
3 Nephi 17 — Behold Your Little Ones — Compassion, Healing, and the Children Encircled with Fire

3 Nephi 17: the tenderest chapter in the Book of Mormon. Jesus tells the multitude his time is at hand and bids them go home, ponder, and prepare for the morrow when he will come again — for they are weak and cannot bear all he has to say. But seeing them in tears, looking steadfastly upon him as if begging him to stay, he says, 'Behold, my bowels are filled with compassion towards you.' He invites them to bring their sick, lame, blind, maimed, leprous, deaf, and afflicted — and he heals them, every one, as they are brought forth. The multitude bows, kisses his feet, bathes them with tears. He commands that their little children be brought and set on the ground around him; he has the multitude kneel; and groaning within himself, troubled because of the wickedness of the house of Israel, he prays to the Father — a prayer so great and marvelous that it cannot be written or uttered or even conceived, filling those who heard with unspeakable joy. He arises; the multitude is overcome with joy. 'Blessed are ye because of your faith. And now behold, my joy is full.' He weeps, and takes the little children one by one and blesses them and prays for them, and weeps again, and says, 'Behold your little ones.' They look, and see the heavens open and angels descending as it were in the midst of fire, encircling the children, who are encircled about with fire, and the angels minister unto them. About twenty-five hundred souls — men, women, and children — see and hear and bear record. The chapter is the heart of Christ laid bare — the compassion that cannot leave the weeping, the healing of every affliction, the prayer beyond words, and the children gathered into his blessing and encircled with the fire of heaven.

If you wanted to show someone the *heart* of Jesus Christ in a single chapter, this is the chapter. After the doctrine of the descent and the heights of the sermon and the sweep of the gathering prophecies, 3 Nephi 17 turns to something simpler and deeper: the tenderness of the Lord. It is a chapter of *compassion* — Christ unable to leave a weeping people, healing every affliction one by one, praying for them in words too great to be written, taking their little children into his arms and blessing them while heaven opens and fire encircles them. There is no grander doctrine here than the doctrine that Christ *loves* — but there is no doctrine more important, and Mormon, who could include only a hundredth part of what happened, chose to give us this. The chapter is the Lord's heart laid bare, and what it reveals is *compassion* so deep that the Greek and Hebrew words for it reach all the way down into the body.

Hebrew Word Studies

ra■amim (splanchna) (רַחֲמִים) — "compassion, tender mercy, deep love" — **ra■amim**, compassion, mercy, tender love; from **re■em**, "womb." The plural of the word for womb, so that compassion in Hebrew is literally "womb-love" — the visceral, gut-deep tenderness a mother feels for the child of her womb. (The Greek *splanchna*, "bowels," behind "bowels of compassion," carries the same gut-level depth) vv. 6–7 (**my bowels are filled with compassion towards you... I have compassion upon you; my bowels are filled with mercy**). When Jesus says *my bowels are filled with compassion*, the strange-sounding English ("bowels") is actually pointing at something profound, for both the Hebrew and the Greek locate compassion in the *body*, in the gut, in the deepest physical seat of feeling. The Hebrew word is **ra■amim**, "compassion, tender mercy" — and it is the plural of **re■em**, the word for *womb*. In Hebrew, then, compassion is literally *womb-feeling*, the visceral tenderness a mother feels for the child she carried — the most physical, instinctive, unbreakable love there is. To have **ra■amim** is to feel for another with a mother's gut-deep yearning. And this is one of the great words for God's love in the Old Testament. The Lord proclaims his own name as *merciful (ra■um) and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness* (Ex. 34:6) — **ra■um**, from the same womb-root. *Like as a father pitieth (ra■am) his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him* (Ps. 103:13). And most movingly, God asks: *Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion (ra■am) on the son of her womb (re■em)? yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee* (Isa. 49:15) — God's compassion compared to, and exceeding, the womb-love of a mother. So **ra■amim** is not a mild, abstract pity; it is the fiercest, most visceral, most maternal tenderness, the love that comes from the deepest place in the body and cannot be switched off. The Greek of the New Testament carries the same gut-level depth: *splanchnizomai*, "to be moved with compassion," from *splanchna*, the inward parts, the bowels — the word used again and again of Jesus, who was *moved with compassion (splanchnistheis)* on the multitudes, on the sick, on the grieving (Matt. 9:36; 14:14; Mark 1:41). To be moved with compassion, in the Gospel sense, is to feel a thing in your *gut*, to be churned and stirred in the deepest physical seat of feeling. This is exactly what 3 Nephi 17 reveals about Christ. He does not feel a polite, distant sympathy for the weeping multitude; his *bowels are filled with compassion* — his very gut is moved, churned, filled with the womb-deep, mother-fierce tenderness that cannot leave them weeping and cannot watch them suffer. This is why he *stays* when he could leave, *heals every one* when he could heal none, *weeps* over the children, *prays* for them in words too great to bear. The whole chapter is **ra■amim** in action — the womb-love of God poured out on a people he cannot bear to leave grieving or sick or unblessed. And the deepest comfort of the word is its source: compassion is *womb-love*, and so the God who has **ra■amim** loves his people the way a mother loves the child of her own body — with a love that is visceral, instinctive, unbreakable, that *cannot forget*, that is *moved* by their tears in the very depths of the divine heart. *My bowels are filled with compassion* is the Lord saying, in the most physical language possible: *I feel you in my gut; my heart is churned with love for you; I cannot leave you so*. The God of the universe has a mother's heart, and 3 Nephi 17 is that heart laid bare.

ayin lo raatah (אֵין לוֹ רָאָה) — "eye hath not seen" — the opening of Isaiah's declaration that the things God has prepared exceed all human faculties of perception: **eye hath not seen (sight), nor ear heard (hearing), neither entered into the heart (thought)**. The biblical idiom for the ineffable, that which surpasses every channel by which the mind receives reality vv. 16–17 (**the eye hath never seen, neither hath the ear heard... no tongue can speak, neither can... the hearts of men conceive**). When the multitude tries to describe Christ's prayer and reaches for *the eye hath never seen, neither hath the ear heard... no tongue can speak... neither can the hearts of men conceive*, they are using one of the most beautiful idioms in scripture for the *ineffable* — that which is too great for any human faculty to grasp. The phrase comes from Isaiah: *since the beginning of the world men have not heard, nor perceived by the ear, neither hath the eye seen, O God, besides thee, what he hath prepared for him that waiteth for him* (Isa. 64:4) — and Paul takes it up famously: *Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him* (1 Cor. 2:9). The structure of the idiom is a catalog of the *channels of perception* — the ways a human being receives and processes reality — and a declaration that the thing in question *exceeds all of them*. The eye receives by sight; the ear by hearing; the tongue expresses by speech; the *heart* (in Hebrew, the seat of thought) conceives by understanding. And the realities of God, Isaiah and Paul and the Nephite multitude all declare, *overflow every one of these*. They cannot be seen, because no sight is wide enough; cannot be heard, because no hearing is deep enough; cannot be spoken, because no language is rich enough; cannot be conceived, because no mind is large enough. The four faculties together — the whole apparatus by which a human being takes in the world — are *insufficient* to contain the marvels of God. This is what the multitude is reaching for about Christ's prayer: it was not merely *beautiful* or *moving* in a way they could describe; it *exceeded description itself*; it ran past the very edges of sight and sound and speech and thought, into a region the human faculties cannot enter. And note the deep fitness of *why* this particular thing is ineffable: it is the *Son praying to the Father*. The intercession of Christ — the eternal communion between the Son and the Father, the Mediator pleading for his people — is among the most sacred realities in existence, the inner life of the Godhead turned, for a moment, toward the saving of these specific souls. To overhear *that* — the Son

speaking to the Father about *us* — is to brush against a reality too vast for the human frame, and the only honest report is that *no eye, ear, tongue, or heart can hold it*. And the fruit of touching the ineffable is *ineffable joy: no one can conceive of the joy which filled our souls* (v. 17). The joy, like the prayer, exceeds the faculties — it is *unspeakable and full of glory* (1 Pet. 1:8), so great that *they were overcome* (v. 18). There is a profound truth here about the deepest experiences of God: that the most real things are often the least describable, that the soul can be filled with a joy or a glory it cannot put into words or even fully hold in thought, because it has touched something that *exceeds* words and thought. The Nephite multitude did not understand the prayer in the sense of being able to repeat it; they *received* it in a way deeper than understanding, and were filled with a joy deeper than conception. And the comfort of the idiom is its promise: that what God has *prepared for them that love him* is not less than we can imagine but *infinitely more* — so far beyond eye and ear and heart that the failure of our faculties to grasp it is not a disappointment but a wonder. The things of God overflow us; and the overflow is joy.

From the Chapter's Architecture

“cross-references Isa. 49:15 (can a woman forget her sucking child... that she should not have compassion — *ra■am* — on the son of her womb — *re■em*? ... yet will I not forget thee — the womb-love of God, vv. 6–7); Ex. 34:6 (the Lord... merciful — *ra■um* — and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness — the compassionate name of God); Ps. 103:13 (like as a father pitieth — *ra■am* — his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him — divine compassion, vv. 6–7); Matt. 9:36; 14:14; Mark 1:41 (Jesus moved with compassion — *splanchnistheis* — on the multitudes and the sick — the gut-deep mercy of vv. 6–7); Isa. 64:4; 1 Cor. 2:9 (eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared — the ineffable prayer of vv. 16–17); 1 Pet. 1:8 (joy unspeakable and full of glory — the joy that overcame them, vv. 17–18); Matt. 19:13–15; Mark 10:13–16 (suffer the little children to come unto me... he took them up in his arms, put his hands upon them, and blessed them — the blessing of the children, v. 21); Hel. 5:23, 43–45 (the fire that encircles without burning, the presence of God — the fire around the children, v. 24); 3 Ne. 11:14–15 (the multitude coming one by one to the Lord — the children blessed one by one, v. 21); 3 Ne. 19:31–34 (Christ's later prayer, again too great to be written — the ineffable intercession, vv. 16–17); John 11:35 (Jesus wept — the weeping Lord, vv. 21–22); Luke 22:44 (Christ's anguished prayer, the Son interceding — the prayer the multitude overheard, v. 15). ”