
Helaman 11 — Rather Let There Be a Famine — The Prophet Who Stood Between

Helaman 11: Nephi uses the sealing power, and uses it for mercy. As civil war devours the land — the Gadianton robbers driving destruction through all the people of Nephi — Nephi prays not for victory but for a gentler scourge: 'O Lord, do not suffer that this people shall be destroyed by the sword; but O Lord, rather let there be a famine in the land, to stir them up in remembrance of the Lord their God, and perhaps they will repent.' The famine comes; thousands perish; the work of death by the sword ceases. When the people humble themselves in sackcloth, sweep the Gadianton band from among them, and plead with Nephi to intercede, he prays again, and God sends rain and restores the harvest. The people esteem him a great prophet; the church spreads; for a few years there is peace and even the Lamanites belong to the church. But the wheel turns: in the eightieth year dissenters and Lamanites revive the robber bands, who grow until they defy the armies of both nations; the people, stirred by this evil, remember God again — and then, with the threat past, begin again to forget him, waxing 'stronger and stronger in their pride, and in their wickedness,' ripening again for destruction. The chapter shows the prophet as intercessor — standing between God's justice and the people's destruction, choosing the famine that humbles over the sword that kills — and it shows, in pitiless miniature, the whole pride cycle spinning faster and faster toward the end.

In the last chapter God gave Nephi the power to call down famine, pestilence, and destruction, to rend the temple and level a mountain. This chapter shows us what Nephi actually *does* with that terrifying power — and the answer is one of the most beautiful things in the book. He uses it to ask for a *famine*. Not to destroy his enemies, not to vindicate himself, not to crush the Gadianton robbers with fire from heaven, but to beg God for the gentlest scourge that might still save his people: *O Lord, do not suffer that this people shall be destroyed by the sword; but O Lord, rather let there be a famine in the land, to stir them up in remembrance of the Lord their God, and perhaps they will repent* (v. 4). Read that prayer slowly, because it tells you everything about why God could trust Nephi with the sealing power. A man with the power to do anything chooses to ask for a famine — because a famine, terrible as it is, *humbles without exterminating*. The sword kills the body and ends all chance of repentance; the famine breaks the heart and opens the door to it. Nephi reaches for the gentlest tool that will still work, because his goal was never to win or to punish. It was always, only, to save.

Hebrew Word Studies

■*atar* / *paga* (עָנָה / רָחַם) — "to entreat, plead, intercede" (■*atar*) and "to meet, encounter, intercede, stand in the gap" (*paga*) — ■*atar* is to entreat earnestly, to pray imploringly, and (in passive) for God to be entreated, to grant the plea; *paga* is to meet or fall upon, and so to interpose, to stand between two parties and plead for one — the act of intercession vv. 4, 10–17 (O Lord... rather let there be a famine... wilt thou turn away thine anger, and try again if they will serve thee?). What Nephi does in this chapter — standing between God's justice and the people's destruction, pleading for the gentlest scourge and then for mercy — is what the Hebrew Bible calls *intercession*, and two great words carry the idea. ■*Atar* is to entreat, to plead earnestly with God; and remarkably, the same verb in its passive form means for God to be entreated, to be moved by the plea and grant it — and Isaac intreated (■*atar*) the Lord for his wife... and the Lord was intreated (■*atar*) of him (Gen. 25:21). The word holds both halves of the transaction: the servant entreats, and God is entreated, relents, answers. This is exactly the rhythm of Nephi's prayers — he entreats for the famine, and God is entreated; he entreats for the rain, and God is entreated again (vv. 4, 17). The second word, *paga*, is even richer: it means to meet, to fall upon, and so to interpose oneself, to stand between. It is the word for the intercessor who stands in the gap. God's lament over Israel is that he sought for a man among them, that should make up the hedge, and stand in the gap before me for the land... but I found none (Ezek. 22:30) — he looked for an intercessor, someone to *paga*, to stand between his judgment and the people, and found no one. And the suffering servant of Isaiah made intercession (*paga*) for the transgressors (Isa. 53:12) — he interposed himself, stood in the gap, between the sinners and their doom. This is precisely Nephi's role in Helaman 11. He stands in the gap between God's anger and the people's destruction. When the sword would consume them, he interposes and pleads for a famine instead. When the famine would destroy them, he interposes and pleads for rain. He is the *paga*, the man God did find, who makes up the hedge and stands in the breach. The great intercessors of scripture are all doing this: Abraham standing before the Lord, bargaining for Sodom — wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked? (Gen. 18:23); Moses on the mountain, let me alone... but Moses besought the Lord, and the Lord repented of the evil (Ex. 32:10–14); Elijah, who by his word shut up the heaven and by his prayer opened it again (1 Kgs. 17–18; James 5:17–18) — the closest parallel of all to Nephi shutting the rain in famine and praying it back. The intercessor does not stand against the people with his power, nor above them in judgment; he stands between, taking the crisis into himself, absorbing it into his own prayers, pleading the people's case before God and pleading God's mercy to the people. It is the most Christlike thing a prophet does, because it is what Christ himself does forever — he ever liveth to make intercession for them (Heb. 7:25), the great High Priest standing eternally in the gap. Nephi, given the power to destroy, chose instead to intercede — to stand between his people and the destruction they deserved, and to plead for the mercy that might yet save them. That is what the sealing power is for in a surrendered hand: not to strike, but to stand in the gap.

From the Chapter's Architecture

“cross-references Gen. 25:21 (Isaac intreated — ■*atar* — the Lord... and the Lord was intreated of him — the entreaty that God grants, Nephi's prayer heard, vv. 4, 17); Ezek. 22:30 (I sought for a man... that should stand in the gap before me for the land... but I found none — the intercessor God seeks, the *paga* Nephi becomes); Isa. 53:12 (he... made intercession — *paga* — for the transgressors — the suffering servant standing in the gap, the type Nephi fulfills); Gen. 18:23–32 (Abraham bargaining for Sodom — the bold intercessor pleading for mercy on the wicked, vv. 10–16); Ex. 32:9–14 (Moses beseeching the Lord and the Lord repenting of the evil — the intercessor who turns away wrath, vv. 14–17); 1 Kgs. 17:1; 18:41–46; James 5:17–18 (Elijah shutting and opening the heavens by prayer — the closest parallel to Nephi calling down and lifting the famine, vv. 4, 13–17); Heb. 7:25 (he ever liveth to make intercession for them — Christ the eternal intercessor, the office Nephi images); Joel 2:12–13 (turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting... rend your heart — the sackcloth repentance the famine produces, v. 9); 2 Chr. 7:13–14 (if I shut up heaven that there be no rain... if my people... shall humble themselves, and pray... then will I... heal their land — the exact covenant pattern of famine, humbling, and restored rain, vv. 4–17); Hel. 10:5–7 (the sealing power granted — here used for intercession and mercy, not destruction); Hel. 12:1–6 (Mormon's meditation on the unsteady hearts that forget God in prosperity — the verdict on the cycle of vv. 36–37); Alma 62:41 (the same affliction hardening some and softening others — the famine that humbles the humble and is forgotten by the proud). ”