

**The Faithful Middle:
How God Measures a Life**

Carol Stewart

American Studies, Senior

cstew73@byu.edu

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Abstract

Alma 38 is easy to overlook. Wedged between the sacred stewardship entrusted to Helaman and the extended correction and doctrine given to Corianton, Alma's fifteen verses to Shiblon can seem the least consequential of a father's final conversations. That brevity, however, reflects attention rather than absence. Reading Alma 36 through 42 together reveals how Alma addresses each son with exact, individualized counsel. He trusts Shiblon before warning him, interprets his suffering through the Lord's presence, cautions him that trusted strength can become pride when it stops answering to Christ, and teaches him that mercy toward others begins with humility before God. Placed beside his brothers, Shiblon becomes a witness for disciples living in the undramatic middle of covenant life, after the beginning and before any visible ending. Alma 38 asks readers to trust not a formula, but Heavenly Father, who prepares each child according to needs only He fully understands.

Every family has a Shiblon, someone whose calling looks smaller next to everyone else's, though nobody quite says so out loud. Scripture can become part of that measuring if we are not careful. Helaman receives the sacred records and a charge that will shape Nephite history. Corianton receives three chapters of searching doctrine on sin, justice, mercy, resurrection, and the Atonement of Jesus Christ. Between them stands Shiblon, addressed in only fifteen verses. The difference in length can make Alma 38 feel like the least consequential of a father's final conversations, but length is a poor measure of love and an even poorer measure of a life.

Read together, Alma 36 through 42 offer more than three separate portraits of three sons. They reveal a father who refuses to minister by formula. Alma does not distribute equal word counts, identical responsibilities, or interchangeable counsel. He gives Helaman stewardship, Shiblon confidence and refinement, and Corianton correction, paired with a sweeping testimony of redemption. The differences don't add up to unequal affection. They add up to a father who knows his sons well enough to speak to each one personally.

Alma's fatherhood offers a mortal glimpse of a divine pattern. God does not prepare every disciple in the same way because He is not creating the same disciple. He knows what must be entrusted, what must be healed, what must be restrained, and what must simply be strengthened. Alma 38 therefore asks more than whether Shiblon deserves greater attention. It asks whether readers can trust a God whose conversations with His children are not identical but perfectly suited to the work He is doing in each life.

Three Sons, Three Conversations

Alma's final instructions are easiest to understand when the three conversations are kept side by side. Helaman is charged to preserve the plates, remember the small and simple means by which God accomplishes great things, and safeguard records that will guide future generations

(Alma 37:1-8). Corianton must confront the damage of serious transgression and learn that repentance is possible because justice, mercy, resurrection, and the Atonement meet in Jesus Christ (Alma 39-42). Shiblon receives neither a new archive nor a prolonged doctrinal rescue. He receives recognition, remembrance, restraint, and the invitation to continue.

It's tempting to rank these conversations — Helaman's stewardship looks most important because it's public, Corianton's chapters feel weightiest because of their doctrine, and Shiblon's brief counsel can seem like whatever was left over. Alma never reads his sons that way. He speaks as though the right words, not the most words, are the measure of faithful fatherhood.

Alma's counsel is just as exact with each son. Corianton's correction wouldn't help Helaman. Handing Shiblon his brother's assignment wouldn't finish his growth. Each son is loved through the particularity of what Alma sees — not by being treated alike, but by being helped, each in his own way, toward the same Redeemer.

Trusted Before He Is Warned

Alma's first personal words to Shiblon look toward the future: “I trust that I shall have great joy in you, because of your steadiness and your faithfulness unto God” (Alma 38:2). The sentence is more than parental encouragement. Before Alma offers warning or instruction, he identifies what years of discipleship have already produced. He does not begin with the distance Shiblon still must travel. He begins with evidence that grace has been active in his son's life.

That order matters because counsel can be heard differently when it is grounded in recognition. Alma will warn Shiblon against pride, boasting, overbearance, uncontrolled passion, and self-congratulation. None of those warnings is softened, but neither is Shiblon reduced to the weaknesses he must continue to guard against. Alma speaks to him as a trusted disciple who still requires refinement. The chapter therefore resists two shallow ways of seeing spiritual growth:

the assumption that goodness eliminates the need for correction, and the assumption that correction cancels what is already good.

The qualities Alma names are quiet ones. He does not commend brilliance, charisma, rank, or public success. He praises steadiness and faithfulness, virtues proven through recurrence rather than spectacle. Steadiness is not a single courageous moment, and faithfulness is not an isolated decision made when the outcome is obvious. Elder Richard G. Scott, of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, named this kind of strength precisely: character, he taught, is “that fabric of inner strength and conviction woven from countless righteous decisions” and “a consistent, righteous life produces an inner power and strength.”¹ Alma recognizes that kind of accumulated strength in Shiblon, but he never separates it from the Lord who made it possible.

Before Shiblon is warned, then, he is seen. Alma isn't padding difficult counsel with a compliment. He's stating, plainly, what is already true of his son. Alma's trust teaches that faithful disciples sometimes need more than another demand for improvement. They need language for the holy change they may not yet recognize in themselves.

Remembering Deliverance

Alma grounds his confidence in a shared history. He reminds Shiblon, “Thou wast in bonds; yea, and I also know that thou wast stoned for the word's sake; and thou didst bear all these things with patience because the Lord was with thee; and now thou knowest that the Lord did deliver thee” (Alma 38:4). Alma does not romanticize what happened among the Zoramites. Bonds and stones remain bonds and stones. Yet he refuses to let suffering become the final interpretation of that experience.

The decisive phrase is not that Shiblon endured because he was unusually strong. He endured “because the Lord was with” him. Alma locates patience inside a relationship with God.

Shiblon's strength was real, but it was never self-created. The Lord sustained him within circumstances neither father nor son would have chosen, and deliverance gave Shiblon experiential knowledge that could not have been acquired through instruction alone.

This is also the pattern of Alma's own testimony. To Helaman he repeats the language Lehi used with Jacob: "Whosoever shall put their trust in God shall be supported in their trials, and their troubles, and their afflictions" (Alma 36:3; compare Alma 38:5). When Alma adapts the promise for Shiblon, the broad "whosoever" becomes personal: "As much as ye shall put your trust in God even so much ye shall be delivered." The doctrine is unchanged, but the address is individualized. President Henry B. Eyring later used Shiblon's own words when he promised that "in time and in eternity God will bless our steadiness as we invite his children to come unto Christ."² A universal promise becomes the remembered history and continuing commission of a particular son.

Alma helps his son see that the mission had formed more than memories. It had produced knowledge: "now thou knowest." Shiblon knows not merely that deliverance is a doctrine, but that the Deliverer is dependable. Elder David A. Bednar, also of the Quorum of the Twelve, makes the same point in doctrinal terms: "all opportunities and blessings of eternal consequence originate in, are possible because of, and have purpose because of, and endure through the Lord Jesus Christ."³ Years later, Shiblon doesn't dwell on the stones. He remembers who stood with him inside them.

The Holiness of Continuing

The governing verb of Alma's counsel is easy to miss because it lacks drama. Alma says that Shiblon has begun to teach and adds, "I trust that thou wilt continue" (Alma 38:2). Later he repeats the invitation: "If ye do this, and endure to the end, ye shall be saved" (Alma 38:5).

Shiblon is not called to reinvent his discipleship. He is asked to keep giving his life in the direction it has already taken.

Continuing can sound like the absence of a story, especially in a culture drawn to beginnings, reversals, and visible breakthroughs. Scripture honors such moments, but covenant life is mostly lived after them. Conversion must survive the days when testimony feels less dramatic than it once did. A calling must be fulfilled after its novelty disappears. Forgiveness, prayer, worship, repentance, and service become transformative through repetition. What appears uneventful from the outside may require the most deliberate kind of faith.

Helaman moves into stewardship, Corianton must turn around, and Shiblon must remain. Repentance, stewardship, and continuing are equally holy; each is its own way of yielding to Christ. President Eyring's promise gives that continuance an eternal horizon: what looks repetitive from the outside can be the steady work that brings a soul, and the people within its reach, toward Christ.

President Russell M. Nelson's observation that "the Lord loves effort" is often heard as encouragement to work harder, but the fuller principle explains why effort matters: some spiritual capacities cannot be received without being practiced.⁴ Shiblon's life illustrates a reward that cannot be rushed. Steadiness only becomes steadiness over time. The Lord was not withholding a larger story from him. He was creating the depth that comes when faith outlasts the need to be continually astonished by itself.

There is consolation here for disciples whose lives seem to occupy long middle chapters. The absence of a dramatic new assignment does not mean heaven has stopped speaking. Sometimes the most exact word God can give is simply this: continue. Keep believing, keep showing up, and keep trusting the grace that has carried you this far.

Strength Governed by Wisdom

Alma's confidence does not make his counsel vague. He tells Shiblon to be diligent and temperate, to avoid pride and boasting, to use boldness without overbearance, to bridle his passions, and to refrain from praying as though his own righteousness entitled him to stand above others (Alma 38:10-14). These warnings reveal that a trusted disciple can still possess dangerous strengths. Conviction can harden into domination, experience can become self-importance, and disciplined living can quietly turn into confidence in one's own moral superiority.

The instruction to use “boldness, but not overbearance” is especially exact. Alma does not ask Shiblon to become less committed to truth. He asks him to govern the way truth is carried. Boldness without love can leave someone feeling conquered instead of invited. Soften it too much, though, and the truth never gets said at all. Mature discipleship requires the difficult union of both, a strength capable of restraint because its purpose is not to display itself but to bless.

Alma then connects restraint with love: “bridle all your passions, that ye may be filled with love” (Alma 38:12). A bridle does not destroy the strength of an animal; it directs that strength toward a chosen end. Alma's image suggests that discipleship does not require the erasure of desire, energy, intensity, or personality. It requires their consecration. Shiblon's strength will become safest and most useful when governed by charity.

Shiblon receives these warnings precisely because Alma trusts him with influence. This is not remedial counsel for a son who has failed to begin. It is advanced counsel for a disciple whose gifts now require governance. Alma does not confuse affirmation with completion. To be seen accurately is to have both grace and danger named without either one canceling the other.

Two Ways of Standing Before God

Near the end of his counsel, Alma contrasts two prayers. He warns Shiblon not to pray as the Zoramites did, saying, “O God, I thank thee that we are better than our brethren,” but instead to say, “O Lord, forgive my unworthiness, and remember my brethren in mercy” (Alma 38:14). The difference between the prayers is not simply tone. Each prayer reveals a different understanding of God, self, and neighbor.

The Zoramite prayer turns God into a witness for the worshiper’s own superiority. Gratitude becomes comparison, worship becomes self-display, and someone else’s weakness becomes proof of one’s own worth. Shiblon had heard that prayer on the Rameumptom and suffered among the people shaped by it. Alma now makes clear that missionary opposition is not the only Zoramite danger. A disciple can reject the tower physically while rebuilding it inwardly. President Dieter F. Uchtdorf’s diagnosis is exact: “At its core, pride is a sin of comparison.”⁵

The alternative prayer turns in two directions at once. Shiblon is to acknowledge his own dependence on mercy and ask that his brethren be remembered in mercy as well. “Forgive my unworthiness” does not erase the faithfulness Alma has just named. Elder ElRay L. Christiansen defined humility not as “an abject, groveling, self-despising spirit,” but as “a right and proper estimate of what one is in the sight of God.”⁶ Shiblon can receive praise without translating it into superiority and acknowledge dependence without denying what grace has formed. Humility before God does not end in self-absorption; it enlarges compassion.

This instruction reaches beyond Corianton’s visible failure. Shiblon must not read his brother’s sin as confirmation of his own spiritual rank — Alma will soon point Corianton toward Shiblon’s example but protects Shiblon first from using that influence pridefully. Corianton will be taught how mercy can claim the penitent without robbing justice; Shiblon is taught how the memory of mercy should shape the way he sees those who still need it. Both brothers are led

toward Christ, from opposite sides of the same doctrine.

A Brother Worth Following

When Alma turns to Corianton, Shiblon's life reappears almost immediately: “Have ye not observed the steadiness of thy brother, his faithfulness, and his diligence in keeping the commandments of God? Behold, has he not set a good example for thee?” (Alma 39:1). The repetition is deliberate. The qualities Alma praised privately in Shiblon are the same qualities he now names as visible to Corianton. What had been formed within one son had become useful in the reclamation of another.

Alma is not weaponizing comparison. He does not tell Corianton that Shiblon is more valuable, more loved, or beyond the reach of weakness. He points to a known life because Corianton needs evidence that covenant faithfulness can be lived. Doctrine will follow in abundance, but the first argument is embodied. His brother's life has made repentance imaginable by showing what a different direction looks like.

President Dieter F. Uchtdorf makes a related point: “individual recognition is rarely an indication of the value of our service,” since every disciple stands in a unique place with an important task.⁷ His language helps explain Shiblon's place in this family. Shiblon's service need not resemble Helaman's stewardship to possess divine value. He is already standing where his steadiness can reach a brother Alma is trying to recover.

This may be one of the most beautiful ways God individualizes discipleship: He forms one person in ways that later become part of His answer to another. Shiblon could not have known while enduring the Zoramite mission that his patience would someday become evidence placed before Corianton. The Lord was preparing more than Shiblon's private faith. He was preparing a brother worth following.

Peace in the Faithful Middle

The chapters surrounding Shiblon are filled with spiritual unrest. Alma remembers the torment of a soul awakened to sin, while Corianton's questions about resurrection, restoration, justice, punishment, and mercy suggest a mind struggling to understand where he stands before God. Shiblon's chapter is not free of warning, but its emotional atmosphere is different. Alma speaks from trust rather than alarm, and the quiet of the chapter is itself a form of testimony.

That quiet should not be mistaken for the absence of spiritual depth. Shiblon has suffered, but suffering has not become his identity. He has strength, but strength has not become self-worship. He has influence, but influence has not excused him from humility. Corianton's chapters show that Christ can enter moral disorder and create a way home; Shiblon's chapter shows that Christ can sustain a disciple before crisis requires a dramatic rescue. One brother witnesses the miracle of return, while the other witnesses the miracle of remaining. Both depend entirely upon the same Atonement.

Grace lifts a fallen disciple off the ground. It also keeps another one walking when the road just won't end. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland put it this way: because God is at work in this world, “we can hope, we should hope, even when facing the most insurmountable odds.”⁸ In Shiblon's life, divine help is not displayed as rank or public elevation. Its evidence is patience under persecution, strength governed by love, and the final blessing that he may be received into God's kingdom “to sit down in peace” (Alma 38:15). Providence isn't rationed among children competing for a father's attention. For Shiblon, it arrives as rest, not rank.

Covenant life is often lived after beginnings and before completion, outside the moments most likely to be remembered. President Uchtdorf's invitation to “lift where you stand” and Sister Bonnie L. Oscarson's questions, “Who needs me today? What do I have to contribute?”

redirect attention from the place another person occupies to the good already within reach.⁹

Comparison keeps asking which brother got the more impressive life. The better question is whether each brother will receive Christ in the life he's been given. That's what the middle is for — where trust slowly turns into temperament, choices repeated long enough turn into character, and the Savior's sustaining power can work so quietly that only looking back reveals how much has changed.

A Father Who Knows His Sons

By the end of Alma's conversations, the most revealing character may be Alma himself. He has given three sons substantially different words without making any one of them disposable. He trusts Shiblon without going soft on him, corrects Corianton without giving up on him, and hands Helaman real responsibility without letting him think he earned it alone. His counsel is personal because his knowledge is personal, and its differences reveal discernment rather than unequal affection.

Alma's own history makes this fatherhood more than instinct. He has been the rebellious son whose father prayed and whose Savior rescued him. He knows what it means to remember another's words when mercy becomes imaginable. Perhaps that is why he speaks so carefully to his own sons. Helaman receives a testimony shaped by remembered deliverance. Shiblon receives trust grounded in observed faithfulness. Corianton receives doctrine capacious enough to hold both accountability and hope. Alma offers each son what his own conversion taught him to value: truth spoken in a way that can lead a soul to Christ.

No parent gets this perfectly right, and Alma's conversations aren't a formula guaranteed to produce good outcomes. Their power lies in the direction they point. Divine love does not flatten persons into types. The Lord who numbers His children also knows them by name, history,

weakness, capacity, and covenant possibility. He may give one child an assignment, another a warning, another a season of patient continuation, and often all three at different times.

The unequal length of the chapters is itself part of their witness. Love isn't proven by identical treatment — sometimes it speaks at length because confusion must be untangled, sometimes it simply says enough. Shiblon gets fewer words, not less love. Alma knows what this son needs and stops there.

This is the theological center of Alma 38. The chapter does not ask readers to admire a neglected figure until he finally receives the attention owed him. It invites them to trust a Father whose attention was never absent. Shiblon was seen before readers learned to see him.

Conclusion

Alma 38 is brief, but its brevity is not indifference. In fifteen verses, Alma recognizes what his son has become, interprets his suffering through the Lord's sustaining presence, calls him to continue, warns him that his strengths could become dangerous, and teaches him how mercy should shape the way he sees other people. That is a full chapter. Its counsel simply wastes no words.

Placed beside Helaman and Corianton, Shiblon shows how personally God prepares His children. A sacred stewardship, an extended correction, and a shorter chapter do not rank the Father's love; they answer three different needs.

That recognition changes the question readers bring into their own lives. The most useful question is not why someone else received a different assignment, a more visible opportunity, a clearer answer, or another kind of rescue. It is whether each reader can discern and trust the conversation God is having with them. His purposes are not generic. He knows what must be healed, entrusted, restrained, remembered, or strengthened.

Shiblon may not have understood his own importance while living in the middle. He could not yet see how patience under persecution would mature into steadiness, how quiet diligence would become an example, or how a father's confidence would preserve his witness in scripture. Yet none of it escaped God's notice. The Lord was present in the bonds, in the command to continue, in the warning, and in the influence that would reach his brother.

Alma's conversations do not promise every disciple the same life. They promise something rarer: to be known. The Father does not measure His children by the length of their chapter or the visibility of their stewardship. That is Alma's word for most of us: God knows the long, largely unseen work of showing up again tomorrow.

Endnotes

1. Richard G. Scott, “The Transforming Power of Faith and Character,” General Conference address, October 2010, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2010/10/the-transforming-power-of-faith-and-character>.
2. Henry B. Eyring, “Because of Your Steadiness,” General Conference address, April 1988, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1988/04/because-of-your-steadiness>.
3. David A. Bednar, “Gather Together in One All Things in Christ,” General Conference address, October 2018, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2018/10/gather-together-in-one-all-things-in-christ>.
4. Joy D. Jones, “An Especially Noble Calling,” General Conference address, April 2020, quoting Russell M. Nelson, “The Lord loves effort,” <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2020/04/14jones..>
5. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Pride and the Priesthood,” General Conference address, October 2010, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2010/10/pride-and-the-priesthood>.
6. ElRay L. Christiansen, “Let Us Walk Humbly Before the Lord,” Conference Report, April 1953, 34–37.
7. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Lift Where You Stand,” General Conference address, October 2008, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2008/10/lift-where-you-stand>.
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9. Uchtdorf, “Lift Where You Stand”; Bonnie L. Oscarson, “The Needs before Us,” General Conference address, October 2017, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2017/10/the-needs-before-us>.

