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The Songs They Could Not Sing

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Many people face significant problems or even tragedy during this mortal journey.

All over the world we see examples of trials and tribulations.¹ We are moved in our souls by television images of death, acute suffering, and despair. We see the Japanese struggling heroically against devastation from an earthquake and tsunami. The haunting scenes from the destruction of the World Trade Center towers, which we recently reviewed, were painful to relive. Something stirs us when we become aware of such tragedy, especially when suffered by innocent people.

Sometimes tragedies are very personal. A son or daughter dies early in life or falls victim to a devastating disease. A loving parent's life is taken because of a thoughtless act or accident. Whenever tragedy occurs, we mourn and strive to bear one another's burdens.² We lament the things that will not be accomplished and the songs that will not be sung.

Among the most frequently asked questions of Church leaders are, Why does a just God allow bad things to happen, especially to good people?

Why are those who are righteous and in the Lord's service not immune from such tragedies?

While we do not know all the answers, we do know important principles that allow us to face tragedies with faith and confidence that there is a bright future planned for each of us. Some of the most important principles are:

First, we have a Father in Heaven, who knows and loves us personally and understands our suffering perfectly.

Second, His Son, Jesus Christ, is our Savior and Redeemer, whose Atonement not only provides for salvation and exaltation but also will compensate for all the unfairness of life.

Third, the Father's plan of happiness for His children includes not only a premortal and mortal life but also an eternal life as well, including a great and glorious reunion with those we have lost. All wrongs will be righted, and we will see with perfect clarity and faultless perspective and understanding.

From the limited perspective of those who do not have knowledge,

understanding, or faith in the Father's plan—who look at the world only through the lens of mortality with its wars, violence, disease, and evil—this life can seem depressing, chaotic, unfair, and meaningless. Church leaders have compared this perspective with someone walking into the middle of a three-act play.³ Those without knowledge of the Father's plan do not understand what happened in the first act, or the premortal existence, and the purposes established there; nor do they understand the clarification and resolution that come in the third act, which is the glorious fulfillment of the Father's plan.

Many do not appreciate that under His loving and comprehensive plan, those who appear to be disadvantaged through no fault of their own are not ultimately penalized.⁴

In a few months it will be 100 years since the tragic sinking of the *Titanic* ocean liner. The calamitous circumstances surrounding this horrendous event have resonated across the entire century since it occurred. The promoters of the new luxury liner, which was 11 stories high and almost 3 football fields long,⁵ made excessive and unjustified claims as to the lack of vulnerability of the *Titanic* to winter waters full of icebergs. This ship was supposedly unsinkable; yet when it slipped beneath the surface of the icy Atlantic Ocean, over 1,500 souls lost their mortal lives.⁶

In many ways the sinking of the *Titanic* is a metaphor for life and many gospel principles. It is a perfect example of the difficulty of looking only through the lens of this mortal life. The loss of life was catastrophic in its consequences but was of an accidental nature. With the carnage of two world wars and having just passed the 10th anniversary of the destruction



of the World Trade Center towers, we have seen in our own time a window into the shock, agony, and moral issues surrounding events resulting from the evil exercise of agency. There are terrible repercussions to family, friends, and nations as a result of these tragedies, regardless of the cause.

With respect to the *Titanic*, lessons were learned about the dangers of pride and traveling in troubled waters and “that God is no respecter of persons.”⁷ Those involved were from all walks of life. Some were rich and famous, such as John Jacob Astor; but there were also laborers, immigrants, women, children, and crew members.⁸

There were at least two Latter-day Saint connections to the *Titanic*. Both illustrate our challenge in understanding trials, tribulations, and tragedies and provide insight as to how we might deal with them. The first is an example of being appreciative for the blessings we receive and the challenges we avoid. It involves Alma Sonne, who later served as a General Authority.⁹ He was my stake president when I was born in Logan, Utah. I had my mission interview with Elder Sonne. In those days all prospective

missionaries were interviewed by a General Authority. He was a great influence in my life.

When Alma was a young man, he had a friend named Fred who was less active in the Church. They had numerous discussions about serving a mission, and eventually Alma Sonne convinced Fred to prepare and serve. They were both called to the British Mission. At the conclusion of their missions, Elder Sonne, the mission secretary, made the travel arrangements for their return to the United States. He booked passage on the *Titanic* for himself, Fred, and four other missionaries who had also completed their missions.¹⁰

When it came time to travel, for some reason Fred was delayed. Elder Sonne canceled all six bookings to sail on the new luxury liner on its maiden voyage and booked passage on a ship that sailed the next day.¹¹ The four missionaries, who were excited about traveling on the *Titanic*, expressed their disappointment. Elder Sonne’s answer paraphrased the account of Joseph and his brothers in Egypt recorded in Genesis: “How can we return to our families and the lad be

not with us?”¹² He explained to his companions that they all came to England together and they all should return home together. Elder Sonne subsequently learned of the *Titanic*’s sinking and gratefully said to his friend Fred, “You saved my life.” Fred replied, “No, by getting me on this mission, you saved my life.”¹³ All of the missionaries thanked the Lord for preserving them.¹⁴

Sometimes, as was the case with Elder Sonne and his missionary associates, great blessings come to those who are faithful. We should be grateful for all the tender mercies that come into our lives.¹⁵ We are unaware of hosts of blessings that we receive from day to day. It is extremely important that we have a spirit of gratitude in our hearts.¹⁶

The scriptures are clear: those who are righteous, follow the Savior, and keep His commandments will prosper in the land.¹⁷ An essential element of prospering is having the Spirit in our lives.

However, righteousness, prayer, and faithfulness will not always result in happy endings in mortality. Many will experience severe trials. When this happens, the very act of having

faith and seeking priesthood blessings is approved by God. The Lord has declared, “The elders . . . shall be called, and shall pray for and lay their hands upon them in my name; and if they die they shall die unto me, and if they live they shall live unto me.”¹⁸

It is instructive that the second Latter-day Saint connection with the *Titanic* did not have a happy mortal ending. Irene Corbett was 30 years old. She was a young wife and mother from Provo, Utah. She had significant talents as an artist and musician; she was also a teacher and a nurse. At the urging of medical professionals in Provo, she attended a six-month course of study on midwife skills in London. It was her great desire to make a difference in the world. She was careful, thoughtful, prayerful, and valiant. One of the reasons she chose the *Titanic* to return to the United States was because she thought the missionaries would be traveling with her and that this would provide additional safety. Irene was one of the few women who did not survive this terrible tragedy. Most of the women and children were placed in the lifeboats and were ultimately rescued. There were not enough lifeboats for everyone. But it is believed that she did not get in the lifeboats because, with her special training, she was attending to the needs of the numerous passengers who were injured from the iceberg collision.¹⁹

There are many kinds of challenges. Some give us necessary experiences. Adverse results in this mortal life are not evidence of lack of faith or of an imperfection in our Father in Heaven’s overall plan. The refiner’s fire is real, and qualities of character and righteousness that are forged in the furnace of affliction perfect and purify us and prepare us to meet God.



When the Prophet Joseph Smith was a prisoner in Liberty Jail, the Lord declared to him that multiple calamities can befall mankind. The Savior stated in part, “If thou be cast into the deep; if the billowing surge conspire against thee; if fierce winds become thine enemy; . . . and all the elements combine to hedge up the way; . . . these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good.”²⁰ The Savior concluded His instruction: “Thy days are known, and thy years shall not be numbered less; therefore, fear not . . . , for God shall be with you forever and ever.”²¹

Some challenges result from the agency of others. Agency is essential for individual spiritual growth and development. Evil conduct is an element of agency. Captain Moroni explained this very important doctrine: “The Lord suffereth the righteous to be slain that his justice and judgment may come upon the wicked.” He made it clear that the righteous are not lost but “enter into the rest of the Lord their God.”²² The wicked will be held accountable for the atrocities they perpetrate.²³

Some challenges come from disobedience to God’s laws. Health problems resulting from smoking, alcohol, and drug abuse are

staggering. Incarceration in jails and prisons as a result of alcohol- and drug-related crime is also very high.²⁴

The incidence of divorce because of infidelity is also significant. Many of these trials and tribulations could be avoided by obedience to God’s laws.²⁵

My beloved mission president, Elder Marion D. Hanks (who passed away in August), asked us as missionaries to memorize a statement to resist mortal challenges: “There is no chance, no fate, no destiny that can circumvent or hinder or control the firm resolve of a determined soul.”²⁶

He acknowledged that this doesn’t apply to all the challenges we encounter but is true in spiritual matters. I have appreciated his counsel in my life.

One of the reasons for the terrible loss of life on the *Titanic* is that there were not enough lifeboats. Regardless of the trials we face in this life, the Savior’s Atonement provides lifeboats for everyone. For those who think the trials they face are unfair, the Atonement covers all of the unfairness of life.²⁷

A unique challenge for those who have lost loved ones is to avoid dwelling on the lost opportunities in this life. Often those who die early have demonstrated significant capabilities, interests, and talents. With our limited understanding, we lament the things that will not be accomplished and the songs that will not be sung. This has been described as dying with your music still inside you. Music in this case is a metaphor for unfulfilled potential of any kind. Sometimes people have made significant preparation but do not have the opportunity to perform in mortality.²⁸ One of the most quoted classical poems, “Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard,” by Thomas Gray, reflects on such missed opportunities:

*Full many a flower is born to blush
unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the
desert air.*²⁹

The lost opportunity might relate to family, occupation, talents, experiences, or others. All of these were cut short in the case of Sister Corbett. There were songs she did not sing and potential she did not fulfill in this mortal life. But when we look through the wide and clear lens of the gospel instead of the limited lens of mere mortal existence, we know of the great eternal reward promised by a loving Father in His plan. As the Apostle Paul taught, “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.”³⁰ A line from a beloved hymn provides comfort, solace, and the clear lens: “And Jesus listening can hear the songs I cannot sing.”³¹

The Savior said: “Therefore, let your hearts be comforted. . . . Be still and know that I am God.”³² We have His promise that we with our children will sing “songs of everlasting joy.”³³ In the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior, amen. ■

NOTES

1. See John 16:33.
2. See Mosiah 18:8–9; see also 2 Nephi 32:7.
3. See Boyd K. Packer, “The Play and the Plan” (Church Educational System fireside for young adults, May 7, 1995), 3: “In mortality, we are like one who enters a theater just as the curtain goes up on the second act. We have missed Act 1. . . . ‘And they all lived happily ever after’ is never written into the second act. That line belongs in the third act when the mysteries are solved and everything is put right.” See also Neal A. Maxwell, *All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience* (1979), 37: “God . . . sees the beginning from the end. . . . The arithmetic . . . is something we mortals cannot comprehend. We cannot do the sums because we do not have all the



- numbers. We are locked in the dimension of time and are contained within the tight perspectives of this second estate.”
4. Those who die before reaching the age of accountability are saved in the celestial kingdom (see Doctrine and Covenants 137:10). Those who have died without knowledge of the gospel and would have received it if they had been given the opportunity will also be heirs of the celestial kingdom (see Doctrine and Covenants 137:7). In addition, even those whose lives have been less than valiant will in time be blessed with an existence superior to this life (see Doctrine and Covenants 76:89).
5. See Conway B. Sonne, *A Man Named Alma: The World of Alma Sonne* (1988), 83.
6. See Sonne, *A Man Named Alma*, 84.
7. Acts 10:34; see also “The Sinking of the World’s Greatest Liner,” *Millennial Star*, Apr. 18, 1912, 250.
8. See *Millennial Star*, Apr. 18, 1912, 250.
9. Elder Sonne is an uncle to Elder L. Tom Perry.
10. See Sonne, *A Man Named Alma*, 83.
11. See Sonne, *A Man Named Alma*, 83–84; see also “From the Mission Field,” *Millennial Star*, Apr. 18, 1912, 254: “Releases and Departures.—The following named missionaries have been honorably released and sailed for home April 13th, 1912, per s.s. *Mauretania*. From Great Britain—Alma Sonne, George B. Chambers, Willard Richards, John R. Sayer, F. A. [Fred] Dahle. From the Netherlands—L. J. Shurtliff.”
12. See Genesis 44:30–31, 34.
13. In Frank Millward, “Eight Elders Missed Voyage on Titanic,” *Deseret News*, July 24, 2008, M6.
14. See “Friend to Friend,” *Friend*, Mar. 1977, 39.
15. See David A. Bednar, “The Tender Mercies of the Lord,” *Liahona and Ensign*, May 2005, 99–102.
16. See Doctrine and Covenants 59:21.
17. See Alma 36:30.
18. Doctrine and Covenants 42:44.
19. Interview with Irene Corbett’s grandson Donald M. Corbett, Oct. 30, 2010, by Gary H. Cook.
20. Doctrine and Covenants 122:7.
21. Doctrine and Covenants 122:9.
22. Alma 60:13.
23. The Savior was clear that “offences will come: but woe unto him, through whom they come!” (Luke 17:1).
24. Section 89 of the Doctrine and Covenants—“the order and will of God in the temporal salvation of all saints in the last days” (verse 2)—increasingly blesses the Latter-day Saints.
25. See Doctrine and Covenants 42:22–24.
26. See “Will,” *Poetical Works of Ella Wheeler Wilcox* (1917), 129.
27. See “The Atonement,” *Preach My Gospel: A Guide to Missionary Service* (2004), 51–52.
28. See “The Song That I Came to Sing,” in *The Complete Poems of Rabindranath Tagore’s Gitanjali*, ed. S. K. Paul (2006), 64: “The song that I came to sing remains unsung to this day. / I have spent my days in stringing and in unstringing my instrument.”
29. Thomas Gray, “Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard,” in *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, ed. Christopher Ricks (1999), 279.
30. 1 Corinthians 2:9.
31. “There Is Sunshine in My Soul Today,” *Hymns*, no. 227.
32. Doctrine and Covenants 101:16; see also Psalm 46:10.
33. Doctrine and Covenants 101:18; see also Doctrine and Covenants 45:71.