

Loss and Childlessness:

FINDING HOPE AMID THE PAIN

On a sandstone bluff at a bend in the River Avon in England lies Warwick Castle. Centuries old, once home to nobles and kingmakers, Warwick has been built and rebuilt, fallen into disrepair and been rebuilt again.

Just a few miles north stands Kenilworth, a castle with equal prestige. In contrast to Warwick, it lies mostly in ruin. Hundreds of castles like these dot the countryside, from the white cliffs of Dover to the northern reaches of Scotland. Many have been smashed and broken through war or disaster.

Like the castles whose once-sturdy walls were breached by opposition, at times we find ourselves assailed by trials that threaten our spiritual fortifications. Those who have suffered the pain of losing a child know the power that grief has to strike at the foundations of faith.

But these castles teach a story of hope, too, to those who have lost a child. Many British castles have found new life as they have been reshaped by a master's hand, just as we are when we turn to the Savior to rebuild after a loss. For example, Warwick Castle with its renewed vitality is open to the public and reminds us of the resilience of the English people. Windsor Castle near London has served as a home and fortress for over 900 years and still serves as one of the residences of Her Majesty, the Queen of England.

Just as these mighty castles have been renewed, we too can survive when our spiritual fortresses are threatened. Even after

we are stricken, we can find newness of life as our Heavenly Father, through the Atonement of His Son, Jesus Christ, helps us restore our spiritual walls.

Trials of Faith: Barren Years

No matter our trials, it is easy to oversimplify how difficult it is to remain steady in the face of adversity. When we are in pain, we can be blind to relief. What's more, the pain can be so great it can cause us to question our faith in the source of all hope, wisdom, and joy—our Father in Heaven and His Son, Jesus Christ.

Such was the case with Simon Mason, a bishop serving near Reading, England. Although Simon was raised as a member of the Church and developed a strong testimony, he has faced periods of loss that have challenged his faith. One such challenge happened a few years after he courted and married Jennifer Martin.

Simon and Jennifer were filled with a desire to have



Left: Warwick Castle. Left, inset: The Leece family. Above: The Mason family.



The London England Temple.

DOCTRINAL POINTS

- Heavenly Father knows our pains and sufferings.
- The Atonement of Jesus Christ brings healing to our souls as we strive to follow Him.
- Hope, healing, and joy come as we turn to the Lord in faith.

children, yet none came. Seeking help, they went to doctors, who could find no medical reason for their infertility. Year after year their hopes to start a family met with disappointment.

After six years, Simon began to lose hope. Confused and discouraged, he sought his Heavenly Father's help, asking, "Father, what is your plan for my life? Do you understand the pain we feel? Do you really know me?"

Through prayer, Simon decided that no matter what trials he was called to endure, he would remain faithful. "From that day forward," he says, "I decided I would live the gospel to the best of my ability; I would be true to the testimony which I had already received."

For Simon, "the peace of God, which passeth all understanding" (Philippians 4:7) did not come immediately, but it did

come. The Spirit confirmed his resolution. Heavenly Father applied the healing balm of Gilead¹ to a child in spiritual crisis.

"For me, that experience has built an absolutely solid foundation, an assurance of who I am," Simon shares. "Heavenly Father knows me as an individual."

The Father had not forgotten him; the walls of Simon's faith, once crumbling, had been restored.

Having passed through the trial with the love of a Father in Heaven who did in fact know them, Simon and Jenny Mason soon discovered that they were expecting not one child but two.

Trials of Faith: Childlessness

For the Masons, the blessings came in the form of peace, strength, and, finally, children. For many others, no children will come. They too may ask, "What is God's plan for my life? Where is the balm of Gilead for me?"

They may wonder how they are meant to grow through trials that seem too hard to bear. Greg and Sharon Leece of Reading, England, know the pain of this adversity. About a year after their marriage, Sharon contracted cancer. Although she survived the treatments, her ability to have children was compromised.

But Greg and Sharon were not left alone. "Throughout the heartache and suffering," Greg relates, "priesthood blessings, fasting, and prayer helped get us through. One blessing not long after the cancer treatment promised that Sharon would be a mother."

Sharon did become a mother—though not in the way anticipated. Through adoption, she and Greg eventually had two wonderful children sealed to them. Again, peace came through faithful perseverance.

Trials of Faith: The Loss of a Child

There may be times, though, when we feel overwhelmed by hardship. When this happens we can draw upon the love and strength of the Lord. As King David of old said, “The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer;

“The God of my rock; in him will I trust: he is my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my high tower, and my refuge, my saviour” (2 Samuel 22:2–3).

For David and Helen McLukey of Oxford, England, it was prayer and feeling God’s love for them while they were in the temple that gave them strength in a time of great distress. Their first son, Oliver, was born without incident. But their second son, Rowan, underwent a tremendous journey. At 20 weeks into the pregnancy, a doctor discovered that their baby had a serious heart condition. Rowan’s aortic valve was too tight, which prevented blood from escaping the left ventricle. As a result, the left ventricle was enlarged and losing its strength.

The doctor explained their options: they could perform an abortion immediately or let the baby die naturally in a week or two—as he surely would. David and Helen sat stunned as they felt the crushing weight of what they had heard.

Almost before they had time to think, the doctor hesitantly offered a third option: an experimental surgery that had been performed only three times before and never successfully. If they chose this option, there was a high probability Rowan would die from the surgery itself; and even if he didn’t die, the surgery might not be successful.

After prayer, the McLukeys chose the third option, which involved open-heart



David and Helen McLukey with their son Oliver.

surgery through the womb. To their joy, the surgery was successful. But Rowan’s condition was fragile, requiring that Helen make weekly visits to the doctor. The anxious months passed. Three weeks before Rowan’s due date, his condition deteriorated and an emergency delivery was required—at great risk to the baby.

Again, Rowan survived, but he had to be put on a ventilator immediately and undergo another heart operation. A week later he needed another operation. Other complications ensued. Two months later, Rowan was moved to Southampton on the south coast for yet another open-heart surgery. More surgeries followed.

Over the course of these trials, Helen began to feel an increasing sense of guilt as she split her time between Rowan at the hospital an hour away and David and Oliver back home. They brought Rowan back to the local hospital to relieve stress on the family. The guilt, fear, and stress were at times unbearable for Helen and her family. There were times when they felt despair.

After giving a valiant fight, Rowan passed away when he was just six months old. It was a terrible experience for the McLukeys, but they had sought the Lord’s guidance in the temple just a few

Children Are Alive in Christ¹

In 1958 my brother Steven died, 13 years before I was born. He had suffered from Wilms' tumor, a type of kidney cancer, and had undergone the body-racking pain of radiation therapy, a brand-new treatment in the 1950s. He was not yet two years old.

This loss caused unending grief to my dear mother. She loved her son; she wanted him to have a future as bright as his smile before he became sick. Her heart was crushed as she watched him waste away in agony. Although she has had many joys in her life, and the joy of five other children, the pain has never fully healed.

In the face of such pain I share this testimony: that Steven will live again, that his release from pain at such an early age was a sign of his great purity.

The Prophet Joseph Smith declared: "And I also beheld that all children who die before they arrive at the years of accountability are saved in the celestial kingdom of heaven" (D&C 137:10).

days before Rowan died, and something remarkable happened.

"I felt God's love for me," David explains, "and a kind of empathy. I felt that God was in control regardless of what I could or couldn't see in those moments."

They rejoiced that Rowan had been a part of their lives. "It was a miracle that he survived at all," Helen explains, "and that we had six months with him. That was an answer to prayer."

David and Helen were also granted that peace "which passeth all understanding" from the Lord, who promised, "I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you. . . . Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" (Philippians 4:7; John 14:18, 27).

Helen and David have taken courage in that peace. "We believe in an afterlife," Helen affirms. "We believe in the Resurrection. We believe in our Savior."

David's views of mortality have changed, and his understanding of the Atonement has deepened.

"Immortality and triumph over physical death is much



My mother, Jane Anne, with my brother Steven.

These words have brought great hope to me, though I have never seen my older brother, and I hope they bring peace to my mother and to all who grieve such loss.

Joshua J. Perkey

NOTE

1. Moroni 8:12.

more significant than it used to be because I know I will see my son again in his physical body," he says. "That is something that I cling to."

Where Can I Turn for Peace?²

Those who build fortifications do so for good reason—they are aware of opposing forces and expect them to attack. But even those with the best-fortified locations must expect to suffer some loss, sorrow, and grief.

What, then, are we to make of this? If pain and sorrow do come, how are we to find solace?

Thousands of miles away from Great Britain's castles lie walls built thousands of years ago in the Holy City, Jerusalem. Isaiah, prophesying the words of the Savior, wrote,

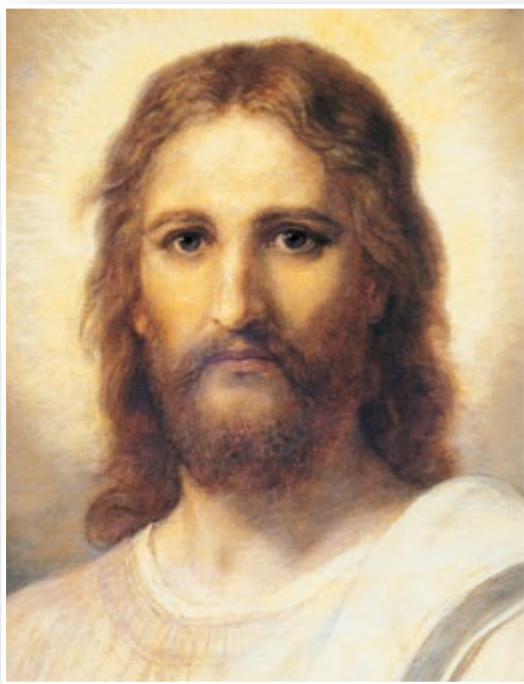
"Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee.

"Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands; thy walls are continually before me" (Isaiah 49:15–16; see also 1 Nephi 21:15–16).

The Savior has not forgotten us. He knows our pains and sufferings and has provided a healing balm through His grace to bring us peace. We, like ancient castles, can find new purpose as we are rebuilt through faith in the gospel. And if we make and keep our temple covenants, our loved ones may be with us again in the Resurrection and in heaven. ■

NOTES

1. See Boyd K. Packer, "Balm of Gilead," *Ensign*, Nov. 1987, 16–18.
2. See "Where Can I Turn for Peace?" *Hymns*, no. 129.



ANSWERING QUESTIONS

You or someone you know may wonder what happens to the spirits of children who die without having received the saving ordinance of baptism. The Book of Mormon teaches us that "all little children are alive in Christ" and are innocent. They are not capable of committing sin and are not accountable, therefore they "need no repentance, neither baptism" and come under no condemnation. (See Moroni 8:5–26.)

Modern-day revelation given to the Prophet Joseph Smith has set forth that "children shall be baptized for the remission of their sins when eight years old" (D&C 68:27), which is the age when they are considered accountable for sins. "All children who die before they arrive at the years of accountability are saved in the celestial kingdom of heaven" (D&C 137:10).

