



In our trials, the Savior extends to each of us the invitation He extended to the man at the pool of Bethesda: "Wilt thou be made whole?" (John 5:6).



Adversity—Part of God’s Plan for Our Eternal Progress

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and refine us and teach us and bless us,
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hands of God to make us better people.”*

From the Life of Howard W. Hunter

At the April 1980 general conference, Elder Howard W. Hunter, then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, told of joining a large crowd to watch the long-boat races in Samoa. “The crowd was restless,” he said, “and most eyes were turned toward the sea, watching for the first glimpse of the [boats]. Suddenly there was a roar from the crowd as the boats came into sight in the distance. Each of them had a crew of fifty powerful oarsmen dipping and pulling the oars with a rhythm that forced the crafts through the waves and foaming water—a beautiful sight.

“The boats and men were soon in full view as they raced toward the finish. Even though these powerful men pulled with their might, the weight of a boat with fifty men moved against a powerful adverse force—the resistance of the water.

“The cheering of the crowd reached a crescendo when the first long-boat crossed the finish line.”

After the race, Elder Hunter walked to where the boats were docked and spoke with one of the oarsmen, who explained that the prow of the long-boat “is so constructed that it cuts through and divides the water to help overcome the resistance that retards the speed of the boat. He further explained that the pulling of the oars against the resistance of the water creates the force that causes the

boat to move forward. Resistance creates both the opposition and the forward movement.”¹

Elder Hunter used the boat race in Samoa to introduce a talk about the purposes of adversity. During his ministry as an Apostle, he spoke about adversity many times, offering counsel, hope, and encouragement. He spoke from personal experience, having endured life-threatening illnesses and other trials. He testified with firm conviction that in times of trouble, “Jesus Christ possesses the power to ease our burdens and lighten our loads.”²

Teachings of Howard W. Hunter

Adversity is part of God’s plan for our eternal progress.

I have observed that life—every life—has a full share of ups and downs. Indeed, we see many joys and sorrows in the world, many changed plans and new directions, many blessings that do not always look or feel like blessings, and much that humbles us and improves our patience and our faith. We have all had those experiences from time to time, and I suppose we always will. . . .

. . . President Spencer W. Kimball, who knew a good deal about suffering, disappointment, and circumstances beyond his control, once wrote:

“Being human, we would expel from our lives physical pain and mental anguish and assure ourselves of continual ease and comfort, but if we were to close the doors upon sorrow and distress, we might be excluding our greatest friends and benefactors. Suffering can make saints of people as they learn patience, long-suffering, and self-mastery” [*Faith Precedes the Miracle* (1972), 98].

In that statement, President Kimball refers to closing doors upon certain experiences in life. . . . Doors close regularly in our lives, and some of those closings cause genuine pain and heartache. But I *do* believe that where one such door closes, another opens (and perhaps more than one), with hope and blessings in other areas of our lives that we might not have discovered otherwise.

. . . A few years ago, [President Marion G. Romney] said that all men and women, including the most faithful and loyal, would find adversity and affliction in their lives because, in the words of Joseph Smith, “Men have to suffer that they may come upon Mount Zion and be exalted above the heavens” [*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 230; see Conference Report, Oct. 1969, 57].

President Romney then said:

“This does not mean that we crave suffering. We avoid all we can. However, we now know, and we all knew when we elected to come into mortality, that we would here be proved in the crucible of adversity and affliction. . . .

“[Furthermore,] the Father’s plan for proving [and refining] his children did not exempt the Savior himself. The suffering he undertook to endure, and which he did endure, equaled the combined suffering of all men [and women everywhere. Trembling and bleeding and wishing to shrink from the cup, he said,] ‘I partook and finished my preparations unto the children of men’ (D&C 19:18–19)” (in Conference Report, Oct. 1969, p. 57).

All of us must finish our “preparations unto the children of men” [D&C 19:19]. Christ’s preparations were quite different from our own, but we all have preparations to make, doors to open. To make such important preparations often will require some pain, some unexpected changes in life’s path, and some submitting, “even as a child doth submit to his father” [Mosiah 3:19]. Finishing divine preparations and opening celestial doors may take us—indeed, undoubtedly will take us—right up to the concluding hours of our mortal lives.³

We came to mortal life to encounter resistance. It was part of the plan for our eternal progress. Without temptation, sickness, pain, and sorrow, there could be no goodness, virtue, appreciation for well-being, or joy. . . . We must remember that the same forces of resistance which prevent our progress afford us also opportunities to overcome.⁴

Our mortal tribulations are for our growth and experience.

When [the difficulties of mortality] humble us and refine us and teach us and bless us, they can be powerful instruments in the hands of God to make us better people, to make us more grateful, more loving, and more considerate of other people in their own times of difficulty.

Yes, we all have difficult moments, individually and collectively, but even in the most severe of times, anciently or in modern times, those problems and prophecies were never intended to do anything but bless the righteous and help those who are less righteous move toward repentance. God loves us, and the scriptures tell us he “gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” [John 3:16].⁵

The great Book of Mormon patriarch, Lehi, spoke encouragingly to his son Jacob, a son born in the wilderness in a time of travail and opposition. Jacob’s life was not as he might have expected it to be and not as the ideal course of experience might have outlined. He had suffered afflictions and setbacks, but Lehi promised that such afflictions would be consecrated for his son’s gain (see 2 Nephi 2:2).

Then Lehi added these words that have become classic:

“For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. If not so, . . . righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness, neither holiness nor misery, neither good nor bad” (2 Nephi 2:11).

I have taken great comfort over the years in this explanation of some of life’s pain and disappointment. I take even greater comfort that the greatest of men and women, including the Son of God, have faced such opposition in order to better understand the contrast between righteousness and wickedness, holiness and misery, good and bad. From out of the dark, damp confinement of Liberty Jail, the Prophet Joseph Smith learned that if we are called to pass through tribulation, it is for our growth and experience and will ultimately be counted for our good (see D&C 122:5–8).



When Joseph Smith was in Liberty Jail, the Lord revealed to him that adversity can give us experience and be for our good.

Where one door shuts, another opens, even for a prophet in prison. We are not always wise enough nor experienced enough to judge adequately all of the possible entries and exits. The mansion that God prepares for each of his beloved children may have only certain hallways and banisters, special carpets and curtains that he would have us pass on our way to possess it. . . .

At various times in our lives, probably at repeated times in our lives, we do have to acknowledge that God knows what we do not know and sees what we do not see. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord” (Isaiah 55:8).

If you have troubles at home with children who stray, if you suffer financial reverses and emotional strain that threaten your homes and your happiness, if you must face the loss of life or health, may peace be unto your soul. We will not be tempted beyond our ability to withstand [see 1 Corinthians 10:13; Alma 13:28; 34:39]. Our detours and disappointments are the straight and narrow path to Him.⁶

3

We have every reason to be optimistic and confident even in times of difficulty.

There have always been some difficulties in mortal life, and there always will be. But knowing what we know, and living as we are supposed to live, there really is no place, no excuse, for pessimism and despair.

In my lifetime I have seen two world wars, plus Korea, plus Vietnam and [more]. I have worked my way through the Depression and managed to go to law school while starting a young family at the same time. I have seen stock markets and world economics go crazy, and I have seen a few despots and tyrants go crazy, all of which caused quite a bit of trouble around the world in the process.

So I hope you won't believe all the world's difficulties have been wedged into your decade, or that things have never been worse than they are for you personally, or that they will never get better. I reassure you that things have been worse and they *will* always get better. They always do—especially when we live and love the gospel of Jesus Christ and give it a chance to flourish in our lives. . . .

Contrary to what some might say, you have every reason in this world to be happy and to be optimistic and to be confident. Every generation since time began has had some things to overcome and some problems to work out.⁷

4

When we come to the Savior, He will ease our burdens and lighten our loads.

“Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

“Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.

“For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matt. 11:28–30.) . . .

. . . This marvelous offer of assistance extended by the Son of God himself was not restricted to the Galileans of his day. This call

to shoulder his easy yoke and accept his light burden is not limited to bygone generations. It was and is a universal appeal to all people, to all cities and nations, to every man, woman, and child everywhere.

In our own great times of need we must not leave unrecognized this unfailing answer to the cares and worries of our world. Here is the promise of personal peace and protection. Here is the power to remit sin in all periods of time. We, too, must believe that Jesus Christ possesses the power to ease our burdens and lighten our loads. We, too, must come unto him and there receive rest from our labors.

Of course, obligations go with such promises. “Take my yoke upon you,” he pleads. In biblical times the yoke was a device of great assistance to those who tilled the field. It allowed the strength of a second animal to be linked and coupled with the effort of a single animal, sharing and reducing the heavy labor of the plow or wagon. A burden that was overwhelming or perhaps impossible for one to bear could be equitably and comfortably borne by two bound together with a common yoke. His yoke requires a great and earnest effort, but for those who truly are converted, the yoke is easy and the burden becomes light.

Why face life’s burdens alone, Christ asks, or why face them with temporal support that will quickly falter? To the heavy laden it is Christ’s yoke, it is the power and peace of standing side by side with a God that will provide the support, balance, and the strength to meet our challenges and endure our tasks here in the hardpan field of mortality.

Obviously, the personal burdens of life vary from person to person, but every one of us has them. . . . Of course, some sorrows are brought on by the sins of a world not following the counsel of [our] Father in Heaven. Whatever the reason, none of us seems to be completely free from life’s challenges. To one and all, Christ said, in effect: As long as we all must bear some burden and shoulder some yoke, why not let it be mine? My promise to you is that my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (See Matt. 11:28–30.)⁸



“Disciples of Christ in every generation are invited, indeed commanded, to be filled with a perfect brightness of hope.”



Latter-day Saints need not fear the tribulations of the last days.

The scriptures . . . indicate that there will be seasons of time when the whole world will have some difficulty. We know that in our dispensation unrighteousness will, unfortunately, be quite evident, and it will bring its inevitable difficulties and pain and punishment. God will cut short that unrighteousness in his own due time, but our task is to live fully and faithfully and not worry ourselves sick about the woes of the world or when it will end. Our task is to have the gospel in our lives and to be a bright light, a city set on the hill, which reflects the beauty of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the joy and happiness that will always come to every people in every age who keep the commandments.

In this last dispensation there will be great tribulation. (See Matt. 24:21.) We know that there will be wars and rumors of wars (see D&C 45:26) and that the whole earth will be in commotion (see D&C

45:26). All dispensations have had their perilous times, but our day will include genuine peril. (See 2 Tim. 3:1.) Evil men will flourish (see 2 Tim. 3:13), but then evil men have very often flourished. Calamities will come and iniquity will abound. (See D&C 45:27.)

Inevitably the natural result of some of these kinds of prophecies is fear, and that is not fear limited to a younger generation. It is fear shared by those of any age who don't understand what we understand.

But I want to stress that these feelings are not necessary for faithful Latter-day Saints, and they do not come from God. To ancient Israel, the great Jehovah said:

“Be strong and of a good courage, fear not, nor be afraid of them: for the Lord thy God, he it is that doth go with thee; he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee. . . .

“And the Lord, he it is that doth go before thee; he will be with thee, he will not fail thee, neither forsake thee: fear not, neither be dismayed.” (Deut. 31:6, 8.)

And to you, our marvelous generation in modern Israel, the Lord has said:

“Therefore, fear not, little flock; do good; let earth and hell combine against you, for if ye are built upon my rock, they cannot prevail. . . .

“Look unto me in every thought; doubt not, fear not.” (D&C 6:34, 36.)

Such counsel is laced throughout our modern scriptures. Listen to this wonderful reassurance: “Fear not, little children, for you are mine, and I have overcome the world, and you are of them that my Father hath given me.” (D&C 50:41.) “Verily I say unto you my friends, fear not, let your hearts be comforted; yea, rejoice evermore, and in everything give thanks.” (D&C 98:1.)

In light of such wonderful counsel, I think it is incumbent upon us to rejoice a little more and despair a little less, to give thanks for what we have and for the magnitude of God's blessings to us, and to talk a little less about what we may not have or what anxiety may accompany difficult times in this or any generation.

A time of great hope and excitement

For Latter-day Saints this is a time of great hope and excitement—one of the greatest eras in the Restoration and therefore one of the greatest eras in any dispensation, inasmuch as ours is the greatest of all dispensations. We need to have faith and hope, two of the great fundamental virtues of any discipleship of Christ. We must continue to exercise confidence in God, inasmuch as that is the first principle in our code of belief. We must believe that God has all power, that he loves us, and that his work will not be stopped or frustrated in our individual lives or in the world generally. . . .

I promise you in the name of the Lord whose servant I am that God will always protect and care for his people. We will have our difficulties the way every generation and people have had difficulties. But with the gospel of Jesus Christ, you have every hope and promise and reassurance. The Lord has power over his Saints and will always prepare places of peace, defense, and safety for his people. When we have faith in God we can hope for a better world—for us personally, and for all mankind. The prophet Ether taught anciently (and he knew something about troubles): “Wherefore, whoso believeth in God might with surety hope for a better world, yea, even a place at the right hand of God, which hope cometh of faith, maketh an anchor to the souls of men, which would make them sure and steadfast, always abounding in good works, being led to glorify God.” (Ether 12:4.)

Disciples of Christ in every generation are invited, indeed commanded, to be filled with a perfect brightness of hope. (See 2 Ne. 31:20.)

Seeking to dispel fear

. . . If our faith and hope are anchored in Christ, in his teachings, commandments, and promises, then we are able to count on something truly remarkable, genuinely miraculous, which can part the Red Sea and lead modern Israel to a place “where none shall come to hurt or make afraid.” (*Hymns*, 1985, no. 30.) Fear, which can come upon people in difficult days, is a principal weapon in the arsenal which Satan uses to make mankind unhappy. He who fears loses strength for the combat of life in the fight against evil.

Therefore the power of the evil one always tries to generate fear in human hearts. In every age and in every era, mankind has faced fear.

As children of God and descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, we must seek to dispel fear from among people. A timid, fearing people cannot do their work well, and they cannot do God's work at all. The Latter-day Saints have a divinely assigned mission to fulfill which simply must not be dissipated in fear and anxiety.

An Apostle of the Lord in an earlier day said this: "The key to the conquest of fear has been given through the Prophet Joseph Smith. 'If ye are prepared ye shall not fear.' (D&C 38:30.) That divine message needs repeating today in every stake and ward." (Elder John A. Widtsoe, in Conference Report, Apr. 1942, p. 33.)

Are we prepared to surrender to God's commandments? Are we prepared to achieve victory over our appetites? Are we prepared to obey righteous law? If we can honestly answer yes to those questions, we can bid fear to depart from our lives. Surely the degree of fear in our hearts may well be measured by our preparation to live righteously—living in a way that should characterize every Latter-day Saint in every age and time.

*The privilege, honor, and responsibility
of living in the latter days*

Let me close with one of the greatest statements I have ever read from the Prophet Joseph Smith, who faced such immense difficulties in his life and who, of course, paid the ultimate price for his victory. But he *was* victorious, and he was a happy, robust, optimistic man. Those who knew him felt his strength and courage, even in the darkest of times. He did not sag in spirits, or long remain in any despondency.

He said about our time—yours and mine—that ours is the moment "upon which prophets, priests and kings [in ages past] have dwelt with peculiar delight; [all these ancient witnesses for God] have looked forward with joyful anticipation to the day in which we live; and fired with heavenly and joyful anticipations they have sung and written and prophesied of this our day; . . . we are the

avored people that God has [chosen] to bring about the Latter-day glory” [*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith*, 186].

What a privilege! What an honor! What a responsibility! And what joy! We have every reason in time and eternity to rejoice and give thanks for the quality of our lives and the promises we have been given.⁹

Suggestions for Study and Teaching

Questions

- How can it help us to know that adversity is part of God’s plan for our eternal progress? (See section 1.) Why do you think adversity is a necessary part of mortality?
- Review President Hunter’s teachings in section 2 about some of the purposes of adversity. How have you seen that adversity can be for our benefit? How can we come to see adversity from the Lord’s eternal perspective?
- Why, as President Hunter teaches, do we have reason to be happy and optimistic even in times of difficulty? (See section 3.) How can we develop greater optimism during such times? What are some blessings we continue to have even during the most severe adversity?
- How do we accept the Savior’s invitation to let Him carry our burdens and lighten our loads? (See section 4.) What does it mean to take His yoke upon us? How has the Savior helped you in times of difficulty?
- President Hunter teaches that feelings of fear about the tribulations of the last days do not come from God (see section 5). How is living by fear harmful? How can we live with hope and faith rather than by fear?

Related Scriptures

John 14:27; 16:33; Hebrews 4:14–16; 5:8–9; 1 Nephi 1:20; Alma 36:3; D&C 58:2–4; 101:4–5; 121:7–8; 122:7–9

Study Help

“Many find that the best time to study is in the morning after a night’s rest. . . . Others prefer to study in the quiet hours after the work and worries of the day are over. . . . Perhaps what is more important than the hour of the day is that a regular time be set aside for study” (Howard W. Hunter, “Reading the Scriptures,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1979, 64).

Notes

1. “God Will Have a Tried People,” *Ensign*, May 1980, 24.
2. “Come unto Me,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1990, 17–18.
3. “The Opening and Closing of Doors,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1987, 54, 59.
4. “God Will Have a Tried People,” 25–26.
5. “An Anchor to the Souls of Men,” *Ensign*, Oct. 1993, 71.
6. “The Opening and Closing of Doors,” 59–60.
7. “An Anchor to the Souls of Men,” 70.
8. “Come unto Me,” 17–18.
9. “An Anchor to the Souls of Men,” 71–73.