

Trusting God When Things Go Wrong

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In selecting a topic for today's talk—trusting God when things go wrong—I in no way wish to be the bearer of bad tidings. Mentioning the possibility (or better, certainty) that things can go badly caused me some uncomfortable moments in the past. At one time I was a member of a high council in a married student stake. I had been discussing the delights of this assignment with a number of my colleagues and friends. Almost unanimously they spoke of the great opportunity it would be to work with young people during the happiest time of their lives.

During a later Church meeting I told the students of my conversations. They greeted my story with blank stares and stony silence. But I could read the meaning of their disapproving glances: "Here we are trying to get adjusted to a new marriage, hoping to stretch the Ramen noodles to the end of the month, being deprived of sleep by a colicky baby (or variously—by a wife with terminal morning sickness [this is the husband's perspective, of course; the wife is far more miserable]), working full-time and enrolled for 17 hours, having just taken out another student loan, hitting our heads on furnace vents every time we move around our basement apartment, trying to drive a car that burns equal amounts of gas

and oil—and here this idiot is telling us that these are the happiest times we can expect?"

The only response that I could think of was, "That's right. Life gives us much happiness, but if your happiness is dependent on circumstances, you probably never will find yourself any happier."

I guess that it doesn't hurt too much to hope that some utopian time is on the horizon when some circumstance will end our problems. It just isn't very helpful to expect that it really will happen. As Alexander Pope, our English language's second-most-quoted poet puts it: "Hope springs eternal in the human breast: / Man never is, but always to be blest" (*An Essay on Man* [1733–34], Epistle I, lines 95–96).

There will be times when earthly hopes—hopes for material rewards, for changed circumstances, for loving relationships, for health, for repentant loved ones, even for lots of sleep and easy A's—will be dashed on the rocks of despair, and then it will be important for all of us to rely on spiritual hope, on the trust we have developed in a loving and all-wise Heavenly Father.

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My reflections on things going wrong have often centered on two of my heroes: the great prophet Mormon and the profound apostle Paul. I have always stood in awe of Mormon, who describes himself at age 10 as beginning “to be learned somewhat after the manner of the learning of my people” (Mormon 1:2) and who at 15 was “visited of the Lord, and tasted and knew of the goodness of Jesus” (Mormon 1:15). Then, a year later, he became the commander of the Nephite troops. The remainder of his life, as we know, was spent leading his people in their desperate and hopeless struggle against the overwhelming forces of the Lamanites and their own evil ways, at the same time ministering to them spiritually and mourning their increasing corruption. But all the while he was engaged in a massive literary project—reading and condensing the huge body of Nephite records.

I have occasionally undertaken some kind of academic task—although none of my projects has come close to the complexity and size of Mormon’s—and I can think of some pretty good conditions under which to complete such work. One should sit in front of a word processor in an air-conditioned office, interrupted only occasionally by one of a cadre of research assistants, taking time to revise, and having a good copy editor checking for typos and mistakes. But Mormon did his work on the run, carrying the load of plates with him as he and his people fled repeated enemy onslaughts. It is difficult to conceive how he could complete such a vast spiritual and literary project under such conditions. Here was a man of heroic stature whose life was filled with tragic circumstances. For this reason, a few verses about him brought tears to my eyes as I was preparing a Gospel Doctrine lesson last year.

At this point I would like to insert another of the parenthetical comments that will interrupt the already disjointed flow of this talk. I have sometimes told my students that they don’t deserve to read Homer’s *Iliad* at their

age—that they need more experience with life to understand it’s profundity. (This does not mean, of course, that I won’t test them on it!) I would never tell students not to read the scriptures, but I do feel that repeated readings at various stages of our lives reveal many things that we simply are not prepared for at first. I recently remarked to a passage of scripture, “Where were you the last time I read the Book of Mormon?”

But it seemed to answer back to me, “I was always here. Where were *you* the last time you read the Book of Mormon?”

Now, back to the passage that so moved me as an older reader: In Mormon 8:5, Moroni writes in the middle of a verse, “My father hath been slain in battle, and all my kinsfolk, and I have not friends nor whither to go; and how long the Lord will suffer that I may live I know not.” What struck me so deeply was that not even in the end was Mormon spared the troubles of this earth. Here was one of the Lord’s greatest who had survived to old age serving as prophet, writer, and military leader. Wouldn’t death on his bed be appropriate? Couldn’t he have spoken his goodbyes to his son and then just slipped away? No, true to his fallen people, he died in conflict, and his undoubtedly heroic death is noted only in the words “My father hath been slain in battle.”

The death of Paul, whose sudden conversion wrenched him from his course as persecutor of the Christians to becoming the apostle most responsible for spreading the blessings of Israel to what has become modern-day Christian Europe, is not even recorded in the scriptures. Luke’s account in Acts does not carry the narrative that far, and we are left to tradition when seeking after the last events of his life. In 2 Corinthians, written probably nine or 10 years before his death, Paul describes his life:

Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one.

Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; [We should add that this was written before the shipwreck described in Acts 27.]

In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren;

In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. [2 Corinthians 11:24–27]

Paul, like any mortal, really suffered through these experiences. In chapter 12 of the same book, he describes his well-known “thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me.” This thorn, which has been variously interpreted as an illness, pain, or even a persecutor or apostate enemy, was a stinging torment. But Paul reports, “For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:7–9). The Lord told Paul not to expect relief in this matter.

Others might think, based on their experiences, that both Mormon and Paul would be bitter or at least perplexed about their lives. But such is not the case. In his last writing but for the epistles recorded by his son, Mormon first laments the destruction of his people and then pleads to those who will come after, especially his enemies, the Lamanites, that they come to Christ and his gospel. As he describes Christ’s victory over the grave, he adds:

And he bringeth to pass the resurrection of the dead, whereby man must be raised to stand before his judgment-seat.

And he hath brought to pass the redemption of the world, whereby he that is found guiltless before him at the judgment day hath it given unto him to dwell in the presence of God in his kingdom, to sing

ceaseless praises with the choirs above, unto the Father, and unto the Son, and unto the Holy Ghost, which are one God, in a state of happiness which hath no end. [Mormon 7:6–7]

Let’s think of this for a moment. Here is a military commander who, having just experienced the virtual annihilation of his people, concludes his work with a promise of endless happiness to those of his enemies who turn to God. What can cause a person to think this way? We’ll leave that question for a moment.

Paul is equally positive: after declaring himself prepared to be offered, he adds:

I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith:

Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.

[2 Timothy 4:7–8]

I believe that the characteristic that helped both Mormon and Paul face difficult lives with calmness and optimism is trust in the Lord and his promises. For them this trust transcended any circumstance, however negative and threatening. Once believers have come to know that God’s assurances are true, no circumstance can undermine their fervent and, ultimately, optimistic view of the world God has created. They understand that the reason for their existence, even in times of trial, is joy. For the next few minutes I would like to make some suggestions that might strengthen our trust in God—even when conditions are not the best.

First, it is good to know how things will ultimately end. That is, it is important to know that God’s promises of the ultimate triumph of goodness and righteousness are valid. I would like to illustrate this point with an analogy from football. I do this with a bit of an apology to my colleagues who can’t understand how someone who makes his living teaching about

poetry, music, and painting could be such a fanatic about this slightly rough sport.

A few years ago, before the time that all BYU games were televised live, I landed at the Salt Lake airport just as a BYU “away” game was concluding. I rushed around the terminal until I finally found someone who could assure me that we had won, although by a very close score. That evening, after returning to Provo, I went downstairs to watch the replay of the game on KBYU. My demeanor was amazingly serene. When we fumbled or had a pass intercepted, I hardly reacted. My wife could even let our children get around me. Usually I feel obligated to help my brethren in striped shirts by pointing out their errors in judgment. Because my seats are on row 25, such correction often requires a rather high decibel level. This loudness has carried over to watching football on television. But on that day I remained absolutely calm, even when I had the benefit of instant replay to verify my claim that their defensive back clearly arrived early and that the ground had obviously caused our running back to lose the ball. I was a veritable model of football decorum, never becoming unduly upset or ill behaved.

The cause of my improved behavior was obvious: I already knew the outcome of the game—BYU would win. It is amazing how that knowledge changes things: cornerbacks can get beat, running backs can fumble, linebackers can miss tackles, offensive guards can blow blocking assignments, and other things can go wrong. But when we know the final score, such things can be endured and sometimes even ignored.

We also know the final score for the history of this world and for the life of the righteous. The Lord and his people will triumph. It is true that the sorrows of this world and the strength of Satan’s forces will win a number of the skirmishes. I am reminded of a wonderful cartoon that appeared in the *New Yorker* magazine many years ago. It depicts on a baseball

scoreboard the battle between the optimists and pessimists. Each inning the pessimists are ahead, sometimes by rather large scores. But at the end of the game, the score reads, “Optimists 1, Pessimists 0.” So it is with the history of this world. Satan and his followers, as well as the natural circumstances of mortal life, will inflict many bruises and win many battles. But God, who knows the end from the beginning, has promised that those who serve him will receive the fullness of his blessings. When we realize that righteous living puts us on the winning side, we can learn to trust him during trying times.

Second, it is good to know how trials can serve us. In Gospel Doctrine class in September or October of this year, nearly all of us have read or will read sections 121–23 of the Doctrine and Covenants. These sections concern what was, at least until the actual martyrdom, the low point of the Prophet Joseph Smith’s life. In that amazing letter dated March 25, 1839, and signed by the Prophet, Hyrum, and three others, from which these sections were excerpted, Joseph describes his conditions in considerable detail. At one point he says the following:

Therefore, dearly beloved brethren, we are the more ready and willing to lay claim to your fellowship and love. For our circumstances are calculated to awaken our spirits to a sacred remembrance of everything, and we think that yours are also, and that nothing therefore can separate us from the love of God and fellowship one with another; and that every species of wickedness and cruelty practiced upon us will only tend to bind our hearts together and seal them together in love. We have no need to say to you that we are held in bonds without cause, neither is it needful that you say unto us, We are driven from our homes and smitten without cause. We mutually understand that if the inhabitants of the state of Missouri had let the Saints alone, and had been as desirable of peace as they were, there would have been nothing but peace and quietude in the state unto this day; we should not have been in

this hell, surrounded with demons (if not those who are damned, they are those who shall be damned) and where we are compelled to hear nothing but blasphemous oaths, and witness a scene of blasphemy, and drunkenness and hypocrisy, and debaucheries of every description.

And again, the cries of orphans and widows would not have ascended up to God against them. Nor would innocent blood have stained the soil of Missouri. But oh! the unrelenting hand! The inhumanity and murderous disposition of this people! It shocks all nature; it beggars and defies all description; it is a tale of woe; a lamentable tale; yea a sorrowful tale; too much to tell; too much for contemplation; too much for human beings; it cannot be found among the heathens; it cannot be found among the nations where kings and tyrants are enthroned; it cannot be found among the savages of the wilderness; yea, and I think it cannot be found among the wild and ferocious beasts of the forest—that a man should be mangled for sport! women be robbed of all that they have—their last morsel for subsistence, and then be violated to gratify the hellish desires of the mob, and finally left to perish with their helpless offspring clinging around their necks. [HC 3:290–91]

It is no wonder then that the Prophet cried out, “O God, where art thou?” and asked how long his hand would be stayed (D&C 121:1–2).

I, for one, do not like to tell someone my troubles and then have them respond that theirs or others’ are worse. But the Lord does tell Joseph that he is not yet as Job, that others have suffered even more (see D&C 121:10). And later he adds, “The Son of Man hath descended below them all. Art thou greater than he?” (D&C 122:8). But God does give the Prophet comfort:

My son, peace be unto thy soul; thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment;

And then, if thou endure it well, God shall exalt thee on high; thou shalt triumph over all thy foes. [D&C 121:7–8]

Later Joseph is told, “Know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good” (D&C 122:7).

At the time of trials, it is difficult for us to understand how suffering can be for our good. But all of us have had the experience of learning afterward what great gains we have made when things have gone wrong. Elder Neal A. Maxwell often quotes the analogy of remodeling the human soul and a living house:

*Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. [George MacDonald, cited in C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), p. 160]*

Certainly it would be wrong to seek out adversity. And it is not likely that all difficult experiences are sent by God. But he has given us the opportunity to be where bad things can happen, and he knows what we can become if we trust him when they do.

Third, we become more trusting as we accustom ourselves to the divine presence of the Holy Ghost. Latter-day Saint teachings inform us, both in the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants, of the concept of spiritual death, the separation of our spirits from God. In D&C 29:41, the Lord says:

Wherefore, I, the Lord God, caused that he [Adam] should be cast out from the Garden of

Eden, from my presence, because of his transgression, wherein he became spiritually dead, which is the first death, even that same death which is the last death, which is spiritual, which shall be pronounced upon the wicked when I shall say: Depart, ye cursed.

In calling this separation both the first and the last death, the Lord seems to be telling us that such a death can be temporary—that unless we are finally thrust from his presence, this separation can be overcome. And the process of overcoming our separation from God is described in the fourth article of faith. When we have developed faith in Christ’s atonement, repented, and been baptized, we can receive the constant companionship of a member of the Godhead. The gift of the Holy Ghost means that we no longer need to endure an existence away from God. Thus we are told “that they may always have his Spirit to be with them” (Moroni 4:3). Having a member of the Godhead always present in our lives should develop our trust to a high degree.

When the Lord promised the companionship of the Holy Ghost, it was to comfort disciples who were becoming aware that they would soon be without Christ.

And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever;

Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you.

I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you. [John 14:16–18]

He also promised peace:

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. [John 14:27]

A good place to observe the nonworldly peace that the Comforter can bring is in the lives of those very disciples who received these promises. I once looked with my computer through the book of Acts for direct references to the Holy Ghost. They were everywhere—as the means by which Jesus guides the apostles, in the account of Pentecost, in the calling of the seventy, in the martyrdom of Stephen, in Ananias’s blessing of Saul, in the extending of the gospel to Cornelius and the Gentiles, in the description of Barnabas, in Paul’s missionary call, etc. Although circumstances were often discouraging and filled with danger, the Holy Ghost helped these apostles and disciples show undaunted confidence in the Lord.

This is clearly the same confidence of which the Prophet Joseph wrote:

Let thy bowels also be full of charity towards all men, and to the household of faith, and let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly; then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God; and the doctrine of the priesthood shall distil upon thy soul as the dews from heaven.

The Holy Ghost shall be thy constant companion, and thy scepter an unchanging scepter of righteousness and truth; and thy dominion shall be an everlasting dominion, and without compulsory means it shall flow unto thee forever and ever. [D&C 121:45–46]

It is a trust and confidence gained through the ever-present companionship of the Spirit.

This spiritual blessing is with us today. A man whom I know related the following event:

I awoke early one morning to feel a very real presence in my bedroom. Although I could not identify who was there nor hear with my natural ears, I knew that I was supposed to learn something important. Clear words entered my mind. They told me: “Something terrible is happening. Tell [your daughter] that it must stop or she will suffer unmeasurable sorrow.”

I asked, "Will she know what it is about?"

"Yes."

"Is it too late?"

"It is not too late."

The message was relayed to the daughter, who called her father later that week to tell him not to worry. She had received a priesthood blessing and was visiting with her Church leaders. Some time later she told her father that she had been contemplating terminating her activity in the Church. She had become so disillusioned by disappointments and seemingly unfulfilled promises that her life was filled with confusion and numbness. Her trials were far from over, but by then she had the support of Church leaders, family members, and, most important, the Holy Ghost.

My fourth suggestion is closely related to the previous one: Become alert to the softening and protecting influence of God, even in the midst of troubles. For the plan of this second estate to work, we must be exposed to all kinds of risks. But God often tempers these trials to make sure that they do not push us beyond our capacities. Lehi, as he is expounding for a last time to his sons (and just before he explains the necessity of opposition and suffering), says the following: "But behold, the Lord hath redeemed my soul from hell; I have beheld his glory, and I am encircled about eternally in the arms of his love" (2 Nephi 1:15). All around us there are signs that we, too, are in God's arms, often when we are not completely aware of the fact. Let me give you an example from my own life.

The October conference of 1993 was particularly moving to my wife and me. For once, we were able to sit down in our family room and listen without interruption. Both of us were especially struck by Elder Jeffrey R. Holland's talk. He related the story of a Sister Lewis, who was struggling with her son's leukemia.

[One day] as she entered her home, four-year-old Katie ran up to her with love in her eyes and a

crumpled sheaf of papers in her hand. Holding the papers out to her mother, she said enthusiastically, "Mommy, do you know what these are?"

Sister Lewis said frankly her first impulse was to deflect Katie's zeal and say she didn't feel like playing just then. But she thought of her children . . . and the possible regret of missed opportunities and little lives that pass too swiftly. So she smiled through her sorrow and said, "No, Katie. I don't know what they are. Please tell me."

"They are the scriptures," Katie beamed back, "and do you know what they say?"

Sister Lewis stopped smiling, gazed deeply at this little child, knelt down to her level, and said, "Tell me, Katie. What do the scriptures say?"

"They say, 'Trust Jesus.'" And then she was gone.

Sister Lewis said that as she stood back up, holding a fistful of her four-year-old's scribbling, she felt near-tangible arms of peace encircle her weary soul and a divine stillness calm her troubled heart.

[Jeffrey R. Holland, "Look to God and Live," Ensign, November 1993, p. 15]

Later that same Saturday evening, seated alone in the broadcast of the general priesthood meeting, I experienced a moment of important spiritual insight about my family and our relationships. This insight was unrelated to the subject matter of specific talks. It was so personal that I cannot tell you any details, but it became very critical for Dorothy and me when we received a call very early Monday morning informing us that our 20-year-old son, who had moved to Arizona to work, had died, almost certainly before we had had these experiences. Naturally the death of a son at any age will bring its share of sorrow, and to lose a bright young man at 20 may increase the suffering and questioning. But as we have looked back at the events surrounding his death, we have observed the comforting arm of the Lord around us. Elder Holland was clearly not aware that his talk would have special meaning for us—teaching us to trust—but

it did. And my experiences in priesthood meeting were a critical preparation for us even though we did not know that at the time I had them. Event after event gave evidence that we were encircled by protections and comforts. And these comforts were not a revising of the record to make ourselves feel better. Some were so specific that even the cynic would need to concede that God was there for us.

What we experienced was not exceptional. Loving fathers often need to chasten and correct their children, and they sometimes need to let them learn hard lessons through experience—but they are always there for them. So it is with our Father in Heaven.

Fifth, we should learn that on this earth God expects our obedience and best effort, not our perfection. Often, when things go wrong, we feel that it is because we have failed in some way. There are times this is true and others when it is not. We live in fragile, mortal conditions and are sometimes quite weak. In chapters 7 and 8 of his epistle to the Romans, Paul discusses the tendency of humans to fall short even of their own expectations and desires. He points out that none of us could be saved through the law alone. He tells us that he delights in the law of God:

But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.

O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? [Romans 7:23–24]

The King James translation of Paul’s apparently complicated Greek seems to be saying this—that even those who wish to obey God’s

law, and who keep that wish in their minds, are still subject to the temptations of the flesh. Because of this, we sometimes fall. But, Paul continues, Christ has overcome our frailties, sorrows, sins, and mortal weaknesses. We are enabled through him to live in the Spirit (see verse 25). And, “The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ” (Romans 8:16–17). Thus Paul can express his faith: “For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18). We should not add to the anxieties of this world a lack of confidence in what God has promised he can do for us through his Son Jesus Christ. He can overcome our sins and failings and cleanse us from our iniquities.

Ultimately it is this faith in what God has done for us and revealed to us through his Son that will strengthen our trust in him when things go wrong. We believe Christ when he said, “In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). And we can affirm with Paul:

For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come,

Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. [Romans 8:38–39]

To which I bear my witness in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.