

# Cycle of Life

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## **Mountains and Valleys**

Recently, while flying from Salt Lake City to Los Angeles, the pilot suggested we look out the right side of the plane and see in the distance a snow-capped mountain called Mount Whitney. Mount Whitney is one of the highest peaks in the United States. It reaches into the sky 14,495 feet. The pilot immediately drew our attention to another interesting sight. This was Death Valley—the lowest point in the United States at 280 feet below sea level. How unusual to see, in this panoramic picture out of an airplane window, both these extremes of nature.

The higher up the mountain we climb, the broader our vision. We can see peaks and valleys. We can see the beauty of forests, and then we notice barren places above the timberline.

There is a parallel to these heights and depths in the way people live their lives—some living below the sea level of humanity and others towering high in the heavens above them.

The distance from Mount Whitney to Death Valley, the way the crow flies, is approximately seventy-five miles—so close in distance, yet so far away and different in circumstances.

A mountain-peak view of life can be seen clearly in the lives of those people recorded in the Book of Mormon. We observe the continual

climbing and falling, the living high and low in life's strata. They prospered, then found themselves in the very depths of despair in captivity.

Now take a moment and think: Where are *you* living? On top of Mount Whitney or in Death Valley?

We can learn lessons of eternal perspective by observing the lives of others. Life can be a cycle of various levels of existence. The living of life is a great contest, greater than basketball or football. The prize is the hearts of men and women—your heart and my heart. When our hearts are not properly attuned, we are unlikely to respond to the pleadings of the Spirit.

Satan is most anxious to capture our hearts and place us in bondage to him to draw us into spiritual darkness.

*He . . . is the author of all sin. And behold, he doth carry on his works of darkness . . . from generation*

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*to generation according as he can get hold upon the hearts of the children of men.* [Helaman 6:30]

For thousands of years Satan has refined his devious tactics designed to capture our attention—one way is by enticing us through our physical senses. He coaxes, entices, and cajoles us to reach out—to reach out to that which degrades. He convinces even intelligent creatures to walk in paths covered with roots and brambles, hoping to trip us so we might fall and sink into the gloom of his power. If we do fall, we will be deep in the ravine of life, weighed down by spiritual darkness. In this uncomfortable, far-off place we see a sign: “Bondage.” Bondage to whom? To Satan.

But if we will look up, we will see a small ray of light piercing through the circumstances of spiritual darkness. This gives us hope. How can we find the path that will lead us upward?

The Lord will beckon us to turn to him. Ammon teaches that

*If ye will turn to the Lord with full purpose of heart, and put your trust in him, and serve him with all diligence of mind, if ye do this, he will, according to his own will and pleasure, deliver you out of bondage.* [Mosiah 7:33]

How can we be delivered from this spiritual bondage? When the heart grows cold and hard, the light of spirituality goes out. Hardening of the heart can be just as dangerous to one’s spiritual health as hardening of the arteries is to one’s physical health. Hardening of the arteries can cause physical death. Hardening of the heart can cause a more serious death—the death of the spirit. When the heart is softened, the Lord can reach out—bringing comfort and spiritual warmth—and give us direction to help us reach our ultimate destination.

### **Climbing up the Mountain**

As we consider making a trip, one of our first priorities is to find a road map that will

clearly outline roads and distances. If we are traveling in a car, we make sure it is in good condition. We make certain our car insurance is current and in force. Having selected our route, we fill the gas tank. As we travel, highway numbers and warning signs will be carefully observed.

Being on the correct route and traveling with a consciousness of varying conditions such as speed limits, curves, and narrow bridges will allow us to arrive safely at our destination. Warning signs are extremely important.

The same is true as we hike on a trail in the mountains. Signs will indicate direction as well as dangerous conditions. We’ll want to be aware of narrow places on the trail and where there are precipitous slopes down the mountainside. Loose rocks, sand, or anything that could cause unsafe footing will be most carefully observed.

Do you need some direction so you can climb to a higher plane? Let’s listen to this counsel:

*He [the Lord] did deliver them because they did humble themselves before him; and because they cried mightily unto him he did deliver them out of bondage; and thus doth the Lord work with his power in all cases among the children of men, extending the arm of mercy towards them that put their trust in him.* [Mosiah 29:20]

They did two things. “They did humble themselves before him” and “they cried mightily unto him.” So we have the attitude of humility and supplication in prayer. This will bring to us a desire to reorder our lives.

Responding to this counsel, we observe at the base of the mountain a trail with a sign lettered “Humility” pointing up the mountainside.

Mustering all our strength, we find ourselves moving slightly upward. We feel exhilaration. It occurs to us that if we follow this

marked trail with proper effort, there is a possibility we could climb even higher.

King Benjamin counseled:

*And again, believe that ye must repent of your sins and forsake them, and humble yourselves before God; and ask in sincerity of heart that he would forgive you; and now, if you believe all these things see that ye do them. [Mosiah 4:10]*

The Lord will reward our honest efforts.

At the side of the trail we now notice the sign marked “Repentance.” In Mosiah the Lord is quoted directly: “Yea, and as often as my people repent will I forgive them their trespasses” (Mosiah 26:30).

Warmed by his spirit of forgiveness, we climb higher up the mountain and find yet another sign on the path—this one marked “Obedience.” We will have a very strong yearning to be obedient and yield our hearts to our Heavenly Father. Speaking of the experiences of the Nephites, we are told:

*They did fast and pray oft, and did wax stronger and stronger in their humility, and firmer and firmer in the faith of Christ, unto the filling their souls with joy and consolation, yea, even to the purifying and the sanctification of their hearts, which sanctification cometh because of their yielding their hearts unto God. [Helaman 3:35]*

What will be the result of moving out of spiritual bondage and up the mountainside through humility and prayer, then passing through repentance and obedience?

King Benjamin tells us that

*all that [the Lord] requires of you is to keep his commandments; and he has promised you that if ye would keep his commandments ye should prosper in the land; and he never doth vary from that which he hath said; therefore, if ye do keep his commandments he doth bless you and prosper you. [Mosiah 2:22]*

Keeping the commandments has led us to stand now atop the mountain peak. How magnificent the view! How pure the air! How stimulating the feeling of having arrived!

### The Descent

As we now live on this mountaintop of spiritual communication with our Heavenly Father, are we safe? Or are there some cautions?

*And now there was nothing in all the land to hinder the people from prospering continually, except they should fall into transgression. [3 Nephi 6:5]*

Why would anyone want to fall into transgression from this sweet communication with him who is our Father? What could possibly cause us to lose our footing and slip partly down the mountainside?

Let’s listen to the wisdom of the scriptures as they describe earlier travelers through this life who began to yield to human tendencies.

*And in the fifty and first year of the reign of the judges there was peace also, save it were the pride which began to enter into the church—not into the church of God, but into the hearts of the people who professed to belong to the church of God. [Helaman 3:33]*

*And it came to pass that the fifty and second year ended in peace also, save it were the exceeding great pride which had gotten into the hearts of the people; and it was because of their exceedingly great riches and their prosperity in the land; and it did grow upon them from day to day. [Helaman 3:36]*

Pride was born in their hearts because of the gift of prosperity from him who temporarily shared a part of his creation with them. As we take inappropriate pride in our earthly accumulations, we distance ourselves from him who is the fountain of all that is good. Thus we have started our descent down the

mountainside. Can we turn about and climb up again? Yes! How? We must forget our foolish pride in human accomplishments, turning our faces once again upward in supplication and gratitude.

If we fail to return upward, loose rocks or shale can make us lose our footing and cause us to be drawn farther down the side of the mountain. Alma asks, “Behold, I say, is there one among you who is not stripped of envy?” (Alma 5:29). As we look about and find others who have fine homes and cars and boats and we observe our own possessions, the eye of envy purges humility from our hearts; then we slip down farther into the valley.

*Wherefore, all things which are good cometh of God; and that which is evil cometh of the devil; for the devil is an enemy unto God, and fighteth against him continually, and inviteth and enticeth to sin, and to do that which is evil continually.*  
[Moroni 7:12]

If we respond to the invitation to sin and do evil continually, and allow pride and then envy to envelop us, we drop back into the bondage of him who is the author of spiritual darkness, and we are now found below sea level in the depths of Death Valley. We have completed the cycle of life as described in the sacred scriptures.

### **Where Are We in the Cycle?**

Now let’s check the map of life to see where we have been according to the cycles reported in the scriptures. Beginning in spiritual darkness—which is being in bondage to this evil but very real power of one who is trying to claim the hearts of those of us here in this probationary state of our existence—we journey through humility and the beginning of faith in him who governs this world. The momentum of this move will carry us through repentance and then to obedience to the principles of the

gospel. We then come to the destination and heights of spiritual peace and prosperity.

The challenge is to maintain our equilibrium in this state of close relationship with the Spirit of the Lord. If we then become careless and allow pride to enter our hearts, followed by envy, we’ll soon lower our resistance to the foolish acts of transgression and arrive once again at the bottom, with our vision impaired by spiritual darkness.

Life gives us two options. One is to go through this cycle repeatedly, experiencing all the heights and depths of ascension and descension but never learning. Or we can struggle up the mountainside of life, observing, learning, internalizing, and acquiring spiritual character that will position us on the mountain peak of spiritual peace and prosperity, where we can see to the eternities and enjoy the companionship of the Holy Spirit.

In all of this journey of life it is well to remember that a loving father is in his heaven pleading, reaching out to us through prophets in their records of sacred writ. Our Father in Heaven has manifested his love for us by ransoming his son in our behalf that we might be forgiven our foolishness and lifted out of the bondage of spiritual darkness.

If you were to ask me, “What can I do to keep myself properly attuned to the Spirit of the Lord?” and “If I feel a distancing from the Spirit, what will help me close the distance and warm my relationship?” I would suggest a daily and a weekly program.

Talking something through with someone we respect brings us to a common understanding. We are given the advantage of the other person’s wisdom. Who better to talk with concerning our challenges and plans, than the wisest of all, our Heavenly Father? Verbalizing these concerns brings them to the surface and exposes them to the wisdom of the ages. Then we must listen for promptings and impressions from that divine source.

The heavens want to communicate with us and lift us heavenward. Our responsibility is to tune in the proper channel. So, I suggest to you that you pray daily, morning and night.

One other practice will bring a great return on the time invested: drinking daily from the scriptures. It might be as little as a verse some days. Other days it could be chapters and many pages. The ever-constant taking in of spiritual truths will develop sinew and muscle to carry us forward and upward in the pursuit of life in its eternal journey.

With the daily practice of prayer and scriptural exposure, we will be protected from many otherwise unhappy moments. But unhappy moments will come. We will not always live up to even our own expectations.

There is a weekly opportunity to reorient our journey—to ponder, meditate, and inventory our feelings. We can bow in reverence for the gift of atonement—the forgiveness proffered us by the cross and the sepulchre. We partake of the bread and water and witness that we are willing to take upon us the name of the Son, always remembering him and keeping his commandments so we may have his spirit to be with us.

### **Channels of Power**

Let me share a growing experience between a man spiritually mature in his understanding and appreciation for the significance of these sacred emblems and a young deacon who was but beginning his association with eternal truths.

*The sacrament never really meant much to me until the Sunday I was ordained a deacon. That afternoon I passed the sacrament for the first time. Prior to the meeting, one of the deacons warned me, "Look out for Brother Schmidt. You may have to wake him up!" Finally the time came for me to participate in the passing of the sacrament. I handled the first six rows quite well. Children and adults partook of the bread with no noticeable thought or problem. Then I got to row seven, the row where Brother Schmidt always sat. But I was surprised. Instead of being asleep he was*

*wide awake. Unlike many of the others I had served, he took the bread with what seemed to be great thought and reverence.*

*A few minutes later I found myself again approaching row seven with the water. This time my friend was right. Brother Schmidt sat with his head bowed and his big German eyes shut. He was evidently sound asleep. What could I do or say? I looked for a moment at his brow, wrinkled and worn from years of toil and hardship. He had joined the Church as a teenager and had experienced much persecution in his small German town. I had heard the story many times in testimony meeting. I decided finally to gently nudge his shoulder in hopes of waking him. As I reached to do so, his head slowly lifted. There were tears streaming down his cheeks and as I looked into his eyes I saw love and joy. He quietly reached up and took the water. Even though I was only twelve then, I can still remember vividly the feeling I had as I watched this rugged old man partake of the sacrament. I knew without a doubt that he was feeling something about the sacrament that I had never felt. I determined then that I wanted to feel those same feelings. . . .*

*It had been seven years since John had the experience of first passing the sacrament to Brother Schmidt. Since that time he had watched Brother Schmidt carefully. John continued to gain a greater and greater appreciation for his faith and love of the Savior. In two weeks John would be in the mission field, but prior to leaving he wanted to do something he had desired for years—have a personal talk with Brother Schmidt. Saturday evening John went to Brother Schmidt's home. He lived alone. His wife had passed away a few years earlier. As John entered the small but neatly kept home, he felt a special spirit. Pictures of some of the temples were hung neatly on one wall. On another wall was a painting of the Savior kneeling in Gethsemane. John began, "Brother Schmidt, ever since I first passed the sacrament to you I sensed it has a profound meaning in your life. Before I leave for the mission field, I want to find out why this ordinance that some seem to take so lightly is so meaningful to you." Brother Schmidt didn't answer for a few moments. His eyes seemed to focus on the*

picture of Christ that hung on the wall before him. Then he said, “John, after I joined the Church in Germany, many of my friends deserted me. My family was also upset and for a time I was left almost completely alone. I desperately needed a source of strength and power to help me survive the challenges I was facing. One day I was reading in the Doctrine and Covenants.” Brother Schmidt turned to these verses and read:

“Therefore, in the ordinances thereof, the power of godliness is manifest.

“And without the ordinances thereof, and the authority of the priesthood, the power of godliness is not manifest unto men in the flesh;

“For without this no man can see the face of God, even the Father, and live. (D&C 84:20–22).

“As I read those verses,” he continued, the revelation came to me that the powers of godliness are really manifest in the ordinances of the gospel. I began to see that ordinances are indeed channels of power. That is to say, through ordinances we can literally partake of the spirit and power that emanates from God. I then began a personal study to learn all I could about the ordinances of the gospel. As I studied I became impressed that the sacrament is one of the most important keys to spiritual growth and strength. I decided as a young man that, no matter what went on around me, my ability to live the gospel and to have a personal relationship with Christ could be strengthened as I partook worthily of the sacrament. Sunday after Sunday I went to the sacrament service hungry—hungry to partake of the power of Jesus Christ in my life. Gradually I learned that those who hunger and thirst after righteousness can be filled with the Holy Ghost. Since then, John, I have tried to make the sacrament a time of total worship—a time to think of the Lord and of my behavior during the preceding week, a time to repent and to make commitments. Now, each day of the week, I look forward to the sacrament. To always remember my Savior is a commitment for every day, as well as Sunday.”

John was greatly impressed by what Brother Schmidt had said and asked, “But, Brother Schmidt, don’t you ever get distracted by the noises during the passing of the sacrament?”

“John, it isn’t always an easy thing to make the sacrament a total worship experience. Sometimes outside influences and distracting thoughts can sidetrack our purpose for being there. But I have found that if I go to a sacrament meeting with a purpose and desire to communicate with the Lord these distractions can be handled more easily.”

As John walked home, he again remembered that day seven years earlier when he had watched Brother Schmidt. Once again the emotions welled up within him. With renewed determination he whispered, “I want to feel those feelings too.” [Book of Mormon Student Manual (Religion 121–122) (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979), pp. 417, 422–23]

The fuel for our eternal journey can be prayer, scriptural truths, and the companionship of the Holy Spirit through partaking of the sacrament. If we are thus fortified, spiritual darkness cannot place us in bondage. If captured momentarily, we will break out through humility, repentance, and obedience to find spiritual peace and prosperity. Then pride, envy, and wickedness will not pull us down the mountainside into the depths of Death Valley.

The power of heaven is awaiting our efforts. May we—you and I—be responsive to this beckoning surge of power that we might be safeguarded from the protruding roots across our paths and the loose rocks or sand that can impede our eternal journey. May we place our hand in his to be guided and lifted heavenward, prepared to give our hearts fully and completely as evidence of our desire to be warmly embraced in his love.

God is in his heaven. Jesus Christ is our Savior. He lived in the meridian of time. He organized the Church. He called others about him. He was placed on the cross and then in the tomb. He lives today. And because he lives today we can live eternally. May we live on this spiritual plane in close communication with the source of all power, I pray humbly in the very sacred name of Jesus Christ. Amen.