

The Bitter Cup and the Bloody Baptism

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The Duration of the War

In the final few weeks of 1944 I was bundled up and taken, at about six in the morning as I recall, down to the Big Hand Cafe on the corner of Main Street and Highway 91 in St. George, Utah. That's where the Greyhound bus stopped in our little town, and that morning my Uncle Herb, all of seventeen years of age, was leaving for San Diego, California—wherever that was. Apparently in 1944 there was a war on somewhere, and he was now deemed old enough to go and do his part. He had joined the United States Navy, and we were there to say good-bye.

Actually, I had a rather formal part in this bus stop program. I had practiced and was now supposed to sing in my four-year-old solo voice a little ditty that celebrated sailors with lyrics beginning "Bell-bottom trousers / Coat of navy blue. / She loves her sailor boy / And he loves her too." However, as with other assignments later in my life, I panicked in the public eye and went stone silent. I refused to sing a note.

But my silence seemed to work out all right anyway because my mother and my grandmother and my aunts were all crying and nobody cared much whether I sang or not. I asked why they were crying, and they said it was because Uncle Herb was going to war.

I asked, "How long will he be gone?"—not knowing then that some of the boys were never coming home. Through her tears my grandmother said, "He will be gone as long as it takes. He will be gone for the duration of the war."

Well, I had no idea whatsoever of her meaning. "As long as it takes to do what?" for crying out loud—which is exactly what they were doing. And what was "the duration of the war"? I was totally confused and very glad I didn't sing my song. That would only have added to the confusion, and the Big Hand Cafe never could stand much confusion.

As you might suppose, I have thought a lot more about my grandmother's words later in my life than I ever thought about them in my youth. Lately they have been on my mind again, and I hope they might have some significance for you this morning.

The longer I live the more I come to realize that some things in life are very true and very permanent and very important. They are, I suppose, matters that might collectively be labeled

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“eternal” things. Without listing a whole catalog of these good and permanent possessions, let me say that all of them are included collectively, in some way or another, in the gospel of Jesus Christ. As Mormon told his son, “In Christ there . . . come[s]” every good thing” (Moroni 7:22). So, as time goes by, we ought—as a matter of personal maturity and growth in the gospel—to spend more of our time with and devote more of our energy to the good things, the best things, the things that endure and bless and prevail.

This is why, I believe, family and true friends become increasingly important the older we get, and so does knowledge and so do simple acts of kindness and concern for the circumstances of others. Peter lists a whole handful of these virtues and calls them “the divine nature,” and he promises us “divine power” in possessing and sharing them (see 2 Peter 1:3–8). These gospel qualities and principles, as I understand them, are the most important as well as the most permanent of life’s acquisitions. But there is a war going on over such personal possessions, and there will yet be a bazooka shell or two falling into your life that will prompt—indeed, will require—careful examination of what you say you believe, what you assume you hold dear, and what you trust is of permanent worth.

When difficult times come upon us or when temptation seems all around, will we be—are we now?—prepared to stand our ground and outlast the intruder? Are we equipped for combat, to stay loyal for as long as it takes, to stay true for the duration of the war? Can we hold fast to the principles and the people who truly matter eternally to us?

It is, I suppose, this quality of your faith, the determination of your purpose, that I wish so much to stress this morning. I am asking you to reexamine and more clearly understand the commitment you made when you were baptized not only into Christ’s church, but into his life and his death and his resurrection, into all that he is and stands for in time and in eternity.

Nearly 98 percent of this audience are baptized and confirmed members of the LDS Church. Virtually that same percentage of the men are also ordained priesthood bearers, and many of the men and women here have already taken upon themselves the highest covenants and holiest ordinances available in mortality—those of the holy temple.

So surely we have as a congregation already thrust ourselves into the most serious and most eternal of issues. The war is on, and we have conspicuously enlisted. And certainly it is a war worth waging. But we are foolish, fatally foolish, if we believe it will be a casual or convenient thing. We are foolish if we think it will demand nothing of us. Indeed, as the chief figure, the great commander in this struggle, Christ has warned us about treating the new testament of his body and his blood trivially. We are told emphatically *not* to pilfer and profane, prevaricate and fornicate, satiate ourselves in every indulgence or violation that strikes our fancy and then suppose that we are still “pretty darn good soldiers.” No, not in this army, not in defending the kingdom of God.

More is expected than that. *Much* more is needed. And in a very real sense eternity hangs in the balance. I truly believe there can be no casual Christians, for if we are not watchful and resolute, we will become in the heat of battle a Christian “casual-ty.” And each of us knows some of those. Perhaps we ourselves have at sometime been wounded. We weren’t strong enough. We hadn’t cared enough. We didn’t stop to think. The war was more dangerous than we had supposed. The temptation to transgress, to compromise, is all around us, and too many of us, even as members of the Church, have fallen victim. We partook of Christ’s “flesh and blood unworthily,” and we ate and drank damnation to our soul (3 Nephi 18:28–29).

Some of us may *still* be taking such transgression lightly, but at least the Master understands the significance of the side we say we have chosen. Let me use just one example.”

“Are Ye Able?”

At the conclusion of his Perea ministry, Jesus and the Twelve were making their way back to Jerusalem for that last, prophetically foretold week leading up to his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. In that most sober and foreboding sequence of events, the Savior—who singly and solitarily alone knew what lay ahead of him and just how difficult the commitments of his final hours would be—was approached by the mother of two of his chief disciples, James and John. She rather straightforwardly asked a favor of the Son of God. She said, “Grant that these my two sons may sit, the one on thy right hand, and the other on the left, in thy kingdom” (Matthew 20:21).

This good mother, and perhaps most of the little band who had faithfully followed Jesus, were obviously preoccupied by the dream and expectation of that time when this, their Messiah, would rule and reign in splendor, when, as the scripture says, “the kingdom of God should immediately appear” (Luke 19:11). The question was one more of ignorance than impropriety, and Christ uttered not a word of rebuke. He gently answered as one who always considered the consequence of any commitment.

“Ye know not,” he said quietly, “what ye ask. *Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of?*” (Matthew 20:22; emphasis added). This startling question did not seem to take James and John by surprise. Promptly and firmly they replied, “We are able.” And Jesus’s response to them was, “Ye shall drink indeed of my cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with” (Matthew 20:23).

Without any reference to the glory or special privilege they seem to have been seeking, this may strike one as a strange favor the Lord was granting James and John. But he was not mocking them by offering the cup of his suffering rather than a throne in his kingdom. No, he had never been more serious. *The cup and the throne were inextricably linked and could not be given separately.*

I am sure that you and I, being not only less worthy than Christ but also less worthy than apostles like James and John, would leave such troublesome issues alone if they would only leave us alone. As a rule we usually do not seek the bitter cup and the bloody baptism, but sometimes they seek us. The fact of the matter is God *does* draft men and women into the spiritual warfare of this world, and if any of us come to genuine religious faith and conviction as a result of that—as many a drafted soldier has done—it will nevertheless be a faith and a conviction that in the first flames of the battle we did not enjoy and certainly did not expect. (See A. B. Bruce, *The Training of the Twelve* [New York: Richard R. Smith, 1930].)

Stand Firmly By Your Faith

I am asking this morning that we put ourselves in the place of James and John, put ourselves in the place of seemingly committed, believing, faithful Latter-day Saints, and ask ourselves, “If we are Christ’s and he is ours, are we willing to stand firm forever? Are we in this church for keeps, for the duration, until it’s over? Are we in it through the bitter cup, the bloody baptism, and all?” And please understand that I am *not* asking if you can simply endure your years at BYU or serve out your term as gospel doctrine teacher. I am asking questions of a far deeper and more fundamental sort. I am asking about the purity of your heart. How cherished are our covenants? Have we—perhaps beginning our life in the Church as a result of parental insistence or geographic happenstance—have we yet thought about a life that is ultimately to be tempted and tried and purified by fire? Have we cared about our convictions enough and are we regularly reinforcing them in a way that will help us do the right thing at the right time for the right reason, especially when it is unpopular or unprofitable or nearly unbearable to do so?

Indeed, you may one day be released as the glamorous gospel doctrine teacher and be called to that much vacated post of gospel doctrine believer and obeyer. That will test your strength! Surely our sometimes clichéd expressions of testimony and latter-day privilege don't amount to much until we have had open invitation to test them in the heat of battle and have in such spiritual combat found ourselves to be faithful. We may speak glibly in those Sunday services of *having* the truth or even of *knowing* the truth, but only one who is confronting error and conquering it, however painfully or however slowly, can properly speak of *loving* the truth. And I believe Christ intends us someday to truly, honestly *love* him—the way, the truth, and the life.

Tragically enough, the temptation to compromise standards or be less valiant before God often comes from another member of the Church. Elder Grant Bangerter wrote of his experience years ago in the military shortly after he had returned from his mission. “I realized,” he concluded, “throughout those years that I was considered different. . . . [But] I never found it necessary to break my standards, to remove my garments, or to apologize for being a Latter-day Saint.” Then came this very telling observation:

*I can honestly say that no nonmember of the Church has ever tried to induce me to discard my [LDS] standards. The only people I remember trying to coerce me to abandon my principles or who ridiculed me for my standards have been non-practicing members of [my own] Church. [William Grant Bangerter, “Don’t Mind Being Square,” *New Era*, July 1982, p. 6]*

What a painful observation if we were to apply it at a place like BYU, where the temptation to compromise may come from a “practicing” member of the Church.

Even here—maybe especially here, because we have been given so much—we must be prepared to stand by principle and act on

conviction, even if that seems to leave us standing alone. Remember these lines from *Paradise Lost*:

I alone

Seemed in thy world erroneous to dissent

From all; my sect thou seest. Now learn too late

How few sometimes may know, when thousands err.

[Book VI, lines 145–48]

I do not think thousands err at BYU, but some do, and I believe that you will leave here to work and live in a world where *many* do, *more* than Milton's thousands. So my call—especially while we are in an environment that requires and expects it—is to live by the highest principles and to stand firmly by your faith. I ask it however difficult or lonely that may seem, even at a place as beautiful as BYU. You may be tempted, you undoubtedly are tempted. But be strong. The cup and the throne are inextricably linked.

Our Christian Challenge

I think perhaps so far I have made you think only of the rather obvious transgressions young Latter-day Saints face, the temptations Satan never seems to keep very subtle. But what about the gospel-living that isn't so obvious and may be of a higher order still? Let me shift both the tone *and* the temptations just slightly and cite other examples of our Christian challenge.

On the night of March 24, 1832, a dozen men stormed the Hiram, Ohio, home where Joseph and Emma Smith were staying. Both were physically and emotionally spent, not only from all the travails of the young Church at the time but also because on this particular evening they had been up caring for their two adopted twins, born eleven months earlier on the same day that Emma had given birth to—and then lost—their own twins. Emma had gone to bed first while Joseph stayed up with the children; then she had arisen to take her turn, encouraging her husband to get some sleep. No sooner had he begun to doze than he heard his wife

give a terrifying scream and found himself being torn from the house and very nearly being torn limb from limb.

Cursing as they went, the mob that had seized him were swearing to kill Joseph if he resisted. One man grabbed him by the throat until he lost consciousness from lack of breath. He came to only to overhear part of their conversation on whether he should be murdered. It was determined that for now he would simply be stripped naked, beaten senseless, tarred and feathered, and left to fend for himself in the bitter March night. Stripped of his clothing, fighting off fists and tar paddles on every side, and resisting a vial of some liquid—perhaps poison—which he shattered with his teeth as it was forced into his mouth, he miraculously managed to fight off the entire mob and eventually made his way back to the house. In the dim light his wife thought the tar stains covering his body were blood stains, and she fainted at the sight.

Friends spent the entire night scraping and removing the tar and applying liniments to his scratched and battered body. I now quote directly from the Prophet Joseph's record:

By morning I was ready to be clothed again. This being the Sabbath morning, the people assembled for meeting at the usual hour of worship, and among them came also the mobbers [of the night before. Then he names them.] With my flesh all scarified and defaced, I preached to the congregation as usual, and in the afternoon of the same day baptized three individuals. [HC 1:264]

Unfortunately, one of the adopted twins, growing worse from the exposure and turmoil of the night, died the following Friday. "With my flesh all scarified and defaced, I preached to the congregation as usual"! To that slimy band of cowards who by Friday next will quite literally be the murderers of your child? Stand there hurting from the hair of your head that was pulled and then tarred into a mat, hurting right down to your foot that was nearly

torn off being wrenched out the door of your own home? Preach the gospel to that damnable bunch of sniveling reprobates? Surely this is no time to stand by principle. It is daylight now and the odds aren't twelve to one anymore. Let's just conclude this Sunday service right now and go outside to finish last evening's business. It was, after all, a fairly long night for Joseph and Emma; maybe it should be an equally short morning for this dirty dozen who have snickeringly shown up for church.

But those feelings that I have even now just reading about this experience 150 years later—and feelings I know that would have raged in my Irish blood that morning—mark only one of the differences between me and the Prophet Joseph Smith. You see, a disciple of Christ—which I testify to you Joseph was and is—always has to be a disciple; the judge does not give any time off for bad behavior. A Christian always stands on principle, even as old Holland is out there swinging a pitchfork and screaming an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth—forgetting, as dispensation after dispensation has forgotten, that this only leaves everyone blind and toothless.

No, the good people, the strong people, dig down deeper and find a better way. Like Christ, they know that when it is hardest to be so is *precisely* the time you have to be at your best. As another confession to you, I have always feared that I could not have said at Calvary's cross, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Not after the spitting, and the cursing, and the thorns, and the nails. Not if they don't care or understand that this horrible price in personal pain is being paid for them. But that's just the time when the fiercest kind of integrity and loyalty to high purpose must take over. That's just the time when it matters the very most and when everything else hangs in the balance—for surely it did that day. You and I won't ever find ourselves on that cross, but we repeatedly find ourselves at the foot of it. And how we act there will speak volumes about what we think

of Christ's character and his call for us to be his disciples.

Tested in the Heat of Battle

Yes, our challenges will be a lot less dramatic than a tar-and-feathering; certainly they won't involve a crucifixion. And maybe they won't even be very personal matters at all. Maybe they will involve someone else—perhaps an injustice done to a neighbor, a person much less popular and privileged than yourself.

In cataloging life's little battles, this may be the least attractive kind of war for you, a bitter cup you especially don't wish to drink because there seems to be so little advantage in it for you. After all, it's really someone else's problem, and like Hamlet you may well lament that "time is out of joint; O cursed spite, / That ever [you were] born to set it right!" (William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 1, sc. 5, lines 187–88). But set it right you must, for "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:40). And in times of such Doniphan-like defense, it may be risky, even dangerous, to stand true.

Martin Luther King, Jr., once said:

*The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy. The true neighbor will risk his position, his prestige, and even his life for the welfare of others. In dangerous valleys and hazardous pathways, he will lift some bruised and beaten brother to a higher and more noble life. [Martin Luther King, Jr., "On Being a Good Neighbor," *Strength to Love* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), pp. 20–21]*

But what if in this war it is neither a neighbor nor yourself at risk, but someone desperately, dearly loved by you who is hurt or defamed or perhaps even taken in death? How might we prepare for that distant day when our own child, or our own spouse, is found in mortal

danger? One marvelously gifted man, a convert to Christianity, slowly watched his wife dying of cancer. As he observed her slipping away from him with all that she had meant and had given him, his newfound faith about which he had written so much and with which he had strengthened so many others now began to waver. In times of such grief, C. S. Lewis wrote, one runs the risk of asking:

*Where is God? . . . When you are happy, . . . [you] turn to Him with gratitude and praise, [and] you will be . . . welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You [might] as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the windows. It might be an empty house. . . . [Yet he was once there.] What can this mean? Why is [God] so present a commander in our time of prosperity and so very absent a help in time of trouble? [C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Seabury Press, Inc., 1961), pp. 4–5]*

Those feelings of abandonment, written in the midst of a terrible grief, slowly passed, and the comfort of Lewis' faith returned, stronger and purer for the test. But note what self-revelation this bitter cup, this bloody baptism, had for him. In an obligation of quite a different kind, he, too, now realized that enlisting for the duration of the war is not a trivial matter, and in the heat of battle he hadn't been so heroic as he had encouraged millions of his readers to be.

"You never know how much you really believe anything," he confesses,

until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you. It is easy to say you believe a rope to be strong and sound as long as you are merely using it to [tie] a box. But suppose you had to hang by that rope over a precipice. Wouldn't you then first discover how much you really trusted it? . . . Only

a real risk tests the reality of a belief. [Lewis, *Grief*, p. 25]

... *Your [view of] . . . eternal life . . . will not be [very] serious if nothing much is [at stake]. . . . A man . . . has to be knocked silly before he comes to his senses.* [p. 43]

... *I had been warned—[indeed,] I had warned myself. . . . [I knew] we were . . . promised sufferings. [That was] part of the program. We were even told, “Blessed are they that mourn,” and I accepted it. I’ve got nothing that I hadn’t [agreed to]. . . . [So] if my house . . . collapsed at one blow, that is because it was a house of cards. The faith which “took these things into account” was not [an adequate] faith. . . . If I had really cared, as I thought I did [care], about the sorrows of [others in this] world, [then] I should not have been so overwhelmed when my own sorrow came. . . . I thought I trusted the rope until it mattered. . . . [And when it indeed mattered, I found that it wasn’t strong enough.]*

... *You will never discover how serious it [is] until the stakes are raised horribly high; [and God has a way of raising the stakes] . . . [sometimes] only suffering [can] do [that].* [pp. 41–44]

[So God is, then, something like a divine physician.] *A cruel man might be bribed—might grow tired of his vile sport—might have a temporary fit of mercy, as alcoholics have [temporary] fits of sobriety. But suppose that what you are up against is a [wonderfully skilled] surgeon whose intentions are [solely and absolutely] good. [Then, the kinder and more conscientious he is, [the more he cares about you,] the more inexorably he will go on cutting [in spite of the suffering it may cause. And] if he yielded to your entreaties, if he stopped before the operation was complete, all the pain up to that point would have been useless. . . . [pp. 49–50]*

[So I am, you see, one] *of God’s patients, not yet cured. I know there are not only tears [yet] to be dried but stains [yet] to be scoured. [My] sword will be made even brighter.* [p. 49]

God wants us to be stronger than we are—more fixed in our purpose, more certain of our

commitments, eventually needing less coddling from him, showing more willingness to shoulder some of the burden of his heavy load. In short, he wants us to be more like he is and, if you haven’t noticed, some of us are not like that yet.

The question then, for all of us milling around the Greyhound bus depot about to report for duty, is: When gospel principles get unpopular or unprofitable or very difficult to live, will we stand by them “for the duration”? That is the question our experiences in Latter-day Saint life seem most determined to answer. What do we really believe, and how true to that are we really willing to live? As university students—bright and blessed and eager and prosperous—do we yet know what faith—specifically, faith in the Lord Jesus Christ—really is, what it requires in human behavior, and what it may yet demand of us before our souls are finally saved?

May I close by telling you how much I love you and how much I care about what you become at BYU and beyond. I think about you day and night, and I pray for your brightest possible future. My testimony to you this morning is that God does live and good does triumph. This *is* the true and living Church of the true and living Christ. And because of him and the restored gospel and the work of living prophets—including President Ezra Taft Benson—there is for each of us individually and for all of us collectively, if we stay fixed and faithful in our purpose, a great final moment somewhere when we will stand with the angels “in the presence of God, on a globe like a sea of glass and fire, where all things for [our] glory are manifest, past, present, and future” (D&C 130:7). That is a triumphant day for which I dearly long, and for which I earnestly pray for all of you. To earn the right to be there may we, as Alma said, “stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places that [we] may be in, even until death” (Mosiah 18:9), I pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.