

“Trust in the Lord with All Thine Heart”

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I had been a missionary in Taiwan less than a month when my companion and I decided to go to the National Palace Museum on preparation day. While waiting at the bus stop, surrounded by a sea of people with black hair and dark eyes, I noticed an older Caucasian woman approach. What immediately caught my attention was that she simply radiated tranquility, serenity, and peace. She came to where my companion and I were standing, recognized from our name tags that we were missionaries, and began to chat.

The woman told us that she, too, was a missionary. In fact, she and her husband had been missionaries for a small Christian sect most of their lives. We boarded the bus and found seats together so we could continue our conversation. The woman related that she and her husband had been missionaries in mainland China during the Japanese invasion and occupation. They had been captured and held in a prisoner of war camp for five years. She described some of the conditions and their treatment in the camp. To say that those five years were difficult, even horrible, would be an understatement. One of the many stories she recounted was about the year her husband wanted to give her a special gift for Christmas. He took the rubber heel off his shoe and carefully

scraped it on a stone until it became a makeshift rubber spatula for her to use in her cooking duties in the camp.

At the end of a most fascinating bus ride, it was time for us to part company. After describing a five-year ordeal that I could scarcely imagine, this beautiful, serene woman said, “You know, I wouldn’t have chosen all of the experiences I’ve had, but I wouldn’t trade any of them now.”

I’ve thought about that statement often over the years—“I wouldn’t have chosen all of the experiences I’ve had, but I wouldn’t trade any of them now”—and I’ve wondered what allows someone to drink from a bitter cup without becoming bitter.

I really don’t want to catalog all of the bitter cups from which it is possible to drink, but it is probably safe to say that between ill health and accidents, natural disasters, social and interpersonal challenges, family concerns, financial setbacks, disappointments, and unrealized dreams, few people have difficulty identifying an experience they would not have chosen.

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The common denominator in those unsolicited but apparently mandatory experiences is that they are painful—sometimes abominably so. Since humans dislike pain, no mentally stable person actively seeks out painful experiences. Like a child who would gladly trade all of her spinach for more dessert, we would try to subsist on the sweet moments in life—forgoing the more nourishing, if occasionally less pleasing, courses. However, difficulties come into our lives unbidden, and we are left to respond to them.

So, what differentiates those who emerge from their bitter experiences bitter from those who become better? As I have observed my own life, the lives of others, and the counsel from the scriptures, I believe the key to being bettered—not broken—by our experiences, is trusting the Lord. Proverbs 3:5 counsels us to “trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.” That is such vital counsel, because our own understanding is so incredibly limited by our mortality. I have to admit that whenever I read in Isaiah “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord” (55:8), my first reaction is, “Boy, I’ll say!” In my less humble moments, I’m quite sure that if the Lord had my unique insights into some situations, he would handle them entirely differently.

Many times, if I had had the power, I would have happily upset the cosmic appletart to spare myself and others pain. I’ve seen my sister widowed with three small children at age 27. A serious fall caused my mother brain damage that left her, thankfully, with wits intact but with her independence diminished. I’ve had friends deal with cancer, the effects of abused childhoods, the infidelity of spouses, and the loss of dreams. And I have wanted to change all of that. But, you see, that’s when I’m leaning unto my own understanding and not trusting in the Lord.

Trust in the Lord leads to a more mature perspective. Implicit in the instruction to lean not unto our own understanding is the possibility that we will never, in this sphere, possess the full perspective of eternity. With trust, however, we may be willing to acknowledge that there *is* another, more accurate, perspective. Trust allows us to believe that what we’re undergoing may, in fact, “give [us] experience, and shall be for [our] good” (D&C 122:7), rather than being detrimental.

I have come to appreciate this aspect of painful experiences because of the academic setting. As the director of the dietetics program, one of my responsibilities, along with the other dietetics faculty, is to establish the curriculum. We can do this because we are dietitians. We’ve done what it takes to become dietitians, we have had considerable practice as dietitians, and we constantly keep an eye on what it will take to practice as dietitians in the future. In our curriculum not one course or assignment is included capriciously—everything is carefully calculated to build the knowledge base and skills required to become a successful dietitian.

Do my students recognize this carefully crafted curriculum and appreciate every opportunity they have to grow and develop? Of course not! Like most students, they wonder what on earth this or that course has to do with anything; they find some assignments far more challenging than they expected and some experiences far more tedious—*until* they become dietitians. Then I get a surprising number of letters saying how valuable certain courses or exercises proved to be.

When I dislike one of the required courses in the celestial curriculum, or feel some of the assignments are unfair or too difficult, I remember the author of the curriculum. His stated purpose is “to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). He, with far more love, wisdom, and perfection than any mortal curriculum planner, crafts the

earthly course of study that is calculated to turn us toward him and our heavenly home. From the eternal viewpoint, nothing in the plan is capricious or cruel. It is my limited understanding, not God's, that makes it sometimes seem so. Now we may question the necessity of this assignment or that lesson or wonder about the relevance of various parts of the curriculum. Eventually we, like my students, come to the end of the curriculum; that is, we will live the type of life that God lives. Do you suppose we will then be saying thank-you, acknowledging the value of those very disliked exercises?

Trust and humility seem very closely related as we accept the Lord's tutelage. Mosiah 3:19 contains some sobering counsel:

For the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father.

This tells me that, far from being a passive approach, trust involves very active decision making and the putting off of natural tendencies.

If we trust the Lord, we can recognize a purpose in our painful, inflicted experiences—even if we don't like them. In the book *Simple Abundance*, Sarah Ban Breathnach states:

As I look at the roses . . . , I realize that pruning is necessary for complete growth. So, I have come to realize, is a certain amount of pain in our lives. Pain prunes the unessential emotions, ambitions, and illusions, teaching us the lessons we either consciously or unconsciously refuse to be taught by joy. Pain prunes the insignificant details that distract us from what is really important. [Sarah Ban

Breathnach, Simple Abundance: A Daybook of Comfort and Joy (New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1995), June 29]

What is really important, of course, are those virtues necessary to reenter God's presence. Elder Neal A. Maxwell spoke about acquiring virtues in a fireside address given at BYU in March 1991. Using another academic analogy, he said:

Given the tremendous importance of these virtues now and in the world to come, should we be surprised if, to hasten the process, the Lord gives us, individually, the relevant and necessary clinical experiences? We do not usually seek these, however. Yet they seem to come, don't they, even when we do not remember having signed up for a particular course? Sometimes we find ourselves enrolled again in the same course. Apparently we were only auditing before; perhaps this time it can be for credit! ["In Him All Things Hold Together," BYU 1990–91 Devotional and Fireside Speeches (Provo: Brigham Young University, 1991), pp. 106–7]

Trust in the Lord helps us know that asking "Why me?" in our times of pain is the wrong question. After all, why *not* me? Instead, we learn to ask, "What wouldst thou have me learn from this?" If we are willing to accept that the Lord's view of what we can become is both loftier and clearer than our own view, we may recognize the compensatory blessings, even prizes, that come with struggles. President Ezra Taft Benson said:

Men and women who turn their lives over to God will discover that He can make a lot more out of their lives than they can. He will deepen their joys, expand their vision, quicken their minds, strengthen their muscles, lift their spirits, multiply their blessings, increase their opportunities, comfort their souls, raise up friends, and pour out peace. [From First Presidency Christmas devotional, 7 December 1986, in "President Benson

Suggests Gifts of Service, Obedience to the Savior,” *Ensign*, March 1987, p. 76]

In the previously mentioned fireside address, Elder Maxwell stated, “The Lord loves each of us too much to merely let us go on being what we now are, for he knows what we have the possibility to become!” (Maxwell, “In Him All Things,” p. 107). Though I sometimes balk and insist that I don’t *want* to be good at whatever a particular experience is teaching me, I have to confess that myriad great blessings in my life have come from totally unwanted experiences. When I stop fussing and start trusting, the blessings come. I even have a greeting card that captures this phenomenon. It says, “You are the answer to my prayers. You’re not what I prayed for, exactly, but apparently you’re the answer.”

I don’t know why some of the lessons are lengthy and some are relatively short, but I do know that our natural tendency is to want the lesson over quickly. The time dimension of trials is strictly mortal. Again, from another perspective, they are “but a small moment” (D&C 121:7). Nonetheless, we are mortal, and time does weigh heavily upon us. You remember the persecution of the people of Alma recorded in Mosiah 24. When Amulon “put tasks upon them, and put taskmasters over them,” their afflictions were great, and they began to “cry mightily to God” (verses 9–10). My suspicion is that their prayers dealt, as most of ours would, with removing the burdens from their backs. Instead, the Lord answered their prayers this way:

And I will . . . ease the burdens which are put upon your shoulders, that even you cannot feel them upon your backs, even while you are in bondage; and this will I do that ye may stand as witnesses for me hereafter, and that ye may know of a surety that I, the Lord God, do visit my people in their afflictions.

And now it came to pass that the burdens which were laid upon Alma and his brethren were made light; yea, the Lord did strengthen them that they could bear up their burdens with ease, and they did submit cheerfully and with patience to all the will of the Lord. [Mosiah 24:14–15]

Later, when the people had adequately demonstrated their faith and patience, they were blessed with a truly miraculous escape from their bondage. Thus they fulfilled the intended purpose of standing as witnesses of the Lord’s wisdom and succor in time of affliction. The message here is to pray not for a light burden but for a strong back, then bear witness of the strengthening power of the Lord.

It is easy to overlook the “bearing witness” aspect of trials. I’m not talking about telling and retelling our harrowing tales to any and all who will listen. I mean that we may use the overcoming of our trials and the learning we glean from the process to buoy and help others going through similar experiences. When so moved by the Spirit, we may testify to the grace and power of the Lord in confronting and conquering challenges. Our increased strength, compassion, or insight could be most helpful to someone else. I have frequently been encouraged by the testimony of others—publicly or privately given—when facing my own unwanted experiences. Talking to the woman on the bus in Taiwan so early in my mission helped me keep a lot of the uncomfortable aspects of missionary service in proper perspective.

Trust in the Lord allows us, at some point, to recognize and appreciate patterns in our lives. Jan Struther wrote *Mrs. Miniver* as a series of vignettes in the *London Times* shortly after the outbreak of World War II. The most striking feature of her fictional heroine, Mrs. Miniver, was her ability to cope with her circumstances and find joy in the ordinary. In one vignette, Mrs. Miniver has been going through one of life’s dreary cycles, full of accumulated

small annoyances. She has an appointment with a friend but is left for a while waiting in his office.

Her gaze wandered to the floor. The hearthrug was an old Khelim strip, threadbare but still glowing. Its border was made up of a row of small lozenges, joined by their acute angles. Beginning on the extreme left, she let her eye run idly along this row, naming the colours to herself as she came to them. Blue, purple, red. Blue, purple, re—but here she was checked, for the second red was different from the first. So she had to begin again. Blue, purple, scarlet. Blue, purple, crimson. Blue, purple, sc—but here was yet a third red, which made the first one look almost orange. Blue, purple, flame, then. Blue, purple, crimson. Blue, purple, scarlet. . . .

Mrs. Miniver continued her observation:

*This, it occurred to her, is one of the things that make life so difficult. The linked experiences of which it is composed appear to you one at a time; it is therefore impossible to gauge their relative significance. In how much detail ought you to notice each one before it slips into the past? Will “red” do, or must you cudgel your brains for a more exact description . . . ? This grief, that joy, this interview, that relationship, this motor-smash, that picnic—can you weigh it up once for all and assign to it a fixed position in your scale of memories, or will you sooner or later be forced to take it out again and reclassify it? [Jan Struther, *Mrs. Miniver* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942), pp. 222–24; emphasis in original]*

Because we do receive our experiences one at a time, it is often hard to identify the pattern. Frequently one experience or set of circumstances prepares us to deal with a subsequent occurrence. In a beautiful choreography, barely noticed at the time, we gain skills, attitudes, and attributes from both our pleasant and unwanted experiences. These are later put to

use in overcoming a new obstacle or in rendering capable service. Because we are in the hands of a very skilled patternmaker, we won't be disappointed with the completed design when we finally see it in its entirety.

Another blessing that comes from trusting in the Lord is the ability to forgive and let go. Some of our difficult experiences are the result of other people's actions, choices, or conditions. These, whether intentional or not, contribute to our suffering. One of the surest ways to be enveloped in bitterness is to nurture grudges, anger, and resentment—whether directed at other people or at God. Truly trusting the Lord frees us from having to keep score, because the Lord does the only scoring that matters.

My favorite fictional depiction of the damaging effects of holding onto hurts is Guy de Maupassant's short story “A Piece of String.” The story begins on market day, with peasants carrying or leading their wares along the roads leading to Goderville.

*Maître Hauchecome, of Breaute, had just arrived at Goderville, and he was directing his steps toward the public square, when he perceived upon the ground a little piece of string. Maître Hauchecome, economical like a true Norman, thought that everything useful ought to be picked up, and he bent painfully, for he suffered from rheumatism. He took the bit of thin cord from the ground and began to roll it carefully when he noticed Maître Malandain, the harness-maker, on the threshold of his door, looking at him. They had heretofore had business together on the subject of a halter, and they were on bad terms, being both good haters. Maître Hauchecome was seized with a sort of shame to be seen thus by his enemy, picking a bit of string out of the dirt. He concealed his “find” quickly under his blouse, then in his trousers' pocket; then he pretended to be still looking on the ground for something which he did not find. [Guy de Maupassant, “A Piece of String,” *The Necklace and Other Short Stories* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1992), p. 39]*

The events of the market day came to an end, and many of the people were eating supper at an inn when the public crier announced that a man had lost a black pocketbook containing 500 francs and some papers on the road that morning. Soon a police officer came to the inn and asked for Maître Hauchecome. He was taken to the mayor, who told him he was seen that morning picking up the missing pocketbook. Hauchecome was astonished and asked who had seen him—it was Malandain.

“Ah, he saw me, the clothopper, he saw me pick up this string, here. . . .’ And rummaging in his pocket he drew out the little piece of string” (p. 41).

He was not believed, and the news quickly spread. Everywhere he went people teased or chided him about the string. He told and retold his story. He could not sleep. He was “stricken to the heart by the injustice of the suspicion.” He told his story some more, “his whole mind given up to the story of the string.”

Toward the end of December he took to his bed. He died in the first days of January, and in the delirium of his death struggles he kept claiming his innocence, reiterating:

“A piece of string, a piece of string,—look—here it is.” [p. 43]

Contrast that with the story of Joseph. In a rather extreme example of sibling rivalry, Joseph’s older brothers sold him to some traveling merchants. They then deceived their father into thinking Joseph had been killed by a wild beast. Meanwhile, the merchants sold Joseph to Potiphar in Egypt. You know the rest of the story. Years later the brothers are sent to Egypt to buy grain because of a famine in their land. After some masquerading, Joseph can no longer restrain himself and reveals his identity to his brothers. He forgives them completely and says:

Be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life. . . .

And God sent me before you to preserve you a posterity in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance. [Genesis 45:5, 7]

Joseph’s trust in the Lord let him see a pattern in his experiences that was probably not evident when he was in the pit waiting to be sold. It also allowed him to hold no ill will and to forgive his brothers freely. Think how the very course of history would have been different if that great progenitor had spent his time harboring resentment and a spirit of revenge. There is no doubt Joseph would rather have been the favored son at home than a slave in Pharaoh’s court, but he trusted that good could come from his plight. He rose to a position of power, thereby fulfilling the patternmaker’s design in rescuing a nation of his people.

Trust in the Lord permits one to approach life with a sense of good humor—not to be confused with a good sense of humor. I like how good humor is described in Proverbs: “A merry heart maketh a cheerful countenance. It doeth good like medicine and is a continual feast” (see Proverbs 15:13, 15; 17:22). Good humor lets us take our situation seriously but ourselves lightly. After all, if you can keep your head while all about you are losing theirs, you obviously don’t understand the situation!

I’m not suggesting for a moment that we relish our trials. In the April 1997 general conference, Elder Neal A. Maxwell stated, “There are variations in our trials but no immunities.” He then said that with the grace of the Lord individuals do “emerge successfully from their varied and fiery furnaces. . . . Even so, . . . such emerging individuals do not rush to line up in front of another fiery furnace in order to get an extra turn!” (“From Whom All Blessings Flow,” *Ensign*, May 1997, pp. 11–12).

We are given the admonition to “be of good cheer” at least 14 times in the scriptures. To be

given that counsel in the face of unpleasant circumstances must mean that we have some control over our responses to those circumstances. As Goethe suggested, "In all things it is better to hope than to despair."

The first time I truly realized how much we control our view of circumstances was while on my mission. One night I was writing in my journal when my companion came into the room. She said, "I just hate to write in my journal."

Well, to be honest, I don't particularly like the physical act of picking up a pen and writing in my journal, so I thought that's what she was talking about. I replied, "I know what you mean. What don't you like about it?"

To this she responded, "Nothing good ever happens to me."

I nearly fell off of my chair. If you have been on a mission or know anyone who has, you know that companions are like conjoined twins all of their waking hours. Nothing happens to one that doesn't happen to the other. I was literally filling my journal with interesting, spiritual, even exciting events, and she, who had witnessed or experienced all of the same events, felt that nothing good ever happened to her. I was astounded, and saddened.

If negative responses are a habit for you, change the habit. It will be as difficult, but as possible, as changing any other habit. You may not be able to change the direction of the wind, but you surely can adjust your sails. The good-cheer habit doesn't eliminate the unpleasant events from our lives, but it makes us a lot more pleasant to be around while we're going through them. That, in turn, helps others to be more supportive of us.

Finally, trust in the Lord enables us to fully savor the Savior's sweet redeeming love. His atoning sacrifice involved more than saving us

from our sins. Alma 7:11–12 describes part of Christ's mission this way:

And he shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people.

Did you hear that? In addition to saving us from death and the damning effects of transgressions, he will take upon him *our* pains and *our* sicknesses.

And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities.

We will never surprise the Lord with a new and improved kind of suffering. Nothing we will ever suffer is unknown to the Lord, who descended below all things that he might lift us up. The bitter heart is impervious to the Lord's tender mercies. The humble, trusting heart can be bathed in the sweet healing balm that only Christ can administer. And that succoring is immediately available; we don't have to wait until the Judgment Day to receive it.

In Taiwan I observed peaceful tranquility on the face of a woman who had endured much. That same tranquility can be ours if we trust in the Lord. I testify that the healing balm of the Savior will help those who trust him overcome every trial. One day those experiences we wouldn't have chosen will become to us gems of instruction in the pattern of our eternal lives. May we learn to trust, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.