

Adversity

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My dear brothers and sisters, I am grateful for your presence here today, especially in view of the fact that you anticipated hearing from President Howard W. Hunter today, and any replacement for him is clearly inadequate. Thank you for accepting a substitute with such graciousness. I bring you his love. He hopes to speak to you on another occasion.

On an earlier occasion when I spoke to a large audience here at BYU, I spoke on the subject “Our Strengths Can Become Our Downfall” (7 June 1992 fireside; see *Ensign*, October 1994, pp. 11–19, or *BYU 1991–92 Devotional and Fireside Speeches* [Provo: Brigham Young University, 1992], pp. 107–15). My subject today is a variation on that theme, which I might call “Our seeming downfalls can be the means of developing our strengths.” I will speak on the significance and uses of adversity.

Adversity will be a constant or occasional companion for each of us throughout our lives. We cannot avoid it. The only question is how we will react to it. Will our adversities be stumbling blocks or stepping stones?

Father Lehi taught his son Jacob that in order to bring to pass righteousness, the Lord’s plan allowed for wickedness. In order for God’s children to appreciate joy, they must also be

subject to misery (see 2 Nephi 2:23). To accomplish the purposes of God, there must needs be “an opposition in all things” (2 Nephi 2:11). Our adversities are part of that opposition. Elder Howard W. Hunter explained the principle in a general conference address many years ago:

We came to mortal life to encounter resistance. It was part of the plan for our eternal progress. Without temptation, sickness, pain, and sorrow, there could be no goodness, virtue, appreciation for well-being, or joy. [CR, April 1980, p. 34]

Some adversities are individual. Others are common to large numbers of our Heavenly Father’s children. During the last decade there have been many examples of large-scale adversities affecting tens or hundreds of thousands or millions. Only a few can be mentioned. In addition to wars in many nations, we have had earthquakes in Japan, California, China, Armenia, and

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Mexico; hurricanes or tornadoes in Florida and the central United States; volcanic eruptions in the Philippines; tidal waves in Nicaragua; forest fires in various western states; flooding in India and in the Mississippi valley; and famine and pestilence in Africa and elsewhere.

These huge catastrophes are tragedies, but they may have another significance. The Lord uses adversities to send messages to his children. Isaiah prophesied that in the last days the Lord would visit all nations with great natural disasters (see Isaiah 29:6; 2 Nephi 27:1–2). In modern revelation, the Lord speaks of calling upon the nations of the earth by the mouth of his servants and also “by the voice of thunders, and by the voice of lightnings, and by the voice of tempests, and by the voice of earthquakes, and great hailstorms, and by the voice of famines and pestilences of every kind” (D&C 43:25). In another revelation, the Lord tells those he has called to teach the gospel:

After your testimony cometh the testimony of earthquakes. . . .

And also cometh the testimony of the voice of thunders, and the voice of lightnings, and the voice of tempests, and the voice of the waves of the sea heaving themselves beyond their bounds.

And all things shall be in commotion; and surely, men’s hearts shall fail them; for fear shall come upon all people. [D&C 88:89–91]

Surely these great adversities are not random or without some eternal purpose or effect. They can turn men’s hearts to God. Nephi was told that the natural enemies of his descendants would be “a scourge unto thy seed, to stir them up in remembrance of me” (2 Nephi 5:25). The idea of a scourge to cause people to remember God reaffirms a familiar teaching in the twelfth chapter of Hebrews: “Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth” (Hebrews 12:6). Even as adversities inflict mortal hardships, they can also be the means of leading men and women to eternal blessings.

Such large-scale adversities as natural disasters and wars seem to be inherent in the mortal experience. We cannot entirely prevent them, but we can determine how we will react to them. For example, the adversities of war and military service, which have been the spiritual destruction of some, have been the spiritual awakening of others. The Book of Mormon describes the contrast:

But behold, because of the exceedingly great length of the war between the Nephites and the Lamanites many had become hardened, because of the exceedingly great length of the war; and many were softened because of their afflictions, insomuch that they did humble themselves before God, even in the depth of humility. [Alma 62:41]

I read of a similar contrast after the devastating hurricane that destroyed thousands of homes in Florida a few years ago. A news account quoted two different persons who had suffered the same tragedy and received the same blessing: each of their homes had been totally destroyed, but each of their family members had been spared death or injury. One said that this tragedy had destroyed his faith: “How could God allow this to happen?” The other said that the experience had strengthened his faith: “God has been good to me. Though my home and possessions were lost, our lives were spared, and we can rebuild our home.” For one, the glass was half empty. For the other, the glass was half full. The gift of moral agency empowers each of us to choose how we will act when we suffer adversity.

I recall a memorable lesson I learned from *Chicago Daily News* columnist Sydney J. Harris. He wrote:

I walked with my friend, a Quaker, to the newsstand the other night, and he bought a paper, thanking the newsie politely. The newsie didn’t even acknowledge it.

“A sullen fellow, isn’t he?” I commented.

“Oh, he’s that way every night,” shrugged my friend.

“Then why do you continue to be so polite to him?” I asked.

“Why not?” inquired my friend. “Why should I let him decide how I’m going to act?”

As I thought about this incident later, it occurred to me that the important word was act. My friend acts toward people; most of us react toward them. He has a sense of inner balance that is lacking in most of us; he knows who he is, what he stands for, how he should behave. He refuses to return incivility for incivility, because then he would no longer be in command of his conduct. [“Do You Act—Or React?” condensed from the Chicago Daily News]

I like that example because it challenges each of us to focus our attention on the individual responses each of us must make to the individual personal adversities that are sure to hound us throughout our lives. Our responses will inevitably shape our souls and ultimately determine our status in eternity.

We can take comfort in the fact that because opposition is divinely decreed for the purpose of helping man to grow, we have the assurance of God that in the long view of eternity, opposition will not be allowed to overcome us. We will prevail. Like the mortal life of which they are a part, adversities are temporary. What is permanent is what we become by the way we react to them.

Our adversities can be the means of obtaining blessings unobtainable without them. Young Jacob had “suffered afflictions and much sorrow” in his childhood, but Lehi assured his son that God “shall consecrate thine afflictions for thy gain” (2 Nephi 2:1–2). After the Saints suffered severe persecutions in Missouri, the Lord gave this beautiful promise:

Fear not, let your hearts be comforted; yea, rejoice evermore, and in everything give thanks. . . .

. . . All things wherewith you have been afflicted shall work together for your good. [D&C 98: 1, 3]

A few years later, the Lord spoke similar words to the anguished Prophet Joseph Smith in Liberty Jail.

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]

“All these things shall give thee experience,” the Lord explained, “and shall be for thy good” (D&C 122:7).

How can adversities be for our good? Speaking in area conferences about twenty years ago, President Ezra Taft Benson explained:

It is not on the pinnacle of success and ease where men and women grow most. It is often down in the valley of heartache and disappointment and reverses where men and women grow into strong characters. [Stockholm Area Conference, 1974, p. 70]

Every reversal can be turned to our benefit and blessing and can make us stronger, more courageous, more godlike. [Philippines Area Conference, 1975, p. 11]

A few years ago I listened as a widow spoke in fast and testimony meeting. She told how she had lost her husband a year earlier. “He was a good man,” she said, adding, “I lived in his shadow.” Now that he was gone, she said she had to develop qualities in herself that were dormant during her husband’s lifetime. She expressed appreciation for that opportunity. Some might not understand that expression, but I do. I heard my own mother express a similar thought about the effect on her of losing her husband—my father—after only eleven years of marriage. To carry this

point to an even more personal level, I know it was a blessing to be raised by a widowed mother whose children had to learn how to work, early and hard. As promised in the scriptures, the Lord consecrated her affliction for her gain and for the blessing of her children.

In general conference ten years ago, Elder James E. Faust shared an experience President David O. McKay had related about the effect of hardships suffered in the Martin Handcart Company. Many years after this tragic event in which so many Mormon pioneers died, a teacher and some members in a Church class criticized the leadership of the Church for permitting that tragedy to occur. A man who had crossed the plains in the Martin Handcart Company was present in the class. Face white with emotion, he told the class they should not criticize something they knew nothing about.

“We suffered beyond anything you can imagine and many died of exposure and starvation,” he admitted, but he reminded them that the survivors of that company had not been critical. “Not one of that company ever apostatized or left the Church,” the old man said, “because everyone of us came through with the absolute knowledge that God lives for we became acquainted with him in our extremities.” He told how he had pulled his handcart “when I was so weak and weary from illness and lack of food that I could hardly put one foot ahead of the other.” Then, he said, “the cart began pushing me. I have looked back many times to see who was pushing my cart, but my eyes saw no one. I knew then that the angels of God were there.” “Was I sorry that I chose to come by handcart?” he continued. “No. . . . The price we paid to become acquainted with God was a privilege to pay, and I am thankful that I was privileged to come in the Martin Handcart Company” (James E. Faust, “The Refiner’s Fire,” *Ensign*, May 1979, p. 53, quoting David O. McKay, “Pioneer Women,” *Relief Society Magazine*, January 1948, p. 8).

Brother Faust concluded:

Here then is a great truth. In the pain, the agony, and the heroic endeavors of life, we pass through a refiner’s fire, and the insignificant and the unimportant in our lives can melt away like dross and make our faith bright, intact, and strong. [CR, April 1979, p. 77]

Thousands of years ago, the Egyptian taskmasters afflicted the Israelites with heavy burdens. However, the Bible records, “the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew” (Exodus 1:12).

The Book of Mormon contains many similar examples of how whole groups of people can be blessed through common adversities.

When the wicked Nephite priests enslaved the faithful people who followed Alma, the Lord blessed them with extra strength as a witness of how he did “visit my people in their afflictions” (Mosiah 24:14).

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 24:15]

When Alma the Younger preached to the Zoramites, the rich and the proud would not listen, but many who were poor heard his message. Alma saw and made record “that their afflictions had truly humbled them, and that they were in a preparation to hear the word” (Alma 32:6).

Later, during the long wars reported in the last chapters of the book of Alma, many of the Nephites and the Lamanites “were softened because of their afflictions, insomuch that they did humble themselves before God, even in the depth of humility” (Alma 62:41). As a result, Helaman and his brethren were able to preach

to them, baptize them, and reestablish the Church in their land (see verses 45–46).

With the blessings of God, what seem to be adversities can be turned to the benefit of his faithful children.

For example, on a large scale, we can look on television as an adversity because it brings ugly programming into our homes and undercuts our standards of behavior by making wickedness seem accepted and popular. But television is also a medium we are using to spread the glorious message of the gospel to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. Many other such examples could be given.

On a personal level, being separated from home during your student years is an adversity, but it is also an occasion for significant growth as you make individual choices and obtain independent experiences you could never have obtained by remaining in the home of your loving parents. This whole process of learning and maturing is a type of the experience of mortality away from our heavenly home.

Some students look on a shortage of money and the need to be employed as a serious adversity. Along with many of your parents and teachers, I remember such experiences and feelings, and I am unpersuaded that relative poverty and hard work are greater adversities than relative affluence and free time. You are all familiar with the cycles reported in the Book of Mormon, in which prosperity led to complacency and pride and spiritual downfall, and in which deprivations led to humility and spiritual growth. I believe that the easy way materially usually is not the best way spiritually. For many, though not all, material wealth and abundant free time are spiritual impediments.

I am sure that the skills and discipline and soul-power that result from overcoming the challenge of material shortages open the door for extraordinary blessings. I offer one small personal example. As poor graduate students

in Chicago, my wife and I did not have the resources to telephone home, except for very short calls on special holidays. We had to keep in touch by long, weekly letters, which each of us typed to both sets of parents each week. The composition of those letters developed writing skills that have blessed each of our lives for the ensuing forty-some years. We would have been deprived of a blessing of significant growth if we could have simply picked up the telephone and communicated in the almost effortless and sometimes almost thoughtless way that would have been available if we had had more money. I am an advocate of letters among loved ones, and my preference has been reinforced as I have written family histories and rejoiced in the details of loved one's lives that have been preserved in writing rather than lost on some electronic highway.

To cite other examples of how what seem to be downfalls can become the means of developing great strengths, consider Japan and West Germany. These nations survived and built upon the terrible adversities of defeat in World War II to become two of the world's mightiest nations. South Korea has done the same. At this time many great people in China and other nations, including members of our Church, face significant adversities in trying to meet together and practice their religion. But I believe that through faith even these adversities will be turned to blessings in the lives of these brothers and sisters. As we sing in that great hymn, "God Moves in a Mysterious Way,"

*Ye fearful Saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break
In blessings on your head.*
[Hymns, 1985, no. 285, verse 2]

In her fine book called *Adversity*, Elaine Cannon shares this valuable example:

An old cowboy said he had learned life's most important lessons from Hereford cows. All his life he had worked cattle ranches where winter storms took a heavy toll among the herds. Freezing rains whipped across the prairies. Howling, bitter winds piled snow into enormous drifts. Temperatures might drop quickly to below zero degrees. Flying ice cut into the flesh. In this maelstrom of nature's violence most cattle would turn their backs to the ice blasts and slowly drift downwind, mile upon mile. Finally, intercepted by a boundary fence, they would pile up against the barrier and die by the scores.

But the Herefords acted differently. Cattle of this breed would instinctively head into the windward end of the range. There they would stand shoulder-to-shoulder facing the storm's blast, heads down against its onslaught.

"You always found the Herefords alive and well," said the cowboy. "I guess it's the greatest lesson I ever learned on the prairies—just face life's storms."

[Elaine Cannon, *Adversity* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987), pp. 133–34]

Similarly, if we face up to our individual adversities or hardships, they can become sources of blessings to their apparent victims. God will not give us adversities we cannot handle, and he will bless us richly for patiently doing the best we can in the circumstances.

Elaine Cannon reminds us of an important way these blessings come and how we can make the most of them.

When we are pushed, stung, defeated, embarrassed, hurt, rejected, tormented, forgotten—when we are in agony of spirit crying out "why me?" we are in a position to learn something.

[Cannon, *Adversity*, p. 47]

A person who understands that life is schooling is more likely to benefit from adversity than one who expects only happiness in life. [Cannon, *Adversity*, p. 46]

The apostle Paul demonstrated his understanding of that principle and provided a wonderful example of how to act upon it. Paul had what he called "a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me" (2 Corinthians 12:7). He prayed for the Lord to take that thorn from him, but the Lord replied: "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). Having received that answer, faithful Paul then said he would "glory in [his] infirmities" (verse 9). "Therefore," he said, "I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10).

Elder Marvin J. Ashton gave a modern example of this in a conference address about fifteen years ago. He quoted a young friend who lost his hand when it was crushed in a hydraulic press.

During the first night there were thoughts of "Why me? Was it something in my past? What have I done to deserve this?" Then I thought, "No more rodeo, football, or skiing," and I wondered what type of a woman would want a one-handed husband.

Then came a fast Sunday when this young man gathered the courage to thank everyone for their prayers in his behalf. He later recalled:

After the testimony meeting, an admired friend gave me a special blessing. So many questions were answered during his blessing. He told me this accident was not punishment for anything I had done but, rather, an opportunity to help me become a better person and to amplify those particular traits which needed to be developed. He shared the thought that this challenge could make me more understanding of people, problems, and life. As I look back now, each point of his blessing and encouragement has helped in a very fulfilling way.

The young man concluded:

Today as I look back, I see the challenge of adversity as something upon which to build. [CR, October 1980, pp. 82–83]

Elder Bruce R. McConkie declared: “In the wisdom of Him who knows all things . . . , all of us are given the particular and specific tests that we need in our personal situations” (CR, October 1976, p. 158; “The Dead Who Die in the Lord,” *Ensign*, November 1976, p. 106). As the Lord explained to the prophet Moroni,

I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them. [Ether 12:27]

The courageous faith and action of one person who excels in coping with adversity can be a great blessing to others who are strengthened by the example.

Many thousands of us were strengthened by observing President Spencer W. Kimball. During his long lifetime he was tortured by the most severe physical afflictions, including invisible boils, life-threatening heart ailments, and the devastating throat cancer that crippled his voice. His noble response to those adversities inspired all of us and helped us respond to our own adversities.

President Kimball gave us these inspired thoughts on the blessings of adversity:

I'm grateful that my priesthood power is limited and used as the Lord sees fit to use it. I don't want to heal all the sick—for sickness sometimes is a great blessing. People become angels through sickness.

Have you ever seen someone who has been helpless for so long that he has divested himself of every envy and jealousy and ugliness in his whole life, and who has perfected his life? I have. Have you seen mothers who have struggled with, perhaps,

unfortunate children for years and years, and have become saints through it? Have you seen people who have calamity like the woman in my childhood who came home after a party and found seven children in ashes, her children, whom she had locked in her home. I am glad that we don't have to make those decisions. No pain suffered by man or woman upon the earth will be without its compensating effects if it be suffered in resignation and if it be met with patience. [TSWK, p. 167–68]

Our president, Howard W. Hunter, has had many adversities, and his stalwart determination to overcome and grow through them is an inspiring example for all of us. After his wife, Clare, had a devastating stroke, Elder Hunter took care of her for many years before her death. Despite the heavy demands of his calling, his personal, loving care for his disabled wife was an inspiring model for all of us. In the years that followed he has surmounted about a dozen life-threatening illnesses and physical impairments. From each new challenge he has emerged with added power and patience and sweetness. In addressing the Church last October he acknowledged God's miraculous hand in his life:

*He has repeatedly spared my life and restored my strength, has repeatedly brought me back from the edge of eternity, and has allowed me to continue in my mortal ministry for another season. I have wondered on occasion why my life has been spared. ["Exceeding Great and Precious Promises," *Ensign*, November 1994, p. 7]*

The Lord's purposes have been served by the adversities given to Howard W. Hunter, and I believe that one of those purposes has been to give each of us a highly visible example of what the surmounting of mortal adversities can do for the refinement of an eternal soul.

I had an earlier experience of learning from someone else's adversity. Many years ago a

tragic accident impaired a boy in our ward. As a freshman in a faraway college, this mischievous boy made a bomb in a chemistry lab, and it exploded and blew off his hand. As I sought to compose a letter of comfort to him, the words of a hymn came into my mind. I remember clearly how I was overcome with emotion and stained the letter with tears as I wrote the words:

*In the furnace God may prove thee,
Thence to bring thee forth more bright,
But can never cease to love thee;
Thou art precious in his sight.
God is with thee, God is with thee;
Thou shalt triumph in his might.*
[“Zion Stands with Hills Surrounded,” *Hymns*,
no. 43, verse 3]

The young man was blessed in his adversity, and so was I. The words of that hymn have been among my comforting companions for almost thirty years. Since that time I have

discovered the source of that vivid metaphor. It is the words the Lord spoke to the children of Israel through the prophet Isaiah: “Behold, I have refined thee . . . ; I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction” (Isaiah 48:10; 1 Nephi 20:10).

I know that the “furnace of affliction” is an eternal reality and that its consequences are an eternal blessing. I know and testify to the truth of Alma’s teaching “that whosoever shall put their trust in God shall be supported in their trials, and their troubles, and their afflictions, and shall be lifted up at the last day” (Alma 36:3).

I pray that we will place trust in that comforting assurance and act so as to be worthy of our Heavenly Father’s choicest blessings for his children. Those blessings are made possible because of the Resurrection and Atonement of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, whose witness I am, and in whose name I testify, even the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.