

Is Your Cup Half Full or Half Empty?

ROBERT J. PARSONS

Good morning, brothers and sisters. In a recent priesthood quorum meeting in my home ward, the instructor began the lesson with a personal experience he had while serving as a bishop of a BYU ward. A young woman in his ward shared with him a concern that she was not achieving her academic goals because she had to get up so early each morning in order to work. Her parents had both been killed by a drunken driver who had ignored a stop sign. Like many of you students here at BYU, this young woman was working, going to classes, and developing her personal financial independence. The discussion in our high priests group that followed this introductory story focused on why we have challenges in our lives. Are these challenges because of transgression? Are they simply random activities that occur in everyone's life? Are challenges and their consequences created by the choices that we make each day? Elder Bruce R. McConkie said the following about life's challenges:

Though Satan may rejoice in the afflictions—whether physical, mental, or spiritual—which befall mortal men, it is not to be assumed that he has power to impose them, except in isolated instances where people have complied with laws which permit such an imposition; otherwise, Satan would shackle

all men with ills so drastic as to destroy them.
[Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965), 1:493]

In his great discourse in about 124 B.C., King Benjamin instructed us to put

off the natural man and [become] a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and [become] as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon [us], even as a child doth submit to his father. [Mosiah 3:19]

Father Lehi some 400 years earlier taught Jacob, his first-born son in the wilderness:

For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. If not so, my first-born in the wilderness, righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness, neither holiness, nor misery, neither good nor bad. Wherefore, all things must needs be a compound in one. [2 Nephi 2:11]

Robert J. Parsons was a BYU professor of economics when this devotional address was given on 1 June 1999.

Bruce and Marie Hafen have suggested the following:

Opposition is a central part of mortal life. It may be the primary difference between what life would have been in the Garden and what it is in mortality. It is the difference between being green, untested, and inexperienced and becoming ripe, seasoned, tested, and having a mature understanding. How different from innocence, for if there is only innocence, there is little meaning.

. . . Mortality presents us with a “compound in one,” a deliberate mixing of righteousness and temptation, holiness and misery, without which there could be “no purpose in the end of [life’s] creation.” (2 Ne. 2:11–12.) [Bruce C. and Marie Hafen, “Opposition, Joy, and the Nice Life,” *Ensign*, December 1992, p. 12]

Continuing on this same theme, Bishop Glenn Pace said:

Sometimes in the midst of trials we cry out, “What have I done wrong to deserve this?” Often, tribulation comes into our lives not because we are doing something wrong but because of what we are doing right. [Glenn L. Pace, “Crying with the Saints,” *Ensign*, September 1988, p. 70]

President Merrill J. Bateman taught us that “opposition, disappointments, pain, suffering, and death are necessary to protect agency and provide for spiritual development” (Merrill J. Bateman, “Living a Christ-Centered Life,” *Ensign*, January 1999, p. 13). In Psalm 34:19 we are told, “Many are the afflictions of the righteous.” And finally, the Prophet Joseph Smith was comforted by the Lord in the jail at Liberty with these words: “My son, peace be unto thy soul; thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment” (D&C 121:7). The Lord added, “Know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good” (D&C 122:7).

So although the lesson that Sunday morning in my priesthood quorum had started with a discussion about *why* we experience challenges, it concluded with the belief that it is more important to know *how* we should react to these challenges. Again, in the words of Bishop Pace:

Latter-day Saints don’t seek the unpleasant things of life. We don’t look for pain and suffering. However, we [should] recognize that trials and tribulations come to all of us and they can be turned into spiritual stepping-stones to sanctification and exaltation. [Pace, “Crying,” p. 72]

As a faculty member in the Marriott School, I teach a managerial economics course in the Romney Institute of Public Management. In this economics course we deal with the importance of making a decision—a choice—on how to best allocate limited resources to produce goods and services to satisfy unlimited wants. We all possess the very significant opportunity to make individual choices in our life as they pertain to economic decisions, employment decisions, personal family decisions, and those decisions that affect us in our spiritual development. The old saying we have all heard is, “Is your cup half full or half empty? Are you sad that there are thorns on rosebushes or happy that there are roses on thornbushes?” The question is one of vision, direction, focus, or choice. Another way of talking about vision, direction, focus, or choice comes from my favorite cartoon strip, *Calvin and Hobbes*.

Calvin and Hobbes, his playful toy tiger, are walking and talking.

“‘Live for the moment’ is *my* motto,” says Calvin. “You never know how long you’ve got! You could step into the road tomorrow and—*wham*—you get hit by a cement truck! Then you’d be sorry you put off your pleasures! That’s why I say ‘Live for the moment.’”

Then Calvin asks Hobbes, “What’s *your* motto?”

And Hobbes answers, "Look down the road." (In Bill Watterson, *Attack of the Deranged Mutant Killer Monster Snow Goons* [Kansas City, Missouri: Andrews and McMeel Publishers, 1992], p. 66; emphasis in original.)

When we are faced with a challenge in our life, we, too, should "look down the road." An optimist will see the cup as half full, and a pessimist will see it as half empty. Here is how some of my business faculty colleagues see the cup. An entrepreneur sees that the cup is waiting to be filled. For a consultant, the problem would be that you have too much cup. A finance professor would reason that we must first establish that there is a positive net present value in the cup filling before proceeding. An accounting professor would insist that if the cup is a fixed cost and the water a variable cost, then the unused capacity should be considered a sipping expense. A human resources professor would argue that management should assign a team to the project to assess the work flow of the water in the cup. An information systems professor would inform us that through the efficient use of technology we will be more productive in filling the cup. Finally, the marketing group would advise that if we position the cup properly, we could probably sell it to both the optimist and the pessimist.

When my wife, who is a first-grade teacher, read my talk, she said, "If you were to ask a first grader this question, they would ask, 'What is the flavor of the drink in the cup?' Maybe they have the right idea.

So how are we looking at our cup? How do we react to our life's challenges? I once heard a parable about a farmer who owned an old mule. The mule fell into the farmer's well. The farmer heard the mule braying and, after a careful assessment of the situation, decided that neither the well nor the mule were worth saving. He enlisted his neighbors to help haul dirt to bury the old mule in the well and put him out of his misery. Initially the old mule was hysterical. But as the farmer and his neigh-

bors continued shoveling and the dirt hit his back, he would shake it off and step up. This he did, blow after blow: shake off the dirt and step up, shake it off and step up, shake it off and step up. It wasn't long before the old mule, battered and exhausted, stepped over the wall and out of the well. If we face our challenges and problems in the same way and respond to them in a positive way, we, too, can realize the benefit of our choice to see the cup as half full.

I would like to share with you this morning a true story from the life of a young woman. I share it not to make you feel bad or to scare you but to help us realize that some people can go through terrible trials in today's world. By perceiving that the cup is half full rather than half empty, we can survive and keep the important things in our life in perspective. This young woman grew up in North Hollywood, California—not Beverly Hills, but Hollywood, in a ghetto area. Her parents were not married when she was born. Her parents were alcoholics, and each year they were together, they drank more and more. After her parents had two more babies, another daughter and a son, they finally did get married. Although they loved each other, the parents abused one another verbally and physically.

Life at school was not much better for their daughter. It was hard to be popular because she didn't have nice things to wear and ate free school lunches. Gangs were prevalent, and, more than once, others threatened her life with knives. Many of her childhood friends had already made bad choices related to drugs and drinking and had ended up in juvenile detention centers. During this time of trial, she decided that she was going to be different. She did not want this kind of life forever. She began to have a determination, a goal, a focus, a conscious decision to make a better life for herself.

Her mother passed away when she was 13, leaving her to care for her younger brother and sister and their alcoholic father. One night two years later, she took her younger sister to their

bedroom to sleep since her father and his friend were drinking excessively. Now let me read from her own words:

I awoke the next morning to find my brother face down on the front-room floor and my father on the back porch. During the night this man had murdered my father and my brother over a meaningless argument. I trembled as the man began to tell me of the most horrifying thing I have ever heard. He told me that if I didn't do exactly what he said that he would not hesitate in shooting me also. I prayed continually to the Lord, knowing in my heart that there was a God to help me. Even though I did not belong to any church at that time, I had the faith and the courage from my prayers to not give up.

This man kidnapped us and drove around all day trying to find some money so he could get out of the country. I suggested that we go to my aunt and uncle's house so he could use their telephone. While he was occupied on the telephone, my sister and I were able to go out the back door and run down the block to another home, where we called the police.

After this terrible ordeal my sister and I went to live with our aunt and uncle. Growing up I remember some of the exposure that I had to the Mormon Church. Many of my friends would talk about going to seminary, but I didn't really understand it, although I listened a great deal to what they had to say. I entered high school and found a friend who became very close to me. She was a member of the LDS Church. I proceeded into my school year with an attitude to make myself the best I could be and to succeed in my schoolwork and to obtain good grades.

During the summer I started going to Church dances with my LDS friend. At one of these Church dances a young man there introduced me to the Church, and I started having the missionary lessons. I was scared and a little hesitant, but I knew that there was a God, and after reading the Book of Mormon I received a witness of its truthfulness. I was baptized six weeks later. The Book of Mormon gave me great strength when I had to testify against the man who had committed this

terrible crime against my family. [Personal journal, name withheld]

The struggle in the life of this young woman has a happy ending because of her determination to see life's challenges as springboards for positive change. The challenges helped her to focus, to seek for direction in her life, and to make choices that have created greater spiritual awareness and happiness.

I would like now to share three thoughts with you this morning in terms of what we might do "when upon life's billows [we] are tempest tossed" ("Count Your Blessings," *Hymns*, 1985, no. 241).

First, it is important for us to "abide in the ship." In Acts 27, the Apostle Paul was en route to Rome when the cargo ship he was on met a violent storm. Buffeted by winds, it was driven off course, and the seafarers feared for their lives. After 14 days of tossing at sea, they finally neared land. At that point, in reading Paul's advice to the men on board, we are provided with an insight into how we might learn to deal with the challenges that come into our lives. In verse 31, after several of the men had contrived to escape by stealing the lifeboat, Paul gave us his practical advice as stated to the centurion and to the soldiers on board the boat: "Except these abide in the ship, ye cannot be saved" (Acts 27:31).

Abide in the ship. Stay the course. Stay with what we believe to be important and true. Don't allow the winds, the hardships, the difficult people, or the buffetings of life to deter you from your spiritual objectives. Remember that we are children of our Heavenly Father. He loves us. He is kind, gentle, and loving. Remember that our family gives us purposeful living. Accept that life may not always be fair.

When we have these challenges in our lives, this is the time to abide by the principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is the time to continue our prayers, to continue to attend our church meetings, to search the scriptures, to go

to the temple, and to trust in the Lord. How often do we read our patriarchal blessings to help us abide in the ship? The gospel was restored for us. The Lord will answer our prayers. He is mindful of us, for we are his sons and daughters.

Second, it is important for us to seek counsel and comfort. When we are burdened by a difficult challenge, it is a good time to seek counsel and comfort from those who know and love us the most. Certainly at those times of discouragement we can turn to our ecclesiastical leaders, to priesthood brethren, and to our professors for guidance, comfort, and direction. But this is also a wonderful opportunity to turn to our parents, our grandparents, and our extended family for vision, for focus, and for direction in our choices. There are dangers in the world that our parents may have experienced or situations that we might be able to handle better with their counsel and direction. Their counsel and comfort will aid us through our decision-making process. They can help us whenever we are riding out the storms in our life. I will share with you another story, that of Melanie and how she was assisted by her family during a storm.

Melanie stared straight ahead. The storm was getting worse. She watched the windshield wipers go back and forth. "Poor Grandpa," thought the girl. "He looks worried. He hates driving in this kind of weather." Melanie was worried, too. She'd never been out in a storm this bad. She closed her eyes and tried to forget it. But just then she was thrown forward. The car jerked to a halt.

"Grandpa, are you all right?" she cried.

"No, Melanie," he said in a weak voice. "We need help. I think I'm very sick."

The girl looked at her grandfather. His face was very pale. She could tell he was in pain.

"Grandpa, what is it?"

The old man said slowly, "My chest aches something awful. I need a doctor. Please, child, open my collar."

Melanie leaned over and unbuttoned her grandfather's shirt. Tears ran down her face.

"No time for crying," he said softly. "Too much to do. I got us to the side of the road. I can't go any further. You've got to drive the car."

"But I don't know how!" cried the girl.

"I know," said her grandfather. "I'll tell you exactly what to do. We'll take it step by step." [The scriptures call it "line upon line" (Isaiah 28:10).]

Melanie thought of all the times she had dreamed about driving. She'd always thought it would be easy and fun. But not now. Melanie helped her grandfather move to the right side. Then she climbed over him and in behind the steering wheel.

"Open your window. You'll have to fix the side-view mirror. Check the rearview mirror. Okay, now start the car. Now put your left foot on the brake, hold it down, and shift into drive. You are doing fine. Put your foot on the gas pedal very gently, and don't worry," he added. "We'll be fine."

Grandpa leaned over toward the steering wheel and pushed a button under it and then fell back into his seat. Melanie took her foot off the brake and pressed down on the gas pedal. The car started forward. She held onto the wheel and steered as best she could.

"Why are those lights flashing on the dashboard?" she wondered. "Is something wrong with the engine?"

There was so much to remember, so much to figure out. She brushed the tears out of her eyes. Melanie could see a car coming down the road. It was headed straight for her. Just in time the other car veered out of the way and stopped.

"Is everything okay?" yelled the other driver.

"No!" Melanie shouted as she rolled the window down. Melanie did as the men told her and brought the car to a halt as the other car pulled up behind her. Within half an hour, Melanie, her grandpa, and the man who had helped them were at the emergency room of the hospital.

"How did you know something was wrong when you saw our car?" questioned Melanie.

"I saw your lights flashing," he replied.

*“But how did they go on?” asked Melanie.
The man replied, “Most cars have a button
under the steering wheel for the flasher lights.
Maybe you hit it by mistake.”*

*Melanie smiled, “No, I didn’t, but I know who
turned them on. [Author unknown]*

We enjoy knowing that we have a living prophet, bishops, priesthood quorum leaders, parents, other family members, and friends who are there to turn on the warning “flashers” for us during times of challenge and difficulty. They are there to provide comfort and counsel.

In addition to abiding in the ship and seeking for comfort and counsel, the third and most sustaining influence of all during life’s difficult challenges is to embrace the love and atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ. In John 3:25–36, John the Baptist preached one of the greatest sermons ever delivered on the divinity of Jesus Christ and the obligation that we have to accept him as the Son of God. And the story of the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4 teaches that the peace of the gospel is the “living water” that he offers to all men. Following his long journey from Judea, the Lord was physically tired, hungry, and thirsty and yet took the opportunity to teach the simple truths of the gospel.

*Now Jacob’s well was there. Jesus therefore,
being wearied with his journey, sat thus on the well:
and it was about the sixth hour.*

*There cometh a woman of Samaria to draw
water: Jesus saith unto her, Give me to drink. . . .*

*Then saith the woman of Samaria unto him,
How is it that thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me,
which am a woman of Samaria? for the Jews have
no dealings with the Samaritans.*

*Jesus answered and said unto her, If thou
knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to
thee, Give me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of
him, and he would have given thee living water.*

*The woman saith unto him, Sir, thou hast nothing
to draw with, and the well is deep: from whence
then hast thou that living water?*

*Art thou greater than our father Jacob, which
gave us the well, and drank thereof himself, and his
children, and his cattle?*

*Jesus answered and said unto her, Whosoever
drinketh of this water shall thirst again:*

*But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall
give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall
give him shall be in him a well of water springing
up into everlasting life. [John 4:6–14]*

The Savior then told her to go and get her husband and return.

She said, “I have no husband.”

The Lord reminded her that she had had five husbands.

The woman replied, “I perceive that thou art a prophet.”

Jesus then preached the gospel to her and testified of our Heavenly Father.

The woman replied unto him, “I know that Messiah cometh, which is called Christ: when he is come, he will tell us all things.” (See John 4:16–25.)

As the woman at the well was taught more about the Savior, she progressed from calling him a Jew to sir to prophet and, finally, the Messiah: “Come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did: is not this the Christ?” (John 4:29).

We, too, can turn to him, the Messiah, during our times of opposition and know that because of his great love for us, he will not abandon us at our time of need. President Gordon B. Hinckley provides us with additional insight into this life, quoting from a newspaper clipping he saved years ago:

“Anyone who imagines that bliss [in marriage] is normal is going to waste a lot of time running around shouting that he has been robbed.

“[The fact is] most putts don’t drop. Most beef is tough. Most children grow up to be just people.

Most successful marriages require a high degree of mutual toleration. Most jobs are more often dull than otherwise. . . .

“Life is like an old-time rail journey—delays, sidetracks, smoke, dust, cinders and jolts, interspersed only occasionally by beautiful vistas and thrilling bursts of speed.

*“The trick is to thank the Lord for letting you have the ride” (“Big Rock Candy Mountains,” Deseret News, 12 June 1973, A4). [Jenkins Lloyd Jones, quoted in Gordon B. Hinckley, “A Conversation with Single Adults,” *Ensign*, March 1997, p. 60]*

Sometimes struggles and opposition will come into our life. We can become stronger by dealing with these difficult challenges and by not allowing them to cripple us in our spiritual progression. During these stormy days, remember to, first, abide in the ship and stay in the course of the gospel; second, seek for counsel and comfort from those who love us the most and who are in authority; and third, embrace the love and atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In our college convocation in April, the faculty / staff / student choir sang a beautiful

song by Joyce Elaine Eilers, “Go Ye Now in Peace.” Let me close my remarks with her words.

*Go ye now in peace
And know that the love of God will guide you.
Feel His presence here beside you
Showing you the way.*

*In your time of trouble,
When hurt and despair are there to grieve you,
Know that the Lord will never leave you.
He will bring you courage.*

*Know that the God who sent His Son
To die that you might live
Will never leave you lost and alone
In His beloved world.*

*Go ye now in peace.
Go ye now in peace.*
[1981, Jenson Publications, Inc.]

To his love and comfort, I bear testimony in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.