

The Weight of the World

JAMES D. STICE

Have you ever picked up a fully loaded pack at the start of a really long hike? It is almost staggering as you try and throw it on your shoulders and secure it to your frame. However, once you get it adjusted on your back and hit your hiking stride, it may still be heavy but you are able to manage.

Well, school has started. You have had four weeks to get into the swing of things. Initially your class load, your work schedule, your social life, and your family and church responsibilities all considered together might have appeared a bit too much. By now, though, many of you have adjusted to your load. But some of you have not. For some of you, juggling all the aspects of your life is a challenge. And just when you think you have got your pack adjusted, a little weight gets added.

It turns out that each of us has at one time or another felt—or will feel—the weight of the world on our shoulders. My purpose today is to remind us that we are not involved in a weight-lifting competition to determine whose world weighs the most. Instead, we are involved in the competition of helping others to lift the weight of their world when it becomes unbearable.

I am a Gospel Doctrine teacher in my ward. This year I have come to appreciate

the struggles that the early Saints endured so that I might enjoy the many blessings of the gospel. I often wonder how they were able to go on in the face of such oppression and opposition. Imagine this: In 1831 a group of Saints leave the comfort of their homes in the state of New York and head for Kirtland, Ohio, only to be told that they are to go to Jackson County, Missouri. Jackson County was then the wild frontier. The Saints buy land, clear it, build houses, and plant crops. All is well—for a couple of years. Then they are forced out. Off they go across the Missouri River to Clay County, where they buy land, clear it, build houses, and plant crops. All is well—for a couple of years. Then they are forced out. Then off they go to Far West, where they buy land, clear it, build houses, and plant crops. In March 1838 the Prophet Joseph Smith joins them from Kirtland. Finally, all is well—for six months—until Governor Boggs issues the extermination order. The Prophet is arrested almost immediately and eventually ends up in Liberty Jail, where he spends approximately four months.

James D. Stice was the associate director of the Marriott School of Management's MBA -program at BYU when this -devotional address was given on 2 October 2001.

While the Prophet was imprisoned, what was happening to the Saints? About 8,000 members of the Church were run out of their homes and forced to flee to Illinois. The anguished prayer offered by Joseph Smith during that period is found in section 121 of the Doctrine and Covenants. That prayer reflects the same feelings shared by people around the world in the wake of last month's terrorist attacks.

O God, where art thou? And where is the pavilion that covereth thy hiding place?

How long shall thy hand be stayed, and thine eye, yea thy pure eye, behold from the eternal heavens the wrongs of thy people and of thy servants, and thine ear be penetrated with their cries?

Yea, O Lord, how long shall they suffer these wrongs and unlawful oppressions, before thine heart shall be softened toward them, and thy bowels be moved with compassion toward them? . . .

Let thine anger be kindled against our enemies; and, in the fury of thine heart, with thy sword avenge us of our wrongs.

Remember thy suffering saints, O our God; and thy servants will rejoice in thy name forever. [D&C 121:1–3, 5–6]

One can sense in the Prophet's pleas his despair and his frustration. His followers were being exterminated—or, if they were lucky, simply driven to a swamp in Illinois—and he could do absolutely nothing to help. Joseph felt the weight of the world on his shoulders—and that was a lot of weight. President Bush has felt a similar weight this past month as he has sought to lead the United States—and the world—in a civilized response to the uncivilized attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C.

Fortunately for us, we are not expected to carry the weight of a prophet's world or a president's world. I am grateful for that. My world is heavy enough, as, I am sure, is yours. Still there are times when the weight of my

world gets heavier as challenges come. In times like those I am grateful for the help heaven sends that allows me to carry on. And I am grateful for people who are sensitive to the promptings of the Spirit and who help me with my load in my times of need.

I would like to share with you several experiences from the scriptures and from my life that illustrate how worlds can get heavy and how we can, with heaven's help, assist other people by lightening their loads. Some of the examples that I will describe will seem very small, especially when compared with the suffering of the Saints in Missouri or that of the victims in New York. But the examples I will share were not small to the participants. My message is not one of comparing burdens. It is about sharing burdens and not judging the severity of someone else's trial.

I have a six-year-old daughter named Cierra. She is the youngest of our seven children. Her favorite thing to do is play dress-up with her friends. When I walk into the house, I never know what my role is to be. She, with her friends Madison and Bethany, may be Snow White or Ariel or Jasmine or Sleeping Beauty—otherwise known as Princess Aurora—and I may instantly be called on to be Prince Eric or King Triton or Gaston or the wicked Jafar. I must always be on my toes because these girls take their game seriously. They don't like it when an amateur messes up his lines.

I went into Cierra's room at the end of a recent hard day of playing dress-up. It looked like a Disney Store had exploded. There were outfits everywhere, with props all over the place. I went in search of the princess because someone was going to clean up this mess, and that someone was not going to be me. I found Cierra and calmly explained to her the situation and my concern. She immediately understood and headed to her room to take care of the problem. After five minutes I went to her room—her still messy room—to find her playing with her Barbies. I asked what she

was doing, and she said, as though I was a bit slow, "I'm playing Barbies."

"But, Cierra," I said, "I thought you were going to clean up this room."

She said to me, "But, Daddy, there is too much stuff out. Besides, I didn't make this whole mess by myself."

I then explained to her that she should have thought of that when she and her friends were making the mess. "Now clean up this mess," I sternly declared.

I went back every five minutes or so to make sure she was staying on task, and, bless her heart, she kept trying. But the mess was too big for her. After all, three little girls together make a much bigger mess than three little girls individually. There is some synergy there.

After a half-hour of periodically checking on her and verbally poking her to keep her working, I again went into her room only to find her lying on her bed with her back to the door. I marched over to the bed thinking she had gone to sleep. How dare she do that! Just as I reached down to turn her over, she rolled back and, with big, tear-filled brown eyes, said, "Daddy, it's too hard."

The weight of a six-year-old's world can get very heavy—to a six-year-old. She did not want to hear me say, "I could clean this room up in five minutes" or "When I was your age . . ." At that moment the weight was too much, and she needed relief. So Prince Eric picked her up, and he, together with Princess Ariel, cleaned up the castle. It didn't take much effort on my part to lighten a load that to her had become too heavy.

Recall from the Book of Mormon the story of Alma the Elder and Abinadi. Alma believed the words of the prophet Abinadi, and he then himself became a mighty prophet. In one of his sermons by the Waters of Mormon, Alma detailed the characteristics of one who desires to come into the fold of God and be baptized:

Ye are desirous to come into the fold of God, and to be called his people, and are willing to bear one another's burdens, that they may be light;

Yea, and are willing to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort, and to stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places that ye may be in, even until death. [Mosiah 18:8–9]

Baptism is an outward ordinance signifying a change that occurs on the inside. Alma taught that true followers of Jesus Christ should demonstrate a willingness "to bear one another's burdens, that they may be light." Sometimes it is as easy as helping to pick up a messy room. In fact, I would argue that, in many cases, lightening the load of someone else is easy—because it is their load. The burden is not weighing us down. If we are earnestly striving to do God's will, He will often direct us to those who might need our help, and He will inspire us as to what we might do—if we are paying attention. And sometimes Heavenly Father takes matters into His own hands and does what needs to be done when others can't do it.

Let me share with you a brief missionary story. Our oldest son J.D. (our number-two child) is 19 years old. He was called on a mission and assigned to serve in the Peru Lima North Mission. He was to spend three weeks in the Provo MTC and then head to the MTC in Lima for six weeks. When we left him at the MTC here in Provo, we left him knowing that in three weeks we would see him at the airport. My dear wife had spent 19 years raising this young man. For 19 years, raising him was her full-time job. When she put him in the MTC, she was forced into a kind of retirement. No longer would she be right there to help him solve his problems or, in those instances when he was the problem, help him to see what he could do better. Now he was out of her reach, and so she, like

all mothers, worried. And because he was her first missionary, she worried all the more.

She regularly sent letters and care packages to the MTC, and on occasion she would drive by the MTC in hopes of perhaps catching a glimpse of her missionary. I should note that she never got his schedule so that she could time things just right—after all, that would have been against the rules. She would just randomly drive by the MTC, and she would consistently strike out. She saw everyone else’s missionary, but she never saw hers. But that was okay, because after three weeks she would see him at the airport.

Then we got the phone call telling us that the hoped-for reunion was not to be. Visa problems would prevent his leaving on time. Three weeks would stretch to nine weeks. It’s not a long time, but when your heart is set on seeing your missionary on a certain day, what a disappointment it is to find out it just isn’t going to happen.

On the day J.D. was originally supposed to leave, I, without any clue as to the significance of the day, went with my wife to mail J.D. a package. As we were leaving the parking lot of the post office, she said, with a quiver in her voice, “I was supposed to see my son today.” I could hear in her voice the ache in her heart. After a moment she then said, “I think Heavenly Father will let me see my son today.” So off we went to the MTC with me thinking, “Sure, honey, like that will happen. Three thousand missionaries up there coming and going all the time, and we are going to see J.D. I don’t think so.”

We circled the field that is in front of the temple and just across the street from the MTC. On the south end of that field is a parking lot. As we approached that parking lot, there stood J.D., just as though he had been waiting for us. We pulled over, and out she jumped. As my wife threw her arms around her boy, I saw the weight of her world lifted off her shoulders as she saw with her

own eyes what had become of her son. That was all she needed, and if she had not been listening to the promptings of the Spirit, we would have missed him.

I was reminded of two things on that day: (1) never trifle with the faith of a mother; and (2) Heavenly Father is mindful of each of His children. He knows our weight-lifting capacity, and He is there to help us when life starts to get heavy.

In most cases Heavenly Father uses us to lighten someone else’s load. In the case of my Cierra, an understanding father pitched in and helped. Sometimes heaven takes matters into its own hands, as was the case with my dear wife seeing her missionary son. In both cases the burden was lifted. But sometimes the burden is not lifted immediately or in a manner that we would like. Recall when Alma and his followers were held captive by the Lamanites. Amulon, one of the former wicked priests of King Noah, was their ruler. Amulon and Alma had been companions in wickedness as priests of King Noah, and now Amulon didn’t like the repentant Alma or his followers. In Mosiah 24 we read that “he exercised authority over them, and put tasks upon them, and put taskmasters over them” (Mosiah 24:9). In short, Amulon made it his goal to make life miserable for Alma and his followers. And it worked. In verse 10 we read, “And it came to pass that so great were their afflictions that they began to cry mightily to God.” Seeing this, Amulon outlawed prayer and decreed that anyone “found calling upon God should be put to death” (verse 11). So Alma and his people prayed in their hearts, and the Lord heard their cries, and He answered their prayers in an interesting sort of way. We read:

And I will also 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]

In the case of Alma and his followers, rather than remove the burden, the Lord gave them increased strength to bear their burdens. And why? That they would know of a surety that the Lord does visit His people in their afflictions. I know this is true. There is personal growth that comes from receiving the strength to bear a burden. Sometimes that strength comes straight from heaven, and sometimes that strength comes from others who are sent by heaven.

Let me share with you the moment in my life when my world was its heaviest. One of our children was born with serious medical problems. The doctors knew the instant she arrived that all was not well. You have all probably seen those red emergency buttons that are in hospital rooms and have wondered, “What would happen if I were to push that button?” In this instance that button was pushed, and controlled chaos erupted. Doctors and nurses came running from all over the hospital. We, the parents, were pushed to the side as they took our baby and immediately prepped her for surgery. It turned out that her insides were not hooked together properly, and if they didn’t act quickly she would not survive. And even if they did act quickly, things didn’t look hopeful. We were told prior to the surgery that many babies with her condition just didn’t make it. She was just a little over six pounds, less than one hour old, and she was going under the knife.

In less than one hour I had gone from the highest high to the lowest low. One minute my wife and I were eagerly awaiting the arrival

of our beautiful baby. The next minute we were being told that this one might not ever go home with us. The weight of our world became crushing—and earthly angels instantly rushed to our aid to help us lift the burden. Family members, ward members, friends, and strangers—people we did not know—literally did all they could to help us face this struggle. And, believe me, watching a tiny newborn fight for life is a very heavy burden to bear. She made it through the first surgery. That was followed by ups and downs and then another surgery, and then another.

My wife or I were always at the hospital in hopes that our baby would somehow know that however things turned out, she was loved and she was not alone. All the while our other children were cared for. Food appeared from out of nowhere, and dirty dishes would simply vanish. The clothes hampers were always empty and the clothes closets were always full. Children would disappear for sleep-overs and reappear, well-kept, days later. People fasted for our baby. Prayers were offered for our baby and for our family—and the blessings of heaven rained down on our home. As with Alma and his people, the Lord did strengthen us that we could bear our burdens with ease. In this case we were strengthened by the willingness of countless Saints to magnify their baptismal covenants and help bear our burdens, mourn with us, and comfort us. After three surgeries and 35 days in the newborn intensive care unit, our baby came home, and she was perfect. Now, six years later, I am her prince and she is my princess. It was only through heaven’s help and through the help of those around me that I was able to carry the weight of my world. I don’t think I could have done it on my own.

For each of us there are moments when the weight of our world becomes almost unbearable. Interestingly enough, we each probably have classmates, friends, or family members who are, right now, experiencing

dark moments and who need our help. Is Heavenly Father trying to tap us on the shoulder to point out those in need? Are we paying attention, or are we caught up in the thick of thin things?

Six years ago this month, from this very pulpit, President Hinckley gave a devotional talk about what the Church expects of each of us. President Hinckley reminded the students of BYU, as Paul of old had reminded the Hebrews, “Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and strengthen the feeble knees” (JST, Hebrews 12:12). The prophet then went on to provide this counsel:

I know that you are engrossed with your studies. This is important, but in a sense it is a selfish pursuit. Take a little time, now and again, to reach out to help others—there are those right around you, students in need of a little kindness, a little attention, a little appreciation. . . .

*Give expression to the noble desires that lie within your hearts to reach out to comfort, sustain, and build others. As you do so, the cankering poison of selfishness will leave you, and it will be replaced by a sweet and wonderful feeling that seems to come in no other way. Never forget that the Church expects you to be benevolent and to do good to all men. [Gordon B. Hinckley, “To a Man Who Has Done What This Church Expects of Each of Us,” *BYU 1995–96 Speeches* (Provo: BYU, 1996), 54]*

So what can we do? Let me suggest three things. First, lend a listening ear. Often after a hard day at the office, when it has felt like nothing can go right, I will go home and my wife will sense that it was a particularly tough day. She will sit me down, hold me close, and ask about my day. I will begin with something like, “All the other kids at school picked on me today.” She will then listen as I tell her what went wrong and why it wasn’t fair. At the appropriate times she will say something like, “I understand how you feel” or “That would

have upset me, too.” For a moment she lets me rest my load on her shoulders long enough for me to gather my strength, take a deep breath, and wade back into life.

When we are hiking in the mountains with a fully loaded pack, we look for those shady spots where we can rest for a moment, remove the weight from our backs, take a drink, and gather our strength for the rest of the journey. Listening is a shady spot on the trail of life. I don’t need you to take my burdens. After all, how I handle my burdens is going to help develop celestial qualities within me. What I need is for you to, on occasion, hold them for me for just a moment while I rest and gather my strength.

Second, look for small things. Too often we look for huge things to do to lighten someone’s load. Then, not finding big things to do, we often do nothing, thinking that the little things won’t make a difference. But for me it is often the multitude of little things that gets me down. If someone would help me with those little things, I could then harness my energies for the big challenges.

When Cierra was in the hospital going through her struggles, it was the little things of life that were annoyingly distracting. Here is a simple little example. Every time I would come home from the hospital or from work, I would notice the newspapers scattered about on the front porch. At the time I didn’t care much about the news of the world. I didn’t have any desire to read the paper—or even to pick it up. So they started to accumulate. Those scattered newspapers would bother me every time I drove into the garage. I always meant to pick them up and throw them away, but that small task never even came close to making it onto my to-do list. Then one day I noticed they were gone. I was so stunned that I walked over to the front door. All the papers had been gathered in a neat little pile placed by the door. Every couple of days the newspapers would be gathered and placed in a neat pile by the front

door. Who did it? I have no idea. Did that small thing make a difference to me? Absolutely!

Look for small things. To you they may not seem a big deal. But to the recipient your small deed may make a difference.

Here is my final suggestion: Err on the side of action. Have you ever found yourself face-to-face with an opportunity to help someone and said something like, “Surely someone else will help” or “I don’t have the time right now” or “I have my own problems to worry about”? When it comes to helping others, when in doubt, get in the game. If there is help that needs to be given, give it. If you can make a difference for good, make it. Don’t wait for an engraved invitation. Don’t worry about what others might think. If the Spirit whispers to you that something needs to be done, do it.

So now you have my three suggestions: (1) lend a listening ear; (2) look for small things; and (3) err on the side of action. If implemented, they will allow us to lighten the loads of those whose worlds are too heavy.

Recall the prophet’s pleas in Liberty Jail when his burden seemed at its heaviest. The Lord was mindful of Joseph’s plight, as we read in verses 7 and 8 of section 121:

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.

In one of Joseph’s darkest moments, the Lord reached down and blessed him with the strength to go on. May we be an instrument in God’s hands to make the burdens of others last for “but a small moment.” Let us lift up the hands of those whose hang down, that they may “endure it well.” There are people in our midst whose backs are bent from the weight of their world. It is our duty to seek them out and do what we can to lighten their load. I leave this challenge with each of us in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.