

“Strengthened by the Hand of the Lord”

ROSEMARY THACKERAY

On November 10, 1882, a young woman named Sarah Jane Carter married Alma Porter, a widower of 10 years. Sarah Jane was almost 18 years of age, and Alma was almost 48. To Sarah Jane and Alma were born 10 children. Their last child and eighth daughter was my grandmother. My grandmother was just five months old when her father died, leaving Sarah Jane a widow at age 38. In addition to losing her husband, four of Sarah Jane’s daughters died at a young age.

Sarah Jane worked hard to provide for her family. Her only source of income was from what they produced on a small farm. From the cow’s milk she made butter to sell at the local butcher shop. With that money Sarah Jane could buy the items the family needed that they could not supply themselves. She also sold apples and raspberries for money to pay the taxes on the farm.

In my living room hangs a large oval frame with a picture of Sarah Jane. On days when I think my life is hard, I think of her. I think of her challenges. I believe it was Sarah Jane’s faith in the Lord and belief that He would strengthen her that helped her through what I imagine were very difficult and lonely days. My grandmother wrote this about Sarah Jane:

I can never remember sitting down for breakfast but what we knelt down and had a family prayer. It was a must at our home. You all know the slogan today, “the family that prays together stays together.” Mother knew she needed lots of help to keep her family close to her and our Heavenly Father was her best source of strength.

Difficulties in life serve at least two purposes: they help us come to the Lord and rely on His strength, and they also help refine us. The process of refining gold and silver requires the elements to be exposed to very high temperatures. This removes the impurities and results in a final product that is much stronger. In life, the trials, challenges, heartaches, disappointments, and so forth, like the ones experienced by my great-grandmother, are part of the mortal refinement process.

As painful and difficult as these experiences may be, if endured well, they will lead to our growth and development. As Job said of his trials, “When he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold.”¹ Elder Dallin H. Oaks stated:

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“Through the justice and mercy of a loving Father in Heaven, the refinement and sanctification possible through such experiences can help us achieve what God desires us to become.”²

Of course talking about enduring is somewhat easier than actually doing it. At times we may become discouraged and feel like giving up. We may relate to the feelings of Mrs. Linforth, a pioneer immigrant stranded on the Wyoming plains. In 1856 converts to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints went west pulling handcarts. Most handcart companies were successful. The Willie and Martin Handcart Companies started late in the year. By the time they reached Wyoming, food and other provisions had run low, winter snowstorms had arrived early, and, as a result, hundreds were dying from starvation, exposure, exhaustion, and dysentery.

The handcarts and wagons left most of their belongings at Devil’s Gate and started toward the Salt Lake Valley. Later that day Mrs. Linforth was found sitting by the side of the road dressed “elegantly” and crying. When asked what the matter was, sobbing she replied:

*This is too much for me. I have always had plenty, and have never known hardships; we had a good team and wagon; my husband, if let alone, could have taken me on in comfort. Now I am turned out to walk in this wind and snow. I am determined not to go on but will stay here and die. My husband has gone on and left me, but I will not go another step.*³

To endure well and not give up amidst the challenges in our journey will require us to have strength beyond our own. We cannot do it alone, but with the Lord’s help our success is assured. As the Psalmist wrote, “Many are the afflictions of the righteous: but the Lord delivereth him out of them all.”⁴

A central message found in the Book of Mormon is that of deliverance—specifically,

the Lord’s power to deliver His people. As Alma promised:

*I would that ye should remember, that as much as ye shall put your trust in God even so much ye shall be delivered out of your trials, and your troubles, and your afflictions, and ye shall be lifted up at the last day.*⁵

One story of deliverance is found in Alma 2. The Nephites were experiencing a tremendous period of prosperity and peace. Then one day a man by the name of Amlici decided that he wanted to be king and convinced people to follow him. Once Amlici became king he started a war with the Nephites. During the first day of the war, more than 12,000 Amlicites were killed, as well as more than 6,000 Nephites. The Nephites decided to rest, and they pitched their tents in the valley of Gideon. Alma sent spies to check on the Amlicites. The report came back that the Lamanites had joined forces with the Amlicites and were attacking the people north of Zarahemla. If Alma and his army did not return to Zarahemla, the Amlicites would certainly overtake the city. They packed up camp and began to cross the river. As they did so, they were attacked by the Amlicites and Lamanites, who Mormon recorded were “as numerous . . . as the sands of the sea.”⁶ Mormon then related (and this is the key point):

*Nevertheless, the Nephites being strengthened by the hand of the Lord, having prayed mightily to him that he would deliver them out of the hands of their enemies, therefore the Lord did hear their cries, and did strengthen them, and the Lamanites and the Amlicites did fall before them.*⁷

In our life it may seem that the opposition is “as numerous . . . as the sands of the sea.” We may be encumbered by spiritual bondage and sin, discouragement, disappointment, and weaknesses that hinder our progression

or with responsibilities and burdens that are beyond our own ability to manage. On my bedroom wall hangs a painting of a single woman pulling a handcart across a snowy plain. Sometimes I feel like I am that woman—I'm steadily climbing the hills of life, and at times it feels like I am doing it alone. Yet I know God is mindful of me as an individual and is watching over me. Just as the Nephites were strengthened by the hand of the Lord and delivered from their enemies, I, and you, will receive similar strength to pull our loads.

Last fall I received the invitation to speak at the devotional today. I pondered, prayed, and selected the topic "Strengthened by the Hand of the Lord." A few weeks later I met with my bishop, and he extended a call for me to serve as the ward Relief Society president. I knew immediately that I would have personal experience with being strengthened by the hand of the Lord. Today I share with you what I have learned from that experience and many others by offering four suggestions that can help us be qualified to be strengthened by the hand of the Lord.

These suggestions are not just for the really difficult trials but also for everyday life. Each day we have an opportunity to be strengthened by the hand of the Lord. Think about that. Why would anyone choose to wade through life's difficulties alone when the Lord stands at the door and knocks? The Savior Himself said, "Draw near unto me and I will draw near unto you."⁸

For us to draw near unto the Lord and be strengthened by Him, the first thing we must do is to have faith and believe that the Lord can and will strengthen us. In Isaiah the Lord counseled: "Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness."⁹

If we are to be strengthened by the hand of the Lord, we must learn to more effectively control our fears and feelings of discouragement.

Then we must trust God and wait for Him. In Hebrew the phrase *to wait* means "to hope for or anticipate."¹⁰ Consider that definition as we read a verse from Isaiah 40:

*But they that wait upon the Lord [or hope for or anticipate] shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.*¹¹

An experience of Daniel W. Jones illustrates well the concept of being strengthened by the hand of the Lord as we wait upon Him. Daniel Jones was one of 20 men who agreed to stay at Devil's Gate through the winter of 1856 and protect possessions left there by the immigrant pioneers I mentioned earlier. Daniel and two of the other men had come from Salt Lake City as members of the rescue party and were planning to be gone for just a few days, not the entire winter. There were only enough provisions to last about 20 days, even though there were at least five months of winter ahead. After eating the meager provisions, including the remaining 20 head of cattle, the men survived on what they could hunt. But food was scarce because the cold winter storms had driven away all the animals.

Daniel Jones related the following about their situation:

Game soon became so scarce that we could kill nothing. We ate all the poor meat; one would get hungry eating it. Finally that was all gone, nothing now but hides were left. We made a trial of them. A lot was cooked and eaten without any seasoning and it made the whole company sick. Many were so turned against the stuff that it made them sick to think of it. . . .

Things looked dark, for nothing remained but the poor raw hides taken from starved cattle. We asked the Lord to direct us what to do. The brethren did not murmur, but felt to trust in God. We had cooked the hide, after soaking and scraping the hair off until it was soft and then ate it, glue and all.

This made it rather inclined to stay with us longer than we desired. Finally I was impressed how to fix the stuff and gave the company advice, telling them how to cook it; for them to scorch and scrape the hair off; this had a tendency to kill and purify the bad taste that scalding gave it. After scraping, boil one hour in plenty of water, throwing the water away which had extracted all the glue, then wash and scrape the hide thoroughly, washing in cold water, then boil to a jelly and let it get cold, and then eat with a little sugar sprinkled on it. This was considerable trouble, but we had little else to do and it was better than starving.

We asked the Lord to bless our stomachs and adapt them to this food. We hadn't the faith to ask him to bless the raw-hide for it was "hard stock." On eating now all seemed to relish the feast. . . . We enjoyed this sumptuous fare for about six weeks, and never had the gout.¹²

As Daniel Jones and the other men waited upon the Lord and trusted in Him, they were strengthened by His hand. Their bodies were able to bear their burdens with ease.¹³ They were able to cheerfully endure months of freezing temperatures and near starvation without murmuring.

Another illustration of faith as a prerequisite of strength was brought to my attention while doing family history research. Annie Langeland was born in Wisconsin in July 1859 to immigrant Norwegian parents. At age 18 she married Adolph Langeland, also a Norwegian immigrant, and they homesteaded in South Dakota. From what I have read, Annie worked hard and did not enjoy much of the world's wealth. Yet I believe that Annie's Lutheran faith and her trust in God sustained her and increased her capacity for endurance as she waited upon Him. In 1939, at age 79, a widow of six years, Annie wrote the following letter:

My dear friends, I received your very interesting letter and the gift inside, for which I can not find

words strong enough to express my thanks, but it was entirely undeserving. What little I've done for you was not . . . as much as I wanted to do. How the Lord does provide. I have to buy seed corn as we're putting [in] 25 acres of corn and I could not see where the money was coming from to buy [it] and here came your fine gift. I surely need a new dress, but will have to get the seed. It's awful dry here and the grasshoppers are hatching by the thousands, so it is not very encouraging to do any sowing or planting, but we must not lose faith in our God. He is almighty and can save us from all evil.¹⁴

Faith in the Lord helps us endure well our personal challenges. It also helps us serve more effectively in our callings. In 1837 Heber C. Kimball was called as a missionary to England. President Gordon B. Hinckley said the following about Heber's call:

It is difficult for us to comprehend the enormity of that call. . . . It meant leaving a family destitute. It meant traveling to New York and crossing the sea when he had no money. It meant that a man with very little schooling, who had grown up and lived in frontier communities, would go to the great cities of the British Isles among a people known for their education and enlightenment.¹⁵

Heber wrote: "The idea of such a mission was almost more than I could bear up under. I was almost ready to sink under the burden which was placed upon me." Heber's response to this call illustrates his faith and belief that he would be strengthened by the hand of the Lord to fulfill this mission. He also wrote:

However, all these considerations did not deter me from the path of duty; the moment I understood the will of my Heavenly Father, I felt a determination to go at all hazards, believing that He would support me by His almighty power, and endow me with every qualification that I needed; and although my family was dear to me, and I should have to leave them almost destitute, I felt that the

*cause of truth, the Gospel of Christ, outweighed every other consideration.*¹⁶

The Lord did strengthen Heber and made him a successful missionary; in eight months 2,000 Saints had been baptized and 26 congregations had been formed.¹⁷ The Lord will strengthen us and deliver us as we wait for Him.

My second suggestion for being strengthened by the hand of the Lord is to pray and ask the Lord for strength. As it states in Matthew, the Lord already knows what we need before we ask.¹⁸ However, I believe the Lord wants us to acknowledge Him and express our understanding that strength and other blessings come as gifts from His hand. Our responsibility is to humbly petition the Lord to receive those blessings.

In the Book of Mormon, Nephi and his family left Jerusalem and journeyed in the wilderness for eight years. After a period of time, the Lord commanded Nephi to build a ship. It is highly unlikely that Nephi, having lived in Jerusalem, possessed many ship-building skills. Nevertheless Nephi did not doubt—he responded positively with faith to the Lord’s command. In the process of building the ship, Nephi frequently went to the mountain to pray. As he did, the Lord showed him great things, including how to build the ship.¹⁹ The same can be true for us. When we need to be strengthened by the hand of the Lord to do hard things beyond our natural ability, if we pray, God will show us the way.

I have found myself on my knees many times petitioning the Lord for guidance in my new call as a Relief Society president. One morning I was feeling particularly weighed down. As I knelt down to pray and express my concerns, an overwhelming sense of peace came over me that everything would be okay. The answers to my prayers do not come all at once, but rather line upon line. Just as Nephi kept returning to the mountain for additional

instructions on building the ship, I return to my knees and seek guidance on moving forward.

A few years ago our stake youth went on a pioneer trek to Martin’s Cove, an area in Wyoming where the stranded handcart pioneers took shelter from the storms and waited for help to arrive. As a stake we had planned and prepared for this experience for months. On the second morning of the trek, around 4 a.m., I awoke suddenly with terrible stomach pains from food poisoning.

In the early morning hours I slowly paced back and forth in significant discomfort. I sat for a while on a wooden bench and watched the sun begin to peek over the horizon. I knew that it was very unlikely that in just a couple of hours I would be able to walk with the youth from our campground to the cove.

All morning I had had a prayer in my heart that I would be able to accompany the youth. However, at one point I stopped and specifically prayed that I would be healthy and able to go to Martin’s Cove. I told Heavenly Father that after all the months of planning and effort, I really wanted to go and have that experience.

At approximately 6 a.m. I received a message that a member of the stake presidency wanted to give me a priesthood blessing. To be honest, I had not thought about asking for a blessing, but I readily accepted the offer. In that blessing President Smith told me that Heavenly Father was mindful of me. He blessed me that my body would rid itself of what was making me sick and that I would be able to fulfill my responsibilities with the youth.

By 10:30 a.m. I was able to leave camp, meet the youth at the cove, and fulfill my responsibilities as promised. I then walked back to camp, a distance of about four miles. I had the strength to do this despite the fact that I had been sick, had slept only a few hours, and had eaten very little food.

I had often wondered why the Lord allowed those faithful handcart Saints to suffer so

much. Surely he could have intervened and tempered the storms. As I stood in Martin's Cove and pondered the pioneers who lived and died there, the Spirit whispered to me that just as the Lord was mindful of me that day, He was mindful of those pioneers in 1856. He knew of their suffering and pain. Just as those pioneers came to know the Savior in their extremities, I too have a testimony that when we have trials and challenges, we can, if we are willing, draw close to the Lord and that He will strengthen and bless us by the power of His almighty hand.

The third suggestion is to immerse ourselves in daily scripture study. A study of the scriptures will deepen our understanding of and relationship with Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ. It is this personal testimony and perspective that will carry us through and strengthen us in times of need. We will have faith that "[He] will go before [our] face. [He] will be on [our] right hand and on [our] left, and [His] Spirit shall be in [our] hearts, and [His] angels round about [us], to bear [us] up."²⁰

Our need to study the scriptures to qualify us for the Lord's strength is illustrated by an account from the Old Testament. Ezra was a scribe in Israel. A scribe was not just someone who wrote down the law but also someone who had studied and was very familiar with the scriptures and taught them to others. Ezra and the children of Israel had been in captivity in Babylon for many years. One day Ezra asked the king of Persia if he could leave Babylon and take some of the children of Israel home to Jerusalem. The king agreed. The king also told Ezra to take all the silver and gold they could find so they could buy meat and drink for offerings at the temple in Jerusalem. If they did not have enough money to purchase these, they had permission to take it out of the king's treasury. And so it was that Ezra prepared 2,000 people for a journey of 1,100 miles (about the same distance it would be to walk between BYU campus and Nauvoo, Illinois).

Going on this long journey with thousands of people and a lot of money was a little daunting to Ezra. However, Ezra was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect them because he had told the king that the hand of God was over all those who sought Him. So Ezra and the people fasted and prayed. Then Ezra reported, "The hand of our God was upon us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy."²¹

Perhaps it was Ezra's personal scriptural preparation, in addition to fasting and prayer, that allowed the hand of the Lord to be upon him and the people to be delivered from their enemies. Having a testimony of the Lord and His goodness, gained through scripture study and confirmed by the Holy Ghost, strengthens us in our subtle needs as well as in our crises.

Elder M. Russell Ballard tells a story about receiving a visit from one of the missionaries who served under him when he was a mission president. The missionary expressed that he was beginning to doubt his testimony and had several questions. Elder Ballard posed the following question to the young man: "How long has it been since you read from the Book of Mormon?"

His response was, "It's been a long time."

Elder Ballard challenged the young man to read the Book of Mormon for an hour each day until they met again. Ten days later the young man returned to Elder Ballard's office. He immediately said that he knew the Church was true and that Joseph Smith was a prophet. Elder Ballard asked the young man what he had learned from the experience.

The young man said, "Give the Lord equal time."²²

My testimony of the power of personal scripture study began in college during a religion class taught by Dr. Keith Sellers. As part of the course we were required to read the scriptures for 30 minutes each day. The course ended, and though I continued to read the scriptures, it was not at the same level. When

I finished graduate school, I realized that if I had spent as much time studying the scriptures as I had studying for a degree, I would have known the gospel so much better. At that point I made a commitment to diligently study the scriptures and give the Lord equal time. I testify that this effort has increased my testimony and that because of it I have felt strengthened by the hand of the Lord.

My fourth and last suggestion to help us become strengthened by the hand of the Lord relates to temple worship. One summer I visited Nauvoo, Illinois, with my sister and her family. We walked down Parley Street along the Trail of Hope reading the testimonies of the faithful Saints who had left their beautiful city for the unknown. As we turned and looked up the bluff at the majestic Nauvoo Temple, I mentioned to my nine-year-old nephew, Justin, how sad it must have been for the Saints to leave this beautiful temple they had just built. Justin said to me, "I would take the temple with me."

It is possible to take a piece of the temple with us each time we attend. The dedicatory prayer offered at the Kirtland Temple, as recorded in Doctrine and Covenants, included the following promise for temple worship:

*And we ask thee, Holy Father, that thy servants may go forth from this house armed with thy power, and that thy name may be upon them, and thy glory be round about them, and thine angels have charge over them.*²³

Perhaps the early Saints who waited from early morning until late at night to receive their temple endowments in the Nauvoo Temple knew something about the power of temple covenants and the Lord's ability to bless and strengthen them through those covenants. Sarah Rich, who served with her husband in the Nauvoo Temple for four months, wrote:

Many were the blessings we had received in the House of the Lord, which was [cause for] joy and

*comfort in the midst of all our sorrows, and enabled us to have faith in God, knowing He would guide us and sustain us in the unknown journey that lay before us. For if it had not been for the faith and knowledge that was bestowed upon us in that Temple by the influence and help of the Spirit of the Lord, our journey would have been like one taking a leap in the dark, to start out on such a journey in the winter as it were, and in our state of poverty, it would seem like walking into the jaws of death.*²⁴

Elder David A. Bednar shared the following insight about the power of temple worship. He said that when serving as president of BYU–Idaho, he and Sister Bednar would host General Authorities who had served as temple presidents. In talking with them he would always ask this question: "What have you learned as a temple president that you wish you had better understood when you were a General Authority?" Elder Bednar said:

As I listened to their answers, I discovered a consistent theme that I would summarize as follows: "I have come to understand better the protection available through our temple covenants and what it means to make an acceptable offering of temple worship. There is a difference between church-attending, tithe-paying members who occasionally rush into the temple to go through a session and those members who faithfully and consistently worship in the temple."

*The similarity of their answers impressed me greatly. Each response to my question focused upon the protecting power of the ordinances and covenants available in the house of the Lord.*²⁵

I know, just as Sarah Jane knew, that the Lord is my best source of strength. I must regularly and consistently do those things that will qualify me to receive that strength. When I first received my temple endowment, I made a personal commitment that I would never let my temple recommend expire. I wanted to be worthy and able to go to the temple at any

time. One year it was time to renew my temple recommend. I was living in Atlanta, Georgia, and within a week I would be returning to Utah, where I could meet with my home-ward bishop to renew my recommend. However, I chose to meet with my Atlanta bishop and stake president so that my temple recommend would remain current.

On my way to Utah I met my sister and her family in Nauvoo for the vacation I mentioned earlier. As part of our stay we had made arrangements to attend a session in the Nauvoo Temple. On the morning of our appointment I awoke early, quietly got dressed, and prepared to leave. Much to my dismay, I could not find my temple recommend. I searched my purse and suitcase and then began unloading my car, sifting through all my moving boxes. The time for my appointment approached, and there was still no recommend. I resigned myself to the fact that I would miss my appointment and began to cry. I so wanted to attend the temple. I needed the strength that I knew a temple session would provide. My niece, Katie, who was five years old at the time, asked me what was wrong. I explained that I could not find my temple recommend. She responded, "That's not very good." No, it wasn't very good, and I was despondent. Then Katie, in a most sincere and thoughtful tone, said to me, "My mom has one that you can borrow."

Unfortunately I could not borrow my sister's personal recommend to attend the temple that day any more than I could borrow her prayers, the hours she has spent in scripture study, or her faith that the Lord will strengthen her during her difficulties. Being strengthened by the Lord is an individual experience. We qualify for it individually, and individually we receive strength.

I testify that as we wait upon the Lord and prepare ourselves to be strengthened by the hand of the Lord, we will become the person the Lord desires us to become. As the Lord says

in Zechariah, "I . . . will refine them as silver is refined, and will try them as gold is tried: they shall call on my name, and I will hear them: I will say, It is my people: and they shall say, The Lord is my God."²⁶

I testify that the Lord is my God. He lives. I am strengthened by His hand each day. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Job 23:10.
2. Dallin H. Oaks, "The Challenge to Become," *Ensign*, November 2000, 33–34.
3. Daniel W. Jones, *Forty Years Among the Indians: A True Yet Thrilling Narrative of the Author's Experiences Among the Natives* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1890), 73.
4. Psalm 34:19.
5. Alma 38:5.
6. Alma 2:27.
7. Alma 2:28, emphasis added.
8. D&C 88:63.
9. Isaiah 41:10.
10. See footnote to Isaiah 40:31.
11. Isaiah 40:31.
12. Jones, *Forty Years Among the Indians*, 81–82.
13. See Mosiah 24:14.
14. Letter in possession of the author.
15. Gordon B. Hinckley, "The Lengthened Shadow of the Hand of God," *Ensign*, May 1987, 53.
16. Orson F. Whitney, *The Life of Heber C. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1945), 104; emphasis added.
17. See *Church History in the Fulness of Times* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2000), 176.
18. See Matthew 6:8, 30, 32.
19. See 1 Nephi 18:1–3.
20. D&C 84:88.
21. Ezra 8:31.
22. M. Russell Ballard, "When Shall These Things Be?" BYU devotional, 12 March 1996.
23. D&C 109:22.

24. Sarah DeArmon Pea Rich, *Journal of Sarah DeArmon Pea Rich* (Provo: Brigham Young University Library, 1960), 42.

25. David A. Bednar, "Honorably Hold a Name and Standing," *Ensign*, May 2009, 99.
26. Zechariah 13:9.