

*The trials of this life will ultimately lead to joy if we patiently trust in God's plan and discover how to use adversity to grow stronger.*

# LEARNING THROUGH Life's Trials

By Larry Richman

I've learned that the way I respond to trials can have a great effect on whether they become roadblocks in my life or expressways to learning and growth. When I anguish over difficulties, the experiences only serve to weigh me down. But remembering that these trials are part of the great plan of happiness helps me to see them as opportunities to grow and learn.

As children of a loving God, we accepted our Father's plan to obtain a physical body, gain earthly experience, and qualify to return to His presence and enjoy eternal life. In fact, we "shouted for joy" at the chance to participate in this "plan of

happiness" (Alma 42:8, 16). Here on earth, there is a lot of joy, but there are also times of trial, misfortune, and grief.

A common misunderstanding among members of the Church is that if we strive with all our might to live the commandments, nothing bad will happen to us. We may believe if we are married in the temple, our marriage will automatically be heaven on earth, or if we live the Word of Wisdom, we will never get sick. But the truth is that bad things may happen to the best of people. The consequences of good and bad actions will come, but they do not always come immediately, and they may not even come in this life.

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### Origins of Adversity

Much suffering comes as a direct result of sin. When we use our agency to disregard the commandments of God, we follow Satan's plan of misery rather than God's plan of happiness.

Other trials come as a result of unwise choices. For example, many people are burdened with financial debt because they choose to make purchases on credit rather than delay purchases until they can afford to pay in cash.

Yet other challenges come as a natural result of mortality and the world we live in. We are mortals with bodies that will age and may become ill or injured.

### Degree of Fault for Problems in Life

As mortals, we try to assign fault for every situation. Often, we judge ourselves harshly, concluding that problems occur because of something we did wrong or because we failed to do something to prevent them.<sup>1</sup>

As we consider the degree of our personal fault for the tribulations in our lives, it may be helpful to think of a continuum with sin at one end and adversity at the other.<sup>2</sup>

Our degree of fault is high at the end of the spectrum marked as *sin*. We should accept responsibility for problems caused by sin by repenting and continually striving to do better. However, as we continue down the spectrum, our fault drops to zero at the end marked by *adversity*, where we may bear no responsibility at all. These trials may come to us regardless of any conscious action on our part. If we blame ourselves for things that are not our fault,

we make a bad situation worse by seeing ourselves as bad people who deserve bad things.

It is difficult to judge our level of responsibility for problems that fall between these two ends of the spectrum. In these cases, it may be unproductive to try to establish blame because it may cause us to lose focus on the very reason for the trial.

### The Purposes of Adversity

Apostle Orson F. Whitney (1855–1931) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, explained: “No pain that we suffer, no trial that we experience is wasted. It ministers to our education, to the development of such qualities as patience, faith, fortitude and humility. All that we suffer and all that we endure, especially when we endure it patiently, builds up our characters, purifies our hearts, expands our souls, and makes us more tender and charitable, more worthy to be called the children of God . . . and it is through sorrow and suffering, toil and tribulation, that we gain the education that we come here to acquire.”<sup>3</sup>

Trials give us opportunities to show the Lord and ourselves that we will be faithful. We can choose to feel sorry for ourselves and ask, “Why me?” or we can grow from our trials, increase our faith in the Lord, and ask, “How can I be faithful in the midst of this trial?” We can let adversity break us down and make us bitter, or we can let it refine us and make us stronger. We can allow adversity to lead us to drift away from the things that matter most, or we can use it as a stepping-stone to grow closer to things of eternal worth.

Spiritual growth can often be achieved more readily by trials and adversity than by comfort and tranquility. Trials can teach us that faith in God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ is the source of inner strength. President David O. McKay (1873-1970) recounted the testimony of one of the survivors of the ill-fated Martin handcart company, who said: “We suffered beyond anything you can imagine and many died of exposure and starvation, but . . . [we] came through with the absolute knowledge that God lives for we became acquainted with Him in our extremities.”<sup>4</sup>

### Benefitting from Adversity

Since adversity will come to us all, consider the following ideas to help face trials and benefit from them.

#### • Rely on Christ

One of the purposes of trials is to help us come to know Christ, understand His teachings in our minds, feel them in our hearts, and live them in our lives. Elder Richard G. Scott of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles explains that God loves us perfectly and “would not require [us] to experience a moment more of difficulty than is absolutely needed for [our] personal benefit or for that of those [we] love.”<sup>5</sup> President Harold B. Lee (1899–1973) once remarked: “Sometimes when [we] are going through the most severe tests, [we] will be nearer to God than [we] have any idea.”<sup>6</sup>

When we turn to Christ, we will not only find the comfort we seek, but in so doing we will also gain an increased testimony of the reality of the Savior and His Atonement, which can heal all suffering. We often speak of the Atonement in terms of relief from sin and guilt. But the Atonement is more. Alma taught that Christ suffered pains, afflictions, and temptations of every kind so He could be filled with mercy and know how to succor His people according to their infirmities (see Alma 7:11–12).

The Atonement can heal the effects of all pain and

affliction in mortality.<sup>7</sup> When suffering is our fault, we can be cleansed through repentance, and “after all we can do,” the Atonement can compensate for the consequences of our sins. It can also compensate for the harmful effects of our ignorance or neglect, the pain caused by the willful actions of others, and the suffering that comes as a result of living in a natural world.

God lets us have difficult days, months, or lives so we can grow from these experiences. I believe that the specific challenges I have faced in my life were the specific ways I had to learn the lessons I needed to learn. I believe I am the man I am today *because* of the trials I’ve experienced, not in *spite* of them.



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## mortality

and the world we live in. We are mortals with bodies that will age and may become ill or injured.

Elder Richard G. Scott taught that “the Lord is intent on [our] personal growth and development. . . . Progress is accelerated when [we] willingly allow Him to lead [us] through every growth experience [we] encounter. . . . If [we] question [every unpleasant challenge], . . . [we] make it harder for the Lord to bless [us].”<sup>8</sup> But if we center our hearts and minds on the Lord’s will, we will gain more happiness in the journey and more fulfillment in life.

### • Rely on Others

President Spencer W. Kimball (1895–1985) taught, “God does notice us, and he watches over us. But it is usually through another person that he meets our needs.”<sup>9</sup> We need to allow other people to be instruments in the Lord’s hands to help us through the challenges in life.

### • Let Adversity Make You a Better Person

A woman in my stake fought a battle with cancer. Although she endured pains and heartache that few people understood, she remained cheerful and optimistic.<sup>10</sup>

She wrote her own obituary, which, in part, reads: “Today at the young age of 33 I left this mortal existence to a holier sphere. I was born . . . to wonderful parents . . . who taught me to live life well. . . . We have three sweet children who I will miss greatly. At the young age of 29, I was introduced to something called cancer. Cancer was

my great adversary, but I have learned that in this life our enemies can become our choicest friends; the secret is in learning what to do with the conflict.”

We are not always healed from pain and sickness. Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve has said, “Sometimes we are ‘healed’ by being given strength or understanding or patience to bear the burdens placed upon us.”<sup>11</sup>

### • Live with Integrity

When faced with seemingly insurmountable challenges, we may be tempted to take the easy way out. Although my friend Cody (name has been changed) has felt same-gender attractions his entire life, he doesn’t listen to the world’s view that he was born that way and has no accountability for his actions. He knows that the commandments and blessings of the gospel are as real and relevant to him as to anyone else. Cody is living his life with integrity to the principles he knows to be true. He knows that if he lives faithfully, all the blessings of the gospel will be his, either in this life or in the next. He knows that his present trials don’t determine who he really is, but his responses to them will influence who he will become.

Yielding to adversity makes us weaker. Keeping the commandments—no matter how trying—makes us stronger and helps us overcome every challenge in life. Through faith

and obedience, we qualify for the divine spiritual guidance we need to guide us along unknown roads.

#### • **Be Patient**

We live in a world of instant gratification. We want fast food, quick loans, and instant solutions to our problems. However, the Lord may ask us to show our faith by enduring some problems patiently. Today, we may not be able to grasp all the reasons for our challenges or the opportunities they will give us to grow. We may have to learn line upon line. As we patiently endure in righteousness, He may reveal to us greater understanding about our trials and the purpose of them in our lives.

#### • **Keep an Eternal Perspective**

Some of the challenges we experience in this life are conditions of mortality that will not continue into the next life. President Brigham Young (1801–1877) taught: “We talk about our trials and troubles here in this life; but suppose that you could see yourselves thousands and millions of years after you have proved faithful to your religion during the few short years in this time, and have obtained eternal salvation and a crown of glory in the presence of God? Then look back upon your lives here, and see the losses, crosses, and disappointments, the sorrows . . . ; you would be constrained to exclaim, ‘but what of all that? Those things were but for a moment, and we are now here. We have been faithful during a few moments in our mortality, and now we enjoy eternal life and glory, with power to progress in all the boundless knowledge and through the countless stages of progression, enjoying the smiles and approbation of our Father and God, and of Jesus Christ our elder brother.’”<sup>12</sup>

#### **Facing Adversity**

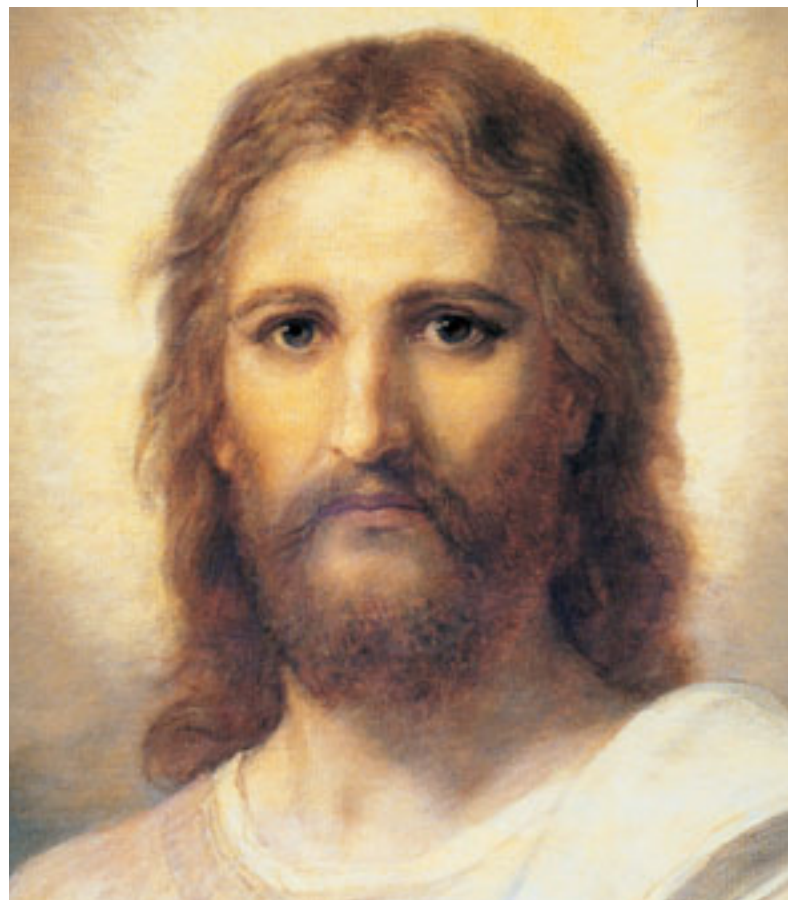
If we turn to Christ with faith and patience, we can have the strength we need to face adversity. The doctrines of the restored gospel give us an eternal perspective that provides hope and courage to bear all of life’s trials. Each of us has the strength to bear our challenges in life because of who we are, who God is, and who we are together ■

One purpose of trials is to help us come to know

*From a devotional address given at Brigham Young University—Idaho on October 30, 2007.*

#### NOTES

1. See Richard G. Scott, “Trust in the Lord,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1995, 17.
2. See Bruce C. Hafen, “Beauty for Ashes: The Atonement of Jesus Christ,” *Ensign*, Apr. 1990, 10.
3. Quoted by Spencer W. Kimball in *Faith Precedes the Miracle* (1972), 98. Also, Brigham Young taught, “Every trial and experience you have passed through is necessary for your salvation,” *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young*, 262.
4. Quoted by David O. McKay, *Relief Society Magazine*, Jan. 1948, 8.
5. “Trust in the Lord,” 17.
6. Harold B. Lee, in Conference Report, Munich Germany Area Conference 1973, 114.
7. Bruce C. Hafen, “Beauty for Ashes,” *Ensign*, Apr. 1990, 7–13; see also Dallin H. Oaks, “He Heals the Heavy Laden,” *Liahona* and *Ensign*, Nov. 2006, 6–9.
8. Richard G. Scott, “Finding Joy in Life,” *Ensign*, May 1996, 25.
9. Spencer W. Kimball, “Small Acts of Service,” *Ensign*, Dec. 1974, 5.
10. See Joanne D. Smith, “Annette’s Halo,” *Ensign*, Sept. 1991, 71–73.
11. “He Heals the Heavy Laden,” 7–8. See also Mosiah 24:13–15.
12. Brigham Young, in *Deseret News*, Nov. 9, 1859, 1.



# Christ,

understand His teachings in our minds, feel them in our hearts, and live them in our lives.