

Adversity
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I am grateful to be here in Princeton and on this pioneer day weekend I am also thankful to be among you who have sacrificed so much to build this beautiful building with your own hands and to create strength and faith in Zion, here in New Jersey. You are truly the worthy sons and daughters of New Jersey Pioneers and Pioneers in your own right!

Our topic is, "Adversity". I suggest the best way to understand *how* to handle adversity is to first understand *why* we have adversity. So I'm going first.

At this time of year for Mormons, the word adversity immediately creates visions of suffering, hungry handcart pioneers, shoeless, struggling across the plains among the rocks and sage with hastily dug graves strewn along the path to the right and the left, but their job (and metaphorically ours) is to keep plodding along knowing its all for the best, and there are rewards at the end. Ultimately adversity and tribulation are part of God's plan for us and indeed they are our destiny.

But are they really?

I say yes and no.

Yes, when God placed our first parents on this earth and married them together, he promised them joy and rejoicing in their posterity.

Yes, God's plan intended for us to experience opposition. To be able to learn from mistakes and to mature in understanding; from stumbling and facing challenges; from falling down and getting up again. From facing opportunities and seizing them. From recognizing blessings and magnifying them. From seeing pain and empathizing; from recognizing need and serving or ignoring and regretting.

When God introduced our parents into the Garden he made them Lords over the whole earth and promised them joy and then promised to come visit them again and bring them further light and knowledge. Does this not suggest God's intention to place the whole world at their disposal, for them to learn, face challenges and grow? And to return to the garden temple to commune with Him as they wished?

What happened next?

I suggest that what happened next represents the most significant gift that was to ever have been given to God's children: The ultimate test of choice as they faced the Tree of Life and its opposing neighbor, the tree forbidden by God because *it promised to bring death*. The choice between these two trees is significant because that test conveyed not only the right to choose between Good and Evil, but it carried with it the *implicit consequence* to both become subject to and to assume the attributes of the one (ultimate good and life) or the other (ultimate evil and death). This was the highest level of choice making: Moral agency. It is so much more significant than the mundane daily choices we

make. The choice of Moral agency is not even in the same league as choosing between pizza or salad; or between staying late at work or coming home for family home evening, between honking at the one who cut you off or not, between staying or leaving an abusive husband; or even between the business trip or your daughter's concert.

We tend to beat up on ourselves and think that life is all about trying to figure out whether Jesus would have gone to the concert or not, and wrongly assume that we can never be perfect like He was or like He commanded us to be. He probably would have chosen the salad and wouldn't have missed family home evening, right? But did he honk at the driver? I know he cursed the barren fig tree on his own highway. I also know that Jesus did not suffer on the cross for our little imperfections, miscues, shortcomings, failures and mistakes. The challenges we all face—and maybe fail—did not create the need for the Son of God to be tortured until He bled from every pore, to be betrayed, scourged, smitten, cursed, shamed, spat upon, bruised and to suffer unimaginable torment, and later to die. What, then, did?

I suggest that the Moral Agency exercised that first day in the Garden, was exercised in unrighteousness. I suggest that: while there is no sin in our little imperfections, miscues, shortcomings, failures and mistakes, there was *primal sin* in standing in the presence of God, feeling His limitless love, being married by Him and promised unimaginable blessings by maturing through the challenges and vicissitudes of life... yet our parents betrayed His love and trust by preferentially believing and following the Father of Lies.

Our parents believed the liar when he told them his fruit would magically impart the ability to discern opposites, that god himself had once done likewise and that this would be in some way better than what god had planned and commanded. In fact, he lied, *it was the only way*. Will we believe him too?

If we are to truly implement Moral Agency, then we must also understand that not only does it mean that God gave us choices, but it also means that He must not; no He *cannot* intervene and prevent us experiencing the consequences to those choices. So God, having given us moral agency, must allow us to succeed when we so choose. And He must also *allow us to fail*. These choices were freely given to our first parents by God—along with opposition—as well as the ability to discern opposites. If the greatest success and achievement possible is coming into the presence of God, to experience eternal joy, life, & exaltation, then indeed *there can be no true success without a legitimate opportunity to fail*. Failing in the extreme sense of falling and symmetrically opposite to exaltation means sin, exile, suffering, sorrow, death, even utter destruction hanging upon our choice. Note that the *temptation* to fall is sufficient for enabling us to exercise moral agency; one does not *have* to sin. The Lord himself has said, “...*it must needs be that the devil should tempt the children of men, or they could not be agents unto themselves.*” D&C 29:39

I suggest the tragedy of mortality is that God intended for our parents and for us to grow throughout the righteous efforts of facing challenge and opportunity; by experiencing and overcoming pain, disappointment, and even through making mistakes to the point of failure. There is no *sin* here. Yes, adversity was designed and intended to be part of our righteously maturing experience on this beautiful creation we call earth, leading to joy

and exaltation. Yet our unrighteous choice for betrayal and sin that began way back in the garden required certain natural consequences to be felt: death had been chosen. The consequence was humanity-wide genocide. And Satan became the default “god of this world”, ruling with blood and horror.

One might reasonably ask "what might have been different", had our parents not fallen. In my opinion the answer is murky because those opportunities were lost to our direct knowledge. Only on His other countless creations are we told that "justice, truth and peace" prevail in His Plan of Happiness where a contingent plan-B plan of salvation and rescue was not made necessary by unrighteous actions of agency. But we have more clues what might have been in store, second arising in a conviction that God gives blessings contingent on obedience—*never* disobedience—and third in His use of the word "multiply" when explaining the consequences of our parents' disobedience.

Humanity's bondage to Satan gave rise to the merciful necessity of probation and then those positive aspects of “adversity” became “multiplied” to the extent that we mortals would now experience *tribulation* well beyond mere adversity; *sin* beyond mere mistakes; *exile* beyond independence; *fruitless toil* beyond satisfying work; *suffering* beyond pain; *sorrow* beyond disappointment; the very shadow of death multiplied well past travail and indeed death instead of life. Jesus had to come so that joy might be restored, because there could be no joy otherwise coming from sin, suffering, sorrow, exile and death.

Moroni 7:24

And behold, there were divers ways that he did manifest things unto the children of men, which were good; and all things which are good cometh of Christ; otherwise men were fallen, and there could no good thing come unto them.

So what does this all mean? I suggest that we not blame God for tribulation by suggesting that He did this to me, or sent me this test or gave me this trial, or punished me with this bad thing. None of this is true.

As an example, I think of Jim, my college roommate: I ran into Jim for the first time in 18 years on a cross country flight. He had become inactive as a response to his former mission companion's child who was born so disabled such that as we spoke the child was 7 years old with no further mental development beyond the day it was born. This was seen as extreme tribulation with Jim commenting, “If God either did that to the child or was complicit in allowing it to happen when He could have prevented it, then *I do not want to know such a God*”.

I suggest the image of a controlling God is not true. The idea that everything that happens is part of a grand plan and that we are just pawns on a giant chess board is utterly false. We are agents unto ourselves living in a fallen world where random things happen and where we are subject to the consequences of our own choices and even those arising from the choices of others. Our true and righteous God cannot intervene in our lives unless we ask Him. This is the most fundamental tenet of our god-given agency.

President David O. McKay shared the effect of extreme hardships suffered in 1856 by the

Martin Handcart pioneers: A survivor rebuked those critical of the decisions that placed the Martin pioneers in jeopardy. Face white with emotion, he told them 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 every one 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"*

Brothers and Sisters, when random bad things happen, when tribulation comes, God didn't cause it or will it or intend those things. He simply cannot, having told us our agency *"is given unto you."* For in exercising such omnipotence *He would become a liar.*

Random tribulation is neither His test nor punishment upon us. But He allows the effects of a fallen world to happen, waiting to see what we will *do* with them. Will we rise up and face the challenge? Will we learn? Will we grow? And when we run up against the wall and simply have not the strength to face the test alone, will we recognize His loving outstretched and pierced hand? Will we have the courage to ask Him for assistance and strength, for comfort and even healing? That's what the pioneers did.

I testify that God loves us. That He lives. That He knows us. That He is ever righteous and unchanging; that He cannot lie.

I testify that God sent His only begotten Son to rescue us from the one our first parents chose as the master of death in preference to the master of life. There is no work we can do to rescue ourselves. This is why we need the grace of Jesus Christ. This is the Gospel of Jesus Christ: that He came and was lifted up so that we might also be lifted back up, to innocence. (D&C 93:38,39) Praise be to Him!

I also testify that after we have once taken His outstretched hand and made covenant to honorably bear His name in service to humanity, now we press forward in Christ and strive to overcome the afflictions and tribulations of the world, along with the further temptations of the adversary in opposition to righteousness. This time, our God has given us many gifts to strengthen our ability to manage these obstacles on our own. Yet He still stands by to assist after all we can do, and waits upon our call for help. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen

· There are non-random tribulations that come as a result of intensive requests, like Nephi praying for famine to bring humility to the people, like Alma and Mosiah praying for their sons, like the people of Christ praying fervently for those who do persecute and revile, and whose prayers wrought upon Saul who became Paul.