

What Is the Purpose of Suffering?

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Alma the Younger was no stranger to affliction and suffering. It seemed to be his constant companion. He fought in hand-to-hand combat defending his people (Alma 2:29). He was rejected, reviled, spit upon, and cast out of Ammonihah, “being weighed down with sorrow, wading through much tribulation and anguish of soul” because of the sins of his people (Alma 8:13–14). He “was pained” as he witnessed righteous men, women, and children being cast into a fiery pit at the hands of the wicked (Alma 14:10). He was bound, imprisoned, and physically abused (Alma 14:14–15); the wicked gnashed their teeth upon him, spit upon him, mocked him, and withheld food and water from him so that he “suffered for many days” (Alma 14:21–23). His “heart was exceedingly sorrowful” because of the iniquities of the people (Alma 35:15), and he “had been racked with eternal torment” because of his own sinful past (Alma 36:12). Suffice it to say, Alma was acquainted with grief.

Alma knew that his righteous son Helaman would likewise face adversity. Accordingly, Alma commenced his counsel to Helaman as recorded in Alma 36 by addressing the subject of affliction. He exhorted him to remember “the captivity of our fathers; for they were in bondage, and none could deliver them except it was the God of Abraham . . . [who] surely did deliver them in their afflictions.” Alma then continued: “And now, O my son Helaman, behold, thou art in thy youth, and therefore, I beseech of thee that thou wilt hear my words and learn of me; *for I do know that whosoever shall put their trust in God shall be supported in their trials, and their troubles, and their afflictions, and shall be lifted up at the last day*” (Alma 36:2–3; emphasis added throughout). The essence of his counsel was that Helaman, even though he was righteous, would still face his share of afflictions, but if he put his trust in God, the day of deliverance would come when he would be “lifted up”—meaning exalted. No doubt this counsel was included in the Book of Mormon because it is applicable to each of us as we face the inescapable afflictions of life. In fact, one key reason for the gospel is to give purpose to suffering, to help it make sense, so we can hold on and have hope even in moments of excruciating pain and despair.

Questions about Affliction and Suffering

The subject of affliction and its corresponding companion, suffering, raise some thought-provoking questions.

- ✦ Who or what causes affliction and suffering?
- ✦ Why does God intervene and alleviate suffering for some but not for others?
- ✦ Does all suffering lead to positive growth?
- ✦ How does God help us face our afflictions?
- ✦ How should we respond to affliction and suffering?
- ✦ What is the ultimate objective of suffering in God’s plan?

The following is an attempt to provide some answers to those questions, inspired in part by Alma's counsel to his son Helaman.

Who or What Causes Affliction and Suffering?

Is the answer Satan, others, ourselves, our mortal condition, natural causes, God, all of these, or only some of them?

Satan is certainly a cause of some affliction as evidenced by the experience of Job: “[Satan] . . . smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown” (Job 2:7). Furthermore, the scriptures tell us that “because he [Satan] had fallen from heaven, and had become miserable forever, he sought also the misery of all mankind” (2 Nephi 2:18). Suffice it to say that Satan is a prime perpetrator of misery and affliction.

Mortals also cause affliction and suffering—for themselves and for others. This is evidenced by widespread domestic abuse, sexual abuse, dishonesty, murder, fraud, reckless driving, and other cases of negligence and sinful conduct.

There are also afflictions for which, it seems, no one is to blame. Our mortal condition subjects us to natural disasters such as earthquakes, famines, hurricanes, and the like—for as the Lord said, “Your Father which is in heaven . . . maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matthew 5:45). Enoch observed, “Because that Adam fell, we are; and by his fall came death; and we are made partakers of misery and woe” (Moses 6:48). Death, infirmities, and accidents are a natural consequence of our fallen condition. In other words, God allows natural laws to take their natural course against the just as well as the unjust.

But what about God? Does He cause affliction? The Lord has caused affliction to come upon the wicked as evidenced by His many warnings to the wicked, which were followed by wars, fires, earthquakes, hurricanes, famines, and other devastations.

He even seems to cause affliction among His chosen people who need to repent. With regard to the Saints driven out of Missouri, God

said, “I, the Lord, have suffered [allowed] the affliction to come upon them, wherewith they have been afflicted, in consequence of their transgressions” (Doctrine and Covenants 101:2; see also Helaman 12:3).

The next question becomes, Does God allow the righteous to suffer? Alma wrote, “For the Lord suffereth [allows] the righteous to be slain that his justice and judgment may come upon the wicked” (Alma 60:13). Alma and Amulek experienced this as they witnessed righteous saints, including women and children, being consumed by fire because they would not deny their testimonies. The scene was so graphic, so terrible, so awful that Amulek petitioned Alma to use their power of God to “save them from the flames.” But Alma replied, “The Spirit constraineth me” (Alma 14:10–11).

But most significant of all, God allowed the most righteous of all beings to suffer, even Jesus Christ. Who can forget the Savior’s plea at the commencement of His atoning sacrifice: “Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42) or Christ’s words from the cross: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). Despite His earnest pleas, there would be no relief. God would allow this infinite sacrifice with all its related anguish and pain to run its course without intervention.

But perhaps the most difficult question to ask is, Does God not only allow suffering for the righteous but also cause it? Another way to state the question is, Does God test or try even the righteous, not directly causing the related suffering, but knowing that suffering will be a byproduct of such trial or test?

The scriptures declare: “Many are the afflictions of the righteous” (Psalms 34:19). And Paul added, “Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution” (2 Timothy 3:12). At first this may be a troubling thought and seem grossly unfair. On occasion, we might feel like Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*, who at one point was reflecting upon the afflictions of his family and people. He then said,

as though he were speaking to God, “I know, I know we are your chosen people. But once in a while, can’t you choose someone else?”¹

The Lord said of the early Saints expelled from Missouri, “It is expedient in me that they should be brought thus far for a trial of their faith” (Doctrine and Covenants 105:19; see also Mosiah 23:21). In Genesis we read, “God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, . . . Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest . . . and offer him . . . for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of” (Genesis 22:1–2). This was a test of Abraham’s exact obedience—of his submission to God’s will under the most difficult of circumstances. Certainly this was an agonizing, heartbreaking experience for Abraham. Some might say Abraham could have said no, but that would have triggered a guilty conscience and hence suffering. In essence, either choice would bring some form of anxiety, angst, and suffering. This seems, however, not to be an isolated case, for the Lord said of the early Saints in this dispensation, “They must needs be chastened and tried, even as Abraham, who was commanded to offer up his only son” (Doctrine and Covenants 101:4).

Suffice it to say, God will try everyone—even the righteous—to their limits. He will see if there is a point at which we will give in, throw in the towel, and surrender our trust in God. The real issue is not the source of our afflictions but how we will respond to them.

Why Does God Intervene and Alleviate Suffering for Some but Not for Others?

If God is just (which He is), some might ask, Why does God provide relief for one but not another who is equally righteous? Why does He heal one innocent child but not another? Why does He prevent death for one in a car accident but not for the person sitting next to him? The honest answer is that we don’t fully know the answers to those questions.² What we do know is that because God loves us perfectly, He will always do whatever will best facilitate our spiritual progress.

John Greenleaf Whittier wrote of those troubling times when it is difficult to make sense of our suffering:

Yet, in the maddening maze of things,
And tossed by storm and flood,
To one fixed trust my spirit clings,
I know that God is good!³

We can take comfort in knowing that because of God's goodness, He will not allow us to suffer one more ounce of affliction than is necessary to perfect us. It was Elder Richard G. Scott who taught: "Your Father in Heaven and His Beloved Son love you perfectly. They would not require you to experience a moment more of difficulty than is absolutely needed for your personal benefit or for that of those you love."⁴ That is one truth to which we can hold fast—God is good, and He "is no respecter of persons" (Acts 10:34). He will never treat any of us unfairly.

Does All Suffering Lead to Positive Growth?

Not all suffering proves to be constructive. Anne Morrow Lindbergh made this candid observation: "I do not believe that sheer suffering teaches. If suffering alone taught, all the world would be wise, since everyone suffers. To suffering must be added mourning, understanding, patience, love, openness and the willingness to remain vulnerable. All these and other factors combined, if the circumstances are right, can teach and can lead to rebirth."⁵

Mormon gave a specific example of destructive suffering. He spoke of his people who were beaten in battle: "Their sorrowing was not unto repentance, because of the goodness of God; but it was rather the sorrowing of the damned, because the Lord would not always suffer them to take happiness in sin" (Mormon 2:13).

It is of interest to note that two people can suffer the same experience; for one it is a negative experience, but for the other it is a positive. For example, at the end of many years of war, the Book

of Mormon records, “Many [people] had become hardened, because of the exceedingly great length of the war; and many were softened because of their afflictions, insomuch that they did humble themselves before God, even in the depth of humility” (Alma 62:41). Obviously, suffering was not the cause of a negative or positive experience, but rather one’s reaction to it determined the nature of his or her experience. In a sense, affliction is the great divider—it will either distance us from God or bring us closer to Him. It does not lend itself to fence-sitting.

How Does God Help Us Face Our Afflictions?

By virtue of His Atonement, the Savior acquired the knowledge and powers to strengthen, support, and comfort us as we experience the afflictions and infirmities of life. Perhaps there are no more instructive verses in all of scripture that explain how and why the Savior suffered for us and how that suffering enabled Him to be the ultimate Comforter, than these found in the book of Alma: “And he shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people. And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities” (Alma 7:11–12; see also Mosiah 3:7).

Isaiah gave additional insights into the Savior’s comforting and healing powers. In what seems like angelic language, he explained that because the Savior suffered our afflictions, He is able to “bind up the brokenhearted, . . . to comfort all that mourn,” and “give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness” (Isaiah 61:1–3). What comfort to know that though our life be in figurative ashes, the Savior can make it beautiful.

It is one thing to understand that the Savior has universal comforting and healing powers; it is quite another to know how these powers might be applied in our personal lives, even in times of our deepest, most hopeless despair. The scriptures reveal multiple ways in which this is accomplished. Hearing or reading the word of God can bring hope and peace to our souls. Jacob invited his people “to hear the pleasing word of God, yea, the word which healeth the wounded soul” (Jacob 2:8).

I personally found this to be true. I was fourteen years old when my fifteen-year-old sister, Paula, suddenly passed away from a kidney disease. At the time I was on a Scout trip at a naval base in San Diego. When I returned home, my brother Dick approached me at the front door and told me that Paula had passed away. I remember sobbing and sobbing. I went upstairs to see my father, who was stretched out on the floor, also crying. I remember him saying, “Things will never be the same without her.” I believe I prayed as hard as a fourteen-year-old boy could pray that Paula would come back to life, but it was not to be. It was the first time that the consequences of death had been so personal and so troubling to me.

In time two things brought me comfort. One was reading her patriarchal blessing that did not promise her health and strength as I had been promised by the same patriarch. Second, as I read these words from the Doctrine and Covenants, I received the comfort for which I so desperately sought: “And it shall come to pass that *those that die in me shall not taste of death, for it shall be sweet unto them. . . .* And again, it shall come to pass that he that hath faith in me to be healed, and is not appointed unto death, shall be healed” (Doctrine and Covenants 42:46, 48; emphasis added). The truth and hope found in the scriptures were a healing balm to me.

Sometimes the simple words from the Lord “Be comforted” are sufficient for the healing to occur. When the sons of Mosiah needed comfort as they began their mission to the Lamanites, “the Lord did visit them with his Spirit, and said unto them: Be comforted. And they were comforted” (Alma 17:10; see also Jacob 2:8).

In other cases, the Lord intervenes in our behalf to soften the hearts of those who are the cause of our afflictions. When Limhi and his people were in bondage to the Lamanites, they suffered great afflictions, “and there was no way that they could deliver themselves out of their hands” (Mosiah 21:5). Then the Lord stepped in with His comforting powers “and began to soften the hearts of the Lamanites that they began to ease their burdens” (Mosiah 21:15). We see similar comforting powers in operation when the Lord softens the heart of a reluctant husband, who then allows a wife to be baptized, or when He softens the hearts of rulers of countries to allow missionary work within their borders, often among an oppressed people.

When Alma the Elder and his people were in bondage, the Lord chose yet another way to comfort His people in their afflictions. He said to them: “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 . . . the Lord did strengthen them that they could bear up their burdens with ease” (Mosiah 24:14–15).

But the Lord can also comfort us in other ways. Consider the example of Joseph Smith. He and his companions had languished in the cramped quarters of Liberty Jail for over two months in the dead of winter. They were bitterly cold, sick, hungry, and badly mistreated. Meanwhile, the Saints were being persecuted and driven from their homes. They needed Joseph’s counsel, his encouragement, his prophetic vision, and his presence, but there seemed to be no liberty in sight for Joseph. Finally, in desperation, Joseph cried out, “O God, where art thou? . . . How long shall thy hand be stayed?” (Doctrine and Covenants 121:1–2).

Then the Lord gave Joseph what I believe to be the ultimate comforting remedy—the cure for any affliction regardless of how long or exquisitely painful it may be. The Lord gave Joseph eternal perspective. He helped him see the trials of the moment in comparison to the

eternal reward of the future. The Savior articulated it in these comforting and intimate words: “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; thou shall triumph over all thy foes” (Doctrine and Covenants 121:7–8).

The Lord then painted a picture of Joseph’s mortal life, and it was not a pretty one. He enumerated many of the tragic and harrowing trials that Joseph had endured or must yet endure—the forced separation from his wife and six-year-old child, being “cast . . . into the hands of murderers,” and having “the jaws of hell . . . gape open the mouth wide after [him].” And then remarkably the Lord said, “Know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good.” The Lord followed with this comforting promise of priceless worth. “Fear not what man can do, for God shall be with you forever and ever” (Doctrine and Covenants 122:6–9). In other words, there is nothing man can do, there is nothing the elements can do, there is nothing anyone or anything can do to rob you of your exaltation if you “endure it well.” You, Joseph, are in sole, absolute control of your destiny if you choose to find growth in these afflictions rather than despair. Then these afflictions will be for your good, and exaltation will be your reward.

There was no immediate relief for Joseph after this divine counsel and promise. He would still be confined in Liberty Jail for more than a month, but his spiritual eyes were opened. He now saw with keener eyes this brief speck of mortal affliction compared to his heavenly reward of eternal duration. He had an eternal perspective, which allowed him to write to the Saints from that infernal prison, “Dearly beloved brethren, let us cheerfully do all things that lie in our power; and then may we stand still, with the utmost assurance, to see the salvation of God, and for his arm to be revealed” (Doctrine and Covenants 123:17).

On another occasion, the Lord taught Joseph the same lesson: “He that is faithful in tribulation, the reward of the same is greater in the kingdom of heaven. Ye cannot behold with your natural

eyes, for the present time, the design of your God concerning those things which shall come hereafter, and the glory which shall follow after much tribulation. For after much tribulation come the blessings. Wherefore the day cometh that ye shall be crowned with much glory; the hour is not yet, but is nigh at hand” (Doctrine and Covenants 58:2–4).

It was this same perspective that Job enjoyed in spite of his loss of family, wealth, and friends: “Though [God shall] slay me,” he declared, “yet will I trust in him” (Job 13:15).

The Atonement of Jesus Christ brings eternal perspective, eternal perspective brings hope, and hope brings comfort and peace.

Sometimes the scriptures provide seeming contradictions about suffering. For example, Moses taught, “When thou art in tribulation . . . if thou turn to the Lord thy God, and shalt be obedient unto his voice . . . he will not forsake thee” (Deuteronomy 4:30–31). On the other hand, Christ cried out from the cross, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). This may seem like a contradiction when viewed through the lens of mortality, but there are no contradictions when viewed through the lens of eternity. Admittedly, sometimes our lens is foggy, and we must “walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7), but in the end, in retrospect, there will be no loose ends, no contradictions.

Elder Melvin J. Ballard told of “going into a carpet factory where they were making beautiful rugs. The shuttle was flying back and forth . . . but there was not any design there. It was all raveling and ends. It was just like life. When I stepped around on the other side,” he said, “it was another picture.” It was the same operation—the same things exactly, only this was the design side. The color was blending; the figure was developing. There was not any failure there. “We look at sorrows like death and we think they are tragedies, but we are only looking at things from the seamy side [our mortal perspective]. There is another side to the picture, the designer’s side—God’s side [the eternal perspective]. And there are no blunders there. Some day we will see it.”⁶

The scriptures help us understand that God can comfort us in many ways—by the power of His words, by softening hearts, by strengthening us so we can more easily bear our burdens, and—perhaps most importantly—by giving us an eternal perspective. No doubt the Lord can comfort us in other ways, such as removing the affliction entirely, if He so desires. Recognizing all this, it is no wonder that Alma should say to Helaman, “I have been supported under trials and troubles of every kind, yea, and in all manner of afflictions; yea, God has delivered me from prison, and from bonds, and from death; yea, and I do put my trust in him, and he will still deliver me” (Alma 36:27).

These examples from the scriptures can strengthen our faith in the Savior’s healing powers for our specific needs.

How Should We Respond to Affliction and Suffering?

Suffering, when properly responded to, can be a means of supreme spiritual growth. But one might ask, Can’t we have growth without suffering? Yes, but suffering can accelerate and deepen the refining process—it can facilitate the acquisition of divine attributes if we respond in a saintly way.

Because of God’s commanding respect for agency, He allows bad people to do bad things, even to good people. The choice to do evil can jeopardize the exaltation of the perpetrator, but in and of itself it can never jeopardize the exaltation of the victim. In other words, no one else’s agency can adversely affect our exaltation. Why? Because our exaltation is not determined by the choices of others but rather by our own choices. How, then, should we respond to affliction to maximize our spiritual growth?

The scriptures give us both counsel and examples in this respect. Patience seems to be a recurring theme. At a time of great difficulty in the church, Alma spoke of the faithful who “bore with patience the persecution which was heaped upon them” (Alma 1:25, see also

Romans 12:12). On another occasion the Lord instructed the sons of Mosiah, who were about to go among the Lamanites, to “be patient in long-suffering and afflictions, that ye may show forth good examples unto them in me” (Alma 17:11). Joseph Smith and other early leaders were given the heavenly counsel to “continue in patience until ye are perfected” (Doctrine and Covenants 67:13). To those who are patient, the Lord has promised, “they shall not be ashamed that wait for me” (1 Nephi 21:23).

Patience, as used in the scriptures, seems to refer to retaining one’s faith in God without murmuring, without complaining, but trusting in God implicitly. Nephi, Job, Abraham, and the consummate example of all—Jesus Christ—are powerful reminders of this.

Suffering can drive us to our knees in humility. Such a response prepares us to be receptive to the Lord’s tutoring. Some of the great lessons of life are learned in these moments. Elder Lance B. Wickman once shared a lesson in this regard when he and his wife, Pat, lost their five-year-old son Adam to an unexpected illness. He told of the lesson they learned: “Reduced to their essence,” he said, “humility and submissiveness are an expression of complete willingness to let the ‘why’ questions go unanswered for now. . . . I believe that mortality’s supreme test is to face the ‘why’ and then let go, trusting humbly in the Lord’s promise that ‘all things must come to pass in their time’ (D&C 64:32).”⁷

If we are willing to become wet clay in the Potter’s hands—to ask, What can I learn from this?—then suffering has the power to stretch us to new heights, perhaps even beyond those we thought possible. President Dallin H. Oaks spoke of this concerning his widowed mother: “I often heard my mother say that the Lord consecrated her afflictions for her gain because her husband’s death compelled her to develop her talents and serve and become something that she would never have become without that seeming tragedy.”⁸

Christ taught us the role of obedience in suffering: “Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered” (Hebrews 5:8). If we, like Nephi, can be obedient to the trials and

tests we face without murmuring or complaining, then we too can be “led by the Spirit not knowing beforehand the things which [we] should do” (1 Nephi 4:6).

Suffering can destroy our faith or strengthen it, depending on how we respond. You recall the incredible hardships faced by those in the Willie and Martin Handcart Companies. President David O. McKay tells of a Sunday School class, years after the Saints were established in Salt Lake Valley, in which Church leaders were being criticized for sending the handcart pioneers out so late in the season: “An old man in the corner sat silently and listened as long as he could stand it, then he arose and said things that no person who heard him will ever forget. His face was white with emotion, yet he spoke calmly, deliberately, but with great earnestness and sincerity: ‘I ask you to stop this criticism. You are discussing a matter you know nothing about. I was in that company and my wife was in it. . . . We suffered beyond anything you can imagine, and many died of exposure and starvation, but did you ever hear a survivor of that company utter a word of criticism? Not one of that company ever apostatized or left the Church, because everyone of us came through with the absolute knowledge that God lives for we became acquainted with him in our extremities.’”⁹

What a powerful insight. During the moment of their extremity, no doubtful thoughts occurred to these pioneers such as, *Why me or my little helpless child? Where is God in my hour of need? Does God really love me? Is this suffering necessary for my exaltation?* But in retrospect, there seemed to be no complaining, no cursing God, no questioning His love or motives, but rather an intense deepening of their faith in a loving Father in Heaven. In their Abrahamic test, these handcart pioneers remained true to the end—and in the process became pure gold.

John Roberts, chief justice of the US Supreme Court, speaking at his son’s ninth-grade graduation, addressed the inescapable nature of affliction, the need for it in our lives, and how we should respond:

Commencement speakers will typically also wish you good luck and extend good wishes to you. I will not do that, and I'll tell you why. From time to time in the years to come, I hope you will be treated unfairly, so that you will come to know the value of justice. I hope that you will suffer betrayal because that will teach you the importance of loyalty. Sorry to say, but I hope you will be lonely from time to time so that you don't take friends for granted. . . .

And when you lose, as you will from time to time, I hope every now and then, your opponent will gloat over your failure. It is a way for you to understand the importance of sportsmanship. I hope you'll be ignored so you know the importance of listening to others, and I hope you will have just enough pain to learn compassion. *Whether I wish these things or not, they're going to happen. And whether you benefit from them or not will depend upon your ability to see the message in your misfortunes.*¹⁰

Suffering can be one of our greatest teachers—a catalyst for our greatest growth or our greatest regression. The consequence is under our control—it is determined by our response.

What Is the Ultimate Objective of Affliction and Suffering in God's Plan?

The Lord allows and sometimes even causes affliction and suffering, because (1) it preserves the agency of humankind, (2) it has a refining influence that facilitates the perfection and glory of the afflicted, and (3) it serves as a means to condemn the wicked (Alma 14:10–11).

The scriptures reveal that a primary purpose of mortality is to see if we “will do all things whatsoever . . . God shall command [us]” (Abraham 3:25). We see a dramatic example of this testing in the Book of Mormon. Believers during the time of Samuel the Lamanite were required to put their physical lives on the line to determine if

there was a point at which they would give in or if they would trust God to the bitter end.

The prophet Samuel had prophesied that in five years the Savior would be born in Jerusalem and that His birth would be evidenced by a night with no darkness. Time passed and the sign had not yet occurred. The disbelievers became more vocal and powerful, finally declaring that if the prophecy did not come to pass by a certain date, all believers would be put to death. This was a supreme test of the Saints' faith and endurance. One wonders if some "believers" dropped out a month, a week, or even hours before the appointed time. But we know that Nephi and the other faithful Saints could not be weeded out under any set of circumstances. They were there for the duration—whatever the cost. God had taken this group to the edge of the cliff, to the brink of death, but they would not relent. Then Nephi prayed mightily to God, and in response came these heaven-sent words: "Lift up your head and be of good cheer; for behold, the time is at hand, and on this night shall the sign be given, and on the morrow come I into the world" (3 Nephi 1:13). These souls never gave up on the Lord, never surrendered their trust in Him. They could now say as Job did, "When he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold" (Job 23:10).

The Lord gave us the underlying reason for affliction: "All things wherewith you have been afflicted shall work together for your good, and to my name's glory" (Doctrine and Covenants 98:3). Or as Lehi said to Jacob, "God . . . shall consecrate thine afflictions for thy gain" (2 Nephi 2:2). But how are these afflictions for our good? The Lord gave this insight: "My people must be tried in all things, that they may be prepared to receive the glory that I have for them, even the glory of Zion" (Doctrine and Covenants 136:31).

The end results of constructive suffering are greater compassion for our fellow beings, an enhanced ability to comfort others, more divine humility, increased patience, a greater appreciation for our blessings, and increased faith and trust in God. In essence, we emerge from the crucible of affliction a more refined and holy man or woman, worthy of the glory of Zion.

Truman Madsen gave us an additional reason for our need to suffer. When he asked President Hugh B. Brown why Abraham was commanded to sacrifice his son Isaac, President Brown responded, “Abraham needed to learn something about Abraham.”¹¹ Perhaps each of us, through suffering, learn about our true nature—whether we are willing to trust God even when the elements combine to hedge up the way (Doctrine and Covenants 122:7) and all Satan’s fury is unleashed against us. Then we will know who we are and what we deserve in the heavenly realm. No doubt our final judgment will be only a confirmation of what we have already learned about ourselves.

Perhaps one doctrinal principle about affliction and suffering can be stated as follows: God will allow us, even on occasion cause us, to suffer those afflictions necessary to refine and exalt us, but in that process He will not allow or cause us to suffer unnecessarily. Elder Neal A. Maxwell observed that some of this suffering may not seem fair: “A good friend, who knows whereof he speaks, has observed of trials, ‘If it’s fair, it is not a true trial!’ That is, without the added presence of some inexplicableness and some irony and injustice, the experience may not stretch or lift us sufficiently.”¹²

Paul put our suffering in its proper perspective: “For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18). Sister Linda S. Reeves similarly put in perspective our mortal sufferings as compared to our possible eternal rewards:

I do not know why we have the many trials that we have, but it is my personal feeling that the reward is so great, so eternal and everlasting, so joyful and beyond our understanding that in that day of reward, we may feel to say to our merciful, loving Father, “Was that all that was required?” I believe that if we could daily remember and recognize the depth of that love our Heavenly Father and our Savior have for us, we would be willing to do anything to be back in Their presence again, surrounded by Their love eternally. What will it matter . . . what

we suffered here if, in the end, those trials are the very things
which qualify us for eternal life and exaltation in the kingdom
of God with our Father and Savior?²³

No doubt it is impossible for the blind to fully appreciate a glorious golden sunset, a patch of brilliant wildflowers dancing in the gentle mountain breeze, the breathtaking masterpieces of Leonardo da Vinci, or the lifelike statues created by Michelangelo. Likewise, it is impossible for the deaf to fully grasp the beautiful song of the morning bird or the awe-inspiring music of the “Hallelujah Chorus” from Handel’s *Messiah*. In a similar way, our mortal senses—our natural eyes and ears and heart—lack the perspective and vision and passion to fully understand the quantum leap from mortal life to eternal life. Paul wrote, “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9).

Reduced to its simplest terms, we are all undergoing the same test—to choose between instant gratification now if we conform to the ways of the world or never-ending happiness if we conform to the ways of the Lord. We are being tested to see if we can faithfully endure the loss of a spouse now in return for eternal companionship in a glorified state forever and ever; suffer from cancer for five years now in return for an eternity of absolutely perfect health with a glorified, resurrected body; be ridiculed now for our religious beliefs in return for unlimited eons of being worshipped by those we have created; and subject ourselves to the unrighteous powers of others for a fixed number of years in return for unlimited power, with all things being “subject unto [us]” (Doctrine and Covenants 132:20) forever and ever.

It always comes back to eternal perspective and faith in God. That is what gives us hope. That is what gives us the physical and spiritual stamina to say, “Satan, be gone; I will not murmur, I will not curse or blame God, I will not harden my heart, I will never give up on God. Rather, I will do my best to cheerfully move forward with the best smile I can muster. As a consequence of my suffering, I will be more

grateful for God's blessings and divinely promised rewards; I will be more compassionate to others; I will be more humble; I will be more faithful; I will do all within my power to use this affliction and suffering to refine and perfect me, so I can emerge pure gold—more sanctified and holy." That is the purpose and end goal of saintly suffering.

Leading up to the darkest moments of the Savior's life—just before Judas betrayed Him, Peter denied knowing Him, those whom He had come to save condemned Him, and the infinite pain of Gethsemane and the cross were thrust upon Him—Jesus said to His disciples: "These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: *but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world*" (John 16:33). As Elder Neal A. Maxwell said, "Partaking of a bitter cup without becoming bitter is . . . part of the emulation of Jesus."¹⁴

Because the Savior performed His Atonement, there is no external force or event or person—no affliction, divorce, financial disaster, weakness, or loss of spouse or child—that can prevent us from achieving exaltation provided we repent, obey God's commandments, and receive the saving ordinances. We are in the driver's seat as to our eternal destiny. No amount of mortal affliction or suffering can rob us of that promised blessing. To the contrary, suffering can be our best friend and teacher.

As Elder Orson F. Whitney said: "No pain that we suffer, no trial that we experience is wasted. . . . It is through sorrow and suffering, toil and tribulation, that we gain the education that we came here to acquire."¹⁵ God loves us so much that He provides the necessary experiences, even those that require suffering, that will ultimately perfect us and exalt us. That is the purpose of suffering; that, I believe, is the Savior's doctrine and theology on suffering.

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Notes

1. Joseph Stein, *Fiddler on the Roof*, 1964.
2. When Nephi sees what fate awaits his people at their destruction, he says: “O the pain, and the anguish of my soul for the loss of the slain of my people! For I, Nephi, have seen it, and it well nigh consumeth me before the presence of the Lord; but I must cry unto my God: Thy ways are just” (2 Nephi 26:7).
3. John Greenleaf Whittier, “The Eternal Goodness,” lines 41–44.
4. Richard G. Scott, “Trust in the Lord,” *Ensign*, November 1995, 17.
5. Anne Morrow Lindbergh, *Hour of Gold, Hour of Lead: Diaries and Letters of Anne Morrow Lindbergh, 1929–1932* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 1973), 3.
6. Melvin J. Ballard, *Crusader for Righteousness* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), 276.
7. Lance B. Wickman, “But If Not,” *Ensign*, November 2002, 30.
8. Dallin H. Oaks, *Life’s Lessons Learned* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 70.
9. David O. McKay, “Pioneer Woman,” *Relief Society Magazine*, January 1948, 8.
10. John Roberts, address at his son’s ninth-grade graduation, July 2017; emphasis added.
11. Truman Madsen, *The Highest in Us* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1978), 49.
12. Neal A. Maxwell, *All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 31.
13. Linda S. Reeves, “Worthy of Our Promised Blessings,” *Ensign*, November 2015, 11.
14. Neal A. Maxwell, “Apply the Atoning Blood of Christ,” *Ensign*, November 1997, 22.
15. Orson F. Whitney, quoted in Spencer W. Kimball, *Faith Precedes the Miracle* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 98.