

Earthquakes, Wars, Holocausts, Disease, and Inhumanity

Why Doesn't God Intervene?

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Students of human history are faced with penetrating and oftentimes disturbing issues of evil and suffering. As one of these students, I seek to understand why God did not intervene to save 1.5 million Jewish children who died in the Holocaust and millions of others who suffer what seem to be premature or agonizing deaths. I search to know why God allows natural disasters and has not eradicated poverty, disease, and malnutrition. I seek for insights into understanding better God's view of human-inflicted suffering such as that suffered by the Aztecs and the Incas, the mistreatment of the American Indian, slavery, barbarism, massacres, burning at the stake, kidnapping, oppression, world wars, forced prostitution, and a host of the world's other ills. I pray and study the scriptures to understand God's justice for the wicked and rewards for the righteous. I recognize, as Elder M. Russell Ballard stated, "One cannot look at suf-

fering, regardless of its causes or origins, without feeling pain and compassion. I can understand why someone who lacks an eternal perspective might see the horrifying news footage of starving children and man's inhumanity to man and shake a fist at the heavens and cry, 'If there is a God, how could he allow such things to happen?'"¹ As a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, Elder Spencer W. Kimball addressed the Church regarding the Lord's involvement in causing or preventing death and suffering. Concerning these issues he readily acknowledged, "Answer, if you can. I cannot, for though I know God has a major role in our lives, I do not know how much he causes to happen and how much he merely permits. Whatever the answer to this question, there is another I feel sure about. Could the Lord have prevented these tragedies? The answer is yes. The Lord is omnipotent, with all power to control our lives, save us pain, prevent all accidents, drive

all planes and cars, feed us, protect us, save us from labor, effort, sickness, even from death, if he will. But he will not.”²

Obviously, in this article I cannot address each of the above topics individually, but rather I will offer helpful observations to arm the modern Latter-day Saint student with understanding that can then be applied to specific situations of suffering. Briefly stated, the answer to the above concerns is that God does not intervene because in His divine wisdom He knows that such intervention would not be in our best eternal interests and also because, if we turn to Him, He can and will enable us to overcome all of the negative effects of such sufferings. Now, let us explore and examine a few of the specifics.

THE DIVINE PARADIGM

Although we are not able to fully comprehend God and all His ways, He has revealed enough of His purposes to give answers and insights to our most penetrating questions regarding the ills of humanity. He does not view mortality in the same manner that many of us do. It might be said that in comparison with the various theories of man the Lord’s perspective is the *divine paradigm*. In other words, the Lord sees the ills of humanity through the lenses of eternal purpose. Our understanding of the Lord’s perspective is couched in what is termed the plan of salvation. This plan reveals that there is godly design in mortality, with its attendant evils and suffering. “Con conversationally, we reference this great design almost too casually at times,” Elder Neal A. Maxwell has written. “We even sketch its rude outlines on chalkboards and paper as if it were the floor plan for an addition to one’s house. However, when we really take time to ponder the Plan, it is breathtaking and overpowering!”³

As part of the pondering mentioned by Elder Maxwell, we must remember this essentially important truth restored in latter days—that the beginning of God’s purposes for humankind did not commence with mortality. We

were begotten as spirit children of heavenly parents and lived with Them before we came to earth. Mortality is but a fraction of our existence as we become more like our heavenly parents. The time spent by most mortals on this earth is brief, at best, in relation to the eons of time that we were learning and becoming as premortal spirit beings. Likewise, an eternity of future existence stretches out before us. Next, the key to understanding God’s intervention or seeming lack thereof and the purposes of mortality lies in our understanding of how the Atonement of Jesus Christ is woven into the very fabric of our existence. Mortality, in its planning, received divine design, including salvation from the ills and wickedness of this present existence through the atoning sacrifice of the Only Begotten Son of God. That is, mortality, with its attendant wickedness, suffering, and evil, was never intended to stand alone without means of deliverance from that same evil, suffering, and death. Thus, “if we looked at mortality as the whole of existence, then pain, sorrow, failure, and short life would be calamity,” explained Elder Kimball. “But if we look upon life as an eternal thing stretching far into the premortal past and on into the eternal post-death future, then all the happenings may be put in proper perspective.”⁴

God the Father explained the purposes and attendant bounds and guidelines for the experience of mortality, and we sanctioned them⁵ before we were born on earth. The first of these purposes is that we came to earth to obtain a body of flesh and bones, which will become an eternal part of our soul in the Resurrection (see D&C 88:15–16). Second, we are here as part of an ongoing process of perfection in which we are tested, tried, and refined.

DEATH AND MORTAL NATURES DO NOT THWART GOD’S DESIGNS

Regarding the first purpose, that of obtaining a body of flesh and bones, the Prophet Joseph Smith taught that in receiving a body we are

treading in the footsteps of God the Father and Jesus Christ, both of whom have “a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s” (D&C 130:22).⁶ The Lord further revealed that to receive a fulness of joy it is essential to receive a mortal body, die, and rise from the grave in the Resurrection with “spirit and element, inseparably connected” (D&C 93:33). Because of the grace offered by the Lord Jesus Christ, even those babes that take the breath of life and are soon laid in the grave will have claim on their earth-gained body in the Resurrection. Moreover, the means by which we suffer and die—whether these means are sudden and acute or lingering and painful—have no bearing on the power of God to bring us forth from the dead. Thus, the first purpose of mortality of providing a body of flesh and bones that will unite with the individual spirit in the Resurrection cannot be thwarted by suffering and death. Rather, the truth is the very opposite. That is, through the redemptive power of God, death of the mortal body opens the door to an eternal, resurrected body of flesh and bone. Therefore, as Jacob wrote, “death hath passed upon all men, to fulfil the merciful plan of the great Creator” (2 Nephi 9:6).

Regarding the second purpose, mortality may be viewed as an arena in which we continue to gain experience that tests, tries, and refines us. To meet these ends, in the Lord’s wisdom, the plan required that this mortal existence be a brief experience in a fallen, carnal world. That is, men and all creation upon the earth are fallen for their own growth and benefit. The Lord explained to Adam that even the ground was cursed to bring forth thorns and thistles “for thy sake” (Genesis 3:17; Moses 4:23). It is not by accident that opposition is part of our mortal sojourn. Moroni wrote that an essential part of our mortality brings with it weakness of the flesh (see Ether 12:27). Further, King Benjamin explained that by our mortal nature we are fallen and that unless we humble ourselves and yield to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, we will remain in a state of corruption (see Mosiah 3:19). The prophet Abinadi explained

that “he that persists in his own carnal nature, and goes on the ways of sin and rebellion against God, remaineth in his fallen state and the devil hath all power over him,” which is “the cause of all mankind becoming carnal, sensual, devilish” and thus we all are in a “lost and fallen state” (Mosiah 16:3–4).

The uphill struggle necessary to overcome our fallen natures—to be the masters of our mortal bodies—requires the best that is in us and, additionally, that we increase our capacity for righteousness. The Apostle Peter wrote that we must escape the corruption of the sins of the world if we are to “be partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). He further wrote of the traits that we must obtain to be victorious in the battle against whatever is in our fallen natures through faith, virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness, charity, humility, and diligence (see 2 Peter 1:5–7; D&C 4:6). In addition, unless we develop those virtues and overcome our frailties, our struggles to overcome sinfulness will continue with us in the spirit world that follows death. As part of the divine plan, most of humanity must tackle this real-life educational course without knowledge of the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ, relying solely on the Light of Christ to teach them good from evil. That is, while in mortality, most of the inhabitants of the earth will never be taught the gospel of repentance, be washed clean in the waters of baptism, or receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. Lehi explained, “Men are instructed sufficiently that they know good from evil” (2 Nephi 2:5), and all are required to respond to the experiences of life with the light that they possess. Wisely, God provided a time following mortality in which all may be taught the fulness of the gospel and aided in their eternal progression. Further, the Prophet Joseph Smith taught that the Lord is acquainted with “the situation of all nations and with their destiny; He ordered all things according to the council of His own will; He knows the situation of both the living and the dead, and has

made ample provision for their redemption, according to their several circumstances, and the laws of the kingdom of God, whether in this world, or in the world to come.”⁷ President Joseph F. Smith explained that those who are held captive by their own weaknesses and sins will have liberty proclaimed to them by means of repentance and receiving the gospel while in the spirit world (see D&C 138:31–34).

The temporal condition of our mortal existence is a blessing. Except for blasphemy against the Holy Ghost, all of our wicked choices and actions may have but a temporary effect. The suffering that we cause ourselves and others, as well as the pains of sickness, natural disasters, and death, may be overcome through the grace and power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

A TIME OF REFINING

The Lord’s purposes include the refining of the earth’s inhabitants. He deems to purify and purge His children of their sins and weaknesses as a refiner’s fire purges gold and silver of their impurities (see Job 23:10; Proverbs 17:3; Zechariah 13:9) and to prepare them through experiences that will serve for their education in the eternities. Speaking of Saints who transgressed the Lord’s commandments in Jackson County, Missouri, the Lord declared, “Yet I will own them, and they shall be mine in that day when I shall come to make up my jewels. Therefore, they must needs be chastened and tried, even as Abraham, who was commanded to offer up his only son” (D&C 101:3–4). Thus, the Lord uses these metaphors of refining metals and creating jewels in describing purposes of mortality. The process of refining includes pressure, heat, and time. In other words, mortality is designed to include tribulations, diseases, persecutions, disappointments, enduring, and more, for that is the means, as deemed by God, to best refine His children. The Apostle Peter admonished the Saints of his day, “Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as

though some strange thing happened unto you” (1 Peter 4:12).

There appears to be some customizing of the situations in which we are placed to help us individually in our refining process. Isaiah taught that just as the wise farmer sows seeds in a manner that best suits their growth requirements, so does the Lord place His children in mortal situations that best meet their needs for growth and refinement (see Isaiah 28:23–29).⁸ That is, the wise farmer knows that the small seeds of fitches and cumin should be planted in clumps to grow together in small bunches, while the seeds of the wheat and barley require special spacing and furrows in their planting to provide for germination and watering. The tough and hardened rye, probably a type of spelt wheat, is wisely placed in the edges of the field, as its firm encasement is difficult for vermin to eat as they first enter the farmer’s ground. A message of the parable is that God is aware of each of His children’s needs and places individuals in mortal situations that will best allow for their eternal progression. It may be that some individuals are best placed in protected bunches, like the fitches and cumin, while others are like wheat and barley, needing more individual room to grow. Because of the Lord’s wise placement, they each will yield fruit according to their individual abilities.

Isaiah also metaphorically addressed the chastening of mortal beings, likening it to the wise farmer’s knowledge of the appropriate manner in which to harvest and thresh the various plants. “The delicate herbs, cumin and nutmeg flower, were not threshed with threshing sledges or cart wheels but rather were carefully beaten out with a stick. The more robust cereal grains were threshed with a cart but not to the extent that the kernels were crushed.”⁹ An application may be that some individuals require a simple chastening expression of parental disappointment to reconsider their choices, while others may require more severe reminders to accomplish the same purposes. Similarly, in mortality

the Lord speaks to many “in a still small voice,” while to others who are past feeling He speaks “like unto the voice of thunder” (1 Nephi 17:45).

Taken together, our mortal situations and the appropriate chastening hand of the Lord “give [us] experience, and shall be for [our] good” (D&C 122:7). The Apostle Paul was one whom the Lord sought to purify and make a fruitful plant. In his particular situation this required not only outside influence but also struggles that afflicted his own body. Explaining his personal circumstances and God’s wisdom in leaving him in the midst of the refiner’s fire, Paul wrote, “And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh. . . . For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses” (2 Corinthians 12:7–10).

Although the Lord could deliver us from the tribulations and challenges of life, He does not. Elder Neal A. Maxwell asked, “Is not our struggling amid suffering and chastening in a way like the efforts of the baby chicken still in the egg? It must painfully and patiently make its own way out of the shell. To help the chick by breaking the egg for it could be to kill it. Unless it struggles itself to break outside its initial constraints, it may not have the strength to survive thereafter.”¹⁰ The struggles in the shell of mortality are the very struggles that will not only break through the veil to the next phase of existence after death but also prepare us to survive and help us eventually qualify to dwell in the presence of God and other celestial beings.

A few years ago I saw an illustration that portrayed the various stages of a chick breaking through its shell. When the hatchling finally broke through, it looked around, and to my sur-

prise, quickly pulled its head back into the shell and replaced the broken pieces. At times we may feel the same about the world around us. That is, we might wish simply to hide from the world that engulfs us. However, this does not diminish the truth that we have been blessed with mortal bodies and an earthly education that includes curriculum best suited for our eternal progression. The Lord knows that strength is obtained in overcoming weakness and difficulty. We are made equal to the task before us in a world and universe that is full of opposition. Further, the effort to endure requires that we humble ourselves before God and ask for His blessing and sustaining power. That is, even with the efforts that we put forth to break through the shell, we still must seek the help of God to triumph. Many of life’s challenges have power to persuade all of humanity to seek understanding and strength from a higher source. In the end, the refining qualities that we must acquire necessitate that we submit ourselves to the Lord, which submission is indispensable for salvation.

Elder Orson F. Whitney summarized the purpose of tribulation in our lives: “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 and which will make us more like our Father and Mother in heaven.”¹¹

A TEST OF OUR RESOLVE TO CHOOSE RIGHTEOUSNESS

Another vital aspect of the tests of mortality is faithful obedience. Abraham was shown in a vision that while the creation of the earth was being considered, the premortal Jehovah “said to

those who were with him: We will go down, for there is space there, and we will take of these materials, and we will make an earth whereon these may dwell; and we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them" (Abraham 3:24–25). As previously noted, most of God's children will never hear of the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ while in mortality. Yet, with very few exceptions, all of humanity is able to exercise agency in choosing between good and evil. "For behold, the Spirit of Christ is given to every man, that he may know good from evil" (Moroni 7:16). This gift of knowing good from evil enables all individuals to obey or disobey whatever light is communicated to them through the power of God. Even the very devils cannot prevent this light from proceeding "forth from the presence of God to fill the immensity of space" (D&C 88:12). The divine light given to mortal beings allows each of us to be tested in our resolve to obey God and seek righteousness. At the same time it allows us to choose wickedness, which brings sorrow and pain to many. Thus, the process of testing and its attendant agency brings with it many of the earth's evils and nearly inexplicable suffering.

A TIME OF TESTING AND INCREASING OUR FAITH

Mortality is designed to test us and help us increase our faith. If God intervened to rescue the innocent from suffering, faith could not be developed as needed in the eternities. Elder Kimball explained, "The basic gospel law is free agency and eternal development. To force us to be careful or righteous would be to nullify that fundamental law and make growth impossible. . . . If all the sick for whom we prayed were healed, if all the righteous were protected and the wicked destroyed, the whole program of the Father would be annulled and the basic principle of the gospel, free agency, would be ended. No man would have to live by faith."¹²

During this time of probation we do not know reasons for all that we and others experience. We "see through a glass, darkly" in this life with occasional glimmers of additional light illuminating our lives (1 Corinthians 13:12). The Lord then leaves us to apply that light to other situations amidst the perplexities of mortality. This trust in our ability to work out application of the truths of the plan of salvation in our own lives is an essential part of the refinement and purpose of our existence. Such an effort to seek meaning to life's perplexities sets us on the path of faith—to remain true to the light that we have received even though we are in a world of darkness. Perhaps more important than the test of retaining faith that God exists are the circumstances that test our faith that He is interested in our eternal happiness and that we can truly trust Him even when faced with uncertainties and paradoxes that seem to defy our understanding of God's purposes.

One event that provides insight into the Lord's hand in the seemingly paradoxical tests and tribulations of life is the episode in Church history known as Zion's Camp. In February 1834 the Lord called for the Saints to raise an army to act under the direction of the Prophet Joseph Smith. The immediate goal appeared to be redeeming the Saints' land in Jackson County, Missouri, from the hands of their enemies. However, as it turned out, the purposes of Zion's Camp had more to do with the redemption of souls than the redemption of property. Following the Saints' long and hot summer journey from Ohio to western Missouri and after their arrival at the doorstep of Jackson County, the Lord revealed, "It is expedient in me that they should be brought thus far *for a trial of their faith*" (D&C 105:19; emphasis added). The Lord knew before He called upon the Saints to raise an army of men to redeem Zion that they were not yet ready to live the laws necessary for Zion's redemption.

Yet the Lord had purpose in His command that they travel to Missouri as an army of Saints.

Only a relatively few brethren volunteered to journey with Zion's Camp. Before they left their homes in the eastern states they recognized that they might lose their lives in battle against the mobs in Missouri. Further, the journey to Missouri itself was a trial of faith that tested their mettle. When cholera broke out among them at the end of the journey, it took the lives of fourteen Saints. The test of these Saints' faith in mortality had been taken and passed. On February 8, 1835, "the Prophet Joseph Smith called Elders Brigham and Joseph Young to the chamber of his residence, in Kirtland, Ohio, it being on the Sabbath day. . . . He proceeded to relate a vision to these brethren, of the state and condition of those men who died in Zion's Camp, in Missouri. He said, 'Brethren, I have seen those men who died of the cholera in our camp; and the Lord knows, if I get a mansion as bright as theirs, I ask no more.' At this relation he wept, and for some time could not speak."¹³

Earlier, the Lord revealed: "I will try you and prove you herewith. And whoso layeth down his life in my cause, for my name's sake, shall find it again, even life eternal. Therefore, be not afraid of your enemies, for I have decreed in my heart, saith the Lord, that I will prove you in all things, whether you will abide in my covenant, even unto death, that you may be found worthy. For if ye will not abide in my covenant ye are not worthy of me" (D&C 98:12–15). Ironically, eternal life was gained by being willing to lay down mortal life. Indeed, the plan of salvation rests on this truth. For the very Son of God needed to sacrifice His mortal life to bring to pass immortality and eternal life.

This same principle may be applied to a thousand other similar circumstances throughout history. Faith in God is strengthened through enduring in adversity and suffering. This is true even in paradoxical suffering, when God seems to be distant and to not rescue the innocent from the ravages of disease, persecution, human error, and murder. Elder Maxwell noted, "Christ on the

cross gave out the cry 'My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?' That cry on the cross is an indication that the very best of our Father's children found the trials so real, the tests so exquisite and so severe, that he cried out—not in doubt of his Father's reality, but wondering 'why' at that moment of supreme agony—for Jesus felt so alone."¹⁴

Our mortal tests appear to include our ability to determine with the eye of faith that which truly matters. Elder Henry B. Eyring related the trial of faith and the education that his father received before dying of cancer:

Let me illustrate for you what I know about the questions that matter and how they are answered by telling you about the last conversations I had with my father.

He was suffering through the end of a long struggle with bone cancer. He still weighed enough and was in such pain that it was hard to move him from a chair to his bed. Others far more heroic than I spent the months and the days caring for him. But I took some turns on the midnight-to-dawn shift. . . .

One night when I was not with him and the pain seemed more than he could bear, he somehow got out of bed and on his knees beside it—I know not how. He pled with God to know why he was suffering so. And the next morning he said, with quiet firmness, "I know why now. God needs brave sons."¹⁵

Elder Eyring's father found meaning in the sufferings that attended his death. I judge that his trust and faith in God were tested and increased in his ordeal of pain. In contrast, following the disbanding of the aforementioned Zion's Camp, a few of its members became very critical of the Prophet Joseph Smith and left the faith. Others appear to have found great spiritual strength in the experience. We might say that all individuals are sent to earth on a type of Zion's Camp experience. That is, they find themselves in situations whose purposes are not always

clearly understood. The test of faith is how one responds to such situations of mortality.

The ultimate mortal test of faith may well be death itself, including those events that lead up to it. It makes no difference what light one is given in mortality: whether it be the dimness of the newly rising morning sun or the full resplendence of the noonday sun, all must die. Job, a towering scriptural example of faith in God, declared his ultimate certainty of divine purpose in the midst of his trials. "Though [the Lord] slay me," he passionately declared, "yet will I trust in him" (Job 13:15). Ironically, that depth of faith and trust may be exactly what the Lord wishes to prove and teach each of His children in mortality and the spirit world that follows. Apparently, attitudes of the individual toward God during suffering and death continue in the spirit world. Thus, death itself serves the Lord's eternal purposes of proving His children and their trust and faith in His existence, omnipotence, and wisdom. Passing through the portals of death may place even wicked individuals in a state of searching for meaning to their brief mortal sojourn and continued existence in the spirit world.

GOD'S VIEW OF HUMAN POVERTY

The inequities among the peoples of the world regarding the necessities and niceties of life can be a challenge to reconcile with God's love for all of His children. Yet, in the Lord's perspective, mortality is a time for His children to learn to manage the earth's bounties and to lift up the poor. This requires that we reject covetousness and learn to organize ourselves, working together to bless the lives of others. Consequently, the problems of poverty come most often from wicked individuals who use their positions of power to make themselves rich by treading upon and grinding the face of the poor. God created the earth with all the necessary elements to provide for all of its inhabitants. The Lord explained: "For the earth is full, and there is enough and to spare; yea, I prepared all things,

and have given unto the children of men to be agents unto themselves. Therefore, if any man shall take of the abundance which I have made, and impart not his portion, according to the law of my gospel, unto the poor and the needy, he shall, with the wicked, lift up his eyes in hell, being in torment" (D&C 104:17-18).

One of the tests of mortality is how we treat the poor and less fortunate. The Lord has commanded us to be wise stewards over our earthly goods. This stewardship includes an obligation to share knowledge of appropriate agriculture techniques with others. Thus, rather than pouring manna from heaven upon the starving of the earth, the Lord allows us to learn that we must care for the welfare of humanity. Consequently, it is not God's indifference to the needs of the human race that leads to hunger and poverty but our lust for corruptible goods and our apathy, or even hatred, toward our fellow earthly sojourners.

DEATH OF INFANTS AND BLESSINGS DENIED IN MORTALITY

Another issue with which many struggle is the seemingly premature death of many infants. Even within the framework of the plan of salvation, it might appear that they have missed the necessary opportunities to grow. In a discourse given in Nauvoo, Illinois, on March 30, 1842, the Prophet Joseph Smith taught:

In my leisure moments I have meditated upon the subject, and asked the question, why it is that infants, innocent children, are taken away from us, especially those that seem to be the most intelligent and interesting. The strongest reasons that present themselves to my mind are these: This world is a very wicked world; and it is a proverb that the "world grows weaker and wiser"; if that is the case, the world grows more wicked and corrupt. . . . The Lord takes many away even in infancy, that they may escape the envy of man, and the sorrows and evils in this present world; they were too pure, too lovely, to

live on earth; therefore, if rightly considered, instead of mourning we have reason to rejoice as they are delivered from evil, and we shall soon have them again.

. . . All children are redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ and the moment that children leave this world, they are taken to the bosom of Abraham. The only difference between the old and young dying is, one lives longer in heaven and eternal light and glory than the other, and is freed a little sooner from this miserable wicked world. Notwithstanding all this glory, we for a moment lose sight of it, and mourn the loss, but we do not mourn as those without hope.¹⁶

The Prophet further taught that these children taken from us in their infancy may yet be cradled in the arms of their loving parents: "Will mothers have their children in eternity? Yes! Yes! Mothers, you shall have your children; for they shall have eternal life, for their debt is paid. There is no damnation awaiting them for they are in the spirit. But as the child dies, so shall it rise from the dead, and be for ever living in the learning of God. It will never grow [in the grave]; it will still be the child, in the same precise form [when it rises] as it appeared before it died out of its mother's arms."¹⁷

The Lord's plan provides a period of one thousand years in which losses incurred in mortality may be made up. This period, known as the Millennium, is an essential element of the plan of salvation. In addition to restoring little children to families, the Lord will provide other blessings denied to innocent people in mortality. Elder Dallin H. Oaks explained:

Singleness, childlessness, death, and divorce frustrate ideals and postpone the fulfillment of promised blessings. . . . The Lord has promised that in the eternities no blessing will be denied his sons and daughters who keep the commandments, are true to their covenants, and desire what is right. Many of the most important deprivations of mortality will be set right in the Mil-

lennium, which is the time for fulfilling all that is incomplete in the great plan of happiness for all of our Father's worthy children. We know that will be true of temple ordinances. I believe it will also be true of family relationships and experiences.¹⁸

Therefore, much of the apparent frustration to God's plan is overcome because of God's forethought and foreknowledge. Referring to the Second Coming of the Lord, the Prophet Joseph Smith explained, "At that time the hearts of the widows and fatherless shall be comforted, and every tear shall be wiped from their faces. The trials they have had to pass through shall work together for their good, and prepare them for the society of those who have come up out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb."¹⁹

Thus we see that no interference of iniquity or physical weakness can prevent the Lord from fulfilling His promises. No disaster or tribulation is too great for Him to overcome.

NATURAL DISASTERS, DISEASE, AND DEATH

Another area of human suffering that does not fall under the explanation of the human misuse of agency is that of natural disasters, such as earthquakes, hurricanes, famines, and pestilences. Indeed, God has declared that as the Creator of the earth, He is the author of such conditions and events (see D&C 43:25; 87:6). President Joseph F. Smith explained that

[Latter-day Saints] believe that God rules in the fire, the earthquake, the tidal wave, the volcanic eruption, and the storm. Him they recognize as the Master and Ruler of nature and her laws, and freely acknowledge his hand in all things. We believe that his judgments are poured out to bring mankind to a sense of his power and his purposes, that they may repent of their sins and prepare themselves for the second

coming of Christ to reign in righteousness upon the earth. . . .

We believe that these severe, natural calamities are visited upon men by the Lord for the good of his children, to quicken their devotion to others, and to bring out their better natures, that they may love and serve him. . . .

If these lessons are impressed upon us and upon the people of our country, the anguish, and the loss of life and toil, sad, great and horrifying as they were, will not have been endured in vain.²⁰

Although there are notable exceptions, the wicked and the righteous are exposed together to these tribulations. Earthquakes make no distinction between young and old, male and female, or rich and poor. Cancers may attack all, and children are often the first to die in pestilence and famine. For those who question why God does not regularly intervene to deliver the young from the disease or the righteous from the hurricane, I have asked myself, "What blessing comes from death's unpredictability?" My reasoning has pursued somewhat the following lines. Suppose that we have the power to change the world and only the wicked die before they reach one hundred years of age. Might not many choose righteousness simply to prolong their mortal lives? Or if all are given the right to one hundred years of mortality, regardless of their righteousness or wickedness, might not we predict that many would choose wickedness for a season with the intent to repent in the guaranteed latter part of their mortal probation? The purposes of the Lord for mortality are fulfilled in having death be a prospect at any time in our lives. That divine determination provides reason to live each day of mortality walking in the paths of righteousness. On the other hand, the doctrine of the wicked is "eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die" (2 Nephi 28:7). That is, they wish to fill their short mortal existence with deeds of debauchery, sensuality, and pleasure. Further, the unpredictability

and often randomness of death, debilitating diseases, and incapacitating natural events actually increase the importance of our daily acts and choices and erase the attraction of the devilish doctrine of procrastination.

Therefore, even the righteous are subject to disease and death. "It is a false idea that the Saints will escape all the judgments [of the coming of the Son of Man], whilst the wicked suffer," explained the Prophet Joseph Smith, "for all flesh is subject to suffer, and 'the righteous shall hardly escape;' still many of the Saints will escape, for the just shall live by faith; yet many of the righteous shall fall a prey to disease, to pestilence, etc., by reason of weakness of the flesh, and yet be saved in the Kingdom of God."²¹

Thus, debilitating diseases and death from natural disasters do not rob the righteous or the wicked of the ultimate goal for which they entered mortality. Like other aspects of God's plan for us, He designs that we will be refined and our faith tested and increased by the tribulations of nature that we encounter.

GOD'S VIEW OF HUMAN-INFLICTED SUFFERING

A common cry is for God to intervene to stop the wicked from inflicting suffering on innocent victims. The absence of God's intervention is often cited as a reason for not believing in God. For example, during the time that my family and I lived in Israel we often heard the query, "Of what faith are most Jews?" The first few times we heard the question we thought that perhaps it was meant to be a trick question as we thought that the obvious answer was, "They are Jewish." However, an unexpected answer was given: "Atheist!" The intent of the exchange seemed to be to provoke thought and to emphasize the feeling of abandonment felt by the Jewish people in general. Those who posed the question were secular Jews and did not express the faith of believers. Many explained that they felt a kinship to the prophets of the scriptures but chose not to believe

in a God who would abandon His people as they felt they were during the Holocaust and throughout much of history.

Such a view has a fatal flaw, namely, the belief that individual ease, or at least survival, indicates divine assistance. God's perspective is radically distinct from such a view. Even in an atrocity of the enormity of the Holocaust, God's purposes can be fulfilled. This is borne out in a similarly tragic instance recorded in the Book of Mormon. The wicked people of the city of Ammonihah mocked faithful believers in God and cast out men who believed in the inspired teachings of Alma and Amulek. "And they brought their wives and children together, and whosoever believed or had been taught to believe in the word of God they caused that they should be cast into the fire" (Alma 14:8). Recognizing that he and Alma possessed the power of God to save them from the flames, Amulek suggested that they stretch forth their hands and exercise priesthood authority. "But Alma said unto him: The Spirit constraineth me that I must not stretch forth mine hand; for behold the Lord receiveth them up unto himself, in glory; and he doth suffer that they may do this thing, or that the people may do this thing unto them, according to the hardness of their hearts, that the judgments which he shall exercise upon them in his wrath may be just." Justice will be satisfied regarding their wicked acts. "The blood of the innocent shall stand as a witness against them," Alma continued, "Yea, and cry mightily against them at the last day" (Alma 14:11). The innocent will not be deprived of any blessings in eternity because of the sufferings caused by the wicked. Rather, they will be received by the Lord in glory.

The destruction of life and great persecution, whether of the Latter-day Saints, the Jews, or any other people, is of such enormity that a note or two more may be appropriate. First, the Lord is aware of tribulations that come upon His children. Indeed, we might note that God could have intervened at the height of the Saints' tribu-

lations in Missouri or in the Jewish holocaust to have appeared as their saving Messiah. Certainly, many called upon the Messiah to come at that time. However, God revealed that He has determined another timetable for the redemption of Zion and the temporal and spiritual rescue of the Jewish remnant. To the Saints He declared: "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" (D&C 58:3-4). The words of the Lord will not fail. According to the Lord's divine timetable, Zion will be redeemed and built up in glory. Likewise, Jesus Christ will appear to the Jewish remnant as their Savior (see Zechariah 12:2-3; 13:7-9; 14:1-4; D&C 45:47-53). We need to trust in the Lord and await the wisdom of His timing to be manifest in the eyes of all the earth.

Another insight to God's purpose for allowing the wicked to carry out their evil designs for a season is found in the sufferings heaped upon the Savior by wicked individuals in Jerusalem. When yet a babe, Christ's parents took Him to the temple, where they were found by the aged Simeon. This venerable old patriarch spoke by the power of the Holy Ghost in explaining to Christ's mother, Mary, "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel. . . . Yea, a spear shall pierce through him to the wounding of thine own soul also; that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed" (Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 2:34-35).

This explanation may be applied to a host of other situations of suffering being heaped upon the innocent by the wicked, who have surrendered their wills to devils. That is, the Lord wishes to reveal the "intents and thoughts of many hearts."

It is necessary that agency be preserved for both the righteous and the wicked. As a familiar

hymn teaches, “Know this, that ev’ry soul is free to choose his life and what he’ll be; for this eternal truth is giv’n: that God will force no man to heav’n. He’ll call, persuade, direct aright, and bless with wisdom, love, and light, in nameless ways be good and kind, but never force the human mind.”²² The Lord safeguards the agency of all of His children. Thus, I have concluded that it would be a greater evil for God to compel earth’s inhabitants to choose Him as their father and love others as themselves than it is for God to allow individuals to choose to be wicked.

Further, for the preservation of agency and the schooling of mortality, our choices must have real and often natural consequences. The same is true of the choices of others. How could we learn the value of obedience and doing good if we were protected from the consequences of our own and others’ disobedience and wickedness?

Making the consequences of evil admissible does not suggest that God would have His children choose evil. During an intimate and revealing experience with God, Enoch saw the Lord weep over the wickedness of the people. When asked, “How is it that thou canst weep, seeing that thou art holy, and from all eternity to all eternity?” the Lord explained,

Behold these thy brethren; they are the workmanship of mine own hands, and I gave unto them their knowledge, in the day I created them; and in the Garden of Eden, gave I unto man his agency;

And unto thy brethren have I said, and also given commandment, that they should love one another, and that they should choose me, their Father; but behold, they are without affection, and they hate their own blood. . . .

Satan shall be their father, and misery shall be their doom; and the whole heavens shall weep over them, even the workmanship of mine hands; wherefore should not the heavens weep, seeing these shall suffer? (Moses 7:29, 32–33, 37)

Thus, in protecting every individual’s ability to choose, God weeps with us in viewing the sufferings caused by wickedness. However, it appears that His weeping is not only for the suffering of the victims but also for those who inflict such suffering on others. The greater sorrow comes from knowing that any people would so harden their hearts as to choose such terrible wickedness, even if it be in the temporary setting of mortality.

THE LORD’S JUSTICE FOR THE WICKED

Mortality is generally not the time for the Lord to visibly and fully intervene to bring justice to the wicked. The Lord taught that the wheat and the tares are allowed to grow together until the harvest (see Matthew 13:24–30). That is, the righteous and the wicked remain in the same world during mortality. Further, the Savior emphasized that during this life God “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). Nevertheless, there are appointed times of divine judgment, with accompanying rewards and punishments. None of the wicked are granted immunity from death, whether it comes quickly following their wicked actions or at some later time. In one sense, God intervenes in the lives of all wicked individuals by limiting the span of mortality, preventing them from inflicting further wounds. That is, all who live on earth know that the day will come when they will take one final breath, and we know that they will pass from this sphere of existence to the next.

At death God executes justice upon those who inflicted evil upon others. Explaining the distinction between the righteous and the wicked who die and take up their abode in the spirit world, Alma declared, “Then shall it come to pass, that the spirits of the wicked, yea, who are evil—for behold, they have no part nor portion of the Spirit of the Lord; for behold, they chose evil works rather than good; therefore the spirit

of the devil did enter into them, and take possession of their house—and these shall be cast out into outer darkness; there shall be weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth, and this because of their own iniquity, being led captive by the will of the devil” (Alma 40:13).

“Their torment is as a lake of fire and brimstone, whose flame ascendeth up forever and ever and has no end” (2 Nephi 9:16) or “*endless torment*” (D&C 19:6; emphasis in original).

A more perfect understanding of God’s reasons for often waiting until after their deaths to intervene in the lives of the wicked requires further explanation. The scriptures clarify that deliverance from endless torment is possible through the infinite and eternal Atonement of Jesus Christ (see 2 Nephi 9:19, 26; D&C 19:16). Further, the same principles governing humanity in mortality continue after death. Throughout the sojourn in the spirit world, the utmost care is taken to protect agency. No one is forced to accept deliverance from such suffering and despair as they have brought upon their own heads. That is, these individual spirits remain in this state of misery *until* they repent and obey, at which time they are delivered from endless torment through the Atonement of Christ. Exactly what is entailed in making restitution for the suffering that they brought upon others in mortality is not made clear in the scriptures, but according to the laws of justice and mercy, “none but the truly penitent are saved” (Alma 42:24).

Each aspect of the plan of salvation was foreknown and organized by God before the earth was created. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that

the great Jehovah contemplated the whole of the events connected with the earth, pertaining to the plan of salvation, before it rolled into existence, or ever “the morning stars sang together” for joy; the past, the present, and the future were and are, with Him, one eternal “now”; He knew of the fall of Adam, the iniquities of the antediluvians, of the depth of iniquity that

would be connected with the human family, their weakness and strength, their power and glory, apostasies, their crimes, their righteousness and iniquity; He comprehended the fall of man, and his redemption; He knew the plan of salvation and pointed it out; He was acquainted with the situation of all nations and with their destiny; He ordered all things according to the council of His own will; He knows the situation of both the living and the dead, and has made ample provision for their redemption, according to their several circumstances, and the laws of the kingdom of God, whether in this world, or in the world to come.²³

THE LORD’S JUSTICE FOR THE RIGHTEOUS

The Lord has revealed that the results of sickness, death, and the acts of wicked individuals will not prevail. Regarding the innocent victims of mortality’s caprice, John the Revelator heard the heavenly voice declare, “And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain” (Revelation 21:4). Part of God’s intervention at mortal death is that contrary to the suffering of the wicked, “the spirits of those who are righteous are received into a state of happiness, which is called paradise, a state of rest, a state of peace, where they shall rest from all their troubles and from all care, and sorrow” (Alma 40:12). They are placed beyond the challenges of a corruptible world and out of the clutches of designing and evil individuals who tormented them in mortality. Even the wicked are unable to visit their iniquities on others. Spirits are placed beyond the reach of pain and suffering, hunger, and death. It is no longer possible for thieves to steal. Because spirits do not have bodies of flesh and bone, a host of atrocities are absent from the spirit world. The wicked are left to suffer for their iniquities and wait upon the mercy of the Atonement to be taught to them with its attendant requirements

and the ordinances of salvation. Ironically, the victims of evil deeds may very well be those who now preach to the spirits in prison. Those who suffered will be given the opportunity to forgive those who vexed them in mortality and possibly even to extend the blessings of salvation to them. Although the intervention of God is postponed, the deferment is designed in perfect wisdom for all involved. The righteous lose nothing in the eternal perspective but gain everything that may have been taken from them in mortality, and furthermore, they will receive all of the blessings that God can bestow upon them for their strength of character, according to their individual choices and the degree of their faithfulness. At the appropriate time their joy will increase when their spirits are inseparably united with their resurrected bodies and they are “brought to stand before God, and be judged according to their works” (Alma 40:21). Thus, although the Lord’s retribution for wickedness and blessings for righteousness are sure, they are not premature. “A premature showing of His power and strength in support of His Saints,” explained Elder Maxwell, “could cut short the trial of our faith.”²⁴

CONCLUSION

Regardless of tribulations and inhuman acts, we may trust that mortality has divine purpose and that the Lord is not an absentee master. He is serious in His work to help His children become sanctified and perfected. The trials of mortality are an integral part of that schooling. The reality of those trials witness to the certainty of the Lord’s purposes. Further, as Saints of the latter days we need to hold up the light of truth in our discussions of history. I believe that we may do so without being insensitive to the sufferings of others. Indeed, rather than minimizing the importance of their afflictions, understanding their sufferings in the divine plan of God lends legitimacy and value to their experience. True understanding and empathy are expressed for chal-

lenges in the life of each individual. The climate of scholarly exchange of ideas allows for consideration of distinct perspectives. Indeed, that climate anticipates and expects that such an exchange will occur. Thus, it is right that we include the paradigm of a Latter-day Saint perspective of God’s designs during painful events in world history while conversing as scholars and students of history.

NOTES

1. M. Russell Ballard, in Conference Report, April 1995, 30.
2. Spencer W. Kimball, *Faith Precedes the Miracle* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1975), 96.
3. Neal A. Maxwell, “God’s Plan of Happiness,” in *Repentance* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 23.
4. Kimball, *Faith Precedes the Miracle*, 97.
5. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught, “At the first organization in heaven we were all present and saw the Savior chosen and appointed, and the plan of salvation made and we sanctioned it” (*The Words of Joseph Smith*, comp. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook [Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980], 60).
6. See also Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 345–47.
7. Smith, *Teachings*, 220.
8. I am indebted to the insights of my colleague Terry Ball, who pointed out and explained the meaning of the parable of the wise farmer (see Terry B. Ball, “Isaiah’s Imagery of Plants and Planting,” in *Thy People Shall Be My People and Thy God My God*, 22nd Annual Sidney B. Sperry Symposium [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994], 20–22).
9. Ball, “Isaiah’s Imagery,” 22.
10. Neal A. Maxwell, *All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 39.
11. Orson F. Whitney, quoted in Kimball, *Faith Precedes the Miracle* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 98.

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12. Kimball, *Faith Precedes the Miracle*, 96–97.
13. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed., rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1918), 2:181.
14. Neal A. Maxwell, “But for a Small Moment,” *Speeches of the Year: BYU Devotional and Ten-Stake Fireside Addresses, 1974* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), 443–57.
15. Henry B. Eyring, *To Draw Closer to God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 115–16.
16. Smith, *Teachings*, 196–97.
17. Smith, *History of the Church*, 6:316.
18. Dallin H. Oaks, in Conference Report, October 1993, 101.
19. Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:11.
20. Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 55.
21. Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:11.
22. “Know This, That Every Soul Is Free,” *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 240.
23. Smith, *Teachings*, 220.
24. Maxwell, *All These Things*, 17.