

D&C LESSON #28
“O GOD, WHERE ART THOU?”

By Ted L. Gibbons

On June I was in the jail at Carthage, Illinois. I had my picture taken next to the statue of Joseph and Hyrum with the jail in the background. On June 6th, I visited Liberty Jail. I knelt by the cutaway corner of the missing wall and a kind guide took a photo showing the upper and lower levels, the prophet Joseph at his small table, and the great squared stones of the wall. I have been in these places before, and as always I was moved by the witness of suffering and solitude and sacrifice that seemed to seep from the very walls. But I also sensed that the restriction of Joseph’s body gave his spirit increased capacity to soar. I wrote some words in my journal about my feelings:

The two jails made famous in Church History—Liberty and Carthage—have never felt to me like places of confinement. They seem somehow spiritually liberating. They speak of sacrifice more than suffering, and they speak of sanctification. Ancient Jewish Rabbis used to describe the act of making a covenant as *building an altar in the heart*. Joseph had certainly built such an altar, and had laid everything he had on it, including his life. There was nothing the Lord could ask for that he would not give because he had given everything already. In that matter, he was very much like Abraham, who had offered Isaac, and everything else, long before he arrived at Moriah.

But even with that kind of commitment in his heart, Joseph cried to the lord from the darkness and uncertainty of Liberty, “O God, where art thou?” (D&C 121:1)

1. JOSEPH SMITH’S PRAYER AT LIBERTY JAIL, AND THE LORD’S RESPONSE.

While Joseph and others waited on an uncertain future in Liberty Jail, 8000 saints were being forced from the state of Missouri by armed mobs and politically supported troops. Even at the distance of 162 years it seems

strange that the Lord should have allowed his people to suffer so acutely and continuously in the future land of Zion. Of course they were not perfect, but neither were they evil enough to have deserved the tribulation they experienced. Joseph, unable to do anything for his people except pray, did exactly that, and one of his prayers is recorded:

O God, where art thou? And where is the pavilion that covereth thy hiding place?

How long shall thy hand be stayed, and thine eye, yea thy pure eye, behold from the eternal heavens the wrongs of thy people and of thy servants, and thine ear be penetrated with their cries?

Yea, O Lord, how long shall they suffer these wrongs and unlawful oppressions, before thine heart shall be softened toward them, and thy bowels be moved with compassion toward them?

O Lord God Almighty, maker of heaven, earth, and seas, and of all things that in them are, and who controllest and subjectest the devil, and the dark and benighted dominion of Sheol—stretch forth thy hand; let thine eye pierce; let thy pavilion be taken up; let thy hiding place no longer be covered; let thine ear be inclined; let thine heart be softened, and thy bowels moved with compassion toward us.

Let thine anger be kindled against our enemies; and, in the fury of thine heart, with thy sword avenge us of our wrongs.

Remember thy suffering saints, O our God; and thy servants will rejoice in thy name forever. (D&C 121:1-6)

Nothing seemed to change. The exodus continued. The suffering did not abate. It is true that within a month Joseph would be in Illinois himself, and the Saints would be welcomed by the outraged inhabitants of Quincy, Illinois, where 1600 Illinoisans tried to provide food and shelter for 5600 Saints. (Comprehensive History of the Church, II, p. 57), but those interventions hardly seem commensurate with the suffering the saints had

endured.

How do you feel about Joseph's prayer? Would you want to quote the words of D&C 101:16 or Psalm 46:10 to him at a time like this?

Consider the first part of the Lord's response to Joseph's cry. What lessons does he want us to learn from these verses?

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 shalt triumph over all thy foes.

Thy friends do stand by thee, and they shall hail thee again with warm hearts and friendly hands.

Thou art not yet as Job; thy friends do not contend against thee, neither charge thee with transgression, as they did Job. (D&C 121: 7-10)

The most important thing we can do when unexpected trials come is to "endure it well." We have this promise to sustain us:

"When you pass through trials for His purposes, as you trust Him, exercise faith in Him, He will help you. That support will generally come step by step, a portion at a time. While you are passing through each phase, the pain and difficulty that comes from being enlarged will continue. If all matters were immediately resolved at your first petition, you could not grow. 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." (Elder Richard G. Scott, *Ensign*, Nov. 1995, p. 17)

The Lord said it in this way in Isaiah 30:20,21.

“And though the Lord give you the bread of adversity, and the water of affliction, yet shall not thy teachers be removed into a corner any more, but thine eyes shall see thy teachers: thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, This is the way, walk ye in it, when ye turn to the right hand, and when ye turn to the left.”

2. THE SAVIOR’S PERFECT UNDERSTANDING OF OUR SUFFERING AND ADVERSITY

A powerful part of the Lord’s answer to Joseph’s cry is found in D&C 122. Read 122:5-8 and mark all the trials that Joseph might have to face as given in these verses. I count about 20 of them. What is the statement in D&C 122:8 meant to teach us about our afflictions?

Who in the history of all the universe has suffered more than the Savior? Who in the history of the universe was less deserving of suffering than the Savior? Whose sufferings did the Savior bear in the garden and on the cross?

In the garden and on the cross, Jesus saw each of us and not only bore our sins, but also experienced our deepest feelings so that he would know how to comfort and strengthen us. (Elder Merrill J, Bateman, *Ensign*, May 1995, p. 14)

There are a number of verses in the scriptures that teach that the Savior knows us intimately and perfectly. Read these verses and consider their importance.

- T Moses 1:35
- T Acts 15:18
- T Alma 18:32
- T D&C 67:1,2
- T John 4:29

T 1 Kings 8:38

If the Savior knows us intimately and perfectly, and if he loves us with an unconditional love, and if he has all power to stop our suffering but allows us to suffer anyway, what does that mean?

3. PURPOSES OF ADVERSITY

Why does the Lord allow those who have made covenants with him to suffer, often at the hands of wicked men? The scriptures suggest at least five reasons.

T **Sin:** See D&C 101:1-8.

Alma bluntly told his wayward son that “repentance could not come unto men except there were a punishment.” (Alma 42:16)

The punishment may, for the most part, consist of the torment we inflict upon ourselves. It may be the loss of privilege or progress. 15 (For further information, see additional text in this endnote.) We are punished by our sins, if not for them. (Boyd K. Packer, “The Brilliant Morning of Forgiveness,” Ensign, Nov. 1995, 19)

T **Experience:** This is part of the Lord’s answer to Joseph. “All these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good.” (D&C 122:7)

T **Agency:** That is, the Lord sometimes allows even the wicked to exercise their agency so that the judgements of God can be just. This passage comes from Alma as he and Amulek observed the burning of women and children in Ammonihah:

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; and the blood of the innocent shall stand as a witness against them, yea, and cry mightily against them at the last day. (Alma 14:11).

T **Covenants:** The Lord has great rewards for those who will keep their covenants no matter what.

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 98:14,15; see also Abraham 3:25)

T **Trust.** In our extremities we may learn to trust God in a way that we could not learn under any other conditions.

“Many were softened because of their afflictions, insomuch that they did humble themselves before God, even in the dept of humility.” (Alma 62:41). In this context I remember the words spoken by one of the survivors of the Willie and Martin Handcart companies. President Hinckley related this account.

Members of [a] group [in Cedar City] spoke critically of the Church and its leaders because the [handcart] company of converts had been permitted to start so late in the season. I now quote from a manuscript which I have:

“One old man in the corner sat silent and listened as long as he could stand it. Then he arose and said things that no person who heard will ever forget. His face was white with emotion, yet he spoke calmly, deliberately, but with great earnestness and sincerity.

“He said in substance, ‘I ask you to stop this criticism. You are discussing a matter you know nothing about. Cold historic facts mean nothing here for they give no proper interpretation of the questions involved. A mistake to send the handcart company out so late in the season? Yes. But I was in that company and my

wife was in it and Sister Nellie Unthank whom you have cited was there too. 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 every one of us came through with the absolute knowledge that God lives for we became acquainted with him in our extremities.’ ”
(Cited by Gordon B. Hinckley, “Our Mission of Saving,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1991, 54)

4. THE LORD’S COUNSEL TO THOSE WHO EXPERIENCE ADVERSITY

There are attitudes that will assist us as we experience adversity. If our afflictions are in fact to be good for us, we must meet them with a correct perspective. Note a few of the things the Lord suggests to those who face trials:

- T “Hold on thy way” (D&C 122:9)
- T “Hold our faithful to the end” (D&C 6:13)
- T “Be patient in afflictions” (D&C 24:8)
- T “Be of good cheer” (D&C 61:36; 68:6; 78:18, etc.)
- T “In everything give thanks” (D&C 98:1 Thess. 5:18)
- T “Let the solemnities of eternity rest upon your minds” (D&C 43:34)
- T “Seek not to counsel the Lord, but to take counsel from his hand” (Jacob 4:10)
- T “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10; D&C 101:16)

There are many of these injunctions in the standard works. They all seem to say that in times of adversity, attitude is everything. The foundation of our faith should be summarized in this expression of Job: “Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him . . .” (Job 13:15)

5. THE LORD’S PROMISES TO THOSE WHO ARE FAITHFUL IN ADVERSITY

I am a parent. I cannot imagine anything more difficult than to watch my children suffer when I have the capacity to prevent it. But our Heavenly Father with his perfect love and limitless knowledge does that very thing.

However, the scriptures, and especially the D&C are filled with promises of his concern and caring—of his awareness and ability to help. In addition he has repeatedly commanded his disciples to render aid one to another in times of trouble. In fact, according to Alma, this is one of the main parts of the baptismal covenant. (See Mosiah 18: 8-10) As you reflect on the scriptures below, consider what they teach us about the compassion and empathy of the Father and the Son for us in times of trouble.

THE LORD’S WILLINGNESS TO HELP

- T “You may know of a surety that I, the Lord God, do visit my people in their afflictions.” (Mosiah 24:14)
- T “Yea, they did remember how great things the Lord had done for them, that he had delivered them from death, and from bonds, and from prisons, and from all manner of afflictions and he had delivered them out of the hands of their enemies.” (Alma 62:50)
- T “And the LORD said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows . . .” (Exodus 3:7)
- T “Many are the afflictions of the righteous: but the LORD delivereth him out of them all.” (Psalm 34:19)
- T “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)
- T “My God hath been my support; he hath led me through mine afflictions in the wilderness; and he hath preserved me upon the waters of the great deep.” (2 Nephi 4:20)

GOD’S COMMANDS TO HIS CHILDREN TO HELP EACH OTHER IN TIMES OF ADVERSITY

- T “Succor the weak, lift up the hands which hang down, and strengthen the feeble knees” (D&C 81:5)
- T “Think of your brethren like unto yourselves, and be familiar with all and free with your substance, that they may be rich like unto you.” (Jacob 2:17)
- T “He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath meat, let him do likewise.” (Luke 3:11)

- T “Mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort” (Mosiah 18:9)
- T “And also, ye yourselves will succor those that stand in need of your succor; ye will administer of your substance unto him that standeth in need; and ye will not suffer that the beggar putteth up his petition to you in vain, and turn him out to perish.” (Mosiah 4:16)
- T “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 104:18)
- T “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.” (Matthew 25:40)

If God had repeatedly promised his own help for us in times of trouble, and if he has commanded us to help each other, we must know that he is never indifferent to our trials.

CONCLUSION: The purpose of mortality is not to collect more stuff. As Elder Sterling W. Sill once said, “You were not sent into the vineyard to eat the grapes.” The Lord sent us here to prove us. He fashioned a Testing Center that would enable us to demonstrate our love for him and for his work by our devotion to our covenants. There will come times when it will seem that he is far, far away; time when we may want to cry out with Joseph: “O God, where art thou?” To such a question, there is really only one answer: “I am here. I am always here. If I watch the sparrows, I will also watch you.”

Copyright © 2001 by Ted Gibbons <tedgibbons@yahoo.com>. All rights reserved. No part of this text may be reproduced in any form or by any means for commercial gain without the express written consent of the author. Digital or printed copies may be freely made and distributed for personal and public non-commercial use.