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## Every Experience Can Become a Redemptive Experience

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**Abstract:** The unjust incarceration of the Prophet Joseph Smith in Liberty Jail during the bitter winter of 1838–39 embodies a poignant irony. In the narrow confines of that foul-smelling and vile dungeon, Joseph Smith received extraordinary revelations (see D&C 121–23). Commenting on the circumstances in which these revelations were received, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland taught, “Every experience can become a redemptive experience if we remain bonded to our Father in Heaven through that difficulty.” In essence, “man’s extremity is God’s opportunity . . . [because] He can turn the unfair and inhumane and debilitating prisons of our lives into temples—or at least into a circumstance that can bring comfort and revelation, divine companionship and peace.”

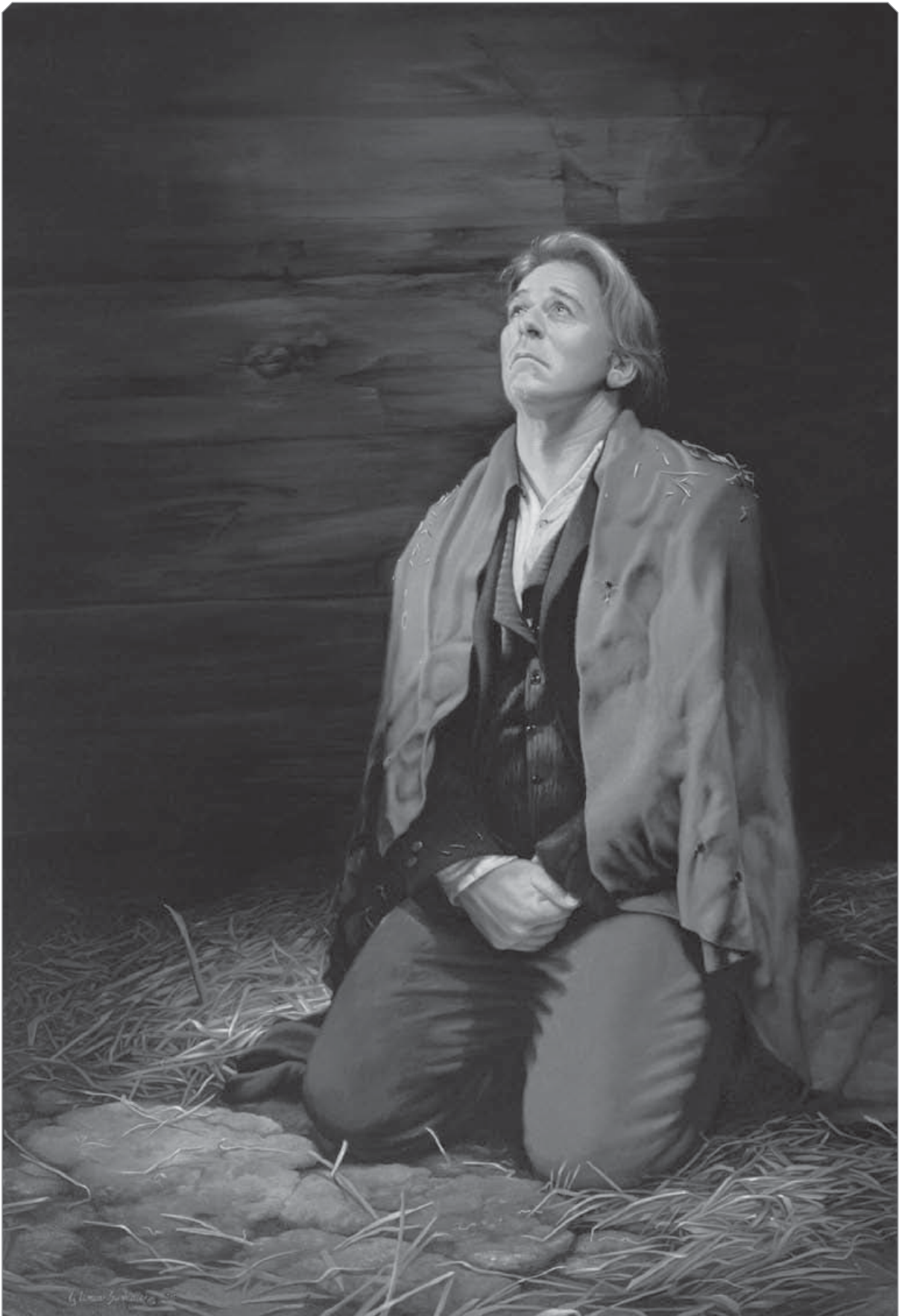
If every experience can become a redemptive experience, then even when we unfairly suffer there is reason to hope. Joseph Smith learned in Liberty Jail that when the faithful suffer injustice, such afflictions “shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good” (D&C 122:7). Significantly, the Book of Mormon confirms this principle and provides compelling evidence of its efficacy. These Book of Mormon teachings will be the focus of this paper.



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# *Every Experience Can Become a Redemptive Experience*

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The unjust incarceration of the Prophet Joseph Smith in Liberty Jail during the bitter winter of 1838–39 embodies a poignant irony. In the narrow confines of that foul-smelling and vile dungeon, Joseph Smith received extraordinary revelations (see D&C 121–23). Commenting on the circumstances in which these revelations were received, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland taught, “*Every* experience can become a *redemptive* experience if we remain bonded to our Father in Heaven through that difficulty.” In essence, “man’s extremity is God’s opportunity . . . [because] He can turn the unfair and inhumane and debilitating prisons of our lives into temples—or at least into a circumstance that can bring comfort and revelation, divine companionship and peace.”<sup>1</sup>

If every experience can become a redemptive experience, then even when we unfairly suffer there is reason to hope. Joseph Smith learned in Liberty Jail that when the faithful suffer injustice, such afflictions “shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good” (D&C 122:7). Significantly, the Book of Mormon confirms this principle and provides compelling evidence of its efficacy. These Book of Mormon teachings will be the focus of this paper.

### “Because of the Rudeness of Thy Brethren”

Jacob was Lehi’s firstborn son “in the days of [his] tribulation in the wilderness” (2 Nephi 2:1). During this eight-year journey, Lehi’s family did “wade through much affliction” (1 Nephi 17:1, 4). On one occasion, when they were “much fatigued, because of their journeying, [and] did suffer much for the want of food,” even Lehi “began to murmur against the Lord his God” for they “were all exceedingly sorrowful” (1 Nephi 16:19–20). And yet, when Lehi refers to the suffering of Jacob’s childhood he does not talk about hunger, thirst, or fatigue. Instead Lehi observes, “And behold, in thy childhood thou hast suffered afflictions and much sorrow, *because of the rudeness of thy brethren*” (2 Nephi 2:1; emphasis added).

According to the 1828 edition of *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, rudeness constitutes much more than impolite behavior. Rudeness implies a “coarseness of manners; incivility; rusticity; vulgarity.” It can also denote violence.<sup>2</sup> Though Lehi does not specify who the rude brethren were, 1 Nephi provides compelling evidence that Laman and Lemuel would be included. The following table documents a pattern of behavior that impacts Lehi’s entire family and helps us to have a clear understanding of what Lehi means by rudeness.

Reference	Rude behavior	Unjust suffering imposed on the innocent
1 Nephi 3:28	“angry,” “hard words,” “they did smite us even with a rod”	Mental, emotional, and physical abuse
1 Nephi 7:16, 19	“angry,” “did lay their hands upon me,” “did bind me with cords, for they sought to take away my life,” “angry with me again, and sought to take away my life”	Mental, emotional, and physical abuse
1 Nephi 16:37	“let us slay our father, and also our brother Nephi”	Anxiety and fear over threats of murder
1 Nephi 17:17–19, 48	“Our brother is a fool,” “complain against me,” “when they saw I began to be sorrowful they were glad in their hearts,” “angry with me, and were desirous to throw me into the depths of the sea”	Mental, emotional, and physical abuse

While Laman and Lemuel may have rationalized their abusive behavior to Nephi because they felt he was usurping their authority (see 1 Nephi 16:37; 18:10; 2 Nephi 5:3), there is no morally compelling defense for how their rude behavior adversely impacted an entire family—including aged parents, women, and children. Consider their ocean voyage to the promised land. Once again they chose to express their anger towards Nephi through violence and “much harshness” (1 Nephi 18:11). Not satisfied to focus on him alone, they “did breathe out much threatenings against anyone that should speak for [Nephi]” (1 Nephi 18:17). What follows is the sad tale of how the innocent suffered at the hands of the wicked:

And my parents being stricken in years, and having *suffered much grief because of their children*, they were brought down, yea, even *upon their sick-beds*.

Because of their *grief and much sorrow*, and the iniquity of my brethren, they were brought *near even to be carried out of this time to meet their God*; yea, their grey hairs were about to be *brought down to lie low in the dust*; yea, even they were *near to be cast with sorrow into a watery grave*.

And Jacob and Joseph also, being young, having need of much nourishment, were *grieved because of the afflictions of their mother*; and also *my wife with her tears and prayers*, and *also my children*, did not soften the hearts of my brethren that they would loose me. (1 Nephi 18:17–19; emphasis added)

The fact that Lehi’s family suffers *because* of Laman and Lemuel’s misuse of moral agency touches upon a rather thorny problem in traditional Christian theology. This problem is known as theodicy and seeks to vindicate the goodness of God in the face of evil. David L. Paulsen, professor of philosophy at BYU, succinctly captured the problem as follows: “Soaked as it is with human suffering and moral evil, how is it *possible* that our world is the work of an almighty, perfectly loving Creator?” For either “God is unwilling to prevent evil or He is unable. If he is unwilling, then He cannot be perfectly good; if He is unable, then He cannot be all powerful.” This problem is exacerbated by creedal Christianity’s insistence on an *ex nihilo* creation (out of nothing) and God’s “absolute foreknowledge of all the outcomes of His creative choices.” In this view, God “is an accessory before the fact and ultimately responsible for every moral and non-moral defect in the universe,”<sup>3</sup> including the suffering of Lehi’s family. No doubt, faith is challenged when this conundrum is not persuasively addressed. Thankfully, Lehi carefully tackles this issue.

## Opposition, Law, and Agency

Too often the problem of evil is mistakenly treated as a convergent problem that can be solved with simple, straightforward logic. Of convergent problems, E. F. Schumacher has written, “The more intelligently you (whoever you are) study them, the more the answers *converge*.” Eventually proposed solutions will yield to *the solution* that can then “be written down in the form of an instruction.”<sup>4</sup> The reasoning employed to solve convergent problems is well-suited for objects void of “consciousness and self-awareness” such as the problems found in “the fields of physics, chemistry, astronomy, in abstract subjects like geometry and mathematics.” However, Schumacher continued, as soon as we introduce “higher Levels of Being, we must expect *divergence*, for there enters, to however modest a degree, the element of freedom and inner experience.”<sup>5</sup> If divergent problems are to be properly understood, there must be an admission that “*life is bigger than logic*” and that “faculties of a *higher order*” must be employed to discover truth that transcends what appears to be *prima facie* contradictions. Informed by higher truth, what first may appear to be opposites “cease to be opposites; they lie down together peacefully like the lion and the lamb.”<sup>6</sup> For example, treated as a convergent problem, the doctrines of justice and mercy are irreconcilable; however, when viewed as a divergent problem that must be transcended by the infinite Atonement, they are no longer contradictory foes but become essential doctrines in the plan of salvation.

Lehi addressed the ill effects of his son’s rude behavior as a divergent problem. He placed their evil behavior and the attendant consequences to the innocent within the context of the doctrine of moral agency. Lehi declared, “There is a God, and he hath created all things, both the heavens and the earth, and all things that in them are, both *things to act* and things to be acted upon” (2 Nephi 2:14; emphasis added). Endowed with moral agency,<sup>7</sup> man has the power to act “for himself” (2 Nephi 2:16; see also Moses 4:3; 7:32; D&C 29:35). Lehi explained that this exercise of free will is essential to bring about God’s “eternal purposes in the end of man” (2 Nephi 2:15). And what is that end? The Lord unequivocally announced his ultimate purpose as follows: “For behold, this is my work and glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). Elder Russell M. Nelson equated immortality and eternal life with the Lord’s command to be “perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). Therefore, to gain immortality and eternal life is to achieve “eternal perfection.”<sup>8</sup> Significantly,

with the “sublime gift” of agency, President James E. Faust taught, we can “grow, improve, progress, and seek perfection.”<sup>9</sup> Agency is not incidental to achieving eternal perfection; it is essential to it.

In verses pregnant with metaphysical implications, agency is placed in the context of law and opposition (see 2 Nephi 2:10–16). The “ends of the law which the Holy One hath given” verify the underlying reality of opposition. To each law there are “affixed” (2 Nephi 2:10) consequences. Disobedience results in misery, while obedience produces happiness. Thus the very existence of law itself presupposes that there is an “an opposition in all things.” Without “an opposition in all things . . . righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness, neither holiness nor misery, neither good nor bad.” Void of opposition, “all things must needs be compound in one” and would “remain as dead” (v. 11). In other words, without opposition there would be no life, consciousness, intelligence, or awareness. We would be nothing more than dead matter—inanimate objects void of “sense [and] insensibility” (2 Nephi 2:11). “Unless there are opposites,” Elder Bruce R. McConkie concluded, “there is nothing.”<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, from the beginning “there was an opposition; even the forbidden fruit in opposition to the tree of life; the one being sweet and the other bitter” (2 Nephi 2:15).<sup>11</sup>

Soured by bitter consequences, people often malign God’s character. As we have already noted, we reason that if God is all-loving, he surely would not allow the innocent to suffer at the hands of the wicked. This argument implies that if God really loves us and is all-powerful he would protect the innocent from the Lamans and Lemuels of this world. Since he does not, then he is either not all-loving or not all-powerful, or worse yet—he is pathologically flawed. As persuasive as this argument may be, it fundamentally misunderstands the nature of God and ignores the given realities of opposition, law, and agency.

God is an eternal being who governs by eternal truth. Eternal truth “was not created or made” (D&C 93:29) and therefore it “abideth forever and ever” (D&C 1:39). In simple terms, God’s “law is the truth” (Psalm 119:142) because *truth is God’s law*. These laws were not created *ex nihilo*<sup>12</sup> any more than matter can be created *ex nihilo*. John Cobb and Truman G. Madsen wrote, “God is not the only self-existent reality. The creation accounts and other texts teach that God is not a fiat creator but an organizer and life-giver . . . and that the undergirdings of eternal law . . . are coexistent with him (cf D&C 88:34–45). ‘Omnipotence,’ then, means God has all the power it is

possible to have in a universe . . . of these givens.”<sup>13</sup> More to the point, God governs a universe in harmony *with* eternal law *not* contrary to it.

The fact that God governs by eternal law does not undermine his perfect love for us. Elder Dallin H. Oaks has taught, “The love of God does not supersede His laws and His commandments, and the effect of God’s laws and commandments does not diminish the purpose and effect of His love.”<sup>14</sup> If we choose to violate eternal law we will experience the fruit of our choices. Even so, Elder Nelson reminded us, since God’s “love is infinite and universal,” he will still love us. Thus while God loves “both saints and sinners,” how they experience that love is conditioned upon their obedience to his laws.<sup>15</sup>

God’s love cannot contravene his laws. To the contrary, Terryl L. Givens wrote, within the “parameters that Lehi and Alma have framed, there can be no escape from the consequences of law without destroying the moral order of the universe and both the human agency it grounds and the status of the divine Guarantor of the whole system.”<sup>16</sup> If God’s love was used to remove negative consequences of our choices, then our moral agency would be negated, law would be violated, and justice would be eliminated. Such divine intervention would destroy the plan of salvation and therefore could hardly be considered an act of love. Truly, “God is omnipotent,” David Paulsen concluded, “but He cannot prevent evil without preventing greater goods and ends—the value of which more than offsets the dis-value of the evil: soul-making, joy, eternal (or godlike) life.”<sup>17</sup> Alma articulated this reality clearly when he declared to his wayward son Corianton that “justice claimeth the creature and executeth the law, and the law inflicteth the punishment; if not so, the works of justice would be destroyed, and God would cease to be God” (Alma 42:22).

The grief, sorrow, and pain Laman and Lemuel’s rude behavior inflicted on Lehi’s family provides compelling evidence of the reality of opposition, law, and agency. There is no indication that God either caused or condoned their choices or the related suffering. Since he has granted man their agency, he *permits* the consequences of their choices to bear fruit. As a result, Elder Oaks observed, “God does not intervene to forestall the consequences of some persons’ choices in order to protect the well-being of other persons—even when they kill, injure, or oppress one another—for this would destroy His plan for our eternal progress. He will bless us to endure the consequences of others’ choices, but He will not prevent those choices.”<sup>18</sup>



Terryl Givens succinctly summarized these Book of Mormon teachings as follows: “Genuine moral agency must entail necessary consequences. If choice is to be more than an empty gesture of the will, more than a mere pantomime of decision making, there must be an immutable guarantee that any given choice will eventuate in the natural consequence of that choice.”<sup>19</sup> This means that all choices, good or evil, “are allowed, inexorably, to bear their own fruit.”<sup>20</sup> The bitter fruits of wicked choices are experienced by both the evil and the good, by both the perpetrator and the victim, by both the guilty and the innocent.<sup>21</sup>

### Nevertheless

When innocent people suffer collateral damage because of wickedness we should be careful not to imply that such suffering is God’s will. Elder Neal A. Maxwell affirmed, “God is not ‘responsible’ for our human misdeeds!”<sup>22</sup> Latter-day Saints do not subscribe to Augustine’s premise that “God—and God alone—is the ultimate cause of all things.”<sup>23</sup> We do not propose, as Martin Luther did, that “Nothing whatever can exist or happen apart from God’s direct plan and causation.”<sup>24</sup> Evil and its unhappy consequences are evidence of a violation of God’s will, not a fulfillment of it (see Alma 41:10; Helaman 13:38). Thus Laman and Lemuel were exercising their own will and not God’s will when they behaved with such “exceeding rudeness” that the rest of the family suffered grief and sorrow (1 Nephi 18:9). Yet even in the anguish of undeserved suffering there is hope. Lehi did not focus on Laman and Lemuel’s rude behavior but on the “righteousness of [his] Redeemer” (2 Nephi 2:3). Hope is not found in the experience itself but in what God can bring to that experience. “Nevertheless, Jacob, my first-born in the wilderness, thou knowest the greatness of God; and he shall consecrate thine afflictions for thy gain” (2 Nephi 2:2).

The pairing of *affliction* with *consecration* is curious, if not a bit unsettling to those who suffer innocently. Remember, in this particular instance Lehi is referring to the rude behavior of Laman and Lemuel; behavior that clearly constitutes emotional, mental, and physical abuse. Even so, Lehi chooses to connect such miserable experiences with the word *consecrate*. Why?

To capture the implications of this remarkable assertion, we must look carefully at the word *consecrate*. If something is consecrated it is declared holy and is set apart for a sacred purpose. In the context of these verses, Lehi taught that unjust suffering imposed upon the righteous can be transformed into a

blessing. Therefore, wicked choices that adversely impact righteous people can be ameliorated through the Atonement.

Elder Holland testified, “The Savior’s Atonement lifts from us not only the burden of our sins, but also the burden of our disappointments and sorrows, our heartaches and our despair.”<sup>25</sup> A moment’s reflection verifies that Jesus does know something about unjust suffering. Without any warranted provocation, he was exposed to “shame and spitting” and to the lash of “the smiter” (2 Nephi 7:6), was “despised and rejected” (Isaiah 53:3), and was finally “wounded for our transgressions” and “bruised for our iniquities” (v. 5). Rising triumphant from the ashes of such egregious adversity, he became the “fully comprehending Christ” and thereby, Elder Maxwell taught, was “enabled to be a fully succoring Savior.”<sup>26</sup> The conclusion is beautiful: through the Atonement of Jesus Christ all victims can become victors; indeed, “every experience can become a redemptive experience.”<sup>27</sup>

### **A Case Study: Alma and Amulon**

A classic moment of bitter irony in the Book of Mormon is when the two former priests of King Noah, Alma and Amulon, again cross paths. Both have become leaders of separate groups. Alma’s followers have formed the “church of Christ” (Mosiah 18:17) while Amulon’s followers have banded together by necessity of their cowardice (see Mosiah 19:11–23). In time both groups confront the same Lamanite army. Alma’s people find themselves in bondage after the Lamanites renege on a promise of freedom, while Amulon’s cohorts are given power and position because of the pleadings of their Lamanite wives—women whom they abducted from Shemlon (see Mosiah 20:1–5; 23:25–38). Alma has become the spiritual leader of a righteous flock of Nephites (see Mosiah 18:18), while Amulon through his cunning has found favor with the Lamanite king (see Mosiah 24:1). Alma has helped transform the lives of his people through faith in Jesus Christ (see Mosiah 18), while Amulon has not taught the Lamanites “anything concerning the Lord” (see Mosiah 24:5). In essence, we have a vintage juxtaposition between the righteous and wicked.

Now the irony: wicked Amulon is given charge by the Lamanite king over Alma’s righteous people. In his position Amulon “began to exercise authority over Alma and his brethren, and began to persecute him, and cause that his children should persecute their children” (Mosiah 24:8). If that were not bad enough, as the people “began to cry mightily to God” because of their afflictions, Amulon “commanded them that they should stop their cries; and

he put guards over them to watch them, that whosoever should be found calling upon God should be put to death” (vv. 10–11). Clearly, we have a case of good, righteous people suffering because of the rudeness of their brethren!

Though we do not have details, we can imagine the verbal and physical abuse that must have taken place. Nevertheless, it is in the midst of this ugliness that we have one of the most beautiful accounts of how the Atonement can consecrate human afflictions for our gain. In answer to their prayers the Lord promises to deliver Alma’s people from their difficult circumstances—but not immediately. Why? The answer bears witness of God’s consecrating power. The sacred text reads: “And 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” (Mosiah 24:14).

While burdens are unjustly placed on their backs, the Lord promises to strengthen them so they can not only bear the burdens but also so they can bear witness that God does help his “people in their afflictions.” In short, they are to become witnesses of the “greatness of God” and his power to consecrate our afflictions for our gain (2 Nephi 2:2).

The consecrating power of the Lord is confirmed since “the burdens which were laid upon Alma and his brethren were made light; yea, the Lord did strengthen them that they could bear up their burdens with ease, and they did submit cheerfully and with patience to all the will of the Lord” (Mosiah 24:15). When Alma places cheerfulness in the context of suffering he is inviting us to see the consecrated and sacred dimensions of suffering. A careful reading suggests that in the midst of their suffering Alma’s people willingly turned to the Lord, and in him they found the power to bear their burdens. They were not cheerful about the burdens; they were cheerful about the Lord!

## Conclusion

Liberty Jail has been called a “prison temple.” Elder Holland suggested that this is appropriate not because of the conditions and brutality associated with this jail but because of the marvelous spiritual blessings that came while Joseph Smith was held as a prisoner there. In short, one “can have sacred, revelatory, profoundly instructive experience with the Lord *in the most miserable experiences of . . . life.*”<sup>28</sup>

Because opposition, law, and agency are given realities in this mortal sphere, unwanted and undeserved difficulties will chaff the innocent and the righteous. Even so, we need to remember that through the Atonement of Jesus Christ *all experiences* can be consecrated for our gain—even “those inflicted from sources beyond our control.”<sup>29</sup> Reflecting on a life of emotional and mental abuse, one woman wrote: “I have realized that [because of opposition, law, and agency], he does not control how other people treat us, but he does comfort and offer us peace through the Atonement. My trials haven’t gone away, but I feel very much like the people of Alma. He has strengthened me and made my trials lighter than they really are.” She concluded, “I can’t change how people treat me, but I can, through the Atonement, have those horrible experiences consecrate me to become a better person . . . , the person the Lord needs me to be.”

By taking upon himself the full scope of human suffering, Jesus knows “according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities” (Alma 7:12). Thus, as Elder Maxwell repeatedly taught in his ministry, “He knows personally all that we pass through and how to extend His perfect mercy—as well as how to succor us.”<sup>30</sup> Adding his witness, Elder Oaks stated, “The healing power of the Lord Jesus Christ—whether it removes our burdens or strengthens us to endure and live with them like the Apostle Paul—is available for every affliction in mortality.”<sup>31</sup> Truly, “every experience can become a redemptive experience.” **RE**

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## Notes

1. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Lessons from Liberty Jail,” *Religious Educator* 10, no. 3 (2009): 7–8; emphasis in original.

2. Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: S. Converse, 1828), “rudeness.”

3. David L. Paulsen, “Joseph Smith and the Problem of Evil,” BYU forum address, September 21, 1999.

4. E. F. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Trinity Press, 1977), 136.

5. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, 140.

6. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, 141.

7. The gift of agency is essential to our self-understanding. Elder Wolfgang H. Paul of the Seventy noted: “When we came into this world, we brought with us from our heavenly home this God-given gift and privilege which we call our agency. It gives us the right and power to make decisions and to choose. Agency is an eternal law. President Brigham Young, speaking of our agency, taught: ‘This is a law which has always existed from all eternity, and will continue to exist throughout all the eternities to come. Every intelligent being must have the power of choice.’ President Wilford Woodruff observed on the same subject: ‘This agency has always

been the heritage of man under the rule and government of God. He possessed it in the heaven of heavens before the world was, and the Lord maintained and defended it there against the aggression of Lucifer and those that took sides with him” (Wolfgang H. Paul, “The Gift of Agency,” *Ensign*, May 2006, 34–35).

8. Russell M. Nelson, “Perfection Pending,” *Ensign*, November 1995, 86.

9. James E. Faust, “The Great Imitator,” *Ensign*, November 1987, 35. President Marion G. Romney taught that the plan of salvation “provided for them to receive physical bodies in a mortal experience where, endowed with free agency and being acted upon by good and evil, they would prove themselves worthy or unworthy to return to the society of God and go on in eternal progress to perfection” (“Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ,” *Ensign*, November 1979, 41). Elder Hugh B. Brown articulated the connection between agency and our eternal possibilities as follows: “Man faces a vista of limitless development, eternal progression, if he will cooperate in winning mastery over himself and the universe. We believe that man’s earth life was made possible by Adam’s role in a foreordained plan which included the provision for man to come face to face with both good and evil and, under the eternal law of free agency, elect good or evil without compulsion, knowing however that under the immutable law of the harvest he must abide the consequences of his choice, must reap as he sows. Free agency is prerequisite to any character-building plan, and while with free agency any plan is inevitably crammed with risk, we, with all the sons of God, accepted that risk and shouted for joy at the prospect of earth life” (Hugh B. Brown, in Conference Report, April 1956, 105).

10. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Millennial Messiah: The Second Coming of the Son of Man* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 667.

11. Even though opposition and law are necessary conditions for moral agency, they are not sufficient. Moral agency is only a possibility for those who are capable of moral reasoning, or who have knowledge of good and evil (see 2 Nephi 2:5, 26). Furthermore, “man could not act for himself save it should be that he was enticed by the one or the other” (2 Nephi 2:16).

12. Joseph Smith taught, “The first step in salvation of man is the laws of eternal and self-existent principles.” (Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938], 181). “There are certain laws of the universe that are immutable, that are without beginning of days or end of years. They were not created by an intelligent being, nor are they the product of moral thought, rather they are eternal, co-existent realities with the intelligences of the universe. These laws are immutable in that they cannot be altered or modified in any form. They are unchangeable from eternity to eternity” (Tad R. Callister, *The Infinite Atonement* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000], 299–300).

13. John Cobb Jr. and Truman G. Madsen, “Theodicy,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 4:1473–74.

14. Dallin H. Oaks, “Love and Law,” *Ensign*, November 2009, 26.

15. Russell M. Nelson, “Divine Love,” *Ensign*, February 2003, 24.

16. Terryl L. Givens, *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2009), 81.

17. Paulsen, “Joseph Smith and the Problem of Evil,” 6.

18. Oaks, “Love and Law,” 27–28.

19. Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2002), 206.

20. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 207.

21. In scripture there are examples of God preventing the natural consequences of human choices. In particular, prophets are protected by divine power (for example, Nephi, Abinadi, Alma, Amulek, Lehi, Nephi, Samuel the Lamanite, Moses, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego) from those who were intentionally seeking to kill them. Thus the wicked intend to use their agency to kill, but the Lord intervenes and circumvents those murderous choices. Does this mean agency has been destroyed because consequences have been thwarted? If so, has the justice of God that underwrites and insures agency been compromised?

From a temporal perspective, in some cases the natural consequences of physical laws have been circumvented. The natural consequence of fire, stones, and arrows as instruments of death have been negated. Even so, I would propose that from God's eternal view no spiritual law has been negated, but only a temporal consequence has been delayed or supplanted for a larger purpose. For instance, when Abinadi is preaching, an attempt is made on his life. God intervenes with his power and Abinadi's attackers cannot touch him (see Mosiah 13:2–3). Later, after he has delivered his message, the Lord's protective power is removed, and Abinadi is killed (Mosiah 17:14–19). It seems in these instances we have a classic case of competing interests in regards to the use of agency. A prophet *chooses* to do the Lord's will, and the wicked *choose* to do Satan's bidding. Significantly, when a prophet chooses to do God's will and is therefore on the errand of the Lord, then he is entitled to God's protection so he can accomplish his mission. *The consequence of his choice is to receive God's protective power to complete the divinely appointed mission.* While the wicked choose to destroy the prophet, it would appear that the consequence of their choice cannot trump the prophet's choice until his mission is completed. If a prophet and his choice to fulfill his mission were circumvented by Satan and his servants' efforts to destroy the prophet, then the work of God would be frustrated—something that is not within the realm of possibility for man. When consequences collide, at least in the case of the Lord's servants and their enemies, then *prophetic choice* to fulfill the will of God trumps the designs of evil men (see D&C 3:1).

Significantly, even when God thwarts the wicked from physically destroying his called messengers, the spiritual consequences are never lost. We are not only judged by our works but also by the desires of our hearts (see D&C 137:9). If we desire to kill a prophet, we suffer the spiritual consequences of our desires. We can become, like Laman and Lemuel, “murderers in [our] hearts” without actually killing someone (1 Nephi 17:44). In short, if we want to kill a prophet, but the Lord protects his life so he can fulfill his divinely appointed mission, the consequences for our murderous desires will impact our souls, and we will suffer accordingly—the spiritual consequence is affixed, and the justice of God will be satisfied.

Another dimension of this matter is compelling. Law, agency, and consequence are requisite to the justice of God. When people choose wickedness, innocent people suffer. I have often wondered how God can look upon the suffering of so many innocent souls and not simply turn this earth to dust. The answer is in the Atonement. I believe that God can bear the suffering of the innocent because he knows the healing and redemptive power of the Atonement. Thus when prophets receive God's divine protection from the hands of the wicked, it is not to spare them from undeserved suffering or to give them special treatment, but it is because those prophets bear the message of hope—even the message of the Atonement. Without that message humans would lose all hope and drown in their own sorrow. No wonder he insures that the messengers are protected!

22. Neal A. Maxwell, “The Richness of the Restoration,” *Ensign*, May 1998, 12.

23. Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1999), 275.

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24. Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 388.
  25. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Broken Things to Mend,” *Ensign*, May, 2006, 70–71.
  26. Neal A. Maxwell, “Irony: The Crust on the Bread of Adversity,” *Ensign*, May 1989, 64.
  27. Holland, “Lessons from Liberty Jail,” 7.
  28. Holland, “Lessons from Liberty Jail,” 7; emphasis in original.
  29. Bruce C. Hafen, *The Broken Heart: Applying the Atonement to Life’s Experiences* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 29.
  30. Neal A. Maxwell, “Plow in Hope,” *Ensign*, May 2001, 60.
  31. Dallin H. Oaks, “He Heals the Heavy Laden,” *Ensign*, November 2006, 8.