

The Family Crucibles of Chronic Illness and Death

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A couple of years ago, I was invited to participate in a wonderful project, helping to write a book that was being produced on the Proclamation on the Family. I was privileged to work on a chapter on illness, disability, death, and other losses with several outstanding BYU colleagues and insightful graduate students. A number of the ideas that I will discuss today come from this chapter in what we now call “The Proclamation Book.” I would highly recommend it to you; it’s called *Strengthening Our Families: An In-depth Look at the Proclamation on the Family* (Dollahite, 2000).

Our book chapter (Carroll et al., 2000) centers around the idea that experiences with chronic illnesses and death can become what we call “crucible experiences.” The chapter explains that crucibles are furnace-like vessels that can endure intense heat and chemical reactions. This results in the refinement and transfiguration of raw materials. Crucibles facilitate a process that purges impurities and creates a qualitatively different final product. In industry, crucibles are used to create high-grade steel or metal alloys of unusual strength—actually differing in quality from the original ingredients.

In the book chapter, we also explain that there is a metaphorical meaning of crucible—a severe test or trial that refines and purifies. President Marion G. Romney, in a general conference talk given in October of 1969, pointed out that when we decided to come to mortality, we knew that we would have to be proven in the “crucible of adversity and affliction.” Thus, as we all know, and as pointed out by President Romney, an essential part of Heavenly Father’s plan was this “proving.” We read in Abraham 3:24–25, “We will go down . . . and . . . make an earth whereon

these may dwell; And we will prove them . . . to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them.”

Experiences with illness and death can be considered “provings” that come as a part of the plan. Elder A. Theodore Tuttle (1967), formerly of the Quorum of the Seventy, has noted that adversity is a universal experience. Although some type of adversity may be a part of everyone’s life, it is not the experience of adversity itself upon which we should focus. Rather, how we respond to the experience is probably more important. Pauline Boss, a noted stress researcher in family studies, has observed that families have the potential to grow and learn through life crises. Experiences with chronic illness or death often help us become stronger and may influence us to change how we view ourselves and our relationships with others (see Carroll et al., 2000).

Elder Dallin H. Oaks (1998) of the Quorum of the Twelve puts it another way. He says, “Adversity will be a constant or occasional companion for each of us throughout our lives. We cannot avoid it. The only question is how we will react to it. Will our adversities be stumbling blocks or stepping-stones?” (p. 7).

Today I would like to focus on four questions that those of us who have experienced or are experiencing these types of adversities might ask. These four questions are:

- Why is this so hard?
- How can experiences with chronic illness and death refine and purify me?
- How can I cope?
- Where can I turn to find help?

Why Is This So Hard?

Often our experiences with death and chronic illness do not come at convenient points in our lives. In *The Proclamation Book* (p. 285), we discuss how experiences with illness and death may be *more difficult* to manage, given the following factors.

Timing. It may be easier to adjust to illness or a death in the family when it occurs at an age when most people would expect it. Scholars who study family life talk about events that are “off-time” versus “on time.” An example from my own life may serve to illustrate this. Both my father and mother recently passed away at the ages of 84 and 80, respectively. Although it was (and still is) difficult to lose my parents, I would consider their deaths to be “on-time”—they had both lived productive lives and had arrived at a point where they were experiencing both physical and cognitive decline. On the other hand, my own husband passed away from a chronic illness at the age of 24. His death at this early age was very much “off-time,” requiring me to make life adjustments regarding further schooling and employment that were somewhat unanticipated.

Type of life interference. If the illness or death overlaps with other important life events within a family, it may contribute to the experience being more difficult. I recently spoke with an older friend who told me that his grandson’s marriage had been postponed because of the serious illness of his fiancée. A former student of mine left college to raise her younger brothers and

sisters when her parents passed away. A colleague at BYU has put off certain types of professional advancements in order to care for her aging mother.

Family member afflicted. If the individual who becomes ill or passes on is the primary provider or the person who has the major responsibility for the care of the children, this may pose additional stress on family members. For instance, a number of years ago, the husband of a neighbor of ours was killed tragically in an accident, leaving her and her five children. While dealing with the death of her husband, she also had to make decisions regarding how she would support and care for her young family. Another neighbor was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis when her family was fairly young. Because of her deteriorating physical condition, her family had to take on additional responsibilities around the house.

Thus, the timing of the adversity, the type of life interference involved, and the family member afflicted may all influence the difficulty or ease to which we adapt to these life experiences. In addition, these experiences may seem difficult because we don't understand *why* they might be happening to us or our loved ones and how such experiences might help us.

How Do Experiences with Chronic Illness and Death Refine and Purify Us?

The text to the hymn “How Firm a Foundation” (*Hymns*, no. 85) has been attributed to Robert Keene. Verses 4 and 5 read:

When through the deep waters I call thee to go,
The rivers of sorrow shall not thee o'erflow,
I will be with thee, thy troubles to bless
And sanctify to thee, thy deepest distress.

When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
My grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply.
The flames shall not hurt thee; I only design
Thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine.

President Ezra Taft Benson (Conference Report, Stockholm Sweden Area Conference, 1974) reminds us that we often grow more from difficult circumstances than from successes. He said, “It is not on the pinnacle of success and ease where men and women grow most. It is often down in the valley of heartache and disappointment and reverses where men and women grow into strong characters” (p. 70).

And why is it that we develop such strong character? President James E. Faust (1998) has noted, “Why is adversity often such a good schoolmaster? Is it because it teaches us so many things? . . . In often unpleasant circumstances we may also be subjected to a buffeting, a honing, and a polishing that can come no other way” (p. 5).

A number of years ago I served as a Welfare Services missionary in Bolivia. Prior to leaving on my mission, I went through the full medical regimen that was suggested, including a physical, dental check-ups, and my personal favorite part of the preparation, immunizations. We got to have DPT shots and smallpox vaccines, and we were also immunized for typhoid.

After all of this, my two months in the MTC and my first few months in Bolivia passed without incident, until one night I woke up around 2 a.m. with a terrible fever. A trip to the doctor the next morning confirmed that I had contracted typhoid fever (one of the diseases for which I had been immunized). When I asked the doctor why I got typhoid, his reply was that there were 23 different types of typhoid and the shot only worked against three of them! Although there were many missionaries who had worse cases of typhoid than I had, this became a turning point in my mission, in that missionary work became much more difficult for me because of continuing problems with my physical health. These were not problems that were great enough to limit my missionary work, but they were constant “thorns in the flesh” that I dealt with on an almost daily basis.

This experience with illness taught me a number of lessons. Previous to my mission I hadn’t had a sick day in my life and had had very little sympathy for anyone who was ill. However, because of my experience with sickness on my mission, later when I was married and my husband’s health began to deteriorate, I was much more empathetic than I believe I would have been, had I not had my own experience with illness.

After serving on my mission a number of months, I ran into a former companion one day at the mission home. She was there because she had some health problems, which were much more serious than my own—she was diagnosed with lupus. It was on this occasion, while we were commiserating with each other, that she shared with me a book chapter entitled “Tragedy or Destiny?” that has helped me for the last 25 years. It was written by President Kimball and is part of his book *Faith Precedes the Miracle*. It provided me with great comfort, and I think it can be useful in helping us understand how our experiences with chronic illness and death may refine and purify us. President Kimball quotes a poem by an unknown author that helps us understand a little about the purpose of pain in our lives. He says:

Pain stayed so long I said to him today,
 “I will not have you with me any more.”
 I stamped my foot and said, “Be on your way,”
 And paused there, startled at the look he wore.
 “I, who have been your friend,” he said to me,
 “I, who have been your teacher—all you know
 Of understanding love, of sympathy,
 And patience, I have taught you. Shall I go?”
 He spoke the truth, this strange unwelcome guest;
 I watched him leave, and knew that he was wise
 He left a heart grown tender in my breast,
 He left a far, clear vision in my eyes.
 I dried my tears, and lifted up a song—
 Even for one who’d tortured me so long.

The point this poem puts across is an interesting one—that we can learn from pain what we may not learn any other way. President Kimball also cites this quote from Elder Orson F. Whitney, who said, “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 . . . 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” (p. 98).

President Kimball was well qualified to talk about adversity and affliction. President Faust (1998), in a recent *Ensign* article, described some of the afflictions that President Kimball faced. He said, “As a young boy [President Kimball] nearly drowned. He suffered from Bell’s palsy. . . . Shortly after marriage he contracted smallpox. . . . Like Job, he suffered from boils, which continued for many years. On one occasion he suffered from 24 boils at one time; not long thereafter he began to suffer the excruciating pain of heart attacks, which continued for many years and finally resulted in open-heart surgery. He became bothered by a hoarseness of voice. . . . A serious cancer in the vocal cords required surgery and thereafter voice training and cobalt treatments. The Bell’s palsy returned, and skin cancers were removed” (p. 5).

President Faust observed that these experiences resulted in a refined spirit, sensitivity, an understanding heart, kindness, and humility. President Kimball shows us that through pain and suffering, we learn valuable lessons that we might not learn otherwise.

Recently I was reading Eleanor Knowles’ biography of President Howard W. Hunter. You may recall that President Hunter spent over 10 years caring for his first wife as her health gradually deteriorated. In addition, he had a number of bouts with major health problems himself as he grew older. In the book, the story is told of President Hunter and his son, Richard, having a conversation. Richard reminded his father that the doctrine of the church is that in the pre-existence we all shouted for joy at the chance to come to earth and have a body. He then asked President Hunter if he thought that was true. President Hunter replied that yes, he thought it was true, but added, “I’m not sure we know the full story.” (Knowles, 1994, p. 279)

Knowing that President Hunter himself had extended experience with caregiving, as well as numerous experiences with illness and poor health, it is interesting to hear what he says about it. President Hunter (1980) teaches us that pain, sickness, and sorrow are part of our Heavenly Father’s eternal plan. He states, “We came to mortal life to encounter resistance. It was part of the plan for our eternal progress. Without . . . sickness, pain, and sorrow, there could be no goodness, virtue, appreciation for well-being, or joy” (p. 25).

In our finite eyes, how easy it is to question why we have to endure days or months or years of disabling illness or the pain of unanticipated death. President Harold B. Lee (1951), spoke at a BYU Commencement half a century ago and compared the lessons that we learn through suffering to pruning by the “Master gardener” He taught,

Listen to the Master’s lesson in human horticulture—“Every branch that beareth fruit must be purged (or pruned) that it might bring forth more fruit” (see John 15:2). Remember it’s the new wood following such pruning which brings the fruit.

Rarely, if ever, is there a truly great soul except he has been tried and tested through tears, and adversity—seemingly pruned by the hand of a master gardener. By applying the knife and the pruning hook, the branch is shaped and fashioned to God’s omnipotent design, in order that its full fruitage may be realized (pp. 5, 10, 14).

Another author has likened the process of going through adversity to the remodeling of house. Often what we go through is unplanned, but results in making us unexpectedly better. Thus, C. S. Lewis in his book *Mere Christianity* said,

“Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently, He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace” (p. 174).

Thus, through pain and suffering we learn a number of unanticipated lessons that we possibly could not learn any other way. It is through this learning process that we can grow to become more like our Savior.

How Can I Cope?

The theme for this conference is “Take Unto Ourselves the Whole Armor of God.” In reflecting on that theme and how it might apply to our topic today, let’s take a look at the scripture from which it is derived: We read in the New Testament in Ephesians chapter 6, verses 11 through 13 “Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against . . . the rulers of the darkness of this world . . . Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day.”

This scripture reminds us that by putting on the whole armor of God, we are able to stand against the wiles of the devil.

Choose to reframe your experiences positively. One of the most insidious ways that Satan uses to attack our armor is discouragement. Last Saturday in the General Relief Society meeting (September 2001), Sister Virginia Jensen counseled us not to let the difficulties inherent to family life discourage us. Discouragement can easily prevent us from progressing and being happy.

In family therapy, one of the concepts that therapists talk about is “reframing.” Reframing refers to changing how we perceive and evaluate our life experiences. Through reframing we can

redefine the meaning of something. We can choose to “frame” our experiences negatively, or alternately, we can “reframe” them more positively. These interpretations and beliefs will influence how illness and death affect our lives.

Researchers who study families suggest that reframing helps people to adapt to stressful situations successfully. Some research indicates that having an optimistic attitude is the most helpful single predictor of how a family will function in a crisis situation (Broderick, 1988).

Let me share with you some examples of how reframing experiences can be helpful to those with chronic conditions.

I first met Hannah about eight years ago when I moved to Utah Valley. She was a member of my ward, and initially I didn't know her very well, except for what I observed at church. What I saw was a sister who was very much affected by the crippling effects of arthritis. Hannah is bent over and her fingers and hands are crooked and badly misshapen. I later learned that the arthritis had affected her legs so badly that she has a special chair in her home that raises and lowers her because her legs can't support herself well enough for her to get up by herself.

As I have come to know her better, I have seen that she is a remarkable woman indeed. It would have been very easy for Hannah to become bitter due to the pain and inconveniences of her condition. Instead, she is a great example to everyone of someone who looks for the positive. She always has a smile on her face and is always minimizing her own problems, regardless of the severity. Whenever I come to visit, she asks, “What can I do for you?” She doesn't realize what she has done for me just by being the great example that she is.

A recent article in the BYU—Idaho newspaper reported on a staff member at BYU—Idaho. His name is Steve Anderson. As reported in the paper, Steve was born in 1948 with cerebral palsy. Cerebral palsy affects people to different degrees and can severely limit the activity of an individual. In Steve's case, he could have used his condition as an excuse. Instead he graduated from high school, received bachelor's and master's degrees from BYU, and worked for a number of years as a caregiver for people with severe physical and mental conditions until he came to Ricks in 1984. At Ricks he started the Adaptive Services for Adventure Program, a program designed to give experiences to students with disabilities who would not normally have them. As often as possible, Steve takes anywhere from 5 to 35 students with him on activities such as horseback riding, skiing, and canoeing. He was featured in the BYU—Idaho newspaper because he recently completed climbing Mount Kilimanjaro, the sixteenth highest mountain in the world.

Reading about Steve reminded me of a young adult friend of mine. Diagnosed with juvenile diabetes at the age of 13 and epilepsy when she was 14, she could have easily felt sorry for herself, whined about all she was required to do because of her health conditions, and generally made life miserable for everyone around her. Instead, she stands as a great example of positivity and perseverance.

Truly these people exemplify the scripture found in Proverbs 17:22: “A merry heart doeth good like a medicine; but a broken spirit drieth the bones.”

Indeed, reframing allows a person to see things differently, creating a different “worldview.”

Recognize that testing is a part of Heavenly Father’s plan, even if you are living a righteous life. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland (1995) teaches us the following:

When those difficult times come to us, we can remember that Jesus had to descend below all things before he could ascend above them, and that he suffered pains and afflictions . . . of every kind that he might be filled with mercy and know how to succor his people in their infirmities (see D&C 88:6; Alma 7:11–12) . . . However dim our days may seem they have been darker for the Savior of the world.

In fact, in a resurrected, otherwise perfected body, our Lord . . . has chosen to retain for the benefit of his disciples the wounds in his hands and his feet and his side—signs, if you will, that painful things happen even to the pure and perfect. Signs, if you will, that pain in this world is *not* evidence that God doesn’t love you. It is the *wounded* Christ who is the captain of our soul—he who yet bears the scars of sacrifice, the lesions of love and humility and forgiveness (p. 69).

Elder Holland reminds us of a number of important points. First, that Christ, as our exemplar, descended below all things. Second, He retained the wounds in His body to remind us that painful things happen to even the righteous. Finally, pain is not evidence that God doesn’t love you. In fact, our Heavenly Father, in His love for us, has provided a way for us to handle the burdens that are placed on us. In the 24th chapter of Mosiah, we read about an incident that helps us to understand how the Lord strengthens us when we are faced with seemingly insurmountable burdens. The wicked Lamanite leader Amulon has persecuted Alma and his followers to the extent that they kill anyone who is found praying. As a result, the people can no longer pray openly, but continue to pray to the Lord in their hearts. It is at this point that the scriptures tell us that “the voice of the Lord did come to them in their afflictions,” comforting them (verse 13). Then we read in verses 14 and 15 of Mosiah 24:

And I will also ease the burdens which are put upon your shoulders, that you cannot feel them upon your backs . . . ; and this will I do that ye may stand as witnesses for me hereafter, and that ye may know of a surety that I, the Lord God, do visit my people in their afflictions.

And now it came to pass that 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.

Elder Richard G. Scott (1994) teaches us the following regarding healing: “It is important to understand that [the Lord’s] healing can mean being cured, or having your burdens eased, or even coming to realize that it is worth it to endure to the end patiently, for God needs brave sons and daughters who are willing to be polished when in His wisdom that is His will” (p. 7).

Thus, when we experience difficult situations, our Heavenly Father will help us in a number of ways. He will ease our burdens so that we can bear them up and help us to submit cheerfully to His will. In addition, we have this comforting promise in Doctrine & Covenants 84:88: “I will go before your face, I will be on your right hand and on your left, and my Spirit shall be in your hearts, and mine angels round about you, to bear you up.”

Remember to keep an eternal perspective. Often when life is difficult, it is hard to keep things in perspective. The day-to-day struggles, the pain, the loneliness, or the feelings of inadequacies - may crowd out any feelings of hope. In the April 1996 general conference, Elder Richard Scott gave us this insightful counsel:

Sadness, disappointment, and severe challenge are events in life, not life itself. I do not minimize how hard some of these events are. They can extend over a long period of time, but they should not be allowed to become the confining center of everything you do. . .

A pebble held close to the eye appears to be a gigantic obstacle. Cast on the ground, it is seen in perspective. Likewise, problems or trials in our lives need to be viewed in the perspective of scriptural doctrine. Otherwise they can easily overtake our vision, absorb our energy, and deprive us of the joy and beauty the Lord intends us to receive here on the earth (p. 24).

President Kimball (1974) also counsels us to consider “the big picture,” not just focusing on this life. He says, “If we look at mortality as the whole of existence, then pain, sorrow . . . and short life would be a calamity. 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 happenings may be put in proper perspective” (p. 97).

Recently, President Mark J. Willes of the Honolulu Hawaii mission spoke at a devotional at BYU—Hawaii (September 27, 2001). He talked about the recent death of his young granddaughter, who had been critically ill. Her death was difficult for him to accept until he “understood that God has an eternal perspective.” President Willes said,

[God] is not bound by the narrow earthly perspective that we so often look from, and make decisions from. The doctors had done all that they could do, a little girl who was never to move in this life, was now able to move freely and happily. A little girl that would have had a very limited earthly life, now had an unlimited eternal life.

A little girl who would have faced severe tests all of her earthly life, had now passed the one and only test required of her and was now happily and gloriously back with her Father in Heaven. Oh yes, she had been touched and healed . . . totally and completely, as only God can.

Because of this experience, Pres. Willes observed, “It is not sufficient to look from our earthly perspective . . . if we are to understand how God answers prayers.”

Where Can I Find Help?

I recently read a book written by a number of family therapists whose practice centers around helping families who are experiencing medical problems and illness. One of the therapists, in reflecting about what she had learned working with these families, observed that it was dangerous to make generalizations about families who were coping with chronic illness. She stated that what might be helpful to one family, may not necessarily be useful to another (McDaniel et al., 1997).

With that preface, there may be some resources that may be helpful to families who each are working through their own experiences with either chronic illness or death. Researchers who study families under stressful situations have found that strong families have a pool of resources that they can draw upon when times become difficult (Cox, 1993). In addition, Elder Richard Scott (1994) has suggested that some of the following resources or sources of support can help each of us as we strive “to be healed.”

Professional help. Often, professionals can be a resource to family members because they provide both informational as well as emotional forms of support. Medical professionals can furnish us with information that will help us understand the progression of chronic a disease or the course of a terminal illness. Hospice workers can provide needed support in the final days of life. Mental health professionals such as family therapists or bereavement counselors often offer useful suggestions for working through difficult situations. In some cases, support groups may be helpful.

In my own case, for a period of time I cared for my mother, who was in the final stages of Alzheimer’s disease. Although my mom had experienced memory loss for a number of years, a time came when her behavior changed, and we needed to make additional adjustments. Fortunately, I was able to make connections with some wonderful people at the Alzheimer’s Association of Utah, who provided me with encouragement as well as helpful information about how I could handle her changing behavior.

Support from family, friends, and church members. President Kimball (1974) said, “God does notice us, and he watches over us. But it is usually through another person that he meets our needs. . . . So often, our acts of service consist of simple encouragement or of giving mundane help with mundane tasks, but what glorious consequences can flow from mundane acts and from small but deliberate deeds!” (p. 5).

Often, our family, friends, or other church members are the ones who give the mundane help or offer the words of encouragement. At a recent BYU devotional (October 2, 2001), Brother James D. Stice of the Marriott School of Management here at BYU talked with students about bearing each other’s burdens. He recommended that when in doubt, we should always err on the side of action.

Elder Boyd K. Packer (1997) tells the story of how a friend of his received the help he needed from a church leader. Elder Packer described this friend as “[a] saintly . . . steady, serene, [man],

with a deep spiritual strength that many people drew upon” (p. 15). He said that he thought that he knew the man well, but one day his friend told him a story about his life that he wouldn’t have supposed. This is the story as related by Elder Packer.

[His friend] grew up in a little community. . . . He married a lovely young woman . . . [and] was well employed with a bright future. They were deeply in love and she was expecting their first child.

The night the baby was to be born there were complications. The only doctor was somewhere in the countryside tending to the sick. They were not able to find him. After many hours of labor the condition of the mother-to-be became desperate.

Finally the doctor arrived. He sensed the emergency, acted quickly, and soon had things in order. The baby was born and the crisis, it appeared, was over.

Some days later the young mother died from the very infection that the doctor had been treating at the other home that night (p. 16).

President Packer relates that at that point his friend’s world was shattered.

He had lost his wife. . . [and] he had no way to take care of a tiny baby and. . . tend to his work ” (p. 16). The man’s grief festered as the weeks wore on. “That doctor should not be allowed to practice,” he would say. “He brought that infection to my wife; if he had been careful she would be alive today.” He thought of little else, and in his bitterness he became threatening (p. 16).

Then one night a knock came at his door. A little youngster said simply, “Daddy wants you to come over. He wants to talk to you.”

“Daddy” was the stake president. . . . [The] young man went to see his spiritual leader . . . [who] had been watching his flock and had something to say to him.

The counsel . . . was simply: “John, leave it alone. Nothing you do about it will bring her back. Anything you do will make it worse. John, leave it alone” (p. 17). Elder Packer’s friend told him that “this had been his trial, his Gethsemane.” How could he leave it alone? . . . A terrible wrong had been committed, and somebody must pay for it. He struggled in agony to get ahold of himself but it did not happen at once. Finally he determined that whatever else the issues were, he should be obedient [and] follow the counsel of that wise spiritual leader. He would leave it alone (p. 17).

His friend told Elder Packer that “[he] was an old man before [he] finally understood.” He said,

It was not until I was an old man that I could finally see a poor country doctor—overworked, underpaid, run ragged from patient to patient, with little proper

medicine, no hospital, few instruments. He struggled to save lives, and succeeded for the most part.

He had come in a moment of crisis when two lives hung in the balance and had acted without delay. I was an old man . . . before finally I understood I would have ruined my life and the lives of others (pp. 17–18).

President Packer concluded saying, “Many times [his friend] had thanked the Lord on his knees for a wise spiritual leader who counseled simply, ‘John, leave it alone’” (p. 17).

Spiritual sources of support. The scriptural theme for this conference in Ephesians gives us an idea of some of the spiritual resources that we can draw upon. “Stand therefore, having your . . . feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace. Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take . . . the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God: Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit.”

This scripture describes three sources of spiritual support: the word of God, prayer, and the preparation of the Gospel of peace.

Scriptures. Oftentimes we can find support and comfort from scriptural passages that may provide us with insight and greater understanding of what we are experiencing. Nephi counsels us in the Book of Mormon in 1 Nephi 19:23 that that we should “liken the scriptures unto ourselves” for our “profit and learning.”

Prayer. In addition, the Lord teaches us in Alma 37:37 that we should “Counsel with the Lord in all they doings, and he will direct thee for good. . . .” He also reminds us in Matthew 11: 28 to “Come unto me, all ye that are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

I mentioned to you before about President Mark Willes of the Honolulu Hawaii mission. In trying to grapple with the premature death of his granddaughter, both prayer and the scriptures helped him to be able to feel peace.

President Willes said he had been asked by his daughter and son-in-law to give the child a blessing on two occasions. In the blessings he felt prompted to promise, “After the doctors and nurses had done all that they could do, the Lord would heal her, completely.”

“You can image my surprise and yes, even some confusion, when I would give those blessings and feel so comfortable about them,” President Willes said, “to then see as the days and weeks went on that she got worse instead of better.”

Becoming more concerned for the life of his granddaughter, he did something he had never done before. He called President Hinckley and “asked him if there was any way possible that he could come and bless this little girl. With the kindness that you might imagine only the prophet would have, he said, ‘Of course,’ and we arranged a time to meet.”

“You can imagine how thrilled we were as the prophet of the Lord laid his hands, in this case fingers, on her small head, and gave her virtually the identical blessing that I had given her twice before.’ He promised her that ‘after the doctors and nurses had done all that they could do, she would be touched . . . by the finger of God, and healed totally and completely.’”

President Willes did not understand when shortly after this blessing, his granddaughter died. “As I was preparing to speak at her funeral, the Spirit led me to the 55th chapter of Isaiah.”

“My thoughts are not your thoughts. Neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts higher than your thoughts,” he said, quoting Isaiah.

This scripture helped President Willes to recognize that all the blessings his granddaughter had been promised had been realized. Both by seeking the Lord and through the scriptures President Willes received solace regarding why his young granddaughter had been allowed to die at such an early age (Source: <http://w3.byuh.edu/devotionals/media/2001/20010927.html> [report of September 27, 2001 Devotional, BYU—Hawaii]).

The preparation of the Gospel of Peace. The ultimate support supplied by the Gospel of Peace comes from our knowledge of the eternal sacrifice of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Elder Bruce C. Hafen (1989), of the Quorum of the Seventy, teaches us: “Our understanding of the Atonement is hardly a shield against sorrow; rather, it is a rich source of strength to deal productively with the disappointments and heartbreaks that form the deliberate fabric of mortal life. The gospel was given to us to heal our pain, not to prevent it” (p. 5).

Elder Merrill J. Bateman (1995) provides us with additional insight: “The Savior’s atonement in the garden and on the cross is intimate as well as infinite. Infinite in that it spans the eternities. Intimate in that the Savior felt each person’s pains, suffering, and sicknesses. Consequently, he knows how to carry our sorrows and relieve our burdens that we might be healed from within . . . and receive everlasting joy in his kingdom” (p. 14).

Elder Bateman teaches us that everlasting joy is experienced only with the assistance of the Master. Each of us is dependent on the miracles of Christ’s atonement if we are to be made whole from grief, sorrow, and sin. Through faith in our Savior and the healing power of His atonement, we can be comforted through the Holy Spirit and be changed eternally. As the scripture in Isaiah 53:4 reminds us, “Surely he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.”

Elder Robert D. Hales (1998) taught: “The Lord is the ultimate caregiver. We must surrender ourselves to the Lord. In doing so, we give up whatever is causing our pain and turn everything over to Him” (p. 16).

The hymn “Does the Journey Seem Long?” (*Hymns*, no. 127), with text by President Joseph Fielding Smith, describes the kind of help that the Savior can offer. It says:

Is your heart faint and sad,
Your soul weary within,

As you toil 'neath your burden of care?
Does the load heavy seem
You are forced now to lift?
Is there no one your burden to share?

Let your heart be not faint
Now the journey's begun;
There is One who still beckons to you.
So look upward in joy
And take hold of his hand;
He will lead you to heights that are new—

I pray that we can take the hand of the Savior, and by taking that hand receive both comfort and solace.

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