

Why Bad Things Happen at All

A Search for Clarity among the Problems of Evil

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In college I lost my faith—not completely and not for long. But that moment impacted my beliefs deeply. I was standing in the back of a theater watching a scene unfold, waiting for my cue to enter. On the stage, my character’s parents, farmers during a war depicted in Bertold Brecht’s *Mother Courage*, realize that the army impressing my character into service is about to descend on their farm and then on the nearby village.¹ Alone and defenseless, they beg God to save them. As I watched this pathetic pair plead for rescue, a thought occurred to me that drove itself like a wedge into my faith: This is a prayer that has been offered up prior to the slaughter of God’s children for thousands of years and often has gone unanswered by God for just as long. God must be unwilling or unable to help them. In either case, who needs such a god?

Since that moment, I have struggled to make sense of what I think is an inescapable problem for the believer: Why does evil, suffering, or injustice exist in a world created and watched over by a benevolent, omniscient, omnipotent god? He says, “I the Lord cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance” (D&C 1:31), and yet he has created a world where his children suffer under relentless exposure to these very forces of evil.

The persistence of this stubborn quandary is highlighted by the fact that the attempt to resolve the logical incongruity between an omnipotent, benevolent God and a world full of evil has a name: *theodicy*. This conundrum is sufficiently unsettling that in a survey of beliefs among scientists, the problem of evil was one of the most important reasons given for not believing in God.² I, too, find it difficult to come to terms with God’s interest in our welfare, as I, a Latter-day Saint doctor, reflect on the myriad

forms of birth defects, on the tragic and unpredictable physical and mental illnesses we live with and die from, and then on the repeated acts of cruelty from the Crusades to the genocides of the twentieth century. I remain haunted by my memory of the solemn corridors of Buchenwald (one of the early camps for housing Jews, Communists, and other enemies of the Nazi party), where I stood and grasped for divine purpose amidst the piles of children's shoes and old men's glasses.

But this problem is nothing new. Before the time of Christ, the problem of evil was distilled into three well-known incompatible propositions by the Greek philosopher Epicurus, and more recently this conundrum has been rephrased and reexamined by Scottish philosopher David Hume, Elder B. H. Roberts, and many others: "1) Is God willing to prevent evil but not able? Then he is impotent. 2) Is God able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent! 3) Is he both able and willing? Then why is evil?"³ Given that evil exists, God must be either not omnipotent or not benevolent. But this conclusion does not describe the God who kept his promises to the children of Israel and delivered them from Egypt, who delivered the people of Alma from bondage, and who sent his Son to save humanity from sin and death.

Being neither a philosopher nor a theologian, I do not intend to summarize or critique the myriad attempts that have been made over the centuries to cut the knot of theodicy. Readers may turn elsewhere for those machinations.⁴ Rather, I begin with two recent observations by Latter-day Saint philosopher David Paulsen. First, the problem of evil is really three problems: a logical problem (how might I reconcile evil in a world watched over by a benevolent, omnipotent being?); a theological problem (does my understanding of the gospel provide a sufficient reconciliation of justice and mercy in the context of the universality of sin and suffering?); and an existential problem (how can I respond to evil experiences?). Second, an alternative solution exists to the logical problem of evil described by Epicurus. God logically can be omnipotent, omniscient, *and* benevolent, provided he prevents all the evil he can without, in the process, obstructing some greater good or causing some greater evil, and thus his nature is consistent with the natures of eternal existences.⁵

While Paulsen's helpful analysis provides a logical reconciliation, his insights invite further reflection about the meaning of God's omnipotence and the essential purpose provided by evil that would justify God's benevolence despite his unwillingness to eliminate evil. Thus, two questions become crucial: What does omnipotence mean? And what greater good might be lost if evil, suffering, and injustice were removed from our world?

Turning these problems over again, this essay explores a few ideas I have encountered while engaged in scientific research and medical practice. Rejecting the notion of a static God who is alien to time and space, I first turn to the idea that our creation by God, described in Genesis and in the Book of Moses, is, in an important sense, still ongoing. By seeing that the Earth's creative cycle has not ended and that we are still in its sixth creative day, we can situate God's omnipotence in this temporal world. God may be able to do all things, but he need not do them all at the same time. This world's creative cycle has its appropriate times and seasons when certain tasks will be performed. A time will come when chaos and evil are made subject to God's will, but that time has not yet arrived. During the present creative time, these elements may, and in some cases must, operate in certain ways independent of God's personal will.

An answer to the second question of what greater good might be lost if evil were removed from our world—why God would place us in a world that permits so many forms of evil and why we ourselves would have willingly entered such a world—can be found by considering the kinds of virtues that are developed only in the presence of evil and through the voluntary choices that come in evil's aftermath. Slowly but surely I have seen, in case after case, how evil, suffering, and injustice serve as essential creative conditions that allow us to develop nearly every Christian virtue, creating opportunities for goodness and the grace of the Atonement to cure us. The development of such interpersonal virtues as forgiveness, mercy, generosity, compassion, and charity logically requires the prior existence of some form of evil, suffering, or injustice. But divine meaning and purpose emerge from the ashes of sin, suffering, or misfortune only when human confederates engage the healing power of the Atonement in becoming more sympathetic, forgiving, and compassionate.⁶

Evil is experienced personally. Bad moments jolt each of us to reformulate our beliefs in God and our relations to those around us. Because this confrontation is deeply personal, different explanations for the problem of evil will work for different people. Some resolutions, even if they are logically or theologically unstable when pressed to their natural ends, still provide genuine comfort to people facing evil's grim stare. Reverend Frederick W. Schmitt has rightly described the encounter with theodicy as a lifelong process of trying out different explanations and justifications, keeping some and later rejecting others.⁷ The solvents I pour out on the following pages have not dissolved my existential anguish over human suffering, but they help me to see a bit beyond certain commonly stated logical and theological absolutes. Embracing temporal and relational factors has, ironically, projected me more toward eternal factors, with

greater compassion and purpose, to “mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort” (Mosiah 18:9), in other words, to become, in modest ways, more like God.

Free Will, Chaos, and Ongoing Creation

A key source of tension in the paradox of theodicy is a belief that God is somehow responsible for everything that happens on earth. He either causes each event to happen directly or watches these events and does nothing to stop them. But can such global responsibility be laid at God’s feet? Is it possible that free will and random elements of chaos extend beyond the present exercise of God’s power, even acting at times in opposition to God’s will?

Experience as well as Church doctrine confirms for me that God allows free will, even if its consequences will result in evil or suffering. He does not stop me from sinning against my brother. He does not stop children from saying cruel words to each other on the playground, nor does he stop adults from killing each other or my patients from harming themselves. Experience also tells me that chaos, in the form of natural disaster, unintentional and unforeseeable consequences of my actions, and illness and ultimately death, strike the elderly and young alike with seeming indifference to circumstance.

The results of free choices and the random elements of chaos surround me. My city, San Diego, has chosen to conduct nearly all transportation by individual automobiles on high-speed freeways. Each morning on the way to work, I listen to the radio announce where the traffic accidents are. I do not listen to see *if* any have occurred, but rather I listen to see *where* the three to five accidents have taken place. Residents of San Diego have accepted that about five people per day will be involved in these automobile accidents, making a concession so that the city can get to work by personal automobile. By living in this city and driving to work on these freeways, I am party to this risk and must accept that people will be involved in accidents and that I may be one of them. Can I expect God to carefully select the five people most deserving of or ready for an automobile accident in the city of San Diego every day and to make sure they are the ones who crash? Or should I expect these events to be controlled by such forces of free will as poor driving and such random conditions as unforeseeable obstacles and road hazards?

These lessons about free will and randomness were starkly presented to me during my first clinical rotations as a medical student. During surgery, I worked in the burn unit. There I saw adults and children suffering

from tragic misfortune or foolish error. Even with the liberal use of narcotics during dressing changes, many of these patients released the most horrible shrieks of pain I hope ever to hear. One of the first children I helped care for was a boy who had been badly burned at a family barbecue. The briquettes had been soaked with gasoline, and he was given the honor of lighting the fire. The briquettes exploded, badly burning much of his face and arms. While I might understand the tragic chain of events leading up to his injury as simple cause and effect, it was in fact a combination of poor judgment and unfortunate conditions that resulted in the injury of a child who was largely a bystander. This injury could have occurred to his cousin, his uncle, or any other member of the family. But he was given the match, and the conditions were right for calamity. Was this horrible accident meant for him, or did it occur as the result of free will and random circumstance?

One of the most tragic memories I have of my pediatrics rotation is of a six-month-old girl who was brought to the hospital because of brief spasms marked by shrill shrieking and arching of her back. After a number of tests, my team had the burden of telling her parents that their otherwise healthy child had a genetic defect called *tuberous sclerosis*, that our best medication had numerous side effects, and that despite treatment she might never learn to walk or talk. This was the first time I had to deliver such terrible news to a loving family, and it was difficult for me to find purpose in this tragic random defect of molecular biology. Although I recognize as a scientist that randomness is necessary to generate and sustain genetic diversity in any population, this time it had gone terribly wrong for this dear infant.

Scripture describes a *future* subduing of God's enemies. Psalm 110 begins, "The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, *until* I make thine enemies thy footstool." Doctrine and Covenants 76:61 affirms that man should "glory in God, who *shall* subdue all enemies under his feet." That work will not be completed until "the fulness of times, when Christ shall have subdued all enemies under his feet" (D&C 76:106). Is it possible that among those enemies are voluntary evil as well as involuntary random events and chaos, which currently operate independent of God's will?

In *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Rabbi Harold Kushner provides an insightful reading of the creation story in Genesis. He argues that the creation has not yet ended, that we are still somewhere in "day six," and that "pockets of chaos remain."⁸ For me, as a Latter-day Saint, this argument is very interesting because this reading is even more *a propos* of the creation account in the Book of Moses than it is of the account in

Genesis. The Book of Moses account begins with the earth being “without form and void” (Moses 2:2). Chapter 2 recounts how God created all things during days one through six and then rested. However, all stages of the creation described in chapter 2 were “spiritual,” as chapter 3 continues:

For I, the Lord God, created all things, of which I have spoken, spiritually, before they were naturally upon the face of the earth. For I, the Lord God, had not caused it to rain upon the face of the earth. And I, the Lord God, had created all the children of men; and not yet a man to till the ground; for in heaven created I them; . . . spiritually were they created and made according to my word. (Moses 3:5–8)

The description next cycles through the physical creation of the earth, with the actual watering of the earth (Moses 3:6) and the physical creation of Adam and Eve (Moses 3:7–25). The Book of Moses then continues on into the history of humanity, stopping with the story of Noah in Moses 8.

It is significant, however, that the Book of Moses never describes or mentions “day seven” a second time. The book ends, not with the completion of humanity and God resting from his labors, but with the commandment to have faith, repent, be baptized, and receive the Holy Ghost: an invitation to become perfected and completed in the future. This need for further completion characterizes the moment I find myself living in. Judgment has not yet come, evil and disorder still exist to some degree in this world, day six of the creation is ongoing, and there are still many wonderful possibilities of this creation left to be completed.⁹

Day seven, the day when God will rest from his labors (Moses 3:2), is known in the Book of Moses primarily because of its description as part of the spiritual creation of this earth. The implication is that the seventh day has not yet come to pass in the physical creation. Only the spiritual portion of the seventh day of creation was finished when God had “ended [his] work” (Moses 3:2) and rested for a season. Thus the scriptures describe the beginning of an ongoing creative period in which God’s children remain surrounded by the continuing possibilities of growth and corruption on the pathway to redemption and completion. Day seven in the physical creation is yet to come in the millennial or celestial age.

The current exposure of mortals to the randomness of natural elements during an ongoing creative process may also be seen in some of the sayings of Jesus. One man builds his house on a rock; the other builds on the sand. But the same catastrophic calamities struck each: “the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew” (Matt. 7:25). The trials we face may not be tempered to the level of our preparation. Creative forces of both disorder and divine purpose can strike anywhere, to our growth or detriment.

A similar suggestion of perfection pending is found in the parable of the wheat and the tares. The man's enemy sows tares into his field the night after it had been planted. The next day, the man's servants ask if they should "go and gather [the tares] up" (Matt. 13:28), but the man lets the wheat and the tares grow together until the harvest, when the tares will be gathered together first and burned (Matt. 13:30). As a missionary, I spent nearly a year cycling between outlying German villages surrounded by fields of wheat. In the spring, the fields were thick and green. As the summer waxed, the wheat heads grew fat and began to bend under the weight of the ripe grain. The tares, however, did not grow heavy with seed but remained tall. By late summer before harvest, the wheat kernels had all drooped down, leaving the tares standing several inches taller than the wheat. Even from the far side of the field, we could easily distinguish the wheat from the tares as we rode by. As the children of the kingdom and the children of the wicked one, symbolized by the wheat and tares, we all live together in the same field. We are all blessed together with the same sunshine and the same rain (Matt. 5:45). We suffer together the same wind and the same hail. Justice cannot be meted out—yet. We live in too close a proximity and are not yet ripe; we cannot yet be truly differentiated. I cannot expect that hail will fall only on the tares or that sun will shine only on the wheat so long as time is yet allotted for the growth of all the grain in the field. And even when evil choices appear unmistakably heinous, God still allows people to complete their wicked acts so that "the judgments which he shall exercise upon them in his wrath may be just" (Alma 14:11).

Understanding Omnipotence in Time

Because God truly respects the free agency of his children, he willingly limits himself in the ways he will control their lives at this time. If chaos and evil exist as unfinished parts of my creation, then God does not take complete control over these parts of my life. I am accustomed to think about God's power in terms of "omnipotence," but how should one understand God's omnipotence in light of the paradoxical existence of random elements and free agency as well as evil in this world?

Scriptural descriptors of God's power proclaim him "almighty" (Gen. 28:3; 49:25; D&C 84:96, 118), "omnipotent" (Rev. 19:6; Mosiah 3:5), and as having "all power" (Mosiah 4:9; Alma 26:35; Ether 3:4). They speak of God as not facing anything that is impossible (Matt. 19:26; Mark 10:27; Luke 1:37; 18:27; 1 Ne. 7:12). Yet Latter-day Saint scriptures contain a unique understanding that God voluntarily operates within certain limitations. There are things God must choose not do, lest he "cease to be God," such as

“destroy the work of justice” (Alma 42:13). “God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets” (Amos 3:7), and the prophets describe God’s creation as a process of separating beings into things that “act” and those that “are acted upon” (2 Ne. 2:13), so that we are free agents capable of acting independently of God’s will. Although God can command enormous entities—the earth, the sun, mountains, valleys, rivers, and seas—he cannot compel obedience or love from his children, and thus he cannot save the unwilling or unrepentant man (Alma 11:34–37). For this reason, scripture proclaims that God’s power must be maintained through appropriate actions, as “no power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned; by kindness, and pure knowledge” (D&C 121:41–42).

This contradiction resides, at a deeper level, in God’s incapacity to do *all* things, as illustrated by the child’s question “Can God make a stone so big that he cannot pick it up?” God cannot do everything, for doing some things requires not doing others. God cannot both grant us our free agency and control our lives. God cannot, in our current world, both feed the lion and protect the lamb. Most importantly, without the intercession of the Atonement of Jesus Christ, God cannot satisfy both justice and mercy. On a number of instances, God is presented with two mutually exclusive tasks and chooses to complete only one of them. To Nephi, God says, “It is better that one man should perish, than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief” (1 Ne. 4:13). In powerful submission to this very mentality, God himself later gives his only begotten Son to enable the redemptive Atonement for the remainder of his children. That is why, although God’s power has been described with terms such as “almighty,” “omnipotent,” and “capable of all things,” I do not believe that God is unlimited in the things he will do or in the ways he will accomplish them. God’s priesthood, like ours, requires that it be exercised in the appropriate time and manner.

In his book *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis explains the paradox of an ostensibly omnipotent person being unable to do the impossible or to complete mutually exclusive tasks. He reasons that God’s

omnipotence means power to do all that is intrinsically possible, not to do the intrinsically impossible. You may attribute miracles to Him, but not nonsense. There is no limit to His power. If you choose to say “God can give a creature free will and at the same time withhold free will from it,” you have not succeeded in saying *anything* about God: meaningless combinations of words do not suddenly acquire meaning simply because we prefix to them the two other words “God can.” It remains true that all

things are possible with God: the intrinsic impossibilities are not things but nonentities. It is no more possible for God than for the weakest of His creatures to carry out both of two mutually exclusive alternatives; not because His power meets an obstacle, but because nonsense remains nonsense even when we talk it about God.¹⁰

Neither C. S. Lewis nor I will say that tasks that appear impossible to us are impossible to God. Miracles occur. The dead have been raised, the sick healed, the helpless protected, and the captive astonishingly released. But we risk frustrating our faith by expecting God to perform impossible tasks. Although I consider God to be omnipotent, I cannot confuse his omnipotence with a power to do *all* things, both those possible and those impossible, both those compatible and those mutually exclusive.

Here again time plays a role. While it is impossible for God to do two mutually exclusive things at the same time, he can do them at two different times. Here Latter-day Saint theology stands at a distinct advantage over traditional Christian views that remove God from space and time. Is it possible that God's power or willingness to circumscribe or punish evil in our world should be seen as operating over time? If this world is still evolving toward completion and the full measure of its creation, it seems only reasonable that some, if not most, of its elements will still have rough edges and imperfections, particularly when my own disobedience creates some of those rough edges. The moment when God will file off the imperfections of mortality and polish out the final burrs of independence lies in a creative future. Like the completion of a large and complex stained-glass window that draws an image out of light and dark, justice and mercy cannot coexist in this world before each piece of creation is cut, polished, and fitted into the entire work. Until that moment, the window lacks integrity, unity, and strength, and does not yet "answer the end of its creation" (D&C 49:16).

As I stare into a microscope revealing a medical catastrophe or into the blistered face of a burn victim, the tension I feel between God's omnipotence and human suffering at the hand of evil lessens when I see these tragedies as part of a temporal work in progress. God can accomplish marvelous things, but creative tasks exist in time only as they come into being. They must be performed with appropriate seasonality. Free will and chaos are part of this creative season. Order and justice will coexist with free will only when each of us chooses to accept God's principles that allow for justice and order. Until that time, evil and suffering will remain as essential parts of our existence. However, we are promised, someday this creative cycle will be completed, and the elements of evil, chaos, and injustice will be defeated for our ultimate good.

Good from Evil

After surviving internment at both Auschwitz and Dachau, psychiatrist Viktor Frankl concluded, “Man’s main concern is not to gain pleasure or to avoid pain but rather to see a meaning in his life.”¹¹ I have been unable to explain away evil, suffering, and injustice, or their tragic consequences. They exist. But by giving meaning to their existence, I begin to understand God’s purposes in allowing these elements to enter our lives during this creation, and I can understand my own willingness to have entered this mortality at this time. By knowing the good from the evil, one can also draw good from evil.

One purpose of such knowledge is protective. For example, physical pain serves an important function. We all need pain to maintain a healthy body and to protect ourselves from more severe harm. The necessity of pain is underscored by the fact that we consider the inability to feel pain to be pathological. When I was a first-year medical student, I met a man with stocking-glove syndrome. As a result of long-standing diabetes, he had lost feeling in his feet and was beginning to lose feeling in his fingers. Since he could not feel his shoes fitting poorly, it was easy for him to wear shoes that rubbed. On such days, his feet would often suffer bleeding blisters. He had found by unfortunate experience that his feet required vigilant daily attention just to keep the toenails cut right and to prevent his shoes from causing blisters. After seeing the results of life without pain in only one part of the body, I realized that pain plays an essential and purposeful role in my entire life.

Do other forms of suffering, evil, and injustice serve similar essential purposes in my life? At one level, they help me recognize their opposites. Lehi states, “There is an opposition in all things. If not, . . . all things must needs be a compound in one” (2 Ne. 2:11). Life truly depends on duality. I know that something is alive only if I know about death; I understand corruption because I have seen incorruption.

But can I know happiness only if there is misery? Is the quality of my happiness proportional to the misery that I experience? If I were raised well and never exposed to misery, would I be unable to be happy? Or will I be truly happy only after my brother suffers a violent death? Perhaps the value of these experiences lies in comparison. Until I have been sick, I have little appreciation for being well. But how much pain is needed to accomplish this result? Is it sufficient to peek over the cliff of illness to value standing on secure ground, or do I need to be dangled precariously over the edge to grasp its potent meaning? The extremes of sorrow, intractable pain, tragic loss of a child, and the odious consequences of heinous deeds seem a high price to pay for an appreciation of well-being.

In *The Truth, the Way, the Life*, B. H. Roberts—a man who suffered greatly during his life, having been persecuted as a missionary and later losing his leg and eyesight to diabetes—writes a chapter on the problem of evil. He claims that evil is a necessary part of the universe, and without it God would cease to exist. For Roberts, God embodies the good, selected out of possible evils. If there is no evil as a background, then what would it mean for God to be good? In this treatise, Roberts makes a claim similar to Lehi's: a happy world can exist only if it coexists with sorrow and pain. Roberts quotes John Fiske, who writes, "It is an undeniable fact that we cannot know anything whatever except as contrasted with something else. The contrast may be bold and sharp, or it may dwindle into a slight discrimination, but it must be there."¹² Evil and suffering must exist as a background on which God can paint goodness and happiness. The sharp contrast between the two dimensions gives definition to both, allowing us to discriminate the dualistic pairs.

Roberts ultimately takes the necessity of evil so far as to suggest something very interesting: "By the side of the virtue of courage lurks the evil of danger, without which courage would be unknown. In the same way, good must have its background of evil, else it would never be known."¹³ There are many virtues that require the presence of a vice to act as a sharp and distinctive background to make clear by contrast the characteristics of virtue.

But danger does not serve simply as a background in contrast to courage. Danger is a creative force that impels the existence of courage. Until the tiger of danger leaps into my face and I am forced to react, either to engage or to withdraw, I am neither a courageous nor a cowardly person. It may seem a good idea to protect my child from all danger, but if she never faces a dangerous situation that truly threatens her, she will never experience courage or cowardice and can never develop into either a courageous or a cowardly woman.

Many virtues intimately linked to the plan of salvation are such virtues; they depend on the prior existence or even coexistence of a vice. I can forgive someone only if I have first been sinned against. Even though forgiveness is a beautiful virtue, its existence requires the coexistence and not merely the contrasting background of vice. Likewise, unless I am allowed to sin against my brother, I will never have the opportunity to experience forgiveness from him.

Most of the attributes praised by Jesus in the Beatitudes and required for membership in the Church by Alma at the waters of Mormon are virtues whose very existence depend on the preexistence of vice. We can bear each other's burdens only if such burdens exist. We can be comforted

only when we sorrow. We can be generous only if there is someone in need. Mercy can be granted only to someone who is undeserving. Peacemakers can exist only in a world of conflict. Reconciliation can occur only where there is contention. Even though these virtues are the pillars of Christianity, they depend on the coexistence of a vice. Remove the evil, the suffering, or the injustice from this world and these virtues have no place.

Just as God's word distinguishes light and dark out of the formless void, so these evils reveal new axes of moral development and force my maturation down one of two pathways. Want allows me to be either generous or miserly. Conflict forces me to become forgiving or unforgiving. Suffering offers fleeting opportunities for compassion or indifference. Without these axes, I would be, as Lehi writes, a "thing of naught" (2 Ne. 2:12), "a compound in one" (2 Ne. 2:11), and God himself, let alone my progress toward godliness, would not be. Even the Atonement requires both the Fall and personal transgression for healing grace to be brought into effect. It is only when I find myself outside the circle of God's love that I can seek him out and find his compassionate forgiveness.

It is evident that certain things can be learned only in this temporal realm. Patience is a divine virtue. But patience has meaning only when time is scarce and precious. Courage is another godly trait. But because threats to the existence of an immortal being must be extremely rare, courage would be hard to learn in an immortal sphere. In this mortal existence, however, losses, both perceived and real, constantly threaten to invade my life.

Moreover, these virtues are not to be learned for our personal benefit alone. The purpose of this creation, from God's perspective, is not so much to create individuals as to redeem his entire family of children. One of the fundamental principles at the core of the restored gospel is that the children of God have never lived alone. The purpose of this creation is to bring about the immortality and eternal life of all humanity. In Genesis, the word *adam* can refer to a single man, but it also denotes all mankind.¹⁴ In our postenlightenment culture, where the individual is the fundamental unit of society, it is easy to focus on the Creation as the creation of a single person, Adam, who later generates society as his family grows.¹⁵

It changes my understanding if I recognize that God's Creation is not focused on my creation but rather on the creation and redemption of an entire community. This view transforms the problem of "why is this happening to me?" to "why is this happening to us?" It is conceivable that God could have created a world in which I would suffer in total isolation. But he created one where I suffer together with an extended family. Not surprisingly, the Christian virtues required for admission to the kingdom of God are those that allow free-will-possessing individuals like me to enter into a

godlike collective: compassion, forgiveness, mercy, generosity, and love. I can obtain none of these virtues if I remain isolated; they must be experienced in the context of other people. This principle is especially true in confronting suffering, evil, and injustice. Mourning with those who mourn and suffering with those who suffer make it possible for me to become a more sympathetic, forgiving, and connected person.

Conclusions

The incongruity of the existence of suffering, evil, and injustice and a world created by a benevolent, omnipotent, omniscient god is one of the most difficult and persistent problems for the believer to reconcile. In an effort to resolve these paradoxes, I have rethought two fundamental theological axioms to arrive at somewhat novel resolutions.

First, I have suggested that the divine creative process is ongoing. It is open in time. The record of Creation in the Book of Moses describes the creative cycle twice. However, day seven, the day that follows the completion of Creation and God's rest, is described only once. This text suggests that, in real time, day seven has not yet arrived; that I live in day six; and that the creation of humanity is unfinished. This understanding of my creation leads to an alleviation of tension surrounding the existence of chaos and injustice; I cannot expect God to enforce order and justice prematurely when he has not yet finished my creation through the final redemption. And because it is ongoing in time, this process has a diachronic nature. In any creative cycle or process, there will be times and seasons when certain tasks must be performed and others may not. This helps resolve the paradox of God's omnipotence, which does not include the power to do all things at all times.

Second, God's Creation was not intended to fashion and redeem me alone but rather as a part of an eternal community. His work is eternal and involves the creation of open-ended and eternal relationships. Understanding this goal shifts my focus away from trying to give meaning to individual trials experienced by individual people and moves my attention toward the necessity of such experiences in the creation and development of collective virtues and the love of the others.

These ideas help me respond to trials by bearing them courageously. By "courageously" I do not refer to the stoic tradition of suffering silently and with a stiff upper lip. Rather, these trials may become potent moments for me to feel the healing power of God and to bond with my fellow human beings. In moments of great fear or suffering, the Lord and my fellow sojourners have fleeting opportunities to comfort and heal me if I will look

to them for that comfort. As the world watched the terrible news on September 11, 2001, redeeming elements were visible even in the midst of that extreme pain—the solidarity, kindness, and openheartedness of those who turned to help. Instead of being downtrodden by this tragic attack, many people reached out to each other, comforted each other, helped each other, bore each other's burdens, and clung to each other compassionately.

One of the great moments in the life of Alma and his people came after they had suffered at the hands of Amulon and other Lamanite oppressors, when the Lord's voice came to them in their afflictions:

Lift up your heads and be of good comfort, for I know of the covenant which ye have made unto me; and I will covenant with my people and deliver them out of bondage. 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 . . . that ye may know of a surety that I, the Lord God, do visit my people in their afflictions. (Mosiah 24:13–14)

I am changed by these words and events. I yearn to ease such burdens. Like Alma and his people, I am drawn to God for help, comfort, and support in such moments of pain and agony. Not only do our hardships allow us to empathize with each other and draw closer to one another, but they also allow us to do the same toward him, seeing him not as a cruel schoolmaster but a loving parent: proud of each of us, willing to support us, sharing our successes and disappointments, and even, like Jesus with Lazarus's sisters, weeping with us.

As I am putting the final touches on these pages, I have just received a telephone call from a friend. An hour before, a sixteen-year-old boy in his ward was killed in a single-car accident in the desert. He was driving and missed a sharp turn. Two were thrown from the vehicle as it rolled off the highway. One was killed; the other survived. The news is stunning. I do not know which arms of comfort or words of explanation will help us stare this real-life theodicy in the face: perhaps we will be strengthened by the iron sinews of Paulsen's logic, or by the postponed comfort of someday understanding, or by the stringent rigors of seeing ourselves in the throes of a divinely customized test, or a blend of all three. But my faith survives this misfortune best by seeing it in the context of creative conditions of willing creators and progressing creatures, by seeing misfortune as an outcome of choices, risks, and random events that necessarily arise in an imperfect, fallen, and as yet still unperfected world. My testimony rallies around this poignant opportunity to grow closer to those family members who are desperately in need of friends and loved ones to walk by their side through the coming hours, cherishing with them the memory of their son. I regain my

faithful bearings, knowing that I have willingly subjected myself, and those I love, to this world of sorrows, in order to have the opportunity to see cowardly, unforgiving, selfish, merciless, base people become divinely transformed in due time into souls with all the admirable qualities that God himself possesses.

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1. Bertold Brecht, *Mother Courage*, scene 11.
2. Edward J. Larson and Larry Witham, "Scientists and Religion in America," *Scientific American* 281 (September 1999): 90–91.
3. B. H. Roberts, *The Truth, the Way, the Life: An Elementary Treatise on Theology*, ed. John W. Welch, 2d ed. (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 1994), 339, citing Epicurus.
4. *The Problem of Evil*, ed. Mark Larrimore (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2001), and Joseph F. Kelly, *The Problem of Evil in the Western Tradition: From the Book of Job to Modern Genetics* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2002), provide good overviews of writings on theodicy throughout history. For Latter-day Saint writings on this topic, see Neal A. Maxwell, *All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980); Robert L. Millet, *I Will Fear No Evil: How the Lord Sustains Us in Perilous Times* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 2002); and Wayne E. Brickey, *Making Sense of Suffering* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2001), who all approach the existential problem of evil. David L. Paulsen, "Joseph Smith and the Problem of Evil," *BYU Studies* 39, no. 1 (2000): 53–65, and Kathleen Flake, "Evil's Origins and Evil's End in the Joseph Smith Translation of Genesis," *Sunstone* 21, no. 3 (1998): 24–29, both approach the theological problem of evil from a Latter-day Saint perspective. Paulsen's essay has appeared in an expanded form as "Sin, Suffering, and Soul-Making: Joseph Smith on the Problem of Evil," in *Revelation, Reason, and Faith: Essays in Honor of Truman G. Madsen*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2002), 237–84.
5. Paulsen, "Joseph Smith and the Problem of Evil," 60. Paulsen shows that Latter-day Saint doctrine defuses the theological or soteriological problem of evil through baptism for the dead and the preaching of the gospel in the afterlife to those who did not receive it in mortality on earth, thus giving all people a full opportunity for salvation.
6. As John Cobb and Truman Madsen describe, in Latter-day Saint thought humans individually share "creative complicity" with God in our earthly trials and sufferings because we each made an active choice in the premortal life to enter this mortal realm. John Cobb Jr. and Truman G. Madsen, "Theodicy," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 4:1473–74.

7. Frederick W. Schmidt, *When Suffering Persists* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Morehouse, 2001).

8. Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Avon Books, 1981), 51–52.

9. The Book of Abraham refers to the creative days as “times,” which are measured “after the Lord’s time . . . for as yet the Gods had not appointed unto Adam his reckoning” (Abr. 5:13). Latter-day Saint doctrine does not subscribe to the traditional Christian idea that God created the entire cosmos in a single creative stroke but rather sees the creative process as involving many times and seasons, phases and stages, not only on this world but on worlds without number as well. F. Kent Nielsen and Stephen D. Ricks, “Creation, Creation Accounts,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1:340–43.

10. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (London: Collins, 1940), 16.

11. Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (New York: Washington Square, 1984), 135.

12. John Fiske, “The Mystery of Evil,” in *Studies in Religion, Being the Destiny of Man; The Idea of God; Through Nature to God; Life Everlasting* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1902), 242–43, 249–52, quoted in Roberts, *The Truth, the Way, the Life*, 335.

13. Roberts, *The Truth, the Way, the Life*, 337.

14. William Smith, ed., *Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1948), 18.

15. Modern descriptions of the genesis of society generally start with the individual. Society is generated later as individuals band together for protection against other individuals. Two influential examples include Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *The Social Contract* and Thomas Hobbes’s *The Leviathan*.