RETURN

Four Phases of Our Mortal Journey Home

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

FACING DEATH

While I was serving in the Air Force in my early twenties, one of the pilots in my squadron crashed on a training mission and was killed. I was assigned to accompany my fallen comrade on his final journey home to be buried in Brooklyn. I had the honor of standing by his family during the viewing and funeral services and of representing our government in presenting the flag to his grieving widow at the graveside.

The funeral service was dark and dismal. No mention was made of his goodness or his accomplishments. His name was never mentioned. At the conclusion of the services, his widow turned to me and asked, “Bob, what is really going to happen to Don?” I was then able to give her the sweet doctrine of the Resurrection and the reality that, if baptized and sealed in the temple for time and all eternity, they could be together eternally. The clergyman standing next to her said, “That is the most beautiful doctrine I have ever heard.”

In moments like this we become aware of the power of the eternal perspective offered us in the doctrine of the plan of salvation, and we truly appreciate the restored gospel in our lives.
THE IMPORTANCE OF AN ETERNAL PERSPECTIVE

Of course, there is never a good time to lose those we love to death. Sorrow at their passing is understandable; in fact, it is commanded: “Thou shalt live together in love, insomuch that thou shalt weep for the loss of them that die” (D&C 42:45). Yet when we understand the plan of salvation, our grief is tempered by the knowledge and hope of what is to come for our departed loved ones. Their passing may be painful for us, but we are promised by the Lord that “those that die in me shall not taste of death, for it shall be sweet unto them” (D&C 42:46).

When the Savior died, there was darkness and sorrow on earth but joy in the spirit world (see D&C 138:18). We mourn the loss of those we love, but we know they are passing “beyond this vale of sorrow into a far better [place]” (Alma 37:45). Joseph Smith, who faced the prospect of death repeatedly during his own short life, taught, “The only difference between the old and young dying is, one lives longer in heaven and eternal light and glory than the other, and is freed a little sooner from this miserable, wicked world.” I testify of the extraordinary peace and tranquillity that await those beyond the veil who have followed the light and knowledge they received in this life. If we could experience, even momentarily, the scene that awaits the righteous there, we would find it difficult to return to mortality. I know this from experience.

Facing death for ourselves or our loved ones is never easy, but consider the contrast between the funeral for my fallen Air Force comrade and the attitude of faithful disciples who mourn the loss of their loved ones. Some time ago I had the opportunity of visiting a man who had been diagnosed with a terminal illness. A devoted

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priesthood holder, he was confronted with the realities of mortality. He found strength, however, in the example of the Savior, who said, in the Lord’s Prayer: “After this manner therefore pray ye: . . . Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:9–10). My friend took courage in knowing that as Jesus was required to endure great pain and agony in the Garden of Gethsemane while completing the atoning sacrifice, He uttered the words, “O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done” (Matthew 26:42).

My friend came to accept the phrase “Thy will be done” as he faced his own poignant trials and tribulations. As a faithful member of the Church, he now turned away from the daily concerns of mortality and began to let the solemnities of eternity rest upon his mind (see D&C 43:34). Particularly touching were his questions: Have I done all that I need to do to faithfully endure to the end? What will death be like? Will my family be prepared to stand in faith and be self-reliant when I am gone?

We had the opportunity to discuss all three questions. They are clearly answered in the doctrines taught by the Savior. We discussed how he had spent his life striving to be faithful, doing what God asked of him, being honest in his dealings with his fellowmen, and caring for and loving his family. We talked about what happens immediately after death, about what we have been taught about the world of spirits. We discussed the place of paradise and happiness for those who have lived righteous lives. We reminded ourselves of the doctrine that death and what awaits us is not something to fear.

After our conversation, he called together his wife and children and grandchildren to teach them again the doctrine of the Atonement and that all will be resurrected. Everyone came to understand that just as the Lord has said, while there will be mourning at the temporary separation, there is no sorrow for those who die in
the Lord (see Revelation 14:13; D&C 42:46). A special priesthood blessing gave him comfort, reassuring him that all would be well, that he would not have pain, that he would have additional time to prepare his family for his departure—including the rare and sacred blessing that he would know the time of his departure. The family related to me that on the night before he passed away, he said he would die the next day. He passed away the next afternoon, at peace, with all his family at his side. This is the solace and comfort that comes to us when we understand the gospel plan and know that families are forever.

I was also impressed by a young man I knew who passed away from a terminal illness. He knew that his illness would first take away his manual dexterity and his ability to walk, its progression would take his ability to speak, and finally his respiratory system would cease to function. But he also had faith that families are forever. With this knowledge, he spoke to each of his children through video recordings for them to view when he was gone. He produced recordings to be given to his sons and daughters at important, sacred occasions in their lives, such as baptisms, priesthood ordinations, and weddings. He spoke to them with the tender love of a father who knew that even though he would not physically be with them for a time, he would spiritually never leave their side. He knew and bore witness that families are, literally, forever.

The examples shown by those who face death with faith are an inspiration to all of us. Great lessons can be learned as we observe how the restored gospel brings light where there is darkness and a calming influence where there is turmoil. It gives eternal hope where there would otherwise be despair. It is more than just beautiful doctrine. It can be a reality in our lives, based on our obedience. Because of our Savior’s Atonement, in the apparent strike of death there truly is no sting. Because of the Savior’s Resurrection, in the
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apparent triumph of the grave there truly is no victory. His resurrected light dispels the darkness, defeating the prince of darkness. His eternal light brings a perfect brightness of hope, thwarting the one who wants all to be miserable like unto himself. The knowledge and understanding of the doctrine that God lives and Jesus is the Christ makes it possible to endure all things, including death.

DIFFICULT DEATHS

Whenever we lose loved ones at a young age, death becomes an especially great trial. It is a supernal blessing to know that “all children who die before they arrive at the years of accountability are saved in the celestial kingdom of heaven” (D&C 137:10). Faithful family members feel the pain of separation but are comforted by the peace that comes from priesthood blessings, family prayers, and the knowledge of the Resurrection that assures them they will be reunited with their loved one in the not-too-distant future. Their faith and putting their trust in the Lord help them put the whys and ifs behind them and feel the comfort of the Spirit of the Lord.

Our hearts are especially tender at the passing of those who have attained the age of accountability but did not necessarily “die in the Lord” (D&C 63:49). The Savior acknowledged the difficulty of death under such circumstances when He said that we should “weep for the loss of them that die, and more especially for those that have not hope of a glorious resurrection” (D&C 42:45). Yet even for such individuals we can rejoice that they will eventually be literally resurrected. Amulek taught, “This mortal body is raised to an immortal body, that is from death, even from the first death unto life, that they can die no more; their spirits uniting with their bodies, never to be divided; thus the whole becoming spiritual and immortal, that they can no more see corruption” (Alma 11:45). All of us who came to earth will receive this extraordinary gift of immortality (see
1 Corinthians 15:22). The path to receive that gift may be longer and more painful for some than for others, but ultimately everyone will be redeemed by a loving Savior and will be “heirs of salvation” (D&C 76:88).

Our grief is also more poignant when a young person dies before fully embracing the ways of the Lord. It is true that “this life is the time for men to prepare to meet God” (Alma 34:32). Yet Joseph Smith had few truths revealed to him that were more merciful and comforting than this one: “All who have died without a knowledge of this gospel, who would have received it if they had been permitted to tarry, shall be heirs of the celestial kingdom of God” (D&C 137:7). This verse speaks only of those who died without a knowledge of the gospel, but it is my personal belief that the God who knows the thoughts and intents of our hearts will not deny eternal blessings to any who would have lived worthy of such blessings “if they had been permitted to tarry.”

Losing a loved one to suicide is a uniquely heart-wrenching trial. Knowing that the Lord commands us not to take our lives, we understandably worry about the fate that awaits loved ones who succumb to such a temptation. Nonetheless, we are commanded not to judge unrighteously, and Church leaders have counseled us not to judge those whose physical, mental, and emotional conditions are not known to us, as in the case of those who take their own lives. I am absolutely convinced of the rightness of that counsel.

In all matters of individual salvation, I take great hope in the knowledge that all of us will be judged by the Savior, who knows our circumstances perfectly because He has suffered our individual pains, afflictions, sicknesses, and infirmities (see Alma 7:11). As Paul wrote, “For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities” (Hebrews 4:15). We may be surprised at just how much mercy will be available from the Savior,
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who was “made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest” (Hebrews 2:17).

SURVIVORS’ GUILT

Besides sorrowing for the passing of loved ones, sometimes we experience the sorrow of guilt for what we might have done to prevent death or better support and comfort the dying in the twilight of their lives. Some may even wonder whether they might have saved their family member or friend if they had only been more diligent or exercised more faith in their behalf.

We should not blame ourselves or let guilt compound our grief when a loved one passes away. I once heard President Spencer W. Kimball teach that while we can shorten our lives by our actions, we cannot lengthen our lives one second more than the time that is granted to us to be on earth. There is a time appointed for each of us to leave this world (see D&C 42:48), which means that as long as no unrighteousness is involved, there is nothing we can do to prevent death or forestall it when the appointed time has come. We should leave the burden of such groundless guilt at the feet of the Savior and “bear a song away,” focusing on past joys and lessons learned rather than on facts we cannot and need not change.²

TRUSTING THE LORD’S TIMING AND PURPOSES

Some whose loved ones suffer from prolonged and painful illnesses may wonder why their loved ones cannot pass away more quickly and peacefully; however, we cannot fully know what lessons a wise Heavenly Father wants our loved ones or us to learn from their suffering: “Ye cannot behold with your natural eyes, for the present time, the design of your God concerning those things which

². “How Gentile God’s Commands,” Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 125.
shall come hereafter, and the glory which shall follow after much tribulation. For after much tribulation come the blessings” (D&C 58:3–4).

When we genuinely pray, “Thy will be done,” we exercise faith in God, both in His timing and His purposes. We may not know exactly what lessons the Lord has in store for us by extending the life of someone in pain, but we can be confident that He does nothing that is not in our interest or for our benefit (see 2 Nephi 26:24).

My mother experienced paralysis during the last several years of her life as a result of a stroke that affected her right side. As I mentioned earlier, for the last two years she needed care around the clock, and my dear father and a nurse cared for her. One night, a few weeks before she passed away, I knelt at her bedside after a word of prayer, and Mother said, “I would like to go to heaven to see Papa,” referring to her father.

She asked, “Why am I going through this pain?”

My response was, “I don’t know, Mother. Possibly to learn patience.”

“To learn patience?” Mother questioned. Then, with a mother’s kind way of teaching, she looked at me and said, “I have learned mine, but have you learned yours?” At that moment, I was sobered by the thought that one purpose of her suffering might have been so that we, her children, could learn patience.

At such moments we begin to understand the “wise and glorious purpose[s]” for which we are on earth, for which we are called upon to go through the transition called death. As those who are dying and those who are living together draw close to the Lord, they realize that the afflictions accompanying death can truly be consecrated to the good of all (see 2 Nephi 2:2).

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How do we face death as believers in the true and living Son of God, even Jesus Christ? "Wherefore, fear not even unto death; for in this world your joy is not full, but in me your joy is full" (D&C 101:36). As faithful Latter-day Saints, we face death in and through Christ. He is the Holy One who overcame death by love. When we love Him and keep His commandments, we are in Him, and we overcome death as well. "Therefore, let your hearts be comforted concerning Zion; for all flesh is in mine hands; be still and know that I am God" (D&C 101:16).

CHECKPOINTS

✓ How prepared am I to submit my will to God’s in all things, including the timing of my departure from this life?
✓ How fully do I appreciate the gift of the Resurrection?
✓ How well do I use my knowledge of the Atonement and the Resurrection to help comfort others in times of grief?