

Survive or Thrive

Elder Lawrence E. Corbridge
Pioneer Day Devotional, July 24, 2019

Hardship and Suffering

There is nothing easy about the pioneers and the story of the Restoration, but there is nothing easy about the children of God receiving and following His guidance from the beginning of time. The best and highest road, the road of greatest worth, the only road to fulfillment and eternal life is not an easy road.

Hardship, suffering, disappointment, failure and faith, but always leading to ultimate triumph, always have been the common lot of the faithful from the beginning of time.

When I think of the Restoration, including pioneers, I think of hardship and suffering, but I also have questions. Let's talk about three of them.

Why did so many intelligent people give up so much and willingly endure such great suffering to gather (to Zion) with the Saints?

Here's the first: *Why did so many intelligent people give up so much and willingly endure such great suffering to gather with the Saints? Why did they do it?*

Why not accept the ordinances and the scriptures and live a good life without extraordinary sacrifice? Why not simply embrace a new religion and remain in place? Why uproot everything and everyone, why leave one's family, home and homeland forevermore to traipse off to a strange land however great the promise may be? Why not build the kingdom of God in New England, the British Isles, Scandinavia or wherever is home? Could they not simply live the gospel where they were? Does faith, faithfulness and righteousness require willing abandonment of almost everything else?

This is a particularly relevant question today, as some chart a course of ease, cherry-picking among what the gospel, the Restoration and the Church offer, quietly hunkering down in the routines of their own lives and shrinking from any level of inconvenience, sacrifice and service; much, much less the level of hardship willingly endured by the early members of the Church.

Much of truth is counterintuitive. Our natural instinct understandably is to shrink from hardship, but it is a grave mistake for that to be life's primary objective however instinctive it may be. That kind of thinking wrongly equates the pursuit of joy with the hollowness of ease. While that has some appeal, it is a deeply flawed strategy because suffering and joy are not incompatible but essential companions. You can suffer and never know joy, but you can't have joy without suffering.

On April 6, 1830, the Church of Jesus Christ was organized. In September of that same year the Lord declared "ye are called to bring to pass the gathering of mine elect . . . the decree hath gone forth from the Father that they shall be gathered in unto one place upon the face of this land." (D&C 29:7-8). Over time there were four gathering places beginning with Kirtland Ohio (1831-1837), and then Missouri (1831-1838), followed by Nauvoo (1839-1846) and then, Utah (1847-early 1900s).

Think of the staggering scale of this. In a series of wagon trains and a few hand-cart companies over 22 years, between 60,000 and 70,000 people would gather here in Salt Lake Valley.ⁱ By 1900, about 90,000 Saints gathered to America. Approximately 55,000 emigrated from the British Isles – a distance of approximately 6000 miles. About 25,000 came from Scandinavia. Others came from Germany, Switzerland, Austria, the Netherlands, Italy, France, Australia and the South Pacific.ⁱⁱ

How did that happen, especially at a time when everything seemed to be teetering on the brink of disaster? You can't explain it as religious fanaticism, not on this scale. It is one thing for a new convert, or even a few zealots here and there to pick up and pack up a few things and leave everything else behind blinded by a new faith, but it is quite another for tens of thousands of intelligent, good, rational people to do that in the same time frame and do it willingly and largely independently of others. They were who Charles Dickens described as "the pick and flower of England."ⁱⁱⁱ How did that happen?

There is nothing like it in all of history. Yes, there have been other mass migrations of greater dimension, but not like this one. Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt and the Jews returned to Israel from Babylon in 539 BCE and they have been returning again during the last 70 years. But in two of those instances the people were fleeing slavery and all of those gatherings were of a united, cohesive people with long history and deeply rooted identity.

The story of the Restoration and westward migration is a different story. It is the story described by Jeremiah of hunters and fishers gathering diverse people with no known history and no cohesive identity "from every mountain, and from every hill, and out of

the holes of the rocks,"^{iv} he said. It is the story of gathering a few here and a few there throughout New England and Europe. "Most of them . . . had never pitched a tent, slept on the ground, cooked outdoors, or built a campfire. They had not even the rudimentary skills that make frontiersman."^v How did that happen?

One of the tens of thousands was Jane Charters Robinson who said: "In the year 1855 ... I together with a younger Sister left home and Sailed ... for Liverpool and arrived there Next day for the purpose of going to America, very Much against my Father's wishes. But I believed in the principle of the gathering and felt it My Duty to go altho it was Sever[e] trial to Me in My feelings to leave My Native Land and the pleasing associ[at]ions that I had formed there but my heart was fixed. I knew in whom I trusted and with the fire of Israels God burning in my bosom I forsook My home, but Not to gather wealth or the perishible things of this world."^{vi}

How does one explain that, tens of thousands of times over? There is nothing like it and there is no good explanation, at least in human terms.

It cannot be explained away by the charisma of Joseph Smith whom these emigrants had never met, and you can't fairly explain it away as the power of a cult either, not on the scale of what actually occurred.

Some have said it was the result of a sense of community, but while a sense of community evolved over time as diverse converts gathered and melded together in increasingly greater numbers, that was after the fact of their leaving home and homeland. A sense of community might have kept them together once they were together, but what sense of community would have urged leaving home in the first place?

What about a need to find refuge from persecution and the evils of the world? Maybe, here and there, but can that explain the scale of sacrifice we are considering? Can't you hunker down at home and let the winds of scorn blow overhead?

Another explanation is a common cause. Yes, the greatest cause on earth is to build up the kingdom of God, but why not take up that cause and build up God's kingdom at home? Why go somewhere else to do it?

This leads us to another explanation closer to the heart of the matter, the call of a prophet to gather. Surely the gathering would not have occurred without the call of the Lord through His prophet to gather not only to Zion but to a temple, the House of the Lord, where His people would be endowed with power from on high.

In the end, however, all of those explanations fall short for me. Maybe they played a role but even in combination they are insufficient. There is no good explanation, at least in human terms, which leads me to conclude this was not a human endeavor but the work of God. The story of the Restoration, the pioneers and the westward migration, the willing and total sacrifice of tens of thousands, the hardship and suffering and making the desert to blossom as a rose is the story of God's hand bringing about His purposes in this last chapter. It is that simple. This story stands alone in history and is a testament to the truthfulness of the Restoration and the work of God gathering Israel, which continues today on both sides of the veil.

Why did they persist after repeated failure and constant opposition?

Now, a second question: Why did the early Saints persist after repeated failure and constant opposition? Why not ultimately hunker down and let it blow over?

Some say, *nothing breeds success like success*. If that is the formula for success then the story of Joseph Smith, the Restoration, the pioneers and the early Saints should have been a very different story, because it is a story of repeated failure and unrelenting opposition. It is the opposite story; the story of ultimate success arising out of the ashes of repeated failure. For them there was no pillar of a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night to lead them^{vii} or other dramatic manifestations of God's hand as repeatedly witnessed by the children of Israel.

The early Saints were driven from home and lands in New York to Kirtland Ohio, where they built homes, a community and the first temple in this dispensation. After an 800-mile march, Zion's Camp failed to regain land from which the Saints had been dispossessed. The bank established under the direction of Joseph Smith failed. From Kirtland they were driven to Missouri, but soon an order was issued from the highest level of the state government to expel the Saints. Some were massacred, others beaten, tarred and feathered and left for dead. Many women were brutally assaulted, time and time again, houses robbed, food, wagons, tents and clothing stolen, and livestock driven off. Joseph Smith and other leaders were imprisoned for many months. Opposition came from every direction, from without and within as well. There was apostasy, dissent and betrayal even among trusted leaders.

The Saints were driven from Missouri to Illinois, where out of the swamps of the Mississippi River they built another temple and the beautiful city of Nauvoo. Within a few years, persecution and discord infiltrated Nauvoo as well. The newspaper and printing office were ransacked and closed. The Prophet Joseph Smith and his brother, Hyrum, were imprisoned and martyred by a mob of 200 men in nearby Carthage. The

Saints were again driven into the bleak winter, this time without a clear destination in sight. The temple was ransacked and burned.

During the trek across the western plains hundreds, if not thousands, would die along the trail.^{viii} Once arriving in Salt Lake Valley homes, farms and communities had to be carved out of the wilderness.

Surely some, if not many questioned, if this is God's work, where is He?

People ask a similar question today. Some lose faith because of hardship. A daughter dies and, in their grief, parents question their faith in God. Another thinks her life should be happier and better because of her righteousness. It is more than "why me"; rather, it is "where is God, why would He allow this to happen despite my faithfulness?" It essentially denies God because one does not get one's way. It is to trust in God only so far as things go well. It is the stubborn mindset of 'my way or no way'.

God declared His purpose for the creation of the heavens and the earth saying: "And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them."^{ix} The question is not whether we will be faithful when things go well; rather, will we be faithful when they don't? That's the question, and that is faith. Faith is faithfulness in uncertainty and disappointment, faithfulness not to get one's way, rather faithfulness regardless of the outcome.

So, back to the primary question: Why did the early Saints keep on going after repeated failure and constant opposition? Why not step back from the lightning-rod of the body of the Saints, hunker-down, keep your faith without talking about it so much and live a life of quiet devotion? Wouldn't that be the prudent course of action?

Surely there were some who quietly stepped away, but we know very little about them and, in that fact alone we find the answer to our question. They have no legacy--at least not after they stepped back. We don't know who most of them are. Faith does not step back or hunker down. Faith is rarely, if ever quiet or obscure, and silence is not golden.

What are the characteristics of people who not only survive but thrive in great adversity?

This brings us to a last and maybe most relevant question for the day: What are the characteristics of people who not only survive but thrive in great adversity?

Although we talk a lot about PTSD, posttraumatic growth is actually more prevalent. More people benefit from life's worst events than are shattered by them. It is one thing to survive the desert, but quite another to make it blossom as a rose. It is one thing to survive; it is another to thrive. What makes the difference?

Just four days after arriving in the Salt Lake Valley, Brigham Young stated that "he intended to have every hole & corner from the Bay of San Francisco to Hudson Bay known to us".^x Small settlements emerged along the Wasatch Front almost immediately to the north and south of Salt Lake Valley. Within twenty years the Saints established some 350 communities in the west. That is not surviving but thriving in hardship. How does that happen?

While living in Chile, my wife and I experienced the fifth strongest earthquake in recorded history anywhere in the world. In the aftermath we observed different reactions. Some waited for the ground to stop shaking and, when it did, they started to pick up the rubble and build again. Some, including our missionaries, immediately began to help others. Many were immobilized and waited for help to arrive.

We witnessed what some experts have termed the 10-80-10 principle which suggests that 10 percent of us will handle crisis and trauma in a relatively calm and rational state of mind. These pull themselves together quickly. They accept the situation, make decisions to improve it and take action. The vast majority of us, however, 80 percent, are immobilized, stunned and bewildered and wait for help to come or someone to tell us what to do. The group we don't want to be in, however, is the last 10 percent. They freak out and make the situation worse.

Our missionaries responded quickly by helping others rebuild their lives and homes. They were in the first group, the top 10 percent because they were not afraid to die. They didn't think about it that way, but they were in a good place, doing good things, on the errand of the Lord. As a result, they were instinctively less concerned for their own survival than the welfare of others. They were in a place to thrive. They faced death and fear and stared them down to the ground.

Another characteristic of those who not only survive but thrive is adaptability, which is sometimes referred to as "acceptance coping," or coming to terms with a new reality. We are most rattled when our lives suddenly change, especially by events outside our control. Those who fare best are the most flexible and less dependent on their environment and the normal routines of life for stability.

This is more than optimism or a positive attitude. It is faith which is different. Admiral James Stockdale was the highest-ranking American prisoner of war in Vietnam. When asked to explain which American prisoners perished in captivity in Vietnam, the admiral replied, “Oh, that’s easy. The optimists. (They) “were the ones who said, ‘we’re going to be out by Christmas.’ And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart.” Stockdale went on: “This is a very important lesson. You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”^{xi}

Survivors and thrivers see things for what they are, good and bad, and they deal with them. Bad things happen, but as with the early Saints we must accept life’s realities, even the harsh ones, trust with the Lord’s help we may endure well, and all things, both good and bad, will ultimately work together for our good. “And should be die before our journey’s through, happy day, all is well.”^{xii}

Conclusion

I am grateful for the marvelous heritage we share. I testify of the hand of God in bringing about His purposes both in the early days of this the last chapter and today. I pray that we will be valiant, that our faith not be quiet or obscure, that we not step back or hunker down, that we adapt with faith to whatever our circumstances may be from time to time, knowing that all things will work together for our good if we endure them well. I pray that we will not only survive the adversities of life but thrive because of them.

i <https://www.lds.org/study/ensign/1998/07/i-have-a-question/i-have-a-question?lang=eng>

ii Richard L. Jensen, *Immigration to Utah*, in Allan Kent Powell, ed., *Utah History Encyclopedia* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1994), 270-273.

iii Charles Dickens, *The Uncommercial Traveller*, (NY: Macmillan and Co., 1896), 193.

iv Jeremiah 16:16

v Wallace Stegner, *The Gathering of Zion: The Story of the Mormon Trail* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 221.

vivi Jane Charters Robinson [Hindley], *Journal*, February, 12, 1855, Church History Library.

vii Exodus 13:21-22

viii Estimates range between 1,900 (*Mortality on the Mormon Trail, 1847–1868*, Bashore and Tolley: BYU Studies, *Journal* 53:4) and about 5000 (<https://www.lds.org/study/ensign/1998/07/i-have-a-question/i-have-a-question?lang=eng>)

ix The Pearl of Great Price, Abraham 3:25

x Wilford Woodruff journal, July 28, 1847

xi The Survivors Club: The Secrets and Science that Could Save Your Life (Ben Sherwood)

xii Come, Come Ye Saints, Hymn #30