

“A Saint Through the Atonement of Christ the Lord”

JEFFREY R. HOLLAND

In general conference of October 2016, I told the story of my friends Troy and Deedra Russell of the Dutchman Pass Ward in Henderson, Nevada. No one will remember the talk, but it dealt with their experience when Troy pulled his pickup truck out of the garage on his way to donate goods to the local Deseret Industries. As he did so, he felt his back tire roll over a bump. Thinking some item had fallen off the truck, he got out only to find his precious nine-year-old son, Austen, lying face down on the pavement. The screams, the priesthood blessing, the paramedic crew, the hospital staff—all, in due course, were engaged in trying to save this beautiful boy’s life, but to no avail. Austen was gone.

Over time, Troy and Deedra found peace in their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, in the comforting presence of the Holy Ghost, and in the scores of loving friends and neighbors who helped them, especially their then “home teacher” John Manning.¹

My purpose today is not to repeat that message but to tell you in your university years that some of life’s lessons will be difficult, and you may be

asked to face more than you think you can—and certainly more than you want.

In Brother and Sister Russell’s case, one might think that losing a child in the nightmarish way that they lost Austen would be enough of a parental test for any young couple to face. But there is language in the very heart of one of the greatest of all Book of Mormon sermons that implies trials and tests may come to us often in life. In his farewell address, King Benjamin taught that a fundamental purpose of mortal life—perhaps *the* fundamental purpose—is to become “a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord,” which will require us to become “as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, *willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him*, even as a child doth submit to his father.”²

What does that mean for us? It means that struggle and strife, heartbreak and loss, are not experiences that come only somewhere else to someone else. It means that moments in which faith feels frightfully difficult to hold on to are not reserved for our bygone days of persecution and

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martyrdom. No, the times when becoming a saint through Christ the Lord seems almost—almost—too much to achieve are still with us. And so it will be until God has proven His people for their eternal reward. We will be asked to submit, to obey, and to be childlike. For some of us that is difficult now, and it will be difficult then.

My plea today, in this university that I love with all my heart, is that we practice now and be strong now for those times of affliction and refinement that surely will come. For some of us they come now, in university years. *That* is when faith in God, faith in Christ, and faith in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will really count. *That* is when faith must be unwavering, because it will be examined in the refiner’s fire to see if it is more than “sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.”³ For some, the severity of the test might seem like a marathon-length final exam in Mortal Life 101. It is *then*, sailing in what Hamlet called “a sea of troubles,”⁴ that it may take all the faith you have just to keep your little craft afloat.

But you can sail on, King Benjamin said, if you will be childlike, “submissive, meek, humble, [and] full of love.” I think the only commentary needed for this verse might be regarding the line suggesting God “inflicts” trials and burdens upon us. In English, the word *inflict*, which comes from the Latin *infligere*, has at least two meanings. One is “to strike or dash against” and another is “to beat down,”⁵ but those definitions are *not* applicable to God or His angels. No, the proper definition of the word as King Benjamin used it is to *allow* “something that must be borne or suffered.”⁶ Now *allowing* something is a different matter! God can and will do *that* if it is ultimately for our good. I am going to say it again: God does not now nor will He ever do to you a destructive, malicious, unfair thing—ever. It is not in what Peter called “the divine nature”⁷ to even be able to do so. By definition and in fact, God is perfectly and thoroughly, always and forever *good*, and *everything* He does is for our good.⁸ I promise you that God does not lie awake nights trying to figure out ways to disappoint us or harm us or crush our dreams or our faith.

Now, with that long introduction, let’s return to Troy and Deedra Russell just four months ago.

Early in the morning hours of September 8, having spent much of the night getting her second son ready for his beginnings at BYU–Idaho, Deedra Russell was traveling northbound on Interstate 15. Near mile marker number 14, where the highway is tightly cut into the sides of the Virgin River Gorge, Deedra saw a pickup truck traveling at freeway speed. Unfortunately, it was traveling right at her, coming south in her northbound lane. At the wheel was an inebriated male driver, age thirty-nine.

This is a photo taken by emergency personnel at about 5:30 in the morning, so forgive the dark lighting. It is what was left of Deedra’s charcoal-colored Honda after the head-on collision. [A photo of the wrecked car was shown.]

In spite of what that wreckage would seem to indicate, Sister Russell, though pinned immovably inside the car, was not killed in this accident. With remarkable assistance from emergency personnel, she was extricated from the wreckage and life-flighted to the St. George Regional Medical Center, where—after 132 days of hospitalization, some forty of them in intensive care—she is still waging the fight of her life.

Fortunately, she *is* alive.

Here is the best she could do to say goodbye to her oldest son, Collin, who left two months after the accident to serve in the Canada Edmonton Mission, Tagalog speaking. [Another photo was shown.] Her dreams of helping him get ready and seeing him off to serve were left somewhere near mile marker number 14 on Interstate 15.

I need to move past the details of Deedra’s medical condition, but, as I do, let me say that her lacerations, fractures, and surgical needs almost defied description. She has been in the operating room for eighteen surgeries, with more to come. Her kidneys have been damaged, and at least two of her external wounds have to remain open with wound VAC assistance until they can be closed. Indescribable pain, interrelated injuries, recurring nightmares, and, most recently, a sequence of paralytic seizures have been her lot day and night. But every indication is that she is going to make it, for which we are grateful.

Here is a photo of Deedra with Troy on the right and Area Seventy Jonathan S. Schmitt on

the left, to whom I am indebted for many of the photos. [A photo was shown.]

Heaven's Grace Exceeds Our Merit

Now let me share a few gospel-related thoughts I have had as these reports have come in.

Lesson 1

First of all, public condemnation of the driver—who miraculously survived this incident and is with his parents and some of the Russell family in the audience today as our special guests—is *not* the purpose of this message. Our purpose is to learn. And that is why we come to a university. And one thing this brother and his family have taught us is that when we have made a mistake, serious or otherwise, we should feel genuine remorse and sorrow, and we should take responsibility for damage done and suffering caused. In the process, we should demand of ourselves a change in the habits and behaviors that brought on these harmful events. But even when we have done what we can, it often won't amount to much, so we will have to ask God to carry all the parts we can't repair or repay. To deserve such help, we surely *ought* to seek to live a life that would warrant it, always remembering that heaven's grace exceeds our merit. I am touched that the brother who caused this accident is trying to do all that I have just said in every way he knows how.

For example, I was touched to learn that in addition to his writing to, praying for, and visiting Deedra and Troy, he and his extended family spent not a penny on Christmas gifts this year in order to give that sizeable cash equivalent to the Russells to help defray some of the horrendous financial costs that will most assuredly bankrupt them before this is all over.

An equally poignant example of true remorse is this handwritten eight-page letter, a copy of which I hold in my hand. It is too long to read here in its entirety, but I give you just a sample line or two:

Deedra, I feel so horrible [about what] I [have done] to you. My heart is [broken]. My lungs can't breathe. I am so sorry for the pain you are in. . . .

Troy, you are an angel [to forgive me]. . . . I am so sorry you had to go through so much in your lives

already, and now this, all because of me. . . . [But] I am going to church again. I am reading my scriptures every night.

And please tell the kids I am so sorry I hurt their mother. [Deedra,] I know I nearly took your life, but if it matters, you have saved mine.

Sincerely, . . .

Behind what we want to be a hopeful and constructive ending to this story is the constant reminder, the drumbeat in our brain—rain or shine, night or day, spring, summer, winter, and fall—that says there is a loving reason to obey gospel laws and a worthy reason to follow gospel principles, that the keeping of God's commandments really is important, and that revealed do's and don'ts are for a purpose.

Without needing another photo of that Honda to prompt us, we all ought to recognize the wisdom of a loving God who—decades before cars and freeways and life flights were ever imagined—revealed the destructive possibilities of alcohol consumption. Without listing again the crushing costs borne by the victim *and* the perpetrator of this accident, we ought to acknowledge the tears of a Heavenly Father who simply asks us to take care of one another, to be careful rather than reckless with the well-being of our sisters and our brothers. Childlike obedience to His parental calls and His divine warnings will spare us and others agony in the end. Thus the cry of His Only Begotten Son: "If ye love me, keep my commandments."⁹ It is part of the apostolic burden for us to stand with the Savior with that plea, in that request. We *always* extend our love—always—but we are morally obligated to ask for obedience to the commandments as evidence of that affection.

Now, please, please, as I have tried to speak of childlike, Christlike, saintly submission to the trials and tribulations of life and to divine commandments, however tried and tested you may already feel, *please* do not walk out of here today eager to tell your absentee roommate that Elder Holland gave a devotional today on the Word of Wisdom. If you want to see an old man cry, do that! I pray you will find my message larger and more significant than the sorrow of drunk driving.

Lesson 2

After understanding the reason for commandments and the need to seek forgiveness when we break them, I offer a second lesson. It is the other side of the forgiveness coin: Just as the transgressor seeks forgiveness as part of the quest for relief and peace, we need to forgive at least in part for the relief and peace it brings *us*. As angry as Troy and Deedra might justifiably have been over this terrible experience, they have felt that they should *not* withhold forgiveness for him who gave offense. At least part of that motivation was because Troy has spent these last five years of his life struggling with *his* role, accidental as it was, in the loss of nine-year-old Austen.

To carry that into this setting, there is not one of us anywhere on this campus who has not needed forgiveness for some mistake made. Our deed may not have been as severe as the kind we are recounting today, but we have all made mistakes, and some of them *were* very serious mistakes. Whatever the event, we all thank God for being the Father of forgiveness and for the gifts of mercy and relief He offers us—all of it ultimately coming to us through the majestic Atonement of His Only Begotten Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. We are to join in and participate in that offering. The Russells have done that. They have looked up to their God and, even in their anguish, have humbly but resolutely joined the Savior in extending forgiveness to one in need. Surely they have been “submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love.” Without embarrassing them, surely they are becoming “saint[s] through the atonement of Christ the Lord.”

Lesson 3

Now, a third lesson from this incident. I have never heard them say it, but like all of us in moments of suffering and pain, the Russells may have sometimes shouted, “Why me? Why again?” or “How much do we have to face in life?” or “Does God really care about me?”

If they have asked those questions, they would have been in good company. The Psalmist asked, “How long wilt thou forget me, O Lord?”¹⁰ and the Prophet Joseph Smith asked, “O God, where art thou?”¹¹ Even the Savior Himself, in the

excruciating ordeal of the Atonement, wondered if He too had been forsaken.¹² But the divine answer to these faithful souls, to questions uttered in the darkness of despair, is always and ever the same: “Be still and know that I am God.”¹³ He has not left us; we are not cast off; His promises are sure; sanctified love is a constant: “The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.”¹⁴

So, when you are being hammered on the anvil of adversity, when your soul is being refined with severe lessons that perhaps cannot be learned in any other way, don’t cut and run. Don’t jump ship. Don’t shake your fist at your bishop or your mission president or God. Please stay with the only help and strength that can aid you in that painful time. When you stumble in the race of life, don’t crawl away from the very Physician who is unfailingly there to treat your injuries, lift you to your feet, and help you finish the course.

We don’t know why all of the things that happen to us in life happen, why sometimes we are spared a tragedy and sometimes we are not. But that is where faith must truly mean something, or it is not faith at all. In such severe circumstances, rare as we hope they are, we can fall back on Alma’s reminder that faith and knowledge are related, but they are not synonymous. In some matters you can have knowledge, even perfect knowledge, but in some things, faith will have to do until knowledge comes.¹⁵ And, as sweet Sister Holland always tells the missionaries, faith isn’t really faith if you have anything else to hold on to.

What we need from everyone, from those of you solidly in the Church as well as those struggling to hold on, is always the same: powerful faith, faith that sustains us here and now, not just on the day of judgment or somewhere in celestial glory. Most of us have faith in the ultimate, long-term issues such as the truthfulness of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or Christ’s Atonement and Resurrection. But sometimes we are less secure in pulling that faith down to today, to this morning, to help with challenges in the near-term, such as Austen’s death or Deedra’s automobile accident or your financial troubles or disappointment in dating or asking for a much-needed blessing regarding marriage

or health or some other personal need—prayers that seem to go unanswered and unanswered and unanswered. In these matters, too, you need faith, as well as in ultimate things such as the truthfulness of this Church and the reality of Christ’s Resurrection.

With this latter call for submissive and child-like faith in the near-term coming virtually every day of our lives, my young friends, I welcome you to the life that King Benjamin described and that Jesus perfectly exemplified. Welcome to concepts such as patience and long-suffering, which take on meaning you never knew they had. Welcome to not knowing but still believing. Welcome to trusting in your Father in Heaven and believing that *all* His promises, near-term or long-, will all yet be kept in full. But beware, there can be some anguish in this journey. That is because the road from faith to pure knowledge, from mortal trials to celestial rewards, always somehow winds through Gethsemane. And when we are invited to join the Savior of the world in that place, we should be prepared to answer the demanding question He put to Peter, James, and John: “Could ye not watch with me one hour?”¹⁶ Figuratively speaking, our entire cycle of searching and waiting, of repentance and forgiveness, adds up to much less than an hour compared to His blood-producing purge of all the sorrows and all the sins and all the mistakes made by all humankind from Adam and Eve to the end of the world.

Please, you beautiful young colleagues in this work: When your life seems to be one tear and tragedy and heartache after another, the meaning of which and the answers to which you cannot understand, I ask you as Alma did to “hope for things which are not seen [but] which are true.”¹⁷ As sure as you live, all of the blessings of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, of Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel, are waiting for you, short-term, long-term, and forever.

“A Refuge in Times of Trouble”

Well! Tragedies and submission. Heartache and belief. Repentance and rainbows. Love and head-on collisions. These are big boy and girl issues, even seemingly contradictory issues at times. But I promise you in the name of the Lord that help will

come and resolve those contradictions through the cohesive power of the gospel of Jesus Christ—what President John Taylor called the “cementing and harmonizing influences”¹⁸ of eternal truth.

So, the Troy and Deedra Russells submit like the young saints that they are. And they watch the miracle of love and faith ripple out in ever-widening circles to touch literally hundreds of people—for example, the groups and groups of people who have done the Russells’ laundry, those who have brought in meals every day, those who have taken the children to school, and those who have stayed by Deedra’s bedside every day and night that she has been in the St. George hospital. And remember that her family and friends live in Henderson, Nevada. Love and faith have helped Troy drive those miles and stay with his bride fully one-half of those 132 days and nights. His colleagues have doubled up at work to free him for such attention. Meanwhile, two of his patients have begun reading the Book of Mormon. A close friend who over the years had refused invitations to five different baptisms and a baby blessing—vowing never to set foot in a Latter-day Saint chapel—came to the sacrament meeting in which Collin Russell spoke prior to leaving on his mission. This friend thought that was the least he could do for an absent mother lying in an intensive care unit miles away. And so, miracles flow even from the mangled wreckage of a charcoal-gray Honda and a white Silverado pickup—all in response to childlike submission and meekness when dealing with what the Father allows.

[A video was shown of the Russells talking to the audience from the hospital room:]

[Deedra Russell:]

We appreciate Elder Holland letting us share our testimonies with you all today. I know that we wish trials weren’t a part of our life, but one thing I’ve learned these past few months, which have been really, really hard for me, is that we have a very loving Heavenly Father, and the reason He lets us go through these trials is so that we can learn things about ourselves. We can learn to have faith, and we can learn to be strong. And especially we can learn to rely on our Savior. Heavenly Father definitely sends us angels. He sent us so many people to help us! He lets other people help us

during our lowest moments. I don't think that I would have had such a strong testimony of just how much Heavenly Father really loves us if I hadn't gone through these things.

[Troy Russell:]

A few weeks after Austen passed away, a friend came up to me and said that I had gone through the worst thing that anyone could ever go through. I thought about it for a minute, and I said, "I don't agree with you. I think the worst thing that any of us could ever go through is to not be with our family for eternity." In these past four months there have been three or four times when I didn't know if she was going to make it, but in the back of my mind I knew that even if she didn't, we had been sealed in the temple for time and all eternity. And that was what really mattered. The only thing I believe that we truly own is our ability to make choices. Our bodies are a gift from God. The air we breathe is a gift from God. All the material things can be taken away at any time, but the one thing we have is our agency. And what is so beautiful about the struggles and trials and difficulties that we have is that they allow us to use our agency: whether we can forgive or not forgive, whether we can show love or kindness, or whether we can help people. We hope you all know that we love our Savior. We know that He died for us, and because of Him we can be together as a family. We just hope that we always use our agency to forgive others who have wronged us, that we always show love and kindness, and that we always are there for other people. And we leave this with you in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

[Elder Holland:]

My beloved young friends, I too leave my witness with you. I testify that when life brings you disappointment or sorrow—and on occasion it will—the gospel of Jesus Christ and the Church that espouses the fullness of it are true and strong. They are what the Psalmist called “a refuge for the oppressed, a refuge in times of trouble.”¹⁹ I bear witness of love and faith, of repentance and perseverance, of long-suffering and the merciful grace of God. I particularly bear witness of joy at the end of the quest, some of which comes

from the hard things we are called to do on that quest. I testify that we are in the process of rebirth and refinement, of becoming “a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord.” And we will be reduced to childlike faith and humility in the course of that experience. I testify of these truths and leave an apostolic blessing on each of you for the realization of every righteous desire of your heart as you search for the God of heaven and earth to be in your life. I willingly and lovingly share with you my own faith *in* you and *with* you and *for* you, lifting from you every burden that you feel—the ones you can carry and the ones you cannot—and healing every wound you fear now is fatal. I do so with love in the name of Him who gives the power to do such things, who Himself was lifted up on a cross so we could be lifted up to eternal life.²⁰ In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. See Jeffrey R. Holland, “Emissaries to the Church,” *Ensign*, November 2016.
2. Mosiah 3:19; emphasis added.
3. 1 Corinthians 13:1.
4. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 3, scene 1, line 59.
5. *Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (1987), s.v. “inflict,” 979.
6. *Random House Dictionary*, s.v. “inflict.”
7. 2 Peter 1:4; see also verses 2–11.
8. See 2 Nephi 26:24; see also Moroni 7:12–13.
9. John 14:15.
10. Psalm 13:1; see also Alma 31:26.
11. Doctrine and Covenants 121:1.
12. See Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34.
13. Doctrine and Covenants 101:16; see also Psalm 46:10.
14. Psalm 46:11.
15. See Alma 32:21.
16. Matthew 26:40.
17. Alma 32:21; see also Hebrews 11:1.
18. John Taylor, “Discourse,” *Deseret News*, 20 August 1879, 450.
19. Psalm 9:9.
20. See 3 Nephi 27:14–15.