Your Own Crown of Thorns

Lynn M. Roundy
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Our Heavenly Father, in designing the carefully chosen experiences of our first and second estates, was guided by his eternal goal, “to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man.” (Moses 1:39) To insure that we would each have the opportunity to achieve such a glorious destiny, he planned significant pre-mortal challenges as a measure of our willingness to be obedient to his will despite the clever persuasions of Lucifer. Those who remained committed to God and to His plan were given the privilege of leaving our Father’s presence to be further tried and tested in order that ultimately, if faithful, we might eventually progress to the point where we would be worthy to re-enter His kingdom and potentially even become like Him, exalted and perfected:

And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them;
And they who keep their first estate shall be added upon; and they who keep not their first estate shall not have glory in the same kingdom with those who keep their first estate; and they who keep their second estate shall have glory added upon their heads for ever and ever. (Abraham 3:25-26)

According to the divine wisdom of an omniscient Father, some of the schooling experiences of earth life are, by design, calculated to try our capacity to endure difficulties, that God may determine our willingness to “submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon [us].” (Mosiah 3:19)

In this paper we will examine four symbolic metaphors which, if fully understood, might enable us to appreciate part of the divine purpose in the Lord’s plan to “prove [us] herewith.” (Abraham 3:25)

Throughout the scriptures we find frequent use by the Lord and His prophets of symbolism to teach both obvious and underlying messages. For example, when God asked Abraham to sacrifice the life of his son, Isaac, He directed them to travel to Mt. Moriah, not just out of Sarah’s view. They journeyed three days to reach this mountain. Why? The symbolism becomes more evident when we realize that Moriah is the prominence upon which Jerusalem was later built; it is the temple mount, and a portion of this same mountain is called Calvary. In similitude of the giving up of His Only Begotten Son, God asked Abraham to be willing to offer up his only son on the very same “altar.”

In this simple illustration we see the Lord’s application of symbolism to instruct His children. By examining the life and teachings of the Savior, we can find further use of the symbolic method in teaching significant truths.

Though the mortal ministry of Christ brought him into direct contact with all classes and degrees of tribulation and suffering, His greatest agony was in the Garden of Gethsemane, when He assumed the collective burden of the sins of all men. The word Gethsemane, when broken into its Hebrew parts gives us: Geth or Gar, which is rendered “press,” and Shemen, or “oil press.” Anciently there may have been a press among the trees on the Mount of Olives which served the function of forcing out the precious fluid of the olives, under great pressure.

Did the Savior specifically choose Gethsemane for His Atoning sacrifice? Did He deliberately choose that garden to undergo the horrible “pressure” that forced the “precious fluid” of His blood to ooze from every pore? I prefer to believe He did.

As the Lord faced His own Gethsemane, so too must we all. Ella Wheeler Wilcox described our “garden” experience this way:

Gethsemane
All those who journey, soon or late
Must pass within the garden’s gate;
Must kneel alone in darkness there,
And battle with some fierce despair.

God pity those who cannot say:
“Not mine but thine;” who only pray:
“Let this cup pass,” and cannot see
The purpose in Gethsemane.

(In Morrison, 1948, p. 184)

Each of us will, at one time or another, find ourselves in the loneliness of “the garden,” facing unwanted pain, torment, and suffering. These difficulties may be somewhat less traumatic if we can “see the purpose in [our] Gethsemane.” In order to discover this “purpose” we will expand on the premise that each person must endure some kind of a “garden” experience in mortality.

During His ministry Christ applied a second metaphor to this same principle. “Then said Jesus unto His disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.” (Matthew 16:24) A close look at this verse reveals the following points: First, this message was for the disciples, the committed followers of Christ, not the general Jewish population. Second, for those who determined to “come after” Him there were three expectations: 1, he must “deny himself;” or cease to be motivated by the things of the world and to achieve mastery over himself; 2, the Savior asked that we each take up our own “cross.” Perhaps the significance of this challenge may be better understood if we examine the nature of a literal cross.

The timbers from which the cross was constructed must have been rather substantial, perhaps six inches by eight inches, and several feet in length. They would have been heavy, and picking them up would not be easy, especially considering the extreme fatigue that the Lord must have been experiencing. The “cross,” then, becomes the heavy “burden” of our lives -- our trials and sufferings; and 3, after getting the cross shouldered, we are asked to follow Him. Follow Him where? To Calvary! That is

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where He took His cross. Picking up the “cross” is not necessarily the end of our torment, but perhaps only the beginning. Such a thought buckles the knees! Must I go where He did? For those who pause to consider whether or not to hoist this burden, the Lord then might add, “And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me.” (Matthew 10:38, emphasis added)

If we desire to be worthy of our Savior, we must shoulder our “cross,” and march resolutely to “Calvary.” For those who determine to follow the Master, Elder Neal A. Maxwell (1976, p. 259) offers some suggestions to aid us in “cross carrying”:

What, then, are some of the skills and strengths...which enable us to lift and then to carry the cross? First, we must realize that the weight of the cross is great enough without our carrying burdens that we could jettison through the process of repentance. It is so much more difficult for us to carry the cross when our back is already bent with the burdens of bad behavior. Second, the cross is something we cannot shoulder and then stand still with. The cross is easier to carry if we keep moving. Action and service, happily require enough of our attention that the sagging of self-pity can be avoided. Third, we must realize, finally, that we can only contemplate the cross just so long: rhetoric will not raise it. It must soon either be taken up or turned away from!

It would appear, then, that we may all eventually be required to either “enter the garden” or “carry the cross.” Throughout the course of human history each mortal has experienced his own share of tribulation and suffering. Abraham, Noah, Nephi, Joseph Smith, Paul the Apostle, Peter, and Job were all on the list of “garden” visitors. We might increase our appreciation for this principle of personal suffering by examining closely the life of Joseph, who was sold into slavery:

Joseph, the son of Jacob, in a story that someday we shall have the full and fascinating particulars of, overcame what could have been the disabling shock of being sold into slavery. The gall of bitterness was not in him then, nor had bad breaks made him bad. He later rose to positions of trust in the household of Potiphar. His same refusal to resent “all these things” was there subsequently in the unjust imprisonment of Joseph; his resilience could not have emerged if he had been a bitter prisoner. Should we then be surprised by his later anonymous generosity to his hungry brothers—the very brothers who had sold him into slavery? Resilience begets resilience!

Thus, Joseph’s quality service to Potiphar and his management skills even in the jail were a clear foreshadowing, of his brilliant service later on as the “prime minister” of the Pharaoh. But it all sprang from within: Joseph’s spiritual strength could not be shaken by things from outside.

Bad breaks, therefore, need not break a good man; they may with God’s help even make him better! (Maxwell, 1979, pp. 40-41)

As we viewed the repetitive devastations in the life of Joseph from our pre-mortal vantage point, would any of us have been able to critically disparage him had he given up after being sold as a slave by his brothers? What about after he was imprisoned for remaining virtuous in the face of the seductive advances of Potiphar’s wife? What would we have said had he crawled into the corner of Pharaoh’s prison stench-hole? When the butler, having been restored to his former position, as prophesied by Joseph, and having promised to plead Joseph’s case before Pharaoh, forgot for two years, how disappointed would we have been if then he had rolled into a fetal ball and “went away” spiritually and mentally? How different the course of history if he had done so?

Consider the possibilities. After two years Pharaoh has his famous dream which no one could interpret. Now the butler remembers. Guards are immediately dispatched to the prison to fetch Joseph, who they find muttering gibberish in the far corner of the cell. Upon being presented before Pharaoh, and being questioned relative to his ability to interpret dreams, his only response is the unintelligible raving of a madman. What such a turn of events would have meant to the sons of Israel who went to purchase grain during a famine, or to Moses who was to be born through the lineage of Israel, or to those who are descendants of Ephraim or Manasseh. We can only speculate, but certainly history would have taken a different course if fulfilling the prophecies of God.

Such for Joseph, and thankfully for us, was not the case. After two years, under the most incredible filth and abandonment of family, friends, and seemingly God, he was called forth by Pharaoh’s servants. There was no time to get “in tune,” to fast and pray for divine guidance; it was there, or it was not. When asked if he could make sense of the troubling dream, Joseph’s immediate response, incredibly, was, “It is not in me: God shall give Pharaoh an answer of peace,” whereupon he then delivered an inspired interpretation. A more marvelous display of the capacity for endurance in garden visiting and “cross bearing” would be difficult to find.

Another individual who was fully familiar with “crosses” and “gardens” was the Apostle Paul, who nearing the conclusion of his life recounted the various difficulties and trials he had faced:

Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep: In journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of mine own countrymen, in perils of the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches. (2 Corinthians 11, 24-28)

Could any of us chastise Paul had he failed to endure to the end? Surely we might have wept with sadness, but we most likely would have understood, seeing the depth of his pain and torment.

Finally, and ultimately we recount the unfathomable miseries of the Messiah. In our present consideration let us limit our review to the events of his last night in mortality.

During the darkness of that terrible night the Lord suffered incomprehensibly in Gethsemane, taking our sins upon himself. Never before or since has any mortal being even approximated the spiritual-mental-physical agony of this crucial element of the Atonement. Shortly after that awesome burden was shouldered Judas came...
with the traitor’s kiss.

Throughout the remainder of that night Christ was dragged in succession from one insulting “trial” to another—first before Annas, then to Caiphas and the Sanhedrin, where He was spilt upon, buffeted, smitten, found “guilty,” and sent to Pilate for further examination and for sentencing. When the Roman Procurator could find nothing in Jesus worthy of death, and having discovered his Galilaean background, he ordered the Lord to be taken to King Herod who was in Jerusalem for the Passover. There He was accused, mocked, and dressed in a robe before He was returned to Pilate. Herod would not intervene.

Again Pilate sought to find some vestige of guilt with which he could placate the Jewish elders who were clamoring for a sentence of death. Finding no such crime in the Son of Man, Pilate sought his release by offering the people a choice: Barabbas, a convicted murderer, or the sinless Jesus would be released as part of the Passover tradition. When the people demanded the release of Barabbas, the Procurator assented to their wish and sent the Savior to be scourged, preliminary to crucifixion. After the horror of scourging was finished, the Roman soldiers determined to make sport of this “king.” They replaced the scarlet robe, platted a crown of thorns, placed it roughly on his sagging head, gave Him a reed-scepter, bowed before Him, and in ultimate mockery before the King of Kings, they paid “homage”: “Hail, King of the Jews!” (John 19:3) Then, spitting upon the Lord, they took the reed and hit Him on the head, and smote Him with their hands.

Such a pitiful sight: the Christ dressed in a kingly robe, crowned with thorns, beaten, mocked, scourged, weakened to the point of utter exhaustion, both by the incessant haranguing of the entire night, and even more—so by the soul-wrenching struggle in Gethsemane. Perhaps in a final appeal to the humanity of the Jews who had congregated in the courtyard of the Antonia Fortress, Pilate had Jesus brought onto the parapet before them, to allow full observation of the pitable condition of the Lord.

He plead, “Behold the Man!” (John 19:5)

But, compassion was not a visitor that morning. “Crucify him, crucify him!” (John 19:6)

Who among those of us who were watching from heaven in bitter, tearful agony would have felt the Lord unjustified if He had stopped there and then?

“I have suffered enough! O, my Father, release me from this mortal prison. I will not go one step further for them. They do not deserve any of this. I will not go to Calvary for them!”

Consider for a moment how profoundly such a decision would have altered our future possibilities. No Savior to free us from death or from our sins. No hope, ever, to escape eternal damnation. Though, in the face of such trials, Christ may have been “justified” to leave His mission unfinished, how very grateful we must be that He picked up His cross, as He has asked each of us to do, and struggled under its burden up that terrible mountain to give final fulfillment to the symbol of Abraham’s sacrifice.

Although we need not anticipate difficulties of equal magnitude and as numerous as those of the Lord, life for each of us is likely to be punctuated with challenging moments in our own “garden,” under the significant burden of our own “cross,” or perhaps in a long and arduous climb up the slope of the “mountain” described in the following parable.

COME, FOLLOW ME

It was one of those blistering hot summer days for which Arizona is infamous. I still don’t understand how the message was communicated—three simple words: “Come, follow me.” This was obviously no ordinary man. His dress was strange, not of our day and age, and he was bearded, yet, there was something calmly powerful about him. Most of the people who heard him were openly scornful in their rejection of his invitation to follow. Still, there was a multitude that responded to him. We found ourselves, with our families, walking behind him as he moved in a northerly direction, leaving behind those who considered us fools, who saw nothing significant about this man.

We had no idea how far we would be going, but there was a general assumption that this was to be some sort of gathering, perhaps at the edge of the city. For the first few miles there was an electrical excitement and great anticipation regarding the nature of this strange event in our lives. All through the caravan there was hum of conversation centering on where we were going, and why. After several miles, with sweat streaming down foreheads, into eyes, over cheeks, and dripping from chins, the anticipation gradually subsided and concern regarding just how far we were going became the dominant thought.

By late morning we had moved into the outer suburbs of the city. Already the crowd had thinned considerably, with many dropping from the ranks to return to the comfort of home and friends. The natural desert landscape was a mixed blessing—its beauty tempered by the spines that afflicted the unwary. When he began the ascent into the gently sloping foothills skirting the more distant mountain range there were more questions, more complaints, and fewer followers. I suppose that many assumed that whatever reward they had anticipated in coming this far should, by now, have been granted. The others continued, wondering—perhaps less excited now but still wondering: “Where are we going?” Though this question hung unanswered, we would, in time begin to know.

And yet, on he continued.

When the foothills became more literal mountain, some were offended and turned back excusing themselves, saying, “We have gone as far as we can. What does he expect of us?” With the increasing steepness of the incline the pace flowed, though in the intensity of the afternoon sun, perspiration now coursed down brow and cheek in rivulets. Desert vegetation gave way gradually to scrubby brush that required a meandering route.

Several hundred yards above us was the crest of the first major ridge of our climb. Immediately speculation broke out among us that this would be our point of destination. The pace quickened until the summit was achieved. Filled with anticipation, and gasping for air, we anxiously searched for our leader. For several moments he remained unseen, until one among us, in an exasperated groan announced, “There he is, going down into that next ravine!”

Another man called out, “What do you want of us? We will not go on!” With that he and his family joined others who were turning their faces to the desert floor. Those of us who remained atop that peak shouldered our little ones and slowly renewed our journey.
Onward, upward, downward, the course continued. Brushy terrain was becoming overshadowed by evergreen trees. Having abandoned our false expectations for an abbreviated climb, we now viewed each new ridge as a challenge to be met and overcome. As we stood atop each summit, we were filled with glory and wonder, knowing that in the distance was yet another grander peak waiting to be surmounted—and between us, another gaping chasm waiting to be traversed. One silver-haired man, who with his sweetheart, struggled to maintain the pace, observed, “Sometimes the only way up is down!”

And still he continued.

It is unclear where it was in the climb that we awakened to the realization that the air was cooler. Now, though the sweat was still profuse, there was a refreshing breeze of cool mountain air to invigorate our aching muscles. Now, too, we realized that no longer was the air stale with dust, smoke, and city smells—but rather it was crisp and clean. Reaching the next summit, one among us scanned the distant horizon and exclaimed, “Look! How far you can see!” After that, each plateau was a reward, a more expansive view. Never before could we have envisioned such horizons, or believed ourselves capable of such arduous effort.

By now the little band of followers was spread out considerably. Slowly we made our way up the ever-increasing incline, one step ahead of the previous. On occasion we were met by those who, seeing what lay ahead, would not continue: “If you think it’s tough here, you should see what it’s like above. This is crazy! He can’t expect us to go where he’s going, can he?”

So down they went.

And yet, still he climbed.

Now the shadows of late afternoon were lengthening, the breezes cooler, the air even clearer, the vision even grander. The ridge ahead appeared the most difficult of all we had come upon—higher, and the incline more severe than previous. Somehow, with what little stamina remained, we placed each foot in front of the other and began making our way upward. Because of the exaggerated slope, progress was painfully slow, and everyone struggled against the nearly overwhelming desire to drop out and turn back.

Then, unmistakably, the air was filled with a rapidly increasing feeling of anticipation. As if we were one, we raised our heads to behold, several yards above us, the Master, standing with arms beckoning, on his countenance, a gloriously peaceful expression of love! With tears of joy we rushed into his embrace. Now, falling to our knees, we bathed his feet with kisses and tears—each foot reflecting a glorious scar.

“My Lord! My God!”

“Arise, my children. Look about you!”

Slowly rising, through tear-filled eyes the glorious scene unfolded. In every direction we could see forever! Gathering our loved ones, we scanned the endless horizons, marveling at the beauty, grateful to the deepest part of our souls that we had not faltered; trembling with the realization that we might, like some, have turned back one ridge too soon.

But now we turned again, to look upon the glorious being that stood before us, (filled to overflowing with unutterable joy)

“Come, follow me” the Savior said.

Then let us in his footsteps tread,
For thus alone can we be one
With God’s own loved, begotten Son.

We must the upward path pursue
As wider fields expand to view,
And follow Him unceasingly
Whate’er our lot or sphere may be.

For thrones, dominions, kingdoms, powers
And glory great and bliss are ours

If we, throughout eternity,
Obey his words, “Come, follow me.”

(Hymns, #14)

All true disciples of Christ, who deny themselves, take up their “cross,” and willingly follow him, not faltering until after the last “ridge” has been achieved will be able, like Paul, to say:

I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith:
Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing. (2 Timothy 4:7-8, emphasis added)

The image of a “crown” seems to be symbolic of a reward for passing the tests of mortality. The conditions for our receiving such a crown, as we kneel at the feet of the Lord, atop that highest peak, are described by Brigham Young:

All intelligent beings who are crowned with crowns of glory, immortality, and eternal lives must pass through every ordeal appointed for intelligent beings to pass through, to gain their glory and exaltation. Every calamity that can come upon mortal beings will be suffered to come upon the few, to prepare them to enjoy the presence of the Lord. (1966, p. 150)

This crown, then is of substantial importance. What kind of crown is it? Thomas Carlyle (1949, p. 707) suggests that, “Every noble crown is, and on earth will ever be a crown of thorns.” A crown of thorns? Of course. Another symbol with hidden significance. And how do I earn my own crown of thorns? Simply the same way that Joseph, or Paul, or Christ did: thorn by thorn, like a charm bracelet. As each new thorn (trial) is successfully endured it is added to our developing crown. Some thorns are small and some are very large, but all are precious “jewels” and will be treasured when finally the crown is finished.

Thoughtfully pondering this imagery of a thorny crown gives added meaning to the Apostle Paul’s lament regarding his “thorn in the flesh”:

And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure.

For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me.

And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong. (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)

The Apostle James was apparently also aware of the necessity to endure first before the promised “coronation”: “Blessed is the man that endures temptation [trials?): for when he is tried he shall receive the crown of life [thorns?), which the Lord hath promised to them that love him. (James 1:12)

As suggested by both Paul and James, perceiving life’s “thorns” as potential “crown jewels” is an essential first

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step if we are to clearly understand what Ella Wheeler Wilcox calls the "purpose in Gethsemane." Regardless of which metaphor ("gardens," "crosses," "mountains," or "thorn crowns") we wish to consider, it is apparent that if we choose to follow the Savior and go where he is now, we will need to develop a personal appreciation for the purpose in the challenges of life, and to determine that we will endure, like Joseph, Paul, and Christ.

If our Heavenly Father deliberately and wisely designed a mortal probation which included "an opposition in all things" (2 Nephi 2:11), and if this opposition suggests both elements of life which are glorious and wonderful, as well as those which are bitter and difficult, then part of the trial must be to see how well we submit to all that the "Lord seeth fit to inflict upon [us]." (Mosiah 3:19) We may more readily come upon the decision to enter our "gardens," shoulder our "crosses," and climb our "mountains" if we can learn to see past the pain and beyond the sorrow to the "crown" our Lord waits to lovingly place upon our heads when our compliment of "thorns" has been earned.

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