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Empathy and the Atonement

Tyler Johnson

Even as an incurable optimist, I can see the world is often drenched in suffering.

It is difficult to imagine a more idyllic home than my sunny northern California, yet even here sorrow surrounds me. I see it in the sunken eyes of a young woman who is struggling furiously to free herself from addiction. I hear it in the anguished voice of a friend as he tells me how he used to envision hanging himself because he so desperately wanted not to be gay. I feel it in the intensity with which a loved one pleads to know why God had seemingly abandoned him to the hands of a callous abuser. And it haunts the halls of the hospital where we often have to deliver shattering news—*I'm sorry, Ma'am, there is nothing more we can do for your husband; I'm sorry, Sir, but your cancer has spread to the liver and can no longer be cured.*

This is to say nothing of far-off places where suffering seems universal. Across the globe, great waves of refugees fan out across deserts and rivers, succumbing to starvation, disease, or, worse: abuse, rape, and torture. In far-away countries, warlords rule with blood and horror; evil dominion is the wont of the powerful across much of the earth. It is enough to stop and crush the fragile heart.

It is understandable, then, that the thoughtful throughout history have questioned God's love. For as long as people have conceived of an omnipotent and perfectly beneficent God, they have wondered, *Why do so many suffer so much—indeed, why does anyone suffer at all?* For the Christian disciple, these questions can be all the more vexing because even in our most difficult moments, and even when we look to God for

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answers, his help is not always immediate or obvious. Even C. S. Lewis once questioned God's apparent apathy, observing in the midst of his anguish at the passing of his wife:

> But go to [God] when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the windows. It might be an empty house. Was it ever inhabited? It seemed so once. And that seeming was as strong as this. What can this mean? Why is He so present a commander in our time of prosperity and so very absent a help in time of trouble?[1]

These questions yield no easy answers.

Yet, as I have come of age, Mormonism has offered me powerful and deeply satisfying responses to these thorny quandaries. I first sensed the stunning potency of Mormonism's intellectual answer to the problem of evil as a college freshman fifteen years ago. As time wore on, however, and as my loved ones and I became more intimately acquainted with sadness and loss, this intellectual answer grew insufficient. The problem is not with the sufficiency of Mormonism's answer to the intellectual problem of evil, but, rather, that the intellectual question is not really the one ultimately most worth asking. While I first asked, "Why does suffering exist if God loves us?" life eventually moved me to ask, "How has God responded to this suffering?" and "How would he have me respond?"

Happily, I've discovered that Mormonism also offers substantive and fulfilling responses to these more pressing questions. As I've made my own way along the pathway of Christian discipleship, I've found that Christ's perfect answer to the world's suffering is to offer to weep with us through each of our trials—he literally and individually takes our sorrow upon him. In similar fashion, I have become increasingly deeply convinced that empathy is the most powerful way in which God invites us to partner with him in assuaging the world's manifest sadness. Ultimately, by precept and by covenant, Mormonism invites us to make God's willing empathy our own. This empathy becomes a golden thread woven through the fabric of our theology and our lived discipleship.

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1. C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1961), 6.

A Theological Response

No treatment of Mormonism's response to the problem of evil can be complete without recognizing David Paulsen's masterful theological exegesis on the subject. To this day, I recall listening—rapt—to Paulsen (a BYU religious philosophy professor) address the subject with force and elegance at a BYU devotional one Tuesday morning more than fifteen years ago. In that discourse, Paulsen laid out the contours of what is arguably religious philosophy's most vexing and insoluble dilemma, saying that the problem of evil not only challenges our faith but seemingly demands that we "stare contradiction right in the face."[2]

He goes on to quote the philosopher David Hume, who wrote: "Why is there any misery at all in the world? Not by chance, surely. From some cause then. Is it the intention of the Deity? But he is perfectly benevolent. Is it contrary to his intention? But he is almighty. Nothing can shake the solidity of this reasoning, so short, so clear, so decisive."[3]

Paulsen then proceeds to outline why the problem is even more hopeless than Hume suggests. In short, Paulsen's argument is that in addition to assigning God perfect goodness and omnipotence, most creedal Christians affirm that he has created all things *ex nihilo*. In so doing, they place God in an inescapable bind, making him not only aware of, but also an accessory to, every human crime.

Paulsen then proceeds to demonstrate, however, how Joseph Smith leads us out of this hopelessly tangled intellectual thicket. Paulsen points out that Joseph blasphemously denied *ex nihilo* creation, teaching instead that the matter of which we are made is coeternal with God and that some essence of what makes me me—my "intelligence"—has been forever and will never cease to be. If this is true, Paulsen explains, then God is freed from the unrelenting demands of absolute creation—he cannot then be held responsible for every consequence of our misused agency. Thus Joseph's teaching allows God's perfect love to remain intact, in spite of the evil we see in the world.

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2. David Paulsen, "Joseph Smith and the Problem of Evil," *BYU Studies* 39, no. 1 (2000): 54.

3. David Hume, "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion," in *Reason and Responsibility: Readings in Some Basic Problems of Philosophy,* 13th ed., ed. Joel Feinberg and Russ Shafer-Landau (Belmont, Calif.: Thompson Wadsworth, 2008), 65.

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While I still deeply appreciate Dr. Paulsen's (and Joseph Smith's) gift to our community, it has struck me more powerfully with the passage of time that his answers do little to quench the thirst of the parched soul. Yes, it is true, Joseph's theology convincingly answers evil's cognitive *why* and thus gives us grounds to accept the existence of suffering in the universe of a perfectly loving God, but even this philosophy does little to ease real human suffering. The inadequacy is a categorical one—abstract theology packs a certain intellectual heft, but it is ultimately inadequate to address the pain of abuse, neglect, terror, and loss.

Mormonism, however, goes beyond this set of abstract—if beautiful—intellectual equations. While David Paulsen demonstrates how Joseph Smith's theology of eternal souls solves the intellectual problem of evil, other modern Mormon authors have demonstrated that Mormonism also helps ease the emotional weight of evil, and, finally and most importantly, both Mormon theology and our lived Mormon experience invite us as Latter-day Saints to partner with God in becoming the answer to the existence of evil in the world.

Empathy as God's Answer

Perhaps no book has affected me as profoundly in the last ten years as Terryl and Fiona Givens's *The God Who Weeps*. Among the many resonant ideas they articulate, one stood out to me as being of utmost, urgent importance. Their chief and most beautiful offering is this: that God most deeply deserves our worship because he willingly submitted himself to suffer, in every particular, each of the terrible vicissitudes through which we pass. Using as their central motif Enoch's encounter with a weeping God, the Givenses argue that God taking upon him our sins and suffering was far from a singular event (for example, in Gethsemane and on Calvary), but, rather, his decision to suffer with us is one of his character's central features. Their argument is that God answers the quandary of evil's existence by offering to make our suffering his own.[4]

As Terryl Givens has argued elsewhere, this central tenet—that God eternally mourns with us—is one of Mormonism's most profound contributions to modern religious discourse.[5] While hints of this appear in

4. Terryl Givens and Fiona Givens, *The God Who Weeps: How Mormonism Makes Sense of Life* (Salt Lake City: Ensign Peak, 2012): 24–29.

5. Terryl Givens, "Mormons at the Forefront," *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life* (June/July 2016): 20, available online at http://www.firstthings.com/article/2016/06/mormons-at-the-forefront.

the Bible and creedal Christianity, the very idea is contradicted by the Nicene Creed (a God without passions could hardly sorrow, let alone weep), and it is demonstrated nowhere so urgently and descriptively as in distinctly Mormon scripture.

Understandably, we may naturally incline toward a conception of the Savior as a steel-skinned spiritual colossus, even when he dwelt in his mortal tabernacle. *Yes,* we may reason, *Jesus was not only human but also suffered immeasurably. In the end, however,* we think, *his divine parentage must have shielded him from the full weight of the burden he carried. His suffering was greater than ours, but given his godly strength he must hardly have felt the weight of it at all.*

Book of Mormon prophets, however, go to great lengths to teach us that the opposite of this is true. Nephi leads out, and his emphasis is unsubtle: "And the world, because of their iniquity, shall judge [Christ] to be a thing of naught; wherefore they scourge him, and *he suffereth it*; and they smite him, and *he suffereth it*. Yea, they spit upon him, *and he suffereth it*" (1 Ne. 19:9). Nephi may intend two purposes here: first, to emphasize Christ's willingness to suffer (*suffer* meaning "to allow"); but the second purpose, I would submit, is to underline the visceral depth of the Savior's suffering. The nails at Calvary did not glance off impenetrable wrists. Nephi wants us to understand that those weapons—and many others—found their marks in skin every bit as fleshy, fragile, and thin as ours; Christ's searing pain raced across nerves and synapses with the same lancing speed with which pain arcs toward our brains. Nephi's repetitive insistence that Christ did not merely pass through pain as an abstraction but suffered it in all its messy furor—just like we do—seems almost a calculated reaction against the idea of an unfeeling God.

King Benjamin goes further still: "[Christ] shall suffer temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue, even more than man can suffer, except it be unto death; for behold, blood cometh from every pore, so great shall be his anguish" (Mosiah 3:7). Here, the prophet king is at pains to assure we understand that Christ did not just suffer these things *as deeply* as we do, but *much, much more deeply still*. Death is a blessed boundary, King Benjamin suggests, which separates even the world's most beleaguered from even greater suffering.[6]

6. There is some physiologic sense to this idea. Pain stresses the body terribly. A person in pain suffers a surge of adrenergic hormones—a super-charged version of the response we colloquially call "fight or flight." But if that surge becomes too severe, eventually the organism can't handle it and a person passes

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Yet for Christ, there was no such boundary. He, alone, ventured past the point where suffering overwhelms normal physiology and set forth into a desolate abandoned wilderness the likes of which we thankfully will never know if we repent. Paradoxically, rather than shielding him from suffering, his divinity excavated a great crater into which the dregs of the bitter cup were poured. No wonder the Savior is so expressive—indeed, his words ring with pathos—when he describes the experience himself: "I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent; . . . which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit—and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink" (D&C 19:16, 18).

Alma goes further still. While preaching to the people in Gideon, Alma gives perhaps the most poignant and meaningful three verses ever written about the atonement:

> And [Christ] shall go forth, suffering pain and afflictions and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pain and the sicknesses of his people. And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities. Now the Spirit knoweth all things; nevertheless the Son of God suffereth according to the flesh that he might take upon him the sins of his people, that he might blot out their transgressions according to the power of his deliverance. (Alma 7:11–13)

Like Nephi, Alma is insistent—with his repetition of "according to the flesh"—in emphasizing the visceral, urgent, and mortal dimension of the terrible price Jesus paid. Beyond this, however, Alma introduces another facet to our understanding of the Savior's sacrifice. Often, when I conceive of the Atonement, I picture the Savior bent below the weight of the world, like Atlas beneath a globe freighted with the world's sins. Alma, however, does not suggest such a single massive load; instead, he depicts a personal act of willing sacrifice wherein the Savior enters into our suffering with each of us one at a time.

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into shock. While we don't usually say as much, it is not hard to imagine that, if left entirely unchecked, this response would make suffering literally lethal.

How such a thing could have been accomplished, we do not know. Certainly, to fully realize such a vision must have involved some violation of the laws of space and time as we understand them. Nonetheless, Alma connotes an image of Christ learning to succor each person one at a time. Alma suggests a personal encounter wherein Christ invites me to lay my burdens at his feet and then, surveying my particular allotment of betrayals, illnesses, sadness, and sin, the Savior offers to suffer through all of it at my side. He repeats this process over and over again with each person in the whole human family until he has "descended below all things" (D&C 88:6) and, having "trodden the wine-press alone" (D&C 76:107), can offer with perfect understanding to succor each of us in our most desperate moments. Viewed in this light, the Atonement's most meaningful balm is that it assures there is never a time when the Savior cannot say with genuine integrity, "I know just how you feel." Jesus is, as Elder Neal A. Maxwell once beautifully put it, "a fully comprehending Christ."[7]

Few general conference addresses in recent years have touched me as deeply as Elder Jeffrey R. Holland's "Behold Thy Mother."[8] Elder Holland's central conceit in this talk is that many of the superlatives we ascribe most readily to the Savior apply for similar reasons to mothers—just as Christ bore our sorrows and iniquities, our mothers bear us in the womb and then bear with us through our most poignant afflictions. Elder Holland's most obvious purpose is to reverse engineer our understanding about Christ's love to help us better understand just how deeply our mothers love us, as well as the depth of mothers' collective sacrifice.

For me, however, his talk worked most powerfully to do the reverse—that is, to teach me about Jesus's love. About halfway through the talk, Elder Holland tells of a young boy who entered the mission field worthily but who soon found himself overwhelmed by the complexities of confronting his own same-sex attraction and "some trauma he experienced in that regard." The young elder, as Elder Holland recounts, returned home early from his mission, with his "faith . . . at crisis level," and then soon found himself "by turns hurt, confused, angry, and desolate."[9]

7. Neal A. Maxwell, *Not My Will but Thine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 51.

8. Jeffrey R. Holland, "Behold Thy Mother," *Ensign* 45 (November 2015): 47–50.

9. Holland, "Behold Thy Mother," 49.

This boy's saving grace, however, was his mother's love. Elder Holland describes her love movingly:

> His mission president, his stake president, his bishop spent countless hours searching and weeping and blessing him as they held on to him, but much of his wound was so personal that he kept at least parts of it beyond their reach. The beloved father in this story poured his entire soul into helping this child, but his very demanding employment circumstance meant that often the long, dark nights of the soul were faced by just this boy and his mother. Day and night, first for weeks, then for months that turned into years, they sought healing together. Through periods of bitterness (mostly his but sometimes hers) and unending fear (mostly hers but sometimes his), she bore—there's that beautiful, burdensome word again—she bore to her son her testimony of God's power, of His Church, but especially of His love for this child. In the same breath she testified of her own uncompromised, undying love for him as well. To bring together those two absolutely crucial, essential pillars of her very existence—the gospel of Jesus Christ and her family—she poured out her soul in prayer endlessly. She fasted and wept, she wept and fasted, and then she listened and listened as this son repeatedly told her of how his heart was breaking. Thus she carried him—again—only this time it was not for nine months. This time she thought that laboring through the battered landscape of his despair would take forever.[10]

As Elder Holland told the story in conference, my wife and I sat, transfixed, because the boy's mother is my wife's sister and the boy is my wife's nephew and dear friend (they are nearly the same age). We were among the first to know about his early homecoming, and we spent sleepless, tear-filled nights worried whether he would ever be whole again. My wife, especially, spent some nights journeying with him through that battered landscape, and from conversations with her, her sister, and the boy (now a man), I have some modicum of understanding of just how harrowing a journey it was (and still can be) for all involved.

What lends the story such remarkable power is the willingness of my sister-in-law (and, to a lesser degree, my wife) to enter into the boy's pain with him and the terrible price they paid to do so. For them, his suffering was not an abstraction but, rather, a visceral, immediate, ever-present

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10. Holland, "Behold Thy Mother," 49.

reality that consumed their hearts and minds, at times, just as much as it did his. What spiritual alchemy allowed his suffering to become so truly theirs I do not know, but it is clear to me that the love impelling their willing suffering exerted a nearly irresistible spiritual pull on my young friend, and it was largely that force which drew him back into an orbit of safety and brought him back to his (earthly) spiritual home.

It is likewise the Savior's willing sacrifice and resulting empathy that pulls us toward him and his perfect love. As the story of God weeping with Enoch suggests, Christ's empathy—that is, his willingness to suffer with us—was not finished when he expired on Calvary but instead appears to be as eternal as his love. I learned the power of the pull this love exerts nearly ten years ago while studying my father's journals from around the time he got married. My father's dear friend had spent many years estranged from the Church, having immersed himself in hippie culture and the 1960s tide of sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll. Eventually, however, this friend returned to full faith and fellowship in the Church. One evening, many years after his return, my father found his friend, who was staying in our home, studying his scriptures and noted that he had embroidered on his scripture case "gravity." When my father asked why, the friend looked at him knowingly and said, "God's love is like gravity: you can hate it, curse it, and say it doesn't exist, but it is always there, pulling us closer to Christ." My wife and her sister have taught me, through their example, that it is the Savior's decision to suffer with us that gives his love such irresistible, irrepressible, gravitational power.

We Are His Hands

Once, when discussing the ideas of Terryl and Fiona Givens with my wife, she responded, "Yes, but sometimes when we are sad, we need someone 'with skin.'" Abstract theology—even when it's as beautiful as what the Givenses describe—does not on its own entirely erase abuse, heal the sick, comfort the widow, or counter power's abuses in the world. To accomplish these tasks, we must embody divine empathy—most often, *we* become the face and hands that allow those around us to feel God's love. In life's most vexing moments, we often cannot "fix" anything, but we can always offer to listen and to try to understand. My argument here is that, understood rightly, Mormonism—through both scripture and our lived cultural and religious experience—uniquely and actively encourages us to deepen our Christian discipleship by empathizing with those in need.

Perhaps it should not surprise us that it is Alma's father, Alma, who most memorably captures the covenantal nature of this empathy. Indeed, he suggests that empathy is not simply one among an array of important religious virtues; rather, it is—or ought to be—one of the defining hallmarks of our Mormon identity. While this may seem a radical claim, how else are we to understand his articulation that an undergirding principle by which we can know if we are prepared to be baptized is our willingness to empathetically care for the other members of the flock. Our preparation is complete, he explains, when we find ourselves ready to "mourn with those who mourn, and comfort those who stand in need of comfort" (Mosiah 18:9). We commit to do this on the day we become Latter-day Saints, and we implicitly renew this commitment each subsequent Sabbath as we take the sacrament—how better, after all, to simultaneously take Christ's name upon us, keep his commandments, and always remember him than by bearing the burdens of those around us?

Sitting in the pews on Sunday, then, we are to recognize that the suffering of our fellow Saints is, by covenant, our own. We are bound by our integrity to bear the burdens that weigh down our fellow disciples. This understanding illuminates for us one meaning of Jesus's paradoxical invitation to us to lay our burdens at his feet while also shouldering his heavy cross. Because Christ deserved no punishment himself—he committed no sin and likely could have escaped, by his divine heritage, all difficulty if he so chose—when he asks us to "take up [our] cross, and follow [him]" (Matt. 16:24), what he is really asking is that we shoulder the burdens of those around us. Their burdens are his, and so when we commit to become members of the "fellowship of his sufferings" (Philip. 3:10), we are actually promising to take up the burdens of those with whom we live, work, and worship.

It is for this reason that many of the seemingly mundane aspects of Mormon ecclesiastical organization constitute an inescapable aspect of the genius of Mormon Christian discipleship. A church run by lay clergy refuses to allocate to professional priests and preachers the burdens of parishioners. No, because all of us band together to run our wards, we are all ultimately responsible for each other's welfare. Home and visiting teaching, for example, are actually a means of assuring we each have a chance to enter into another family's sorrow, as well as celebrating together with them their joy. Similarly, geographically assigned wards assure we cannot ensconce ourselves only with those who are like us and who might make us comfortable. As Eugene England reminded us in "Why the Church Is as True as the Gospel," the mundane

matter of working through the quotidian particulars of running a ward forces us up against personalities and characteristics that may nearly drive us to distraction—and that's the point.[11] This sometimes tumultuous process buffs us, teaching us to love not in abstraction but in the face of our oh-so-mortal brothers and sisters.

This is perhaps why King Benjamin's sermon is filled with poignant reminders that are key not just to understanding God's mercy but to developing some modicum of it ourselves. More frequently than I care to admit, I find myself frustrated at faults I perceive in those I love; over and over again when I am tempted toward such small-minded thinking, I hear King Benjamin saying, "Tyler, you are a beggar, too," and immediately I find that any umbrage at the faults of those around me melts away. We have no right, after all, to look askance at those who ask undeservedly for our help; we will doubtless be doing the same (at least to God) before long. The reminder King Benjamin offers—that we all incline before the divine throne, dressed in rags and pleading for mercy and help—is a vivid and potent impetus to enter into empathetic relationships with everyone we meet, no matter how mean or unimportant the person seems (see Mosiah 4). Indeed, some of our finest moments as a people are those where we combine our strength as we ride to the rescue of those in need. The ability of Mormons to mobilize in the aftermath of a natural disaster, for example, is legendary, and it has likewise been genuinely remarkable to watch our people respond to the recent call to make worldwide refugees' stories our own—the resultant outpouring of time and resources has been heartening.

Initially, of course, there will be limits to the degree to which we can enter into others' suffering. Unlike Jesus, our empathy cannot—at least initially—be perfect. In addition, for nascent Christians like most of us, empathy will tax us as perhaps no other Christian endeavor does. I, for one, come face to face with the limits of my own empathy daily. I am an oncologist, a father, a husband, a friend, and a disciple. In each of these roles, I make the deepening of my empathy a daily pursuit. Yet, in spite of my best efforts, I find this endeavor to be exhausting, toll-taking work.

Nonetheless, I have often found myself seemingly endowed with empathic reserves beyond my own capacities in some of the moments that matter most. This in one arena where I have found sweet fulfillment

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11. Eugene England, "Why the Church Is as True as the Gospel," *Sunstone* 10, no. 10 (1986): 32.

of a version of Nephi's promise, for it is "by grace" that I have empathy, "after [and sometimes in spite of] all [I] can do" (2 Ne. 25:23). I have found that, my own inadequacies and exhaustion notwithstanding, the Lord often honors my desire to have the strength to enter into another's suffering. Perhaps this is because the resulting spiritual connection is among the most sacred of which we mortals are capable. In what way, after all, can we more powerfully emulate Christ than this?

Perhaps no other aspect of Mormon life represents our distinctive success in cultivating a culture of empathy better than our genealogical labors. While genealogy might, on the surface, seem a fairly dowdy duty, and while some may approach it as a pro forma box to check, I've been impressed at the empathic depths to which genealogy often takes us. We Mormons delight in tales of our ancestors. Many members have an aunt or grandparent who has spent hours poring over century-old diaries or searching through reams of microfiche in an attempt to deepen her understanding of a long-departed ancestor's life. In its best iterations, all of this work symbolizes the empathic drive of members to enter into the lives of their forebears, to better understand what it would have been like to live so many years ago.

Likewise, the distinctive doctrine of performing ordinances vicariously for the deceased constitutes a call to devote ourselves to a sort of visceral, corporeal empathy. This work done on behalf of ancestors who have passed on is really quite staggering. First, think of the labor that goes into "preparing a name for the temple." In homes around the globe, members—be they teens or nonagenarians—sift through recent or ancient documents in an attempt to reconstruct the rudiments of a deceased person's life. What was her name? When was she born, and where? When did she die? Was she married? To whom? And the list of questions goes on. While the questions are basic and the degree to which the living member can really empathize with the plight of the deceased forebear is often limited, the fact that the work happens at all is quite striking and testifies to the force of the empathic impulse in Church culture.

Then, once these details are appropriately noted, a small card is created, which—again in the vein of seemingly mundane Mormon rituals with an elevated symbolism—represents the existence of a man or woman often long since passed. A distant family member, often many branch-points down the family tree, lovingly takes this card to a temple set apart and consecrated partly for this purpose. Finally, over a number of hours, the member lends his body as a temporary offering to allow the deceased's spirit a chance to access saving ordinances.

That this happens ever, at all, in a world consumed with so much empty buzzing busyness, should stop us in our tracks. But that such corporeal, focused, spiritual effort should be made endlessly on behalf of those we have never met and to whose thanks we will not—at least in this life—be exposed, is both spiritually impressive and incredibly hopeful. This oft-repeated ritual is a powerful testament to the power of the empathic impulse within the Church. Indeed, what other impulse could better impel Elijah's mission of turning the hearts of the children to their fathers and the hearts of the fathers to their children than empathy?

As I have pondered temple work as a part of this exploration of Mormon empathy, I have found that the image I describe above—of an empathetic believer entering a sacred space to do for another what he cannot do for himself—brings me back, full circle, to Jesus. For it is there, in the temple, in that infinitely repeated empathetic vicarious work, that we see a reflection—an earthly echo—of the beauty of the Savior's sacrifice.

I do not mean to suggest any special insight into the particular mechanism by which the Atonement works; indeed, I freely confess that while I treasure what understanding I have of the Atonement, it is limited and provincial. Still, while pondering on the temple as described above, a specific, visceral, and powerful image came to my mind, and that image has changed how I understand the Savior's sacrifice. I saw, in my mind's eye, the Savior entering his house and picking up a card with my name etched in black ink on light blue paper. I saw the Savior enter the "session" as I have so often done. But then, instead of the expansive and didactic re-enactment to which I am treated each time I go, the Savior is confronted instead with a synopsis of my life. There, in every particular, he suffers with me: each pain, each sin, each sickness, each sorrow. He willingly stays for the duration, feeling each lash I endure with flesh every bit as sensitive as mine. He stays with me, he cries with me, he suffers with me, and, by the end, his empathy for me glows—perfect and complete. And then, still in this vision, I see him shower me with love and then turn, pick up another card, and start the whole process again but for someone else.

Ultimately, then, Mormonism offers an answer to the problem of evil that comes in at least three parts. First, as outlined so eloquently by David Paulsen, Joseph's theology frees God from the constraints of an *ex nihilo* creation and thus allows us to believe in a perfectly loving God even in a world drenched in suffering. Beyond that, Mormonism offers us a perfectly and eternally vulnerable God who answers evil's existence by taking all suffering upon himself. Finally, and most

urgently, Mormonism teaches us that *we* must be God's most frequent and immediate response to evil—for those around us who suffer, we are, most often, God's face and hands.

Because We Are All Beggars

My argument here is that Mormonism offers an expansive understanding of empathy that rivals that found in any belief system with which I am familiar. Furthermore, in some respects—such as genealogy, temple work, and responding to crises around the world—I believe we are imperfect but that we excel. Yet, in other regards, there is still so much more we can do. Indeed, as I examine my life, and in spite of my best efforts, I am struck that I have so often passed by opportunities for empathy without even realizing they were there. In this regard, I am saddened to think how often I have been deaf and blind to the suffering of those around me. I fear that, in this way, I may have contributed to the "contraction of feeling and lack of charity" that the Prophet Joseph once lamented.[12]

In my mind's eye, I think of the poor who often arrived there through some hopelessly complex mix of poor personal decisions and even worse surrounding circumstances. I picture a young man who is coming to recognize that he is attracted to other men and who sits on the ward's periphery, terrified someone might find out. I see committed disciples, beset by doubt, who fear disclosing their questions out of trepidation that we will accuse them of sin as the impetus for their questioning. I see the childless couple, biologically barren and devastated to be so, who weep at the frequent, if unintended, slights doled out by fellow Saints. I hear the cries of the depressed woman who has just been told, again, that if she would only "try harder" her spirits would lift and her heart would easily gladden.

I do not mean to suggest any meanness of spirit on the part of those of us who pass by these suffering souls without offering them solace or comfort. Indeed, I believe my own failures in this regard have been the result not of personal pique, but of a failure of my moral imagination.

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12. Jill Mulvay Derr and others, *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-day Saint Women's History* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2016), 78, available online in "Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book," 62, Church Historian's Press, *The Joseph Smith Papers,* http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/nauvoo-relief-society-minute-book/59.

Nonetheless, whatever the reason, each time I "pass by on the other side" (Luke 10:31–32) I forfeit the opportunity to enter into an empathetic relationship that would lift us both together.

Perhaps King Benjamin knew our moral imaginations would need stirring in these latter days. Perhaps he envisioned our remarkable ability to vicariously empathize with some even while, at times, ignoring the suffering of others. Perhaps this understanding and vision partly drove him to deliver his stirring sermon. And perhaps it was with this understanding in mind that he reminded his listeners that the humility inherent in understanding that "we are all beggars" should be enough to rouse our faculties to a commitment to willingly enter into the suffering of those around us. King Benjamin's entire sermon rings with empathy, but nowhere more so that when he resoundingly reminds us:

> Do we not all depend upon the same Being, even God, for all the substance which we have . . . ? And has he suffered that ye have begged in vain? Nay. . . . O then, how ye ought to impart of the substance that ye have one to another. . . . I would that ye should impart of your substance to the poor, every man according to that which he hath, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and administering to their relief, both spiritually and temporally, according to their wants. (Mosiah 4:19–21, 26)

Don't you see? he pleads. *Don't you understand? Christ willingly took on him your suffering*—he still bears the marks as reminders—*and in so doing now asks you to do the same for those around you. Suffering is our opportunity to deepen our empathy and thus develop more fully one of Christ's most resplendent virtues.*

Perhaps King Benjamin is so forceful—even uncomfortably direct—on this point because he understands that cultivating a moral imagination is heavy lifting and we often need coaxing to work that hard. Developing empathy for those who suffer around us is not the same as "being nice," nor do kind acts fully suffice. Empathy, though a gift, is like a muscle we must exercise and strengthen. It requires a pause when a suffering person confronts us—a moment of silence in which we ask, "What would it be like to walk in this person's shoes?" Or, in the eloquent summation provided by President Linda K. Burton, we might query: "What if *their* story were *my* story?"[13] Such a probing mental task will

13. Linda K. Burton, "I Was a Stranger," *Ensign* 46 (May 2016): 15; italics in original.

seldom leave us cool or apathetic but instead will often yield the shocking realization that *had my life been a little different, that could very well have been my fate*. Thus these moments offer a rare pivot point, a flash of time wherein my heart can genuinely soften and my spirit can grow that much more contrite. The miracle is that this purposeful moment is, nonetheless, just a moment—and yet, in it we can make the quantum leap from apathy or enmity to empathy, and this transformation can mean the world to those who suffer around us.

On a recent Tuesday, I found myself at the hospital near midnight. Over the preceding few days, I had cared for a young woman whose metastatic cancer had begun growing aggressively. As the cancer grew, she began suffering a number of complications from that growth, and the situation grew increasingly grim. I wondered—occasionally out loud to my team, but more often to myself—whether she would ever leave the hospital. Her case particularly unnerved me because she and her husband were both quite young. It was easy to imagine her husband's heartache as my own—I wondered how I would respond if it were my wife lying there, possibly dying. On that night, in particular, my heart was heavy as I rushed back to the hospital from home to attend to a worrisome new complication.

After a few hours spent attending to the patient, counseling with her family members, and consoling the other grieving members of my medical team, I headed with weary shoulders and a heavy heart out the back door of the hospital toward my car in the parking lot. This was a pathway I had traversed hundreds if not a thousand times before, but that night the walkway seemed unfamiliar to me because—in place of the bustling milieu of doctors and patients that normally envelops me there—I found myself alone, wrapped in the silence of the starry night. At one point along the path, I stopped and gazed into the silent cancer center. In my mind's eye, I imagined the hallways bursting with people, and, in that moment, it was as if my soul was infused with insight—suddenly, I could hear arising from each person I saw the worries that weighed on his or her heart. Here was a man who had just been told no further options could hold his cancer at bay; here was a woman who wondered if she could continue caring for her increasingly invalid husband; here was a man who, after coping with cancer for five years, was suddenly faced with the prospect of a divorce; here was a teen wondering what life would be like without her mother; here was a doctor terrified he had missed a critical diagnosis; and here, there, and everywhere wandered eternal souls, confined to mortality, and all carrying

loads that could easily break a wounded heart. My heart swelled in that moment, and I felt compelled forward with an urgent desire to reach out, help, lift, and heal.

Taken aback, nearly breathless from the impact of the image, I found myself stepping backward, as if the weight of the idea were just too much. It was one thing to discover—nearly unbidden—an easy sense of empathy toward that young couple with whom my wife and I had so much in common; it was another matter entirely—and an incredible and overwhelming one at that—to find myself suddenly filled with even a momentary trace of empathy extending in every direction. I have wondered since what my life would be like—what choices I would make—if I could be blessed to see things that way at all times, every day. I can only imagine such a life, and I can only conclude that it would be enormously difficult, staggeringly rewarding, and, in a word, divine.

Thus we arrive at a central paradox of the Mormon life. Mormonism may initially appeal to us because in the midst of our own suffering, our beliefs offer a cogent intellectual, emotional, and spiritual answer to the question "Why do I suffer?" Yet, if we are not careful, the comfort we find in these answers can lull us into a false security that inhibits us from entering into some of the most difficult, meaningful, and fulfilling work of becoming truly converted Mormon Christians. Perhaps it is partly for that reason that far from our baptism standing as a singular life event, the promises we make at baptism—including the one to empathically enter into the suffering of those around us—we implicitly renew every week as we partake of the sacrament. In that weekly sacred moment, we can remember that it was Alpha and Omega—the singular Being who by dint of his perfection merited no suffering whatsoever—who entered not just into mortality but likewise willingly took upon him our betrayals, sins, sicknesses, death, fears, and all other suffering. Furthermore, in that instant of epiphany we can remember that the Weeping God has made this empathy a defining feature of his divine character, and he has invited—no, commanded—that we do likewise.

It is little surprise in this context that Joseph Smith declared, "A man filled with the love of God, is not content with blessing his family alone, but ranges through the whole world anxious to bless the whole human race."[14] We will know the Atonement is working in us when the prospect

14. Joseph Smith, "Extract from an Epistle to the Elders in England," *Times and Seasons* 2 (January 1, 1841): 258.

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of suffering strikes us as so repugnant that it drives us to "pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that [we] may be filled with [Christ's] love" (Moro. 7:48).[15] Then, when the work on our knees is done, we will leap to our feet and wear out the rest of our lives by listening to those who need an open heart, consoling those who cry alone, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and seeking to succor and nourish wherever we go.

It is certain that becoming the answer to suffering will be difficult—sometimes it will wrench our very hearts—but for committed Mormons, the obligation presses on us with the weight of covenant and commandment. We cannot rightly escape the burden of compassion for our fellow travelers; empathy beats at the very heart of our religion.

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15. King Benjamin teaches precisely this principle in Mosiah 4:12–16. While we often read these verses as injunctions—that is, as "thou shalt" commandments—in fact King Benjamin lists these actions (living peaceably, helping the poor, nurturing children, succoring those who stand in need of succor, and many others) as signs indicating a disciple has "come to a knowledge of the goodness of God . . . through the atonement which was prepared from the foundation of the world" (vv. 6–7).

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