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Adversity: The Refiner's Fire

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One essential purpose of our earth life is to learn from the great teacher, experience. That learning can come firsthand or vicariously. If we learn our lessons well, we can be strengthened against sin and the fiery darts of the adversary and become more deeply committed disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Of life's many kinds of experiences, adversity is most like a refiner's fire. If we allow it to do so, adversity can remove the impurities from our souls and make us more like our Savior, who "shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness" (D&C 128:24).

Amid the darkness of his days in the Liberty Jail, Joseph Smith received comfort from the Lord, who gave a partial recitation of the Prophet's trials and travails, including having his name used in derision, having hell rage against him, passing through tribulation, being in peril among false brethren and robbers as well as on land and at sea, being falsely accused and torn from his loved ones, being cast into the pit or into the hands of murderers, and having the jaws of hell gape open after him (see D&C 122:1-7). Then the Lord concludes, "All these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good" (D&C 122:7). The hard experiences of his life and his constant reliance on the Lord made him equal to the task of restorer, translator, prophet, seer, revelator, and friend to all Saints, past and present. Thanks be to God that these stories have been recorded for our profit, instruction, and motivation. What examples of discipleship, long-suffering, faith, and refinement!

The examples of those who have gone before us, including the Savior Himself, imbue us with the faith that our Heavenly Father will be there when we face our own trials. I learned about adversity firsthand during the year I spent in Vietnam on the front lines. The experiences of that time have provided lifelong lessons—lessons of faith, reliance on the Lord, prayer, and holding to the rod—but, most of all, they taught me that the Lord’s hand is truly manifest in our lives and that He strengthens us in our times of hardship. In the lines that follow, I have included some of my experiences from that time and reflections about their meaning.

“God Is Going to Watch Out for You Today”

It was dawn. We had marched all night to reach our objective: a medium-sized Vietnamese village with a large rice plantation located on its south side. Our company had come in from the southwest. Three other companies also came in under cover of night to form a cordon around the village, a suspected Viet Cong stronghold.

As we awaited orders to move in, a dozen or so children from the village came out to view these curious-looking men in olive drab and to filch cigarettes or leftover C-rations. A middle-aged man came out as well, carrying a dingy white styrofoam cooler salvaged from a U.S. base. In it were fifteen to twenty homemade popsicles. I reached into my pocket for a wad of *piasters* left over from a weekend leave in Saigon, bought the vendor’s entire stock, and handed it out to the youngsters.

My buddy Rufus Burleson, a black soldier from the Texas-Louisiana border who had grown up near other rice fields, told me, “God is going to watch out for you today because you were kind to those kids.” I was grateful for his words. We had grown to be good friends since one of my first days in the field when I had been bogged down in mud clear up to my waist. Four fellow riflemen had passed me by before Rufus came and pulled me out.

“Move out!” came the command. We took our positions around the village while specialists moved in to look for weapons caches, rat-holes, and, of course, the Viet Cong themselves. As we approached, I observed sticks and rocks placed in telling configurations on the ground next to our trail. “Charlie [the Viet Cong] is here, and these are his signs. This place is booby-trapped,” I warned. No one seemed to believe me despite the fact that recognizing these signs had been part of our advanced infantry training.

Louisiana, Wagner, Chicago, and I were soon called out and assigned as a reconnaissance team to check out a large grove of trees bound together with thick underbrush that stood between the rice

fields and the village. I was assigned to take the lead. The standard policy in the Third Brigade of the Eighty-second Airborne Division was to not allow a married soldier to act as a point man, but this time I didn't mind. I often envied the point man in swampy areas because he had the easiest time going through the mire. Each succeeding man would sink in just a little deeper than the previous one, and the going would get progressively harder.

As we moved toward the thicket, Chicago called out. His machine gun had jammed. Our platoon leader, Louisiana, took the point and told me to help Chicago. We fixed the problem, and the four of us continued to move forward. I had gone from first in line to last. The order was now Louisiana, Wagner, and Chicago, and I followed in the rear.

The trail led to a narrow gap between two trees. The first two men reached the trees. Chicago was about two yards behind them, and I was eight feet behind him. As we inched ahead, something exploded at Chicago's feet. Dust and debris flew everywhere. For a few seconds, everything seemed to go into slow motion. I could see shrapnel flying all around me. Yet it was as if there was an invisible shield in front of me, and, as far as I could tell, nothing hit me directly.

The blast sounded like a grenade, and I instinctively dove into the bushes. After a few seconds, I crawled out and surveyed the area for Viet Cong. Then I saw the size of the hole in the ground and realized that Chicago had stepped on a mine.

Louisiana and Wagner had been more than superficially wounded but were well enough to take care of each other and were busy applying bandages to one another's wounds. Chicago was in shock. His leg was severely damaged. There were deep wounds on his right side, and he had lost fingers. I applied a compress bandage to his leg and frantically called for a medic.

Two medics came, along with four or five of our platoon members. They attended to the wounded men. The radioman called for a dust-off, or evacuation by helicopter, from the nearby field hospital. It didn't take long for the chopper to arrive, and the three victims were carefully placed on board.

Suddenly, two of my buddies took hold of me and said, "Come on, Olsen, let's get you on the chopper too."

"Am I hit?" I wondered if I had really been hit but had just not noticed it because of adrenalin or shock. "I don't think I'm hit."

Simons told me I had to have been hit: "You were right there in the middle of the explosion, and it blew you into the bushes."

"Check me out, guys. I don't think I'm hit."

They checked me three times, and I was unscathed. I had been saved by the tender mercy of a gracious Heavenly Father.

“Don’t Tell the Other Men”

After the dust-off, the rest of our platoon was assigned to look for weapons caches around the rice fields. When the mine had exploded, some inner mechanism or spiritual strength had taken over, giving me presence of mind and blocking out fear and panic. Those defenses began to fade as the reality of what I had just been through started to sink in. I realized there could be other mines, other booby traps, and every step I took had the potential of unleashing death and destruction. I began to consciously and earnestly pray every step of the way. I prayed that the Lord would guide my feet and continue to keep me out of harm’s way.

Rufus reminded me, “I told you God would bless you.” I thanked him. Then almost immediately he stepped on a trip wire. Fortunately the Chi-Com (Chinese-Communist) grenade to which the wire was connected had gotten wet in the rain and rice paddies, and the detonator failed to work. God had rewarded Rufus’s kindness as well. As we exploded the booby trap in place, Rufus was visibly shaken and offered fervent prayers of thanksgiving.

After that long and eventful day, we moved out to a predesignated area and set up a makeshift camp for the night. I was assigned the first watch as one of the perimeter guards. I set up my position in some tall, thick plants. A short time after darkness had fallen upon us, I heard a rustling in the undergrowth behind me, coming from the main encampment. It was Henry. “Olsen, I just wanted you to know that what happened today was a miracle, and I know it was because you live your religion and your family back home is praying for you.” I hadn’t known Henry that well, but he had deep personal convictions about God, and I got to know him better as we chatted for a few minutes. “But don’t tell the other men I said this,” were his parting words as he crawled back to camp.

About fifteen minutes later, another soldier, whom I can visualize but whose name the years have erased, came out to see me and repeated in essence what Henry had told me. He too asked that I not tell the other men that he had borne witness to me that he knew God’s hand had been manifest that day.

Reflections on Trials

The experiences of those days have given me much to contemplate. Why did some of the men ignore the warnings about the danger that

lay in our path? Why did some want to hide their faith? Why was I spared and Chicago maimed? What strange destiny had brought me to the battlefield?

During my last weeks of advanced infantry training, I attended a servicemen's worship service at Fort Ord. One man there had been assigned to Germany, whereas most of us were on orders to serve in Vietnam. This man told us that it was because he was living the gospel that he had not been sent to Vietnam and that God would not let a righteous man go there.

I do not believe our Heavenly Father works that way. Sometimes He lets the evil prosper and the righteous suffer—for a season—to fulfill His purposes. He gives each of us what we need to achieve our divine destiny. I suspect that I was living just as good a life as my friend who went to Germany, but I also understand that God's plan for us is not always the easy one or the one we would choose for ourselves at the time. We do not have sufficient wisdom to know the eternal implications of all our mortal choices and the events of our lives; however, from time to time we are blessed with glimpses of why things happen to bolster our faith. I know that in my case a kind Father was teaching me lifelong lessons, including this promise: "If ye will keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land" (Alma 37:13). I believe He was preserving my life for a higher purpose. In the final analysis, He gives each of us the specific challenges we need to mold us, if we live up to our potential, into stronger, better, more faithful, and more useful people.

Adversity generally comes as a consequence of one or more of the following: our own foibles and sins, someone else's inhumanity, or the higher purposes of a loving Father's wisdom. Regardless of why they may come, trials offer us an opportunity to strengthen and refine ourselves, to trust in or to reject our God. Each struggle fortifies us against the next siege, if we endure. And the antidotes to adversity's accompanying discouragement and despair are ever the same: faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, repentance, obedience, endurance, and communion with the Infinite, whereby forgiveness and comfort come. We can be sure that in the end God will always give us what we need to make us whole—if we turn to Him. That wholeness is burned into our hearts by the refiner's fire, which, if allowed to work its miracle, will, among other things, enable our "confidence [to] wax strong in the presence of God" (D&C 121:45). And although at times in our trials it may seem that the just suffer and the wicked do not, justice will always prevail in God's eternal plan, and mercy will be graciously extended to the truly penitent. **RE**