

# *Tragedy or Destiny?*

Spencer W. Kimball,

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The daily newspaper screamed the headlines: “Plane Crash Kills 43. No Survivors of Mountain Tragedy,” and thousands of voices joined in a chorus: “Why did the Lord let this terrible thing happen?”

Two automobiles crashed when one went through a red light, and six people were killed. Why would God not prevent this?

Why should the young mother die of cancer and leave her eight children motherless? Why did not the Lord heal her?

A little child was drowned; another was run over. Why?

A man died one day suddenly of a coronary occlusion as he climbed a stairway. His body was found slumped on the floor. His wife cried out in agony, “Why? Why would the Lord do this to me? Could he not have considered my three little children who still need a father?”

A young man died in the mission field and people critically questioned: “Why did not the Lord protect this youth while he was doing proselyting work?”

I wish I could answer these questions with authority, but I cannot. I am sure that sometime we’ll understand and be reconciled. But for the present we must seek understanding as best we can in the gospel principles.

Was it the Lord who directed the plane into the mountain to snuff out the lives of its occupants, or were there mechanical faults or human errors?

Did our Father in heaven cause the collision of the cars that took six people into eternity, or was it the error of the driver who ignored safety rules?

Did God take the life of the young mother or prompt the child to toddle into the canal or guide the other child into the path of the oncoming car?

Did the Lord cause the man to suffer a heart attack? Was the death of the missionary untimely? Answer, if you can. I cannot, for though I know God has a major role in our lives, I do not know how much he causes to happen and how much he merely permits. Whatever the answer to this question, there is another I feel sure about.

Could the Lord have prevented these tragedies? The answer is, Yes. The Lord is omnipotent, with all power to control our lives, save us pain, prevent all accidents, drive all planes and cars, feed us, protect us, save us from labor, effort, sickness, even from death, if he will. But he will not.

We should be able to understand this, because we can

realize how unwise it would be for us to shield our children from all effort, from disappointments, temptations, sorrows, and suffering.

The basic gospel law is free agency and eternal development. To force us to be careful or righteous would be to nullify that fundamental law and make growth impossible.

And the Lord spake unto Adam, saying: Inasmuch as thy children are conceived in sin, even so when they begin to grow up, sin conceiveth in their hearts, and they taste the bitter, that they may know to prize the good.

And it is given unto them to know good from evil; wherefore they are agents unto themselves.... (Moses 6:55-56.)

... Satan rebelled against me, and sought to destroy the agency of man, which I, the Lord God, had given him.... (Moses 4:3.)

If we looked at mortality as the whole of existence, then pain, sorrow, failure, and short life would be calamity. But if we look upon life as an eternal thing stretching far into the premortal past and on into the eternal post-death future, then all happenings may be put in proper perspective.

Is there not wisdom in his giving us trials that we might rise above them, responsibilities that we might achieve, work to harden our muscles, sorrows to try our souls? Are we not exposed to temptations to test our strength, sickness that we might learn patience, death that we might be immortalized and glorified?

If all the sick for whom we pray were healed, if all the righteous were protected and the wicked destroyed, the whole program of the Father would be annulled and the basic principle of the gospel, free agency, would be ended. No man would have to live by faith.

If joy and peace and rewards were instantaneously given the doer of good, there could be no evil—all would do good but not because of the rightness of doing good. There would be no test of strength, no development of character, no growth of powers, no free agency, only satanic controls.

Should all prayers be immediately answered according to our selfish desires and our limited understanding, then there would be little or no suffering, sorrow, disappointment, or even death, and if these were

not, there would also be no joy, success, resurrection, nor eternal life and godhood.

For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things . . . righteousness wickedness holiness . . . misery . . . good . . . bad .... (2 Nephi 2:11.)

Being human, we would expel from our lives physical pain and mental anguish and assure ourselves of continual ease and comfort, but if we were to close the doors upon sorrow and distress, we might be excluding our greatest friends and benefactors. Suffering can make saints of people as they learn patience, long-suffering, and self-mastery. The sufferings of our Savior were part of his education.

Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered;

And being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him. (Hebrews 5:8-9.)

I love the verse of “How Firm a Foundation” --

When through the deep waters I call thee to go,  
The rivers of sorrow shall not thee o’erflow  
For I will be with thee, thy troubles to bless,  
And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.  
—Hymns No. 66

And Elder James E. Talmage wrote: “No pang that is suffered by man or woman upon the earth will be without its compensating effect . . . if it be met with patience.”

On the other hand, these things can crush us with their mighty impact if we yield to weakness, complaining, and criticism.

No pain that we suffer, no trial that we experience is wasted. It ministers to our education, to the development of such qualities as patience, faith, fortitude and humility. All that we suffer and all that we endure, especially when we endure it patiently, builds up our characters, purifies our hearts, expands our souls, and makes us more tender and charitable, more worthy to be called the children of God . . . and it is through sorrow and suffering, toil and tribulation, that we gain the education that we come here to acquire and which will make us more like our Father and Mother in heaven.... (Orson F. Whitney)

There are people who are bitter as they watch loved ones suffer agonies and interminable pain and physical

torture. Some would charge the Lord with unkindness, indifference, and injustice. We are so incompetent to judge!

I like also the words of these verses, the author of which I do not know:

Pain stayed so long I said to him today,  
“I will not have you with me any more.”  
I stamped my foot and said, “Be on your way,”  
And paused there, startled at the look he wore.  
“I, who have been your friend,” he said to me,  
“I, who have been your teacher—all you know  
Of understanding love, of sympathy,  
And patience, I have taught you. Shall I go?”  
He spoke the truth, this strange unwelcome guest;  
I watched him leave, and knew that he was wise.  
He left a heart grown tender in my breast,  
He left a far, clear vision in my eyes.  
I dried my tears, and lifted up a song --  
Even for one who’d tortured me so long.

The power of the priesthood is limitless but God has wisely placed upon each of us certain limitations. I may develop priesthood power as I perfect my life, yet I am grateful that even through the priesthood I cannot heal all the sick. I might heal people who should die. I might relieve people of suffering who should suffer. I fear I would frustrate the purposes of God.

Had I limitless power, and yet limited vision and understanding, I might have saved Abinadi from the flames of fire when he was burned at the stake, and in doing so I might have irreparably damaged him. He died a martyr and went to a martyr’s reward—exaltation.

I would likely have protected Paul against his woes if my power were boundless. I would surely have healed his “thorn in the flesh.” And in doing so I might have foiled the Lord’s program. Thrice he offered prayers, asking the Lord to remove the “thorn” from him, but the Lord did not so answer his prayers. Paul many times could have lost himself if he had been eloquent, well, handsome, and free from the things that made him humble. Paul speaks:

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.

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, 9-10.)

I fear that had I been in Carthage Jail on June 27, 1844, I might have deflected the bullets that pierced the body of the Prophet and the Patriarch. I might have saved them from the sufferings and agony, but lost to them the martyr's death and reward. I am glad I did not have to make that decision.

With such uncontrolled power, I surely would have felt to protect Christ from the agony in Gethsemane, the insults, the thorny crown, the indignities in the court, the physical injuries. I would have administered to his wounds and healed them, giving him cooling water instead of vinegar. I might have saved him from suffering and death, and lost to the world his atoning sacrifice.

I would not dare to take the responsibility of bringing back to life my loved ones. Christ himself acknowledged the difference between his will and the Father's when he prayed that the cup of suffering be taken from him; yet he added, "Nevertheless, not my will but thine be done."

For the one who dies, life goes on and his free agency continues, and death, which seems to us such a calamity, could be a blessing in disguise just as well for one who is not a martyr.

Melvin J. Ballard wrote:

I lost a son six years of age and I saw him a man in the spirit world after his death, and I saw how he had exercised his own freedom of choice and would obtain of his own will and volition a companionship, and in due time to him and all those who are worthy of it, shall come all of the blessings and sealing privileges of the house of the Lord.... (*Three Degrees of Glory*.)

If we say that early death is a calamity, disaster, or tragedy, would it not be saying that mortality is preferable to earlier entrance into the spirit world and to eventual salvation and exaltation? If mortality be the perfect state, then death would be a frustration, but the gospel teaches us there is no tragedy in death, but only in sin. "... blessed are the dead that die in the Lord...." (D&C 63:49.)

We know so little. Our judgment is so limited. We judge the Lord's ways from our own narrow view.

I spoke at the funeral service of a young Brigham Young University student who died during World War II.

There had been hundreds of thousands of young men rushed prematurely into eternity through the ravages of that war, and I made the statement that I believed this righteous youth had been called to the spirit world to preach the gospel to these deprived souls. This may not be true of all who die, but I felt it true of him.

In his vision of "The Redemption of the Dead" President Joseph F. Smith saw this very thing. He sat studying the scriptures on October 3, 1918, particularly the statements in Peter's epistle regarding the antediluvians. He writes:

. . . As I pondered over these things which are written, the eyes of my understanding were opened, and the Spirit of the Lord rested upon me, and I saw the hosts of the dead.

While this vast multitude of the righteous waited and conversed, rejoicing in the hour of their deliverance . . . the Son of God appeared, declaring liberty to the captives who had been faithful, and there He preached to them the . . . redemption of mankind from the fall, and from individual sins on conditions of repentance. But unto the wicked he did not go, and among the ungodly and the unrepentant who had defiled themselves while in the flesh, His voice was not raised, neither did the rebellious who rejected the testimonies and the warnings of the ancient prophets behold his presence, nor look upon his face....

And as I wondered . . . I perceived that the Lord went not in person among the wicked and the disobedient who had rejected the truth . . . but behold, from among the righteous He organized his forces . . . and commissioned them to go forth and carry the light of the gospel....

. . . our Redeemer spent His time . . . in the world of spirits, instructing and preparing the faithful spirits . . . who had testified of Him in the flesh, that they might carry the message of redemption unto all the dead unto whom He could not go personally because of their rebellion and transgression....

Among the great and mighty ones who were assembled in this vast congregation of the righteous were Father Adam . . . Eve, with many of her faithful daughters . . . Abel, the first martyr . . . Seth, . . . Noah, . . . Shem, the great High Priest; Abraham, . . . Isaac, Jacob, and Moses . . . Ezekiel, . . . Daniel.... All these and many more, even the prophets who dwelt among

the Nephites.... The Prophet Joseph Smith, and my father, Hyrum Smith, Brigham Young, . . . and other choice spirits . . . in the spirit world. I observed that they were also among the noble and great ones who were chosen in the beginning to be rulers in the Church of God....

I beheld that the faithful elders of this dispensation, when they depart from mortal life, continue their labors in the preaching of the gospel of repentance and redemption.... (Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, pp. 472-76[now found in D&C 138])

Death, then, may be the opening of the door to opportunities, including that of teaching the gospel of Christ. There is no greater work.

Despite the fact that death opens new doors, we do not seek it. We are admonished to pray for those who are ill and use our priesthood power to heal them.

And the elders of the church, two or more, shall be called, and shall pray for and lay their hands upon them in my name; and if they die they shall die unto me, and if they live they shall live unto me.

Thou shalt live together in love, insomuch that thou shalt weep for the loss of them that die, and more especially for those that have not hope of a glorious resurrection.

And it shall come to pass that those that die in me shall not taste of death, for it shall be sweet unto them;

And they that die not in me, wo unto them, for their death is bitter.

And again, it shall come to pass that he that hath faith in me to be healed, and is not appointed unto death, shall be healed. (D&C 42:44-48.)

We are assured by the Lord that the sick will be healed if the ordinance is performed, if there is sufficient faith, and if the ill one is “not appointed unto death.” But there are three factors, all of which should be satisfied. Many do not comply with the ordinances, and great numbers are unwilling or incapable of exercising sufficient faith. But the other factor also looms important: If they are not appointed unto death.

Everyone must die. Death is an important part of life. Of course, we are never quite ready for the change. Not knowing when it should come, we properly fight to retain our life. Yet we ought not be afraid of death. We pray for the sick, we administer to the afflicted, we implore the

Lord to heal and reduce pain and save life and postpone death, and properly so, but not because eternity is so frightful.

The Prophet Joseph Smith confirmed:

The Lord takes many away even in infancy, that they may escape the envy of man and the sorrows and evils of this present world; they were too pure, too lovely, to live on this earth. Therefore, if rightly considered, instead of mourning we have reason to rejoice as they are delivered from evil and we shall have them again. The only difference between the old and the young dying is, one lives longer in heaven and eternal light and glory than the other, and is freed a little sooner from this miserable world.

Just as Ecclesiastes (3:2) says, I am confident that there is a time to die, but I believe also that many people die before “their time” because they are careless, abuse their bodies, take unnecessary chances, or expose themselves to hazards, accidents, and sickness.

Of the antediluvians, we read:

Hast thou marked the old way which wicked men have trodden?  
Which were cut down out of time, whose foundation was overflown with a flood. (Job 22:15-16.)

In Ecclesiastes 7:17 we find this statement:

Be not over much wicked, neither be thou foolish:  
why shouldst thou die before thy time?

I believe we may die prematurely but seldom exceed our time very much. One exception was Hezekiah, 25-year-old king of Judah who was far more godly than his successors or predecessors.

In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death. And the prophet Isaiah . . . came to him, and said unto him,

Thus saith the Lord, Set thine house in order; for thou shalt die, and not live.

Hezekiah, loving life as we do, turned his face to the wall and wept bitterly, saying:

. . . remember now how I have walked before thee in truth and with a perfect heart, and have

done that which is good in thy sight....

The Lord yielded unto his prayers.

. . . I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears: behold I will heal thee....

And I will add unto thy days fifteen years; and I will deliver thee and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria.... (2 Kings 20:1, 3, 5-6.)

A modern illustration of this exceptional extension of life took place in November, 1881.

My uncle, David Patten Kimball, left his home in Arizona on a trip across the Salt River desert. He had fixed up his books and settled accounts and had told his wife of a premonition that he would not return. He was lost on the desert for two days and three nights, suffering untold agonies of thirst and pain. He passed into the spirit world and described later, in a letter of January 8, 1882, to his sister, what happened there. He had seen his parents. "My father . . . told me I could remain there if I chose to do so, but I plead with him that I might stay with my family long enough to make them comfortable, to repent of my sins, and more fully prepare myself for the change. Had it not been for this, I never should have returned home, except as a corpse. Father finally told me I could remain two years and to do all the good I could during that time, after which he would come for me.... He mentioned four others that he would come for also...." Two years to the day from that experience on the desert he died easily and apparently without pain. Shortly before he died he looked up and called, "Father, Father." Within approximately a year of his death the other four men named were also dead.

God has many times preserved the lives of his servants until they could complete their work—Abinadi, Enoch, the sons of Helaman, and Paul.

And God will sometimes use his power over death to protect us. Heber C. Kimball was subjected to a test which, like the one given Abraham, was well-nigh unthinkable. Comfortless and in great perplexity he importuned the Prophet Joseph to inquire of the Lord, and the Prophet received this revelation: "Tell him to go and do as he has been commanded, and if I see that there is any danger of his apostatizing, I will take him to myself." (Orson F. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball*.)

God controls our lives, guides and blesses us, but gives us our agency. We may live our lives in accordance with his plan for us or we may foolishly shorten or terminate them.

I am positive in my mind that the Lord has planned our destiny. Sometime we'll understand fully, and when we see back from the vantage point of the future, we shall be satisfied with many of the happenings of this life that are so difficult for us to comprehend.

We sometimes think we would like to know what lies ahead, but sober thought brings us back to accepting life a day at a time and magnifying and glorifying that day. Sister Ida Allredge gave us a thought-provoking verse:

I cannot know the future, nor the path I shall have trod,

But by that inward vision, which points the way to God.

I would not glimpse the beauty or joy for me in store,

Lest patience ne'er restrain me from thrusting wide the door.

I would not part the curtains or cast aside the veil,

Else sorrows that await me might make my courage fail;

I'd rather live not knowing, just doing my small mite;

I'd rather walk by faith with God, than try alone the light.

We knew before we were born that we were coming to the earth for bodies and experience and that we would have joys and sorrows, ease and pain, comforts and hardships, health and sickness, successes and disappointments, and we knew also that after a period of life we would die. We accepted all these eventualities with a glad heart, eager to accept both the favorable and unfavorable. We eagerly accepted the chance to come earthward even though it might be for only a day or a year. Perhaps we were not so much concerned whether we should die of disease, of accident, or of senility. We were willing to take life as it came and as we might organize and control it, and this without murmur, complaint, or unreasonable demands.

In the face of apparent tragedy we must put our trust in God, knowing that despite our limited view his purposes will not fail. With all its troubles life offers us the tremendous privilege to grow in knowledge and wisdom, faith and works, preparing to return and share God's glory.