

250.1: Suffering and Pain (D&C Gospel Doctrine Lesson 28, Updated)

"O God, Where Art Thou?"

Manual Goal: To help class members better endure adversity by turning to the Savior.

EGD Goal: To help class members decrease their suffering through greater understanding and applying the gospel principles of faith, hope, and charity.

Outline

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- II. Discussion of new resources
- III. Productive Sunday Schooling
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 - b. Suffering and Covenants
 - c. Understanding suffering
 - d. Suffering and accountability
 - e. Decreasing suffering: Acceptance, faith, hope
- IV. Lesson:
 - a. Accountability and human nature
 - b. Digging deeper into suffering
 - i. What happens
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 2. Injustice
 3. Evil
 4. Challenge
 - ii. Our responses
 1. Pain (Physical pain vs. Emotional pain)
 2. Grief
 3. Indignation
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Framing

What matters most: When we are suffering, or someone we know is suffering, we should "mourn with those who mourn and comfort those in need of comfort." Full stop. Don't judge,

don't explain. Show up. Be with that person. Resolve the immediate concern. This is the heart of the gospel. Show up for each other in our need, our vulnerability, our pain.

Ok good. Still here? When we are not in urgent suffering, we can think about suffering in ways that will decrease our suffering in the future. Kind of like how when you are not broken down on the side of the road, you can take care of your car in ways that will decrease the chance you will break down on the side of the road.

Discussion of new resources

- [“Light in the Darkness, Liberty in a Jail”](#): This narrative will help you contemplate the suffering of Joseph Smith and other captives in Liberty Jail and ponder the power of the revelations Joseph received there. This is a well put together, engaging resource worth recommending class members look through. Helps us contemplate what early saints suffered.
- [“Within the Walls of Liberty Jail”](#): This article gives context for Doctrine and Covenants 121, 122, and 123. (From Lesson 25) Poignant and worthwhile read. The beginning contains some odd framing. What were the members of the First Presidency charged with? (Also treason, not surprisingly. Then why the avoidant wording?) I fully agree that D&C 121 and 122 are some of the most poignant and profound sections of scripture in Mormon tradition. The counsel on authority in 121 is especially pertinent.

[“Peace and Violence among 19th-Century Latter-day Saints”](#): This Gospel Topics essay gives historical context for violence both against and by Latter-day Saints in the 19th century. **Strong, clear introduction:** The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is founded on the teachings of Jesus Christ. The virtues of peace, love, and forgiveness are at the center of Church doctrine and practice. Latter-day Saints believe the Savior’s declaration, found in the New Testament and the Book of Mormon, that “blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.”¹ In Latter-day Saint scripture, the Lord has commanded His followers to “renounce war and proclaim peace.”² Latter-day Saints strive to follow the counsel of the Book of Mormon prophet-king Benjamin, who taught that those who are converted to the gospel of Jesus Christ “will not have a mind to injure one another, but to live peaceably.”³

Despite these ideals, early Latter-day Saints did not obtain peace easily. They were persecuted, often violently, for their beliefs. And, tragically, at some points in the 19th century, most notably in the Mountain Meadows Massacre, some Church members participated in deplorable violence against people they perceived to be their enemies. This essay explores both violence committed against the Latter-day Saints and violence committed by them. While historical context can help shed light on these acts of violence, it does not excuse them.

I’m impressed that this essay acknowledges violence by Church members, including the establishment of the Danites and violence against the Native Americans. It provides helpful historical context (but also does not excuse this behavior). This is an important example of accountability and clarity.

- [“Waiting for the Word of the Lord”](#): This article discusses the crisis created by early persecution of the Saints in Jackson County, Missouri, and the role that revelation played in the Saints’ response. Notes from Lesson 27: [Frank and detailed overview, worthwhile reading. There is more engagement than answers, with a great deal of suffering and failure. That’s how life often works, and I am grateful for this balanced resource.](#)
- [“Preparation of Joseph Smith: Strengthened by Trials”](#): This two-minute video features quotes from Joseph Smith about trials.
- [The Armenian Exodus](#): This online exhibit describes the trials of Latter-day Saints in Turkey and Syria during and after World War I. [Well put together presentation about a little known historical event. I really appreciate the Church highlighting this.](#)
- [“Letter to the Church and Edward Partridge, 20 March 1839”](#): This page from the Joseph Smith Papers website gives the text of the longer letter that Doctrine and Covenants 121 and 122 were extracted from. [Poignant context for these sections, but also difficult to read in the original spelling \(especially for 17 pages\) Very worth digging into.](#)

Productive Sunday Schooling

Why we are going to get this wrong (desire for simplicity, to judge, to be right, to relieve our own discomfort. This is a fraught topic we need to tread carefully)

Suffering and Covenants (we have covenanted to show up for each other. Nothing is more important than that)

Understanding suffering (Distinguishing pain from suffering)

Suffering and accountability

Decreasing suffering: Acceptance, faith, hope (Serenity Prayer)

Lesson:

Accountability and human nature (We want to feel good about ourselves, but unfortunately our biases mess up the math of accountability. We assign accountability mostly as we are conditioned to. We all want to feel that we are doing the right thing and are good people)

Digging deeper into suffering

What happens

Challenge (Something is more difficult than you would prefer/are able to manage)

Tragedy (things happen that hurt us because we are vulnerable, but isn’t necessarily any one’s fault, like natural disasters)

Injustice (we are hurt because we live in systems and relationships that are unfair, but malice is not necessarily present)

Evil (We are hurt by those with intent to harm and destroy)

Our responses

Pain (Physical pain vs. Emotional pain. Physical pain is a warning signal that something is wrong and we need to pay attention. Emotional pain, which piggybacks onto our physical pain responses, relates to how our expectations are challenged. More in a bit)

Grief (completing grief is the process of metabolizing our emotional pain and adjusting to a new reality)

Indignation (anger at injustice or evil)

Suffering

No “right answers” here, just some thoughts. Nuancing based on a Facebook conversation proved very helpful.

Pain, loss, and injustice are inevitable. Grief is needed and healthy. Suffering is optional.

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Suffering involves resistance; the antidote is acceptance.

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Suffering is functionally inevitable.

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Continued suffering is optional.

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Continued suffering is reduceable to varying degrees depending on complex factors.

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No matter what our views about suffering, it is our responsibility to show up for ourselves and others who suffer.

Suffering describes the emotional distress related to interpretation of and resistance to pain and disappointment. It involves resistance to what is, either active (usually involving anger) and passive (involving avoidance).

I distinguish suffering from pain, loss, and injustice, which we all need to deal with. Physical pain communicates that something is wrong with our physiology. Emotional pain has strong evolutionary roots (our social and emotional responses tap into our same nervous system that experiences physical pain, which is why we feel emotional pain in our body). I would propose grief, indignation (which I use to describe “clean anger” at injustice), acceptance, and action as healthy responses to pain.

A note on indignation: I think we should always remain aware of and opposed to the injustices in our own lives and the world (correctly diagnosing accountability is essential here). We should seek to minimize accepting or accommodating injustice. I think we can remain indignant at the wrongs that occur, while also working to accept that they do occur and do our best to manage the consequences of those injustices.

Impressively succinct definition of suffering:

“Suffering [results from] repeated failure to act on the natural motivation of pain to do something that will heal, repair, or improve.”

Using blame, denial, or avoidance to numb or elude pain not only causes suffering, it cuts us off from our basic humanity. We cannot recognize the pain of others when injured to our own.

Basic humanity is the innate capacity for interest in the well-being of others. In its more developed expressions, it motivates respectful, helpful, valuing, nurturing, protective,

and altruistic behaviors. In adversity it motivates sacrifice. In emergency it motivates rescue.

To prevent suffering we must follow the motivation of pain to heal, correct, and improve, which in turn will enhance the sense of basic humanity. For example, we experience guilt when we violate personal values, especially interpersonal values like love, trust, compassion, and kindness; guilt can be resolved only by acting according to those values. Shame signals a perception of failure or inadequacy; the motivation is to reevaluate, re-conceptualize, and redouble effort to achieve success. Anxiety is a dread of something bad occurring that will exceed or deplete coping skills; the motivation is to learn more about what might happen and develop plans to cope with it. Anything that undermines these motivations provides, at best, temporary relief from guilt, shame, and anxiety, suppresses basic humanity, and, in the long-run, creates suffering.

If it's that simple, why does it seem so hard? In a word, habit. Many of us have developed habits of numbing or avoiding the pain-signals that would otherwise motivate healing, repairing, or improving. Some of these, for example, blame, denial, and avoidance, began in toddlerhood. All animals, including humans, are prone to retreat to earlier habits under stress.

It takes mindfulness and emotional reconditioning to break entrenched emotional habits like blame, denial, and avoidance. The first crucial step is to take responsibility for your emotions and pain, so they can work for you instead of against you.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/anger-in-the-age-entitlement/201706/pain-suffering-basic-humanity>

Physical pain has distinct biological and psychological components that effectively represent stimulus and response. The biology of pain is the signal transmitted through the central nervous system that “something is wrong.” The psychology of pain is the interpretation or meaning we give to that pain signal—the internal self-talk and beliefs about it which then drive our emotional reactions. **Suffering results from mental and emotional responses to pain.** The biological and psychological facets of chronic pain combine to become like a smoke detector that goes on and stays on, continuously sounding a harrowing alarm at high volume. Recovery from chronic pain distinguishes between the actual pain and the suffering it causes, and focuses on achieving relief from that suffering. Pain is unavoidable; suffering is not. It occurs in response to thoughts such as: “Why me?!” “It isn’t fair!” “This is horrible!” “I can’t stand it!”

Suffering in general, as well as specific to chronic pain, is a function of imbalances in physical, mental, emotional, and/or spiritual functioning. Because whatever affects the

mind or the body will inevitably affect the other, regardless of which side of the fence an issue originates, imbalances in thinking can create imbalances in physical, emotional, and spiritual functioning. Recovery—from any significant condition or life challenge—is a gradual, progressive, and ongoing process of restoring balance in these areas.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/some-assembly-required/201401/pain-is-inevitable-suffering-is-optional>

Acceptance (Engaging with things as they are, not as we wish they were) Serenity prayer is essential. Things we cannot change require acceptance. Things we can and should change require effort.

Conclusion