

250.2: Suffering and Pain (D&C Gospel Doctrine Lesson 28)

“O God, Where Art Thou?”

Hook	Life is hard. How do we cope? Is understanding even an option?
Goal	Take home message: appreciate the power of being there for each other. Truly being there—not explaining, not judging, just being present, serving if needed. But being. And most powerful is someone who has experienced what you have
Overview	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Scope of suffering• Problem of suffering• Review of reading• Explanations for suffering• Approaches to suffering• What we can do about it
Conclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•

Scope of suffering

Life is too much. Too hard (talk about how the total suffering that happens in one minute on the planet would overwhelm any of us.

Elder Eyring: When I was a young man, I served as counselor to a wise district president in the Church. He tried to teach me. One of the things I remember wondering about was this advice he gave: “When you meet someone, treat them as if they were in serious trouble, and you will be right more than half the time.”

I thought then that he was pessimistic. Now, more than 40 years later, I can see how well he understood the world and life.

I will read from two sources that evoke the scale of suffering more specifically

Sin, Suffering, and Soul-Making: Joseph Smith on the Problem of Evil
[Blake T. Ostler](#), and [David L. Paulsen](#)

Nothing tests our trust in God or challenges the rationality of our belief in him more severely than human suffering and wickedness. Both are pervasive in our common experience. At the moment, the mention of the World Trade Center and Afghanistan evokes images of unspeakable human cruelty or grief, and Auschwitz and Belsen still haunt our memories. Truman Madsen has powerfully portrayed the unfathomable depth of human pain and anguish in his descriptions of persons seeking to maintain their faith in the face of seemingly horrendous evils:

As a beginning, let us walk into a hospital:

Here. This newborn infant with the lovely face. She could not have worthier parents. But she was born in total paralysis and is blind. The doctors do not know if she will survive. And if she does .

..

This bed is empty. Its occupant, a quivering psychotic with a wild stare, is upstairs undergoing shock treatment. He collapsed when his wife and two children were maimed in a fire, one beyond recognition.

Over here is a surgeon who had a rare brain disease and asked his closest friend to operate. The operation failed; and he has been, for nearly three years, a human vegetable. His friend has since committed suicide.

Somewhere tonight the families of these souls are crying themselves to sleep.

Now, if your arm will hold out, write as many zeros after a "1" as will portray similar reenactments of these scenes that are, or have been, or may be, on this planet. And that will be one thread in the tapestry of human misery.¹

This, then, is the challenge: our moral sensibilities are so outraged by such evils that we may begin to question whether our world is really the product of an all-powerful, all-knowing, and morally perfect Creator. We are at a loss to see how a perfect God could have any morally sufficient reason for permitting such evils to occur. Of course, our perplexity is not merely conceptual, nor does it involve only the suffering of others. Few of us escape deep anguish, for it is no respecter of persons and arises out of our experiences of incurable or debilitating diseases, mental illness, broken homes, abuse, rape, wayward loved ones, tragic accidents, untimely death—the list goes on. Many of us are constrained to cry out from the depths of our souls: "Why, God? Why?" And many of us have prayed, often on behalf of a loved one, "Please, God, please help," and then wondered why all that we seem to hear is a deafening silence. All of us have struggled, or likely will struggle, in a very personal way with the problem of evil.

We say *the* problem of evil, but actually there are several.² We will consider here just three: the logical problem, the soteriological problem, and the existential problem. The logical problem of evil is the apparent contradiction between the world's evil and an all-powerful and all-loving Creator. The soteriological problem of evil is the apparent inconsistency between an all-loving Heavenly Father and particular Christian doctrines as to the means and scope of salvation. The existential problem of evil is the personal challenge of living trustingly and faithfully in the face of what seems to be overwhelming evil.

Dostoevsky expresses this even more poignantly and graphically in his book *The Brothers Karamazov* (http://www.online-literature.com/dostoevsky/brothers_karamazov/35/) Ivan is speaking to his brother Alyosha about suffering, specifically of children (Allusions remain to longer narratives that I took out but you will get the idea)

People talk sometimes of bestial cruelty, but that's a great injustice and insult to the beasts; a beast can never be so cruel as a man, so artistically cruel. The tiger only tears and gnaws, that's all he can do. He would never think of nailing people by the ears,

even if he were able to do it. These Turks took a pleasure in torturing children, -too; cutting the unborn child from the mothers womb, and tossing babies up in the air and catching them on the points of their bayonets before their mothers' eyes. Doing it before the mothers' eyes was what gave zest to the amusement. Here is another scene that I thought very interesting. Imagine a trembling mother with her baby in her arms, a circle of invading Turks around her. They've planned a diversion: they pet the baby, laugh to make it laugh. They succeed, the baby laughs. At that moment a Turk points a pistol four inches from the baby's face. The baby laughs with glee, holds out its little hands to the pistol, and he pulls the trigger in the baby's face and blows out its brains. Artistic, wasn't it? By the way, Turks are particularly fond of sweet things, they say..."I think if the devil doesn't exist, but man has created him, he has created him in his own image and likeness." I must have justice, or I will destroy myself. And not justice in some remote infinite time and space, but here on earth, and that I could see myself. I have believed in it. I want to see it, and if I am dead by then, let me rise again, for if it all happens without me, it will be too unfair. Surely I haven't suffered simply that I, my crimes and my sufferings, may manure the soil of the future harmony for somebody else. I want to see with my own eyes the hind lie down with the lion and the victim rise up and embrace his murderer. I want to be there when everyone suddenly understands what it has all been for. All the religions of the world are built on this longing, and I am a believer. But then there are the children, and what am I to do about them? That's a question I can't answer. For the hundredth time I repeat, there are numbers of questions, but I've only taken the children, because in their case what I mean is so unanswerably clear. Listen! If all must suffer to pay for the eternal harmony, what have children to do with it, tell me, please? It's beyond all comprehension why they should suffer, and why they should pay for the harmony. Why should they, too, furnish material to enrich the soil for the harmony of the future? I understand solidarity in sin among men. I understand solidarity in retribution, too; but there can be no such solidarity with children. And if it is really true that they must share responsibility for all their fathers' crimes, such a truth is not of this world and is beyond my comprehension. Some jester will say, perhaps, that the child would have grown up and have sinned, but you see he didn't grow up, he was torn to pieces by the dogs, at eight years old. Oh, Alyosha, I am not blaspheming! I understand, of course, what an upheaval of the universe it will be when everything in heaven and earth blends in one hymn of praise and everything that lives and has lived cries aloud: 'Thou art just, O Lord, for Thy ways are revealed.' When the mother embraces the fiend who threw her child to the dogs, and all three cry aloud with tears, 'Thou art just, O Lord!' then, of course, the crown of knowledge will be reached and all will be made clear. But what pulls me up here is that I can't accept that harmony. And while I am on earth, I make haste to take my own measures. You see, Alyosha, perhaps it really may happen that if I live to that moment, or rise again to see it, I, too, perhaps, may cry aloud with the rest, looking at the mother embracing the child's torturer, 'Thou art just, O Lord!' but I don't want to cry aloud then. While there is still time, I hasten to protect myself, and so I renounce the higher harmony altogether. It's not worth the tears of that one tortured child who beat itself on the breast with its little fist and prayed in its stinking outhouse, with its unexpiated tears to 'dear, kind God!' It's not worth it, because those tears are unatoned for. They must be atoned for, or there can be no harmony. But how? How are you going to atone for them? Is it possible? By

their being avenged? But what do I care for avenging them? What do I care for a hell for oppressors? What good can hell do, since those children have already been tortured? And what becomes of harmony, if there is hell? I want to forgive. I want to embrace. I don't want more suffering. And if the sufferings of children go to swell the sum of sufferings which was necessary to pay for truth, then I protest that the truth is not worth such a price. I don't want the mother to embrace the oppressor who threw her son to the dogs! She dare not forgive him! Let her forgive him for herself, if she will, let her forgive the torturer for the immeasurable suffering of her mother's heart. But the sufferings of her tortured child she has no right to forgive; she dare not forgive the torturer, even if the child were to forgive him! And if that is so, if they dare not forgive, what becomes of harmony? Is there in the whole world a being who would have the right to forgive and could forgive? I don't want harmony. From love for humanity I don't want it. I would rather be left with the unavenged suffering. I would rather remain with my unavenged suffering and unsatisfied indignation, even if I were wrong. Besides, too high a price is asked for harmony; it's beyond our means to pay so much to enter on it. And so I hasten to give back my entrance ticket, and if I am an honest man I am bound to give it back as soon as possible. And that I am doing. It's not God that I don't accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return him the ticket."

- **Problem of suffering**

Hard to beat the concise wording of Epicurus (d. 270 bce): "Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?"

There are broadly two types of suffering 1) human-caused suffering, 2) natural suffering (disasters, etc)

Jessica: One of the most difficult aspects of suffering is the suffering that is not caused by human malice or sin. The suffering that comes from drought or tsunamis or earthquakes or extreme temperatures. I think for me it is easy to rationalize the human aspect of it, but it is hard for me to see why God allows nature to cause such damage to innocent human life. I can see the the need for God to allow us to exercise agency, but where is the agency in being downed in a giant wave? Where is the agency is starving to death because there has not been enough rain to grow crops? Where is the agency in so many aspects of human suffering, what is the point?

Anciently the natural fluctuations in weather were seen as a sign of righteousness or of sin. But as technology improves we can predict weather further into the future. What once seemed to be random we know is often cyclical, and a chain of events caused a considerable distance from the most devastating loss of life. How do I move past what I feel is purposeless suffering, caused by nature and still believe in an all powerful God? I can see how sin leads to suffering but so much suffering now and historically has not been a result of human control or sin.

-

- **Review of reading**

Explanations for suffering

<http://mormonmatters.org/2010/02/11/perspectives-on-suffering/>

Hindusim: It's your own fault (karma and reincarnation)

Deuteronomistic theology: It's your own fault

Buddhism: suffering comes from attachment (in a sense suffering is indeed the difference between our expectations and reality) The knowledge our life could be better is useful to the degree we can improve it.

Mormonism: It is part of God's plan; you agreed to it in the pre-existence; it will all be for your good, etc.

**God, to creation: Be perfect. Be loving. Be whole.
Knowing it would require
Billions of years, broken hearts, broken souls.**

- **Approaches to suffering**
- **What we can do about it**

Theodicy has been called the problem of evil, but really it is the problem of suffering. More specifically, it is the problem of radically unequal and seemingly random suffering.

Keep this as short as possible.

Overview of the problem of suffering

Make sure I discuss Jesus' "Why have you forsaken me" line

(talk about Kumare... how would the world be different if each person had someone else who gave them their full attention and caring for an hour?)

Maxwell different kinds of suffering (find this. Is it a book?) (can't find it, but his point was that we need to respond differently to the different types of suffering: sin, fallen world, Abrahamic tests) PUSH BACK

<http://www.lds.org/ensign/1997/04/enduring-well?lang=eng>

Resources

For next lesson: Sin, Suffering, and Soul-Making: Joseph Smith on the Problem of Evil
[Blake T. Ostler](#), and [David L. Paulsen](#)
<http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/books/?bookid=100&chapid=1111>

Use this? At least use quote about crisis: <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2004/04/in-the-strength-of-the-lord?lang=eng>

When I was a young man, I served as counselor to a wise district president in the Church. He tried to teach me. One of the things I remember wondering about was this advice he gave: “When you meet someone, treat them as if they were in serious trouble, and you will be right more than half the time.”

I thought then that he was pessimistic. Now, more than 40 years later, I can see how well he understood the world and life.

Radiowest series

Radiolab the bad show

Radiolab the good show

Mormon Matters on suffering (also mourning)

Jacob Baker posts (his theodicy lament one)

Psychology books about dealing with suffering and trauma?

The bitter end <http://www.radiolab.org/blogs/radiolab-blog/2013/jan/15/bitter-end/Suffering>

The bad show:

The good show:

A RadioWest series on suffering where an Evangelical, Atheist, Jew and Mormon each answer the question of why we suffer <http://radiowest.kuer.org/topic/why-god-and-tragedy>

<http://bycommonconsent.com/2012/05/13/deaths-and-rebirths-part-1-the-descent/>

<http://bycommonconsent.com/2012/12/14/all-eternity-shakes-mormonisms-weeping-god/>

<http://bycommonconsent.com/2012/11/11/acts-of-mourning/>

<http://bycommonconsent.com/2012/07/01/they-lay-down-beside-her-and-wept/>

<http://bycommonconsent.com/2010/06/29/we-come-over-and-sit/>

<http://bycommonconsent.com/2013/01/26/being-someone-to-sit-with/>

<http://www.onbeing.org/blog/pursuit-and-practice-happiness-awareness-suffering-and-pleasure-others/4153>

<http://www.onbeing.org/blog/on-being-more-than-ourselves-alone/5072>

Man's Search for Meaning

<http://www.onbeing.org/blog/god-who-fits-our-agenda-911-then-and-now/2540>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jE81oJVdrq8> (suffering into healing)

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/25/magazine/post-traumatic-stress-surprisingly-positive-flip-side.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/what-doesnt-kill-us/201303/the-key-posttraumatic-growth-0>

<http://www.onbeing.org/blog/repossessing-virtue-sharon-salzberg-humiliation-suffering/4372>

(Address Jessica's point)

**God, to creation: Be perfect. Be loving. Be whole.
Knowing it would require
Billions of years, broken hearts, broken souls.**