

The Ultimate Paradox

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When Nephi saw in vision the condescension of both the Father and the Son in offering the Son as the Lamb of God, he could only describe the love in superlative phrases as “beauty . . . exceeding of all beauty; . . . the whiteness of the driven snow. . . . Precious above all. . . . The most desirable above all things. . . . And the most joyous to the soul” (1 Nephi 11:8–9, 22–23). That Emmanuel, “God with us,” deigned to “descend from his throne divine” (“I Stand All Amazed,” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 193) to assume the temptations, pains, suffering, and infirmities of mortality, and then voluntarily yield to death led Søren Kierkegaard to describe the condescension of the Son of God as “the ultimate paradox” (Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, vol. 3 (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1975), p. 400). Indeed, from his birth through his death, the Savior’s ministry was full of both paradox and irony. Note, for example, the irony of the Savior’s mortal accommodations. Though “the earth [was] the Lord’s, and the fulness thereof (Psalms 24:1), “there was no room for [him] in the inn” (Luke 2:7). Though “worlds without number [had he] created” (Moses 1:33), “the Son of man hath not where to lay his head”

(Luke 9:58). Though “all things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made” (John 1:3), his final resting place in mortality was a borrowed tomb (see Matthew 27:57–60). Such was the pattern of the condescension of the Son of God at birth, in life, and in death.

The Irony and Paradox of Jesus’ Birth and Early Life

Of his humble birth, Martin Luther wrote, “For what man, if left to his natural promptings, if he were God, would humble himself to lie in the feedbox of a donkey?” (Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* [New York: Mentor, 1950], p. 173). Although Elohim must have lovingly observed the birth from a heavenly vantage point, even Mary’s extraordinary travail increased the irony. The tiring journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem when she was great with child, the exclusion from the inn, the natural anxiety of bearing a first child, and Mary’s isolation from her own

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family must have weighed heavily upon her soul.

“The birth was still more pitiable,” wrote Martin Luther.

No one noticed that in a strange place she had not the very least thing needful in childbirth. There she was without preparation: no light, no fire, in the dead of night, in thick darkness. . . . And now think what she could use for swaddling clothes—some garment she could spare, perhaps her veil. . . .

Think, . . . there was no one there to bathe the Baby. . . . The mother was herself midwife and the maid. [Here I Stand, p. 277]

Yet when the ordeal was over, the heavens proclaimed the eternal significance of the event by the voice of angels and the light of a new star, summoning representatives from the full spectrum of the human condition—the lowly shepherds and the affluent wise men—perhaps a harbinger of the universal scope of the Savior’s ministry. And so the Son of “God deigned to take on the likeness of man,” noted Malcolm Muggeridge, “in order that thenceforth men might be encouraged to aspire after the likeness of God” (Malcolm Muggeridge, *Jesus, The Man Who Lives* [London: Fontana/Collins, 1984], p. 22).

But if Joseph and Mary were pleased with the human and divine adulation of the birth of Jesus, they were soon shaken by an ominous warning to Joseph to flee Bethlehem for Egypt. What irony that the vassal king Herod, in a fit of jealousy, issued a sweeping edict to massacre the male infants in Bethlehem so that he might slay the King of Kings—the supposed rival to his throne. Yet this was only the beginning of the collision of the Savior’s loving condescension with the spirit of rebellion. The juxtaposition of love and rebellion only exacerbated the irony and paradox associated with the Son of God’s ministry. What irony, too, that the targeted Savior was in flight from Israel to Egypt, from whence he, as Jehovah,

had led the children of Israel out of bondage, protecting Israel’s sons with the blood of the lamb on that Passover evening. Now Egypt became a temporary refuge for the Savior from the storm in Israel.

Eventually the circuitous route from Nazareth to obscure Bethlehem to Egypt and back to Nazareth was complete. In a modest home among the common people, the Son of God is tutored in virtual obscurity.

*So, a carpenter’s shop in Nazareth rather than a liberal education in Rome or Athens . . . was the requisite preparation for Jesus’s ministry. . . . [Jesus] needed to experience at first hand the hazards . . . of earning a living in order to be able to teach us with conviction to pray: Give us this day our daily bread—seven words singularly beautiful and touching, and calculated to explode all the fantasies of affluence, and convey the basic condition of our existence. [Jesus, *The Man Who Lives*, p. 45]*

Consistent with this unpretentious pattern of paradox, although the Son of God was without moral blemish, he was, for the sake of example and the will of the Father, baptized “with water unto repentance” (Matthew 3:11). Later, ever subservient to his Father, the Redeemer humbly commenced his ministry by fasting for forty days. During that period he was both fortified by divine beings and sorely tempted by Satan.

“What would be said of a God,” asked Dennis Rasmussen, “who came not in glory but in secret, a King who came not to command but to obey” the will of his Father? (See Dennis Rasmussen, *The Lord’s Question* [Provo, Utah: Keter Foundation, 1985], p. 61.) Any measure of divine favoritism, either at birth or during the preparatory years of his ministry, was carefully concealed in the cloud of his seemingly obscure origins. After all, was not this the carpenter’s son?

Condescension and the Servant Metaphor

When his formal ministry finally commenced, unlike worldly royalty, Jesus disdained the trappings of status, the exercise of unrighteous dominion, the quest for recognition, the display of wealth, or the flaunting of righteousness. Instead, “the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister” (Matthew 20:28). His teachings were as paradoxical as his life. For example, “Whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant” (Matthew 20:26–27). “Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:4). “Whosoever will save his life shall lose it,” he said, “and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it” (Matthew 16:25). “The last shall be first, and the first last (Matthew 20:16). “Whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted” (Matthew 23: 12).

Furthermore, the Savior rejoiced that the precious pearls of the gospel were hidden from the “wise and prudent, and . . . revealed . . . unto babes” (Luke 10:21). In his doctrine, the wise are foolish, and fools are wise, and he came into the “world, that they which see not might see; and that they which see might be made blind” (John 9:39). Ironically, he assigns the “weak and the simple” to proclaim the fullness of his gospel (D&C 1:23) and the “unlearned and despised, to thrash the nations by the power of [his] Spirit” (D&C 35:13). “The weak things of the world shall come forth and break down the mighty and strong ones” (D&C 1:19). The “weak . . . shall be made strong” (D&C 50:16), and “the wise, and the learned, and the rich, that are puffed up . . . shall be thrust down to hell!” (2 Nephi 28:15). The “meek . . . shall inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5) and “the poor in spirit . . . the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3).

Condescension and Mortal Relationships

The spirit of condescension was also evident in the choice of Christ’s mortal associates. His closest disciples were drawn from the ranks of the common people. Some were fishermen. Even the detested class of publicans was represented by Matthew. Far more startling, however, was the array of sinners, lepers, unpopular Samaritans, beggars, the sick, lame, blind, deaf, those possessed of evil spirits, the lost sheep, the prodigal, and even the deceased who were restored to life. These were the central characters of the Christian experience, whether in parable or narrative expression. Any deprivation of “the least of these my brethren” (Matthew 25:40) created a singular appeal to the Savior’s breadth and depth of compassion. For Jesus, the sick, not the whole, needed the physician. Ironically, in the eternal scheme of things, no one was ultimately whole. All had need of the Redeemer.

Actually, the Savior’s special interest in the downtrodden, oppressed, sick, and infirm should not have been a surprise. Had Isaiah not seen in vision, seven hundred years before the birth of Christ, the Savior’s compassionate condescension for the “poor,” “the broken-hearted,” “the captives,” “the blind,” and the “bruised”? (See Luke 4:18; Luke paraphrases Isaiah 61:1–3.) And had Alma not seen the Savior “take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people. . . . loose the bands of death . . . and . . . take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, . . . that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people” (Alma 7:11–12)?

Indeed, the Son of God did know how to succor his people! To illustrate his loving condescension, let us briefly examine three cases of troubled humanity: the woman taken in adultery, a leper, and the Samaritans (the second-class citizens of their day).

Imagine the scene on the temple grounds when the scribes and Pharisees brought a woman taken in adultery to the Savior. How

frightened the woman must have been. What embarrassment and shame she must have felt. Was she in tears? How insensitive of the scribes and the Pharisees to accuse her in that manner and in a public setting. Did the Savior stoop down to avert his eyes from the woman and to separate himself from her accusers? When the scribes and Pharisees, trying to find some grounds for accusation against the Savior, asked whether the woman should be stoned to death, Jesus, drawing in the sand, ignored the question. Was he gathering his thoughts? Was he nurturing his compassionate feelings for the accused? Was he restraining his mounting emotions for the accusers? Finally, when the scribes and Pharisees hypocritically persisted in their quest for an answer, Jesus arose in majesty to his full stature and said to them, “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her” (John 8:7). Ironically, by that rigorous standard, only the Son of God was qualified to cast any stones. The Savior stooped down again to write in the sand. One by one, the accusers, thoroughly reproved for their impure lives and motives, began to leave. Not until they had all gone did the Savior stand again to face the woman. How relieved and grateful she must have felt. For a moment, her life stood in the balance, but, mercifully, it was entrusted to the Son of God: “Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee? She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more” (John 8:10–11). What a healing phrase—“Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more,” containing, in just a few words, the elements of forgiveness and the prospect of lasting change! Suddenly the focus had reverted from her mortal life to her eternal life. Imagine the memorable impression on her soul as she walked away from her Redeemer, perhaps weeping for joy. Was this a divine example of one of those occasions of which the Prophet Joseph Smith spoke?

Ever keep in exercise the principle of mercy. . . ; and should we even forgive our brother, or even our enemy, before he repent or ask forgiveness, our heavenly Father would be equally as merciful unto us. [Teachings, p. 155]

Although the leper’s plight was of a very different nature from that of the woman taken in adultery, the heartache, and even the sense of rejection, was just as real. In the New Testament period, lepers were considered unclean. They were the untouchables and pariahs of their day. Cast out from normal social intercourse, they hungered for warm human contact and acceptance. But for the leper who encountered Jesus as he came off the mountain, it was not human, but divine healing that he sought. “Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean” (Matthew 8:2). What solace the leper must have felt when he who was considered unclean and untouchable was gently touched by the Savior before he healed him. Of the significance of that touch, listen to the words of the nineteenth-century cleric George Macdonald:

Jesus could have cured him with a word. There was no need he should touch him. No need did I say? There was every need. For no one else would touch him. The healthy human hand, always more or less healing, was never laid on him; he was despised and rejected. It was a poor thing for the Lord to cure his body; he must comfort and cure his sore heart. Of all men a leper, I say, needed to be touched with the hand of love. . . . It was not for our master, our brother, our ideal man, to draw around him the skirts of his garments and speak a lofty word of healing, that the man might at least be clean before he touched him. The man was his brother, and an evil disease cleaved fast unto him. Out went the loving hand to the ugly skin, and there was his brother as he should be—with the flesh of a child. I thank God that the touch went before the word. Nor do I think it was the touch of a finger, or of the fingertips. It was a kindly healing touch in its nature as

*in its power. Oh blessed leper! thou knowest henceforth what kind of a God there is in the earth— . . . a God such as himself only can reveal to the hearts of his own. That touch was more than the healing. It was to the leper what the [phrase] Neither do I [condemn thee] was to the woman [at] the temple. [George Macdonald, *The Miracles of Our Lord* (New York: George Routledge & Sons, 1870), pp. 88–89]*

But the Savior was just as adept at succoring a disdained ethnic group, like the Samaritans, as he was one on one with unpopular individuals. There were two natural obstacles to the Savior in forming a meaningful relationship with the Samaritans. First, he was a Jew, and the Jews had established a reputation of having “no dealings with the Samaritans” (John 4:9). Second, because the Savior was sent explicitly to the house of Israel, neither the gentiles nor the Samaritans enjoyed the full blessings of the gospel. In fact, Jesus instructed the Twelve, “saying, Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” (See Matthew 10:5–6. Authorization for the Samaritans to receive the gospel came in Acts 1:8.) However, the compelling example of the Savior’s love for the Samaritan people broke down both of these artificial barriers. His own solicitous care for the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well, his offer to provide her “living water. . . springing up into everlasting life,” his discernment of her spiritual status, the witness she received that he was the Christ, her testament to her fellow Samaritans, and the Savior’s two-day sojourn among her people convinced many “that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world” (John 4:4–42). Moreover, the heroic figure, so carefully crafted by Jesus in the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37) and in the story of the grateful Samaritan (the only one of the ten lepers to return to Jesus to thank him for healing

him of his affliction; Luke 17:11–19) solidified the growing bond of mutual affection. But the crowning evidence of solidarity between Jesus and the Samaritans was a backhanded compliment. In the dominant culture the word *Samaritan* had become a powerful slur comparable in emotional intensity to the most repulsive ethnic epithets of our time. In a moment of passion, the detractors of Jesus resorted to name-calling: “Say we not well that thou art a Samaritan, and hast a devil? Jesus answered, I have not a devil” (John 8:48–49). Note, however, that the Redeemer refused to disavow the imputed identification with the Samaritans. Such was his love for these social outcasts and, for that matter, all people—including his own.

The Rejection of the Savior’s Miracles

No feature of the Savior’s ministry increased his public visibility quite like the performance of miracles. For example, when the Savior approached the gate of the city of Nain, he encountered a funeral procession taking the only son of a widow to his burial. When Jesus saw the mother weeping, he had compassion for her. The Savior stopped the cortege, touched the casket carried by the pallbearers, and commanded the young man to “Arise. And he that was dead sat up, and began to speak.” Luke describes the startling effect of the miracle:

And there came a fear on all: and they glorified God, saying, That a great prophet is risen up among us; and, That God hath visited his people.

And this rumour of him went forth throughout all Judaea, and throughout all the region round about. [Luke 7:11–17]

But this was only one of countless miracles. In the category of restoration of life from death, two others, the daughter of Jairus; and Lazarus, the brother of Mary Magdalene and Martha; were likewise blessed. There were miracles of nature, including the miraculous feeding of

thousands, the changing of water to wine, the calming of a tempest, the walking on water, the retraction of a coin from the mouth of a fish, and others. Numerous miracles healed physical ailments, and others dispossessed the afflicted of evil spirits. To be sure, the Savior's fame spread throughout the land.

There was irony, too, and the spirit of condescension in conjunction with these miracles. In the midst of the euphoria and joy produced by these blessed events, Jesus was ridiculed and, as Isaiah prophesied, "despised and rejected of men" (Isaiah 53:3). Some simply dismissed him as "a gluttonous man, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners!" (Luke 7:34). At the site of the healing of the daughter of Jairus, "they laughed him to scorn" (Matthew 9:24). There was a poignant scene at the temple when the Savior healed "the blind and the lame. . . . And when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying in the temple, and saying, Hosanna to the Son of David; [the chief priests and scribes] were [ironically] sore displeased" (Matthew 21:14–15). And when the Pharisees were told that Jesus had brought Lazarus back to life from four days of death in a tomb, "from that day forth they took counsel together . . . to put [the Son of God] to death" (John 11:53).

The finding of fault continued to mount. After a remarkable healing of a blind man on the Sabbath, the Pharisees referred to Jesus disparagingly as "this fellow" (John 9:29), "a sinner" (John 9:24), and a "man [who] is not of God, because he keepeth not the sabbath day" (John 9:16). With his Father Elohim, Jehovah had instituted the Sabbath as the earth was formed. Indeed, he was Lord of the Sabbath. How incongruous that the creator and Lord of the Sabbath is accused of its violation. "It is lawful to do well on the sabbath days," he said to his critics, after healing another man of a withered hand. Nevertheless, "the Pharisees

went out, and held a council against him, how they might destroy him" (Matthew 12:10–14).

In those vexing cases of evil spirits, his opponents accused him of casting "out devils through the prince of the devils" (Matthew 9:34). To this argument Jesus convincingly asked the rhetorical question, "How can Satan cast out Satan?" (Mark 3:23).

For me, one of the most intriguing miracles of the New Testament involved the man called Legion, who had been transformed into a man who slept not in a home but among the tombs—"no man could bind him, no, not with chains, . . . neither could any man tame him." He wore no clothing, and "night and day, he was in the mountains, and in the tombs, crying, and cutting himself with stones." Some of us might have bypassed the man called Legion (Luke 8:30), but not the Savior. As the Son of God cast out the evil spirits, the spirits rushed into a herd of swine that ran, in turn, into the sea. But that is not the essence of the miracle. The real miracle was the change in the man. He came out of the tombs, wore clothing, ceased cutting his own flesh, and became a disciple of Christ. After hearing the news of this singular event, "the whole city came out to meet Jesus." Ironically, "when they saw him, they besought him that he would depart out of their coasts." (See Mark 5:1–20 and Matthew 8:34; also Luke 8:26–39. The account in Matthew describes two men possessed of devils, whereas the accounts in Mark and Luke only refer to the story of Legion.)

By far the most serious indictment of the Savior was blasphemy, the trumped-up charge that, along with sedition, eventually led to his death. The argument asserted that Jesus was an imposter, masquerading as the Son of God. It too surfaced in the context of the performance of miracles. When the friends of a man who was seriously afflicted with palsy, out of their love and faith, dismantled a roof so that they could lower him on a bed to the feet of the Savior, Jesus saw that the man's most

compelling need was forgiveness of his sins. Immediately, he assured the diseased man that his sins had been forgiven. At that moment, the Savior also discerned that the scribes saw the act of forgiveness as concrete evidence of blasphemy. To them, Jesus said,

Wherefore think ye evil in your hearts?

For whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and walk?

But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (then saith he to the sick of the palsy,) Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house.

And he arose, and departed to his house.

[Matthew 9:2–8]

Once again, as Nephi prophesied, “The world, because of their iniquity, shall judge him to be a thing of naught” (1 Nephi 19:9).

Ironically, in the cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, “wherein most of his mighty works were done,” the inhabitants “repented not.” In fact, Jesus said that, given the light they had rejected, the wicked cities of Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom would fare better on judgment day than these cities (Matthew 11:21–24). In Nazareth, his hometown, though the people were “astonished” at his “wisdom, and these mighty works,” they too were offended. It was in Nazareth that Jesus lamented, “A prophet is not without honour, save in his own country, and in his own house” (Matthew 13:54–58). And so for many, despite the condescension of the Son of God, the miracles were performed in vain.

Law and the Condescension of the Son of God

In the matter of law, irony was also prominent in the condescension of the Son of God. Amidst the thunder and lightning of Mount Sinai, Jehovah had given the law to the prophets for the children of Israel. Now many of the children of Israel were judging and

condemning the law giver, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, for his interpretation and implementation of the law. Jesus of Nazareth interpreted the law with much greater flexibility. One brief example may suffice.

On the Sabbath day, Jesus and his disciples walked through a grain field. To satisfy their hunger, the disciples plucked a few ears of grain. This action grated on the moral sensibilities of the Pharisees, and they inquired of the Savior why his disciples broke the law. The Savior wisely cited the Old Testament precedent of King David eating the shew bread in the house of God on the Sabbath day. Then Jesus taught the broader principle: “The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

The Ultimate Paradox: The Bitter Cup

As the ministry of the Son of God came to a close, the irony only intensified. During those last days, this modest King of Kings and Lord of Host’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem came “not riding clouds of glory, but a borrowed donkey” (Muggeridge, *Jesus, The Man Who Lives*, p. 49). Despite the agony of the anticipation of Gethsemane, the betrayal, the arrest, the trial, and the ordeal at Calvary, Jesus preserved his noble, godly composure. “Let no one think,” wrote George Macdonald,

that [the sufferings of our Lord] were less because He was more. The more delicate the nature, the more alive to all that is lovely and true, lawful and right, the more does [one] feel the antagonism of pain, the inroad of death upon life; the more dreadful is that breach of the harmony of things whose sound is torture. He felt more than man could feel, because He had a larger feeling.

[Rolland Hein, ed., *Creation in Christ* [Wheaton, Illinois: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1976], p. 334]

And so let it not be said that because he was more, his suffering was less.

The intensive odyssey of godly testing began at Passover. Jesus was only hours away from that moment in cosmic history that worlds without end had awaited. The word *condescend* literally meant to descend with or be among his people, but now he was about to descend below all things. His rendezvous with destiny, sealed in that grand council by his own words—“Father, thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever” (Moses 4:2)—had arrived. This was the culmination and convergence of the love of the Father and the Son. Later in the evening he would teach his disciples, “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). In divine modesty, he declined to note that he was also laying his life down for his enemies.

Years of Passover celebrations and the animal sacrifices from Adam to the meridian of time had all pointed to this moment. *Passover* signified deliverance, the blood of the Lamb, redemption. The symbol of the sacrificial lamb and the reality of the Lamb of God had finally come together. This was the eve on which the Lamb of God was to go like a lamb to the slaughter. In the Passover feast were the usual symbolic items—the lamb, the unleavened bread, the wine, and perhaps the bitter herbs. If the unleavened bread signified a sense of urgency, it now, with the wine, was used by the Savior to introduce the sacrament, a visual aid of what would soon transpire to help them and us to remember him. If the bitter herbs usually signified the bitterness of the Exodus experience, the most proximate and compelling symbol for the Savior must have been the bitter cup.

During that extraordinary evening Jesus was the consummate servant. He devoted his time to teaching, comforting, preparing, challenging, serving, and praying for the Twelve and for all who would somewhere and sometime believe in his words. With the bitter cup raised almost to the level of his lips, how could

he be so selfless? After the Passover supper he washed each of the disciples’ feet in an ordinance that reminded them of the essential nature of their ministry as servants commissioned to administer the love of God that shed forth in their hearts. It was in this context of the ordinance of washing of feet that the Savior said, “A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you” (John 13:34).

Following the washing of feet, the Savior’s final discourse on mortality rivaled in beauty the Sermon on the Mount (John 14–16). The sermon was imbued with the language of comfort, love, and peace of mind. It also affirmed our utter dependency on the Savior: “As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me” (John 15:4).

Sometime during the evening Jesus offered the moving intercessory prayer (John 17). Remarkably, only the first few verses barely mention the fact that his own “hour is come.” He was praying as an advocate for his Father’s children. Finally, Jesus and the Twelve sang a hymn together before the Savior, Peter, James, and John departed for Gethsemane.

Jesus then

began to be sorrowful and very heavy.

Then saith he unto them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here, and watch with me.

And he went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt. [Matthew 26:37–39]

Of that excruciating experience King Benjamin wrote,

He shall suffer . . . even more than man can suffer, except it be unto death; for behold, blood cometh

from every pore, so great shall be his anguish for the wickedness . . . of his people. [Mosiah 3:7]

In reflection, the Savior added,

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 19:18]

Soul—wrenched, his clothing soiled with “great drops of blood” (Luke 22:44), fatigued in body and in spirit from the incomparable ordeal only endurable by a God, Jesus emerged from the garden.

By now the voices of betrayal and arrest were within the range of the human ear. Ironically, thirty pieces of silver, the price for a common slave, was the value attached to him whom Isaiah called, “Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6). How incongruous that a kiss, an emblem of affection, consummated the betrayal. In the confusion surrounding the Son of God’s arrest, Peter severed the ear of Malchus, one of the assailants of Jesus. The Savior, ever the servant and healer, restored the ear to its normal state. Charitably, Jesus also requested that the officials in charge of the arrest let his disciples “go their way” (John 18:8). Ironically, in the interim between his arrest and Calvary, each disciple, to one degree or another, forsook him. “All ye,” Jesus prophesied, “shall be offended because of me this night: for it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered” (Matthew 26:31). Completely alone, although the Savior had at his disposal legions of angels, he deferred to the will of the Father and submitted to the train of indignities.

From the scene of the arrest, the Savior was illegally taken to the home of the high priest Annas. There he was interrogated, charged with blasphemy, smitten, spat upon, and

mocked. He received more of the same treatment when he was sent to Caiaphas. When Caiaphas took Jesus to Pilate, the indictment changed from blasphemy to sedition, an action calculated to stir up the Romans. When Pilate found no evidence of guilt, learning that Jesus was actually in Herod’s jurisdiction, Pilate sent him to Herod. “And Herod with his men of war set him at nought, and mocked him, and arrayed him in a gorgeous robe, and sent him again to Pilate” (Luke 23:11). When Pilate still found no justification for the accusations, he proposed, customary with the tradition of the feast days, to release him. But his antagonists insisted on both crucifixion and that the notorious Barabbas, justly convicted of sedition and murder, be released in lieu of the falsely accused Son of God. Finally, when a spineless Pilate caved in to the social pressure, the process of crucifixion commenced.

In preparation,

Pilate therefore took Jesus, and scourged him.

And the soldiers platted a crown of thorns, and put it on his head, and they put on him a purple robe,

And said, Hail, King of the Jews! and they smote him with their hands. [John 19:1–3]

Nephi observed this whole demeaning process in panoramic vision:

And the world, because of their iniquity, shall judge him 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, because of his loving kindness and his long-suffering towards the children of men. [1 Nephi 19:9]

Centuries before, in “similitude” (Jacob 4:5) of the “great and last sacrifice” (Alma 34:10), Isaac—lowly in heart, innocent, and obedient—carried wood for his father Abraham for sacrifice on Mount Moriah, just as the Savior

bore wood, his own cross, for his Father toward Calvary, “where they crucified him” (John 19:17–19), ironically, between two thieves. How ironic, too, that the perpetrators of the Crucifixion “did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted” (Isaiah 53:4). Instead, “he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities” (Isaiah 53:5). Wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer,

It is infinitely easier to suffer in obedience to a human command than to accept suffering as free, responsible men. It is infinitely easier to suffer with others than to suffer alone. It is infinitely easier to suffer as public heroes than to suffer apart and in ignominy. It is infinitely easier to suffer physical death than to endure spiritual suffering. Christ suffered as a free man alone, apart, and in ignominy, in body and in spirit. [Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan, 1953), p. 31]

Even on the cross his compassion was endless. He gently placed his mother, Mary, in the caring hands of his beloved disciple John; to the solicitous thief he promised a personal rendezvous in the spirit world; and to those who crucified him he sought forgiveness, “for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). He was like “a rock,” noted George Macdonald, “which swallowed up the waves of wrong in its great

caverns and never threw them back to swell the commotion of the angry sea whence they came” (C. S. Lewis, ed., *George Macdonald*, 365 Readings [New York: Collier, 1986], p. 112).

Søren Kierkegaard was right. The mortal ministry of the Savior was, indeed, “the ultimate paradox.” He drank the bitter cup that we might drink the sweet. He was taken captive that we might be delivered. He was mocked that we might be more merciful. He was spat upon that we might be more sensitive. He was scourged that we might be sanctified. He was judged of the world that we might be justified. He was bruised that we might be blessed. He was wounded that we might be made whole. He died that we might live.

“My Father sent me that I might be lifted up upon the cross,” he said, “that as I have been lifted up by men even so should men be lifted up by the Father, to stand before me” (3 Nephi 27:14). What is our stance toward this “man of sorrows . . . acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3)? If we turn our backs on the Holy One of Israel, our rebellion, ironically, collides with his infinite love.

“If ye love me,” he said, “keep my commandments” (John 14:15), “feed my sheep” (John 21:15–17), and “love one another” (John 15:12). May we strive more fervently to do so, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.