

RESURRECTION AND JUDGMENT

Jason R Steffen

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Good morning. It is an honor to speak to you today on the holiest of Sabbaths, when we come together to celebrate the resurrection of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Easter is, of course, a day of rejoicing. The events of Holy Week leading up to Easter—Palm Sunday, the Last Supper, Christ’s suffering in Gethsemane and the Crucifixion—all lead inexorably to the joyful conclusion that “Christ the Lord is Risen Today.”¹

I want to acknowledge, however, that not everyone here today may be feeling unmitigated joy. Some might be feeling joy mixed with sadness or fear or shame. Perhaps you are one of those people. Perhaps you have experienced the loss of a loved one; perhaps a wayward child’s antics are causing you anxiety; perhaps you are struggling with an addiction. Perhaps physical or mental health challenges prevent you from experiencing the full measure of peace and happiness the gospel promises. Perhaps you have been paying attention to the news lately and are overcome with grief at the tens of thousands of people who have died in conflicts in Ukraine, Gaza, or other places around the world. Perhaps you are wondering, *What good is it to contemplate the Resurrection amid so much pain and suffering, whether in my own heart or in the world?*

Church leaders have acknowledged that it is neither possible nor desirable for life to always be easy and happy. In the April 2021 general conference, Sister Reyna Aburto, then a counselor in the Relief Society general presidency, acknowledged the many people who had recently

1. *Hymns*, no. 200.

suffered the loss of family and friends from COVID-19. She quoted President Nelson, who had given a talk many years earlier as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve in which he stated: “Irrespective of age, we mourn for those loved and lost. Mourning is one of the deepest expressions of pure love. . . . Moreover, we can’t fully appreciate joyful reunions later without tearful separations now. The only way to take sorrow out of death is to take love out of life.”² Even our Savior experienced sadness. When confronted with the death of his friend Lazarus, Christ raised him from the dead—but before doing so, whether because of grief over Lazarus’s death or simply out of empathy for the grief of Lazarus’s sisters, Mary and Martha, the Gospel of John reports simply: “Jesus wept.”³ It appears that, even if we have an ironclad testimony of the Resurrection, even if we know beyond doubt that we will see those we have lost again in the next life, even if we could, like Jesus, raise the dead, we must still experience grief and pain at the loss of our loved ones in mortality.

How, then, do we move forward in faith when faced with sadness—or with regret, fear, anger, or any other emotion that causes us to feel something other than joy? In her address, after acknowledging the suffering many were experiencing at the time, Sister Aburto turned to the events after the Crucifixion: “We can imagine how Jesus’s friends, who had followed Him and ministered to Him, felt upon witnessing His death. We know that ‘they mourned and wept.’ On the day of the Crucifixion, not knowing what would happen on Sunday, they must have been overwhelmed by distress, wondering how they would go on without their Lord. Nevertheless, they continued ministering to Him even in death.”⁴ She then gave some examples of such ministering: “Joseph

2. Reyna I. Aburto, “The Grave Has No Victory,” Apr. 2021 (quoting Russell M. Nelson, “Doors of Death,” *Ensign*, May 1992, 72), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2021/04/42aburto/?lang=eng>.

3. John 11:35.

4. Aburto, “The Grave Has No Victory.”

of Arimathea begged Pilate to give him Jesus's body. He took the body down, wrapped it in fine linen, laid it in his own new tomb, and rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulchre. Nicodemus brought myrrh and aloes. He helped Joseph take the body and wrap it in linen with the spices. Mary Magdalene and other women followed Joseph and Nicodemus, watched where they laid Jesus's body, and prepared sweet spices and ointments to anoint it."⁵

We often think of Jesus as being the one who ministered to others, and of course this is true: his mortal life consisted largely of attending to others' needs, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual. Yet he also received the ministrations of others, both during his life and after his death. His faithful disciples, as much as they no doubt sorrowed over his death, responded to their pain by continuing to minister to Jesus.

There are at least two lessons here for us.

First, we are called to keep ministering even when life is difficult. Perhaps it is especially during those times that we should strive to reach out to others. In doing so, we may find that our own burdens are lightened. Consider Mary Magdalene who, according to the Gospel of John, stayed at Jesus' empty tomb after the other disciples had left.⁶ Christ revealed himself to her in that moment, perhaps because she had chosen not to give up and go home. Mary probably felt lost without the guidance of the mortal Jesus in her life—but it was when this loss was the most keenly felt that she found Jesus the Messiah, because she did not stop looking for him.

Second, we are called to be ministered to. As a Church we often talk of self-reliance as a virtue, but Easter should remind us all that, however great our talents and abilities, whatever degree of self-sufficiency we feel proud to have attained, ultimately we can do nothing for ourselves in terms of our own salvation and exaltation, for "there is no other way

5. Aburto, "The Grave Has No Victory."

6. See John 20:10–18.

nor means whereby [people] can be saved, only through the atoning blood of Jesus Christ.”⁷ Remembering that we are, as King Benjamin put it, “all beggars” can help us accept others’ attempts to minister to us.⁸

Allowing others to serve us, and serving others in turn, can also help us avoid the dangers of passing judgment on others.

I would like to think that I know something about judgment, given what I do for a living. (For those who missed the joke, I am a judge.) So what does it mean to judge, and why is that a problem? The notion of judgment in the general sense has a finality to it. When I pass judgment in a legal case, that is generally considered a positive thing, at least in the sense that a decision has been made. Whether the decision is favorable to you or not, at least you have an answer to your question about whether you are, say, going to jail today, or going to inherit the property you believe you are entitled to, or whatever the issue is in the case at hand. Indeed, people sometimes get frustrated at what they perceive as the slow pace of justice simply because they want a final answer, one way or another.

On the other hand, judging in the more common sense, the one that Jesus warns us about in the Sermon on the Mount,⁹ also has a finality to it, but in a negative sense. For example, suppose I have made up my mind that someone is a jerk and, with this judgment in mind, I vow never to speak to that person again. Or perhaps I speak to him in a way that is “Minnesota nice”: with a surface-level politeness but while harboring unkind feelings toward him. By passing that judgment (“This person is a jerk!”), I have closed off other possibilities. I have made it unlikely that I could become friends with him, that I could work closely with him to help someone else, or that I could have empathy for him

7. Helaman 5:9.

8. Mosiah 4:19.

9. See Matthew 7:1–2.

based on his life circumstances. These are all possibilities that could bring me closer to the other person—and therefore closer to God—that I have rendered impossible by my act of judgment. So while it may be a desirable quality of the law that alternative possibilities are foreclosed—appeals must, eventually, be exhausted—this is not a desirable quality of character, and ultimately it leads us away from Zion.

So how do we stop, or at least reduce, our tendency to judge others? Ironically, here I have very little insight because I find that I am the least judgmental when performing my duties as a judge and the most judgmental when I am not. Perhaps this is because when I am judging in the professional sense, I am focused on hearing from both sides in a case, ensuring that everyone in my courtroom is treated respectfully, and maintaining the appearance of impartiality that people rightly expect from judges. It is when I am *not* forced to do that by my professional commitments that I often find myself being more judgmental of people, thereby foreclosing possibilities of meaningfully connecting with them and, therefore, with God.

But while I do not speak from a position of strength in this respect, I do feel confident in asserting that there is no better antidote to judgment than service, or what we call “ministering.” As a judge in the legal system, I often must make decisions with limited information. I listen to lawyers’ arguments and rely on common sense and, of course, the law. But I am sure I would sometimes make a different decision if I knew the whole story of someone’s life. Likewise, think of someone you don’t get along with. Is it possible that you would judge her differently, or not at all, if you knew her whole story? And how could you possibly get to know her story, or more of it, without serving her? King Benjamin asked how we can know the master we have “not served, and who is a stranger unto [us], and is far from the thoughts and intents of [our] heart”;¹⁰ but the same is true of other human beings: How can we know them if we do not serve them?

10. Mosiah 5:13.

In this respect, celebrating Easter should help us draw closer to God, but also closer to one another. The Resurrection reminds us that nobody is a lost cause. Everyone will be resurrected, and everyone will be brought to stand before God to be judged. And not a single person—not you, not me, not the homeless guy you think doesn’t deserve your money, not the needy coworker you think doesn’t deserves your time—will be denied a room in the celestial inn if they are willing to repent and accept the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. And whether they will do that is something we cannot possibly know given our limited mortal view of things. Moreover, nobody—not you, not me, not the bishop nor even the prophet—can get there on our own. “We are all beggars,” and we all need the grace of our Savior. This, above all, should give us pause before we judge others—or at least motivate us to repent when we find ourselves doing so.

Finally, let me suggest one other potential antidote to judgment. We tend to think that the time we are living in is particularly challenging, and sometimes in the Church we talk of the world we live in as if it were the worst of all possible worlds. In an era where the internet and social media give us instant access to the world, it is easy to think that humans have never been more sinful than they are today. But while we may be tempted to look upon the past with nostalgia, the view we have may not be as accurate as we think it is.

There is a passage in the Book of Mormon that I find instructive in this respect. In Helaman 7, Nephi the son of Helaman returns from an unsuccessful mission to the “land northward” where he “did preach the word of God unto them, and did prophecy many things unto them;” but, unfortunately, “they did reject all his words, insomuch that he could not stay among them, but returned again unto the land of his nativity.”¹¹ Nephi is no doubt already saddened by his failure to con-

11. Helaman 7:1–3.

vince this one group to repent, and his mood is worsened when he returns home and discovers that his own people are, if anything, even more wicked:

And seeing the people in a state of such awful wickedness . . . his heart was swollen with sorrow within his breast; and he did exclaim in the agony of his soul: Oh, that I could have had my days in the days when my father Nephi first came out of the land of Jerusalem, that I could have joyed with him in the promised land; then were his people easy to be entreated, firm to keep the commandments of God, and slow to be led to do iniquity; and they were quick to hearken unto the words of the Lord—Yea, if my days could have been in those days, then would my soul have had joy in the righteousness of my brethren. But behold, I am consigned that these are my days, and that my soul shall be filled with sorrow because of this the wickedness of my brethren.¹²

Nephi's reaction to his sadness and anger and frustration is to yearn for the good old days when Lehi took his family out of Jerusalem and had a fun camping trip and a delightful cruise to the promised land, where everyone lived harmoniously in perfect righteousness!

When I read this, I want to say: "Nephi, are you kidding me?! Have you even read the records kept by your ancestors Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob? Apparently you need a reminder of some things Lehi and his family experienced":

- After Lehi prophesies about the destruction of Jerusalem, the people mock him and attempt to kill him.¹³
- Lehi's wealthy family members are commanded to leave all their possessions behind and travel through the wilderness, where they live in primitive conditions, sleeping in tents and subsisting on raw meat.¹⁴

12. Helaman 7:4–9.

13. See 1 Nephi 18–20.

14. See 1 Nephi 2:2–4, 15; 17:2.

- Lehi worries constantly about his oldest children's wickedness and sees a vision that strongly implies that they are not going to inherit eternal life like the rest of the family.¹⁵
- Nephi on multiple occasions gets robbed, beaten, kidnapped, and nearly killed both by enemies like Laban and by his own brothers.¹⁶
- No sooner do they arrive in the promised land than Nephi, no doubt still grieving his father Lehi's recent death, is forced to flee their community and start over his own with his extended family because of his homicidal brothers.¹⁷
- Meanwhile, Nephi's comments on his own spiritual state go like this: "O wretched man that I am! Yeah, my heart sorroweth because of my flesh; my soul grieveth because of mine iniquities."¹⁸

Jacob takes over as prophet after the death of his brother Nephi, and at the end of Jacob's record here is how he describes the conditions of his age: "I, Jacob, began to be old; . . . wherefore, I conclude this record . . . by saying that the time passed away with us, and also our lives passed away like as it were unto us a dream, we being a lonesome and a solemn people, wanderers, cast out from Jerusalem, born in tribulation, in a wilderness, and hated of our brethren, which caused wars and contentions; wherefore, we did mourn out our days."¹⁹ Nephi the son of Helaman appears to have forgotten about this section when he reminisces about the good old days of his ancestor Nephi I!

Now there were, of course, positive things that happened to Lehi and his family. They experienced miracles, they inherited the land of promise, and at one point Nephi even claims that they lived "after the manner of happiness."²⁰ But they were human, they faced immense

15. See 1 Nephi 8:4–18, 35–36.

16. See 1 Nephi 3:26–29; 7:16–19; 16:37; 17:48; 18:10–12.

17. See 2 Nephi 5:1–7.

18. 2 Nephi 4:17.

19. Jacob 7:26.

20. 2 Nephi 5:27.

challenges, and certainly it is naïve for Nephi son of Helaman to think, six hundred years later, that if only he had lived in the time of the ancient Nephi I he would have been happy. My point is not that we should blame Nephi son of Helaman—we all do this to some extent. But perhaps this vignette is here in the Book of Mormon as a cautionary tale for us as Latter-day Saints. Yes, we face unique challenges in our time. But every age (every life, really) comes with a unique set of challenges. Assuming that people are wicked, that the world is so much worse today than in the past, can cause us to retreat from others in a way that forecloses the possibility of Christlike engagement with them that is just as nefarious as passing judgment upon them as individuals. Perhaps we should worry less about how bad we think the world is and more about what we can do to minister to others, one soul at a time, the way our Savior did—and still does.

After all, Nephi son of Helaman, despite his anger and frustration and sadness, pressed forward with his prophetic duty to cry repentance to the people—and while many rejected him, others did not, for we read that there were “some among the people, who said that Nephi was a prophet.”²¹ Moreover, God told Nephi that it was because he had “with unweariness declared the word”—he didn’t give up even though it probably seemed pointless to him to keep preaching—that he was granted the sealing power.²² God trusted Nephi son of Helaman precisely because he didn’t give up on people he thought were irredeemably wicked. So, too, should we persevere in loving and serving regardless of how we might feel about people or about the world we live in.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus Christ lives. He was born of Mary. He set a perfect example of mortal living for us to emulate. He was betrayed, was unjustly condemned, suffered for our sins in Gethsemane, and was crucified, all to fulfill the will of the Father. And, as we remember today,

21. Helaman 9:40.

22. Helaman 10:4–7.

he was resurrected. All of this with the sole purpose of bringing to pass the immortality and eternal life of all his brothers and sisters.²³ On this Easter day, may we keep in mind our utter and complete reliance on his grace—and may we allow that knowledge to shape our interactions with all of God’s children. This is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

23. Moses 1:39.

JASON R STEFFEN {jason.steffen@gmail.com} is a district court judge in Minnesota’s Tenth Judicial District. Prior to taking the bench, he practiced law primarily as a public defender. Originally from New Hampshire, he now lives in rural Minnesota with his wife, Dr. Nancy Steffen, and their three children.