

The Uncomfortable Gospel: How the Lord Molds and Shapes Us by Pushing Us Out of Our Comfort Zones

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High Council Talk
June 22, 2025

I have decided to title the topic I have been asked to speak on today as: “The Uncomfortable Gospel: How the Lord Molds and Shapes Us by Pushing Us Out of Our Comfort Zones.” The “Uncomfortable Gospel” makes an appearance within the first few pages of the Bible. In the book of Genesis, after Adam and Eve had partaken of the forbidden fruit—which partaking symbolizes them, and all of us, choosing to be born into mortality—Lucifer, who hates us and only desires our misery, instructed Adam and Eve to hide. In contrast, when Heavenly Father—who’s ultimate desire for His children is their eternal happiness, and who’s love for them is so powerful, so deep, and so infinite that we can only describe it as “indescribable”—when He saw that they had partaken of mortality, said:

“Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee;” Genesis 3:17-18

Many have interpreted this statement as a punishment that Adam and Eve received for being disobedient. However, given our understanding of the deep love that God has for us, I feel it makes much more sense to understand the statement, “Cursed...for thy sake”, rather as “Cursed... for thy benefit and growth.”

Understood this way, the hardships, and pains of life, with all its thistles and thorns, are provided for us by a loving Heavenly Father because this was the only way we could successfully grow into the kind of person that can return to His presence.

This appears to be a nearly universal principle. The result of lying in bed for long periods of time inevitably leads to muscle atrophy, which reduces the ability to walk more than a few paces, or perhaps not to walk at all. Muscles can only grow when strained. Physical stamina can only be increased by uncomfortable exercise. Degrees can only be earned by doing homework and passing exams. Mountains can only be climbed by going up. And since God is much more interested in what we are becoming, and the spiritual strengths we are gaining during this life, than if we ever arrive at perfection during mortality—this means that during our long climb up the celestial mountain, if it seems like we are constantly stumbling, and sliding back down the mountain, as long as we pick ourselves up and continue to climb, our growing spiritual muscles won't know the difference.

We have plenty of examples from church history to understand that the Lord does not shy away from asking His covenant people to grow by experiencing some severe thorns and thistles. The PhD dissertation of Sherilyn Farnes studied the demographic makeup of Missouri in the 1830's. She concluded that, "The Lord could not have chosen a more challenging place in North America to build the city

of Zion than [where He did].” During this same time period the Lord asked the impoverished Saints to build a massive Temple in Kirtland. He later asked the Saints to accept the incredibly challenging practice of plural marriage, while at the same time asking the Saints to start all over once again by crossing the plains and settling an untamed desert. These are just a few of the many examples that could be mentioned.

At first glance, this idea of the “Uncomfortable Gospel” might seem to be in opposition to a few other sentiments stated in scripture. I can think of three that might come to mind. The first could be Lehi’s statement that, “Men are that they might have joy.” This certainly is a true principle, but it is pretty clear that the Lord’s joy generally does not appear to be the constant ease and plenty that might occur to us when we first think of joy. I am not saying that we shouldn’t relax and enjoy ourselves from time to time, but in my experience, many of the greatest joys of my life have come at the end, and sometime in the middle of, a lot of thorns and thistles, both for me and those I love. The joy I receive daily from my burning testimony of the Lord and His restored gospel, was first forged during the serious struggles and hardships of my full-time mission in the Dominican Republic. Our precious children and granddaughter were born after their mothers suffered a lot of discomfort and pain. The joy I feel from the powerful love I have for my wife has only increased as we have grown in unity during the serious mental and physical

illnesses we have experienced throughout our marriage. My time as a Bishop was one of the most challenging periods of my life, but also one of the most joyful as I was given a front row seat in watching the Lord work in the lives of His beloved Saints. These joys are real and powerful, and I would not trade them.

The second example some might consider to be in opposition to the “Uncomfortable Gospel” could be the statement by the Lord that if we take His yoke upon us, our yoke will be easy, and our burden light. Once again, in my experience, the Lord generally does not make our burdens light by removing them once His yoke is upon us. Rather, I suspect He means that all these thorns and thistles will cause our shoulders to be so strong, that between His strength, and our own growing strength, our burdens will *feel* light—not that the burdens themselves will be lightened or removed.¹ Therefore, the first part of the oft stated proverb: “The Gospel is to comfort the afflicted, and to afflict the comfortable,” might need to be modified to say: “The Uncomfortable Gospel is to *strengthen* the afflicted so that they can bear their burdens more comfortably.” Perhaps not as catchy, but maybe closer to the truth.

The third example could be the idea expressed so often in the Book of Mormon, that if we keep the commandments of God, we will prosper in the land. Many have interpreted this to mean that if we faithfully keep the commandments, our marriages will be happy, our children will turn out well, and our careers will be

successful. If this is the way we understand the word “prosper,” life will eventually disabuse us of this idea. Keeping the commandments does tend to create the stability, patience, self-discipline, and willingness to sacrifice that are necessary elements to succeed in our careers, our marriages, and raising children—and obeying the Word of Wisdom does help us avoid many health challenges that violators often face—but keeping the commandments certainly does not seem to guarantee success in all these areas. I believe the Lord’s promised prospering has much less to do with our wealth and success, and a lot more to do with our growth. In other words, I believe *prospering is how God strengthens us in the midst of the inevitable failures and hardships of our lives in ways that help us to learn and grow from them*. It doesn’t mean that challenges and trials won’t happen, but it does mean that if we are striving to keep the commandments, we will be in a position to learn and grow far more from these struggles than we otherwise would. The life of the prophet Brigham Young powerfully illustrates this point. Because of his association and responsibilities in the Church, Brigham lost everything he had multiple times in his life. The apostate John Hyde, who knew Brigham Young, left this remarkable assessment of the sincerity of Brigham Young:

“For the sake of his religion, he has over and over again left his family, confronted the world, endured hunger, come back poor, made wealth and given it to the Church. He holds himself prepared to lead his people in

sacrifice and want, as in plenty and ease. No holiday friend or summer prophet, he has shared in their trials as well as their prosperity... No man prays more fervently nor more frequently than Brigham Young. No man can more win the hearts nor impress the minds of his hearers than Brigham while in prayer. Few men can persist in believing him a hypocrite.”

-The Emergence of Brigham Young and the Twelve to Mormon Leadership, Ronald K Esplin, page 2

Another interesting description of Brigham Young was shared by one of his granddaughters:

“One night one of the saddles fell down from the peg, a rather expensive saddle, and got trampled in the filth all night long. When Brigham Young came out in the morning, he was furious. He called all the help together and gave them a real dressing down. Then he stormed down the hall and into his office. Emma Lucy Gates, being a little girl, was standing outside the door listening, and she heard him say, “Down on your knees, Brigham, get down on your knees!” -Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints, Hugh Nibley, page 471

I would submit to you that when he found the motivation and strength to start all over again after losing everything time and time again, that was the Lord prospering Brigham. That when his burning testimony of the Son of the living God gave him the strength to attempt the seemingly impossible tasks continually set before him, that was Brigham being prospered. And most of all, when he was

regularly driven to his knees to ask for guidance and forgiveness, that was Brigham being prospered! His life and the lives of so many of our spiritual forbears powerfully demonstrate the life shaping impacts, and prospering, of the “Uncomfortable Gospel.”

In contrast to the Lord’s “thorns and thistles” plan, the plan of Lucifer, who claims to be the god of this world, is to hide—to hide from the hard things of the Lord, and all the uncomfortable circumstances of life, to hide from responsibility for our actions and attitudes by claiming we are the victims, and to always take the path of least resistance. No matter what we may rationalize, consistently taking these paths will inevitably lead to spiritual, moral, emotional, and physical weakness, and just makes the climb back to our heavenly home that much harder.

And given the devotion that so many give to this philosophy of avoidance and self-centeredness, I have often wondered if there isn’t real merit to Satan’s claim of being the god of this world. Based on the behavior of humanity, it seems to me that he has many more worshipers than the true and living God. In American culture, with its hyper focus on entitlement, personal rights, and self-fulfillment; its obsession with endless lawsuits seeking what we think we are owed—and barring that, then hopefully winning the lottery—the philosophy of looking out for number one has become the new American religion. A few of the principles of this new religion do indeed appear to have some useful concepts, such as filling our own

cups, setting up boundaries, and ridding ourselves of toxic relationships. I'm not saying that these ideas aren't sometimes good and necessary, but when used too broadly, and when taken to extremes, it should be obvious how quickly and easily these practices can slip into simple hiding and avoidance techniques—which is exactly what the despiser of our souls desires for us.

Instead, He who loves us above all else asks us to build Temples and settle untamed wildernesses, to fill both our own as well as the cups of others, to engage with the thorns of life, to strive to heal relationships, to love our enemies, to freely give our coats and our cloaks when sued at the law, to walk the extra mile, to turn the other cheek, and to forgive.

Above all, I believe that the Lord's remedy for our society's spiritual cancer of hiding in self-centeredness, is to engage and bear with the thorns and thistles of life that most often come due to other people, by obeying His command ***"to be one."*** The idea of oneness and unity is one of the most powerful and frequently spoken doctrines in scripture. The Lord and His prophets seem almost obsessed with it. In John 17 Jesus prays to the Father "that they may be One, as we are". In 1 Nephi 21, Lehi counsels: "be determined in one mind and in one heart, united in all things". In Mosiah 18, Alma the Elder commands the people to have "their hearts knit together in unity and love one towards another". In D&C 38, the Lord commands His church: "be one; and if ye are not One ye are not mine." I believe

that this is one of the main reasons the Lord desires us to join the Church, serve in callings, and attend our meetings; so that we can learn to be one. By requiring that we regularly associate with each other, and serve each other, the Lord causes us to learn unity, patience, longsuffering, meekness, and forgiveness, all attributes required for a group of flawed individuals to become as one.

Of the many doctrines restored through the Prophet Joseph Smith, one of the most revolutionary was the idea that exaltation is not received by individuals, but by families sealed together for eternity. And not just by individual couples and families, but by all the exalted family of Adam; all ultimately sealed together through their various generations in a perfect unity. This idea has been beautifully expressed by one scholar who said: the song of redeeming love sung by the exalted in heaven is not a personal solo, but rather it is the performance of a unified celestial choir (John Welch, 2019 FAIR Conference). Indeed, as described in Moses 7, the people of Zion, the celestial city, are described as those that are “of one heart and one mind.”

The repercussions of this surprising restored doctrine are, that worshipping the Father and the Son as individuals in personal private acts of prayer and devotion are good and necessary steps, but ultimately these are Terrestrial Kingdom forms of worship. These continual acts of private devotion are required for us to participate in the true and Celestial form of worship desired by the Lord, which

consists of praying, serving, and sacrificing as a unified body of saints in our neighborhoods, in our communities, and in our Ward and Stake congregations.

In light of the Lord constantly pointing us to the importance of becoming unified as a people, it should become clear to us that one of the main purposes of His atonement— or his “at-one-ment”—is to not only make us one with Him and His Father, but also to make us one with each other. This means that if we are not striving to become one as a people, we are missing one of the most significant purposes of the Lord’s atonement.

So, what does it look like to become one as Latter-day Saints? We become one with the Prophet and Apostles by listening to their teachings and following their counsels. We become one in worshipping as a congregation by regularly attending our sacrament meetings. We become one with the Stake Presidency by worshipping together in Stake conference, rather than finding excuses not to attend. We become one with the Bishopric by accepting the callings they feel inspired to extend to us. We become one as we faithfully serve in the callings and ministering assignments we accept. We become one with our Sunday school, Primary, Relief Society, and Elders Quorum presidencies and instructors by attending and participating in the second hour of church. We become one with our kindred dead as we serve them in the Temple and do family history work. And ultimately, we become one with the Savior as we drink not just of the pleasant cups

of life, but also of the many bitter and uncomfortable cups of life that He allows to be presented to us, rather than turning and hiding from them.

In closing, I want to address the feeling some may have that they really don't *want* to hide, but the trials of life have worn them down so much that they don't possess the strength to fully engage in the Lord's Zion project. Illnesses, both physical and mental are real, and can be severely debilitating. In such cases, I like to think of the Lord's project as a great wagon train. We in the Church are all trying to move the wagon train forward. However, the sick and weak sometimes have to ride inside the wagons. This is ok. Some may have to stay there for the whole journey. The Lord *wants* us to carry others burdens when they cannot. The problem is that, as stated recently by a good friend, if you look under the calm surface of almost anyone, you will find a whole bunch of crazy. We all have challenges and issues of one kind or another. This means that all of us can find reasons that we should be riding in the wagons. But if everyone is riding in the wagons, then no one is doing the work necessary to make sure that the wagon train is successfully moving forward. Or, if all but a few are in the wagon, those working to move the train forward may find it almost impossible to make progress. For those that have no other choice than to ride, there are certainly things that can be done from inside the wagons to help the wagon train move forward. But for those remaining unnecessarily in the wagons, they are missing out on the many strengthening

opportunities available outside the wagons, and are also possibly losing the capacities and motivation they once had to help. This is why I would suggest that we carefully counsel with both the Lord and our leaders before we decide that we belong in the wagons, and strive to get out as soon as we possibly can.

It is my testimony that God lives. That Jesus Christ is our Savior and Redeemer, and that He has restored His church, and His “Uncomfortable Gospel”² so that we all may become “as one” in returning to His presence. It is my prayer that we all may do so.

In the sacred name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

Footnotes

1. “And I will also ease the burdens which are put upon your shoulders, that even you cannot feel them upon your backs, even while you are in bondage; and this will I do that ye may stand as witnesses for me hereafter, and that ye may know of a surety that I, the Lord God, do visit my people in their afflictions. And now it came to pass that the burdens which were laid upon Alma and his brethren were made light; yea, the Lord did strengthen them that they could bear up their burdens with ease, and they did submit cheerfully and with patience to all the will of the Lord.” Mosiah 24:14-15
2. The phrase “Uncomfortable Gospel” is a term I use to describe the Gospel revealed to us by the Prophets. After giving this talk, a good friend suggested that I may have overstepped my bounds with the idea of “The Uncomfortable Gospel,” since they could not find it anywhere in the scriptures, and had not heard a general authority describe the Gospel in quite the same way that I have in this talk. I will admit to being surprised by this comment, since I had not thought calling the Gospel uncomfortable would be considered controversial. But since at least one person had this question, I thought I would address this concern in a footnote. Although I will admit that the phrase is not scriptural, and perhaps my way of describing it—and my use of the Garden of Eden “thorns and thistles” episode as the first appearance of such discomfort—may be a little innovative, there are few things that I can think of that are more in harmony with the scriptures and the prophets than the idea that the Gospel, as taught by the Savior, is uncomfortable. I consider the sampling of the following teachings of the Savior and His prophets in the scriptures as very uncomfortable:
 - “For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. Matt 16:25
 - “But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;” Matt 5:44
 - “And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:27)
 - “And blessed are all they who are persecuted for my name’s sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. And blessed are ye when men shall revile you and persecute, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake;” 3 Ne 12:10-11
 - “For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory;” 2 Cor 4:17
 - “If thou art called to pass through tribulation; if thou art in perils among false brethren; if thou art in perils among robbers; if thou art in perils by land or by sea; If thou art accused with all manner of false accusations; if thine enemies fall upon thee; if they tear thee from the society of thy father and mother and brethren and sisters; and if with a drawn sword thine enemies tear thee from the bosom of thy wife, and of thine offspring, and thine elder son, although but six years of age, shall cling to thy garments, and shall say, My father, my father, why can’t you stay with us? O, my father, what are the men going to do with you? and if then he shall be thrust from thee by the sword, and thou be dragged to prison, and thine enemies prowl around thee like wolves for the blood of the lamb; And if thou shouldst be cast into the pit, or into the hands of murderers, and the sentence of death passed upon thee; if thou be cast into the deep; if the billowing surge conspire against thee; if fierce winds become thine enemy; if the heavens gather blackness, and all the elements combine to hedge up the way; and above all, if the very jaws of hell shall gape open the mouth wide after thee, know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good.” D&C 122:5-7

As for modern prophets, I can think of no better example than the following teaching by Elder Jeffrey R. Holland:

“Sadly enough, my young friends, it is a characteristic of our age that if people want any gods at all, they want them to be gods who do not demand much, comfortable gods, smooth gods who not only don’t rock the boat but don’t even row it, gods who pat us on the head, make us giggle, then tell us to run along and pick marigolds.

Talk about man creating God in his own image! Sometimes—and this seems the greatest irony of all—these folks invoke the name of Jesus as one who was this kind of “comfortable” God.

Really? He who said not only should we not break commandments, but we should not even think about breaking them. And if we do think about breaking them, we have already broken them in our heart. Does that sound like “comfortable” doctrine, easy on the ear and popular down at the village love-in?

And what of those who just want to look at sin or touch it from a distance? Jesus said with a flash, if your eye offends you, pluck it out. If your hand offends you, cut it off. “I came not to [bring] peace, but a sword,” He warned those who thought He spoke only soothing platitudes. No wonder that, sermon after sermon, the local communities “pray[ed] him to depart out of their coasts.” No wonder, miracle after miracle, His power was attributed not to God but to the devil.” Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, *The Cost—and Blessings—of Discipleship*, April 2014

Finally, as to my comment in the talk about the necessity of the “Uncomfortable Gospel,” the answer to that is addressed by the Restored Gospel’s reply to a centuries old theological debate called “The Problem of Evil.” This has been much discussed among LDS scholars. In a simple description, the Problem of Evil states that since God is all powerful, and He created all people, he could have made them to be good with no evil in the world. Since he did not, does that mean that God is not all powerful, or if He is, does that mean that He is ultimately responsible for all evil in the world, and men are not? The Restored Gospel has a satisfying answer to this particular problem, since it teaches that the “intelligence” of man, or that part of us that is capable of making free will choices, is co-eternal with God, and was not created by Him (D&C 93:29). Rather, those intelligences were organized by Him into living souls (Abr 3:22-25). This means He need not take any responsibility for our choices, and that He is merely shepherding us along to help us progress. However, this part of the answer only replies to the evil and good caused by the choices of humankind. There is still much suffering in life that is not caused by the choices of others, such as natural disasters, chance accidents, and genetically caused illnesses. This suffering, that is not caused by agency, is a large component of what I call the Lord’s “thorns and thistles” plan. If God is all powerful, could He not have created a world without such suffering? Since He did not, He is either a sadist that enjoys torturing His creations, the Nicene Creed’s unfeeling God, without body, parts or passions, or there was no other way to enact His plan for His children than to allow for such suffering. Given the Restored Gospel’s revelation of the loving nature of God (1 John 4:8, 1 Ne 11:17, Moses 7:29-31), I feel it must be the “no other way” reason, and that a major purpose for such suffering is its educative role in helping us progress to return to His presence.