

Infuriating Unfairness

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Jesus Christ both understands unfairness and has the power to provide a remedy.

In 1994, a genocide took place in the East African country of Rwanda that was partly due to deep-seated tribal tensions. Estimates are that more than half a million people were killed.¹ Remarkably, the Rwandan people have in large part reconciled,² but these events continue to reverberate.

A decade ago, while visiting Rwanda, my wife and I struck up a conversation with another passenger at the Kigali airport. He lamented the unfairness of the genocide and poignantly asked, “If there were a God, wouldn’t He have done something about it?” For this man—and for many of us—suffering and brutal unfairness can seem incompatible with the reality of a kind, loving Heavenly Father. Yet He is real, He is kind, and He loves each of His children perfectly. This dichotomy is as old as mankind and cannot be explained in a simple sound bite or on a bumper sticker.

To begin to make some sense of it, let us explore various types of unfairness. Consider a family in which each child received a weekly monetary allowance for doing common household chores. One son, John, purchased candy; one daughter, Anna, saved her money. Eventually, Anna bought herself a bicycle. John thought it was totally unfair that Anna got a bike when he did not. But John’s choices created the inequality, not parental actions. Anna’s decision to forgo the immediate gratification of eating candy did not impose any unfairness on John, because he had the same opportunity as his sister.

Our decisions can likewise yield long-term advantages or disadvantages. As the Lord revealed, “If a person gains more knowledge and intelligence in this life *through his diligence and obedience* than another, he will have so much the advantage in the world to come.”³ When others receive benefits because of their diligent choices, we cannot rightly conclude that we have been treated unfairly when we have had the same opportunity.

Another example of unfairness stems from a situation my wife, Ruth, encountered as a child. One day Ruth learned that her mother was taking a younger sister, Merla, to buy new shoes. Ruth complained, “Mom, it’s so unfair! Merla got the last new pair of shoes.”

Ruth’s mother asked, “Ruth, do your shoes fit?”

Ruth replied, “Well, yes.”

Ruth's mother then said, "Merla's shoes no longer fit."

Ruth agreed that every child in the family should have shoes that fit. Although Ruth would have liked new shoes, her perception of being treated unfairly dissipated when she saw the circumstances through her mother's eyes.

Some unfairness cannot be explained; inexplicable unfairness is infuriating. Unfairness comes from living with bodies that are imperfect, injured, or diseased. Mortal life is inherently unfair. Some people are born in affluence; others are not. Some have loving parents; others do not. Some live many years; others, few. And on and on and on. Some individuals make injurious mistakes even when they are trying to do good. Some choose not to alleviate unfairness when they could. Distressingly, some individuals use their God-given agency to hurt others when they never should.

Different types of unfairness can merge, creating a tsunami of overwhelming unfairness. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affects those who already are subject to multifactorial, underlying disadvantages. My heart aches for those who face such unfairness, but I declare with all my aching heart that Jesus Christ both understands unfairness and has the power to provide a remedy. Nothing compares to the unfairness He endured. It was not fair that He experienced all the pains and afflictions of mankind. It was not fair that He suffered for my sins and mistakes and for yours. But He chose to do so because of His love for us and for Heavenly Father. He understands perfectly what we are experiencing.⁴

Scripture records that ancient Israelites complained that God was treating them unfairly. In response, Jehovah asked, "For can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb?" As unlikely as it is that a loving mother would forget her infant child, Jehovah declared that His devotion was even more steadfast. He affirmed: "Yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee. ... Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands; thy walls are continually before me."⁵ Because Jesus Christ endured the infinite atoning sacrifice, He empathizes perfectly with us.⁶ He is always aware of us and our circumstances.

In mortality, we can "come boldly" to the Savior and receive compassion, healing, and help.⁷ Even while we suffer inexplicably, God can bless us in simple, ordinary, and significant ways. As we learn to recognize these blessings, our trust in God will increase. In the eternities, Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ will resolve all unfairness. We understandably want to know *how* and *when*. *How* are They going to do that? *When* are They going to do it? To my knowledge, They have not revealed *how* or *when*.⁸ What I do know is that They *will*.

In unfair situations, one of our tasks is to trust that "all that is unfair about life can be made right through the Atonement of Jesus Christ."⁹ Jesus Christ overcame the world and "absorbed" all unfairness. Because of Him, we can have peace in this world and be of good cheer.¹⁰ If we let Him, Jesus Christ will consecrate the unfairness for our gain.¹¹ He will not just console us and restore what was lost;¹²

He will use the unfairness for our benefit. When it comes to *how* and *when*, we need to recognize and accept, as did Alma, that “it mattereth not; for God knoweth all these things; and it sufficeth me to know that this is the case.”¹³

We can try to hold our questions about *how* and *when* for later and focus on developing faith in Jesus Christ, that He has both the power to make everything right and yearns to do so.¹⁴ For us to insist on knowing *how* or *when* is unproductive and, after all, myopic.¹⁵

As we develop faith in Jesus Christ, we should also strive to become like Him. We then approach others with compassion and try to alleviate unfairness where we find it;¹⁶ we can try to make things right within our sphere of influence. Indeed, the Savior directed that we “should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of [our] own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness.”¹⁷

Someone who has been anxiously engaged in combating unfairness is attorney Bryan Stevenson. His legal practice in the United States is dedicated to defending the wrongly accused, ending excessive punishment, and protecting basic human rights. Some years ago, Mr. Stevenson defended a man who had been falsely accused of murder and was condemned to die. Mr. Stevenson asked the man’s local Christian church for support, even though the man was not active in his church and was disparaged in the community due to a widely known extramarital affair.

To focus the congregation on what really mattered, Mr. Stevenson spoke to them about the woman accused of adultery who was brought to Jesus. The accusers wanted to stone her to death, but Jesus said, “He that is without sin ... , let him first cast a stone at her.”¹⁸ The woman’s accusers withdrew. Jesus did not condemn the woman but charged her to sin no more.¹⁹

After recounting this episode, Mr. Stevenson observed that self-righteousness, fear, and anger have caused even Christians to hurl stones at people who stumble. He then said, “We can’t simply watch that happen,” and he encouraged the congregants to become “stonecatchers.”²⁰ Brothers and sisters, not throwing stones is the first step in treating others with compassion. The second step is to try to catch stones thrown by others.

How we deal with advantages and disadvantages is part of life’s test. We will be judged not so much by what we say but by how we treat the vulnerable and disadvantaged.²¹ As Latter-day Saints, we seek to follow the Savior’s example, to go about doing good.²² We demonstrate our love for our neighbor by working to ensure the dignity of all Heavenly Father’s children.

With our own advantages and disadvantages in mind, reflection is healthy. For John to understand why Anna got the bike was revealing. For Ruth to view Merla’s need for shoes through her mother’s eyes was enlightening. To try to see things with an eternal perspective can be clarifying. As we become more like the Savior, we develop more empathy, understanding, and charity.

I return to the question posed by our fellow passenger in Kigali when he lamented the unfairness of the Rwandan genocide and asked, “If there were a God, wouldn’t

He have done something about it?”

Without minimizing the suffering caused by the genocide, and after acknowledging our inability to comprehend such suffering, we replied that Jesus Christ has done something about infuriating unfairness.²³ We explained many gospel precepts concerning Jesus Christ and the Restoration of His Church.²⁴

Afterward, our acquaintance asked, with tears in his eyes, “You mean there is something I can do for my dead parents and uncle?”

We said, “Oh, yes!” We then testified that all that is unfair about life can be made right through the Atonement of Jesus Christ and that by His authority families can be joined together forever.

When faced with unfairness, we can push ourselves away from God or we can be drawn toward Him for help and support. For example, the prolonged warfare between the Nephites and the Lamanites affected people differently. Mormon observed that “many had become hardened” while others “were softened because of their afflictions, insomuch that they did humble themselves before God.”²⁵

Do not let unfairness harden you or corrode your faith in God. Instead, ask God for help. Increase your appreciation for and reliance on the Savior. Rather than becoming bitter, let Him help you become better.²⁶ Allow Him to help you persevere, to let your afflictions be “swallowed up in the joy of Christ.”²⁷ Join Him in His mission “to heal the brokenhearted,”²⁸ strive to mitigate unfairness, and become a stonecatcher.²⁹

I testify that the Savior lives. He understands unfairness. The marks in the palms of His hands continually remind Him of you and your circumstances. He ministers to you in all your distress. For those who come unto Him, a crown of beauty will replace the ashes of mourning; joy and gladness will replace grief and sorrow; appreciation and celebration will replace discouragement and despair.³⁰ Your faith in Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ will be rewarded more than you can imagine. All unfairness—especially infuriating unfairness—will be consecrated for your gain. I so testify in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.