Introduction

“O God, where art thou?  And where is the pavilion that covereth thy hiding place?  How long shall thy hand be stayed and thine eye, yea thy pure eye, behold from the eternal heavens the wrongs of they people and of thy servants, and thine ear be penetrated with their cries?  Yea, O Lord, how long shall they suffer these wrongs and unlawful oppressions, before thine heart shall be softened toward them, and thy bowels be moved with compassion toward them?  O Lord God Almighty, maker of heaven, earth, and seas, and of all things that in them are, and who controllerst and subjectest the devil, and the dark and benighted dominion of Sheol—stretch forth thy hand; let thine eye pierce; let thy pavilion be taken up; let they hiding place no longer be covered; let thine ear be inclined; let thine heart be softened, and thy bowels moved with compassion toward us.  Let thine anger be kindled against our enemies; and, in the fury of thine heart, with thy sword avenge us of our wrongs.  Remember thy suffering saints, O our God; and thy servants will rejoice in thy name forever.”  (D&C 121:1-6)

Months of misery, oppression, persecution, deprivation, mobs, looting, robbing, murders and dark prison cells stirred Joseph to declare these words.  His questions evoked some of the most sublime revelatory responses, now published in the Doctrine & Covenants section 121-122.  After a historical review of the circumstances under which these revelations were received, we will explore the divine purpose of life and the role that suffering plays.

Fleeing Kirtland in 1838 for the Safety of Zion

In fall 1837 and early winter 1838 deceit, apostasy and bitter animosity burned through the foundations of the young church at Kirtland, Ohio.  The divisions were so great that one group of apostates claimed that the Kirtland Temple was their possession, they physically blocked the members from worshiping there and many of the church leaders were compelled to flee Kirtland for their lives. ((William Edwin Berrett, The Restored Church: A Brief History of the Growth and Doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 4th edition (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1944), pp. 188-192.))  Once again the faithful saints packed up their belongings and migrated for the hope of a promised land, much like their 1831 migration from upstate New York to Kirtland, Ohio.  Zion—Missouri—was their promised land.

Despite the calamities that surrounded Joseph and the other faithful saints from Kirtland they found safety and peace in Missouri, but only for a short time.  The migrating saints settled in Far West, Missouri and other surrounding areas Daviess, Livingston, Carroll and Ray counties.  The Missouri saints had settled these areas late in 1833 after they were forcibly expelled from JacksonCounty.  So, to Far West came the eastern saints, not just those from Kirtland, but many from Canada and even from England. ((The Canadian mission (1836) and the England mission (1837) brought many souls into the church who desired to gather to Zion and unite with the common body of saints.))  The hopes of Zion were again established as a large and vigorous community of saints gathered together in Missouri to build a city and a temple.  For a time, it seemed that the past difficulties and animosities with the citizens of Missouri had been forgotten, but slowly the smoldering flame of fear, anger and jealously ignited the fires of hell.

Zion Opposed Once Again

As the numbers of Mormons swelled throughout Missouri the old settlers feared to lose their political and religious power.  Unfortunately, some events such as Sidney Rigdon’s fiery 4th of July speech in Far West the summer of 1838 on the subject of freedom aroused the deepest anxieties of the old settlers who began to arm themselves and harass the saints.  Soon the burning of haystacks turned to thrusting families out while the mob destroyed their home.  The situation escalated throughout the fall of 1838.

Understandably many of the Mormons were outraged and sought to defend themselves.  A Mormon militia was formed for the physical defense of the saints and was sent forth to disperse the mobs.  On October 25,1838 a small
band of the Mormon militia headed by Apostles David Patten and Lyman Wight engaged in a night skirmish with an armed band of the Missouri militia near Crooked River about 12 miles south of Far West. Although the number wounded or killed on both sides was at a minimum, the Missouri militia immediately appealed to Governor Boggs with inflated and exaggerated stories that imminent doom awaited the Missourians at the hands of the Mormons. The following is an example of one of the outlandish reports about the battle of Crooked River and Mormon plans for conquest used to excite the fear and anger of Governor Boggs:

“Captain Bogart and all his company, amounting to between fifty and sixty men were massacred by the Mormons…This statement you may rely on as being true and last night they expected Richmond to be laid in ashes this morning….We know not the hour or minute we will be laid in ashes—our country is ruined—for God’s sake give us assistance as quick as possible.” ((B.H. Roberts, Comprehensive History of the Church 1:477.))

The day after receiving this and other similar bogus reports Governor Boggs issued the extermination order. ((The extermination order, issued on Saturday, October 27, 1838, reads in part, “The Mormons must be treated as enemies and must be exterminated or driven from the state, if necessary for the public good. Their outrages are beyond description. If you can increase your force, you are authorized to do so, to any extent you may think necessary.”)) Three days after the infamous extermination order was issued the Haun’s Mill massacre took place (October 30, 1838). Mormons feared for their lives and poured into the city of Far West from outlying communities. Full-scale war seemed imminent.

“The (Mormon) militia of Far West guarded the city…and arranged a temporary fortification of wagons, timber, etc. on the south. The sisters, many of them, were engaged in gathering up their most valuable effects, fearing a terrible battle in the morning, and that the houses might be fired and they obliged to flee. The enemy was five to one against us.” ((So wrote Joseph Smith in History of the Church 3:188.))

Surrender and Suffering of the Saints

On the morning of October 31, 1838 the Missouri militia sent a white flag of truce to the Mormons at Far West. “Colonel George M. Hinkle, who was at that time the highest officer of the Mormon militia assembled for the defense of Far West” (The Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt, Revised and Enhanced Edition, p. 234.) met the flag and represented Joseph Smith and the rest of the defending Mormons. Shortly thereafter Hinkle returned to assure the Prophet and other church leaders that they would be safe to surrender themselves to the Missouri militia. Only later did Joseph Smith and the other leaders realize that Hinkle had betrayed them into the hands of the Missouri militia. They were taken as prisoners and treated with great contempt. The prisoners included Joseph Smith, Parley P. Pratt, Sidney Rigdon, Hyrum Smith, Amasa Lyman and George Robinson. ((Lucy Mack Smith records, “At the time when Joseph went into the enemy’s camp, Mr. Smith and myself stood in the door of the house in which we were then living, and could distinctly hear their horrid yellings. Not knowing the cause, we supposed they were murdering him. Soon after the screaming commenced, five or six guns were discharged. At this Mr. Smith, folding his arms tight over his breast and grasping his sides, cried, groaning with mental agony, ‘Oh, my God! my God! they have murdered my son and I must die, for I cannot live without him!’ I was unable to answer him. In all our other troubles I had been able to speak a word of consolation to him, but now I could do nothing but mingle my cries and groans with his. Still, the shrieking and screaming continued. No tongue can express the sound that was conveyed to our ears nor the sensations that were produced in our hearts. It was like the screeching of a hundred owls mingled with the howling of an army of bloodhounds and the screaming of a thousand panthers all famishing for the prey which was being torn piecemeal among them. My husband was immediately taken sick and never regained his health afterwards, although he lived for two more years.” The Revised and Enhanced History of Joseph Smith by His Mother, edited by Scot Facer Proctor & Maurine Jensen Proctor (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), pp. 405-406.)) Parley describes the awful circumstances of that first night:
“In camp we were placed under a strong guard, and were without shelter during the night, lying on the ground in the open air, in the midst of a great rain. The guards during the whole night kept up a constant tirade of mockery, and the most obscene blackguardism and abuse.” ((The Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt, Revised and Enhanced Edition, p. 235.))

Many of the leaders of the Missouri militia debated through the night and finally decided to execute these prisoners come morning at the public square in full view of all the inhabitants of Far West. This scheme was firmly opposed by one of the commanding officers of the militia, Brigadier-General Doniphan and so the execution was averted. Nevertheless, the militia wanted their bounty.

“The brutal mob were now turned loose to ravage, steal, plunder and murder without restraint. Houses were rifled, women ravished, and goods taken as they pleased. The whole troop, together with their horses, lived on the grain and provisions. While cattle were shot down for mere sport, and sometimes men, women and children fared no better. On the third morning after our imprisonment...we were now marched to Far West, under the conduct of the whole army; and while they halted in the public square, we were permitted to go with a guard for a change of linen and to take final leave of our families, in order to depart as prisoners to (Liberty Jail) Jackson County, a distance of sixty miles.” ((The Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt, Revised and Enhanced Edition, pp. 236-237.))

The heart-wrenching account of Joseph’s final farewell before going to prison opens up the full scene of suffering and abuse encountered on every side in Far West in early November 1838 as the Missouri militia ruthlessly mistreated the saints.

“I found my wife and children in tears, who feared we had been shot by those who had sworn to take our lives, and that they would see me no more. When I entered my house, they clung to my garments, their eyes streaming with tears, while mingled emotions of joy and sorrow were manifested in their countenances. I requested to have a private interview with them a few minutes, but this privilege was denied me by the guard. I was then obliged to take my departure. Who can realize the feelings which I experienced at that time, to be thus torn from my companion, and leave her surrounded with monsters in the shape of men, and my children, too, not knowing how their wants would be supplied; while I was to be taken far from them in order that my enemies might destroy me when they thought proper to do so. My partner wept, my children clung to me, until they were thrust from me by the swords of the guards. I felt overwhelmed while I witnessed this scene, and could only recommend them to the care of that God whose kindness had followed me to the present time, and who alone could protect them, and deliver me from the hands of my enemies and restore me to my family.” ((History of the Church 3:193. Parley Pratt also offers a detailed description of the anguish accompanying their departure, “This was the most trying scene of all. I went to my house, being guarded by two or three soldiers; the cold rain was pouring down without, and on entering my little cottage, there lay my wife sick of a fever, with which she had been for some time confined. At her breast was our son Nathan, an infant of three months, and by her side a little girl of five years. On the foot of the same bed lay a woman in travail, who had been driven from her house in the night, and had taken momentary shelter in my hut of ten feet square—my larger house having been torn down. I stepped to the bed; my wife burst into tears; I spoke a few words of comfort, telling her to try to live for my sake and the children’s; and expressing a hope that we should meet again though years might separate us. She promised to try to live. I then embraced and kissed the little babes and departed. Till now I had refrained from weeping; but, to be forced from so helpless a family, who were destitute of provisions and fuel, and deprived almost of shelter in a bleak prairie, with none to assist them, exposed to a lawless banditti who were utter strangers to humanity, and this at the approach of winter, was more than nature could well endure. I went to Gen. Moses Wilson in tears, and stated the
circumstances of my sick, heart-broken and destitute family in terms which would have moved any heart that had a latent spark of humanity yet remaining. But I was only answered with an exultant laugh, and a taunt of reproach by this hardened murderer. As I returned from my house towards the troops in the square, I halted with the guard at the door of Hyrum Smith, and heard the sobs and groans of his wife, at his parting words. She was then near confinement; and needed more than ever the comfort and consolation of a husband’s presence. As we returned to the wagon we saw S. Rigdon taking leave of his wife and daughters, who stood at a little distance, in tears of anguish indescribable. In the wagon sat Joseph Smith, while his aged father and venerable mother came up overwhelmed with tears, and took each of the prisoners by the hand with a silence of grief too great for utterance.”  


After nearly a month of trial in Richmond, Missouri where the opposing party did not let Joseph bring forward any witnesses in his defense or that of the Mormons, the prisoners were carted off to Independence where they were thrown into the most dismal jail. Nearly four months of awful confinement awaited them (December 1838-March 1839). It was in these oppressive conditions that Joseph received D&C 121-122.

Doctrines of the Kingdom Revealed in the Midst of Suffering

These sections offer precious morsels of doctrinal significance concerning the nature of suffering, the purpose of suffering and the work of God. One can review the awful circumstances through which early Mormons passed and then question why the Lord allowed so many faithful individuals to suffer such pain, anguish, physical hardship and deprivation. Many may ask, “How can God who is good allow suffering?” ((This is one of the great questions of life. In philosophical or theological terms an answer to such a question, which reaffirms God’s almighty power despite evil, suffering and sin in the world is called a theodicy. Other ancient examples abound such as the Biblical book of Job and from the world of ancient Mesopotamia is the beautiful “Poem of the Righteous Sufferer” also known by its Akkadian title “Ludlul bel nemeqi.”)) From the earliest moments of civilization faithful people have posed this question. The ensuing answers have been beautiful, insightful, even powerful. For instance, righteous Job lost his entire family, all of his flocks and fields and his home. His body was afflicted with boils, his wife urged him to curse God and die and his closest friends accused him of unrighteousness. In the midst of all of these difficulties he exclaimed,

“I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: and though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God.” (Job 19:25-26)

Job’s undying testimony of the reality and power of God sustained him throughout his painful ordeals. When Joseph asked, “O God, where art thou?” the powerful, yet simple reply came,

“My son, peace be unto thy soul; thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment; and then if thou endure it well, God shall exalt thee on high; thou shalt triumph over all thy foes.”  
(D&C 121:7-8)

And then a gentle rebuke followed:

“Thy friends do stand by thee, and they shall hail thee again with warm hearts and friendly hands. Thou art not yet as Job; thy friends do not contend against thee, neither charge thee with transgression, as they did Job.”  
(D&C 121:9-10)

So then, what is the purpose of suffering and afflictions? We have the blessed assurance to inherit eternal life if we endure our suffering and afflictions well. But is that the purpose of this life, simply
to endure suffering? We know that suffering is not the end of our creation for Lehi teaches us, “Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy” (2 Nephi 2:25). We learn additional truth from Alma who testified, “For behold, this life is the time for men to prepare to meet God” (Alma 34:32). We also know that the Lord, who created this earth for us to dwell upon, decreed, “And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them” (Abraham 3:25). Thus we are in a probationary (testing) state, a time for us to learn to live as the Lord commanded, “therefore, what manner of men ought ye to be? Verily I say unto you, even as I am” (3 Nephi 27:27). Similarly the Lord commands, “Be ye therefore perfect, ((It is significant that the word “perfect” is translated from the Greek “telos” which means, “end or goal toward which a movement is being directed…the final goal toward which men and things are striving, of the outcome or destiny which awaits them in accordance (with) their nature” found in Walter Bauer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 811). Footnote 48b of Matthew 5:48 includes, “complete, finished, fully developed” as words describing the Greek “telos.”) even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48).

For us to become as God is we must use our moral agency to choose righteousness despite the temptations, difficulties and suffering that surround us. “For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. If not so…righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness, neither holiness nor misery, neither good nor bad” (2 Nephi 2:11). The Lord explained further through revelation that “It must needs be that the devil should tempt the children of men, or they could not be agents unto themselves; for if they never should have bitter they could not know the sweet” (D&C 29:39). Again the Lord teaches us, “they taste the bitter, that they may know to prize the good” (Moses 6:55). Thus the scriptures teach us that for us to navigate this life we must experience both the bitter and the sweet and learn to prize the good. Suffering is a key component of our temporal and eternal opportunities for happiness, whether that suffering be inflicted through personal carelessness and disobedience or because of the weaknesses and mistakes of others or because the Lord sees fit to allow us to suffer, be tried and chastened. ((Indeed, it appears in some cases the Lord intentionally issues commandments that will lead us into suffering that we might thereby grow and progress. Consider as an example the commandment given unto Abraham in Genesis 22 to offer up his beloved son Isaac and then reflect upon the Lord’s words to Joseph Smith in D&C 101:1-5 given in December 1833 at the time the Missouri saints were suffering great affliction and persecution by being driven from their Jackson County homes.))

The Lord taught Joseph Smith a key principle of truth regarding suffering when the mobs drove the Missouri saints from their homes in November 1833:

“Verily I say unto you, concerning your brethren who have been afflicted, and persecuted, and cast out from the land of their inheritance—I, the Lord, have suffered the affliction to come upon them, wherewith they have been afflicted, in consequence of their transgressions; yet I will own them, and they shall be mine in that day when I shall come to make up my jewels. Therefore, they must needs be chastened and tried, even as Abraham, who was commanded to offer up his only son. For all those who will not endure chastening, but deny me, cannot be sanctified.” (D&C 101:1-5)

This beautiful perspective on the purpose of suffering was augmented by further revelation to Joseph Smith five years later as he sat destitute in the Liberty Jail.

“If thou are 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)

We are never alone. God is always with us—even in the midst of our greatest suffering. He has a perfect knowledge and comprehension of our suffering for he himself declared,

“The Son of Man hath descended below them all. Art thou greater than he?” (D&C 122:8)

That complete Godly condescension on our behalf is found recorded in D&C 19 detailed with a description of sacred suffering given by God himself.

“For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent; but if they would not repent they must suffer even as I; 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—nevertheless, glory be to the Father, and I partook and finished my preparations unto the children of men.” (D&C 19:16-19).

We all must suffer in order to grow, progress and have experience. Yet none of us will ever have to endure what the Lord suffered for us, if we repent. The great message of the restored gospel is that Christ lives, He is our Eternal Savior, and He fully comprehends our sufferings and stands with us through them. Thus we are never alone so that when we feel to cry out in the anguish of our soul, “O God, where art thou?” we hear the gentle and affirming reply, “Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness.” (Isaiah 41:10)