

“It Must Needs Be”

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After speaking to his son Jacob about Jesus Christ’s redemption of mankind, the Book of Mormon prophet Lehi declares, “It must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things” (2 Ne. 2:11). We often use the word *opposition* colloquially to explain the difficulties or challenges that we or others encounter. When others experience troubling times, we frequently, as well-intentioned members of the Church, remind them of this sentiment. Our aim is to provide solace for the one who is suffering by pointing out that facing opposition is a common feature of life (even if normalizing the suffering may inadvertently minimize, as the Jewish scholar Rachel Adler puts it, the “agony and grief [of the sufferer] in all their unendurable concreteness”¹).

However, this view of opposition is incomplete. While the online Merriam-Webster dictionary includes several definitions for *opposition* that reflect antagonistic, adversarial, or otherwise difficult situations,² other definitions derive from the Latin verb *opponere*, with the prefix or preposition *ob* (“in the direction of, in front of, because of”³) and

1. Rachel Adler, “Feminist Judaism: Past and Future,” *CrossCurrents* 51, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 486.

2. Merriam-Webster, s.v. “opposition,” accessed November 27, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/opposition>. See also the definitions in the 1828 dictionary that was available during Joseph Smith’s time: <https://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/opposition>.

3. Online Etymology Dictionary, s.v. “ob-,” accessed November 27, 2023, https://www.etymonline.com/word/ob-#etymonline_v_2404.

ponere (“to put, set, place”⁴). Accordingly, opposition can also reflect the act of placing something in a position relative to another thing. A given position is not inherently troubling or difficult. It does not necessarily convey a negative or positive meaning. Alessio Moretti, a professor of literature, identified multiple ways to characterize these types of opposing positions: (1) as symmetric or reflective of one another (as a mirror), (2) with inverse or contrasting qualities (as a photograph and its negative image), and (3) ordered (as in front, behind, or next to).⁵

To further illustrate this relational meaning, opposite numbers are the same distance from zero on a number line. A negative seven (-7) is the same distance from zero as a positive seven ($+7$). In this context, the word *opposite* denotes a relationship. A set of values that represent this type of relationship could include positive and negative three, positive and negative nineteen, or positive and negative twenty-five. The relationship of any of these sets does not change relative to the number line: both numbers are equidistant from zero.

The relational meaning of opposition helps us recognize the variety of dialectical forces operating in our lives. The scriptures are filled with examples of women and men who confront opposite and even contradictory directives, leading to personal dilemmas. Abraham and Nephi were prompted to take another’s life, violating God’s commandment not to murder (Gen. 22:3; 1 Ne. 4:10). In the Garden of Eden, God exhorted Adam and Eve to “be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth” (Gen. 1:28), on the one hand, and not eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17), on the other. By eating the fruit of this tree, Adam and Eve, as Elder Holland says, “transgressed a commandment of God.”⁶ But if Adam and Eve did not eat the fruit as commanded, they would have been unable to satisfy the commandment to multiply and replenish the earth (2 Ne. 2:23).

There are moments when God uses oppositional or seemingly contradictory circumstances to bring about his eternal purposes. Second Nephi 2:15 speaks about Adam and Eve’s experience of opposition as fulfilling God’s ultimate objective: “And to bring about his eternal purposes

4. Online Etymology Dictionary, s.v. “opposition (n.),” accessed November 27, 2023, https://www.etymonline.com/word/opposition#etymonline_v_7086.

5. Alessio Moretti, “The Geometry of Logical Opposition” (PhD diss., Université de Neuchâtel, 2009), 23–24, <https://citeserx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=7366a3a725e374cb4e23fd352419e3a92ead5078>.

6. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Where Justice, Love, and Mercy Meet,” *Ensign* 45, no. 5 (May 2015): 105.

in the end of man, after he had created our first parents, . . . it must needs be that there was an opposition; even the forbidden fruit in opposition to the tree of life; the one being sweet and the other bitter." God's eternal purpose includes a fallen state where we learn simultaneously from good *and* evil. Exposure to these opposing forces led Adam and Eve to "the Only Begotten of the Father" (Moses 5:7). Christ's Atonement also fulfilled God's eternal purpose: "And the Messiah cometh . . . that he may redeem the children of men from the fall. And because that they are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, knowing good from evil" (2 Ne. 2:26). When they ate the fruit and God introduced the Atonement, Adam and Eve gained the knowledge of and ability to practice discerning good from evil. Eve's discernment and foresight to choose one of the commandments at the expense of the other in that moment brought about the Fall *and* Christ's Atonement. Without opposition, Eve would not have had the choice that brought about "the joy of [their] redemption" (Moses 5:11).

Similarly, we can view phenomena we consider to be opposites as existing simultaneously. That is, many situations or decisions may involve positive *and* negative aspects and outcomes. A decision to move across the country may be financially beneficial to the person moving, but the friend and neighbor who remains might be sad. Or the person moving might be excited about certain aspects of the move *and* feel sad to leave the neighbor and friend behind. The death of a loved one, though excruciating, can bring family members closer to one another or help them feel God's love to a greater degree for a time. Personal relationships often contain highs and lows, or a difficult relationship in the present can help prepare a person for more healthy relationships in the future.

In March 1839, the Prophet Joseph Smith had spent months in jail while members of the Church faced intense and unspeakable persecution. Caleb Baldwin, who was imprisoned with Joseph Smith, learned that his son had been "beaten nearly to death by Missourians with hickory sticks."⁷ Joseph Smith's despair is evident in his petition to God: "O God, where art thou? And where is the pavilion that covereth thy hiding place?" (D&C 121:1). Joseph Smith continues his prayer by pleading for God to intervene (D&C 121:4–5). Members of the Church had wrongfully, unlawfully, and

⁷ "John Gribble, Paragoonah, 1864 July 7," Church History Library, Salt Lake City; quoted in "Within the Walls of Liberty Jail," in *Revelations in Context*, ed. Matthew McBride and James Goldberg (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016), 259.

mercilessly suffered, and Joseph no doubt felt powerless. For him, the situation called for God to intercede on behalf of, demonstrate compassion for, and deliver those who were suffering. Joseph wanted God to change God's position relative to Joseph's. But God ostensibly did nothing at the time, and Joseph Smith did not understand why. These distressing events seemed to contradict Joseph Smith's firsthand knowledge of God's power, compassion, and vision for the Church's survival and future success. But the trials Joseph Smith and others experienced were simultaneously devastating *and* included certain value, as illustrated by God's response to Joseph that "all these things shall give thee experience, and [ultimately] shall be for thy good" (D&C 122:7).

What personal dilemmas or contradictions between opposites do we face? Despite our very best efforts, our circumstances might involve a sincere desire to be married or have children, or for loved ones to make different decisions. We may have poor mental health that disrupts our personal relationships or the extent to which we feel God's presence and love. We may feel isolated, homesick, or entangled in seemingly irreparable or harmful relationships. We—and others we love—may confront dilemmas that hinder our efforts or contradict our deeply held aspirations to align ourselves with God's will. Such situations could be related to the death of a loved one, financial burdens or loss of employment, discrimination and prejudice, terminal illness, chronic or debilitating disease, suicidal ideation or attempted suicide, women's roles in the Church, the Church's past marked by a priesthood ban for Black men, the personal weaknesses of Church leaders, a faith crisis, or cultural and political expressions by other members of the Church with which we strongly disagree. These dilemmas we face are heartbreakingly painful, distressing, and unresolvable in the moment. Any of these situations have the potential to push us beyond our physical, spiritual, and emotional limits.

Lehi's discussion of Jesus's redemption precedes his comment that it "must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things" and provides a useful backdrop for understanding the tensions that can trigger personal crises. These difficult experiences consist of a relationship between competing demands or the juxtaposition of both positive and negative influences or outcomes. Though personal crises sometimes feel as if they push us farther from God, these moments can also draw us closer to him—even amid contradiction. Just as opposite values on a number line describe a relationship, these situations place us in prime position to recognize our dependence on Jesus Christ more fully. The personal dilemmas that pull us in multiple directions simultaneously provide

poignant opportunities for us to seek Jesus Christ and experience his grace. In these moments, when there is no obvious path forward or it seems difficult or impossible to navigate, Jesus Christ becomes *the Way* forward (John 14:6), and our dependence on him becomes unmistakable. We become profoundly desperate for his intercession in our lives. We ache to be remembered and comforted by the only one who can “succor [us] according to [our] infirmities” (Alma 7:12).

When we seek Jesus Christ *and* opposition remains, our relationship with him deepens. By virtue of these persisting circumstances, we spend more time with God on “bended knee.”⁸ These moments provide a portal through which we can spend more time in his presence and feel his love more deeply. And as we continue to commune with him, we become even more disposed to recognize, learn about, and receive the depths of his grace. Precisely *because* the circumstances remain unresolved, opposition is the invitation and gateway to a more personal and sacred relationship with God. Relief and solace begin to come about because of the relationship itself, even when nothing changes or things get worse. Because of our ever-increasing emotional bond with and greater knowledge of the divine, we begin to experience God’s “blessings . . . through raindrops,” and “healing . . . through tears.” We come to know that “a thousand sleepless nights are what it takes to know [God is] near” and the “trials of this life [become his] mercies in disguise.”⁹

In the field of astronomy, planetary bodies are considered “in opposition” when they are aligned. At the moment of opposition, the angle between them is approximately 180 degrees.¹⁰ For example, when the earth is situated directly between the sun and moon, it is considered in opposition. A full moon appears because its entire surface reflects the sun’s light.¹¹ Incidentally, this is the best time to observe planets. “During opposition the planet appears at its largest and brightest, and it is

8. Elizabeth Lloyd Howell, “Milton’s Prayer for Patience,” in *The World’s Great Religious Poetry*, ed. Caroline Miles Hill (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973), 19.

9. LoveOneAnother2011, “Laura Story—Blessings,” YouTube video, 1:05–33, accessed December 1, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1CSVqHcdhXQ>.

10. Emily Lakdawalla, “Oppositions, Conjunctions, Seasons, and Ring Plane Crossings of the Giant Planets,” Planetary Society, July 7, 2016, <https://www.planetary.org/articles/06031044-oppositions-conjunctions-rpx>.

11. “Planetary Opposition 2023: Jupiter, Uranus, and Other Planets at Their Brightest,” Starwalk, November 24, 2023, <https://starwalk.space/en/news/what-is-opposition-in-astronomy#what-does-opposition-mean-in-astronomy>.

above the horizon for much of the night. For stargazers and astrophotographers, it is an ideal time to view and photograph the superior planets.”¹²

When we are aligned with God, perhaps we should expect opposition—being caught between difficult choices or feeling pulled in different directions. The opposition generates more reflected light and love. And perhaps we should not be surprised when we are situated between confusing or contradictory circumstances that also include moments of joy or grace. Years ago, I decided to get an advanced university degree, and I felt my decision had been spiritually confirmed by God. I applied to several schools and was not accepted by any of them. This was a frustrating and confusing time for me. The following year, I continued to feel good about this route, applied to a different set of schools, and was accepted. While attending one of these schools, I encountered extremely challenging circumstances *and* Jesus Christ’s love and grace to a much greater degree.

These opposition moments not only provide the opportunity to draw nearer to God but help us recognize that he weeps for¹³ and stays with us. Before the resurrected Christ left his disciples, he proclaimed, “And, lo, *I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world*” (Matt. 28:20, italics added). When we grieve and sorrow, Jesus Christ willingly grieves and sorrows with us—by our side. The prophet Isaiah attests, “Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows” (Isa. 53:4), and “in all their affliction he was afflicted” (Isa. 63:9). He will never forget us because we are “graven upon the palms of [his] hands; [our] walls are continually before [him]” (Isa. 49:16). Nothing can separate us from his love (Rom. 8:35–39). Through opposition, we learn that God walks with us.

As an example, the great writer and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel witnessed a young boy being hanged by the SS in a German work camp during World War II. At that point, Wiesel overheard someone in the crowd ask, “Where is God now?” Wiesel continues, “And I heard a voice within me answer him: ‘Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows.’”¹⁴ God abides with us in our darkest hour. He suffers

12. “What Does a Planet ‘in Opposition’ Mean?,” Royal Museums Greenwich, accessed November 27, 2023, <https://www.rmg.co.uk/stories/topics/what-planet-opposition>.

13. See 3 Nephi 17:21–22 and Moses 7:28; see also Terryl Givens and Fiona Givens, *The God Who Weeps: How Mormonism Makes Sense of Life* (Salt Lake City: Ensign Peak, 2012).

14. Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Stella Rodway (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), 71.

and mourns¹⁵ with the sufferer, and only a God who is willing to suffer with us can understand us. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor who was imprisoned and eventually executed for his role in a coup attempt of the Nazi government during World War II, wrote a note from his cell in the Flossenbürg concentration camp. It read, "Only a suffering God can help."¹⁶

In his influential writings, the Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel describes what he calls the pathos of God. Divine pathos means that God willingly feels passionately toward and expresses concern for us. He is attentive to and involved in our lives. Heschel's view provides a stark contrast to Greek conceptions of God, traced to Aristotle and Plato, that depict a stoic God who is an objective observer and detached judge of humanity. Instead, Heschel discusses Old Testament prophets who viewed God as directing the affairs of his people because of his emotional connection to and love and concern for them.¹⁷

Heschel reasons that prophets learn God's will as they enter a relationship and commune with God. "To the prophet, knowledge of God was fellowship with Him, not attained by syllogism, analysis, or induction, but by living together."¹⁸ Heschel stresses the importance of covenant-making for fellowship with God. Covenanting with God refers not only to "a covenant of mutual obligations, but also a relationship of mutual concern."¹⁹ Indeed, Old Testament covenants associated with the rites of atonement culminated in fellowship with God. In a 1990 *Ensign* article, Hugh Nibley describes the rites performed in Moses's tabernacle that led to this kind of fellowship. Once the high priest put on the appropriate garb before entering the tabernacle, he was anointed with oil, was set apart, and then performed the animal sacrifice. "Then the Lord received the high priest at the tent door, the veil (in Lev. 16:17–19, the high priest alone enters the tabernacle), and conversed with him (Ex. 29:42), accepting the sin offering, sanctifying the priests and people, and receiving them into his company to 'dwell among the children of Israel,'

15. As we "mourn with those that mourn" (Mosiah 18:9), we are doing what God would do.

16. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Reginald H. Fuller (New York: Macmillan, 1953), 220.

17. Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2001), 285.

18. Heschel, *Prophets*, 288.

19. Heschel, *Prophets*, 32. Similarly, in his intercessory prayer, Jesus Christ underscores the importance of knowing God: "This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" (John 17:3).

and [to] be their God' (Ex. 29:45)."²⁰ In another article within the same series on Christ's Atonement, Nibley reports that one of the meanings of the word *atonement* is "a close and intimate embrace, which took place at the *kapporet* or the front cover or flap of the tabernacle or tent."²¹

Experiencing opposition that cultivates contradictions in our lives enables a "close and intimate embrace" with God. These experiences direct our gaze toward, enable our dependence on, and deepen our relationship with him. During these times, we can petition Heavenly Father as the Savior did: "Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless, not my will, but thine, be done" (Luke 22:42). This prayer reveals Jesus Christ's desire to elude the "bitter cup" (D&C 19:18) *and* do the Father's will. Soul-expanding and grace-inducing moments of opposition are not the result of weakness but the divine design of mortality. Second Nephi 9:18 confirms that "the righteous, . . . [are those] who have endured the crosses of the world." In his October 2011 general conference talk, Elder Quentin L. Cook states, "Adverse results in this mortal life are not evidence of lack of faith or of an imperfection in our Father in Heaven's overall plan. The refiner's fire is real, and qualities of character and righteousness that are forged in the furnace of affliction perfect and purify us and prepare us to meet God."²² Whether we are the prodigal child or the one who remained, God will embrace and remind us, "Thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine" (Luke 15:31). Opposition—a position between seemingly incongruous paths or experiences—can bind us in relationship to Jesus Christ and pave the way for our return to live with our heavenly parents, their greatest desire for us.

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20. Hugh W. Nibley, "The Atonement of Jesus Christ, Part 3," *Ensign* 20, no. 9 (September 1990): 22.

21. Hugh W. Nibley, "The Atonement of Jesus Christ, Part 1," *Ensign* 20, no. 7 (July 1990): 22.

22. Quentin L. Cook, "The Songs They Could Not Sing," *Ensign* 41, no. 11 (November 2011): 106.