

A Patriarchal Blessing: A Message of Identity, Promise, and Love

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Devotionals are a remarkable feature of this university. I have come to appreciate their amazing value as they contribute to our learning, our spirituality, and our sense of community. It is an inspiring sight as we all make the trek from our various places across campus to this location each week. Our attendance reflects the desire of students, staff, and faculty alike to experience, during this brief interlude, thoughts and feelings that provide uplift, strength, and joy for our individual and collective lives. It is an equally awesome and inspiring sight as you flood into this building and take your places. I love to look into your faces and consider the power you represent. Indeed, you are a mighty army. You are being prepared to go forth into the world—even into its more remote corners—to perform a mighty work. You are not here by chance or by fortuitous circumstance. I hope you recognize that you have been given a very special opportunity, one that will bless you, your family, and your associates. I feel I have been so blessed.

I am thankful that my dear companion, Belva, is here with me. It is largely because of her that I stand before you today. As a young woman, as a senior in high school, she introduced me to the doctrines and the way of life of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day

Saints. She exemplified in her conduct what she taught with her speech. Her obedience, happiness, and righteousness radiated truth and beauty. Thus she gave me reason to seek knowledge and a testimony of the Church that gave obvious meaning and purpose to her life. Later these same virtues, so evident in her life and so pleasing to my soul, also caused me to seek to be worthy to be her husband and companion. In the 40-plus years of our acquaintance, friendship, and marriage, I have never had occasion to doubt her love or her goodness. She is a true disciple of our Lord and Savior. It is impossible for me to pay adequate tribute to her or to find words sufficient to express all she has brought and continues to bring into my life.

I have chosen to talk to you about patriarchal blessings. I made this choice even though I am reasonably certain that the majority of you have already received patriarchal blessings. Experience has taught me that there is much that we can learn about these blessings that will cause us to treasure them and learn from them even

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more than we might at present. As I consider the ways I have grown in appreciation for the patriarchal blessing I received 45 years ago, I realize that the more we know about them—about their source, nature, and purpose—the greater will be their value in our lives. Perhaps my main reason for choosing this topic has to do with my deeply positive feelings about these blessings. Just last Friday—as I shared a wonderful hour with a young man, Karl, who came for a blessing—I reflected on how fortunate I was to experience the love of the Lord as it has been manifest on such occasions.

It has been a great privilege and blessing to me to have served for 20 years as a patriarch. I know from countless experiences during those years that patriarchal blessings are communications given to us as personal revelations from God. These few words, recorded on perhaps a page or more, are remarkable. Their prophetic utterances have great power. They speak to our uncertainties, our abilities, our gifts, our life's experiences—all in the interest of assuring us of God's love and of His willingness to help us face the challenges and trials of our lives and to sustain us safely through what we must face. Although I have been richly blessed through my priesthood calling to know that these blessings are from God, I find that my own personal patriarchal blessing is also a very significant source of testimony to me that the Lord's servants speak prophetic words of truth and love to His children. To this day I continue to marvel at the ways in which the promises and statements in my blessing accurately foreshadow and give perspective to the experiences of my life. When I consider the contents of my patriarchal blessing, I am truly amazed at the manner in which the Lord has offered me such a tangible and sure way of knowing that He loves me, of recognizing that He knows me personally, and of trusting that He willingly leads me by the hand.

There is a parallel to be drawn, I believe, between an experience of Oliver Cowdery

and the experience we may have with our blessings. In section 6 of the Doctrine and Covenants we read the words spoken to Oliver Cowdery by Joseph on behalf of the Lord. Oliver was told that he had been given instruction by the Holy Ghost that had led him to his present place. Further, he was reminded how he had inquired of the Lord and received enlightenment. After being informed that “there is none else save God that knowest [our] thoughts and the intents of [our] heart[s] (verse 16), Oliver was told how he could gain a further testimony that the Lord was speaking to him. The Lord then said to him:

Cast your mind upon the night that you cried unto me in your heart, that you might know concerning the truth of these things.

Did I not speak peace to your mind concerning the matter? What greater witness can you have than from God? [D&C 6:22–23]

As Oliver later told David Whitmer, Oliver had never told anyone, not even Joseph, of this occasion to which the Lord referred. So when the Lord reminded him of this private moment, shared by and known only to Oliver and the Lord, Oliver knew the revelation was true. Thus he also knew that Joseph was who he claimed to be.

Within our patriarchal blessings are comparable statements given to us by our loving Father in Heaven. As the whisperings of the Holy Spirit enable us to see the promised blessings fulfilled in our lives, we, like Oliver, can know that such insight is God's gift and His witness to us: a personal way of knowing the truth of the blessing, of the priesthood, and of the message of the Restoration.

In March 1980 Elder James E. Faust spoke from this same platform to a BYU fireside audience on the subject of patriarchal blessings. He indicated that his “chief reason for speaking upon this subject [was] that patriarchal blessings verify the divinity of Christ and

the truthfulness of the Church" ("Patriarchal Blessings," 30 March 1980, in *BYU 1980 Devotional Speeches of the Year* [Provo: BYU, 1981], 53). I hope that the treatment of this same subject today will help lead us to consider "the divinity of Christ and the truthfulness of the Church."

As we think about our patriarchal blessing and about the Lord who has given it, I hope we will recognize and value our blessing as a gift from God. The perspective of a blessing as a gift enables us to more fully appreciate what has been given to us. We have all had experience receiving gifts. Perhaps you can recall times when you were given a gift that was exactly what you wanted. You may have retained and prized such a gift for many years. Maybe there have been times when you have received a gift that was not what you had hinted or pleaded for. Perhaps you overcame your initial disappointment and eventually realized that the giver knew the value of the gift or understood your needs and interests better than you knew yourself.

I encourage you to recall your experience with such gifts to understand more fully how you may regard your own patriarchal blessing. In doing so you may consider scriptural references pertaining to spiritual gifts. Especially helpful is the instruction in Moroni 10 in which Moroni instructs us to avoid denying the power of God (verse 7). Then he admonishes us to avoid denying the gifts of God (verse 8). As we reflect on these directives, we need to think seriously how it is that we may be denying God and His gifts in the way we regard and use our blessings. One clue—one closely related to Elder Faust's purpose in speaking about patriarchal blessings—is found in the next part of Moroni's message. He tells us that there are many gifts and that "they come from the same God" (verse 8). Especially pertinent is this following observation: "They are given by the manifestations of the Spirit of God unto men, to profit them" (verse 8). Our challenge, then, as the recipient of a gift of God, is to

acknowledge Him as the source, having faith that He knows the gift that will be of the greatest value or benefit to us.

Two experiences come to my mind that illustrate contrasting attitudes on this matter of "deny[ing] not the gifts of God." The first occurred nearly 15 years ago in our home in Edmonton. A young woman—about 20 years of age and already a single parent—came for a blessing accompanied by her mother. This young woman had made some mistakes, but through the help of a loving family and a caring bishop, she had reoriented and changed her life, thereby reestablishing her worthiness before the Lord. As I began voicing her blessing, I found myself focusing on the welfare program of the Church, speaking to her of the importance of incorporating the principles of frugality, payment of tithes and offerings, preparedness, industriousness, and avoidance of debt more fully into her life. So dominant was this theme in her blessing and so different from prior blessings I had voiced that I tried to direct my mind and speech to other topics. Still the blessing continued in the same vein. When the blessing concluded I was somewhat apprehensive. I worried as to how this girl and her mother might react, and I wondered whether or not they would be disappointed. Welcome was the response. To my grateful surprise, both were elated. Both were emotionally overcome and obviously thrilled with the blessing.

As though she sensed my thoughts and feelings, the mother of the young woman proceeded to explain their response. Many years earlier the mother, then a young woman living in the house of her mother, had been taught the message of the restored gospel by the missionaries. These two women—the mother and grandmother of the young woman who had just received her blessing—did not immediately gain testimonies of the truth of the missionaries' message. They liked what they heard, but conviction and testimony were absent. They asked the missionaries

to continue teaching them about the Church, which, as you can imagine, the missionaries happily agreed to do. Several weeks later, during one of their lessons, the missionaries described the welfare program of the Church, highlighting the importance of self-reliance, preparedness, and care of the poor and needy. Immediately upon hearing the lesson the two women asked to be baptized. They knew they had found the truth. That message so resonated with their personal beliefs and behaviors that they knew the gospel was true. As the daughter who had heard that message came to be a mother herself, raising her daughter, she, like her mother before her, had made these teachings a significant part of their lives. She concluded, "There is no other subject that as the dominant theme of my daughter's blessing could have given her and me greater personal assurance that this blessing came from God. Only He could have known its dear and special meaning in our lives."

A contrasting experience occurred while I was serving as a patriarch here on BYU campus, when a young woman came for a blessing accompanied by her parents. During the time we shared that day, this young woman received a wonderful blessing assuring her of abundant and powerful gifts she would enjoy at the hand of the Lord. Unknown to me, this young woman and her parents were anxiously hoping for one particular blessing. An older daughter in this family had died before marriage and childbearing, and the parents had noted that there had been no mention of marriage or children in that daughter's blessing. They therefore had reached the conclusion that the absence of these subjects in her blessing foreshadowed her death before marriage. Thus they anxiously waited to hear the words *eternal marriage* in this second daughter's blessing, but these words were not spoken.

The family said nothing at the time but agonized all the way home that the blessing had not included the promise of marriage.

No sooner did they arrive home than they telephoned me. So focused were they on the hope for a promise of marriage, so eager to hear the exact words, they were unable to appreciate the loving and generous promises contained in the blessing the girl had received. I tried to reassure them in a number of ways. First, I cited statements of the Brethren that the absence of reference to a specific blessing does not mean the blessing will not be given. Second, I pointed out that even if a specific promise of eternal marriage had been stated, there was no assurance that it would be fulfilled in mortality. Third, I noted that the wonderful promises of her blessing, so rich and so plentiful, should afford them great joy and strong personal assurance that their daughter would live to receive all the blessings they desired for her.

Despite my best efforts to help them see that the blessing was a beautiful gift from the Lord, their hearts were so set on hearing a particular promise that they remained somewhat disappointed. Because of the goodness of this family, I am sure that by now they have come to see God's hand in the gift to their daughter. Their initial reaction, however, in sharp contrast to that of the young woman I first mentioned, denied the gifts of God and made it difficult for them to see this blessing as a manifestation of God's love for her, reducing her opportunity to profit from the blessing, as Moroni has counseled us to do.

These two experiences illustrate other observations made by Elder Faust about patriarchal blessings. He counseled:

A patriarchal blessing is a sacred guideline of counsel, promises, and information from the Lord. However, a person should not expect that the blessing will detail all that will happen to him or her, or be an answer to all questions. The omission of the blessing of a great event in life such as a mission or marriage does not mean it will not happen. [Faust, "Patriarchal Blessings," 54]

He added this reassuring thought: “My own blessing is short and is limited to perhaps three quarters of one page on one side, yet it has been completely adequate and perfect for me” (p. 54).

Often when people come for a patriarchal blessing I ask them to share with me their knowledge about and understanding of the blessing they are about to receive. Once I have heard their response, I try to enrich and clarify what is usually a fairly sketchy understanding.

Besides affirming the source of the blessing and expressing the hope that they will value the Lord’s gift, I usually try to teach them three additional points:

1. Patriarchal blessings help us understand our identity.
2. They provide prophetic promises that help us recognize God’s hand in our lives.
3. They convey to us the love and goodness of the Lord, assuring us of His ready and constant availability in our lives.

An essential component of each patriarchal blessing is a statement of lineage that generally connects us to God by designating for us a place in the family of Israel, commonly of the tribe of Ephraim or Manassah. Scriptural statements help us understand why these two tribes—those of the sons of Joseph—dominate the lineal inheritances of modern Israel. But rather than elaborating on these matters, I wish to speak on why this statement of lineage is such a vital part of our patriarchal blessing.

In the priesthood manual *The Kingdom of God*, the comment is made that the statement of lineage “is the most important element of [a] patriarchal blessing” (Oscar W. McConkie, Jr., *The Kingdom of God* [Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1962], 248). Would you in thinking about your blessing have arrived at a similar conclusion? Why is this claim made about the importance of our lineage?

In appreciating this select status given to the statement of lineage, I have found it useful to

draw from an experience presented in the book and movie entitled *Roots*. For those unfamiliar with either the book or the subsequent movie version of the story, I should explain that the author, Alex Haley, traces the history of his African-American family back seven generations to the ancestor who was torn from his home on the African continent and brought to America as a slave to be bought and sold as human merchandise, to be denied fundamental human rights, and, most significant to him, to be denied his family and tribal identity.

This noble and proud man, Kunte Kinte, fiercely maintained an allegiance to both his biological and cultural roots. Armed with a strong sense of his own identity that was firmly established prior to his rude induction into slavery, this brave and defiant man offered to his posterity a way of seeing themselves that was in sharp contrast to their slavery. On the night his daughter was born, this wise father held the infant aloft under the beautiful starlit sky and declared, “Thou art Kizzie, daughter of Kunte Kinte, son of the great Mandinka warrior.” Thus he established the identity so significant to him that he wanted her to share. As this child grew she was taught the meaning embedded in her father’s blessing. He wanted her to know about her people in Africa, to know that “she was not born to be a slave in the white folk’s land.” Her image of her “self,” in significant contrast to the demeaning, degrading image associated with her status as a slave, enabled her to overcome great adversity and to, in turn, offer to her descendants a similar gift. (See part 3 of *Roots*, 1977.)

The statement of lineage contained within our patriarchal blessings offers us a comparable treasure. By declaring our place in the family of Israel, our Heavenly Father informs us who we are. We need not consider ourselves subject to the ephemeral, material, and superficial images promoted by the world. Through a simple statement of lineage, we are given a message of profound significance. Our sights

are elevated, our vision is expanded, and our understanding is deepened. We are helped to see ourselves in noble and powerful terms. Those who enjoy the status of membership in Israel should know that they have distinguished themselves in the premortal existence.

This eternal vision of self should stir our imaginations and give power and majesty to our hopes and aspirations. What does it matter how we measure up according to the worldly metrics of wealth, power, intelligence, or beauty? By confirming our status as children of Israel, God has declared our entitlement to the potential to become even like our Savior through His great redeeming gift. Worldly images pale in comparison. The more we study and understand about the nature and gifts of Israel, the greater will be our appreciation of the statement in our blessings that acknowledges our place in this blessed family. I hope we will all, my brothers and sisters, give serious study to the nature and blessings of Israel. Seek to perceive yourself among this select group who gained distinction in the premortal existence, who are sought after and gathered by God as He has promised, and who are offered a gift of incomparable value, even the gift of eternal life. You will feel the powerful effects of seeing and knowing yourself as God knows you. It is no wonder to me that this statement of identity and promise should have preeminent place in patriarchal blessings.

In addition to the statement of lineage, which offers to us the possibility of receiving what God Himself refers to as “the greatest of all the gifts of God” (D&C 14:7), our patriarchal blessings typically offer us prophetic promises pertaining to our life’s experiences, both mortal and postmortal. They may mention virtues we may acquire, service we may render, pathways we may traverse, gifts we may receive, or instruction we should heed. These prophetic statements in our blessing can be likened to prophetic statements in the scriptures. Very

often their exact and full meaning is hidden from our view until we recognize the whisperings of the Spirit confirming that they have been fulfilled. Through obedient and righteous living, members of the Lord’s church may enjoy the companionship of the Holy Ghost, who empowers us to see and acknowledge these signs for what they are. Similarly, the whisperings of the Spirit confirm to us that the prophetic promises of God to us are being realized and we should rejoice as we recognize each gift. Further, though, and perhaps of greater importance, through the spiritual sense that reveals the fulfillment of these prophetic promises we may be enabled to perceive greater truth. As President Joseph F. Smith observed, as he spoke of recognizing the signs of Christ’s second coming, we may know that “the Lord’s hand is over all. . . . He will control the results that will follow. He will overrule them in a way that you and I, today, do not comprehend, or do not foresee, for ultimate good” (*GD*, 89). These signs, both those pertaining to the second coming of Christ and those pertaining to our individual lives as enunciated in our blessings, become like mileposts or benchmarks. As we recognize in them the realization of God’s promises, we develop greater faith that His hand is over all and that He will lead us to the ultimate good—the promise of eternal life.

Last, but by no means least, these blessings are a testament of God’s love for each of His children. They reveal the uniqueness of each of us, and they highlight the fact that God sees in us what we do not see in one another or in ourselves. You will recall the experience of Samuel, the Old Testament prophet who was commissioned by the Lord to find and anoint the future king of Israel from among the sons of Jesse. Each of seven sons passed before Samuel, and the Lord still did not reveal the future king. Samuel asked Jesse if there were other sons. He replied, “There remaineth yet the youngest, and, behold, he keepeth the

sheep" (1 Samuel 16:11). David was summoned and anointed. During the process of selection the Lord told Samuel, "Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature, . . . for the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart" (verse 7). As we consider the things revealed to us in our blessings, we must remind ourselves that even we do not see ourselves as the Lord sees us. Our blessings, given to us as an expression of the Lord's love for us as His children, are intended to help us see ourselves in a unique and special way. No matter how unreal certain insights and promises might appear to us, we should not disbelieve.

This was taught to me rather forcefully shortly after I commenced voicing patriarchal blessings. It is repeated and reinforced each time I voice a blessing now after 20 years. The occasion I refer to happened on an evening when a young man in our stake came for a blessing accompanied by his parents. When I greeted him and shook his hand, I sensed before me a young man who was unsure of himself and hesitant to make eye contact, to converse, or to be engaging in any fashion. To complete this somewhat inauspicious first impression, he had forgotten his recommend. I truly wondered what he would hear that evening.

Eventually we were able to proceed with the blessing. The blessing was remarkable in the way it contrasted with what I had seen in the young man. I learned that I had inappropriately and unwisely judged him. He was soon to leave on a mission. In the blessing he was told of gifts he would develop and of leadership he would offer to fellow missionaries, to Church members, and to those he would teach. They would seek him out—even those many years his senior—for his wise counsel. Much was said of his abilities, his spiritual gifts, and his capacity to bless others. Two years later,

as I walked through a wedding reception line, I encountered him again, freshly returned from his mission. He was a different young man. Already the promised blessings were evident. The story does not end there. Just recently I learned of his appointment to the faculty here at BYU. The news reminded me of that evening and of the powerful lesson I learned through him. Truly the Lord saw what was not readily apparent to me at the moment. I am grateful that this man's life, through his obedience to and love for the Lord, has enabled him to experience fulfillment of his promise.

A rich variety of people seek patriarchal blessings. Some are converts, others are born in the covenant. Some have lived obedient and pure lives, whereas others have sinned seriously and have sought and gained forgiveness. Some are relatively young, others are elderly. Some are bright and learned, and others have a lesser endowment or schooling. However varied, they share a universal gift in these blessings: God's love for all of His children is unequivocal and unconditional. These patriarchal blessings are a way of knowing in a deeply personal and profound manner that regardless of our circumstance, fortune, or status, we are endowed with the great love of God. This knowledge should encourage, sustain, and lift us. Even in our times of heartfelt loneliness, discouragement, or trial, we should be able to turn to our blessing and hear the quiet yet reassuring voice of the Lord saying, "I love you."

I know these things to be true. I know that God lives and that He desires to bless His children. Patriarchal blessings are one of the many ways we may know this in a very powerful and personal way. I am thankful to serve as a patriarch here at BYU among you students. I know you are a royal generation, one being prepared for a noble and great work. I so testify in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior, amen.