

The Lord's Hand in Our Lives

CECIL O. AND SHARON G. SAMUELSON

SGS: We are so grateful for the blessing of being with you this morning as we begin winter semester. We like the new beginnings, new routines, and new opportunities that are part of this time of year. We are glad all of you are with us. We are also happy for those who have chosen to begin their missionary service with the recent announcement made by President Monson.

COS: During general conference this past October, we were very interested in the many references, both direct and indirect, that assured us of the continued influence of heaven in our lives. We believe this is true for us individually, for us as a Church, and also for us as the BYU community. Lest any be confused or misled, I am not suggesting that our agency is compromised or limited. In fact, our agency or responsibility to make proper choices is a fundamental and inescapable doctrine of our Heavenly Father's plan. Likewise, it is also essential we understand that in our mortal probation we are entitled to have the interventions of "the hand of the Lord" in our lives when we live so as to merit such blessings.

Usually, at least in our experience, the touch of the Lord's hand is soft and subtle—so soft and subtle that we may not recognize it.

Happily, in necessary situations our experience can be as that of Ezekiel when he said, "The hand of the Lord was strong upon me" (Ezekiel 3:14).

SGS: What is increasingly clear to us is that as we reflect on what has transpired in our lifetimes and in yours, we have been influenced more than we previously imagined by the blessings and guidance available to us in answer to our prayers. How this happens occurs in multiple ways. We believe in the scriptural assurances of the ministering of angels. We also know that the Holy Ghost has a tremendous influence in our lives when we live so that such help is appropriate. We also understand better as we get older that often the help we need is provided by our loving Heavenly Father and His Son, our Savior, through other people who have been prompted to help, guide, and rescue us in times of need or consequential decision making.

COS: As President Henry B. Eyring recounted the special events that led him to surrender his tenured faculty appointment at Stanford University and took him to preside

Cecil O. Samuelson was president of Brigham Young University when he and his wife, Sharon G. Samuelson, gave this devotional on 8 January 2013.

at Ricks College (see “Where Is the Pavilion?” *Ensign*, November 2012, 72–75), we have reflected on our own experiences. In some ways what has happened to us is very different and in other ways is exactly the same as has unfolded for others. A common characteristic in our case seems to be that we recognize the hand of the Lord much better in retrospect than while interventions are actually taking place. Another is that the Lord’s hand often is so gentle that what happens seems to be usual in the normal course of current events but later turns out to be of very great import. Likewise, when we have not been careful to acknowledge or recognize the reality of our blessings, we have been tempted to conclude that a special outcome was only the result of our own careful thinking, efforts, or strategy. We now confess that we fully believe that rarely, if ever, do good things happen to us without the influence of the hand of heaven.

SGS: Please forgive a few personal examples. We just recently celebrated our forty-eighth wedding anniversary. When my husband was still in medical school more than forty years ago, we thought we had been married a fairly long time. Now, as we look back, our entire married life doesn’t really seem very long at all. Given the time limitations of our devotionals today, we will mention just a few experiences that we have had together when the hand of the Lord played a prominent role in our lives. Again, we did not necessarily think about how this was happening at the time, but, in retrospect, what transpired clearly was not just by chance or coincidence. Likewise, we want to emphasize that customized, special blessings that have come to us are not predictive of what might or will happen with you. Similarly, you will have individualized blessings and interventions that have not been afforded to us or to other people. While Jesus Christ has promised that those who are faithful, keep the commandments, and make and observe their sacred covenants will receive

all that the “Father hath” (D&C 84:38), the timing is unique for each person and does not always happen in this life.

COS: You might begin by telling our special friends just how we got together. Since I was away on my mission at the beginning of what turned out to be an “arranged marriage,” you can share a few of the details, and then I may need to tell my side of the story.

SGS: While I was attending the University of Utah, I acquired a part-time secretarial position in the Department of Educational Psychology. I enjoyed it very much, and it was so convenient to be right on campus, since my previous job had been off campus and transportation had proven difficult. One of the professors I worked for was Dr. Cecil O. Samuelson Sr. He was very nice and pleasant, as were the other professors, but he was especially so. Eventually he mentioned to me that he had a son serving a mission and hoped that I “might be available” when he returned home. I am sure I gave an appropriate response. What I do recall thinking, however, is that dating someone your parents believe would be the perfect match for you usually ends in an embarrassing situation. Am I right? On the other hand, I felt that if his son were at all like his dad, it might be a possibility.

When his son and namesake returned from his mission, I met him when he came to the office so he and his father could drive home together. It did not take me long to change my mind, and I hoped his dad was giving him encouragement to ask me out on a date. I regret to say that it did not occur as quickly as I desired. Nevertheless, I broke off a relationship with another fellow and waited patiently. It is obvious from the fact that we are standing here together that with a little time and encouragement from his dad, we dated and eventually married—one parent-arranged marriage that was successful.

COS: My father was a wise but also crafty man. Since I did not have my own car for a few

months after my mission, I would meet my father at his office at the university to ride home with him. Somehow he always managed to have just a few more things to do, and so I was left to visit with and get to know his secretary better. We didn't date for a few months, but once we began, it didn't take long for us to know that it was a sure thing. We were sealed in the Salt Lake Temple the day before Thanksgiving in 1964 by my former mission president.

SGS: By then I was teaching school, and we were able to get by financially. Since we both came from rather large families, we knew we wanted to have several children. However, our first wasn't born until after we had been married for more than three years. Initially we were not terribly concerned and were content to be getting farther along with my husband's medical education and saving money from my full-time teaching career.

COS: I can still remember how excited we were when we learned we were expecting. As I recall, the pregnancy was rather uneventful—meaning I never had a single day of morning sickness!

SGS: And I suppose you don't want me to tell anyone that you studied for your pathology final while sitting with me in labor at the hospital. I certainly wouldn't want them to know you hoped I would be as quiet as possible while experiencing a contraction.

COS: I think I passed the medical school test, but we were over the top to be the parents of the cutest little baby boy. We enjoyed very much being new parents and had the usual challenges of that blessing most parents experience, including a night in the hospital with his severe croup. Like everyone's children, he was very precocious. He just turned forty-five last month, and we no longer describe him as cute, but he has a wonderful wife and three adorable daughters who challenge him just enough to convince his parents that there is indeed justice in the world for all the pranks,

demands, and surprises he authored during his adolescence.

SGS: Still, it was my dream and my blessing to be a mother, and in that I have never felt otherwise. I think we expected to have our other children come along in due course without too much further delay, but that was not to be. Finally, after more than five years and several surgeries, our second "cutest baby boy" was born. We were again thrilled and felt blessed but didn't perceive the special circumstances that allowed for that pregnancy. We were told by our doctors that if we desired more children, we should not delay unduly because my condition could make further pregnancies unlikely over time.

We should add that our older son, now five, was disappointed, because while he had joined us in prayers for the new baby, his own prayer was for a baby brother *and* a baby sister. Now he only had the baby brother. We told him not to worry and that if there were a baby sister for him, she would eventually come. He was skeptical but seemed to be resolved.

COS: Since obstetrics was not my field in medicine, we were perhaps naïve in our understanding about the hand of heaven in our lives at that time. Just a few months later we learned that we were in the early stages of another pregnancy, and we were very happy. Then one evening Sharon began to experience severe and acute abdominal pain. Again—although not my expertise in medicine—we knew we were in trouble, and so we went to the emergency room at the hospital where I worked. She was examined and a couple of laboratory tests were performed. The attending physician was a very good man who was experienced in such matters but who did not know my wife well. He felt the situation was not serious and that perhaps Sharon was just having an anxiety attack. Now, those who know her well know that she does get very anxious at football, basketball, soccer, and volleyball games,

but this wasn't a game, and we knew our physician friend was in error.

SGS: As we left the emergency room, I was still very uncomfortable, and we were both quite unsettled. We were praying for guidance and comfort, and it became clear that we needed a second opinion. Consequently, we headed for another hospital in our community and finally were able to reach my personal obstetrician, who had been on a Church assignment earlier when we had first decided the problem was serious.

COS: At the second hospital we were quickly met by Sharon's doctor, who knew her well. He determined her anxiety and pain were due to an acute surgical emergency. She was rushed to the operating room and was there found to be bleeding profusely internally. The cause of the problem was an ectopic or tubal pregnancy, which required immediate surgery to stop the bleeding. She had lost a great deal of blood, but her life was saved. Unfortunately, her doctor and we thought it meant that she would never be able to have another pregnancy because of this incident and the previous necessary surgery she had undergone. We did rejoice that her life was spared and that we already had two little boys in our family.

SGS: I healed rather quickly and soon returned home to the active life of a young mother with two lively children and a husband who had a major Church calling as well as a busy professional life teaching, researching, caring for patients, and fulfilling administrative duties. We didn't really mourn but did feel rather constant disappointment that the large family we had expected and frankly took for granted was not to be.

As a young girl growing up, I had four younger brothers but no sisters. While I had girl cousins and girlfriends, I always wished for a younger sister. As I grew up, I knew that was not likely, but I looked forward to being the mother of daughters. Now that possibility seemed to have evaporated too.

COS: Few, if any, outside of immediate family knew of this small but significant grief Sharon carried in her heart. Our boys were healthy and our life was full. About four years quickly passed, and we felt ourselves resolved and settled. We built our home with the plan that it would accommodate the four of us well, and we really were grateful for our general good fortune and happy lives. Then, one weekend in early February 1977, our lives changed.

SGS: The married student stake in which my husband was serving as second counselor in the stake presidency was being reorganized. Elder Marvin J. Ashton of the Quorum of the Twelve was releasing the stake presidency and calling a new one. When he interviewed my husband, Elder Ashton asked if there were any difficulties or disappointments in our family life, and Cec said the only thing he could think of was the set of experiences we have just shared that seemed to determine we would always be a small family. Elder Ashton told my husband not to worry and that things "would work out the way they should." He then went on to call my husband to be the new stake president.

COS: After the Sunday meetings and other formal activities were concluded, a member of the stake high council approached us and asked to be excused from the regular meetings for the next few days because he was returning to Guatemala, where he had served his mission, to look into the possibility of adopting a child. Without any previous discussion or consideration, at least on my part, we wished him well, excused him from his duties for the period he would be gone, and then, almost offhandedly, mentioned that perhaps this was something we should look into as well.

SGS: Within just a few days we received an unexpected call explaining that a set of twins to be born near the end of the month would be available for adoption. The birth mother, a maid with an older child, had been abandoned by the birth father, and she hoped that

somehow her twins, a boy and a girl, could have a better life than what was likely for them in their Guatemalan village. We think one dimension of the concern of this pregnant Indian mother was that having twins was not considered good fortune. The practice in their area at that time was to choose the potentially strongest infant of the two and let that baby be nursed fully. The weaker baby would then be neglected because most nursing mothers did not have sufficient milk for two babies. Thus the outlook for the smaller or weaker baby was dismal.

COS: When we mentioned that my wife had four brothers, we should have also noted that the two immediately younger than Sharon were twins and were quite a handful for her parents and also for their elder sister. Thus our immediate reaction was that we couldn't consider adopting these twins. But after a few days of careful thought and serious prayers, we had our answer that these little ones should be ours. We made the necessary arrangements and provided powdered infant formula to the wonderful people caring for the twins. Then I and our friend made our way to Guatemala to bring the babies home.

We are confident that the hand of the Lord was on those good people, because our twins were healthy when I arrived, although our daughter was still very tiny. Our eldest son's prayer for "a brother *and* a sister" was answered.

SGS: We have told parts of this experience before at BYU and elsewhere. Suffice it to say, with a number of other miracles—some of which we did recognize as they occurred—we had our baby girl and baby boy home in Utah in just a couple of months after their birth. Next month they will be thirty-six, and each is happily married with children of their own.

Now, having doubled the number of our children almost overnight and having the little sister for our older boys, the daughter for me, and a third son for all of us, we felt our quiver

was finally full. Surely we had been richly blessed, and we acknowledged our gratitude for these very happy circumstances, although we learned that this many little people, particularly twin infants, was not necessarily a picnic much of the time.

COS: I should confess that during all this time when I would sit on the stand in Church, it was left to Sharon to struggle with the kids. When asked by a well-meaning member of our ward whether or not I ever helped with the children in Church, my wife would answer, "Oh, yes! Whenever they misbehave, he scowls at them from the stand." But there is yet another interesting—at least to us—part of our story. Another four years passed, and then my dear wife returned from a doctor's appointment to announce that she was pregnant. What a surprise! My older sister Carol has always described our fifth child, Sara, as the "miracle child" because her birth occurred against very long medical odds.

SGS: Now no one can ever say that my husband has not given a medical devotional! We share these experiences only to show the hand of the Lord in our lives and to remind ourselves and others that seeming disappointments and disasters are often the keys that open the doors to greater blessings and opportunities than might have ever been hoped for or even conceived.

For those of you wondering why similar blessings are not now yours, we can only remind you of Jesus' promises and blessings that will yet be yours but that are not possible without significant trials and disappointments beforehand.

COS: The scriptures are replete with accounts of the hand of the Lord influencing the lives of the Father's children. You will have your favorites, and we have ours. A useful exercise that we recommend is to go through the scriptures and count the many references to the reality of the Lord's hand in the lives of His people. The promise made by the Lord

to Abraham is one promise He makes to all of us: “Behold, I will lead thee by my hand” (Abraham 1:18).

Before we close, we must mention one other very significant and major event in our lives that has been lifting and even transforming for us. It also involves “children”—and lots of them! But unlike those we have mentioned, we are not formally sealed to them like we are to the five who have grown up in our home.

We speak of the great privilege of our assignment to BYU. Because we are now getting just a little bit older, we hope we can be excused for considering all of the students who have been at BYU during our tenure or are currently here to be “our children.” Now, we know you are all grown-ups, but we do feel the pride and pain of parenthood as we see you grow, struggle, achieve, and excel. While not officially codified in the BYU Aims and Mission Statement, you and the thousands like you are great blessings in our lives. We feel the same about our colleagues in the administration and in various staff assignments and of course your teachers and faculty members.

SGS: Candidly, coming to BYU, especially in our current positions, was never part of any of our plans or even wildest considerations. I must confess that when my husband told

me of this assignment after he was invited to President Hinckley’s office, I thought he was kidding. And then, when I saw he was serious, I thought President Hinckley must have been kidding! Now, after a few years, we seriously wonder what we might have done that brought us to enjoy the good fortune of experiencing all that is BYU. We do know that the hand of the Lord is on this very special university. We know that God lives and loves us and will guide, correct, and direct us if we are willing to have Him do so.

COS: Perhaps I will save for another occasion a litany of sacred experiences I could share that confirms deeply in my heart and mind the truthfulness of what Sister Samuelson has said about the involvement of heaven in the work of BYU. I am a witness and know that this is true and occurs with great regularity. BYU is a very important part of the great cause of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ found in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. We are led by prophet leaders and are greatly blessed to serve under the direction of President Thomas S. Monson, whom we love and sustain. Please know of our faith in you, our faith in BYU, and especially our faith in the tender hand of the Lord. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.