

## Patriarchal Blessing

### WHAT THE PATRIARCHAL BLESSING IS

**T**HERE ARE SEVERAL types of blessing available to members of the Church of Jesus Christ. The first most of us receive is when we are infants. Parents bring their baby to be "blessed" and elders present it to God in dedication. They join in seeking to live so the child may fare well. If spiritually mature, they will want to discover what God has in mind for the child. The confirmation prayer, administration prayer for the ill, and ordination prayer are other specific forms of blessings.

"The chief purpose of the patriarchal blessing is to give an authoritative priestly blessing, invoked by a spiritual father representing God and the church. Other functions are to give comfort, admonition, counsel as to a godly way of life, rededication and reconstruction, and benediction.

"By its nature, it is for the more mature people who come voluntarily and devoutly to receive a blessing, into the spirit of which they may enter intelligently and emotionally.

It has been the rule, decided upon many years ago, that fifteen years of age should be the minimum age for receiving this blessing. There is no upward limit.

"The patriarchal blessing is a ministry available to members of the Church of Jesus Christ. Only one is given in a lifetime, unless there are unusual situations calling for a supplementary blessing. The patriarch places his hands on the head of a person thereby expressing benediction. He offers a prayer which commends the person to God and opens channels for God's expression in counsel and confirmation."<sup>1</sup>

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND (Ancient)

The patriarchal blessing, as we know it, is of relatively recent origin. Evidently it was a custom, however, for men who held priestly office in ancient times to give blessings of a special character. Most frequently this seemed to be the blessing by a father of his son. Adam blessed Seth;<sup>2</sup> Abraham blessed Esau;<sup>3</sup> Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau;<sup>4</sup> Jacob blessed his sons and also his two grandsons, the sons of Joseph.<sup>5</sup> Some of these blessings were conferred at the time when a patriarch, that is, a head of a family, was aged and about to die. His blessing then constituted a last charge to his sons, and also in some instances indicated something of what the sons' lives should be. In a similar vein, and evidently following the same custom as among the Hebrews, Lehi blessed his sons. These blessings included warnings, instruction, doctrinal teaching, and some prophetic utterances.<sup>6</sup> Alma gave charges to his sons.<sup>7</sup> The words of his counsel to his sons are contained in chapters 17 through 19 of the book of Alma.

It should be noted that these men mentioned here, and others who may have blessed their children similarly, evidently did not hold specific ministerial office which carried the responsibility of giving special priestly blessings. Rather, this seems to have been a custom which developed very early in the human family.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND (Restoration)

The first mention of the office or the work of patriarch in the Restoration movement is in connection with the ordination of Joseph Smith, Sr., to the office of patriarch. The account of this event is given in *Church History*, Volume 2, page 16, as follows:

"On the evening of the 21st of January', 1836, the First Presidency met in the west school room of Kirtland Temple, at which time they ordained Joseph Smith, Sr., Patriarch of the church, and also received their patriarchal blessings under his hands. Joseph states concerning this meeting and other matters as follows:

"The heavens were opened upon us, and I believe the celestial kingdom of God, and the glory thereof, whether in the body or out I cannot tell. I saw the transcendent beauty of the gate through which the heirs of that kingdom will enter, which was like unto circling flames of fire; also the blazing throne of God, whereon was seated the Father and the Son. I saw the beautiful streets of that kingdom, which had the appearance of being paved with gold. I saw fathers Adam and Abraham, and my father and mother, my brother Alvin, that has long since slept...

A>Many of my brethren who received the ordinance with me saw glorious visions also. Angels ministered unto them as well as myself, and the power of the Highest rested upon us, the house was filled with the glory of God, and we shouted, Hosannah to God and the Lamb."

From time to time following that, Joseph Smith, Sr., gave other special blessings.<sup>8</sup> When in September of 1840 he lay on his deathbed, he pronounced special individual blessings upon his children then present, much in the manner which was done in ancient times.<sup>9</sup> After his death divine direction was given that his son Hyrum should continue in the office of patriarch.<sup>10</sup> It is not clear now how many other men in the early church may have been ordained to the office of patriarch or evangelist. In any event, instruction was given in Doctrine and Covenants 104:17 that the twelve apostles should seek out in the larger branches those who by revelation should be designated to hold the office of evangelical ministry'.

It was some years after the reorganization that the question of the office of patriarch was raised. In the year 1894 counsel was given that it was not yet expedient that there should be a patriarch ordained.<sup>11</sup> However, in 1897 Alexander H. Smith was called as presiding patriarch.<sup>12</sup> In 1901, the duties of the office of patriarch or evangelist were outlined in fuller detail,<sup>13</sup> after which other patriarchs were ordained. Three men were ordained to this office in 1901 and the Order of Patriarchs was first organized officially in 1903.

## PURPOSE OF THE BLESSING

The following statement is from Elbert A. Smith's *Evangelists and Patriarchs; Their Work and Caring*, p.24: "The chief purpose of the patriarchal blessing is indicated in the term itself: to give an authoritative, priestly blessing, invoked by a spiritual father representing God and the church. That chief function should not be lost sight of. Little children receive a blessing before they are aware of what is happening or able to comprehend its meaning. But mature people come voluntarily and devoutly to receive a blessing into the spirit of which they may enter intelligently and emotionally.

"Other chief functions caught up under the primary one just mentioned are to give comfort, adinonition, counsel as to a godly way of life, rededication, and benediction.

"Some have erred in thinking that the chief purpose of the patriarchal blessing is to forecast for the candidate his future life. This error has brought some disrepute upon the work of the evangelist. Wisdom should be exercised here that reproach may not be merited. Remember, 'The spirit of the prophet is subject to the prophet.' All this does not mean that the spirit of prophecy is not present in the act of blessing; and fine

promises have been made and kept. The spirit of prophecy has many functions other than that of predicting events: to testify of Jesus, which is the 'spirit of prophecy,' and to reveal and interpret the will of God. Long ago the Order of Evangelists took safe ground in the following pronouncement: 'A patriarchal blessing may or may not contain that which is prophetic in its character; and even if it does, this, as a rule, is by no means the more valuable part of the blessing.'-- *The Patriarchate*, page 42.

"The spirit of prophecy may at times reveal future events, but the function of the blessing is not to give us a detailed chart of things to come in our lives, rather is it to help us build character and develop faith, strength, courage, and wisdom to meet *whatever* may come.

"To quote again from the pamphlet, *The Patriarchate*, approved by the Order of Evangelists in 1905:

"A patriarchal blessing is given for the evident purpose to bring the one so blessed in closer touch with those divine influences which transform the soul and make us more like the Master. . . In other words it secures to the intelligent, sincere applicant more divine light, knowledge, faith, humility, courage, patience, fortitude, integrity of heart, and spiritual strength, that the struggle may be a successful one, and eternal life be secured.'

"When this sort of approach is made and this sort of spiritual development is voluntarily made under divine guidance, and continued in, then may it be truly said that under the blessing, as indicated in Doctrine and Covenants 107:38, the recipient is 'sealed up unto the day of redemption, that ye may not fall, notwithstanding the hour of temptation that may come unto you.'"

A further statement concerning the purpose of the blessing was made by Roy A. Cheville:

"Healthy religion does not take choice-making from its members. The patriarchal blessing is no escape from decision-making. It is no fortune-telling device to unveil the future. In this light I ask you to look well to your expectancies as you come to a patriarch for a benediction. If you expect to shift the responsibility to God for decision-making, you will probably be disappointed. If you come wanting some specific promise of personal achievement, you will likely turn away unsatisfied. If you come to escape from realities of life, you will not find the haven you hope for. God is not going to do your problem-solving. The patriarchal blessing is not to give us easy answers. It is not intended to predict the itinerary' of our lives. Young people of quality do not want this kind of thing. Nor does God. He wants disciples of understanding and ability who choose to go along with him. The prophetic gift in the blessing does well to give counsel that we may understand ourselves and understand God. The blessing will set forth guidelines for life planning. The actual choosing must be ours."<sup>14</sup>

Frequently a patriarchal blessing contains statements of promise. It should be noted that these are not predictions of coming events that are predestined to come to pass. On the contrary, these promises of God concerning that which will come to pass in our lives are most frequently conditioned. That is, the conditions under which these promises can be fulfilled must be met by the one to whom the promise is made. For example, the promises are often prefaced by such statements as "If thou art faithful," "If thou shalt continue steadfast," "If thou shalt respond to the call of God unto you." The principle here is illustrated by the following examples:

A young man was promised in his blessing that he should be called into the priesthood. This man was pleased with the prospect, but felt that at the time when he was called into the priesthood his enjoyment of life would be curtailed. Specifically, he concluded that it would not be proper for him to engage in dancing after he was ordained, so he tried to "get in" all the dancing he could prior to the coming of that call. This is not the only incident, but it typified his attitude. The result was that the call never came. He drifted farther and farther away from being prepared to receive such a call.

A man was promised in his blessing that he could live a very' long life. He misconstrued the meaning of

that promise. He took it to mean that no matter what happened to him there would be a special measure of God's bounty thrown about him to protect him from death. As a result, he was so careless with his health that he died when he was still a rather young man.

The promises of God are always conditional. The above two examples do not mean that God was capricious. They do mean that God's promises can be fulfilled in us only as we keep the conditions under which the promised blessing can be granted properly. This principle is stated again and again in Scripture, of which the following quotations are typical:

"Who am I, saith the Lord, that have promised and have not fulfilled? I command and a man obeys not, I revoke and they receive not the blessing; then they say in their hearts, This is not the work of the Lord, for his promises are not fulfilled. But woe unto such, for their reward lurketh beneath, and not from above."<sup>15</sup>

"I, the Lord, am bound when ye do what I say, but when ye do not what I say, ye have no promise."<sup>16</sup>

"If these will accept this appointment and remain humble, faithful, and diligent, they shall . . . be greatly blessed."<sup>17</sup>

"And now behold, I tell you by the spirit of prophecy, that if ye transgress the commandments of God, behold, these things which are sacred, shall be taken away from you by the power of God, and ye shall be delivered up unto Satan, that he may sift you as chaff before the wind; but if ye keep the commandments of God, and do with these things which are sacred, according to that which the Lord doth command you, (for you must appeal unto the Lord for all things whatsoever ye must do with them), behold no power of earth or hell can take them from you, for God is powerful to the fulfilling of all his words: for he will fulfill all his promises which he shall make unto you, for he has fulfilled his promises which he has made unto our fathers."<sup>18</sup>

## LINEAGE

A secondary purpose of the patriarchal blessing is the naming of the lineage of the person receiving the blessing. This is done in harmony with the revelation which says that the patriarch, in giving the blessing, is "if so led, to point out the lineage of the one who is blessed."<sup>19</sup>

On this point Elbert A. Smith has written: "In the past some have come for blessing, seeking primarily to find out about their lineage. However, naming of lineage is *not* the primary function of the blessing. It is more important to be counseled concerning a Christian way of life and to be blessed and dedicated and inspired for such a life than it is to learn about one's far-off ancestry'. The naming of lineage must have importance or it would not be provided for. Still it is not *the* essential feature of the blessing, as it may be omitted entirely. At this point the patriarch is guided by the Spirit. He may or may not name lineage (See Doctrine and Covenants 125:3). And the Saints should understand that failure to name lineage in no way invalidates the blessing.

"There is some justification for pride in tribal or family ancestry' if it be honorable. But such pride may become bigotry. The Jews at the very time when they were plotting to kill Christ boasted to him that they were 'of the seed of Abraham.' Paul had a pride in that he was 'of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews' (Philippians 3:5). Converted to Christ, all that meant less to him, and he saw that in Christ there 'is neither Jew nor Greek' but all are 'one in Christ' (Galatians 3:27, 28).

"This subject takes us back to the twelve tribes of Israel. The Jews are of Israel, but not all Israel are Jews. Judah was One of twelve. The naming of lineage does not as a rule go back of or outside of the twelve tribes. It has been observed that the lineage of Orientals is seldom if ever mentioned in a blessing. Probably that is because such races go back in antiquity too far to be of Hebraic origin.

"The matter of Israel is of great importance. God did make covenant with Abraham. In him and his seed the peoples of the earth were to be blessed. The promise has been kept in part-gloriously. From Abraham's seed came the inspired prophets, the apostles of the Christian dispensation, Christ himself, the books of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, and the Book of Mormon. Not all of these things came from the Jews. And not all of the prophecies concerning Israel have yet been fulfilled.

"Bible genealogies seem simple. The family lineage is traced back through the fathers, ignoring the mothers. Lineal priesthood may be reckoned that way. In the subject under consideration, it is not that simple.

"It has been said that the family tree is more like a net. There are blood streams coming into it from every direction. You have one father and one mother, two grandfathers, and two grandmothers. Ancestors multiply with astonishing rapidity-thirty-two, sixty-four, and on and on. The mothers and grandmothers may have had as much of character to contribute to the family as did the fathers. They cannot be ignored.

"Matthew traces the lineage of Jesus from Abraham to David and then to Joseph, foster father of Jesus. Luke does the same but along a different line. But Jesus inherited nothing biologically from Joseph. The Bible says Jesus was 'the seed of David *according to the flesh*' (Romans 1:3). That must have been through the line of his *mother's* ancestry. With such a precedent we cannot ignore maternal heritages.

"Various nationalities have contributed to modern family life. Lines are crossed and recrossed. Our people are puzzled when two members of the same family are ascribed different lineage. The reason is simple enough. To illustrate, a German mother and an English father might have two sons, one very 'German' and one very 'English'. More remote ancestors may affect character. . .

"It may be of comfort and inspiration to some people to feel that they are members of a certain group of the 'chosen people' of such distinguished religious history. The matter may also have a forward looking phase of it, looking forward to the return of Israel, and the appointment of inheritances before or during the millennium. The older patriarchs (in the Restoration) dwelt on that theme. A blessing given by John Lake said: 'You belong to the tribe of Ephraim, and when the time comes that the allotments shall be made by Jesus Christ, you shall receive your inheritance with that tribe, and there carry' out the purposes of God in the great thousand years.' There seems to be scriptural ground for such hope. In Matthew 19:28, it is said that Jesus is to judge the twelve tribes of Israel. (See also Revelation 7:4.) "<sup>20</sup>

## WHO ARE ELIGIBLE?

"A member of the church in good standing is eligible to receive a patriarchal blessing. It has become the practice to give blessings only to those fifteen years of age or older, in order to assure understanding of the purpose of the ordinance and adequate background for receiving and using it. In general, too, blessings are given to those who have been in the church long enough to meet these requirements. It is not considered wise to give a blessing too soon after baptism.

"Those receiving blessings are to be persons of sound moral quality. They are to be honest, clean, and wholesome in influence. This does not mean they are to be Saints without weakness or mistake. The blessing is to help them to achieve spiritual strength. If candidates were required to be 100 percent saintly, no blessings would ever be given.

"The candidate ought to have a functioning idea of what the blessing is and what it is for. He sees the blessing as a part of the comprehensive ministry of the church to him. He associates it with his total life."<sup>21</sup>

## PREPARATION FOR THE BLESSING

ASometimes conditions are such that there is little or no time for preparation on the part of the candidate. Sometimes his or her whole life has obviously been one of preparation. But there remains instances wherein at the discretion of the patriarch, a period of preparation may well be advised. This preparation should include prayer, meditation, self-examination, perhaps fasting, perhaps reading of certain suggested Scriptures and meditation upon them. It is advised that the patriarch furnish each applicant a copy of the little leaflet, 'Approach to the Patriarchal Blessing,' approved by the Order of Evangelists and to be obtained from the Herald Publishing House.

"Some few people feel that they prefer to go to a Patriarch who is a total stranger to them, one who knows nothing about them. There seems to be flaws in the reasoning that leads to such a conclusion. The finest, richest, most historic patriarchal blessings of old were given by the patriarch to his own children and grandchildren whom he had known from the cradle. In modern history, the first of our patriarchs blessed his own children.

"The Patriarch may very well interview the one seeking a blessing and in conversation establish a spirit of *rapproch*, of mutual understanding. He may inquire about family situations and background, interests, ambitions, problems, and plans for the future. Thus he may go understandingly to the throne of grace to seek the blessing and counsel needed. He works *with* his Lord, not as an insensate channel through which ideas and words are poured. Beyond the limits of his own wisdom and resources, it remains verily true that he shall depend upon the vast resources of Deity, and 'being in the Spirit,' he may be the more abundantly blessed because he has gone understandingly to the Lord with his petitions."<sup>22</sup>

Roy A. Cheville has written concerning preparation for the blessing as follows: "You need to be mature enough to look at life as a whole and the conditions that can make it blessed, if you are to receive a patriarchal blessing. When you are concerned with your total life rather than some one phase of it, you are ready. Sometimes a youth will be perplexed about some specific question. It may be the choice of a course of study, romantic perplexities, or financial questions that arise at the moment. It is not sound to seek an answer for these, except as they are integrally associated with the entire life program. I have found these days at college especially suited for patriarchal ministry' in blessings. Now you are piecing life together. Now you are working on life objectives. Here you are pushing out the radius of your world. Today you are reinterpreting your theology. Now you are working on plans for vocations, family mates, church participation, advanced education. I can think of no more appropriate time than now when you are looking to the totality of your life.

"This spirit of dedication is indispensable. I cannot expect God to give counsel unless I am disposed to respond. This dedication must be more than a one-sided whim. I do good work when all of me is devoted to all of the divine endeavor. This is more than interest in some specific part of the life of the church. God can direct us only when we are wanting and willing to be directed. The patriarch needs to sense the fullness of consecration. Only then can God bring to a life direction for the ordering of its course.

"The word 'blessed' means 'happy.' Essentially a blessing is a counsel for a commitment to a way of life that will achieve enduring happiness. We do well, then, to think through what values we prize most and to ask ourselves whether these will bring us Zion's well-being. A blessing's purpose is not to bestow gifts and hold out spiritual allurements. Our prayer is that God will help us to see the good way.

"For integrity and personal competence there are no substitutes. God cannot place a benediction on sordid, smutty living. This does not mean that we must be angelic beings before we are blessed. The blessing is designed to help us achieve this quality of character. But we ought to be trying. It is a great experience to place hands on the head of a youth and sense the illuminating presence of God, indicating that the life is clean and worthy of God's approval. Many a time I have experienced this sanction as a life has come before me

clean and consecrated. It is wonderful to be able to say, 'You are loved of the Lord, and your life is approved for its goodness and purity.'

"There is no hurry about receiving the patriarchal blessing. One does not rush up to a minister and ask if he has a few minutes to spare for a blessing. I have been reminded by fellow-ministers that I am very fortunate here at Grace-land. There are no hasty or transient requests. You make your request and your name is placed on a list. Then some time in the next months I shall summon you. I have been told that the day might come when the patriarch might take the initiative in calling men and women for their blessings. I am very happy that many of you are saying that you want a few weeks or a few months that you may mature sufficiently. You want to grow into the experience. It is well, too, that you are making your own appointment. I have met situations in which a parent has wanted to make an appointment for a son or daughter. Sometimes the youth was disinterested or getting off on the wrong track. In such times I have observed that some of the patriarchal ministries might be serviceable but not a patriarchal blessing.

"Then comes the day when you meet the patriarch. You ask if there is any specific preparation you can make. Again I would say that the general basic background is the important thing. The daily way of life, the insight into one's self, the allegiance to God's work, the consecration to the total program of the church, the relaxed relationship with God—all these and more constitute the major fitness. Generally we set a time that is free from inner confusion and strain from any specific situation. When a specific date is set, we shall endeavor to keep free from attitudes and outlooks that would mar our spiritual condition. We do not rush hastily into the presence of God. We come step by step until we feel ready to commune with him as our Father. There need be no anguish of spirit, painful introspection, and exacting fast. The essential relationship is that of Father and child, the one in benediction, the other in dedication."<sup>23</sup>

## **SPECIAL BLESSINGS**

The question might well be raised, why only one patriarchal blessing per person in a lifetime? It has been the practice of the Order of Patriarchs to give one official patriarchal blessing which is recorded, and a copy of which has been submitted to the person receiving the blessing. However, there have been times when special blessings other than this have been given. Such special blessings are ordinarily not recorded. Moreover, such special blessings are usually not given unless they are indicated by direction of the Spirit.

From time to time appointee ministers of the church who were about to embark on unusual or difficult missions have received special blessings. An example of such mission is an overseas assignment, especially when the man is to be separated from his family for a considerable time. Brother Charles Fry tells that before he went on an appointment to England in the 1920's, he felt he ought to have a special blessing. He approached Frederick A. Smith, then Presiding Patriarch, with his request. Brother Smith was at first reluctant but after making it a matter of prayer was convinced that the Lord did have a special blessing for Brother Fry. Various members of the Order of Patriarchs testify that occasionally they have specific direction of the Spirit to give a special blessing. Such blessing is given just as the conventional patriarchal blessing, that is, by the laying on of hands, offering a prayer, and offering specific counsel to the one receiving the blessing. Such counsel may be given by the direction of the Spirit as a patriarchal blessing may be. The only difference from the regular blessing is that the words of the blessing are not recorded.

## **OTHER DUTIES OF THE PATRIARCH**

It is sometimes assumed that the giving of the patriarchal blessing is the chief or the only function of the patriarch. However, Doctrine and Covenants 125:3 enumerates the duties of the office as follows: "To be an evangelical minister; to preach, teach, expound, exhort, to be a revivalist, and to visit branches and districts as wisdom may direct, invitation, request, or the Spirit of God determine and require; to comfort the Saints; to be a father to the church; to give counsel and advice to individuals who may seek for such; to lay on hands for the conferment of spiritual blessing, and if so led, to point out the lineage of the one who is blessed." It will be noted in the foregoing that there are ten specific duties listed before mention is made of the giving of special blessings. Some of the responsibilities have to do with public ministry. These include being an evangelical minister, to preach, teach, expound, exhort, and be a revivalist. Being a father to the church is a public ministry, but includes elements of private ministry' such as giving special counsel to those who are in positions of responsibility in the church. So far as personal and private ministry is concerned, note particularly that he is to give counsel and advice to individuals who may seek for such. This means that the help of the patriarch may be properly sought by those who do need personal counseling for a number of reasons. A patriarch by virtue of his experience in the church and by virtue of his office is uniquely fitted to give personal counseling. It may well be that while one received a single official "patriarchal blessing," that same person may in the long run receive even greater blessings from the patriarch by virtue of personal counsel which the patriarch is able to give. It is therefore a mistake to think of the patriarch as one who gives "a blessing," but who gives no other personal ministry.

#### SCRIPTURAL REFERENCES

D. and C. 104:19; 83:2

Gen. 27

Gen. 48, 49

II Nephi 1, 2

Alma 16:260, 261

D. and C. 107:29; 104:17; 122:14; 124.2, 125.3-6, 58.6, 81:3; 124:4

Alma 17:47-49

Tract: *Making Ready for the Patriarchal Blessing* by Roy A. Cheville, Herald House

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1. *Making Ready for the Patriarchal Blessing*, and quotes from a letter to the authors, by Roy A. Cheville

2. D. and C. 104:19

3. D. and C. 83:2

4. Gen. 27

5. Gen. 48, 49

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6. II Nephi 1, 2
  7. Alma 16:260, 261
  8. For example, *Church History*, Vol.2, p.48
  9. *Church History*, Vol. 2, pp 462-465
  10. D. and C. 107:29
  11. D. and C. 122:14
  12. D. and C. 124:2
  13. D. and C. 125:3-6
  14. *Saints' Herald*, December 15, 1952, pp. 20, 21
  15. D. and C. 58:6
  16. D. and C. 81:3
  17. D. and C. 124:4
  18. Alma 17:46-48
  19. D. and C. 125:3b
  20. *Evangelists and Patriarchs, Their Works and Calling*, by Elbert A. Smith, pp.28-30
  21. *Making Ready for the Patriarchal Blessing*, by Roy A. Cheville, p.7
  22. *Evangelists and Patriarchs, Their Works and Calling*, by Elbert A. Smith, p.26
  23. *Saints' Herald*, December 15, 1952, p. 21