

GENERAL PRIESTHOOD SESSION

The general priesthood session of the 172nd Semiannual General Conference convened in the Conference Center on Saturday, October 5, 2002, at 6:00 P.M. President Gordon B. Hinckley conducted this session.

Music was provided by an Aaronic Priesthood choir from stakes in Provo, Utah. Andrew Crane directed the choir, and John Longhurst was the organist.

President Hinckley opened the meeting with the following remarks.

President Gordon B. Hinckley

We welcome you, brethren, to this general priesthood session of the 172nd semiannual conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

These services are being relayed by satellite transmission to holders of the priesthood gathered in the Tabernacle, Assembly Hall, BYU Marriott Center, the Provo Missionary Training Center, and in locations in many countries around the world.

The singing during this session will be furnished by an Aaronic Priesthood choir from stakes in Provo, Utah, under the direction of Andrew Crane, with John Longhurst at the organ.

We shall begin this priesthood session with the choir singing "Come, All Ye Sons of God." Following the singing, the invocation will be offered by Elder Lynn G. Robbins of the Seventy.

Following the invocation, the choir will sing "O Thou Rock of Our Salvation." President Boyd K. Packer, Acting President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, will then address us. He will be followed by Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.

The choir sang "Come, All Ye Sons of God."

Elder Lynn G. Robbins offered the invocation.

The choir sang "O Thou Rock of Our Salvation."

President Boyd K. Packer

Patriarchal blessing a shield, protection

Fifty-eight years ago I knocked on the door of J. Roland Sandstrom, patriarch of the Santa Ana California Stake, with a recommend from my bishop to receive a patriarchal blessing. We had never met and would not meet again for 14 years. We met again 15 years later. This time, as one of the Twelve, I blessed him the day before he died.

The blessing was delivered by mail to my barracks at an air force base where I was stationed. I did not know then, as I know now, that a patriarch has prophetic insight, that his blessing would be more

than a guide to me. It has been a shield and a protection.

Three kinds of patriarchs

The revelation states that "it is the duty of the Twelve, in all large branches of the church, to ordain evangelical ministers, as they shall be designated unto them by revelation."¹

The Prophet Joseph Smith said: "An Evangelist is a Patriarch. . . . Wherever the Church of Christ is established in the earth, there should be a Patriarch for the benefit of the posterity of the Saints, as it was with Jacob in giving his patriarchal blessing unto his sons."²

The scriptures speak of three kinds of patriarchs: fathers of families,³ the prophet leaders of ancient times, and the stake patriarch, an ordained office in the Melchizedek Priesthood.⁴

The father is a patriarch to his family and can and should give father's blessings to his children.

The calling of patriarchs

Until a few years ago, every stake patriarch was called and ordained by a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. When the number of stakes increased, this responsibility was delegated to the stake president.

Like the other offices in the Melchizedek Priesthood—elders, high priests, Seventies, and Apostles—the stake patriarch is ordained rather than set apart.

The stake president submits a name to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Each name is carefully and prayerfully considered. Once approved, the patriarch is sustained in stake conference, then ordained. He then, with prophetic insights, will pronounce blessings upon the heads of those who come recommended by the bishop of their ward.

Guidelines for patriarchs and blessings

There is a publication, *Information and Suggestions for Patriarchs*. It instructs the stake president and the patriarch about this sacred office. This publication was discussed for years by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve. Each time it was reviewed, it was reduced in size. One senior brother said, "Brethren, we must not get between the Lord and His patriarchs."⁵

We now ask each stake president and each patriarch to reread this brief document. Read it more than once.

Patriarchs do not advertise for blessings. Members should seek blessings as they feel inspired to do so. There is no fixed age at which one may receive a patri-

archal blessing. The bishop ensures that the member is of sufficient age and maturity to understand the meaning and significance of the blessing.

A patriarchal blessing is recorded and transcribed by one who is assigned by the stake president. That blessing becomes a very personal treasure.

Except for members of the immediate family, we should not permit others to read our blessing, nor should we ask others to interpret it. Neither the patriarch nor the bishop can or should interpret it.

An inspired calling

When the Twelve called and ordained patriarchs, we shared experiences. We learned the Lord has a special interest in the patriarch, who holds a unique position in the Church.

I recall a conference where the patriarch was very old. While his ordination would remain in force, it was time that he be excused from giving blessings.

The stake president recommended a man with much leadership experience. However, I did not get the feeling that he should be the patriarch.

I knew that the First Presidency had said to stake presidents: "Because a man has filled with credit a presiding office and has attained a good age is no reason why he should or should not make a good patriarch. . . . [He should be one who has] developed within [him] the spirit of the patriarchs; in fact, this should be [his] leading characteristic, and [he] should be [a man] of wisdom, possessed of the gift and spirit of blessing as well."⁵

As the evening meeting was about to begin, an older man came partway down the aisle and, unable to find a seat, went to the back of the chapel. He was not quite as well dressed as most of the others and obviously had spent much time out-of-doors.

I whispered to the stake president, "Who is that man?"

Sensing what was on my mind, he said, "Oh, I don't think he could be our patriarch. He lives at the far edge of an outlying ward and has never held any leadership in a bishopric or high council."

He was invited to give the opening prayer, and he had said but a few words when that confirmation came, as it does by revelation, "This is the patriarch."

As I recall, he had six sons and one daughter. The youngest was then serving a mission, as had his older brothers, who were married and scattered around the country, all serving faithfully in the Church.

"What about your daughter?" I asked.

"Oh," he said, "you have met her. She is the wife of a counselor in the stake presidency."

I thought, "A patriarch—this man is a patriarch indeed!"

Before the general session, I met the aging patriarch in the foyer and said, "We are going to give you some help today."

He said, "Oh, thank you! I would appreciate that very, very much."

I said, "Let me give you the name of the new patriarch; then you and I and the stake president will be the only ones who know."

When I named the man, he was startled and said, "Isn't *that* interesting! I saw him among the people, coming into the building, and said to myself, 'Wouldn't he make a wonderful patriarch?'" It was an inspiring confirmation from the old patriarch.

There is nothing like this office in all of the Church or in all of the world.

Stake presidents' watch care of patriarchs

Stake presidents must provide very careful, special watch care over the patriarch. You should have him sit on the stand and be recognized.

On regular occasions, perhaps twice a year, you should interview the patriarch and read some of his blessings. Remind him that each blessing should be individual

and special to the member. The periodic reading of blessings must not be neglected by the stake president.

I once ordained a patriarch who was overcome with the responsibility. For months he could not get himself to give a blessing. Finally he asked his stake president if he might write a paragraph as a model introduction to any patriarchal blessing. The stake president approved.

Later he told me this: "When the first young man came for a blessing, because I had memorized this prepared introduction, I felt comfortable. I laid my hands on his head, and I did not use one word of it. That day I learned whose blessings they are. They are not my blessings but are dictated by the Spirit."

Elements of a patriarchal blessing

It has been said that a patriarchal blessing is a "[paragraph] from the book of your possibilities." If we read our patriarchal blessings, we will see what the spirit of prophecy has held up to us as to what each of us can become.⁶

An essential part of a patriarchal blessing is the declaration of lineage. By careful study of the scriptures, a patriarch becomes familiar with the patriarchal order. He learns the destiny of the tribes of Israel.

The Brethren have taught:

"In giving a blessing the patriarch may declare our lineage—that is, that we are of Israel, therefore of the family of Abraham, and of a specific tribe of Jacob. In the great majority of cases, Latter-day Saints are of the tribe of Ephraim, the tribe to which has been committed the leadership of the Latter-day work. Whether this lineage is of blood or adoption does not matter (Pearl of Great Price, Abraham, 2:10). This is very important, for it is through the lineage of Abraham alone that the mighty blessings of the Lord for His children on earth are to be consummated (Genesis 12:2, 3; Pearl of Great Price, Abraham 2:11).

“Then, the patriarch, looking into the future, enumerates the blessings and promises, some special, others general, to which the person of the proper lineage . . . is entitled; and through his authority seals them upon him, so that they may be his forever through faithfulness.”⁷

Since there are many bloodlines running in each of us, two members of one family might be declared as being of different tribes in Israel.

Whom a patriarch may bless

A patriarch may give patriarchal blessings to his own children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren who come recommended by their bishop.

When we receive requests for exceptions, for one to receive a blessing from an uncle or some favorite family friend, we invite them to follow the order and receive their blessing from the patriarch in their own stake.

In mission districts or in stakes where there is no patriarch, members may receive a recommend from their bishop or branch president to a patriarch in an adjoining stake.

Promises will be fulfilled

Occasionally a member may feel that their blessing is somewhat less than expected. But as time goes on, they will recognize the power of revelation in it.

Sometimes someone will worry because a promise made in a patriarchal blessing is not yet fulfilled. For instance, a blessing may indicate that a member will be married, and they do not find a companion. That does not mean that the blessing will go unfulfilled. It is good to know that things happen in the Lord's due time, not always in ours. Things of an eternal nature have no boundaries. From the pre-mortal existence to our existence beyond the veils of death, our life is an eternal life.

Circumstances such as advancing age and infirmity, moving out of the stake, or a call to serve a mission may require that the stake president recommend to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles that the patriarch be honorably excused from active service.

Light of revelation empowers patriarchs

President Harold B. Lee told of calling a patriarch. He and the stake president had gone to the man's home. He had been out with his sons on the welfare farm all day and was tired and weary and covered with grime.

President Lee said, “I made him more weary when I told him what it was I had come for—that he was to be called as the patriarch to that stake.”

After the morning session of conference, where the man had borne a remarkable testimony, they went to a basement office.

The stake president's wife was present and wrote to President Lee:

“As you walked over to put your hands on [his] head, I thought to myself, He is a man with whom we socialize. We have gone on trips with him, to dances. . . . Now part of his responsibility is to declare the lineage from which each one has come in these blessings. He hasn't been a student of ancient languages—how is he going to know?”

“. . . You walked over and put your hands on his head, and a light came from behind you and went right through you and into him. And I thought to myself, Isn't that a strange coincidence that the sunlight has come in just at that moment. And then I realized that there was [no window,] no sunlight. I was witnessing the answer to my question. . . . That light came from somewhere beyond Brother Lee and went through Brother Lee into this patriarch. Then I knew where he was going to get that information—by the revelations of Almighty God.”⁸

And so it must be. Whenever a patriarch is ordained or pronounces a blessing, that same light, though it may be unseen, is present. It empowers a patriarch to declare lineage and to give a prophetic blessing, notwithstanding that he himself may be a man of very ordinary capacity.

A holy, sacred office

Do not let the office of stake patriarch be neglected or ignored. It is essential to the spiritual power of a stake.

Now, to stake presidents, watch over the work of your stake patriarch. Keep him close to you. Interview him and read selections from his blessings.

And speaking to the patriarchs, you have been chosen as few other men are chosen. You must live in such a way that through spiritual inspiration you can give prophetic and inspired blessings. Be an exemplary patriarch in your own family. Live to be worthy of the Spirit. And experience the joy of your calling.

The patriarch, who had never seen me before, made a promise that applies to every one of us. He told me to “face toward the sunlight of truth so that the shadow of error, disbelief, doubt and discouragement shall be cast behind you.”⁹ Many times I have gained strength from reading that patriarchal blessing, given by an inspired servant of the Lord.

I bear witness that this is a holy office, a sacred office, a blessing to this Church, that it is an example of the blessings that the Lord has established in His Church for the blessing of all of us. And I bear testimony of Him in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

NOTES

1. Doctrine and Covenants 107:39.
2. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith (1976), 151.
3. Adam counseled and blessed his posterity (see D&C 107:42–56); Jacob blessed his sons and their descendants (see Genesis 49:1–28); Lehi blessed his posterity (see 2 Nephi 4:3–11).
4. The Savior ordained apostles, prophets, and evangelists (see Ephesians 4:11); the duty of the Twelve is to ordain evangelists (see D&C 107:39); Hyrum Smith was to take the office of patriarch (see D&C 124:91–92, 124; 135:1).
5. First Presidency letter, 29 June 1903; see also James R. Clark, comp., *Messages of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. (1965–75), 4:57–58.
6. Harold B. Lee, *Stand Ye in Holy Places* (1975), 117.
7. John A. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations*, 3 vols. (1943–51), 1:73–74.
8. *The Teachings of Harold B. Lee*, ed. Clyde J. Williams (1996), 488–89.
9. Patriarchal blessing of Boyd K. Packer, 15 Jan. 1944, 2.

Elder M. Russell Ballard

Helaman's extraordinary young men

In one of the most powerful and instructive stories in the Book of Mormon, the people of Ammon had covenanted never again to take up weapons for the shedding of blood. But “when they saw the danger, and the many afflictions . . . which the Nephites bore for them, they were moved with compassion and were

desirous to take up arms in the defence of their country” (Alma 53:13). Helaman and his brethren persuaded them to honor their covenant with the Lord.

The scriptural account doesn't tell us who first pointed out that their sons had not made the same covenant their parents had made. I like to think that it was one of the young men who suggested the possi-