

'The pirate was so happy that his heart pained him.
"Did you see him?" he cried. "Was it San Francisco?
Oh! What good dogs you must be to see a vision!"'

-Tortilla Flat p.143
(John Steinbeck 1963:143)

"The love and warmth which emanate from the being
are utterly beyond words, and he feels completely
surrounded by it."

-LIFE AFTER LIFE
(Moody 1975:43)

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INTRODUCTION:

There is little difficulty understanding what most LDS seem to mean by the word 'blessing'. Usually. But it is evident, on further examination, that few appear to have contemplated other meanings than this 'usual' one. The common understanding is that "blessings" are nice things done to us, or for us, when we are good, especially within the egocentric world view of SMD [¹]. In this sense, it would be comparable to being paid a salary by the Lord for doing work: blessings accrue in our separate account for time and effort invested and are bestowed at an appropriate time. Once more, that is (perhaps/probably?) an adequate definition for most purposes within the world view of SMD. But the term is actually a rubric for a wide variety of processes, as becomes evident after testing the edges of its meanings.

We need to move beyond this general definition, "something good that happens to us when we are good", to differentiate between various types of blessings, based on at least the following:

- a. the source of the blessing**
- b. when the blessing is bestowed**
- c. how it is bestowed**

¹ As I age, I am increasingly sympathetic to critics of Christianity who assert that Christians do good things for two reasons, both of which are invalid reasons for doing good. One reason to do good is to "get a reward." The other: "to avoid punishment."

From the time I was a child, doing good or bad was always -and still generally is- tied to the notion of blessings or punishments. The concept of doing good things because those are the things worth doing, intrinsically, inherently good, never crossed my screen. And the concept that not doing bad things because they are bad, inherently, intrinsically bad, also eluded me. Yet why else should we do good and avoid evil? Certainly not for rewards or punishments. For their own reasons they should be embraced and eschewed respectively.

This concept has been reinforced in my mind over the last few years as I have studied various brands of Buddhism. The state of nirvana is comparable in one sense to the Christian heaven, yet differs fundamentally with it in another. In the first case, it is comparable because nirvana is the final state attained by right living, the state that results from proper motivations and life styles. In the second case, it differs dramatically, in that nirvana is conceived of as a state of 'voidness', or nothingness. There are not emotions. There is no joy, nor sadness. This doctrine includes a concept that acknowledges the truthfulness of the Equal Opposition Condition: if one member of a pair is present, and is recognized as such, it is because its opposite is also present and recognized. Therefore, the state of nirvana, or perfection, is one where all emotion has been purged, where there is no thinking, no joy, etc.

The reason I like this concept is not because I like a void. My deeply entrenched Christianity makes it impossible for me to comprehend -at a true emotional level- such a place. The reason I like it is because it is only achieved by people who live right lives for the sake of living right lives, not because a reward is in store, or a punishment is awarded wrong living. People strive to be guided in paths of goodness because that is right, because others are not injured, etc. In this, Christians unfortunately do have a misunderstanding of how things are to be.

In fact, I suspect that this misunderstanding is one of the obstacles within SMD to comprehending that Christ and His plan apply equally to all mankind. The narrow, provincial view that people will only be blessed by being baptized LDS is wrong. The concept that only LDS will make it to the Celestial world is wrong. All people who live quiet lives of goodness and compassion for the sake of goodness and compassion are as much Christ's follows as are those duly certified by baptism, etc. In fact, those are the ones who merit the greatest respect in the next world because they do it for its own sake, not for a reward or in fear of a punishment.

There actually may be greater similarity between Nirvana and the Celestial Kingdom that the above description would imply in one particular sense. That is: the nature of godliness is such that the individuals who attain such unspeakable glory will also be homogenized. They will be indistinguishable from each other. Once more, remember that the Christ said that seeing Him was the same as seeing the Father, and vice versa. If you do believe they are separate entities, you nonetheless arrive at a conception of Them as being interchangeable, hence undifferentiated from each other. Predictability and consistency characterize Them. So in this narrow sense, there is no contrast. However, this comparison doesn't take into account the eternal opposition of forces. I am not sure how Buddhism takes them into account either. Does a person who has attained Nirvana rise above these forces?

Other dimensions of blessings will become evident as we progress, but let's look at each of these, and then address some problems.

SOURCE:

In regards to a), some blessings appear to be something good which happen to an individual as a reward for good behavior. In other cases, however, the blessing is not a compensation for good behavior. It may actually be earned through the agency and behavior of another person, sort of an oblique, by-product of that person's actions. As an example, note that it is explained in the canon that children are blessed as a result of the goodness of the parents.^[2] Or how about the exercise of faith by family members on behalf on an individual which reaps healing or something positive for that individual?

WHEN:

In regards to b), when blessings are given, some may be immediately given, and others may be delayed. Immediate ones would be given during mortality, deferred ones "in heaven"^[3]. Some may be granted immediately during mortal life while others may be deferred until the final judgment.^[4] The immediate blessings may be something like feelings that result from good works. But note something important about this type of feeling. The sense of goodness or happiness that results from doing good may not actually be blessings handed out by the Father at that moment. They probably derive from the internal workings of our spirits as they perceive that they have been successful at obeying some laws, or they may result from the operation of some power of heaven on the spirit for its goodness. I obviously draw a distinction between direct actions of the Father and application of laws of heaven. I actually believe that the Father and Christ do little direct blessing of mortals because the laws of heaven which are triggered by behaviors automatically apply to yield the product inherent in them.

Other blessings may not occur at the moment the good act is done, but still may be evident during mortal life. Take patience

² Of course, one can interpret this two ways: one is that just by having good parents, a person is fortunate because s/he will not experience the trials attendant on poor parenting. The other, the one really alluded to here, is that actual blessing are bestowed on the children. Is this the case? We don't know, but we believe it.

³ This "heaven" is probably best interpreted as the post-resurrection world.

⁴ Note that the term 'judgment' can refer to the postmortal judgment which applies to our spirit right at the point of death in mortality, or it can refer to the final judgment which occurs at the end of the postmortal period during the resurrection. For discussions of both, see chapters 37 and 45 respectively.

as a possible example. The first time one forbears to become angry become angry for some imagined wrong, there is probably little in the way of a blessing that results - there is probably an embryonic development of a habit or pattern of thought or behavior. However, if this forbearance occurs often enough over time, eventually strong patterns develop and one begins to reap the blessings associated with the condition of having patience.

Note that in the latter example, the blessing may actually be nothing other than an alteration in the spirit itself. That is not to discount such changes because they are profoundly important. But it intended to show that there are not always externally applied blessings.

The blessings that are deferred are perhaps those that have to do with growth opportunities that will be granted to those spirits who have earned the privilege of manipulating the powers of heaven. These blessings would not be granted in this life because, first, they do not pertain to this mortal existence, and second, they must not be given until every moment of probation in this phase has expired.

HOW BESTOWED:

In regards to the c), we believe there are various methods for blessings to be bestowed, different types of blessings. Some are perhaps material blessings. Good performance in dealing with one's associates might create advantages to the individual.^[5] But it is believed here that other blessings are actual alterations in the molecular structure of the spirit itself, rather than a benison bestowed on it by an outside agency. Such internal "blessings" then produce additional advantages for the affected individual. This type of blessing consists of a rearrangement of the "molecules", or whatever the constituent units are of the spirit.

We believe that the blessings that result in internal changes of spirit matter are the most important ones for us. These changes cause our spirit molecular structure to approximate that of celestial spirits. So these types of blessings may actually not

⁵ However, to us, this is a nearly despicable approach to blessings. It turns good-doing and right living into a crass, mercantile transaction. Just live a 'good' life brother, and you will get a big raise, or be able to buy a new car. etc. Pass the maalox, please. I just cite it here because it is such a common LDS conception of blessings, though NOT part of the fundamental theology. (I know. The 'windows of heaven' business can promote this merchant mentality.) This concept is reinforced by the fact that the leaders of the church are nearly uniformly successful men -with a few women- who stand out from the rest of us under-achievers.

The question really is this: is there, in fact, a material correlation between good living and material success, in which case, all leaders will evince a higher than average standard of living; or is this phenomenon of uniformity of GA income and reputations really a manifestation of a sort of good ol' boy mentality; or even the result of a selection process where individuals tend to select others who mirrors themselves? We don't know, but we are uncomfortable that there is such a nearly incestuous -please pardon this nasty word, because I don't mean it literally, but I want to shock you into looking at just how in-grown the hierarchy is- or more politely, a nepotistic, structure to the top of the organization.

The really charitable, and perhaps closer-to-the-truth observation is that this in-breeding was a logical consequence of the church having less than a million people world wide the late '50's for over a hundred years, which meant that the provender at hand for making leaders was sparse. This exigency compelled a selection from a small group of families that knew and trusted each other, or selection from friends of each other's families based on that trust. Admittedly, there are obvious attempts to internationalize the structure and it is working. Just so slowly. I know. The argument is that there aren't enough qualified foreign nationals to take the reins. Sigh.

result in any demonstrable benefit during mortality, rather might "pay off" during or after the judgment process.^[6]

This conception, as you well know by now, recurs throughout this text: for each state of the spirit, there is a particular set of growth potentials or opportunities which are predicated on that state^[7]. When a spirit mutates into a new state, meaning changes in spirit matter configuration even during a single testing phase, there is a new set of growth possibilities which are opened at the same time. Until a spirit develops to a given point, whatever growth possibilities are associated therewith, are not available to the spirit. This is the line-upon-line concept, or the Linear Sequencing Condition.

PROBLEM:

There is a slight problem with the concept of blessings as commonly described by some LDS. I know. I have done it myself. Let's use a real example. When my wife and I were in graduate school, we struggled financially like all students do. We paid tithing and at one point, we received an unexpected windfall from our bank of \$100.00.^[8] After verifying that this amount was in fact intended for our account, we chose to view it as a blessing that resulted from obedience to paying tithing.

Later, in a conversation with the Dean -and his wife- of the Indiana University Business School, we explained our belief to them that this windfall was a blessing for paying tithing, exhibiting great fervor and belief. They had been good friends to us, and they listened patiently to our explanation of being so blessed. Then the husband asked a simple question that still echoes in my mind: "What about the person or business that lost the \$100 in that transaction? It had to come from somewhere." We had no answer, and glibly repeated our belief. But.

We obviously -and greedily- had been choosing to ignore that issue. But it is a real one that must be accounted for. Is it possible that true blessings from the powers of heaven for one person will result in a loss or injury to another? That is what we were ignoring in our excitement. If we were really rational, reasonable people, which we certainly aren't, we probably should have insisted that the bank take back the money and find who it really belonged to. That would have been just. As it remains, I

⁶ Another issue: is it possible that there are blessing that result from performance during mortality which are bestowed on us during post-mortality rather than during post-mortality? It seems possible, even likely, but specifically what they would be is hard to surmise. The only obvious one is that good living will result in being assigned to Paradise. But whether there are others, we can't guess.

⁷ "That state" refers to two states:

- 1) the phase of the metamorphosis we are in, and
- 2) the nature or state of our spirit matter at that point in 'time'.

⁸ This was in the late '60's when we only paid \$60/month for rent and utilities!

am not comfortable with this "blessing" even after all these years and feel sort of like I cheated. But it is not uncommon to hear in testimony meetings of comparable situations.^[9]

LEFT-HANDED BLESSINGS:

This leads to a related issue. This involves testimonies of people being punished by the Lord in some manner "for their own good". Perhaps that philosophy appeals to the Calvinistic, but not to me. Let's take another example. Some people will report that they experienced a terrible struggle as a result of something like a car accident, cancer, death of a loved one, etc. The statement is then made by some that the Lord was testing them, or teaching them something by causing the accident to occur. But, in my estimation, there is a major problem with this simple-minded perception of these situations.

The problem is with the reverse side of the story:

- (a) Does the Lord force someone to do something, a doubtful doctrine, and
- (b) Does the Lord intend that the person who did the deed is now going to suffer in spirit because of the injury they caused the affected party?

Do you believe that the Lord will hurt someone just so that a third party can be taught a lesson? I doubt it. The idea of "Slap the child next to Johnny. That will scare him enough that he will be better." really doesn't seem to me to be what the Lord does to us. The Lord is not going to punish an innocent, uninvolved party.

This doctrine is actually a rather self-centered, egocentric way to view the situation in my estimation. I think bad things happen because bad things happen^[10]. No guilt or judgment is necessary. To perceive the Lord's hand in all things is to do Him a disfavor, in my estimation, because we end up accusing Him of things He didn't and wouldn't do.

CONCLUSION:

The term 'blessing', then, represents a broad range of phenomena, that are difficult to describe and impossible to understand. However, we believe here that most blessings derive

⁹ The hard-core will say to just over-look this issue. "If the Lord chose to bless us that way, shut up and accept it. And don't worry about petty details." I hope noone would argue that. But I wouldn't give you better than even odds that noone will.

¹⁰ The laws and powers we are immersed in consist of both silver and black varieties. The way they mix causes accidents and bad things to happen, without the intervention of Him.

from the direct action of the laws of heaven, rather than some sort of intervention by the Father or Christ. We exercise agency and thereby reap the consequences, whatever they are, based on the behaviors exhibited and the related laws of heaven.

Note that we believe that the significant blessings for our souls derive probably from actions taken by us through the exercise of agency. Agency must be active to trigger the maximum effect of the laws of heaven^[11]. There may be blessings that are bestowed on us in the next world but we do not believe that significant ones can be given unless there were behaviors which merited them.

¹¹ We are not sure whether any blessings actually accrue to us when our spirits are quiescent. We admit that it is possible that they do, but within this mechanical model, it does not seem likely that any blessings that have profound impact on us can derive from environments where we are passive. Active use of agency is the hallmark needed to create the best blessings.

