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A Law Upon Which All Blessings Are Predicated

David A. Thomas

It is a privilege to stand before you at this podium today. This is not an occasion that I anticipated or aspired to, but it is indeed a privilege, and I welcome the opportunity to share my testimony of the Savior and some things I have learned about being His disciple.

On April 8, 2008, I noted, as I always do on that date, the anniversary of my appointment as a faculty member here at BYU, beginning 34 years ago on April 8, 1974. I was not among the original group of faculty hired for what was then the new J. Reuben Clark Law School, but I was the first of the “non-originals” and now, with the passage of time, have become the longest continuously serving member of the Law School faculty. I am profoundly grateful for the many students and colleagues—both at the Law School and the university generally—who have enriched my life.

I first became a student of the law at Duke University School of Law in September 1967—nearly 41 years ago. Only four years earlier I had received my patriarchal blessing, which included the admonition “Study the laws of the temporal affairs of men as well as of their spiritual affairs.” I began teaching here at the BYU Law School less than two years after completing law studies at Duke, and when I reread this patriarchal blessing a few years ago, I realized that most of my legal career had indeed centered on the “study” of the law.

My remarks today will touch on the laws of our temporal affairs as well as on the laws of our spiritual affairs. Our scriptures contain dozens of references to both temporal and spiritual laws. The Lord declared “that all things unto me are spiritual, and not at any time have I given you a law which was temporal” (D&C 29:34). Joseph Smith was urged by the Lord “to

obtain a knowledge of history, and of countries, and of kingdoms, of laws of God and man, and all this for the salvation of Zion” (D&C 93:53). And to all of us the Lord commanded: “Let no man break the laws of the land, for he that keepeth the laws of God hath no need to break the laws of the land” (D&C 58:21). And thus we proclaim in the 12th article of faith our commitment to “obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law.”

The great prophet Lehi taught us that without the law of God there would be no sin, righteousness, happiness, punishment, or misery: “And if these things are not there is no God” (2 Nephi 2:13). Alma affirmed this by teaching:

There is a law given, and a punishment affixed, and a repentance granted; which repentance, mercy claimeth; otherwise, justice claimeth the creature and executeth the law, and the law inflicteth the punishment; if not so, the works of justice would be destroyed, and God would cease to be God. [Alma 42:22]

Whatever else we learn from these scriptures, we learn that one of the important godly attributes is adherence to law.

However, it is important to realize that the law is not only for inflicting punishment. One of my favorite scriptures is the passage that teaches us how the law is also the gateway to blessings:

There is a law, irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundations of this world, upon which all blessings are predicated—
And when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated. [D&C 130:20–21]

One of the really important things we should think about each day is the blessings we have received and whether those blessings seem to be coming to us in response to our obedience to laws and commandments of the Lord. We should always remember to express our gratitude for these blessings. I think this is helpful to think about, even though, as King Benjamin put it, we will always be “unprofitable servants” (Mosiah 2:21)—that is, always in debt to our Father in Heaven.

I don’t know that there is a list of specific laws with specific blessings attached to them, but as we go through life we come to understand some of the important cause-and-effect relationships between our conduct and our blessings. Let me mention a few examples that are important to me.

Liberty and the Rule of Law

Each year at our Law School convocation in the Provo Tabernacle, we conclude our services by all standing and singing “America the Beautiful.” The sights and sounds of that experience have always stirred me, even after participating in this for over 30 years. One of the verses teaches an important law upon which blessings are predicated:

America! America!
 God mend thine ev'ry flaw,
 Confirm thy soul in self-control,
 Thy liberty in law.¹

“Thy liberty in law” is a phrase that we might also describe as “the rule of law.” After a career of observation and study, it is clear to me that all of our human rights and civil liberties, indeed every blessing emanating from this promised land, are predicated on our success in “obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law,” as we declare in our 12th article of faith. In those nations where the commitment to rule of law is weakest, the suffering of the people is the deepest. Strengthening the commitment to rule of law is not only a national or community undertaking but also a challenge we all face individually. We do not disobey or ignore or flaunt our laws without weakening the fabric of our society. If our laws are not wise, we have well-known processes for addressing those flaws. One of those processes is wise participation in our electoral events. Thus King Mosiah taught:

Therefore, choose you by the voice of this people, judges, that ye may be judged according to the laws which have been given you by our fathers, which are correct, and which were given them by the hand of the Lord.

Now it is not common that the voice of the people desireth anything contrary to that which is right; but it is common for the lesser part of the people to desire that which is not right; therefore this shall ye observe and make it your law—to do your business by the voice of the people.

And if the time comes that the voice of the people doth choose iniquity, then is the time that the judgments of God will come upon you. [Mosiah 29:25–27]

Blessings Predicated on Health Laws

Another law upon which important blessings are predicated is found in section 89 of the Doctrine and Covenants, familiar to us as the Word of Wisdom. This revelation “show[s] forth the order and will of God in the temporal salvation of all saints in the last days” (D&C 89:2). It tells us things to avoid and things to do. Then it states what almost sounds like a legal principle:

And all saints who remember to keep and do these sayings, walking in obedience to the commandments, shall receive health in their navel and marrow to their bones;

And shall find wisdom and great treasures of knowledge, even hidden treasures;

And shall run and not be weary, and shall walk and not faint.

And I, the Lord, give unto them a promise, that the destroying angel shall pass by them, as the children of Israel, and not slay them. Amen. [D&C 89:18–21]

Everywhere we go we see the negative and positive consequences of this law on the physical condition of our people. Less visible, but more important, is the effect of this law on the spiritual health of the Saints. Our obedience to this law has much to do with whether we are inviting the Spirit into our lives or leading lives that are not welcoming to the Spirit.

Somewhat related to this law are three minor laws I learned about when I was required to begin military service midway through law school. When I arrived in Vietnam on August 15, 1969, I was assigned to the army's First Infantry Division. Because it was too dangerous to travel on the ground, I was told to get in a helicopter.

The helicopter was what they called a Huey. A Huey had eight campstool-like canvas seats for passengers like myself. Four of the seats faced forward, and two on each side faced out to the sides. These Hueys had a machine gun mounted on each side. The side doors, like doors on a van, were pulled all the way back so the machine gunners could operate their guns if needed.

I took my place on one of the side seats, facing out to the side with a completely clear and open view because the side door had been pulled all the way back. I took my seat with my M16 automatic rifle in one hand and my steel helmet in the other arm, looking forward to my first ride in a Huey helicopter. In a great roar of its engine and the rush of wind from its rotor blades, the chopper lifted off, rising straight in the air for about two hundred feet. Then, as it prepared to turn in the direction of where it was taking me, it leaned over, or banked steeply, to my side, so that I was looking almost straight down out of my open door.

At that moment I realized (1) that I had forgotten to fasten my seat belt and (2) that both my hands were full of important things that I did not want to drop out of the helicopter: my rifle and my helmet. Then realization number three happened. I started to slide out of my seat and drop out of the turning helicopter.

What happened next? Just before I fell from the helicopter, my feet discovered that each of these little seats had two little, straight, aluminum legs. My left foot found one of these, and I wrapped my boot tightly around it just as I was about to fall, and I managed to hold on until the helicopter straightened out. You will probably not be surprised to learn that I now always fasten my seat belt when I drive.

And it was on this occasion that I learned some new things about the law of unintended consequences, about Murphy's Law (if anything can go wrong, it will), and about the law of gravity.

Blessings Predicated on the Law of Obedience

Indeed, obedience is its own law. Pioneer wagon tracks exemplify to me that principle. In the summer of 1847, enduring tracks were first made

by the creaking wagons and the dusty, weary members of the pioneer company of Latter-day Saints blazing the trail to the Salt Lake Valley. The tracks are found in a remote corner of southwestern Wyoming, away from human activity. It was at this spot that Brigham Young fell seriously ill with fever. Over the next 21 years, until 1868, tens of thousands of wagon and handcart wheels and pioneer feet—adult and child—wore down these tracks. Now, over 160 years after that first pioneer wagon train, in places the vegetation still will not grow back and the tracks are still discernible. These faithful emigrants, these “blessed, honored Pioneer[s],”² symbolize a commitment to obedience that must forever remain an example to us.

Among those many thousands of pioneers were the great-great-grandparents of my wife, Paula. Hans and Maren Rasmussen were prosperous farmers when they accepted the restored gospel in Denmark. They responded eagerly and obediently to the call to come to Zion. After selling their farm, they paid their tithing, made a substantial contribution to the Perpetual Emigration Fund, and then equipped and funded themselves and about 30 other Danish Saints for the journey to Salt Lake City. With a covered wagon, they joined one of the two wagon trains accompanying the ill-fated Willie and Martin Handcart Companies. But they had started their journey too late in the summer of 1856. Among their several children were two-year-old twin girls. Soon after they got started, one of these little girls, named Christina—and known as Stina—came down with a simple childhood infection. She was unable to be treated on the trail and died in June 1856. As if this tragedy were not enough, three months later they were caught in the early and ferocious snowstorms and windstorms that caused so much terrible suffering for all in the Willie and Martin Companies. They also lost almost all of their goods.

Shortly after arriving in Salt Lake City, the Rasmussens were called to go south and help settle the pioneer community of Ephraim. Soon thereafter they were sent further south to help settle the community of Richfield, where they lived in a dugout. A year later they were sent back to Ephraim.

Here Hans and Maren Rasmussen established their home by digging a dugout to which was added a two-room adobe house later and which was the home where this onetime rich young Danish convert couple spent the remainder of their lives. Here they raised their family, and though they never enjoyed even the luxury of a cookstove, they often gave expression to their joy of having been found worthy to make these sacrifices and to live among the Saints of latter days. They often said they would gladly do it all over again if necessary to enjoy the blessings of their deep testimony of the gospel.³

Many, many blessings are predicated upon the law of obedience.

Blessings Predicated on the Laws of Teaching and Learning by the Spirit

Another law upon which blessings are predicated is found in the admonition—which sounds like a law—that “the Spirit shall be given unto you by the prayer of faith; and if ye receive not the Spirit ye shall not teach” (D&C 42:14). Our scriptures refer to spiritual gifts of knowledge and wisdom (see D&C 46:13, 15–18; Moroni 10:9–10) and to admonitions to “seek learning . . . by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118, 109:7). I understand from these scriptures that both teaching and learning are gifts of the Spirit and that they are enjoyed as spiritual gifts when we do our very best to invite the Spirit into our lives. Maybe this has always been really obvious to most of you, but there is in fact a connection between spirituality and success in our academic endeavors.

So what sort of obedience may yield the blessings of enhanced teaching and learning? According to the scriptures:

1. We should be *humble*—that is, not prideful in our learning: “And the wise, and the learned, and they that are rich, who are puffed up because of their learning, and their wisdom, and their riches—yea, they are they whom he despiseth” (2 Nephi 9:42).
2. We should be *receptive* to the teachings of the Spirit: “He that receiveth light, and continueth in God, receiveth more light” (D&C 50:24).
3. We should be *obedient* to the commandments: “When they are learned they think they are wise, and they hearken not unto the counsel of God. . . . To be learned is good if they hearken unto the counsels of God” (2 Nephi 9:28–29).

I am sure there are many things we can do to enhance our teaching and learning. Here’s one that I have had personal experience with. When I was in my early teens, I made a personal commitment to avoid doing homework on the Sabbath and to do all I could to keep my Sabbath days holy. Despite all of the circumstances that have challenged and continue to challenge that commitment, I know I have been blessed specifically in academic endeavors and in my professional life since then by whatever success I’ve had in honoring that commitment. This same cause-and-effect relationship pertains to all of our other efforts to obey the commandments and serve our God and fellow beings with faithful diligence.

Sometimes when I am asked by prospective law students why they should choose BYU Law School over other good law schools they may have opportunity to attend, I am tempted to answer: “Well, at BYU you could have me as one of your teachers, of course.” More seriously, perhaps the best answer I can give is this: This is a place where you will be surrounded by faculty and students who are striving to bring the Spirit of God into their lives, and therefore the spiritual gifts of teaching and learning will

be found here in great abundance. Certainly it has been my privilege here, for over three decades, to be surrounded by friends and colleagues, both students and faculty, who are persons of great learning and wonderful intellectual attainment and who are also persons of faith and wisdom. Nowhere else on earth will you find that blessing in such abundance.

So, here are some principles of the law upon which these blessings of teaching and learning are predicated:

- The gospel of Jesus Christ includes and encompasses all knowledge and all truth.
- Ultimately all knowledge is revealed through the medium of the Holy Ghost.
- Increased spirituality and spiritual power increase access to and mastery of knowledge.
- Teaching and learning are gifts of the Spirit; therefore, greater spirituality and greater spiritual power should help us expand our present abilities to teach and learn.

Because my intellectual powers are enhanced by my spiritual powers, it is no coincidence that my most productive and successful years as a teacher, scholar, and lawyer have been in those years when I have tried my best to give a full measure of service in the intense Church callings of a campus stake presidency, a bishop of my home ward and of a BYU ward, and in the other callings that have come to me. I am edified by the example of my very busy law students who accept and serve faithfully in heavy Church callings while successfully pursuing their law studies.

Blessings Predicated on Humility and Being Not “Weary in Well-Doing”

As in all else, we are led by the example of the Savior. Once during His mortal ministry, His disciples tried to protect Him from the press of people who sought His healing blessings. The disciples rebuked those who brought young children in the hope that the Savior would touch them.

But when Jesus saw it, he was much displeased, and said unto them, Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God. [Mark 10:14]

A similar incident occurred when the Savior visited the Nephites after His Resurrection. In chapter 17 of 3 Nephi we read of the Savior’s ministry among the people who had survived the great destruction that had occurred at the time of the Resurrection. After teaching many important doctrines throughout that day, he prepared to leave, saying, “My time is at hand” (3 Nephi 17:1). But then,

he cast his eyes round about again on the multitude, and beheld they were in tears, and did look steadfastly upon him as if they would ask him to tarry a little longer with them.

And he said unto them: Behold, my bowels are filled with compassion towards you.

Have ye any that are sick among you? . . .

And it came to pass . . . all the multitude, with one accord, did go forth with their sick and their afflicted, and their lame, and with their blind, and with their dumb, and with all them that were afflicted in any manner; and he did heal them every one as they were brought forth unto him. [3 Nephi 17:5–7, 9]

And then He commanded them to bring their little children to Him. After praying,

he wept, . . . and he took their little children, one by one, and blessed them, and prayed unto the Father for them.

And when he had done this he wept again. [3 Nephi 17:21–22]

There followed then the marvelous miracle when these little ones were encircled about with fire (*see* verse 24). All of this happened after Jesus had spent a full day teaching the people.

This reminds me that we have been asked to “be not weary in well-doing” (D&C 64:33), and we have the Savior’s example before us. As we seek to be the Savior’s true disciples, this is one of our constant challenges. A month ago I was reminded of this Christlike quality as I learned something about the life of Abraham Lincoln.

In May of this year I had occasion to visit the recently restored Lincoln Cottage, a house about three miles north of the White House, where Abraham Lincoln lived with his family for five months a year during 1862, 1863, and 1864. Each day he rode, usually on horseback, from the White House to this sanctuary, where he could escape from the hot and muggy weather, from the crowds seeking his personal assistance, and from the gloom of the recent death of his son Willie. He accomplished much important work in this “Cottage,” not the least of which was his drafting of the Emancipation Proclamation.

Late one hot summer evening in 1862, Lincoln was at home in the Cottage trying to calm his mind on the eve of a significant Civil War battle about to be fought on the outskirts of Washington, D.C. He was also relieved to be momentarily free of an especially persistent woman who had called on him in the White House that day seeking a promotion for her husband.

Nevertheless, late that evening another private citizen, having been aided in finding the president by a Treasury Department employee, was admitted to see Mr. Lincoln. His story was poignant and wrenching. A Union officer from New Hampshire had been wounded in recent fighting.

The officer's wife and her friend had both made the journey from New Hampshire to locate the wounded soldier and help him recover. As they journeyed by boat back to Washington, the boat collided with another boat at night and 73 passengers drowned, including both ladies. The wounded soldier barely escaped with his life.

The president's visitor had returned to Washington to locate and return the bodies of these ladies to New Hampshire. He sought access to the area of the disaster, which had been closed because of the pending battle. The Secretary of War had gruffly refused his request, so he was now before the president seeking intervention:

Without making any interruptions, Lincoln listened to the [visitor's] long and tragic story. At the end, however, . . . instead of displaying his legendary generosity, Lincoln reportedly said, "Am I to have no rest? Is there no hour or spot when or where I may escape this constant call? Why do you follow me out here with such business as this? Why do you not go to the War-office, where they have charge of all this matter of papers and transportation?" The embarrassed [visitor] tried to argue his case with the exhausted president, but to no avail. . . . [He was] dismissed curtly and sent back to the city without any relief.⁴

Lincoln later appeared at the visitor's hotel apologizing. He confessed, "I was a brute last night."⁵

Another version of the story reports:

[The president said:] "I fear, Sir, that my conduct has been such as to make it appear that I had forgotten my humanity." . . .

. . . The two men sat down and talked as familiarly as old friends. Great tears rolled down the President's careworn face as he heard the story of the shipwreck. . . .

. . . He then wrote a mandatory order to [the Secretary of War], requiring him to furnish a pass, transportation to the scene of the disaster, and all necessary assistance to find the bodies.

. . . The result was that after cruising along the shore in the vicinity of the wreck, and after much inquiry among the inhabitants, the place where the bodies washed ashore and the place of interment were discovered, and they were brought home to their native New-Hampshire.⁶

Seeking the Spirit in our lives consists of much more than keeping basic commandments. Yes, it is important that we refrain from transgression. But there is a higher law. For me, this higher law is well expressed in two familiar scriptural passages.

The concluding statement of the 13th article of faith proclaims: "If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things."

And in the marvelous, divine instructions recorded in section 121 of the Doctrine and Covenants, we are told:

Let thy bowels also be full of charity towards all men, and to the household of faith, and let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly; then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God; and the doctrine of the priesthood shall distil upon thy soul as the dews from heaven. [D&C 121:45]

If we faithfully strive to do these things, I testify that we will have within our grasp the “law . . . upon which all blessings are predicated,” helping us along the way to happiness in this life and exaltation in the next. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

This devotional address was given to the BYU student body on June 3, 2008. Reprinted from the Clark Memorandum, fall 2008, 2–7; also printed in Brigham Young University Speeches, 2008–2009, 57–70.

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Notes

1. “America the Beautiful,” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 338.
2. “They, the Builders of the Nation,” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 36.
3. Text modernized and modified to refer to both Hans and Maren; see Mary R. Olsen, comp., *History of Hans Rasmussen and Maren Stephensen and Their Children* (Salt Lake City: [1927]), 13–14.
4. Matthew Pinsker, *Lincoln’s Sanctuary: Abraham Lincoln and the Soldiers’ Home* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 53; quoting from John R. French, “Reminiscences of Famous Americans,” *North American Review* 141, no. 346 (September 1885): 238.
5. Abraham Lincoln, in Pinsker, *Sanctuary*, 53; from French, “Reminiscences,” 239.
6. “Mr. Lincoln’s Humanity: How He Atoned for His Seeming Rudeness to a Bereaved Father,” 9 May 1885, *Boston Journal*; republished 10 May 1885, *New York Times*, 10.