

# *The Natural Law of Blessings*

R. KENT CROOKSTON

Looking out over this group, I am reminded of a BYU devotional that I attended back when I was a freshman. President Ernest L. Wilkinson was conducting. Just like today, we were on the verge of spring. “Ah, spring!” President Wilkinson said. “What a wonderful season! Spring is that time when a young man’s thoughts turn to that which a young woman has been thinking about all winter long.”

As you learned from my introduction, I am an agronomist. A considerable part of my career has been devoted to improving the production of corn. I begin my remarks with an insight that I have gained from my corn research, an insight that helps me to understand the key to obtaining blessings from heaven.

Let me show you a simple bar graph that shows corn yield as influenced by the previous crop. The best yield was obtained from corn that was grown on a field that had not been planted to corn for five years. The next best yield was from a field on which corn was grown alternately with soybeans. The most depressed yields were all from fields that had been planted to corn following a previous planting of corn for two, three, four, five, or ten years in a row.

The graph illustrates what is referred to among crop scientists as the rotation effect.

Those of you who grow tomatoes have learned that they will not yield their best if you repeatedly grow them in the same spot in your garden year after year. A veteran Idaho potato farmer once said that the best rotation for potatoes was a thousand years of sagebrush and one year of potatoes.

There are two significant conclusions that my students and I gathered from our 20 years of research with corn. The first was that the rotation effect was unfailingly reliable. Rotated corn *always*, not just sometimes, but *always* gave the best yields. No matter the weather, no matter how we modified our management or inputs of fertilizers or pesticides, we could not lift the yield of continuous corn to the level of a first-year crop. Second, although we did gain some insights, we were never able to determine why that first-year yield boost occurred. We evaluated every physical and biological factor we could think of. We finally accepted that we were working with a law of nature and that we could not divert Mother Nature from her decreed course.

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*R. Kent Crookston was the dean of the BYU College of Biology and Agriculture when this devotional address was given on 20 March 2001.*

It is about the laws of Mother Nature—or rather about the laws of Mother Nature’s father—that I will speak today. We might refer to Mother Nature’s father as Grandfather Nature—or we might call him God.

I now switch from corn to my family. The youngest of our seven children is a nine-year-old girl named Sadie. Sadie’s favorite home-evening game is what we call “the blessing game.” To play the blessing game we need only our hands and a small treat. M&M’s are good, or raisins. When Sadie starts the game, the rest of us place our hands on our laps, cupped open, and we shut our eyes. Sadie then goes around to each of us, one by one, and either places a treat in our hands or passes us by, leaving our hands empty. When she has finished her round, she calls for us to open our eyes and declare whether we were “blessed” with the small treat or not.

Once we discover who was blessed and who was passed by, we try and ascertain the “law” or condition of the blessing. Did Sadie give a raisin to only those in the circle who had shoes on, or maybe to those who had slept in the tent the night before? You see, some of the qualifications are elusive, and we have to ask for clues. When someone finally guesses the common qualifying prerequisite of the blessed ones, it is that person’s turn, and we all close our eyes and cup our hands again.

One condition of the game, upon which Sadie’s father insists, is that each time we play it, we read three scriptures.

The first is from D&C 78:

*Verily, verily, I say unto you, ye are little children, and ye have not as yet understood how great blessings the Father hath in his own hands and prepared for you. [D&C 78:17]*

The second is from D&C 130:

*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]*

The third is from D&C 132:

*For all who will have a blessing at my hands shall abide the law which was appointed for that blessing, and the conditions thereof, as were instituted from before the foundation of the world. [D&C 132:5]*

As we read these scriptures in our family home evening, we like to consider the blessings that Heavenly Father has in His hands and how they must differ from Sadie’s M&M’s.

I’m going to quickly review a couple of Heavenly Father’s irrevocably decreed blessings. The first is from section 62 of the Doctrine and Covenants:

*Nevertheless, ye are blessed, for the testimony which ye have borne is recorded in heaven for the angels to look upon; and they rejoice over you, and your sins are forgiven you. [D&C 62:3]*

It is interesting that the angels in heaven record our testimonies and look upon them and rejoice over us for having borne them. It is remarkable that our sins are forgiven by the bearing of testimony. Just like the corn rotation effect, I have not figured out how this works, but I believe it does, for just three verses later in section 62, we find: “I, the Lord, promise the faithful and cannot lie” (D&C 62:6).

Section 78 of the Doctrine and Covenants describes an exceptional blessing for the simple act of maintaining a thankful heart:

*And he who receiveth all things with thankfulness shall be made glorious; and the things of this*

*earth shall be added unto him, even an hundred fold, yea, more. [D&C 78:19]*

The scriptures are well sprinkled with examples of blessings that seem extravagant in proportion to their qualifications. We have the windows of heaven opening with more blessings than we can accommodate just for paying our tithing.

I am going to focus the rest of my talk on one incredible conditional blessing laid forth by the Lord in section 84 of the Doctrine and Covenants known as the oath and covenant of the priesthood. This is the key to my message. I invite you to invest your attention.

*And also all they who receive this priesthood receive me, saith the Lord;*

*For he that receiveth my servants receiveth me;*

*And he that receiveth me receiveth my Father;*

*And he that receiveth my Father receiveth my Father's kingdom; therefore all that my Father hath shall be given unto him.*

*And this is according to the oath and covenant which belongeth to the priesthood.*

*Therefore, all those who receive the priesthood, receive this oath and covenant of my Father, which he cannot break, neither can it be moved. [D&C 84:35–40]*

Did you notice it? Did you catch the simple qualification that we need to meet in order to receive the blessing of the Father's kingdom and all that the Father has? It's in there, and it is powerful in its simplicity. Sisters, I am completely confident that it is there for you to observe and fully receive as well as the brethren.

Let's go over it again: "And also all they who receive this priesthood receive me, saith the Lord."

And how do we "receive" the Lord? He tells us in the next phrase: "For he that receiveth my servants receiveth me."

There it is. That is the qualification. Receive the Lord's servants. If we receive the Lord's servants, we receive the Lord. And if we receive the Lord, we receive the Father. And when we receive the Father, we receive the Father's kingdom and all that the Father has.

Bear with me now while I explore with you the implication of the oath and covenant that the Father makes with those who receive the servants of His Son. And let's not overlook the fact that this is an oath and covenant that the Father "cannot break, neither can it be moved."

I'm going to tell five stories. All of them are true.

The first story took place 3,000 years ago. It started with a lad who was of a beautiful countenance and goodly to look upon and of whom the Lord said to the prophet Samuel, "Arise, anoint him: for this is he" (1 Samuel 16:12). He was the lad who "put his hand in his bag, and took thence a stone, and slang it, and smote the Philistine in his forehead . . . ; and he fell upon his face to the earth" (1 Samuel 17:49). Yes, this was David, who returned from the slaughter of the Philistine to encounter the women coming

*out of all cities of Israel, singing and dancing . . . with instruments of musick.*

*And the women . . . said, Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands.*

*And Saul was very wroth, and the saying displeased him; and he said, They have ascribed unto David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed but thousands: and what can he have more but the kingdom? . . .*

*And Saul was afraid of David, because the Lord was with him, and was departed from Saul. [1 Samuel 18:6–12]*

And then we have Saul casting his javelin at the young hero in jealousy, saying, "I will smite David even to the wall with it. And

David avoided out of [Saul's] presence" (1 Samuel 18:11).

The part of the story I want to focus on is the part where Saul, hearing that David was in the wilderness, "took three thousand chosen men out of all Israel, and went to seek David and his men upon the rocks of the wild goats" (1 Samuel 24:1–2). This is the part where David and his men were hidden in the very cave into which Saul entered to take a nap. And the men of David said unto him, "Behold the day of which the Lord said unto thee, Behold, I will deliver thine enemy into thine hand, that thou mayest do to him as it shall seem good unto thee" (1 Samuel 24:4)

Now, under these circumstances, what thoughts might have passed through David's head? It was obvious to him that Samuel, and the Lord, had rejected Saul, that Saul was a belligerent and mean-spirited man whose principal activity was to hunt David for his life, that the people of Israel loved David, that David was their hero, and, most of all, that he, David, had been selected by God and anointed by the prophet to replace Saul as king.

So what did David do? The record tells us that he crept quietly forth and cut off the skirt of Saul's robe. And when Saul rose up out of the cave and departed, David let him go a safe distance and then called after him, holding up the skirt of the robe, saying, "My lord the king. And when Saul looked behind him, David stooped with his face to the earth, and bowed himself" (1 Samuel 24:8).

Then, realizing what had happened, how his life had been in the hands of David and that David had spared him and was at that moment kneeling before him, "Saul lifted up his voice, and wept" (1 Samuel 24:16).

Now, are we not impressed with the conduct of David? Under the circumstances, has he not acted admirably? But wait. There are two more verses that we must read.

*And it came to pass afterward, that David's heart smote him, because he had cut off Saul's skirt.*

*And he said unto his men, The Lord forbid that I should do this thing unto my master, the Lord's anointed, to stretch forth mine hand against him, seeing he is the anointed of the Lord. [1 Samuel 24:5–6]*

When I consider this story and the admirable perspective and actions of David, I am awed. I cannot think of another account that compares to this one as an example of honoring an anointed servant of the Lord, even when that servant, by any accounting, did not appear worthy of it.

My second story takes place in New Zealand, where my missionary companion and I were laboring in a suburb of the capital city of Wellington. I have changed people's names. We arrived at sacrament meeting one evening to discover the chapel completely filled. The branch president was being released. There were no seats left, so we stood in the back. I noticed, sitting on the last bench, a member of the branch who was inactive. His name was Jimmy Solomon. Jimmy drove a taxi, and I had seen him on the streets several times, usually with a cigar in his mouth.

"Everyone's here to see the change of guard," I thought, "even Jimmy Solomon."

After the retiring branch president had been given a vote of thanks, the mission president told the congregation that the Lord had called Brother Jimmy Solomon to be the next branch president. A gasp arose from the congregation. It seemed that everyone turned and looked at Jimmy. His head was down, and he was twisting a small cap in his hands.

"All who feel they can support Brother Solomon in this calling, please indicate with a show of hands." A few hands went up. "Are there any opposed?" The room was filled with hands.

I had never witnessed such a thing. “What do they do now?” I wondered.

The meeting was adjourned. All who were opposed were invited into the cultural hall to share their concerns. My companion and I did not join the group. The next morning we learned that, after much discussion, Jimmy Solomon had been sustained and ordained as the new president of the branch.

About a week later my companion and I were standing on the corner of a busy street in Wellington. We noticed a familiar figure driving a taxi toward us. As he passed by, we saw, to our disappointment, that there was a cigar in President Solomon’s mouth.

That was the last I saw of Jimmy Solomon before I was transferred. A year later I returned to the branch to perform a baptism. Following the service we were invited to the house of the good brother who had been the branch president just prior to Jimmy Solomon. When we had finished our meal, he stood and said, “Come, there’s something I want you to see.” We went with him down the street to the house of Jimmy Solomon. The room we entered was brightly lighted and warm and full of the feeling of friendship. As I took hold of Jimmy Solomon’s large hand, I noticed his face. It radiated. He was enthusiastic about our missionary work, and he talked about his love of the temple.

“What happened?” I asked the good brother as we left Jimmy’s house a while later.

“Well,” he answered, “as you remember, it was a challenging time for all of us when Jimmy was selected to lead the branch. The high priests group got together. We all agreed that the Lord must have called Jimmy, because none of us would have ever thought of it. And we reckoned that if the Lord had called him, it was our duty to sustain him. Together we went to him and assured him of our love and support. We volunteered to accept callings.

“Jimmy threw away his cigar. He started acting like the leader the Lord knew he was.

And you know what? He went around to all of his beer-drinking buddies and got them started back to church, too. He has taken several of them to the temple. It’s been wonderful. I couldn’t have reached those men. And, as you saw today, we’re building a new chapel. The old one can’t hold all of us anymore.”

The third story took place when I was a graduate student. I was standing before a chalkboard about halfway through my preliminary oral exam for my PhD. One of the professors had discovered an aspect of my knowledge and training in which I was weak, and he was proceeding to expose my ignorance. I recall very clearly how my thoughts floated above me, as it were, out of reach. And when the professor asked me a question, my thoughts began to drift slowly down toward me. But before they could reach me, I was hit with another question, and my thoughts quickly retreated back up again, out of my reach. I lost all hope, and instead of concentrating on the answers to the questions, I began to consider how I was going to deal with failing the exam.

Suddenly a different member of the examining committee broke in. “Stop. That’s enough,” he said. “Crookston, come and sit down. It’s my turn to ask questions.” I returned to my chair, feeling that I had been plucked from the roasting pan only to be tossed into the fire. He who had ordered me to sit down was a biochemist, and biochemistry was a subject in which I was less fluent than the one in which I had just been floundering.

But, instead of asking about biochemistry, the professor proceeded to ask me about my family and about my father’s occupation. Once he could see that I was clearheaded again, he nurtured me through a discussion that led us into an area of my research where I was able to serve as teacher to him. Soon another examiner took up where the biochemist had left off, and I blossomed with answers that came to me quickly. I passed the exam.

I have looked back on that experience a hundred times. And every time I have, I have wondered what might have become of me if that professor had not received me, had not calmed me, had not allowed me to demonstrate one of my strengths rather than leave me to wallow in my weakness. He will forever remain one of my saviors.

The fourth story is short. We were living in the city of Saint Paul, which is home to one of America's great Catholic cathedrals. One of the archbishops of the Catholic Church presides there. One morning in the newspaper I read that the archbishop had been arrested for driving while intoxicated. I was startled. Later that same day one of my graduate students came to my office. She was a Catholic nun. Meaning to express concern and empathy, I asked her about the news of the archbishop.

"Oh, the dear, dear man," she replied quickly. "I have been praying for him ever since we received the news. He is my archbishop. He needs my support."

No sooner had I registered her sweet supportive nature than a disturbing question darted into my mind. How would I have responded had the same news been printed about our stake president and it was the Catholic sister asking the question of me?

Perhaps this story has made you uncomfortable. Let me be so bold as to move from the archbishop and the stake president to the Prophet Joseph Smith. This will be the fifth story.

It was late at night. I was alone on an assignment in Africa, and I was reading a book entitled *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon*, written by Donna Hill. It was a book that bore the mark of scholarship, with hundreds of notes and references. In one of the later chapters, which was entitled "Dissent in Nauvoo," the author had documented what appeared to be unlawful actions and an associated cover-up on the part of the Prophet in ordering the destruction of the *Nauvoo*

*Expositor*. I checked the references; they appeared solid. I grew uneasy. A disturbing spirit entered the room. I shut the book. I turned out the light. I was troubled by what I was feeling. I wished I had never been given the book.

And then, suddenly, all the noises of my mind fell still. It was like a late winter afternoon, when all the sparrows of the neighborhood seem to have gathered to one single tree, and they go about hopping and chirping among the branches, like it was a little sparrow conference. Have you ever heard that? If you're like me, you don't notice it until something causes all the little birds to fall silent. They do that. Suddenly they all stop, exactly at once. And then the silence is so conspicuous that you take notice. Well, my mind went silent like that.

And into the silence there came what I could best describe as a scolding. "So," the words said. "You feel to reprove the actions of the Prophet, do you? You are upset, here in the darkness, because someone wrote something in their journal suggesting that Joseph Smith was not perfect. Not perfect. Imperfection disappoints you. And just who do you think you are? What do you suppose you would have done, had you been in charge in Nauvoo during those grim days? How would you have dealt with the apostasy, with the enmity, with the slander, with unending threats on your life? You expected perfection. You know better than that. Only Jesus was perfect. What imperfection would you have chosen for Joseph? Go ahead. You choose. What imperfection would you accept? He did have failings, you know. Some of them are documented right in the Doctrine and Covenants. And you! You get up on your high horse and condemn him for being a mortal. Shame on you!"

The chastisement continued. "Your problem, young man, your biggest challenge in your Church life, will be to accept those

turkeys they call to preside over you at the local level in the Church. Turkeys is what you will be inclined to call them, because they will make mistakes—some disturbing ones. Your test will be to overlook imperfections, especially in those who appear to you to be less qualified for office than you think you are. Now get down off your high horse and start being thankful for the life of an imperfect man who, as a prophet of God, has brought into your life treasures immeasurable. Be thankful for President Kimball, who has struggled mightily with imperfections and gone on to earn and deserve the office of prophet and to serve as an inspiration to millions, including you.”

And then the words stopped. And I slipped out from under my covers and my knees found the floor and I apologized. And I began pouring out a prayer of thankfulness for the Prophet Joseph Smith and for all that he had done for me. And I thanked the Lord for my bishop and for the time and effort that he spent in behalf of my family. And I expressed appreciation for teachers on low wages who taught my children in school and for politicians and judges struggling through the defects of imperfect systems on my behalf. And then I joyfully expressed thanks for the feelings of acceptance and appreciation that had moved into my heart, replacing criticism and censure.

Well, I trust that these few stories have helped you understand my feelings and perspectives related to the business of “receiving” the Lord’s servants. You can see that I believe that the servants of the Lord are all around us and that we have the opportunity to receive them every day. Actually, I have studied the qualifier and the promise within the oath and covenant of the priesthood for almost as long as I have studied corn. And, as with the corn rotation effect, I do not fully understand this promise—how such a modest qualifier can result in such an awesome blessing—but I

do believe I have achieved some insight into how it works. Bear with me while we role-play for a moment.

It is a hot day. You are in traffic that is at a virtual standstill. You are late for your appointment—exasperated. On your right a vehicle approaches. You stay close to the car in front of you. The car behind you stays close to you. Notice how you feel. Now, see it differently. See yourself letting a space open up in front of you and you motioning to the approaching vehicle to move in. Did you see a wave and a smile?

Also notice this: The very instant we made the decision to open up and let the other driver in, something happened within us. I’m sure you felt it. As soon as we decided to let the other car in, our “way of being” was altered. Would I be correct in suggesting that when we opened up a space in the traffic, our “way of being” became Christlike? “For he that receiveth my servants receiveth me.”

The scriptures are full of this principle. From Matthew we read:

*Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:*

*For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in:*

*Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.*

*Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink?*

*When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee?*

*Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?*

*And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. [Matthew 25:34–40]*

Is it not clear that everyone with whom we associate—everyone, from beginners on the job to seasoned veterans who preside over us—all are benefited when we receive them and support them, even when we disagree with them? I am sure of it.

I testify that whenever I have been able to humbly approach with the resolve to be a comforter and a peacemaker another person with whom I disagree, the Holy Ghost has accompanied me, and both the other person and I have been able to “receive” and support one another, even though we have different perspectives. There is a two-way blessing involved in this. Both the one who does the receiving and the one who is received are blessed. Shakespeare put it well when he spoke through Portia to Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* (act 4, scene 1, lines 179–82):

*The quality of mercy is not strain'd;  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:  
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.*

It is time to close. Let me summarize my message.

The first concept I have hoped to develop is that the Father’s hands are filled with blessings for us and there are immovable laws that govern the delivery of those blessings. Whenever we are obedient to the law upon which a blessing is based, it will be delivered.

The second concept is that all that the Father has will be ours if we meet one simple qualifier. The simple qualifier is that we receive the servants of the Father’s Son. The scriptures make it clear that those servants include not only the prophets and apostles but also all of our brothers and sisters who stand in need of our encouragement and support.

I am convinced that what we find written in section 84 of the Doctrine and Covenants is an irrevocable promise that Grandfather Nature “cannot break, neither can it be moved.” That we may become skilled, especially at this university, in receiving the servants of the Savior, including one another, is my humble prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.