

The Blessing Chair

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The whole family was home for the first time in almost a year. Nothing could make Mom happier. The shadows around her eyes that had deepened a year ago when Jimmy stormed out of the house for the last time seemed lighter.

What was it that had sent him off that time? Refusing to cut his hair? Maybe getting caught coming in the window at dawn? Or someone seeing him at the bar? I couldn't remember. But I would never forget that he didn't come home and what that did to Mom. She died a slow death as months passed and we didn't ever hear where Jimmy was. Dad was harder to read. And we didn't see him much anyway. What with the insurance business to run and being Bishop. He was just wasn't around.

Dad had been fasting since Jimmy arrived home late last night, and had spent what seemed like hours on his knees both before going to bed late and exhausted, and again behind the closed door of his office while at work today. All of us – down to six year old Martha – were told to fast as well so that Heavenly Father would help Jimmy.

This trouble with Jimmy had proved that Dad has a lot of faith in the Lord. More than Mom in some ways, as amazing as that seemed to us. I even thought that maybe God wasn't crazy to have called him as Bishop.

If Jimmy came back, it was God's will. If not, that was God's will too and Dad could accept that without flinching. Mom more than flinched. Jimmy had ripped off a piece of her heart and taken it with him. Maybe Dad didn't always read his scriptures and pray like Mom did. And maybe he would watch the Super Bowl even when Mom got mad at him for breaking the Sabbath. But when it came to Jimmy, Dad trusted God a lot more than Mom could.

The day after Jimmy came home, Dad left work a little early – at about 6 o'clock. He immediately called us together while he brought out Grandpa's

chair. Dad liked to say that it was the most important of his "material possessions". The chair looked small and uninviting. Workmanlike. Efficient. Stern. Like Grandpa, and Dad.

We assembled in the living room – a place only for "special times" as Mom regularly reminded us. Jimmy took the seat of honour on Grandpa's chair where Dad had carefully placed it in the middle of the room. The rest of us sat church-quiet on the sofa and other chairs we carried in.

After looking around the room to ensure reverence, Dad glanced at Mom and said, "Why don't you pray for us."

"Heavenly Father," she said with a voice that barely held together,

"we love you so much, and we know how much you love us, and especially Jimmy. Please bless him with your Spirit this day. And bless Dad – give him the words you want him to say ..."

She was crying before she finished. There was more – much more – in her tears than in her words. She had been fasting and praying for Jimmy far longer than any of us - even Dad - knew.

As Mom finished, and while all eyes in the room except Jimmy's and Dad's remained closed, Dad placed his hands on Jimmy's bowed, unkempt head in a uncharacteristically gentle fashion – like he was comforting a newborn lamb.

The touch of Dad's rough hands on the crown of the head at times like this produces a tingling that races down the spine, and then into the chest. Particularly after the kind of prayer Mom had just said.

Dad paused to allow the Holy Spirit to make its presence felt. His moments of endless silence pressed against my chest, making it was hard to breathe.

The duty to speak for God revealed Dad's crude gift for words. It both softened and loosened his tongue. He started as he always did:

"By the power of the Holy Melquisedek Priesthood, which I hold, I lay my hands upon your head to give you a father's blessing, and to tell you certain things that your Heavenly Father desires you to hear ..."

Dad paused while the Spirit amplified our anticipation. I knew by heart most of the first part of what would follow:

"Your Heavenly Father loves you; your parents love you more than you can know; your younger brothers and sisters love you, and look to you for a good example, which you have sometimes provided. We are all grateful for the joy you have brought into our lives ..."

Certain things are easier for a man to say to the top of his son's head than face to face. "But better said like this than not at all", I thought.

Again Dad paused, waiting for the Spirit to guide him. And then, as always on occasions such as this, his voice resonated sudden confidence and the words began to flow, first brimming with vision, and then emotion.

"Your Heavenly Father's love for you is something more powerful, vaster, deeper and more eternal than any human being can imagine. He wants me to testify to you – to help you to know as you know my hands are on your head – that you lived with Him before coming to this Earth to commence your mortal estate, and that you were among His valiant on that day when Lucifer deceived one third of His children and led them away from Him. You were one of our Heavenly Father's leaders, and were ordained in the Pre-existence to hold His priesthood and direct the affairs of His children here on Earth.

And He sent you to a family that loves both Him and you, and tries to do all they can to help you find Him. You were blessed to have been born in a time and place where His true church is established; where the fullness of His gospel is taught by righteous men who bear His priesthood. You are privileged to have that divine influence in your home, and to have been born into the covenant of Israel with the blood of pioneers – some of whom sacrificed their lives for the Kingdom of God – flowing through your veins. You are truly one of Heavenly Father's elect son ..."

Mom's breathing deepened into quiet tears that fell on her clasped hands. Dad continued without missing a beat:

"Heavenly Father sent you to this Earth with a mission – one that you have not yet fulfilled. If you will have faith in Him, and trust those He has put on Earth to help you, you will be lifted past your current afflictions and will be privileged to find, and fulfill, your purpose. This is the law – that you obey Heavenly Father's will; and His promise is that you will find joy and rejoicing in the fruits of your obedience. As you do what Heavenly Fathers and His prophets teach you to do, you will come to know a joy that has been withheld from you until now because you have not been prepared to receive it."

Mom's sobbing was now noticeable. Some of the girls' too. Dad continued:

"This life is not easy. It was not meant to be easy. It is designed to test and school us. The trial you now undergo has bent you to near the breaking point. But as long as you exercise faith in the Lord and His prophets, you will not break.

I feel instructed by our Heavenly Father to admonish you to remember your prayers; to remember to read your scriptures each day; to respect yourself and make yourself clean from the sins of this generation. Your Heavenly Father knows that you have neglected these things, and this causes Him terrible pain – that yet another of His valiant ones is falling under Lucifer's influence. He weeps when you sin; when you forget to seek Him; and when you ignore Him as He calls to you in your spirit and through the voices of His servants. Your mother and I serve Him, and you. Those called to lead the Kingdom of God on Earth in these latter-days also serve Him, and you. When you ignore them, you ignore your Heavenly Father. This is what causes your road to become rocky and so grieves your Heavenly Father."

Another pause.

"You must go to the Bishop and let him help you repent and become clean again. And remember – remember that sometimes Heavenly Father sends trials to us – to humble us. As He said to His prophet Ether, He gives us weaknesses that we might be made strong. Your trials are nothing more than this. They will turn you back toward Him, and chisel you into His image."

Dad paused again, seeming to wait for another torrent of words to come. The silence went on longer than usual – so long that it became uncomfortable. I finally peeked. Dad's face had reddened. Tears dripped from his chin. When he resumed, his voice lurched with emotion:

"I see you ...

sitting at the bottom of the glacier ...

on the back of Mount Timpanogas ...

surrounded by a crowd of people...

you are grey haired like me ...

one after another the people slide to the bottom of the glacier from the ridge up near the summit ...

and as they reach the bottom they look for you; call to you; embrace you ...

one at a time they thank you for what you have done for them ...

they are your children; grandchildren ...

people you converted to the Church while you were on your mission ...

who speak to you in a language I can't understand ...

and yet somehow I understand ...

people who were in your ward when you were Bishop ...

people who you served as a Stake President and in countless other ways..."

Mom's weeping became more audible as Dad went on:

"and I see Lucifer standing on the summit raging; screaming ...

gnashing his teeth at the sight of so much joy...

he will do anything to stop you from feeling that ...

but no one with you on that mountain can see Lucifer or even cares about him ...

because you are wrapped with them in a peace and joy that only those who obey God can know... "

His voice trailed off into sobbing of his own. Tears splashed down on his hands where they trembled in my brother's wild hair. There was another long silence. My tears started as well. Dad did not resume until his voice was almost under control.

"Your joy will then be full! No price is too high to pay for that! No sacrifice is too great!"

Yet another long pause. The sobbing that started with Mom finished making its way around the room. Only Jimmy, on the chair, remained silent.

Dad's speech returned to near normal as he concluded:

"Your Heavenly Father wants to you know – to feel deep in your heart; even in the marrow of your bones – how much he loves you, and how much your family loves you. He is always there for you! We are always here for you – no matter where you have been or what you have done. And I seal these things upon you, in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen."

The "Amen" echoed around the room. Eight sets of red rimmed eyes opened. Some met as tearful smiles shot across the room. Others remained firmly fixed on the floor. Only one set of eyes were dry and remained downcast.

Dad's hands moved gently from Jimmy's head to his shoulders – a signal Jimmy knew. He stood and turned to face Dad. They embraced.

"Thanks Dad."

"I love you son. You can make it!"

Then each member of the family came to Jimmy; hugged him. Mom first. She wept with her head against his chest for a full minute before she could say anything; and then she whispered. He nodded and squeezed her gently before she turned and went back to the couch where our oldest sister Ann waited for her. They embraced and both continued to cry.

The little ones did not know what had happened, but felt it move the ground beneath them. Jimmy had suddenly returned last night. There was yelling. And hugging. And crying. And now this. So they cried as they held Jimmy around the waist and legs and told him that they were so happy he had come home, and that they didn't want him to ever go away again.

The older girls didn't say anything. They felt all that their little brother and sisters had said, but forced most of it to bounce off. They had seen this and other things like it many times before. It hurts too much if you let everything in. So they quietly hugged Jimmy, wiped their eyes and left the room exhausted.

I was at the end of the line. Jimmy and I used to understand each other – but now I wasn't sure. He had been my idol in all he did – both good and bad. But we hadn't spoken of anything important in well over a year. And since his return late last night, there had been a hardness – or perhaps

deadness – around his eyes. More left unsaid than said; unknown that known. Not like the old times. And now his was the only composed face in the room. Composed, but near lifeless.

We embraced. He held me so tight it hurt, and then tighter – desperately. He didn't breathe. I couldn't. I was about to push him away when he slumped into the kind of soft groan metal makes as it gives way. And finally his tears came.

After his shaking calmed, Jimmy resolutely monotoned in my ear, "I will try harder!" With that he released me and made his way slowly upstairs toward our room. This gave me my first good look at his profile since he arrived home. He seemed to have aged decades. His bounce had disappeared.

Dad's emotions were under control by the time he picked up the blessing chair and returned it to its place of honour in the far corner of the front room. He, his father and that chair had been forged in the same furnace of sacrifice and obedience where emotions – like fuel and oxygen – were carefully controlled to do God's will. He knew that life wrecking explosions were likely without such control.

Before leaving the room, Dad stopped to hug me and tell me how he loved me and prayed that I would resist the evil that had taken down Jimmy and brought so much sorrow and darkness into our family. He said that he knew I had my struggles, and that God would give me power to overcome them. He said that he hoped I had learned from Jimmy's hard life, and that I would not be further tempted to stop going to church or postpone serving my Heavenly Father as a missionary for two years.

"As the prophets have promised", he said as he had on so many other occasions, "you will come to know that the Church is true as you tell others that it is true. A testimony is found when it is borne."

Then speaking more to himself than me, Dad thanked God for the Priesthood power he had felt while blessing Jimmy. "Jimmy must have felt it", he said. "You could have cut the air with a knife during that blessing." Spiritual experiences like this and those Dad regularly had as the Bishop of our Ward stood above the landscape of his Spartan existence like Timpanogas towering over the Utah Valley. His God was the only source of the living water he knew.

Drained of energy, Dad put the blessing chair tenderly in its place to wait until duty called again.

