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America: Land of the Blessed

Author(s): Ezra Taft Benson

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Abstract: This article discusses how Book of Mormon prophets proclaimed the Lord's intent to protect the blessed land of America. The brother of Jared, Nephi, Joseph Smith, and others spoke concerning America's great destiny. Man-made governments often threaten the foundation of liberty. Though the Constitution will "hang by a thread," the promise guarantees that the thread will not break.

AMERICA:

LAND OF THE BLESSED

BY *Ezra Taft Benson*
OF THE COUNCIL OF THE TWELVE

Address delivered at the Monday morning session of the 118th annual general conference, April 5, 1948, in the Tabernacle



ELDER EZRA TAFT BENSON AND SISTER BENSON

I PRAY for the inspiration of the Lord as I address you for the next few moments. I have been thrilled with the testimonies that have been borne in this conference. I love this work in which we are engaged.

I am grateful, my brethren and sisters, for this land in which we live. I never return from foreign shores but what I have a feeling of gratitude for the prophetic mission of America. I love Zion, both as a place and as a condition.

During the last few weeks there has traveled from one end of the country to the other a so-called Freedom Train, the purpose of which has been to direct our attention and focus our interest upon our heritage and blessings as American citizens, and to call our attention to those foundation principles upon which this great country has been established as a Christian nation.

It has been an attempt to call to our attention sacred documents which mark the origin and development of our liberties and to re-awaken in us an appreciation of the American way of life. We have had called to our notice important things that we must do if we are to continue to enjoy and pass on to coming generations the priceless blessings which are ours. Embodied in these sacred documents are eternal principles—God given—and of the utmost importance to all of us.

Now while the world is literally in a mess, is a good time to take stock. We are inclined so much to take our blessings for granted. We are five generations—170 years—removed from the founding of this great nation.

We are living in a critical period of the world's history. We note, on every side, the spread of coercive systems, the increased power of dictators, and the influence of state control and its power over the individual. Recently, we have witnessed nations which have succumbed to the onslaught of these coercive systems. I am sure it has caused deep reflection upon the part of all of us who enjoy the blessings of freedom in this blessed land of America.

I am grateful for the prophetic mission of this nation as it has been proclaimed by prophets, ancient and modern. I have before me, this morning, some of those prophecies made by Book of Mormon prophets which I should like to refer to briefly.

I have always been grateful that the Lord saw fit to hold this nation, as it were, in the hollow of his hand in preparation for its great mission as the cradle of liberty and the cradle for the Church and kingdom of God that was to be established, and now has been established, in this the last dispensation.

THE prophet of the Jaredite colony, Mahonri Moriancumer, commonly referred to as the brother of Jared, spoke of this land as a choice land, a land choice above all other lands. He indicated that those people who live here should worship the God of this land if they were to enjoy the blessings of freedom and liberty and be free from bondage. Otherwise, if they failed, they were to be swept off. And he proclaimed that this is the everlasting decree of God.

Sixteen hundred years later the Prophet Nephi was privileged to see a large part of the history of the establishment of this great nation. He spoke in no uncertain terms regarding its mission. He told that the Spirit of

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the Lord came down and wrought upon a man upon foreign shores, and that he went forth and discovered this land. He also saw other gentiles follow to these shores under the influence of that same Spirit. And he saw that the Spirit of the Lord was here and that multitudes of people came to these shores and that God prospered them because they humbled themselves before him; that he was with them and

that his power was here, and that during times of struggle and conflict—referring to the Revolutionary War—that the Lord was with them and sustained them and bore them off victorious. He further saw that this land was consecrated to those whom the Lord should bring and who would serve him and keep his commandments; that it should be a land of liberty; that it should never be brought down into captivity unless it be because of the iniquity of the people.

The Lord promised through Nephi that the power of God would be with the gentiles whom he should bring to this land and that the wrath of God would be "upon all those that were gathered against them to battle."

Later, after the colony, which came to be called Nephites, arrived on the western hemisphere, their prophet-leader Lehi declared:

Wherefore, this land is consecrated unto him whom he shall bring. And if it so be that they shall serve him according to the commandments which he hath given, it shall be a land of liberty unto them; wherefore, they shall never be brought down into captivity; if so, it shall be because of iniquity; for if iniquity shall abound cursed shall be the land for their sakes, but unto the righteous it shall be blessed forever. (II Nephi 1:7.)

The Prophet Jacob, the brother of Nephi, twenty-five years later was privileged also to see into the future regarding this land and to proclaim that God would fortify the land against other nations; that he that fought against Zion would perish; that no king would ever be raised on these shores; that God would forever here be a light unto the people who accepted and listened to his words.

And so this great nation, my brothers and sisters, has come into being under the inspiration of the Almighty to accomplish his purposes. Through modern revelation we have made very plain to us something of the mission of America and the establishment of our national Constitution in this dispensation.

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of giving his life willingly for them if necessary. Before the death of the Savior, he had full knowledge that the Jews had rejected him and that they would bring about his crucifixion. Yet, as he sat upon a hill overlooking Jerusalem a few days prior to his death, he prophesied to his apostles regarding the destruction of the holy city and the scattering of his people because they had rejected their Lord and Savior. So intense was his love for those who had become his enemies that "Jesus wept." He had taught the people:

... Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you. (Matt. 5:44.)

While hanging on the cross he put those teachings into effect. He looked down upon the jeering mob standing at the foot of the cross and then, casting his eyes toward heaven, prayed:

... Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. (Luke 23:34.)

So it was with the Prophet Joseph

Smith. When he, Hyrum, and others were making plans to flee to the Rocky Mountains for safety, Emma sent word for Joseph to return because the Saints were accusing him of being a coward. Knowing full well that they would be killed if they should return, he turned to his brother Hyrum and said: "If my life is of no value to my friends it is of none to myself." (D.H.C. 6:549) and so they returned to Nauvoo. It was his deep love for the Saints that impelled him to return and voluntarily to give his life as a sacrifice for them. The following day while on their way from Nauvoo to Carthage, Joseph made this memorable statement:

I am going like a lamb to the slaughter, but I am as calm as a summer's morning. I have a conscience void of offense toward God and toward all men. If they take my life I shall die an innocent man, and my blood shall cry from the ground for vengeance, and it shall be said of me, "He was murdered in cold blood!" (Ibid., 555.)

Three days later the assassins' bullets found lodgment in the body of the Prophet of God. As he fell from the window of Carthage Jail, he died with the words on his lips, "O Lord, my God!"

He began his career as a prophet

with the glorious vision of the Father and the Son and ended his earthly career with the name of Deity on his lips. As did the Savior of the world, he sealed his testimony with his blood. Regarding Joseph's death, God revealed to Brigham Young the following:

Many have marveled because of his death; but it was needful that he should seal his testimony with his blood, that he might be honored and the wicked might be condemned. (D. & C. 136:39.)

And like all of the great and holy prophets of old, the Prophet Joseph, being dead, yet lives on forever. Today a million people sing:

Hail to the Prophet, ascended to heaven!
Traitors and tyrants now fight him in vain;
Mingling with Gods, he can plan for his brethren;

Death cannot conquer the hero again.

From the bottom of my heart I want to bear my testimony that I know that Joseph Smith was one of the greatest prophets that ever lived upon this earth. May the Spirit of God be with you and me that we might live according to the teachings that he gave us, I humbly pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

EZRA TAFT BENSON

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DURING the dark days of Missouri when the Saints were being persecuted and driven, and their lives threatened, and their property taken from them, the Lord commanded the Saints, through the Prophet Joseph, to continue to importune for redress. He said:

According to the laws and constitution of the people, which I have suffered to be established, ... for the rights and the protection of all flesh, according to just and holy principles.

He proclaimed, at that time, that it is not right for men to be in bondage one to another. Then he said:

And for this purpose have I established the Constitution of this land, by the hands of wise men whom I raised up unto this very purpose, and redeemed the land by the shedding of blood. (D. & C. 101:77, 80.)

Earlier, the Lord had said:

... verily I say unto you, my law shall be kept on this land, ...

Let no man break the laws of the land. (D. & C. 58:19, 21.)

He commanded the people to be subject to the powers that existed.

In the Kirtland Temple, in that glorious dedicatory prayer which, according to the Prophet, was given by revelation, we find this significant verse:

Have mercy, O Lord, upon all the nations of the earth; have mercy upon the

rulers of our land; may those principles, which were so honorably and nobly defended, namely, the Constitution of our land, by our fathers, be established forever. (D. & C. 109:54.)

And so, every true Latter-day Saint has a deep love and respect for the Constitution of this land.

It is no wonder that the Prophet Joseph said—even though he knew he would suffer martyrdom in this land—"The Constitution of the United States is a glorious standard; it is founded in the wisdom of God. It is a heavenly banner."

Yet, according to his contemporaries, he foresaw the time when the destiny of the nation would be in danger and would hang as by a thread. Thank God he did not see the thread break. He also indicated the important part that this people should yet play in standing for the principles embodied in these sacred documents—the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

WE see abroad today on every hand, and to some degree in our own land, the spread of coercive man-made systems, which are contrary to eternal principles and which strike at the very foundation of all we hold dear as American citizens. These programs would take from us our liberty and freedom, and those opportunities for achievement which the Lord has promised for this nation in order that it might perpetuate those eternal principles so that a haven might be established here where men from all lands

might come and enjoy the glorious blessings of freedom and liberty.

We see abroad in the world an increase in these coercive systems. We witness millions of God's children in bondage, who have had their blessings of liberty and freedom taken from them. Great numbers of liberty-loving people no longer have their free agency, no longer have freedom of choice such as we enjoy here. They no longer have the privilege of living where they wish, taking advantage of any educational or work opportunity, but on the contrary they are under the power of these coercive systems and have lost completely their God-given free agency.

The impelling force in the hearts of the founding fathers as also in the hearts of the pioneers of these valleys was their love of truth and virtue and their belief in the overruling power of Almighty God. They believed in the existence of eternal laws and principles in both the physical and spiritual realms. These, they believed, never change but are eternal and are embodied in the gospel of Jesus Christ. It was their conviction that there are certain inalienable rights which are God-ordained and that no man, group of men, or nation has the right to withhold these blessings from others of their fellow men. To them, governments should be the servants and not the masters of the people. There was no place in their hearts for the principles of communism, fascism, or any other coercive system which endanger the enjoyment of freedom.

One of the greatest conflicts ever

THE IMPROVEMENT ERA

EZRA TAFT BENSON

known to man is rapidly spreading throughout the world. Eternal principles of right and wrong are involved. Communism, to my mind, is not merely an economic program. It is a total philosophy of life, utterly atheistic and utterly opposed to all we hold dear as a great Christian nation. There should be no place in the heart of any true Latter-day Saint for the principles enunciated by the leaders of these coercive systems such as communism, fascism, or any form of state control.

I am pleased to quote to you a part of a statement which was made by the First Presidency of the Church in 1936, and reaffirmed later, regarding this problem of communism which has been referred to. It reads as follows:

Communism being thus hostile to loyal American citizenship and incompatible with true Church membership of necessity no loyal American citizen and no faithful Church member can be a communist.

We call upon all Church members completely to eschew communism. The safety of our divinely inspired Constitutional government and the welfare of our Church imperatively demand that communism shall have no place in America.

My brothers and sisters, our message to the world is, of course, first of all, a message of peace, a message of

love, a message of the restored gospel. At the same time we stand firmly in support of the principles enunciated in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, and every Latter-day Saint would defend to the last those eternal principles. We should measure every coercive system, every program that might be offered, by the standards of those principles set forth in these sacred documents. At the same time, as we face the spread of communism and the spread of other coercive forces in the world, we must keep our hearts free from hatred and remember ever that we should carry with us always a love for the children of men. We should renounce war and declare peace. The Lord has commanded us so to do. Our message is a message of peace. We are followers of the Prince of Peace, and we should rededicate our lives to the spread of truth and righteousness and the preservation of the liberty and freedom, which have been vouchsafed to us as American citizens and as Latter-day Saints.

This nation rests upon a solid spiritual foundation, established by the Lord of heaven, and I hope and pray that the nation may go forward to accomplish its great mission. There is no security except upon the basis of righteousness. The prophets, ancient and modern, have so declared. And so may we value these spiritual principles and

keep them close to our hearts and preserve this land as a land of liberty and freedom, that this, his Church, which has been established by the hand of the Lord, might go forward and accomplish its great mission.

I leave my testimony with you, my brothers and sisters, that God has again spoken from the heavens, that he has raised up a prophet as he said in the first section of the Doctrine and Covenants, in preparation for the calamities which will follow:

Wherefore, I the Lord, knowing the calamity which should come upon the inhabitants of the earth, called upon my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., and spake unto him from heaven, and gave him commandments. (D. & C. 1:17.)

Zion is intended to be a place of refuge, a defense from the storm that is to come, from the wrath which shall be poured out upon the entire earth. God help us to be true and to live the gospel and do all in our power to promote righteousness in this great land. This is God's work, and I testify to you that God lives, that Jesus Christ is the Redeemer of the world, that Joseph Smith is his Prophet, raised up to establish this work in these, the last days, in preparation for the second coming of the Master. I leave this testimony with you in all humility, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

LeGRAND RICHARDS

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Church are not falling off. They are increasing because there is spiritual power and meaning in the Church.

I remember while in the mission field, Sister Richards and I were invited by a member of another church to attend a lecture by an itinerant preacher who was going through the land explaining to the churches how they could get out of debt. His program was that they should turn to the Lord's way of paying their tithes and their offerings, and if they would just do it for ten months, their churches could all get out of debt. After the meeting I had the privilege of being introduced to him, and I told him I would like to bear testimony that he was getting near the truth, that we had been preaching that law all our lives. Then I added, "But what I cannot understand, Reverend, is that if tithing is the Lord's law of blessing his people, why you do not ask them to pay their tithing all their lives, so that they can have the blessings of the Lord, instead of for only ten months." He replied, "Mr. Richards, we cannot go quite that far, yet." Now this is the difference between a man-made system and one where the Lord puts into it the breath of life, the Spirit of God, the Spirit by which we know the truth of all things. We do not send out any collectors in this Church for tithing. We do for fast offerings and for donations to build meetinghouses, as you

know; but if you could be in our office, you would see the number of men who come in years after their tithing is due to make settlement, because the Lord continues to speak to their souls through the power of the Spirit of the Lord until they cannot find peace. We have gone back—not ten years—but twenty and more years to give credit to the brethren on their tithing record. The Spirit of the Lord is a better collector than anyone in the world. We have ministers come in our office to inquire how we run the tithing system in our Church, and when we tell them that all the wards and branches send in all the money they receive to us, and we send back what their allowance is, they shake their heads and say, "They wouldn't do that in our church. The local organizations would take out what they need, first; and if there were any left, they might send it to headquarters."

Well, that same spirit carries through in all the activities of the Church. The testimony of the Spirit of God is the most marvelous thing I know of in this world, and I would rather see that testimony planted in the hearts of my children than anything I know of today.

BROTHER BALLARD used to tell about the colonizer in the northwest who had learned what a marvelous work we had done in colonizing, and came down here to write a treatise on it, to see if he could make it work. After

trying it he said, "Mr. Ballard, you tell us what is wrong with it. You read it over. I have tried it, but it just will not work for me." Brother Ballard read it and said, "You have here a perfect corpse. If someone would just breathe into it the breath of life, it would work." Now you know what the breath of life is.

We were in the temple on Wednesday for seven hours and twenty minutes with the mission presidents. One of them told of his father in Canada, who was sent up there to colonize when he was a mere lad, by the President of the Church. He has wanted to return for years, and his son asked him why he did not come back. He said, "I cannot return until the President of the Church gives me my release." And I have met many others all up and down these valleys who have had similar experiences. When they came here in the early days, they would have gladly remained in Salt Lake with the body of the Church and the brothers and sisters they had known, save for one thing and that is the testimony of the Spirit of God. When they were called by his servants to settle other localities, they were true to their call. This is the spirit by which the Church has accomplished so much.

While I was in Idaho recently, a stake president told me of a trip he and his wife had just made to Texas. They wrote their missionary boy that

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