

*SAINT WITHOUT PRIESTHOOD:  
THE COLLECTED TESTIMONIES  
OF EX-SLAVE  
SAMUEL D. CHAMBERS*

EXACTLY ONE-HALF CENTURY AGO, black Mormon Samuel D. Chambers (1831–1929) died, ending one of the most impressive conversion stories in Church history.<sup>1</sup>

Samuel was born May 21, 1831, in Pickens County, Alabama. In 1844, as a thirteen-year-old slave in eastern Mississippi, he listened to the preaching of Preston Thomas and accepted baptism from that Mississippian, himself a new convert.<sup>2</sup> But, unlike other converts in the area who relocated to Nauvoo or other Mormon centers, Samuel stayed behind. He was property, a slave, not free to migrate. For a quarter of a century he had no further contact with the Church and no hope of ever joining the body of the Saints. Unable to read or write, and lacking parents or peers or missionaries to encourage him in his youthful faith, he retained his testimony through the Holy Spirit.

During that quarter century Samuel married, fathered a son, lost his wife, then married Amanda Leggroan in 1858. When the Civil War brought freedom in its wake, Samuel as freedman worked four years to earn items needed to make a long overland trek to Utah. With son Peter and wife Amanda and the young family of Amanda's brother, Edward (Ned) Leggroan, Samuel undramatically arrived in Salt Lake City in 1870. Unlike so many thousands of converts and emigrants, the Chambers group had gathered to Zion on their own without missionary encouragement or Perpetual Emigration Fund assistance.

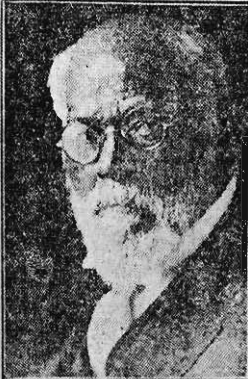

The Chambers settled in the Eighth Ward where they tithed and donated, received patriarchal blessings, accepted rebaptism during the mini-reformation of 1875 and attended meetings. Samuel "was appointed as assistant Deacon," noted the ward records on May 1, 1873, but he received no priesthood. Amanda became a Relief Society "deaconess." Deacons, whose main work then was to care for the meetinghouses, included adults as well as youths. Samuel represented his ward at monthly stake deacons quorum meetings. In January 1876, in appreciation for

Samuel's service in the ward, "A vote of thanks was unanimously rendered Br. Chambers for being so faithful in the discharge of his duties as Deacon and that he be blessed."<sup>3</sup>

Soon the Chambers moved to southeast Salt Lake City. Over the years their small fruit business prospered. Late in life they owned over thirty acres of good farmland and a brick home which still stands. In Wilford Ward they were well known and well liked. Samuel met with the high priests quorum for a while. The couple became known for their firm testimonies, their strict loyalty to Church leaders, their keeping of the Sabbath and generous church donations.

As promised in his patriarchal blessing, Samuel lived to an old age. To his death at age ninety-eight in Salt Lake City in 1929, he was strong in the faith. (Born one year after the Church was restored, he died one year before its hundredth birthday.) Amanda died earlier, in 1925, just after the pair celebrated their sixty-sixth wedding anniversary, an important occasion noted in an article and photographs by the *Deseret News*.<sup>4</sup>

## Worthy Couple Married 66 Years

**MR. AND MRS. SAMUEL D. CHAMBERS.**

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Mr. and Mrs. Samuel D. Chambers celebrated their sixty-sixth wedding anniversary at their home on Seventeenth East and Thirty-third South Monday evening, May 6. Dinner was served to 47 relatives and friends including a grandson, his wife and two children, of Ogden. The elderly couple was presented

Emanicipation Proclamation he followed the trade of shoemaker, and at the close of the war in 1865 he commenced farming.

They left the States for Utah in April, 1870, arriving in Salt Lake City, April 27, and locating in the Eighth ward, where they lived a number of years. From here they

**ARIZONA**  
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President counselors stimulating the people alone gene gratulate sisters as the intelli and the su issuing to have in vi do credit home or i therein an good spirit There is tion to the vate fami data there big in th they furni fice with d cerning th the names books th work of t temple pur decisions

Beyond biographical facts, the real power in the Samuel Chambers' story radiates from his deep feelings and long lasting convictions. These personal convictions would be lost to us were it not for the excellent minutes kept during the 1870s by the stake deacons' clerk, Thomas C. Jones. Unlike our modern clerks, who merely list full names of people bearing testimonies, clerk Jones recorded testimonies in good summary form or nearly verbatim at the monthly quorum testimony meetings. (Evidently he took shorthand notes, then used these when making longhand entries in the minute book.)

The twenty-six times clerk Jones recorded Samuel's testimonies created a rare and valuable document. Samuel, unable to read and write then, left no autobiography, no diary, no written testimony. Only clerk Jones' faded ink entries allow us to appreciate the boy and man who kept his faith alive for a quarter century.



For the first anniversary of the black revelation, *Dialogue* feels it a fitting commemoration to publish the entire collection of Brother Chambers' testimonies from the Salt Lake Stake Deacons Quorum Minute Book, 1873-1877.<sup>5</sup> Samuel Chambers' testimonies forthrightly remind us of the handicap black brothers and sisters suffered when, despite faithful service, they lived and died knowing they were considered unworthy of priesthood ordination, temple ordinances, eternal marriage (even after sixty-six years of marriage) and ultimately full exaltation. These records offer an important illustration of Joseph Smith's teaching that the written testimony of the things of God is as important as the spoken testimony. Here a black Saint, born a century ago, testifies in our own day.

### *Samuel D. Chambers' Testimonies as Recorded in the Salt Lake Stake Deacons Quorum Minute Book, 1873-1877*

Some comments *about* Samuel, found in the minute book, deserve mention. After Samuel's testimony on May 6, 1873, a Brother Cram said that "he has noticed Bro. Chambers at meeting a good while. He knows that he spoke by the Spirit of God. The greater the fall the greater the rise. If he hangs on he will be a savior to his brethren." On November 11th, John Picknell recorded that when Samuel sat down, "Bro. Chambers has preached as good a sermon as I ever wished to hear." Fellow Eighth Warder Joseph McMurrin said of Samuel on November 10, 1874: "It is a high and holy calling to be a deacon. I was a deacon in the old country, and am still one and Bro. Chambers is my assistant and he is faithful. If some white men are not more faithful than they are, the coloured will come out best in the end." On April 11, 1876, Samuel volunteered to attend to the Tabernacle doors during summer meetings. That September 11th, Samuel, the only one in attendance except for the three in the quorum presidency, gave the opening prayer. On November 13th that year James Leach observed:

I love to hear my brethren talk. Brother Chambers likewise. He will be a mighty man. There are not many of his kindred in this church. If we are faithful we don't know what the Lord has in store for us, if we will do his will.

Meeting attendance varied from four to sixty or more, and to the men and boys assembled, Samuel, nearly six feet tall and of large frame and impressive appearance, arose and said the following:

*6 May 1873.* Bro. Chambers said he received the gospel when he was quite a youth while slavery was, and he saved a little money, and came to the valley. He was glad to meet with the Saints, he desired to live with them while he lives, knows the Church is true and the Saints are the people of God. He knew it from the time the Elders laid their hands on him. He feels to be active in doing what he can do for the building up of the kingdom of God. The race he comes of fall away. He feels it is right, the servants of God should keep the Priesthood pure. He feels glad to have the privilege to pay tithing and donations.

*3 June 1873.* Bro Chambers said It was a source of happiness to him to be here,

feels to be the least of all the saints of God, but blest to be one of the number. It is joy to him to fill all calls made upon him. Asks an interest in our faith and prayers, that he may receive an exaltation in the kingdom of God. Feels to fulfill his duty. Had been 29 years in the Church, feels as youthful as ever. Is pleased to have the privilege of paying tithing. Did not come here to sit down and be still. Said when he had lived up to the law of tithing, he had never lacked anything. May God help us to be faithful.

*1 July 1873.* Bro Chambers said it always gives me pleasure to meet with the Saints, and speaking feelings to let you know how I get along and by so doing we may judge of each others feelings. It is good for us to meet together, and speak to each other. I ask an interest in your prayers that I may be faithful to the end. Amen.

*5 August 1873.* Bro Chambers said I love to meet with the Saints, no matter what meeting, it does me good. I have been 29 years in the church, and have never been dissatisfied yet. As I have been appointed a deacon I feel to fulfill my mission. I feel happy to meet any of my brethren. I hope I may always be valiant. May God help me as I grow older in days, that I may ever live with the saints, in time and in eternity.

*14 October 1873.* Bro Chambers said it affords him satisfaction to meet and bear testimony. Said he must apologise for not being here at the last meeting, his wife had been sick, but said I have the privilege to be here to night and have the instructions that are given us. I feel least among the servants of God. I know it is the work of God, but I did not come to Utah to find it out. I ask an interest in your faith and prayers that I may prove faithful to the end. I ask it in the name of Jesus Christ Amen.

*11 November 1873.* Bro Chambers said notwithstanding all my weakness and failings, I feel to fulfill every calling, and desire to attend to every duty when called, and bear my testimony. I have a source of satisfaction in meeting with the saints. Tho' a small company yet as the Saviour said "Where two or three are met together in my name I will be in the midst to bless them." I hope it may be the case to-night. I know we are the people of God. We have been led to these peaceful vallies of the mountains, and we enjoy life and a many other blessings. I don't get tired of being with the Latter-day Saints, nor of being one of them. I'm glad that I ever took upon me the name of Christ. It is our privilege to call our families together, and we can sleep sweetly, and rise and thank God in the morning, for his care thro' the night. It is good when we can go about our business, and return again, and find all right. I've a good woman and that is a great blessing. I thank God, for my soul burns with love for the many blessings I enjoy. I've been blest from my youth up, altho in bondage for 20 years after receiving the gospel, yet I kept the faith. I thank God that I ever gathered with the Saints. May the Lord bless us and help us to be faithful is my prayer. Amen.

*9 December 1873.* Bro Chambers said it is always a source of satisfaction to meet with the Saints. I feel strong in the gospel. I never feel encouraged to fall back but to do my duty. I thank God for all his blessings. I enjoy the good instructions given to us. May we go on, and fulfill our duty as a people is my prayer, Amen.

*10 February 1874.* Bro Chambers said I feel as a little boy. I always feel to be humble and obedient and fulfill every thing placed upon me. I'm apt to forget

sometimes. I'm sorry I forgot tonight. I have a testimony to bear. The oftener I bear testimony the better I feel, it strengthens me. May the Lord bless you.

*12 May 1874.* Bro Chambers said it is a source of satisfaction to me to feel that I have the Kingdom of God at heart. I have been a member of this Church a many years, yet it seems but a few days. I was baptized in the year 1844 and after that I was 21 years in bondage, during which time I never heard a word of the gospel. The spirit of God remained within me. In 1865 I was liberated. I then commenced to save means to gather. This took me 4 years. I have rejoiced in the blessings of God thro' all my life. Tho' lacking age and experience yet God kept the seeds of life alive within me. I feel to be as clay in the hands of the potter. I don't boast in my own strength. I ask an interest in your prayers to help me to be faithful. I have joy in cleaning up and whatever I am called to do. I have my weaknesses in connection with all men. I pray that we may be as one to build up the Kingdom of God.

*14 July 1874.* Bro Chambers said I feel it a source of satisfaction to have the privilege to rise and say a few words and bear my testimony. My weakness is great. We have to lay our cares and dependence on God daily. My mind wanders over many things and causes great reflections to arise. The President at a conference some time ago, prayed us as a people to live our religion and he repeated it last conference. It seems strange that the greatest among us should pray to us. I feel to renew my covenant, and be obedient to the servants of the Almighty. It is not for me to direct, but for them to direct me. I feel to receive consolation this evening for I have felt to ask your faith and prayers before. I have known the gospel to be true ever since I was confirmed. I never set bounds how long I should serve the Lord but I hope to serve him always.

*11 August 1874.* Bro Chambers said I know this is the church and kingdom of God. I know it is my duty to bear testimony as well as my privilege. I feel timid, yet I ought not, because I know it is my duty to be obedient. I may rebel once, but I pray God to help me to keep the prize in view. I desire to live my religion, so that I can rise and say I know the gospel I embraced in my youth is true. This causes me to tell the truth. I ask an interest in your faith and prayers that I may live obedient to those set over us. I feel to step forward and vote, and done it with all my power, and gave it all to my friends. I feel proud I've done it. I looked, and can't see when or where I've done wrong to any of the servants of God.<sup>6</sup>

*8 December 1874.* Bro Chambers said, There is a call for us all, those of us who came here as well as those who were born here. We have met to exchange our views and ideas, as to our everyday duties. I have a great relish for the work I am engaged in. I realize it is all in the gospel. I was not so well placed as these young brethren here, most of you were born in the church. I was born in a condition of slavery, and received the gospel in that condition. I realized I had done right. I received the spirit of God. I was only between 12 and 13 years of age. I was from 23 to 25 years and never heard another word of the gospel. After the war I was made free, then I went to work 4 years and made money and came out here. It is not only to the Gentiles but also to the African, for I am of that race. The knowledge I received is from my God. It is a high and holy calling, without the testimony of God we are nothing. I pray God that we may live true and faithful to the end. Amen.

*13 January 1875.* Bro Chambers said I am the only one of the 8th Ward present

as the rest are in the other room practising for a concert. I feel well in the kingdom of God, and always do in the line of my duty. I testify that the gospel is true. I have done so many a time in my youth. I feel blest. I feel to press forward. I feel to say "God bless the Faithful." Amen.

*9 February 1875.* Bro Chambers said I am a boy as well as others. We have all the right to rejoice. The minutes of the last meeting were good and give encouragement to the deacons. We should realize we are called to act in the Kingdom of God, we should respond to every duty. I feel to give my assistance to roll on this work, for I know it is the work of God. I feel happy to be with you. I would like to hear from the young. It would be a source of joy to all of us. May God help us to be faithful. Amen.

*11 May 1875.* Bro Chambers said I always feel well to meet with the Latter-day Saints, tho' this evening I must plead slothfulness, tho' I try to attend to all duties. I can report the deacons of the 8th Ward to be in the main good, tho' some don't think till they are told. When I live in the discharge of my duty I feel well.

*13 July 1875.* Bro Samuel Chambers bore testimony and said I am thankful to be here, and to be a Latter-day Saint. It is a privilege to know the gospel is true. I did not come to Utah to know of the truth of the gospel, but I received it away back where the gospel found me. I know it is of God, I am well and feel well to give all I have for the Kingdom of God. I desire to do right and live my religion, and keep the Sabbath day and give all my power and strength to the Kingdom of God.

*14 September 1875.* Bro Samuel Chambers said it always [does] me good to rise and speak. My reflections are I'm pleased I live in this day and age when God has spoken from the heavens. I know the brethren who teach us are men of God and if we will put away our weaknesses we shall grow, and I pray that we may ever continue. I've been a member of this Church over 31 years and I am not tired of it yet, and if these young brethren do right they will wish when they have been in it that long they [will] wish to live as long again.

*12 October 1875.* Arose and said it is always a source of pleasure for me to bear my testimony and inasmuch as we live our religion, we shall have the spirit of it. I feel more anxious today than I did in the beginning. We have at our head the Elders of Israel, our Fathers. When I reflect on these things it gives me joy and satisfaction. I feel to improve all the time that I may have the full power of my calling. I know the gospel is true. I received this knowledge in the country where the gospel came to me. I desire to have your faith and prayers, that I may prove faithful, for I realize I shall not have any reward unless I endure to the end. It is there where those who run well will get their reward. May God help us to be faithful is my prayer and desire. Amen.

*14 December 1875.* I desire to improve the time, it has been my desire from my youth up. I came here for my religion. I disposed of all I had and have come here to help to build up the kingdom of God. I desire to be an example to the young. When I realize the great privilege we enjoy in going forth into the waters of baptism,<sup>7</sup> we have one of the greatest blessings we enjoy since we have been here on the footstool of God. I hope we may prove by our works we are determined to carry out the will of God. I'm pleased the Almighty has seen fit to call forth his holy priesthood. He has said you shall hear my voice, for I will declare it by my servants. May the Lord be with us. I realize it is the work of God. I did not come here to find it out, but went forth, not having kind parents as you have, but heard

for myself between 10 and 12 years of age. We should be awake. It is a great privilege to us all to be permitted to speak. Joseph was a boy and also Samuel, and the Lord spoke to them, so we see the Lord is willing to speak to boys.

*12 January 1876.* Said it seems to be my privilege to bear my testimony. We are blest with this privilege from time to time. I esteem it the more, the older I get. I am numbered in the quorum, with you, and if I don't bear my testimony, how do you know how I feel, or how you feel? But if I rise and speak, I know I have a friend, and if I hear you speak as I speak, I know we are one. I pray God to bless those who preside over us in this quorum for where they speak to us, it is the same as the word of God. May we be permitted to live on the earth, and do good to each other, is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

*12 June 1876.* Was happy to meet, and feels determined to press forward and try to live his religion and do as he is told by those placed over him. Some think it is small to be a deacon. Said I think there is nothing small in the kingdom of God. David said "I'd rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than to dwell in the tents of wickedness." I thank God I've a name and standing in my church and kingdom of God. May we all be faithful and live up to every duty is my prayer in the name of Jesus.

*10 July 1876.* I'm pleased being called upon to bear my testimony. I am glad to know I'm as well as I am. I did not come to this part of America to learn the gospel was true, for I knew that in my native part of the land. I knew it for my self. I testify that all who will do the will of the Father shall know for themselves. May God bless us.

*14 August 1876.* Said I feel it a duty to add my testimony to what has been said. I feel it a source of satisfaction to rise and bear testimony to the work of God. I feel there is much to come to pass and it will come shortly. It is our duty to sustain every move made by those over us. It has been said that "God and one good man are a great majority." I never regretted doing anything to build up the Kingdom of God. I'm pleased to live in this day and age "when the Lord has set his hand again, a second time to recover a remnant of his people." We are on a sure footing and we will live and if we live our religion we shall enjoy the Spirit of it. I never feel better than while I'm engaged in my duty. I pray God to help us to live our religion and be saved in the kingdom of God. Amen.

*11 September 1876.* I am always happy when I meet one, two, or three of my brethren in or out of meeting. It is a great satisfaction to me when I am permitted to speak something of our holy religion. I always feel happy when I have risen and given away to my words. I know it is the gospel of Jesus Christ, and we'll always feel happy, if we die before we wake. I always return my thanks to God for his care. If I put it off to a late hour I feel bad. I feel to press forward and be one with you. I feel happy to meet with my brethren and hear their determinations. I feel that their spirit is the same as mine. I think when we have passed the vail how we can re-count our troubles and trials over. I've always felt as I've been taught. It has fallen to my lot to have this spirit. I pray to God to help us to do his will, that we may be exalted in his kingdom, is my prayer in the name of Jesus.

*9 October 1876.* I feel to endorse the words of Bro Picknell. We are few in number, but we have the blessing of God with us. We find it to be so and we can bear witness to the same. Whenever I've met with my brethren, few or many, I've



felt blest and I will continue to have the blessing of God. If I neglect to do my duty I feel bad. I feel proud to be associated with this quorum, and to be with you tonight. I know it is of real worth, I feel to attend to every duty, and I wish I could do more. I look back upon my past life, and feel it has been for the best, the course that God has led me. May he still continue to bless us is my prayer.

*13 November 1876.* It comes to my turn to try and say a few words. I pray I may have the spirit of the Lord to enable me to say a little, and speak whatever the Spirit may give me. I rejoice I ever lived in this great and momentous age, for truly, in the days of my youth, tho' in bondage, I greatly longed to come here, tho' I never could see how it would be brought about. I desire to carry out every measure. I could not see (for a while) how I could pay tithing and live. But the spirit said to me, "All things are possible with God." I never questioned it any longer. May the spirit of God be with us that we may never doubt. I feel thankful to be one with you. I pray God to bless you, brethren in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

*[Note. These minutes cover but three years of Samuel's long life in the Church. He continued to bear his testimony over the decades, and we could offer more excerpts here if other clerks had taken minutes as conscientiously as Thomas C. Jones did. Records from Samuel's Wilford Ward list him as testifying often during the 1901 to 1920 period. His former bishop there, Charles Fagg, recalled that Samuel "frequently" bore his testimony. Samuel's ward teacher, Mahonri White, remembered that Samuel "testified like a man who held the priesthood," and "bore his testimony like an apostle," adding that on occasion "Samuel could holler pretty loud." Black Mormon Monroe Fleming recalls that when he first came to Salt Lake as the non-LDS son of a Methodist preacher, LDS leaders arranged for him to talk about Mormonism with Samuel Chambers and other devoted black Saints in the Wilford Ward area. Editors.]*

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Dialogue* is particularly grateful to William Hartley, research historian in Salt Lake City, for his help in making this compilation.

<sup>2</sup> William G. Hartley, "Samuel D. Chambers," *The New Era* 4 (June 1974), 46–50.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel H. Thomas, "Preston Thomas, His Life and Travels," Historical Department of the Church, Archives (cited as HDCA), photocopy of typescript, pp. 10–11.

<sup>4</sup> Eighth Ward, Salt Lake Stake, Historical Record Book B, 1856–1875, and the same ward's Ward Teachers Report Meetings 1876–1879, both in HDCA.

<sup>5</sup> Salt Lake Stake, Deacons Quorum Minutes, 1873–1877, HDCA.

<sup>6</sup> A month later, on September 5, 1874, Samuel and Amanda received their patriarchal blessings under the hands of Church Patriarch John Smith.

<sup>7</sup> Samuel and Amanda were rebaptized November 27, 1875, like hundreds of faithful Saints that year. Amanda probably was not baptized in the South, and we find no record of her initial baptism prior to this "rebaptism."