

# Blessing the Chevrolet<sup>1</sup>

*Eugene England*

... For a moment Abijah felt stunned; in this, his first real emergency, he had almost forgotten God!

*He turned to Brother Tuckett.*

*Clory, sitting on a boulder near-by, wondered at the sudden purpose in Brother Tuckett's movements. What were they going to do? And then she saw Brother Tuckett appear with the bottle of consecrated sweet oil. She heard Lon say, "You be 'Mouth,' Brother Abijah," and the full significance of the scene burst upon her. Why, they were preparing for "the laying on of hands"! For Abijah would have to be "Mouth" since he held the higher priesthood! She sat up in horror. Administering to an ox!*

*She saw Melancton Tuckett rub the oil between the animal's red ears and then both he and Abijah rest their hands, one over the other, on its head.*

*"We unitedly lay our hands upon thy head, O ox. . . this oil which has been dedicated and consecrated and set apart for the healing of the sick in the household of faith. . ."*

*Bewilderedly Clory grasped the fact that this prayer had all the earnest supplication of the ceremony performed for any ailing human being.*

... Clory watched him calmly speak to the ox. Opening its eyes, it stared at the men with its gentle, liquid gaze. She was not greatly surprised when it scrambled to its feet.

Maurine Whipple, *The Giant Joshua*

AT VARIOUS TIMES I HAVE HEARD AND READ, with mild curiosity, of the anointing of animals by the power of the priesthood in pioneer times, but it wasn't until I found myself with my own hands placed in blessing on the hood of my Chevrolet that I really felt what that experience meant to those early Saints, who depended on their animals, as we do our cars, for quite crucial things.

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1. This essay first appeared in *Dialogue*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Autumn 1974). When Gene wrote it, the Englands were living in Northfield, Minnesota, and Gene was teaching literature at St. Olaf's College.

One evening last fall, Charlotte and I drove about sixty miles to visit a young couple in our branch, converts of a few years who had slipped into inactivity and growing doubt but were now trying to rebuild their faith. We had supper and a good visit and gave a blessing to their new daughter, who had been ill for some time with a vague disorder that kept her crying severely for long stretches. When we tried to return home, the car would not start. We managed to push it to the only garage in that small town just before it closed and were told that the trouble was apparently a broken timing gear, which would take about two days to order and install. Our young friends lent us their car to drive to our home and bring back when we came for ours. When I phoned to check two days later, I was told that the timing gear was installed, but for some reason the car would not start. I drove over anyway and tried to help, but as the afternoon wore on and we tried all kinds of variations of the timing apparatus, plugs, etc., we could only get an occasional rough chug and some backfiring. The mechanic finally said he was afraid he would have to tear out the new timing gear and check it, which would take well into the next day. But I had to be back home to conduct an important branch meeting that night, and when my anxiety reached a certain point, I found that it was quite natural, while the mechanic was helping at the gas pumps out front, to literally place my hands on the car and give it a blessing, explaining to the Lord that I was about his work, that my branch needed me, and I needed some extraordinary help to get there. The mechanic came back, made another adjustment, and half-heartedly tried the starter again for the hundredth time. So help me, I was not even surprised when, after a few mild growls, the engine started. The mechanic was incredulous and insisted on a test drive before he would let me go; after a few miles the engine was still running quite roughly, but he agreed that I could probably get home and then have it tuned up some more later—I was off. It was only on the long ride back that I became properly aware of what had happened, was amazed, and gave thanks.

I have had many occasions to bless my wife and my children and have not been surprised to see them healed, against all the odds, or relax from pain into peace or sleep under my very hands. And on a couple of occasions when we had car trouble during our many trips back to Utah from California or Minnesota, they have suggested that we pray for help, and it has seemed to come. I now remember, while on a little used Nevada back road in early spring, driving onto the shoulder to look at some flowers, finding myself stuck in hub-deep mud, and after a family prayer, inexplicably making it back up onto the pavement. And a number of times, following such a prayer, we have limped across hundreds of miles of desert or a nighttime of closed stations with leaking radiators or worn bearings or something else that should have stopped us. But those

things have occurred in fairly naturalistic ways that I sort of took for granted—as nice experiences for my children but nothing miraculous—and haven't thought much about until recently when I started blessing my Chevrolet.

At Christmas this year we visited our folks in Utah and on our way home noticed there was a certain nagging mushiness when we tried to accelerate and also that a noisy muffler was getting louder. Crossing South Dakota on a Saturday afternoon, we found few mechanics available, but finally one took time to look at the car and found a dirty fuel filter, which he replaced, and a loose tailpipe connection, which he tightened and wired together, so it couldn't work loose again. When the car still had no pickup—in fact, seemed worse—he took a look at the mileage (84,000) and cheerfully declared that the transmission was probably going (\$400), but I could probably make it home. We started out again but found that now we couldn't get up over 40 miles an hour on the level, could barely make it over those infinitesimal variations in the landscape they call hills in South Dakota, and were getting about three miles per gallon. I calculated that even if things didn't get worse, it would take us well into Sunday to get home and we would probably run out of money for gas before then or stall out on one of the (comparative) mountains of Minnesota. And if things *did* get worse, we could be marooned on the South Dakota prairie (fairly dangerous in January) or, at best, stuck in some motel until Monday when someone might be able to put in a new transmission—except that we couldn't pay for it.

Suddenly I found myself gripping the wheel with a special intensity and giving the car a blessing again. I told the Lord that my family was in danger and that our branch needed us the next day and it was time once more for some special help. I felt impressed to take the next exit, which led us to a town some distance from the freeway, and without any surprise felt directed to a certain station. The owner looked things over, disconnected a vacuum tube, and had me drive off for a test. There was no change, and I went back disappointed and for the first time surprised. But the station owner greeted me with a grin and said, "I'll bet I know what the problem is; I heard it as you drove off." He put the car on the hoist and soon found out he was right. Disconnecting the tailpipe at the place the previous mechanic had wired it, he pushed a hose inside and found that the inner wall had collapsed almost shut. He explained that my Chevrolet had been built in one of those few years when the company had experimented with double-walled tailpipes. Sometimes, in the extremes of heat and cold of the upper Midwest, that inner wall collapsed, shutting off the exhaust and producing symptoms much like a bad transmission or an engine that needs overhauling. In fact, the reason he'd recognized the problem was that a friend of his had, just the month before, wasted \$500 on his engine before he discovered this very trouble

with the tailpipe. I wouldn't have been getting any power at all if the pressure had not forced the tailpipe connection loose so that the exhaust could escape; and when the previous mechanic had wired the connection, so it couldn't be forced open, the engine's power was shut down.

I found myself quite calm, without surprise, as he told me these things, without anxiety when he was unable to locate a new tailpipe at that late hour on a Saturday, but then called one supply-house just barely in time to get a length of flexible pipe and some clamps, and thereafter managed to cut out the curved section where the collapse had taken place and clamp in the flex-pipe securely enough for us to get home.

I do not understand fully why or how the Lord does these things—though I know he does. In fact, if I think about it much, there are difficulties: how about our free agency and our need to learn to solve our own problems and be maturely independent—not like infants always asking for help? How did this all fit with the Lord's assurances that he makes his sun and rain to come down equally on all his children—the just and the unjust? How about all that suffering, apparently uninterrupted by God, in the Sub-Saharan famine, Southeast Asia's constant bloodshed, the animal-like packs of deserted children in South American cities, the emotional destruction during slow death in American nursing homes? Couldn't God have veered the typhoon that killed thousands in Bangladesh or the earthquake that killed thousands in Iran as well as guide the mechanic to straighten out the timing on my Chevy or me to someone who could find and cure collapsed exhaust?

I don't know. Perhaps it has something to do with God *guiding people* rather than interfering with nature; perhaps it has something to do with his being asked in faith and for reasons that have to do with his most important purposes, which have to do not just with keeping people alive but with saving their souls. Yet he seems mysteriously selective about helping there as well. And of course, even when he does clearly respond, it isn't always the way we want or expect. In that almost too painfully moving autobiographical account, "The Death of a Son" by Carole Hansen that appeared in *Dialogue* (Autumn 1967), we were powerfully reminded that God, in response to a priesthood blessing, can give assurance and peace, even to the point of being misunderstood—and then eventually can give conviction of his care and the child's ultimate welfare—*without* giving parents what emotionally they want most, the child's life. Again, I don't know why or how.

All I really know is that I continue to ask for blessings and to see them given. Last week our branch held a special fast and had a prayer session for the four-year-old daughter of some friends of one of our members. She had to come from Colorado for extremely dangerous heart surgery at the Mayo Clinic to correct a congenital defect. The parents had lived with the specter of losing this child for four years as she grew into

a poignantly frail, elfin joy while they waited for her to be old enough to risk the operation, and they had fasted each week over the past months as the time grew close. They had been told the chances were about fifty-fifty, but somehow none of us was surprised when the last exploratory catheterization at the Clinic revealed the condition to be less serious than the doctors had supposed and when (after an anointing by her father and a local Rochester Branch brother) the operation went extremely well, and she was up and skittering around after only a few days in intensive care.

Last fall I felt moved to give a special blessing to a dear and extremely capable friend who was suffering anxiety and self-reproach under the pressure of his professional responsibilities and fear of failing his family and himself by not meeting them. I had no doubt that the Lord would bless him with the measure of self-confidence he needed to succeed—as the Lord did. And yesterday a faithful, long-suffering father and I were suddenly called out of our Sunday School preparation meeting to find his daughter in the chapel having a severe seizure. (She has had a condition from birth that causes a reaction at entirely unpredictable moments.) As the father took her in his arms and held her jaw, so she wouldn't bite her tongue, I placed my hands on her head and through the power of the priesthood rebuked the uncontrolled shaking of her entire body. While I continued to stroke her head, the shaking quickly quieted, and then we carried her to the car to be taken home to rest, and I returned to explain to those who had been present what had happened and to ask their prayers for her.

The opportunities, the needs, come often, and the Lord's response forms a bright thread in the texture of gospel living. But I don't fully understand why or how. I only know that I continue to ask—and to acknowledge the Lord's hand in all things.