

Makarios

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Our commentary series devoutly seeks to make New Testament scholarship more accessible to general readers while at the same time reflecting important LDS insights. Indeed, as Joseph Smith stated, the Bible is the word of God as it is translated correctly. Words are important, foundational, and controlling. For example, while all Christians may agree that we are saved by grace, the theological fur begins to fly when we try to define words like “grace” and “saved.” Hence, in the beginning was not only The Word, but also were the original Words and their purported counterparts in hundreds of modern languages. Knowing the range of meanings behind key Greek and Hebrew words is where much of the translational and interpretive fun begins.

Each word focused on in our conference today is of great interest to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Someday I hope we will have an LDS Theological Dictionary of the Scriptures. But for the time being, we need to begin with what’s available and build from there.

LDS Church interest in the words of the New Testament has been developing in recent decades. Tools for Church translators have been developed. Forty years ago, footnotes were added to the LDS Bible offering alternate meanings for unclear words in the King James Version. In 1990, Deseret Book published my book on the Sermon at the Temple, offering temple-related renditions of words in the Sermon on the Mount. In 1993 and 1995, the *Ensign* ran two articles offering New Testament word studies for the Greek words translated as “endued,” related to our word “endowed” (from *enduō*, meaning “clothed or robed”); and the word rendered as “perfect,” as in “Be ye therefore perfect” (from *teleios*, actually meaning “finished” or “completed), and “testament,” as in “new testament” (*diathēkē*, better rendered today as “covenant”). Many such words have distinctive significance in LDS discourse.

Today, I focus on the word *makarios*, translated as “blessed,” most often thought of in the Beatitudes in Matthew 5. My comments build on things I published ten years ago about the Sermon on the Mount in the light of the Temple,¹ and I thank Brent Schmidt, Brock Mason and Jackson Abhau for their assistance.

I have come to love this blessed word. It is exalted and exalting. In all its verbal forms, the idea of blessings speaks to the hearts of Latter-day Saints. The Lord

assured Joseph Smith in Liberty Jail saying: “The pure in heart, and the wise, and the noble, and the virtuous, shall seek counsel, and authority, *and blessings constantly* from under thy hand” (D&C 122:2). Indeed, Latter-day Saints are blessing-seeking people. No people of faith has greater interest in the panoply of blessings than do Latter-day Saints. We bless our children, receive father’s blessings, request blessings when sick; we cherish patriarchal blessings, seek to obtain the blessings of Abraham and, as Paul called it, “the fullness of the blessing of the gospel” (Rom 15:29). Where else can one go to find all these blessings? And indeed, the word “blessed” means many things. Consider the following:

1. The word *makarios* appears about 50 times in the New Testament, in 11 widely distributed books, from Matthew to Revelation, including Luke, John, Acts, as well as letters of Paul, James, and Peter. This word has a very *strong pedigree*. It was important to the Christians disciples who knew Jesus best. We draw close to them when we, too, seek blessings.

2. It meant many things, and each time it is used, we learn more about it. It is sometimes translated as “happy,” “glad,” “prosperous,” “fortunate,” or “enviable.” But it means much *more than happy*. Weak humanistic renditions miss much of the richness of what “divine blessedness” meant to Jesus and his disciples.

3. *Makarios* predominantly refers to a *future and heavenly state*. The word makes its grand entrance at the beginning of each of the nine Beatitudes in Matthew 5. This word signals that Jesus is not primarily speaking about life in this world, but about life in the kingdom of the heavens. Importantly, these short classic statements which are called “macarisms,” usually begin with the plural adjective “Blessed” (*makarioi*), and finish with a verb in the *future* tense, such as “*shall inherit*,”² “*shall be filled*,” and “*shall see God*.” In the King James Version, the word “are” is in italics, because no verb of being is explicitly stated in those cases.³ But because the verb, in the resultant clause, is in the future tense, the unexpressed verb of being may, and probably should, be also understood to be in the future tense as well: “Blessed *will be* those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” “Great *will be* your reward in heaven.”⁴ This assurance of ultimate blessing gives great comfort and solace to those who suffer challenges and tragedies in this life.

4. These blessing statements apply *generically*. That is, they extend promised blessings to all who satisfy the applicable conditions. “Blessed will be the merciful, for *they* shall obtain mercy.” “Blessed will be the peacemakers, for *they* shall be called the children of God.” God’s omni-benevolence reaches out

generously to everyone possible,⁵ making it easy for us all to relate to these promises.

5. And to that end, these expressions are also *invitingly instructive*. They promise blessings to faithful followers who enter into and keep their covenants with the Lord by obeying—as the D&C sets forth—the stated law upon which that blessing is predicated (see D&C 130:21). This does not reflect a mechanical cause and effect, but results because of God’s yearning to have us all follow his guiding words and return unto him (3 Nephi 12:2-3; Matthew 5:2-3 JST).

6. To those who thus covenant with their Lord, these macarisms become *personal*. Having healed people in the multitude in Luke 6:19, Jesus turned to his disciples in 6:20-22 and now addressed four beatitudes to them personally, in the second person: “Blessed are *ye* poor ones, for *yours* is the kingdom of God; blessed are ye now-hungry ones, for *you* shall be filled; blessed are ye now-weeping ones, for *you* shall laugh,” personally.

7. The *covenantal* register behind the tone of the word *makarios* is often evident, as it also is here in Luke 6. Just as blessings and curses are often paired together in biblical covenant texts, for example in Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 27-31, and in the Psalms, those four personal macarisms in Luke 6 are followed by four matched curses: woe to you rich; woe to those who are full now; woe to the ones that laugh now; and woe to you who seek the praise of men (Luke 6:24-26). Thus, macarisms seriously stress stipulations. They do not simply praise or congratulate those who are already virtuous.

8. As such, beatitudes are fundamentally *religious, not philosophical*.⁶ Macarisms appear in several ancient religious texts, but they appear most distinctively in the biblical Psalms, where the word *makarios* appears 28 times, far more than any other book. Because the Psalms are most recognizably at home as the hymns *of the temple*, readers should always be on high alert for temple innuendos whenever the word *makarioi* is encountered.⁷

9. Beginning with the very first word in the Psalms, we learn that the blessed are *righteous*: “Blessed are those who walk not in the counsel of the wicked” (Ps 1:1). “Blessed are they who observe justice, who do righteousness at all times” (Ps 106:3). “Blessed will be those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord. Blessed, those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart” (Ps 119:1–2). The word blessed is a word of *progression*. Wherever one begins or is, blessedness is the goal of those who pursue the path of righteousness.

10. In the Psalms it is especially clear that being “blessed” is not a state of self-satisfaction or social well-being, but that it comes *from the Lord*: “Blessed are all who take refuge in [the Lord]” (Ps 2:12). “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven [by the Lord], whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity” (Ps 32:1–2). It comes by being humbly loyal to God: “blessed is the man who makes the Lord his trust” (Psalms 40:4). It comes by loving to be with the Lord, in his temple: “Blessed are those who dwell in thy house” (Ps 84:4) and who “reveres the Lord” (Ps 128:1).

11. Thus, blessedness describes a *relational* state, having a living relationship with the Lord and his people. “Blessed is the nation for whom the Lord is their God” (Ps 33:12). “Blessed is the one whom the Lord chooses” (Ps 65:4). “Blessed is the one whom the Lord chastens and teaches his law” (Ps 94:12). “Blessed are those who consider the poor” (Ps 41:1). A person cannot be or become blessed alone.

12. Beseeking the Lord for his true blessing was a *sacred* temple plea. The Hebrew word consistently translated by *makarios* in the Septuagint is *'ashrê* (אשר), whose most frequent usage also occurs in the Psalms. One scholar has concluded, this preponderance “will hardly allow one to deny a connection between *'ashrê* and the liturgy of the Second Temple. *'ashrê* is a liturgical cry,” bless now!⁸

13. The Lord’s blessings are *differentiated* from blessings by people. When the Lord gives the blessing, the Hebrew word typically is *'ashrê* and, interestingly, its Greek counterpart is always *makarioi*. The Hebrew word *barukh* is usually used when people praise or bless God, and it is typically translated with the Greek word *eulogēmenos*.⁹ Whenever the word “bless” appears in a transitive sense, when a person blesses some thing or someone, the New Testament likewise uses *eulogēō*.

14. Ultimately, the *final judgment* will bestow the reward of the hallowed heavenly state of being *makarios*.¹⁰ Thus, looking toward the judgment day, Jesus said, “Blessed is that servant, whom his lord, when he cometh, shall find [him]” serving his Lord (Matt 24:46; Luke 12:37-41). To those who feed the poor, Jesus said: “Thou shalt be blessed, . . . for thou shalt be recompensed *at the resurrection* of the just” (Luke 14:14-15). James likewise linked *makarios* with the eternal heavenly reward: “Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life” (James 1:12).

15. From other ancient references, we learn that the mortal souls who attain celestial glory were sometimes understood to be *makarioi*, or *celestialized*,

becoming *like God*. In one Egyptian source, the word *makarios* “designates a state of being that pertains to the gods and can be awarded to humans *post mortem*,” describing a deceased person “who has been approved to enter the paradise of Osiris, even to become an Osiris himself.”¹¹ *Makarios* also appears in Greek texts describing the state of one who has gained knowledge of the divine mysteries,¹² and one Greek funerary inscription reads, “*Makarios*, you will be [a] god.”¹³

16. Because of the widespread occurrence of this word in all parts of the New Testament, one can have great confidence that the word *makarios* is *authentic* with Jesus.¹⁴ In Acts, Paul expressly attributed to Jesus the macarism, “Blessed is rather to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). Jesus’s continued similar usages of the word “blessed” sixteen more times in 3 Nephi (9:14; 12:1, 1, 2, 2; 16:6; 17:20; 18:10, 12, 14, 34; 20:27; 27:22; 28:3, 7, 8; in addition to those contained in beatitudes of Matthew 5) gives further confidence in this conclusion.

17. Jesus uses *makarios* in Matthew, Luke, and John when speaking about *revelation*. Blessedness will come by receiving a testimony of Jesus revealed by God. To Peter, Jesus said: “*Blessed* art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven” (Matt 16:17). To his other disciples, Jesus said, “Blessed *will be* the eyes which see the things that ye see” (Luke 10:23). To Thomas, the resurrected Jesus said, “Blessed (*makarioi*) *will be* they who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29). And Paul affirms that people will be “more blessed” when they accept and abide by his apostolic judgment (1 Cor. 7:40). (Parenthetically, Mark never uses the word *makarios*. Every time the word “blessed” appears in the KJV of Mark, it is a translation of the word *eulogeō*, see above, referring to someone blessing the bread, blessing little children, or in quoting from similar Old Testament passages.)

18. Indeed, so *sacred* were these words of eternal blessing from Jesus that James and Peter humbly inverted the order of two macarisms, apparently not wanting to take any credit for such words themselves. In these reversals, which may signal a quotation, James placed the word *makarios* at the end of his saying that “Whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being . . . a doer of the work, this man shall be *blessed*” (James 1:25). And clearly quoting two of Jesus’s beatitudes, Peter assures Church members: “If ye suffer for righteousness’ sake, blessed (*makarioi*) [are ye]” (1 Peter 3:14); and again, “If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, blessed (*makarioi*) [are ye]” (1 Peter 4:14). Just as Peter did not want to be crucified except upside down, he also refrained from appropriating

unto himself Jesus's words found in Matthew 5 and inverted their normally expected word orders.

19. Finally, the word *makarios* prophetically *epitomizes the apocalyptic end* of the New Testament, appearing in the book of Revelation a characteristic total of seven times. John's revelation begins: "Blessed (*makarios*) *will be* he that readeth, and hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein" (Rev 1:3). The concluding chapter chiastically ends: "Blessed *will be* he that keepeth the sayings of the prophecy of this book" (Rev 22:7).

Macarisms two and five both speak of the dead who will rise: "Blessed *are/will be* the dead who die in the Lord from henceforth" (Rev 14:13); "Blessed and holy *will be* he that hath part in the first resurrection" (Rev 20:6).

In the center, macarisms three and four both refer to words that Jesus Christ had spoken: "Behold, I am coming as a thief. Blessed *will be* he that is watching" (Rev 16:15; see Matt 24:43; Luke 12:39-40); "Blessed *will be* they who are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Rev 19:9; see Matt 22:2-3; Luke 14:15).

A Blessed (*makarios*) *will be* he that readeth, and hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein (Rev 1:3).

B Blessed *are/will be* the dead who die in the Lord from henceforth" (Rev 14:13)

C Behold, I am coming as a thief. Blessed *will be* he that is watching" (Rev 16:15)

C' Blessed *will be* they who are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Rev 19:9)

B' Blessed and holy *will be* he that hath part in the first resurrection" (Rev 20:6).

A' Blessed *will be* he that keepeth the sayings of the prophecy of this book (Rev 22:7)

The seventh macarism places a final exclamation point on the book of Revelation: "Blessed *will be* they who wash their robes [as some manuscripts read] or keep the commandments [as other manuscripts read], that they *will* thereby have the power pertaining to the tree of life and to the gates and shall enter into the [heavenly] city" of the New Jerusalem (Rev 22:14).

These enabling macarisms reveal divine mysteries, prophesy concerning the end-times, give sacred knowledge to those who are set-apart, and summarize conditions for access to the tree of life and into the heavenly city. This holy blessedness depends on our faithfulness, keeping the commandments, wearing the required spotless garments, and having power and authority to enter into God's presence.

In conclusion, it is with the promises of this blessed state that the beatitudes in Matthew 5 begin, and it is with this blessed state that the Sermon on the Mount

also ends. In Matthew 7, Jesus concludes by declaring that they, who come to know God by doing the will of the Father who is in heaven and in that process have become known unto the Lord, shall be allowed to enter into the kingdom of heaven and into His presence (Matt 7:21, 24). This word can certainly bless our lives, as it leads us to seek the blessings of the Lord and eternal life, constantly, diligently, lovingly, singly, collectively, and covenantally, following Jesus, the way, to life eternal, which is divine blessedness. *All of this*, and nothing less, is blessedness (*makarios*) according to the New Testament.

¹ John W. Welch, *The Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon at the Temple* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990); *Illuminating the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon at the Temple* (Provo: FARMS, 1999); *The Sermon in the Mount in the Light of the Temple* (London: Ashgate, 2009).

² G. Strecker, “μακάριος,” *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament vol. 2*, eds. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 376. This general form is consistent throughout Egyptian, Greek, and Jewish literature.

³ One exception is in Matthew 5:11, “blessed are you when” But even here, the sense of the promised blessing is in the future, “for your reward is [will be] great in heaven.”

⁴ In some verses, Luke makes the future-tense aspect explicit, as in Luke 1:45; 14:14–15; 23:29. It should be noted as well that Luke also has at least one verse where the blessings are in the *present* time—Luke 6:25.

⁵ Likewise, the comparable adjective *’ashrê* (אשרי) is plural in virtually all of its appearances in the Psalms.

⁶ One striking aspect of New Testament macarisms is their reversal of traditional understandings of blessedness. It is the poor, rather than the wealthy, who are blessed; it is those who mourn, rather than those with no cause to mourn, who shall be comforted. C.f., John H. Elliott, *1 Peter: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, *Anchor Bible 37B* (New York: Doubleday, 2000).

⁷ Margaret Barker, *The Gate of Heaven* (London, 1991), 45.

⁸ Henri Cazelles, “*’ashrê*,” *TDOT*, 446.

⁹ While a person can be *barukh* as the result of an action by either another person or God, one can only be *asher* as a result of God’s blessing.

¹⁰ For example, Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, 178–81, which includes *2 Enoch* 51–53, where one is admonished “to go to the Lord’s temple” three times a day to praise God by speaking a matched list of seven macaristic blessings and curses, and those words will be the standard of divine judgment weighed “in the balances and exposed in the books on the great judgment day.” Those macarisms are in this form: “Blessed is the person who opens his lips in praise of God; . . . cursed is every person who opens his heart for insulting his neighbor, . . . for that person insults God.”

¹¹ Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 93.

¹² Hauck, “μακάριος, μακαρίζω, μακαρισμός,” *TDNT*, 364.

¹³ Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, 95. In the LXX, God is not said to be *makarios*, only *eulogetos*.

¹⁴ Many scholars agree that the beatitudes are original sayings of Jesus. See, e.g., Collins, “Beatitudes,” *ABD* 1:630. Further, the uniform presentation of macarisms in the New Testament—including the fact that they are very often attributed to Christ—suggests that macarisms are an authentic part of the original Christian message, not simply a later reformulation.