

“This Great Thing Which Has Come to Me a Humble, Weak Farmer Boy”: Ezra Taft Benson’s 1943 Call to the Apostleship

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For forty-four-year-old Ezra Taft Benson, his ordination as an apostle of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on October 7, 1943, marked the major turning point in his life. Leaving behind an enviable career of secular accomplishment, he forever after devoted himself entirely to testifying of Jesus Christ and helping to establish God’s kingdom on earth. Even during his eight years as U.S. Secretary of Agriculture in the 1950s, he considered the federal appointment as a heaven-mandated expression of his duties as Christ’s modern standard-bearer.¹

Before his calling as an apostle, Benson had been employed for the previous four years as executive secretary to the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives, headquartered in Washington DC for \$25,000 annually.² During this time he both championed and helped to coordinate the economic and political interests of some two million farmers and five thousand farming cooperatives nationwide.

Among the first indications of the interest of ranking Church authorities in Benson’s high calling was his receipt of two letters in late April and early May 1943 from J. Reuben Clark, first counselor in the Church’s First Presidency, asking about Benson’s travel plans. As Benson recorded in his diary on May 3: “Received second letter from Pres. J. Reuben Clark requesting I let him know when my wife and I plan to be in Salt Lake. I fear we will not

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with Reed to Bro McKay's office where his driver drove us to the Beneficial Life to pick up the mgr, Bro. Cannon, and then at his home we called for Sr Cannon a daughter of Pres Grant. Then to my surprise they drove Reed and I to Pres Grant's summer home in Immigration Canyon.

When he arrived at his simple but roomy summer cottage I was pleased to see Sister Grant and was shown into Pres Grant's bed room where he was dressed but resting on the cover of the bed facing the door. After I closed the door and sat down on a chair close to the bed he took my right hand in both of his and as I looked into his kindly, tear filled eyes, said, "With all my heart I congratulate you and pray God to bless you. You have been chosen as the newest Apostle of the Church."

The announcement seemed unbelievable and overwhelming. I was stunned and for several minutes could say only, "Oh President Grant that can't be" which I must have repeated several times before I was able to collect my thoughts enough to

be there together until after the war [i.e., World War II] altho a field trip I am planning for about July 1 may take me thru Salt Lake."³ Less than two weeks later, Benson had concluded to take his oldest son, fifteen-year-old Reed, on an extended vacation that summer through the American West and Southwest as a reward for Reed's having recently earned his Eagle badge in the Boy Scouts.⁴ "Reed has a sincere longing for the great, free open spaces," Benson wrote in early July, "which I hope to be able to satisfy in part at least on this trip. I really have much of the same desire."⁵

By mid-July 1943, Benson and Reed had reached "dear old Salt Lake."⁶ The next day, July 16, Benson met with David O. McKay, second counselor in the First Presidency. At the time, Benson was serving as president of the Washington DC Stake, and the two leaders met and reviewed Church affairs in the nation's capital. "I had a most pleasant conference with Pres. David O. McKay about various stake matters but particularly about conditions in Wash., D.C.," Benson records. "It was a pleasure to be in his sweet inspiring presence. He is truly a great man. How I wish we had a man at the head of this great country of his stature and character. I am looking forward to dinner with Pres. McKay and family on July 26th at their home on my way east."⁷ Following this meeting, Benson and Reed traveled north to visit friends and family members in Logan, Utah, and in Preston, Idaho Falls, Mink Creek, and Whitney, Idaho; then they returned to Logan and finally to Salt Lake City, arriving on July 26. Late that same morning, Benson called again upon President McKay. By all accounts, Benson was completely unaware of the life-changing event that awaited him.

The following entries, transcribed from Benson's personal diary, chronicle the surprise, conviction, and loyalty attending the calling to the apostleship of the man who forty-two years later, on November 10, 1985, would become the thirteenth president of the LDS Church.

July 26 [1943]—Monday

This day will ever stand out in my mind as the day of greatest significance to me, altho as I write it seems like a dream.

We drove to Salt Lake this a.m. arriving at 11:30. After spending some time at the Gene[a]logical Society of Utah, where I am having work done on the Benson line, I purchased some garments, had lunch and then went to the offices of the P.B.O. [Presiding Bishopric Office], YMMIA [Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association], Primary and then to the Church Office Bldg.

I called at Pres. [David O.] McKay's office to find if there was any change in the ~~luncheon~~ [?] dinner appointment at his home. He had understood, thru some mistake, that I was to be there to lunch. He said he'd been calling hotels, R.R. [railroad] stations, etc to locate me and that he had promised Pres. [Heber J.] Grant he'd drive me up to his summer home to see the President.

Pres. McKay stepped out of the office to make a phone call or two and on returning said Pres. Grant wants to see you and will have his car here for you at 5:15 p.m. At the appointed time (25 minutes later) I returned with Reed [Benson] to Bro McKay's office where his driver drove us to the Beneficial Life to pick up the mgr., Bro. [George J.] Cannon, and then at his home we called for Sr. [Lucy] Cannon a daughter of Pres Grant.⁸ Then to my surprise they drove Reed and I to Pres. Grant's summer home in Immigration [Emigration] Canyon.⁹

When we arrived at this simple but roomy summer cottage I was pleased to see Sister Grant¹⁰ and was shown into Pres. Grant's bedroom where he was dressed but resting on the cover of the bed facing the door.¹¹ After I closed the door and sat down on a chair close to the bed he took my right hand in both of his and as I looked into his kindly, tear filled eyes, he said, "With all my heart I congratulate you and pray God to bless you. You have been chosen as the newest Apostle of the Church."¹²

The announcement seemed unbelievable and overwhelming. I was stunned and for several minutes could say only, "Oh President Grant that can't be" which I must have repeated several times before I was able to collect my thots enough to realize what had happened and that it was real and not a dream. He held my hand for a long time as we both shed tears of gratitude. For over ½ hour we were alone together, much of the time with our hands clasped warmly ~~to~~ together. Tho feeble his mind was clear and alert and I was deeply impressed with his sweet, kindly, humble spirit as he seemed to look into my soul.¹³

I felt so utterly weak and unworthy that his words of comfort and reassurance which followed were doubly appreciated.

Among other things he stated, "The Lord has a way of magnifying men who are called to positions of leadership." When in my weakness I was able to state that I love the Church, he said, "We know that the Lord wants men who will give everything for His work."

He told of the action taken in a special meeting of the First Presidency and the Twelve 2 weeks before and that the decision regarding me had been enthusiastically un[nim]mous and would be popular with the Church membership.¹⁴ I feel confident that only thru the rich blessings of the Almighty can this ever be realized. With all my heart I pray that I will ever remain true and faithful and at some future day come to be worthy of this sacred trust.

With tear filled eyes the President recalled the devotion of my great-grandfather who was ordained an apostle at Winter Quarters [Iowa] by Brigham Young and came with him to the valleys in 1847. With tear filled eyes he reminded me that Apostle Ezra T. Benson and my other faithful projenetors [progenitors] would rejoice at his appointment of one of their de[s]cendants to the Apostleship.¹⁵

Continuing he said, "We want you to go right on with your work in Washington [D.C.]. It may be a year and it may be several years. We urged Reed Smoot to remain in the [United States] Senate because we believed he could best serve the Church in the Senate."¹⁶ He also made it clear that I must do the right thing by the [farmers'] cooperatives and stated, "We need more cooperation. Bro. Brigham [Young] had the vision of us owning all this intermountain area, and we could have done it thru more cooperation." Here he seemed a bit sad but only for moment for he then recounted some of his early experiences as a member of the quorum of Twelve.

He said he had just finished the reading of the book "Gospel Standards" which embodies his life and teachings in brief. He said, "Bro. Benson I've been impressed there's not a great sermon in it like Orson Pratt and some of the other brethren preached. My life has been one of humble testimony and love for the work."

He then after I had started to go several times said I should be at the October [general] conference at which time I would be ordained. He then bid me a warm goodbye as both his hands clasped mine and we looked into each others tear dimmed eyes.

Later he called me back and asked I remind Pres. McKay that the announcement should be made tomorrow and first in the Deseret News.¹⁷ I then brought Reed in to shake the President's hand and meet Sister Grant after which Bro. Cannon drove us to the home of Pres. McKay. I hardly spoke a word as we drove down the canyon. I was still dazed from the shock. After a warm handclasp and pledge of support from Bro. Cannon he left us to return to the canyon.

Pres. McKay met me at the door with outstretched arms and our persons were pressed together as we pressed our arms around each other. His sweet congratulations and blessing will ever be remembered.

I had not told my son Reed. Pres. McKay told him and Reed and I embraced each other as father and son. Sister [Emma Ray] McKay was then told and later at the dinner table her son David L. and daughter Lugene Blood.

After a lovely cold dinner Pres. McKay drove us to our car, gave a few parting instructions, assured me I should assure the cooperative leaders I would stay until everything in the Council was satisfactorily arranged. Then after giving him two photos for Bro. [Henry] Smith, manager of the "[Deseret] News" whom I had talked with on the phone he left us with his blessing.

We then drove up to Ele[o]nora Falck's,¹⁸ packed our suitcases, delivered our rented car and went to our train. Here we saw brother Thos. C. Romney and wife who are enroute to preside over the Central States Mission at Independence, MO.¹⁹ Had a good visit.

Retired at 11 p.m. but slept very little but prayed, wept and did much sincere thinking regarding this great thing which has come to me a humble, weak farmer boy. With heart full of gratitude I pledged my all to the establishment of the Kingdom of God on the earth and plead with the Lord to give me strength to ever be worthy of this high and holy calling in the Church and Priesthood of God.

July 27 [1943]

High point [of the day] was my call to my sweet and faithful wife [Flora] in Bethesda, Md. [Maryland]. When I told her of the appointment she said how wonderful she felt it was and expressed her complete confidence I could measure up. It was reassuring to talk to her. She has always shown more faith in me than I have myself. We both decided we should plan to attend the Salt Lake [general] conference in October.

Oct[ober] 1, 1943

This of all days is the most significant in my life. I shall never forget it. In the opening session of the 114th Semi-Annual [General] Conference I was sustained as the youngest and junior member of the Quorum of Twelve [Apostles] and called upon to address the great conference of stake and ward officers of the Priesthood.

The Lord richly blessed me altho I was almost overcome with emotion, and my heart is full of gratitude for this great and glorious honor which has come to one of His weak servants, that I found it difficult to speak.²⁰ The entire session, which included

a message from Pres. [Heber J.] Grant, Pres. [J. Reuben] Clark, Bro. Richard R. Lyman²¹ and my new associate in the Twelve, Spencer W. Kimball,²² was inspiring.

Before and after the conference we posed as a Quorum for pictures for the papers. We visited with friends and loved ones and received the affectionate hands of our brethren of the General Authorities.

Bro. Kimball and I received some valuable instructions from Pres. George Albert Smith regarding our duties.

Among other things he urged to us to maintain and continue our contacts with people outside the Church in an official and semi-official capacity as an important part of our work as missionaries and special witnesses of the Lord. He encouraged us not to write our talks unless on a radio program which requires a manuscript. In so advising us he stated he was but repeating the admonition of Pres. Grant to give the Spirit an opportunity to operate. He said some of the brethren have somewhat formed the habit of writing their talks and were finding it difficult to do otherwise.

He also urged us to accept assignments cheerfully without making excuses and urged us to ask questions and come frequently for help.

In the evening, we joined with Bros & Srs [Brothers and Sisters] Kimball,²³ David Smith,²⁴ Pres Idaho Falls Temple, [ElRay L.] Christiansen,²⁵ Pres Logan Temple, Joseph F. Smith,²⁶ Patriarch at the lovely home of Bro. & Sr. S[t]ephen L. Richards²⁷ for a lovely chicken dinner and evening of music, story telling and delightful conversation.

Oct. 2 [1943]

This has been another glorious day. Attended a breakfast meeting at 8:00 a.m. for presidents of outlying stakes sponsored by Mark Peterson²⁸ Mgr [Manager] and other members of Deseret News staff.

Attended three [general] conference sessions at 12–2 and 7 and enjoyed to the full the inspiring sermons and mingling with the brethren. For the first time in my life my right hand is aching [sic] from the warm handshakes of the brethren.

Oct[ober] 4 [1943]

Had conferences with Pres. McKay, Harold Lee,²⁹ Frank Evans³⁰ et al. I am grateful that Bro. Lee gave me a purview of the coming Thursday meeting in the [Salt Lake] Temple.

Oct[ober]. 7, 1943

This day shall ever live in my memory and always I shall be grateful for its blessing.

At 8:30 I met with the Council of Twelve and assistants [to the Twelve]. At 10 a.m. the Twelve and the [Presiding] Patriarch met Pres Grant and McKay in the President's office.³¹

Too weak to make the trip to the temple we had the minutes of the previous week's meeting and the President commented on his health and stated he was willing to remain as long as the Lord wished him to altho there were strong ties on the other side.

He then ordained Spencer W. Kimball as apostle. Then he and members of the Council of Twelve and the presiding patriarch placed their hands on my head as I knelt

in front of Pres. Grant who was sitting. It was a beautiful ordinance and blessing and many wonderful promises were made.³² Pres. Grant talked to us for about an hour largely reminiscing. Out of this and other instructions came the following items as a charge in connection with the new call:

1. In meetings speak your mind freely, but when a decision is made line up and support the policy and uphold the brethren wholeheartedly.
2. Major responsibility is to:
 - a. Set in order the affairs of the Church in all the world.
 - b. Preach gospel to world.
 - c. Perform all ordinances & ceremonies.
3. Give thought and study first to things of the Kingdom.
4. Avoid sin & temptation & set worthy example.
5. Avoid spirit of arrogance, headyness, etc.
6. Be humble, prayerful and kind that the Sprit may dictate.
7. Recognize source of God's direction to his Church.
8. No work is important enough to keep Council members from Temple.
9. Remember no sacrifice is too great for the Kingdom.

At 11:30 the brethren with Pres. McKay in charge went to the temple, dressed in the clothes of the holy Priesthood, participated in the administration of the sacrament and the prayer circle (true order of prayer) around the alt[a]r. Later ~~we~~ we changed clothes and returned for a business meeting. At 2:30 we had lunch in the temple.³³

After conferring with the brethren at the office we joined the Presiding Bishopric, the Kimball's and Lee's at dinner in the house of Bp. [Bishop] [LeGrand] Richards.³⁴

I am most grateful for the love of the brethren and the prospects of spending the rest of my life in the service of the Lord in His glorious work. I only wish I could start on my new labors immediately. The brethren feel I must satisfy the Ntl [National] Council of Farmer Coops [Cooperatives] and rightly so. It will be a pleasure to get into the Glorious work of our Father.

Notes

1. "I feel it was a call," Benson commented of his federal appointment. "I really feel it was a call." Ezra Taft Benson, Oral History Interview by James B. Allen, October 1974–May 1975, 53, James H. Moyle Oral History Program, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

2. By comparison, Benson's beginning yearly salary as an apostle was \$6,000. See Merlo J. Pusey, *Eisenhower the President* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 69. Benson later referred to the impact on his wife and him of his decision to accept the LDS apostleship as "turn[ing] our backs on money." Ezra Taft Benson, *Cross Fire: The Eight Years with Eisenhower* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1962), 142.

3. Ezra Taft Benson, Diary, May 3, 1943, photocopy, courtesy of the Smith-Pettit Foundation.

4. Benson, Diary, May 15 and May 24, 1943.

5. Benson, Diary, July 6, 1943.

6. Benson, Diary, July 15, 1943.

7. Benson, Diary, July 16, 1943. The two men also served together in the

Church's British Mission in the early 1920s, with Benson as a missionary, and McKay as mission president.

8. George Jenkins Cannon had married Lucy Grant, daughter of Heber J. and Lucy Stringham Grant.

9. There is some discrepancy regarding Benson's meeting with McKay. The first reference in McKay's diary to Benson on this day reads: "At 6:00 P.M., met President Benson at our home. Sister [Emma Ray] McKay had prepared a delicious dinner for us. I broke the news to Brother Benson that he had been chosen as an Apostle in the Church. It came as a great shock and surprise to him." David O. McKay, *Diary*, July 26, 1943, photocopy, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City. McKay's diary does not mention an earlier scheduled meeting with Benson, and the comment that it was McKay who first "broke the news" to Benson of his appointment as an apostle cannot be accurate. McKay's diary was kept by his personal secretary, Clare Middlemiss, who may not have been privy to all of the day's events or may have misunderstood some of the details of the day when she recorded this entry in McKay's diary.

In addition, Benson's authorized biographer writes that it was McKay's office staff, not McKay, who "had been frantically calling hotels throughout the city" trying to locate Benson; and that Benson and McKay evidently did not meet until that evening. Sheri L. Dew, *Ezra Taft Benson: A Biography* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 174–75. Finally, a former Secretary to the First Presidency writes that it was "Joseph Anderson, the secretary to the First Presidency, [who] contacted Ezra and advised him that President Heber J. Grant wanted to visit him at his cabin in a canyon east of the city." Francis M. Gibbons, *Ezra Taft Benson: Statesman, Patriot, Prophet of God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 127–28. Yet Benson's diary seems clearly to state that it was McKay who had been looking for Benson (though this would not preclude others—in addition to McKay himself—acting on McKay's orders, including Anderson) and that it was Grant who first informed Benson of his new calling.

10. Hulda Augusta Winters Grant was the last surviving of Heber J. Grant's three wives. She had married Grant on May 26, 1884.

11. Grant had suffered a stroke in 1940.

12. Later, in his autobiography, Benson quoted Grant as saying, "Brother Benson, with all my heart I congratulate you and pray God's blessings to attend you. You have been chosen as the youngest apostle of the Church." Benson, *Cross Fire*, 143.

13. In his first LDS general conference talk after his calling as an apostle, Benson confirmed: "I had no premonition of this call, even of the shortest duration. When passing through Salt Lake and stopping over here, just between trains, on route to Colorado on the 26th of July, President McKay indicated that the president of the Church wanted to see me a few moments. Even then such a thought of being called to this high and holy calling never entered my mind. It was only a few minutes later that President Grant took my right hand in both of his and looked into the depths of my very soul and said: 'Brother Benson, with all my heart, I congratulate you and pray God's blessings to attend you; you have been chosen as the youngest apostle of the Church.' The whole world seemed to sink. I could hardly believe it was true, that such a thing could happen, and it has been difficult since for me to realize that it is a

reality.” “Talk by Elder Benson,” *Church News*, October 9, 1943, 6.

14. Drawing upon the First Presidency's and Twelve's official minutes, Gibbons notes: “[O]n Thursday, July 22, 1943, the Council of the First Presidency and the Twelve affirmed President Grant's decision that Ezra Taft Benson be called as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.” Gibbons, *Ezra Taft Benson*, 127.

15. Benson's great-grandfather, Ezra Taft Benson, was ordained an apostle on July 16, 1846, by Brigham Young, president of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles, at Council Bluffs, Iowa.

16. Reed Smoot was ordained an apostle on April 8, 1900. He served as U.S. Senator (Republican) from Utah from 1903–1932.

17. See “New Apostle Chosen[:] Ezra T. Benson to Fill Post,” *Deseret News*, July 27, 1943, in Journal History of the Church, July 27, 1943, Church History Library. See also “Final Apostle Vacancy Filled[:] Ezra Taft Benson Appointed to Office,” *Church News*, July 31, 1943, 1.

18. Eleonora Smith Amussen had married Louis Kuni Falck. They later divorced. She was Flora Benson's sister.

19. Thomas Cottam Romney had married Lydia Ann Naegle/Naille on December 12, 1899. Lydia would die in Independence, Missouri, less than two years later on May 18, 1945.

20. For the text of his entire first sermon see “Talk by Elder Benson,” *Church News*, October 9, 1943, 6.

21. Richard Roswell Lyman had been ordained an apostle on April 7, 1918.

22. Spencer Woolley Kimball would be ordained an apostle along with Benson on October 7, 1943. He became LDS Church president on December 30, 1973.

23. Spencer W. and Camilla Eyring Kimball.

24. David Asael Smith had served as a counselor to the Presiding Bishop of the LDS Church from 1907–1938, and was president of the Idaho Falls temple from 1943–1949.

25. ElRay LaVar Christiansen was president of the Logan Temple from 1943–1951; and would serve as an Assistant to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles from 1951 to his death in 1975. From 1954–1961, he was also president of the Salt Lake Temple.

26. Joseph Fielding Smith (1899–1964), not to be confused with long-time apostle and Church President Joseph Fielding Smith (1876–1972), served as Patriarch to the LDS Church from 1942–1946.

27. Stephen L Richards had been ordained an apostle on January 18, 1917. He would serve as first counselor in the First Presidency to LDS Church President David O. McKay from 1951 until his death in 1959. He had married Irene Smith Merrill.

28. Mark Edward Petersen would be ordained an apostle the following year on April 20, 1944.

29. Harold Bingham Lee had been ordained an apostle on April 10, 1941. He would be named LDS Church president on July 7, 1972.

30. Frank Evans was financial secretary to the First Presidency from late 1940 until his death in 1950.

31. See also McKay, *Diary*, October 7, 1943: “10:00—Council Meeting in the First Presidency's Room, at which time Spencer W. Kimball and Ezra Taft Benson were set apart to the Apostleship.”

32. Benson's ordination blessing is not available. Kimball's reads, in part: “Therefore, we admonish you to look upon this calling and this Apostleship which we are now giving unto you as paramount to everything else upon the earth. There-

fore, set your heart upon the service of the Lord thy God. From this very moment resolve to make this cause and this labor first and foremost in all your thoughts.” Edward L. Kimball and Andrew E. Kimball Jr., *Spencer W. Kimball: Twelfth President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1977), 205.

33. Though he had previously gone by “Taft,” “T,” and “Ezra,” following his calling Benson began going by his full name. He explained that George Albert Smith, president of the Quorum of the Twelve, advised him: “Now, Brother Benson, in order that we not get you and your great-grandfather mixed up in Church records, we suggest in view of the fact that he always signed his name ‘Ezra T.’ that you spell yours out fully, ‘Ezra Taft.’” Benson then states, “So I’ve made that a practice because of the counsel of George Albert Smith, who was my file leader as president of the Twelve.” Benson, Oral History Interview, 3.

34. LeGrand Richards served as Presiding Bishop of the LDS Church from April 6, 1938, until his ordination as an apostle on April 10, 1952.