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Fourth Principle: Sometimes Prophets Must Make Their Own Decisions

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FOURTH PRINCIPLE: SOMETIMES PROPHETS MUST MAKE THEIR OWN DECISIONS

JOSEPH FINDS EMMA

Moroni told Joseph that he could not embark on this great adventure alone—that when he came to receive the plates from the angel, he must bring someone with him.

“Who?” Joseph asked.

“Alvin, your oldest brother.”

Alvin had been a strength to the young prophet from the first. If there was anyone in this world Joseph could trust it was Alvin. Notwithstanding that trust, Joseph could not tell anyone everything.

The things Joseph knew must have imposed a dreadful loneliness upon the young man. He needed someone who could believe what he said and not demand that he say too much—someone who would accept and love him as a person and not expect that he always act the part of the Elijah-bringing-down-the-fire prophet and sage. There were many things Joseph could not tell; it was as though he were required to walk alone. Moroni had been alone, and he apparently understood how important it was that Joseph have someone who would walk beside him—even in his aloneness. It must have been a great comfort for Joseph to

know there would be someone else he could depend on and trust and that the angel would approve of such a relationship.

But Alvin died on November 19, 1823⁵⁹ (two months after Joseph's first visit to the Hill Cumorah). His death left a dreadful void in Joseph's life. When Joseph climbed the hill to see Moroni he really was alone, and the angel would not let him have the plates. Joseph Knight, one of the young prophet's most trusted friends, tells the story:

[When Alvin died, Joseph] did not know what to do. But when the 22nd day of September came, he went to the place [where the book was buried] and the personage appeared and told him he could not have it now. But the 22nd day of September next he might have the Book if he brought with him the right person.⁶⁰

Joseph was a young man and it would soon be time for him to find a wife. She must be worthy and willing to come with him to the hill when he received the plates. She must be as noble as he; and it was necessary that he find her and marry her before, not after, he was entrusted with the plates.

Joseph asked the angel, "Who is the right person?"

Moroni replied, "You will know."⁶¹

A PROPHET IS NOT A PUPPET

When one sees the years in which Joseph tried to receive the plates as a single experience, one discovers the formula that may be called "How a boy may become a prophet"—not

“How to become President of the Church,” because that is a unique kind of prophet; but how to become a prophet in one’s own life—to ourselves, our families, and in whatever else the Lord asks us to do.

Joseph had learned the first three principles—and they are much simpler to say than to do.

First, learn to tell the difference between the feeling that comes with the Holy Ghost and the temptations from the devil.

Second, learn to tell the difference between the prompting of the Holy Ghost and one’s own desires, whether they come in the form of emotions, enthusiasm, fear, wanting to go with the crowd, or even sometimes one’s sense of what is okay. That second principle is more difficult than the first, because it seems to strike at the very essence of one’s Self. But if one can learn to do that, then one becomes free to follow the Spirit.

Third, in Moroni’s words to Joseph, “You will know,” God expects one to make intelligent, well informed decisions. If those decisions are incorrect, then the Holy Ghost will sound a warning, but prophets do not just sit and do nothing until they get instructions.⁶² The whole purpose of the first two rules is to teach one correct principles so one can make intelligent decisions until one’s own sense of right and wrong is consistent with what God understands is good and bad. Moroni taught Joseph to be a prophet, not a puppet. A prophet and a puppet are not the same thing. When our sense of right and wrong is correct and imbedded into our personality, the consequence is happiness and security in our

relationship with God. A major purpose of the Holy Ghost is to facilitate an understanding of one's Self by one's Self, so that within the full scope of one's own strengths, one can make and act on correct decisions—knowing always, that the Holy Ghost will sound a warning if the decisions are not correct.

When Joseph began to look for a wife, he had a great advantage. If Joseph Knight is correct in his account, the young prophet looked into the “his glass”⁶³ to find out where to find Emma. That he selected his wife-to-be that way is evidence that he trusted the Lord. That he loved her and she him is evidence that the Lord loved and understood them both.

JOSEPH'S FINAL PREPARATIONS TO RECEIVE THE PLATES

After the first two visits to Cumorah when Joseph tried to obtain the sacred record, he tells us there were two more: the third was in September 1825 and the fourth was in 1826. There is not much written about these visits. However, Joseph's sister Katherine,

I well remember the trials my brother had, before he obtained the records. After he had the vision [Moroni's visit], he went frequently to the hill, and upon returning he would tell us, 'I have seen the records, also the brass

plates and the sword of Laban with the breast plate and the interpreters.’⁶⁴

On January 18, 1827, Joseph married Emma Hale and brought her to Palmyra to live in his parents’ home. Moroni, like a good friend, had apparently kept out of the way while Joseph and Emma were falling in love and beginning their life together. But, also like a good friend, he understood what to do when the time came to bring Joseph’s attention back to his mission. The angel chose to do that on an evening when Joseph was alone, walking along the quiet country road near the Hill Cumorah.

One morning in 1827, Joseph had set off early that morning to do an errand for his father and was returning about suppertime. As he passed the hill where the plates were buried, the angel was waiting for him. They talked together for about three hours that night. Moroni chastened Joseph because he “had not been engaged enough in the work of the Lord.” Joseph said Moroni told him that “the time had come for the record to be brought forth; and that I must be up and doing and set myself about the things which God had commanded me to do.”⁶⁵ Moroni also told Joseph that “he should make another effort to obtain the plates, on the twenty-second of the following September.”⁶⁶

What else was said during those three hours Joseph does not say, but that conversation made a deep impression on the young prophet. He described it to his parents as “the severest chastisement that I have ever had in my life.” Yet in that same conversation he confidently reassured his father, “Give

yourself no uneasiness concerning the reprimand which I have received, for I now know the course that I am to pursue, so all will be well.”⁶⁷ Those words (as his mother records them) are a key to young Joseph’s personality. Now that he knew what to do, he would do it; since he would do it, all would be well. One sees great strength hidden amid the unpretentious strains of that declaration, for, indeed, that is the ultimate declaration of one’s own independence. For this young prophet “knowing what to do” and “all will be well” were equivalents.

After that long visit with Moroni, Joseph resolved to “be up and doing.” Oliver Cowdery reported:

From this time forward he continued to receive instructions concerning the coming forth of the fulness of the gospel, from the mouth of the heavenly messenger, until he was directed to visit again the place where the record was deposited.⁶⁸

As before, there was a condition—the one Moroni had written in the book itself.⁶⁹ Joseph must not show the plates to anyone until the translation was completed and Joseph was ready to return them to the angel’s custody. When that time came, Moroni promised, Joseph would be permitted to show the plates to a few people whom the Lord should designate. Joseph promised. This time, notwithstanding being subjected to a great deal of pressure to break that promise, Joseph obeyed. He showed the plates to no one until Moroni instructed him to do so.

That was only a slight variation on the first principle Joseph learned—that one does not speak too openly about sacred things.

JOSEPH RECEIVES THE PLATES

Shortly after midnight on September 22, 1827, Joseph and Emma Smith left his parents' farm and rode together to the foot of the Hill Cumorah. Emma waited by the carriage while Joseph climbed the hill alone.⁷⁰ When Joseph neared the top, Moroni met him and entrusted the golden manuscript of the Book of Mormon, the Urim and Thummim and the Breastplate to his keeping. As Joseph accepted these, Moroni cautioned him again. A paraphrase of that caution, deliciously spiced by the accent and idioms of his mother's own rural New England culture, is given in Lucy Mack Smith's History:

Now you have got the Record into your own hands, and you are but a man, therefore you will have to be watchful and faithful to your trust, or you will be overpowered by wicked men; for they will lay every plan and scheme that is possible to get it away from you, and if you do not take heed continually, they will succeed. While it was in my hands, I could keep it, and no man had power to take it away! But now I give it up to you. Beware, and look well to your ways, and you shall have power to retain it, until the time for it to be translated.⁷¹

Joseph recorded a promise from Moroni: “If I would use all my endeavors to preserve them, until he, the messenger, should call for them, they should be protected.”⁷² Joseph knew he would receive whatever help he needed.

Joseph took the plates and carried them down the hill until he came to a large birch tree, dead and fallen to the ground. He carefully cut the bark of the tree, turned it back, and made a hole in the decayed wood. After hiding the plates inside, he replaced the bark and camouflaged his activity by covering that part of the log with whatever lay nearby. Then, without the plates, he returned to the carriage where Emma was waiting. It was early morning before they arrived at the Smith home again.⁷³

Joseph’s mother had not been able to sleep that night. Before she went to bed, Joseph and Emma had already left the house together, and Mother Smith knew where they were going. Years later, when she wrote her *History* and recorded these events, she vividly recalled her anxiety. For three successive years she had watched Joseph’s disappointment in not obtaining the plates, and she felt she could not bear to see him disappointed again. She “spent the night in prayer and supplication to God.”⁷⁴

Joseph and Emma were gone longer than she expected. When they did return his mother saw that Joseph did not have the plates, and her anxiety got the better of her. She “trembled so with fear” that he might have been disappointed again that she felt compelled to leave the room so he would not notice how upset she was. But he did notice. He followed her into the kitchen and said, “Do not be

uneasy, mother, all is right—see here, I have got a key.” He then handed her the Urim and Thummim. She recounted, “I knew not what he meant, but took the article of which he spoke in my hands and examined it. He took it again and left me, but said nothing respecting the Record.”⁷⁵

The Urim and Thummim were Joseph’s communications system with the heavens. His mother records that he kept it always about his person.⁷⁶ He used it, not only as a learning tool, but also as a kind of alarm apparatus. With its help he “could ascertain, at any time, the approach of danger, either to himself or to the Record.”⁷⁷

Joseph’s not-so-friendly neighbors were very aware that he had been trying to get this golden book. Hunting buried treasure was a popular pastime in New England in the early 1800s, and some of his neighbors were determined to get a share of the treasure as soon as Joseph found it. It is not surprising that Moroni was concerned and that Joseph had learned to be very cautious.

As soon as he was able, he removed the plates from the hollowed-out log and locked them in a box that he buried under a loose stone in front of the fireplace.⁷⁸ However, that hiding place was not secure for long. Joseph’s enemies attached themselves to a Miss Chase, who had a “green glass through which...she could discover the precise place where the plates were hidden.”⁷⁹ Several times Joseph moved the plates just before she and her followers arrived to search, but each of those times, only the previous hiding place was discovered and the plates remained safe.⁸⁰

JOSEPH AND EMMA MOVE TO HARMONY, PENNSYLVANIA

While he was under the constant pressure of trying to keep the plates from being stolen, it was impossible for Joseph to bring them out long enough to work on their translation. Consequently, he and Emma decided they would take the plates and move to Harmony, Pennsylvania, where Emma's parents lived.

That decision created a new problem for the Prophet. Those same people who were trying to steal them from his home would probably stop him and search his wagon. He had to find a way of transporting the plates on the wagon without making them vulnerable during such a search. He and Emma were taking a barrel of beans with them to Pennsylvania, and Joseph created a secret compartment by making a false bottom in the bean barrel. He hid the plates in the space between the two bottoms of the barrel and then filled the rest of the barrel with beans.

His precautions were justified. They had gone only a short distance when a determined band of ruffians caught them and searched the wagon. After what must have seemed to Joseph and Emma to be a very long time, the men left without discovering the secret compartment. The plates remained safe,⁸¹ but that does not suggest they overlooked the bean barrel. The simplest way to search it, without emptying out all the beans, would have been to move a sword blade back and forth through the beans to feel if the sword struck anything hard. If that was the way they

examined the barrel, the would-be thieves did not notice that the distance from the top to the bottom of the barrel was shorter on the inside than the distance from the top to the bottom on the outside. They assumed the barrel contained only beans.

When Joseph and Emma arrived at Emma's parent's home, Joseph removed the plates from the bottom of the barrel and took them into the house. Later, after they were settled into their own home, Joseph kept the plates wrapped in a muslin cloth, sitting on the bureau. Emma frequently moved them to dust, but she never removed the cloth to see the plates—a fact which says a great deal about Emma's personality, and integrity—and which in turn says a great deal about why Joseph loved her and why she had been chosen to be his wife.