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Joseph Smith's First Vision and Scripture Promises

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Sacred Grove, and lane from the barn, showing grove in the distance; also the creek where some of the early baptisms were performed, Palmyra, New York.

Joseph Smith's First Vision and Scripture Promises

By President Anthon H. Lund

This Spring it will be one hundred years since an event happened which was epoch-making in the faith of many thousands of people. This event took place in the Spring of 1820. A young boy, but little past fourteen years of age, was deeply concerned in regard to choosing the right church that taught the true principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This anxiety was caused by the great excitement that existed at that time in his neighborhood concerning religion. Each of the different denominations was claiming that its mode of worship was the only correct one, and that its members had the true gospel. As the teachings of each one of the sects were far from being in harmony with those of the others—in fact, contrary to them—the young boy was bewildered. He thought there could be only one accepted of God. This belief of his was confirmed by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians (4:4-6), in which he says: “There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God, and Father of all, who is above all, and

through all, and in you all." Instead of unity the boy found diversity, contention, and confusion.

The important question to him was, Which sect has the true Gospel? He was a firm believer in the Bible, and he sought in this divine storehouse of truth, to find a solution. He read what James writes in the first chapter and fifth verse of his letter: "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him." The young man felt that he was greatly in need of wisdom, and that in this passage a disciple of Christ had given him a key to obtain the knowledge for which he hungered. He had full faith in the words of the inspired writer, and concluded to follow his instruction.

A short distance west of his father's house there is a small grove, which, from that which occurred there, has been called the Sacred Grove. We do not know the exact date, when the future prophet offered the prayer that opened the heavens, which had for so long a time seemed to be of brass; but he says it was in the Spring. He was seeking solitude, and as he had not prayed before, using his own words, he was, no doubt, shy to let any one know what he intended to do, or to see him kneeling, and the solitude he sought would not be obtained while the trees were bare; so, I would judge that the trees were clothed in their fresh, verdant attire; hence, some time in late April.

Elder Willard Bean, who has charge of the Smith farm, says that much snow falls in that part of New York state, and Winter is slow in yielding its grasp to Spring's warming and reviving influence.

It was about Christmas time, in company with President Joseph F. Smith and members of the party that went with him to the dedication of the Monument erected in memory of the Prophet Joseph Smith at his birthplace in Sharon, Vermont, that we visited the home of the Prophet's father. It was with feelings of reverence and almost awe that I entered the bedroom of the Prophet, for here he had communed with heavenly beings and received teachings to prepare him for the great work that he was destined to accomplish. After we had viewed the different rooms in the house where Joseph Smith had spent the years of his youth, the company crossed the road and took a path to the west. We crossed a rill, or brooklet, said to have been the place where a number of the early members of the Church had been baptized. A short distance from there we reached the Grove where the young boy offered his first prayer and received the glorious Vision which we look upon today as the beginning of the Dispensation of the Fulness

of Times. We selected a spot which we thought would be the most likely place for the purpose for which we had come. If not on the very spot, we knew it must be close to it, where Joseph had attempted to pray, but had been subjected to the power of the adversary, but then the Father and the Son appeared to him, and he received an answer to his question. We felt that we were standing on hallowed ground. All present joined in singing, "Joseph Smith's First Prayer." A heavenly peace pervaded our hearts; and, with grateful emotions, we offered thanks to our heavenly Father for the mission filled by our martyred prophet, and for the testimony we had received of his divine calling through the Holy Spirit.

We will quote the Prophet's own description of what was in reality the beginning of this marvelous work which the Lord said he was about to bring forth:

After I had retired to the place I had previously designed to go, having looked around me, and finding myself alone, I kneeled down and began to offer up the desires of my heart to God. I had scarcely done so, when immediately I was seized upon by some power which entirely overcame me, and had such an astonishing influence over me as to bind my tongue so that I could not speak. Thick darkness gathered around me, and it seemed to me, for a time, as if I were doomed to sudden destruction.

But, exerting all my power to call upon God to deliver me out of the power of this enemy which had seized upon me, and at the very moment when I was ready to sink in despair and abandon myself to destruction—not to an imaginary ruin, but to the power of some actual being from the unseen world, who had such marvelous power, as I have never before felt in any being—just at this moment of great alarm, I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me.

It no sooner appeared than I found myself delivered from the enemy, which held me bound. When the light rested upon me, I saw two personages whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spoke to me, calling me by name, and said, pointing to the other—"This is my beloved Son, hear him."

As soon as Joseph got possession of himself he asked the personages who stood above him in the light, which of all the sects was right and which he should join. He was answered that he must join none of them, for they were all wrong, and the personage who addressed him said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight: that those professors were all corrupt; that "they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; they teach for doctrine the commandments of men; having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof." He again forbade Joseph to join with any of them, and many other things did he say unto him that he could not write at that time.

When Joseph came to himself he found himself lying upon his back looking up into heaven. When the light departed he

had no strength, but soon recovered so that he could walk home. As he leaned up to the fireplace his mother asked him what was the matter with him. He answered: "Never mind, all is well—I am well enough off." He then said to his mother: "I have learned for myself that Presbyterianism is not true."

No doubt the adversary of mankind did not desire that this young person should learn the pitiful conditions of the world in regard to the true knowledge of God, and, therefore, did all to crush him, but help was near, and the enemy fled.

While he was under the adversary's influence, he said that thick darkness gathered around him. Abraham had a similar experience. On the same day, just before the Lord promised Abram that he and his seed should possess the land of Canaan, a deep sleep fell upon him, and "lo, an horror of darkness fell upon Abram." Great, however, was his joy when the Lord unfolded to him the great destiny awaiting his descendants.

When an angel was sent to the Prophet Daniel to inform him of coming events in the history of the world, the Prince of Persia, or the Prince of the air, had power to hold back the heavenly messenger twenty-one days until Michael came to his aid. These instances of the manifestations of the power of the adversary of man corroborate the experience of the young boy, and put the stamp of truthfulness on his words.

Hearing the precious words: "*This is my beloved Son, hear him,*" made plain to young Joseph that the Speaker was God, our heavenly Father; and that the other personage was Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The same testimony that Jesus was the Son of God was heard on the banks of the River Jordan, when Jesus was baptized by John, as he was coming up out of the water. It was heard when Jesus took Peter, James and John up on the mountain of the Transfiguration and was visited by Moses and Elias. A bright cloud overshadowed them and a noise out of the cloud said: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." It was also heard at Zarahemla in the Land Bountiful when Jesus appeared to the people on the American continent.

That which Joseph Smith saw and heard in his first Vision is contrary to the belief of the Christian world; and that which seems to us to be of the greatest importance is wholly denied by professors of religion. We will examine these points and compare them with what the Scriptures teach. To make them clear to our minds, we will limit them to three propositions, or questions:

I. Has God a body, parts, and passions, and was man created in his image?

II. Has there been a general apostasy, and have professors of religion taught for doctrines commandments of men?

III. Is belief in new revelation false?

I. That God has neither body, parts, nor passions is the general belief of the Christian world; but it seems to us that the Bible is very clear to the contrary in its statements concerning God, for it teaches that man was created in his likeness. "And God said let us make man in our image, after our likeness." "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them." The young boy Joseph saw that man was indeed created in the image and likeness of God, and that the doctrine denying this was a doctrine devised by man.

John, the beloved apostle of the Savior, declares, "And this is life eternal that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent." This shows us how important it is to have the true knowledge of God, as it involves the question of eternal life.

Paul writes in the first chapter of his letter to the Hebrews, speaking of the Son, "Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high." Here we learn that Jesus was the express image of the person of God, and sat down at the right hand of Majesty. God spake to Moses face to face. The Lord said: "With him [Moses] will I speak mouth to mouth, even apparently, and not in dark speeches; and the similitude of the Lord shall he behold." With his hand he shaded his glory in passing by Moses, and then allowed Moses to see his back parts.

The above shows that Jesus was the express image of the person of the Father, and that he had parts. As to passions, we read that God is a jealous God; that his anger was hot against Israel; that he is a merciful God; that he "so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16.) David, speaking of the character of God, says: "The foolish shall not stand in thy sight: thou hatest all workers of iniquity."

II. The Personage who spoke to Joseph told him not to join any of the sects; for they were all wrong.

From this we infer that the true gospel was not on the earth. Did the ancient prophets and apostles look forward to a time when there should come a general apostasy of the

Church? I will allude to some passages that indicate that the prophetic writers foresaw that such a condition would exist. In Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians, second chapter and first verse, he writes: "Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him, that ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand. Let no man deceive you by any means; for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshiped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God." We read in Amos 8:11: "Behold the days come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord; and they shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east, they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord and shall not find it." I will quote two more passages bearing upon this subject. Rev. 13:7: "And it was given unto him [the dragon] to make war with the saints, and to overcome them: and power was given him over all kindreds, and tongues, and nations." This includes all the inhabitants of the earth, and is, indeed, a sad statement of what John saw should come to pass. In the next chapter, however, he conveys a glad message. Rev. 14:6: "And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell upon the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people." This shows that the proclamation was to be universal—none to be exempt, for all were without the everlasting gospel.

That this preaching was not referring to the preaching of the apostles formerly is made clear in the next verse: "Saying with a loud voice, Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come; and worship him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters." The angel was to come before the last judgment.

No wonder that the testimony of young Joseph stirred up the professors of religion against Joseph, but he dared not deny or smooth down that which he had heard.

Even history bears out the truth of universal apostasy. The historian Hegesippus, who flourished "nearest the days of the Apostles," is quoted by Eusebius as saying in regard to the times of the first century after Christ and the beginning of the second century: "The Church continued until then as a pure and uncorrupt virgin; whilst if there were any at all that attempted to pervert the sound doctrine of the saving gospel, they were



THE HILL CUMORAH
A painting in the Salt Lake Temple from sketches taken on the spot by Alfred Lambourne

yet skulking in dark retreats; but when the sacred choir of the Apostles became extinct, and the generations of those that had been privileged to hear their inspired wisdom had passed away, then also the combinations of impious error arose by the fraud and delusions of false teachers. These also, as there were none of the Apostles left, henceforth attempted without shame to preach their false doctrines against the gospel of truth."

Mosheim tells us that both Jews and heathens were accustomed to a vast variety of pompous and magnificent rites and ceremonies in their religious service. And, as they considered these rites as essential parts of religion, they looked with contempt on the simplicity of the Christian worship. To meet this objection the Bishops thought it was necessary to introduce more rites and ceremonies, and they did so.

It is easy to see that the man-made ceremonies and rites would be taken to be as essential as those belonging to the Gospel, and when these latter were also changed then indeed the prophet's word came true: "The earth is defiled under the inhabitants thereof, because they have transgressed the laws, changed the ordinance, broken the everlasting covenant."

The Church of England frankly avers the fact of the apostasy, as set forth in the homily against the "Peril of Idolatry," first published about the middle of the sixteenth century: "So that the laity and the clergy, learned and unlearned, all ages, sects, and degrees of men, women and children, of whole Christendom—a horrible and most dreadful thing to think—have been at once drowned in abominable idolatry; of all other vices most detested of God, and most damnable to man, and that by the space of 800 years and more."

III. Is belief in new revelation false? That God will not reveal himself in our age is generally held by the religious denominations. Joseph, the young boy, having implicit faith in the word of God, proved the words of James were true. His prayer was heard; the Father and the Son appeared unto him. He saw them descending from heaven. They instructed him not to join any of the sects, because they were all wrong. He was astonished to find that when he told what he had seen and heard he was persecuted. He says: "Why persecute me for telling the truth? I have actually seen a vision, and who am I that I can withstand God, or does the world think to make me deny what I have actually seen? For I had seen a vision; I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it, neither dared I do it, at least I knew that by so doing I would offend God, and come under condemnation."

After this first vision he received many other revelations for

the guidance of the Church. He was informed that this is the "dispensation of the fulness of times." As all other dispensations had been introduced by revelation from God, so also this was ushered in by heavenly beings revealing the mind and will of God to men. On the fifteenth of May, 1829, John the Baptist appeared to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery and ordained them to the Aaronic Priesthood which held the authority to baptize for the remission of sins. A short time thereafter Peter, James, and John appeared to them and ordained them to the Melchizedek Priesthood, which gave them authority to officiate in all the ordinances of the Gospel. On the sixteenth of February, 1832, Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon received that glorious revelation called The Vision. They say: "And now after the many testimonies which have been given of him, this is the testimony last of all, which we give of him, that he lives; for we saw him, even on the right hand of God, and we heard the voice bearing record that he is the Only Begotten of the Father."

I was trained in a Lutheran school. We had to repeat passages from Bishop Ballo's *Commentary* for school use after having committed them to memory. We learned much that was very good, but also some doctrines that I could not accept. I remember one passage, which, I know, was contrary to the testimony of Joseph Smith. I will quote it from memory: "If any one should say he had received new, divine revelation, we must not put any faith in such a declaration; for God has nowhere promised to give any more revelation for the enlightenment of man." To prove this he referred to Gal. 1:8-9. I opened my Bible and read: "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed." I saw that the learned bishop had not proved his contention. Paul had been converted by revelation. He told of the wonderful revelations he had received, and if Paul had meant what Bishop Ballo tries to prove, namely, that no more revelations should be given, what about the Revelation by John written years afterwards? I read that Elijah would come before the coming of the great and dreadful day, also that John saw an angel flying in the midst of heaven with an important message to all people.

In studying the first vision of Joseph and what he saw and heard, the Scriptures, history, and the fulfilment of the words of revelations received afterwards, all bear witness to the truthfulness of the young man and of the truths he enunciated.