

"I Knew It, and I Knew That God Knew It"

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Perhaps no event in the history of the world, since the Savior's Atonement and Resurrection, has been more important than the experience of young Joseph Smith on that early spring day of 1820. While retiring to the woods in full faith and trust that his prayer would be answered, little did he expect or anticipate what transpired.

My words cannot do justice to the occasion. Joseph's own account (see Joseph Smith--History 1:11-26) provides the critical details with which we are familiar but also should review regularly.

At a very young age, he became aware of the religious excitement in his area. He listened to various preachers and identified their differences and his resultant confusion. While troubled by these issues, he read the scriptural counsel from the book of James (see James 1:5) and concluded that he indeed lacked wisdom. He, therefore, resolved to ask God for clarification, because he had faith that his prayer would be answered. He went to a beautiful, secluded spot where he could pour out his concerns and questions and plead for guidance.

Following a powerful struggle with the adversary, he witnessed the bright pillar of light, brighter than he could imagine, fall upon him, and within this magnificent light, he saw the Father, who called Joseph by name and introduced His Son, who instructed the boy with love and clarity. We know some, but not all, that young Joseph was told and taught that fateful day.

Likewise, we know the later response the lad received from other people. As he expected, his family believed his experience. What surprised him greatly was the reaction of others, particularly the ministers of religion. He had assumed that they would be as thrilled as was he with his remarkable interview with Deity. Their rejection and ridicule were a matter of great disappointment, confusion, and distress for this humble, but honest, youngster, who was only seeking a modest answer to what seemed to him to be a straightforward question.

Joseph's reflections caused him to consider the experiences of the Apostle Paul, who suffered similar persecution for his testimony of the events that occurred so long ago on

the road to Damascus. He took great consolation and courage from Paul's steadfastness. In speaking of Paul's trials, Joseph reported the following:

"So it was with me. I had actually seen a light, and in the midst of that light I saw two Personages, and they did in reality speak to me; and though I was hated and persecuted for saying that I had seen a vision, yet it was true; and while they were persecuting me, reviling me, and speaking all manner of evil against me falsely for so saying, I was led to say in my heart: Why persecute me for telling the truth? I have actually seen a vision; and who am I that I can withstand God, or why 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" (Joseph Smith--History 1:25).

Whatever one might think of Joseph Smith, one cannot be unclear as to what he experienced or what he felt about it. Indeed, his testimony and convictions remained not only consistent but unshaken for the remainder of his tumultuous mortal days.

Our assignment today is to consider together what it is that we might ourselves do to develop testimonies similar in strength and power to the witness of Joseph Smith.

It is not likely that any of us will ever duplicate the experience of Joseph. It is not necessary, and it is not possible. We can, however, develop testimonies that will sustain us in our own lives and seasons sufficient to allow us to return with honor to our Heavenly Father and the Savior, as Joseph Smith did. Let me approach our task by asking four basic questions that will help unlock the doors of understanding essential to our being able to know as Joseph knew.

First, what is it that Joseph knew?

Second, how did Joseph know?

Third, how can we know?

And fourth, what are the implications for us when we do know?

First, what is it that Joseph knew?

Before going to the grove, the young boy had a strong faith in the reality of God and in the power and applicability of the holy scriptures and their counsel and promises. Without this fundamental and foundational faith, both inborn and gained from his parents, it is highly unlikely that this very young man would have presented himself and his question that was so wonderfully and unexpectedly answered in the way he reported it to occur.

From this experience, Joseph Smith learned some vital, essential truths that, at best, he had only hoped for with his limited perspective and experiences. He learned that he in reality had a vision. It was not a dream nor an imaginary thought nor some unexplained release of uncoordinated neurological impulses. He had a vision!

Through this vision he learned that God the Father lives, has a body of flesh and bones, is able and willing to speak to His children, and loves His Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Joseph learned that the Savior also lives, with His wonderfully resurrected body, and acts under the direction of His Father. He learned that both the Father and the Son knew him intimately and were anxious to teach, counsel, and direct him.

Joseph learned that prayers are answered and, as in this experience, often directly and clearly. In addition, he learned that sometimes vital answers are given even when we don't know how to ask the proper question! Specifically, he learned that he was not to join any of the churches that he had been considering.

How did Joseph know?

On this occasion, the occasion of the First Vision, Joseph absolutely knew what he had seen, heard, and felt. It was real, and he knew that it was real. This sacred interview was so tangible, so impressive, so life-altering that Joseph Smith was never again the same, in spite of the tremendous challenges and difficulties that haunted him throughout his life. I am sure that many times he rehearsed the dilemma that I have shared from his own account, but his conclusion was always the same. He knew that he had experienced this vision.

It is appropriate to recall the importance of his preparation for what transpired in the Sacred Grove. It is clear by Joseph's own admission that he had no real idea of why he was preparing and being prepared as he was. He had faith. He not only searched the scriptures for answers but "liken[ed]" them unto himself long before he was aware of Nephi's counsel on this matter (see 1 Nephi 19:23). To understand better the intentions of God for the course of his life, Joseph was absolutely committed to following the direction or understanding that came from his faith and exercise of effort.

Moreover, although difficult, it was sustaining for Joseph to know that "God had a work for [him] to do" (Joseph Smith--History 1:33). Understanding that there is a plan, both "macro" for everyone and "micro" for each of us, gave Joseph Smith the continual confirmation that his course and responsibilities were real and approved of God.

How can we know?

We can obtain a testimony of surety in basically the same way that Joseph did. The basic pattern is conscientious study, deep and consistent thought, and specific, faith-sustained prayer--prayer that includes appropriate preparation, careful asking, and, particularly, concentrated listening with a firm commitment to act on the answer. At that early time, Joseph did not have the advantage of the correcting counsel given to Oliver Cowdery but obviously intended for all of us:

"Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me.

"But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right.

"But if it be not right you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought that shall cause you to forget the thing which is wrong" (D&C 9:7-9).

It would yet be several years after the First Vision that Joseph would translate the helpful instruction and promise of Moroni with respect to how we might really know the truthfulness of these things for ourselves:

"And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.

"And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things" (Moroni 10:4-5).

Listen to these words and promise of the Savior: "If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself" (John 7:17).

It is very clear that we can surely know. The patterns are not ambiguous, but they require real work, real intent, real faith, real effort, and real commitment. Too often, when a desired answer seems to elude us, we may be looking in error to heaven with a questioning eye rather than looking directly into the mirror.

President David O. McKay was the Lord's prophet of my youth. Our family had a special interest in him because my maternal grandfather had served as a missionary in Scotland with Elder McKay. Thus, I have always been impacted by his example and his teachings. Let me share some of his observations and experiences that are germane to the question of how it is we can know.

Said President McKay: "If you ask me where I first received my unwavering faith in the existence of a God, I would answer you: in the home of my childhood--when Father and Mother invariably called their children around them in the morning and at night and invoked God's blessings upon the household and upon mankind. There was a sincerity in that good patriarch's voice that left an undying impression in the souls of his children, and Mother's prayers were equally impressive. . . . Before I heard my father testify that he had heard a divine voice, I knew that he lived near to his Maker. I also know," said President McKay, "through a nearness to that same Eternal Father since, that my father told the truth when he said that when he was on his mission in Scotland, in answer to fervent prayer, he received the following admonition given in audible tones: 'Testify that Joseph Smith is a prophet of the living God' " (David O. McKay, in Conference Report, April 1966, 107).

What are the implications for us when we know?

This is an important query for each of us to make individually and seriously. Most of us are familiar with the initial phrase of the third verse of section 82 of the Doctrine and Covenants but may not pay as much attention to the entire verse. Let me share it for our consideration: "For of him unto whom much is given much is required; and he who sins against the greater light shall receive the greater condemnation."

It is important for us to realize that God does not bequeath His gifts to His children capriciously. While we don't know all of the reasons that each of us has the gifts that we do, we are assured that "they are given for the benefit of those who love [God] and keep [His] commandments, and [those] that seeketh so to do" (D&C 46:9). We also need to remember that with gifts, blessings, and understanding come burdens.

We know, for example, that those who die without the "law," meaning an understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ and access to the saving ordinances (see Moroni 8:22), are eligible for the celestial kingdom. Those of us who have had the opportunity to understand and enjoy the blessings of the gospel are held to a higher standard. This is true with respect to the essential ordinances and also true concerning our conduct.

While we may be able to fool others and even ourselves on occasion, we must remember that as with the Prophet Joseph Smith, God knows each of us intimately and by name. He also knows that we have had the opportunity to know and understand these things as well. One might ask, given these considerations, wouldn't I have been better off never to have been exposed to the gospel in the first place?

If that thought occurs, then be very careful, because this may have been the exact question and conclusion of the third part of the hosts of heaven. They chose to follow Lucifer rather than accept the modest burdens--but incomparable blessings--attendant to the Father's plan that the Savior volunteered to implement (see D&C 29:36). Even for those unfortunate, lost souls, they retained their gift of agency but also the results of the poor choice that they had made. Likewise, we are responsible for our choices and inevitably live with the implications and consequences of our decisions, both good and poor.

For every challenge, problem, difficulty, or disappointment we might be called upon to endure, the evidence is clear that Heavenly Father intends for us to be not only justly recompensed but ultimately, if we do our part, to be the beneficiaries and recipients of all that the Father has (see D&C 84:38). Thus, the bounty of our gifts--our testimonies being among the chief of them--makes the ultimate choice very easy when properly considered, even when the actual implementation of what we know we need to do remains so difficult and taxing.

Just as was the case with the Prophet Joseph, we also need to know that God has important work for each of us to do. Some of that work will be specific and unique to us individually, and some will be expected of everyone. In both cases, our response needs to be as was the case with the Apostle Peter in his answer to the request of the lame beggar: "Such as I have give I thee" (Acts 3:6).

Rather than attempt to anticipate or address what specific individual expectations the Lord may require of any of us, let me attempt, in the time remaining, to focus on some responsibilities of a more general nature. Even with these, specific or customized dimensions will make each of our circumstances unique, although the principles of the general case apply.

First, with respect to those of us blessed to have solid testimonies, think of this observation made by the Lord: "It becometh every man [and woman] who hath been warned to warn his [or her] neighbor" (D&C 88:81). Obviously, missionary work is part

of our responsibility. While all of us should consider how we might prepare and qualify for full-time missionary work, some of us may not have the blessing of a specific call from the prophet to serve a full-time mission. Nevertheless, the scripture reminds us that each of us, whatever our station or circumstances, is under an obligation to share the gospel with our families, friends, and neighbors. The warning we give is not necessarily confrontational or adversarial. Indeed, that should be the exception if it ever needs to occur at all. The warning is really given, almost always, in the context of sharing our testimonies and the fruits of living the gospel of Jesus Christ. How and when we do so is largely up to us, but the mandate and the expectation are clear.

Second, we are required to share the gospel and what we know with our own families. This is true when we are members of a large family, but it is also true when we, as individuals, are the only members of our family or we are a family of one.

How do we share the gospel with ourselves if this is the case? Well, we study and ponder the scriptures. We get up and go to church on Sunday, even when we may not feel like it or are even sure that we won't be missed if we are absent. We qualify for and attend the temple to the degree that we are able, and we also help our friends and neighbors in their responsibilities to share the gospel with their own families.

Let me remind you of the corrective direction given to the prophet Joseph by the Lord. Remember, it was not a lack of testimony on Joseph's part that may have led to his distraction from this most fundamental responsibility.

"And now, verily I say unto [you,] Joseph Smith, Jun.--You have not kept the commandments, and must needs stand rebuked before the Lord;

"Your family must needs repent and forsake some things, and give more earnest heed unto your sayings, or be removed out of their place" (D&C 93:47-48).

This is sobering counsel to anyone and especially to a prophet, I must imagine! What a testimony, by the way, that Joseph really was a prophet when he had both the integrity and confidence to allow such a personal rebuke to be shared so widely. I confess that while I have not done nearly as much as I should or nearly enough in any of the important measures, this pointed counsel has been a great motivator to me as a husband, father, and grandfather.

As the years have passed and my own circumstances have changed, the Book of Mormon has taken on added significance for me. It is a model--even a manual, if you will--on how testimony-blessed parents and grandparents can fulfill their responsibilities to their families with respect to sharing and shaping the testimonies. Think of these great examples and their results.

"I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents, therefore I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father; and having seen many afflictions in the course of my days, nevertheless, having been highly favored of the Lord in all of my days . . ." (1 Nephi 1:1).

I submit that Nephi, like other prophets and his brothers Sam and Jacob, was the product of good parenting. Likewise, you good parents, it is important to know that Lamans and

Lemuels are sometimes found in even the best of families. Lehi and Sariah did their best and left the rest in the hands of the Lord.

Another example: "I, Enos, knowing my father that he was a just man--for he taught me in his language, and also in the nurture and admonition of the Lord . . ." (Enos 1:1).

Time does not permit sharing the accounts of the efforts made by Alma with Alma the Younger or King Mosiah with his children or Helaman teaching his sons or Mormon and his tutorials with Moroni. Clearly, these great prophet leaders who really knew, as Joseph Smith in our dispensation knew, also understood the necessity of working vigorously and proactively in teaching and sharing the gospel with their families. Please indulge me as I share one last example in this regard.

Mormon, the great abridger and editor of the Book of Mormon, lamented in several places that he could not include even the "hundredth part" of what was available and worth sharing (Jacob 3:13; Words of Mormon 1:5; Helaman 3:14; 3 Nephi 5:8; 26:6; Ether 15:33). Thus, we are on safe ground to conclude that what he did include he thought to be of great importance and the result of inspiration from the Lord. Let me now share with you a favorite Book of Mormon teaching experience.

Before King Benjamin gave his great address to all of his people, he gave a short, carefully crafted message to a smaller audience--his three sons. I invite you to study carefully the first several verses of Mosiah chapter 1, where you have both the words of King Benjamin and some telling editorial comments by Mormon. Let me share some of the significant statements that can help us in our teaching and helping our own family members.

"[King Benjamin] caused that [his children] should be taught in all the language of his fathers, that thereby they might become men of understanding; and that they might know concerning the prophecies which had been spoken by the mouths of their fathers, which were delivered them by the hand of the Lord.

"And he also taught them concerning the records which were engraven on the plates of brass, saying: My sons, I would that ye should remember that were it not for these plates, which contain these records and these commandments, we must have suffered in ignorance, even at this present time, not knowing the mysteries of God.

"For it were not possible that our father, Lehi, could have remembered all these things, to have taught them to his children, except it were for the help of these plates; for he having been taught in the language of the Egyptians therefore he could read these engravings, and teach them to his children, that thereby they could teach them to their children, and so fulfilling the commandments of God, even down to the present time.

"I say unto you, my sons, were it not for these things, which have been kept and preserved by the hand of God, that we might read and understand of his mysteries, and have his commandments always before our eyes, that even our fathers would have dwindled in unbelief, and we should have been like unto our brethren, the Lamanites, who know nothing concerning these things, or even do not believe them when they are taught them, because of the traditions of their fathers, which are not correct.

"O my sons," went on King Benjamin, "I would that ye should remember that these sayings are true, and also that these records are true. And behold, also the plates of Nephi, which contain the records and sayings of our fathers from the time they left Jerusalem until now, and they are true; and we can know of their surety because we have them before our eyes.

"And now, my sons, I would that ye should remember to search them diligently, that ye may profit thereby; and I would that ye should keep the commandments of God, that ye may prosper in the land according to the promises which the Lord made unto our fathers" (Mosiah 1:2-7).

Now that is a very long but very important passage that illustrates nicely the kind of responsibilities those possessing strong testimonies have to their own children and the children under their influence. Let me summarize what King Benjamin did with his sons. First, he saw that they were educated both in the things of the world and also in the things of God. Second, he taught them from the scriptures and also helped them understand why the scriptures are so important to each of us. Third, he bore specific and fervent testimony as to the truthfulness of the things that he taught. Fourth, he clearly explained the importance of keeping God's commandments and the absolute relationship between unrestrained obedience and receiving the blessings promised by the Lord.

If we use this same pattern in our own families, we will be well on our way to meeting the responsibilities that our testimonies confer upon us. As we meet these obligations, we in turn can enjoy the peace that the gospel brings and also know of our approval in the eyes of heaven. The Prophet Joseph Smith himself said, "An actual knowledge to any person, that the course of life which he [or she] pursues is according to the will of God, is essentially necessary to enable him [or her] to have that confidence in God without which no person can obtain eternal life"

What a wonderful, beautiful, and necessary thing to know that Joseph Smith is in every respect a true prophet of the living God. I am grateful for my privilege and responsibility to be a witness of him and what he taught. His testimony of the Savior is foundational to my own convictions concerning the Atonement and the Resurrection of our King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Praise be forevermore to the "man who communed with Jehovah!" (*Hymns*, no 27). In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.