

"This Is My Beloved Son"

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To start with, I would like to pay tribute to a magnificent lady. I have loved her for more than 50 years. She personifies everything that is virtuous, lovely, and of good report. I had no idea when I met and married her how good she really was (and I thought she was perfect then). She is the self-described product of a one-bathroom home. It has been a joy for me to see how she has handled the tests and trials of our life together. One of those trials is that it's her birthday today, and she's elected to be here with us.

I have been with her in poverty and danger. I have seen her as a mother and as a daughter. I have watched her confront sickness, disappointment, and death. I have observed her in company and in solitude. I have traveled with her, studied with her, prayed with her, and lost my hair with her. Through it all I have never seen her discouraged, and I have never seen her slacken. She has supported and enhanced me in every calling I have ever had and is my equal in every way--and my better in many ways.

There has not been a day without a smile nor one without a quiet word of encouragement. I know that her eyesight is failing a little because she continues to tell me how handsome I am, and I forgive her for that. I would not be here today were it not for her, and I want to thank her publicly for all of this and more.

Now to my subject.

A few years ago my wife and I were touring the Rochester New York Mission. The mission president asked if we would like to get up early and go to the Sacred Grove before the crowds came. We did. We drove a mile or so past the farmhouse, and he stopped the car. He said, "If you don't mind walking, I will show you my favorite way into the grove." We walked down a little grass-covered lane on the far side of the grove, and in the distance we could see tall trees. After a while we came to a small sign made of brass with gold letters, black background, mounted on two wooden posts. The sign said, "The Sacred Grove," and contained these incredible words: "God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, appeared to Joseph Smith in this grove." Period!

I had been intent on going into the grove and contemplating what occurred there back in

1820, but I found I could not bring myself to leave the sign. Its simple message arrested my progress. It did not say, "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" or "On the morning of a beautiful, clear day, early in the spring." It didn't even purport to be a historical site. It didn't even say, "Visitors Welcome." Rather there was just the simple statement, "God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, appeared to Joseph Smith in this grove."

I read it again and again. My wife said, "Don't you want to go into the grove?" I said, "I need to think about the message on this sign for a moment longer. Either it is true, or it isn't. If it is, it is the greatest message in all the world. Even someone who didn't believe it could not pass by it without being profoundly changed."

The statement "This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!" (Joseph Smith—History 1:17) President Marion G. Romney once said, "together with the Prophet's declaration that 'the Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's; [and] the Son also,' (D&C 130:22) clarifies and confirms, for us of this last dispensation, all that has before been revealed and preserved for us about God. . . . Upon our acceptance and testimony to the truth of this vision and statement hangs our individual salvation" (Learning for the Eternities, 8-9).

Those are strong words. To think that our own personal salvation depends upon whether we accept and have a testimony of what Joseph saw and heard in the spring of 1820.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell put it a little more softly when he wrote:

"Not understanding who Jesus really is by title and role inevitably sets up a lack of gratitude for His astonishing Atonement. If we do not regard Him highly enough to pay heed to His words about *who* He is, we will pay less heed to *what* He says and requires of us. The resulting diminution of regard and comprehension will result in little faith. For what 'think [we] of Christ' inevitably determines His *operative relevancy* for our lives" (*Lord Increase Our Faith* [1994], 9, emphasis added).

That is also a provocative statement. We may profess a testimony of the Prophet Joseph and what he saw in the grove, but if Joseph's experience there has no "operative relevancy" in our lives, then we are but "sounding brass" and "tinkling cymbal" (1 Corinthians 13:1). The First Vision and Joseph's statements accompanying it are the things upon which our salvation rests. And the application we make of these things and their operative relevancy to our lives are at least as important to us practically as the words that were uttered are important to us doctrinally.

Let me illustrate what I think Elder Maxwell meant by "operative relevancy." Elizabeth Claridge McCune once wrote of her father's call to go settle the "Muddy." Listen to her words:

"No place on earth seemed so precious to me at fifteen years of age as dear old Nephi. How eagerly we looked forward to the periodical visits of President Brigham Young and his company! Everything was done that could be thought of for their comfort and entertainment. And with all it was a labor of love.

"We went out with our Sabbath Schools and all the other organizations, with bands of

music and flags and banners and flowers to meet and greet our beloved leader and his company. On one occasion the people were lined up on each side of the street waiting for the carriages to pass. Among them were twenty-five young ladies dressed in white who had strewn evergreens and wild flowers along the path. Bro Brigham, Bros Kimball and Wells with the entire company got out of their carriages, and walked over the flowery road . . . to our homes, [where] dinner was prepared and served.

"We all attended the afternoon meeting, the girls in white having reserved seats in front. The sermons were grand, and we were happy until President Young announced that he had a few names to read of men who were to be called and voted in as missionaries to go and settle up the 'Muddy.' This almost stilled the beating of the hearts of all present. Many of our people had been called to go to settle the Dixie country--but the Muddy, so many miles farther south! And so much worse! Oh! Oh! I did not hear another name except 'Samuel Claridge.' Then how I sobbed and cried, regardless of the fact that the tears were spoiling the new white dress. The father of the girl who sat next to me was also called. Said my companion, 'Why, what is you crying about? It doesn't make me cry. I know my father won't go.' 'Well there is the difference,' said I, 'I know that my father *will* go and that nothing could prevent him, and I should not own him as a father if he would not go when he is called.' Then, I broke down sobbing again. . . .

"We had just moved into a new house and were fixed comfortably. Many of our friends tried to persuade father to keep his home and farm; to go south a while and then come back. But father knew that this was not the kind of mission upon which he had been called. 'I will sell everything I own,' said he, 'and take my means to help build up another waste place in Zion ' " (in *Young Women's Journal*, July 1898, 292-93).

That is operative relevancy. And the individual salvation of Sister McCune and her family may well hinge on the fact that her father knew that Joseph saw what he said he saw and that Brigham Young was his divinely appointed successor and that, because of that, *nothing* could prevent him from going to settle the Muddy.

What must we do to ensure that the events of that spring morning have operative relevancy in our lives? Sister Marjorie Hinckley gave some insight into that question. In a letter to a missionary grandson, she spoke of a journey to Hawaii, where three regional conferences were held on three different islands on the same Sunday. She said it was a brutal schedule but very rewarding. Quoting now, she wrote: "The last conference was on Molokai. The Saints were so excited--they piled leis on us up to our ears. We got home at 9:00 p.m. on Tues., and Gramps was at the office at 7:00 a.m. the next morning. His secretary put on his desk a list of assignments for the next 60 days. Enough to give a younger man a faint heart. There is no let up, . . . but somehow with the help of the Lord he will make it." Now listen to this: "Sometimes when the pressures mount, I have to remember that Joseph Smith did have a vision and though we give our whole souls to the work we are still unprofitable servants" (Sheri L. Dew, *Go Forward with Faith: The Biography of Gordon B. Hinckley* [1996], 470, emphasis added).

Well, the pressures and trials of this life are enough to give any one of us a faint heart. This Women's Conference is one way of helping all of us remember that Joseph really did have a vision. The Lord is in His heaven, and He does care about us. The heavens are not closed. We are in the true Church. The blessings of the Atonement are available to all of us. There is a plan and a timetable for all things. Knowing these things, nothing is ever

hopeless.

As we take steps to ensure that we do not forget what we have seen and felt and what we know, it is helpful to me to recall that prior to 1820 in all of the Bible there was only one reference to a *living* God. As Jesus taught in the synagogue in Capernaum, He referred to Himself as "living bread" and said, "The living Father hath sent me" (John 6:51, 57). The Jews didn't understand. Even many of His disciples complained saying, "This is an hard saying; who can hear it?" (John 6:60).

Before 1820 nearly everyone believed in what Elder Maxwell once described as a "retired God whose best years [were] past. One to whom [they] should pay retroactive obeisance, worshipping him for what he [had] already done" (*The Neal A. Maxwell Quote Book*, 135).

But Joseph was introduced to a living Son by the living Father. He was commanded to hear Him. His experience in the grove brought a comprehension that could not have been gained any other way. One of the consequences of worshipping a living God is knowing that His work is ongoing and that He sees and hears and does that work presently.

In revelation after revelation, the Lord introduced Himself to Joseph as "the only living and true God" (D&C 20:19) or "Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God" (D&C 14:9; 42:1), being mere examples of many scriptures.

The theological and personal implications of this concept were staggering. For suddenly, worshipping God not only entailed remembering Him and keeping His past commandments but also meant furthering His present purposes, receiving additional revelation and commandments, and enlisting in His great latter-day work. Is it any wonder that the angel Moroni warned young Joseph that "those who profess to know the truth but walk in deceit [would] tremble in anger"? (*History of the Church*, 1:79).

Everything the Lord does has purpose and design. So it was with the First Vision. The Lord explained that, "knowing the calamity which should come upon the inhabitants of the earth," He "called upon . . . Joseph Smith, Jun., and spake unto him . . . and gave him commandments; . . . that faith . . . might increase in the earth; that [his] everlasting covenant might be established; that the fulness of [the] gospel might be proclaimed. . . . [That] they [who] sought wisdom might be instructed; and inasmuch as they sinned they might be chastened, that they might repent; and inasmuch as they were humble they might be made strong, and blessed from on high, and receive knowledge from time to time" (D&C 1:17, 21-23, 26-28).

Over the course of the years following the First Vision, the beautiful, distinctive doctrines of the Restoration were revealed. Transcendent teachings, line upon line and precept upon precept, flowed from the Lord's own lips. Joseph came to know the Savior in the present tense as "the Great I Am" and not "the Great He Was." The Book of Mormon was revealed. Joseph learned about faith and how to acquire more, about prayer and asking for what is right.

He heard about and was taught his role in the great and marvelous work, which Isaiah had foretold. He learned about the gift of the Holy Ghost and what it meant always to have His Spirit be with him. He was counseled to follow the example of the Savior in all things. He restored Christ's Church and the holy priesthood. He learned about eternal

marriage and the plan of happiness.

Joseph knew the Savior. He spoke with Him and, thankfully, wrote down His words. One of the greatest contributions of the Prophet Joseph has been to thereby reveal the Savior and His work, His will, and His words and the injunction to "Hear Him!"

And so it is that ultimately that vision is the test for all of us as well. It all begins and ends in a grove of trees in upstate New York, whether we will hear and whether we will *heed*. Did it really happen as Joseph said it happened?

With this question in mind, I would like to relate an experience I had as a young missionary. I was a newly appointed district president. There were six elders in our district. One day the mission president called and told me he wanted to expand the work. There was a fairly large city in our district that had never had missionaries in it before. He suggested that we go there and hold a street meeting. Having never done that, I asked him exactly what he wanted us to do.

In Uruguay, in those pretelevision days, all cities had a public square with a large park in it. There was a cathedral on one end of the square and municipal buildings on the other. In the evening the people would dress up and go for a stroll in the park. The custom was for single women to walk around the park, usually in groups, in a clockwise direction. Single men would walk in a counterclockwise direction. Everyone who wanted to see or be seen was so accommodated. Parents often sat on the benches, and children would teasingly chase one another through the parade of walkers.

The mission president said, "I want you to take your district to the park on a Friday night. Sing some hymns. When a crowd gathers I want one of you to get up on one of the benches and tell the Joseph Smith story. Take the names of any interested persons, and then we will decide whether there is sufficient potential to assign a pair of missionaries to work there permanently."

Friday came. We boarded the train and went to the city, arriving in the early evening. We went to the park. The street lights were just coming on. As a district, we had practiced a few hymns and sang them. And just as the president had promised, a small crowd gathered. Nothing like that had ever happened on their evening walk before.

We sang as long as we could. Finally one of the elders got up on the bench and began to tell the Joseph Smith story--of Joseph's experience in the grove. He told of the religious turmoil, of Joseph's desire to know which church to join, and quoted James 1:5 and spoke of how the boy Joseph decided to ask of God. People were actually listening. The young elder confidently pressed on. He told how Joseph knelt down and began to pray and how a pillar of light descended until it fell upon him, how he saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defied description. He had just gotten to the part where one of Them spoke to him, calling him by name and saying, pointing to the other, "This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!" (Joseph Smity--History 1:17) when the script that the mission president carefully worked out for us abruptly changed.

At the edge of the crowd, in the shadows, a group of teenage boys had gathered, and they began to throw rocks at us. I was the leader. I seemed to be the main target--although I'm sure we all felt the same way--and I had to decide in an instant whether to continue or to

conclude the meeting. And that decision seemed to depend on whether Joseph really went into that grove, whether he really did see a pillar of light, and whether the Father really did say, "This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!" But there was more: Had I really been called by a prophet? Had the mission president really been inspired to ask us to open that town? Were we really on the Lord's errand? And was knowing all of that worth more than a rock in the eye?

After the Spirit answered all of those questions, there didn't seem to be any honorable alternative. We finished the story. A few small stones found their mark. No permanent damage was done. We sang a hymn, closed the meeting, and didn't convert a soul that night. But we did open the city. Sometime later a small branch was organized. There is a prosperous ward there today. None of the members there know of that street meeting that was held in their city nearly 50 years ago, but I have never been quite the same, because on that night the absolute reality of what happened in the grove was indelibly impressed upon my mind.

It is evident that if Joseph saw what he claimed to have seen, and I testify that he did, that he did more than any man who has ever lived to reveal the nature, character, and mission of the Lord Jesus Christ to the world. As a consequence, we have some affirmative duties and responsibilities

President Hinckley has eloquently expressed himself in this regard. Let me quote briefly from his teachings. Said he:

"I read this morning a part of Joseph Smith's testimony of the First Vision. You are all familiar with it. His going into a grove, pleading with the Lord, a light shining above him, and then the appearance of the Father and the Son. I read that testimony and thought of it. I said to myself, If every one of us knew in our hearts that that statement is true, then we would know that all else which follows it, which came through the restoration of the gospel, all else would be true also. And we would walk and live with greater faithfulness.

"Tithing would not be a problem with us. Temple service would not be a problem with us. Keeping the Sabbath day holy would not be a problem with us. We would have no inclination to go to the store and buy things on the Sabbath day. Missionary service would be no problem with us.

"All else that follows would be true. We would know it in our hearts if we had a solid, firm, immovable conviction of the truth and validity of that great vision wherein God the Eternal Father and the risen Lord Jesus Christ appeared to the boy Joseph Smith and the Father said, 'This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!' (Joseph Smith--History 1:17)".

And so it is with operative relevancy. Because of the First Vision, we do things we would not do otherwise. We teach our children because, we repent because, we pray because, we try to walk uprightly because, we keep everlastingly at it--all because of what happened in that grove.

Because of the First Vision, we know that prayer works, that the heavens are not sealed, and that the Father and the Son are separate and distinct beings

Because of the First Vision, we have the many-splendored Restoration in all of its

magnificence and variety.

Because of the First Vision, we know the great plan of happiness and our role and place as sons and daughters of God.

Because of the relevancy of that vision, eight of my great-grandparents crossed the plains in response to Brigham Young's invitation to gather to Zion, and a great-great-grandfather walked away from a 600-acre farm in what today is downtown Kansas City, Missouri, in order to stand by the Prophet.

Every Latter-day Saint knows the story of the First Vision and, to some degree or another, has faith in it. But we must take care to connect the events of the grove with real life and with present circumstance, or the result will be that the great truths of the Restoration will become something we just talk about and do not live.

The problem for most of us is that, while we dearly believe these things, the events of that day in 1820 are far away and sometimes forgotten. The wear and tear of daily living often overshadow the things we know, and we fail to heed. Without really meaning to, we sometimes find ourselves doing or saying things that are inconsistent with the voice from the grove, and Joseph's experience there ceases, for a time, to have operative relevancy for our lives.

I have always been mindful of the remarkable admonition that Moses gave to the children of Israel. He said, "Take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes have seen, and lest they depart from thy heart all the days of thy life: but teach them [to] thy sons, and [to] thy sons' sons" (Deuteronomy 4:9).

I have a confession to make. In an effort to ensure that I do not forget the things that my eyes have seen, I carry with me a reminder of the reality of the First Vision. I would like to show it to you. It is a leaf from a 200-year-old beech tree. I picked it myself in the Sacred Grove a few years ago. The tree, as nearly as I can tell, was in the grove on that spring morning in 1820. Perhaps some of the light Joseph saw shone on it and caused it to sink its roots deeper into the rocky soil or to claim its place among the other trees that surrounded it. Every time I open the scriptures, it helps me remember what I know.

I pray that this conference may help all of us remember what we know and most surely believe and that our lives may reverently reflect the reality of these things, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.