

The First Vision: The Firm Foundation for Our Faith

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How does one do justice to an assignment to capture the meaning of the rapturous and seminal event of the visit of the Father and Son to the 14-year-old Joseph Smith? President Hinckley, during April conference, called it the greatest event since the birth and death of Jesus. Speaker after speaker bore personal testimony of its reality. Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf of the Twelve built his eloquent conference address around his experience as a boy in Germany, gazing at the stained-glass window depicting the event. "I felt it was true," he said. President Hinckley returned to the subject in his closing conference words, witnessing that the Father and the Son spoke with Joseph in the Sacred Grove.

Perhaps the Tabernacle Choir best captured the sacredness of the event by opening the Sunday morning session with a moving rendition of "Oh, How Lovely Was the Morning" (*Hymns*, no. 26), accompanied by a depiction on the large conference screens of Joseph leaving his log home, walking to the grove of trees, and experiencing the sacred theophany.

This is my personal view of what that first vision means. We start with the boy Joseph and his family on a farm in Manchester near Palmyra, New York. A scene of unusual religious excitement caught the Smith family in its web. As a result of the entreaties of the various churches, some family members joined the Presbyterian church. Joseph and his father, however, stayed aloof from all of the churches. Nevertheless, young Joseph developed a deep desire to know the truth about religion. In furtherance of this desire he attended meetings, pondered the messages, and studied the Bible, but remained uneasy as he heard "some crying, 'Lo, here!' and others, 'Lo, there!' " (Joseph Smith--History 1:5).

Joseph and his father believed in God but found the teachings of the various denominations confusing, especially their conflicting claims about which church was the true church of Jesus Christ.

Another confusing matter concerned teachings about the nature of God and His relationship with men. By 1820, doctrinal beliefs about God and Jesus Christ were found in a number of creeds established by leading religious leaders during the centuries after

the Apostles departed. The creeds generally settled on the belief that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost were, in a mysterious way, different manifestations of a single God. The God of the creeds no longer spoke to men on the earth. Churches and their ministers substituted an intangible God in place of a loving and literal Father in Heaven who could hear and answer prayers. These concepts affected not only their worship of the Father but also their understanding about man's potential worth and destiny as the offspring of God.

Differences between Joseph's understanding of some Bible passages and explanations given by preachers also affected and confused him. In his state of confusion, Joseph wondered who was right and who was wrong. If Christian doctrines were at best confusing and at worst in serious error, the beliefs either needed to be corrected or true beliefs restored in some fashion.

Let's go back to the New Testament account of the time Peter spoke to Jews and others gathered around Solomon's Porch on the temple grounds in Jerusalem. After sharing his witness about the recently departed Jesus, he declared that Jesus would come to the earth again during future "times of restitution." He explained that Jesus's Second Coming would be the central event of the "restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began" (Acts 3:21). Let's look closer at this far-reaching prophecy. A *time* is the point or period when something occurs. The use of the plural *times* indicates more than one "time." The word *restitution* means restoration, or bringing back something lost. "Times of restitution," then, would be an era of restoration. During those "times," God would send His Son to earth a second time.

What does that scripture have to do with the events of 1820? Has that predicted future era of restoration begun? If so, what was the first of its "times"? Remember that we spoke about the confusing state of varying beliefs concerning the nature of the Godhead in 1820. What does the Bible teach us about the importance of knowing and worshiping the true God? Biblical prophets of God had constantly implored their people to avoid the sin of worshiping idols or false gods. A glaring example was when Israel made a golden calf out of the women's earrings and then worshiped it (see Exodus 32).. That kind of sin was repeated by Israel regularly. Many of the heathens around them had never even known the true and living God but had created their own gods. In Athens, for example, Paul found a stone dedicated "to the unknown god." He declared to them, "We ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device" (Acts 17:23, 29).

Further illustrating the point I make, the first of the Ten Commandments God wrote on the tablet of stone for Moses and the children of Israel was, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). The second was directly related to the first: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image" (Exodus 20:4). In answer to a question--"Which is the great commandment in the law?"--Jesus emphasized that the first and greatest commandment is, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind" (Matthew 22:36-37). In summary, then, knowing and worshiping the true God is vitally important to mankind. How can we understand who we are and what our destiny is if we don't know that we are literally the sons and daughters of a Father in Heaven?

Now, confronted with confusion and error, even as relating to the God they worshiped, honest searchers for truth needed an authoritative voice to either correct the confusing religious differences or God needed to speak again to men. But when and how would that

help come?

In view of what we have just said about loving and worshiping God, if there were to be a restoration, what would likely be the first gospel truth restored? Isn't it logical and consistent to expect that during the first "time of restitution" God would in some way reveal His true identity as our Father who created man in His own image? If so, to whom would He make His identity known? Who would believe Him and have the courage and energy to do the nearly impossible work of declaring the truth to a doubting world? Who would be able to withstand the persecution and ridicule that would surely arise?

Wouldn't God likely find a young person whose mind and heart were open to unvarnished truth? His heart had to be prepared for new revelation rather than stuck with the notion that the heavens were closed to mortals. Could young Joseph Smith fill the need? He was searching for God but hadn't accepted prevailing false concepts. He also wanted to know which church to join. He was searching for answers and direction.

Let's look a little deeper. Although he attended community meetings that were part of the religious revival around Palmyra, he was independent enough to resist the cries of "Lo, here" and "Lo, there" by preachers attempting to commit him to join one of the several churches in his community. He also lived in a community and country without a chilling official state church, as existed in most European countries. Knowing that Joseph had always told the truth, his parents would likely support him and believe whatever he told them. His father understood that God could communicate with man because he had experienced a number of spiritual dreams himself. His mother enjoyed unusual spiritual strength.

Our Heavenly Father knew that the one He chose would have to possess tremendous energy and the talent to do the great work that would be required. Looking back, we perceive that Joseph possessed amazing spiritual and energy resources.

Indeed, why not Joseph? He was searching for answers to deep religious questions. Thus in Palmyra, God had available the right person if the time had come to make Himself known again to man, as He had in the past to Abraham, Moses, Samuel, and Jesus's Apostles. Also Joseph was untouched by money, position, power, or social status.

While pondering his deep questions, young Joseph turned to the Bible for answers. In the process he came across James, chapter 1, verse 5. These words entered his mind with great power. He reflected on them over and over. He decided to put his questions and concerns directly to God, fully expecting some kind of answer or feeling in accordance with James's promise. Accordingly, he retired to the woods to ask of God. He had never before prayed vocally. An evil power immediately seized him. Obviously Satan sensed that this prayer by Joseph was prelude to a very important event, detrimental to his evil cause. When Joseph was about to be overpowered, he cried to God for deliverance.

A light from above appeared and then descended until it fell and came to rest on him. Two brilliant and glorious personages appeared in the light. One was the Father and the other was His Son, Jesus Christ (Joseph Smith--History 1:10-20).. Joseph learned very much from that pivotal morning, including:

1. Satan is real and has great power.
2. God is glorious beyond description, yet has a form like men.

3. The Father and the Son are separate beings but work in complete unity.
4. The Father knew Joseph by name; and we can love such a personal God, which we're supposed to do.
5. Joseph was not to join any of the churches; their creeds were wrong.
6. And finally, the existing Christian churches had a form of godliness but not His power.

The experience over, Joseph went home, overcome with exhaustion. He told his mother what had happened and she believed him. The "times of restitution" had commenced. This first "time" restored the true knowledge of God and His relationship to mankind as our Father in Heaven. We are God's potential heirs. Other "times" would continue until God restored all truths revealed in all former dispensations of the gospel.

The years ahead would test Joseph severely, but having chosen him so young, the Lord could help him avoid taking the wrong track that would lead him away from the vital task of restoration. Having the freedom to choose, Joseph could fail, but with help and proper tutoring he could and did succeed.

Thus God started the process of restoration in this direct and simple visit to Joseph. Joseph now knew God personally. Knowing and loving his Father in Heaven was a huge first step. Ahead would come the Book of Mormon, restoration of the priesthood, organization of the Church, baptism for remission of sins, the gift of the Holy Ghost, and apostles and prophets. The stone had been cut out of the mountain without hands, with the destiny to fill the whole earth.

In a revelation given him on the day the Church was organized, the Lord commanded Joseph to record his experiences (see D&C 21:1). Those experiences included this first "time" in 1820. He started the process several times, but he was young and needed more peace, more maturity, and more insight into its significance to recount that most important event. Years passed before Joseph was able to write and dictate his history in a manner satisfactory to him. Eventually, with the help of scribes, he completed what became the official record in 1838 and 1839. That record became scripture, just as the appearance to the boy Samuel in biblical times became scripture.

The written account is both simple and powerful enough to touch humble men and women. It touched me when I first read it. Arthur Henry King, a convert to the Church steeped in literature and writing style, and incidentally a faculty member here at Brigham Young University, wrote a brief critique about Joseph's account. He had this to say about Joseph's account of the First Vision:

"When I was first brought to read Joseph Smith's story, I was deeply impressed. . . . As a stylistician, I have spent my life being disinclined to be impressed. So when I read his story, I thought to myself, this is an extraordinary thing. This is an astonishingly matter-of-fact and cool account. This man is not trying to persuade me of anything. He doesn't feel the need to. He is stating what happened to him, and he is stating it, not enthusiastically, but in quite a matter-of-fact way. He is not trying to make me cry or feel ecstatic. That struck me, and that began to build my testimony, for I could see that this man was telling the truth".

Brother Hugh Nibley said this:

"Even more outrageous was his vision of the Father and the Son: the mere idea of it was astoundingly original, but again, the simple, straightforward, noble manner in which he reported it left no room for contention; it was 'yea, yea, and nay, nay,' for as the only witness to the most astonishing of his experiences, Joseph could not be confounded by any contrary evidence; and by the same token neither could anyone be asked to take him seriously were it not that he came before an unbelieving world with boundless riches in his hands".

I think that brings us to an important question, and that question is: What does this sacred event mean to you and me? No one has answered that question more clearly and succinctly than our present prophet, and he's answered it many times. Recently he said:

"This work began with a most remarkable manifestation when the Father and the Son appeared to the boy Joseph Smith on a spring morning in the year 1820. All of the good we see in the Church today is the fruit of that remarkable visitation, a testimony of which has touched the hearts of millions in many lands. I add my own witness," he said, "given me by the Spirit, that the Prophet's description of that marvelous event is true, that God the Eternal Father and the risen Lord Jesus Christ spoke with him on that occasion in a conversation as real and personal and intimate as he described. I raise my voice in testimony that Joseph was a prophet and that the work brought forth through his instrumentality is the work of God".

Thus, brothers and sisters, the era of restoration began in 1820 with that remarkable appearance of the Father and the Son. What began as an answer to the prayer of a young man who was uneasy and confused about religion and who found unsatisfactory the creeds and teachings of the Christian sects ended up being the start of something big-- something amazing and far-reaching. He probably had little idea that his experience was one of the "times of restitution" that Peter prophesied would precede the Second Coming of Christ. He just knew that God had spoken to him and further that none of the existing churches were on the right track. What revolutionary knowledge was his!

Elder Neal A. Maxwell summed it up succinctly. Said he: "His prayer was for personal and tactical guidance. The response, however, was of global and eternal significance". Joseph indeed received personal guidance that 1820 spring morning. The event served as his own focus and foundation for life. On the other hand, the global meaning was that the "times of restitution" had begun. That has affected all of us.

In what ways has it affected us? What difference does it make--that visitation to young Joseph--what difference does it make to you and me? Through Joseph we know that the true and living God is tangible, personal, knows us, and is a distinct personage from His Son, Jesus Christ. We can be certain He hears and answers our prayers in accordance with His plans and our needs, provided we ask in faith and trust His timing and method of answering our pleadings. When we know these things, we also know that we are part of the "times of restitution." Just as Joseph's experience with God placed on him a great responsibility, our exposure to and understanding of these things places on us a similar burden--to share the responsibility of building the kingdom of God on earth. What a glorious burden, and what a majestic and special relationship with God is ours! And because we are the children of our Heavenly Father, then we are also His heirs. That opens breathtaking new vistas in our lives. Have you ever thought of it that way?

One thing more needs to be mentioned. If we know that God is personal, knows our

names, and is guiding the affairs of men and women, consistent with our agency, it is easier to know and love Him. And to love Him is the first and great commandment (see Matthew 22:37-38).. Loving Him can start by reading Joseph's great experience in the spring of 1820. Thus the Lord told Joseph, "This generation shall have my word through you" (D&C 5:10).

Now, conclusion. In addition to the initial strong testimony I gained reading Joseph's account, I add a special experience. When I served as the Idaho Boise Mission president, I suggested to my missionaries that they memorize Joseph's story, found in the Pearl of Great Price, Joseph Smith--History, verses 1--20. I wanted them to memorize it all. To demonstrate my sincerity and unity with them, I told them I would also memorize those verses. Not the smartest thing I've done. It was not easy for me, but I kept working on it. One day, while driving alone from Boise to Idaho Falls, I was quoting the verses aloud. About the time I reached the little town of Fairfield on Highway 20, I was nearly overcome by the Spirit. It was as if I had the same experience Joseph had. I had to stop beside the highway to compose myself before driving on. I had a tremendous feeling of love for the Father and the Son that almost overcame me. I knew through the Spirit more intensely than I can describe that Joseph's account was true. And I share my personal and special witness of these matters with you in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.