

The First Vision: The Firm Foundation for Our Faith

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On a beautiful morning, early in the spring of 1820, Joseph Smith entered a grove of trees near his home outside of Palmyra, New York. His purpose in going there was to inquire of the Lord which of all the sects was right, that he might know which one to join. As he knelt and began to offer up the desires of his heart to God, he was seized by a thick, dark power that gathered around him. Exerting all his powers to call upon God to deliver him from the power of the enemy that had seized him, he saw a pillar of light exactly over his head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon him. It no sooner appeared than he found himself delivered from the enemy which held him bound, and when the light rested upon him he saw two personages, whose brightness and glory defied all description. One of them, calling him by name, said, "This is My Beloved Son" (Joseph Smith--History 1:14-17).

Joseph then received the answer to his prayer. He was told that he must join none of the sects, because all their creeds were wrong, and that their professors drew near to God with their lips, but their hearts were far from Him, that they taught for doctrine the commandments of men, having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof (see Joseph Smith--History 1:19).

This brief experience of the young Prophet Joseph Smith is full of eternal significance. In due time it would lead to the restoration of all things: the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, the establishment of God's Church on the earth, the restoration of the priesthood and saving ordinances.

My remarks today are going to focus on just three of the truths that emerge from Joseph Smith's experience in the Sacred Grove that have great importance to all of us and to all of God's children. These truths are:

First, light and truth always conquer darkness.

Second, we have a loving Father in Heaven and older brother Jesus Christ who are eternal beings and who know and care about us.

And third, God hears and answers the prayers of His children.

You have undoubtedly experienced these truths in your own life as you have sought wisdom from God in response to earthly questions and challenges.

I would like to illustrate these truths through the life experiences of seven women, each of whose lives were changed by their testimonies of what happened to Joseph Smith in the Sacred Grove and each of whom, through their own life experience, could bear testimony of the truths that the Prophet Joseph Smith learned in the Sacred Grove on that day in the year 1820. These seven women are of some interest to me because they form a chain of seven generations of my family traced from mother to daughter.

First, *light and truth always conquer darkness.*

In Isaiah 9:2, the prophet Isaiah referred to a time when "the people that walked in darkness have seen a great light." We are also told in the scriptures that Jesus Christ is the Light of the World, which cannot be hid in darkness (see D&C 14:9). When Joseph Smith entered the Sacred Grove, he was confused. He lacked wisdom. Initially metaphorically, and then literally, he was overcome with darkness. Thereafter his prayer was answered by two beings of light, his loving Father in Heaven and our Savior and Redeemer, Jesus Christ.

I would like to start by telling you about two women who also experienced darkness in their lives and then experienced great light. The first of these is Elizabeth Blunden Elmer, my great-great-grandmother. She and her husband, Edward Elmer, were early converts to the Church in Great Britain. They lived in a small town--Boxford, Suffolk, England--and they were the parents of five small children. Edward died in 1851 and was buried outside the churchyard in his small community because he had joined the Mormon Church. Elizabeth sought help from relatives, but none of them would help a Mormon. Her faith was tested in the most extreme of circumstances. Her prayers are not recorded, but I can imagine that her testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith must have been very strong to sustain her and to keep her from denying her faith and testimony in light of her extreme circumstances. Elizabeth's life experience at this time was the result of the darkness of ignorance and misunderstanding.

As a result of her mother's indigent circumstances, Elizabeth's daughter, Mahalia Elmer Jenkins, was apprenticed at the age of eight years old in order that she might earn her own room and board. Her mistress in that home was very unkind to her, and she never again lived in her mother's home except for a brief convalescence from the measles when she was 12 years old. She had none of what we would call in this life the advantages. She acquired a rudimentary ability to read by practicing on the Bible and could only write because the Mormon missionaries gave her an alphabet to trace. Notwithstanding this lack of education and lack of opportunity, she lived a full and happy life.

Eventually Mahalia immigrated to Salt Lake City and became the plural wife of Thomas Jenkins. What she had lacked in a home life as a child she made up for in the close relationship she had with her four children. She saw to it that they obtained the education and opportunities she had been denied. Her children and grandchildren all affirmed that she had no self-centered aspirations. She expressed herself through service to others. The genuine joy in her face when she was able to help other people was a light which could not be mistaken. Denied intellectual interests in the academic sense of the word, she lived

in the rich world of self-sacrifice. One of her sons-in-law, speaking at her funeral, stated that her life, from its humble beginnings with what we might regard as limited opportunities, affirmed that opportunity is more within than without, more a matter of soul than of circumstance, of will and ideals rather than house and lands, worldly place and position, college degrees and titles. Both Elizabeth and Mahalia showed through their lives that the darkness of ignorance, unkindness, and limited opportunities can be overcome by following the Savior's light through gospel living.

The second truth that emerged from the Sacred Grove that I would like to discuss is that *we have a loving Father in Heaven and older brother Jesus Christ who are eternal beings and who know and care about us.*

When God the Father and Jesus Christ appeared to the Prophet Joseph Smith, there were countless millions of other people better educated, more likely to be respected or to attract a following, than the Prophet Joseph Smith. But the Lord, knowing Joseph and his eternal potential, called him by name and chose him to perform the pivotal role in the Restoration of the gospel. Joseph's experience makes clear that God is not an amorphous influence for good but a real Eternal Father who loves His children.

This truth is repeatedly affirmed in scriptures. Later in Joseph's life, when the Saints were suffering in Missouri, the Lord spoke words of comfort in response to brokenhearted prayer. The Lord said to Joseph in D&C 98:1-3:

"Verily I say unto you my friends, fear not, let your hearts be comforted; yea, rejoice evermore, and in everything give thanks;

"Waiting patiently on the Lord, for your prayers have entered into the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth, and are recorded with this seal and testament--the Lord hath sworn and decreed that they shall be granted.

"Therefore, he giveth this promise unto you, with an immutable covenant that they shall be fulfilled; and all things wherewith you have been afflicted shall work together for your good, and to my name's glory, saith the Lord."

Mahalia's daughter Rose Jenkins Badger was my grandmother. She benefited from her mother's strong moral influence and desire to see that her children had the opportunities she was denied. Rose went to normal school and prepared to be a teacher. Through the teachings of her parents, she developed a strong testimony and desire to do what was right. Eventually she married Carlos Badger, and they became the parents of 12 children.

Rose conscientiously kept a journal, which reveals her testimony of the restored gospel. Her faith is reflected poignantly in her journal when, as a young woman, she faced a personal crisis. From her youth she had loved Carlos Badger, and they wrote while he was in the mission field. He was serving in Colorado. When he had a quarrel with his mission president, he took the train home.

Rose was devastated and wrote in her journal: "None but my Heavenly Father knows how hard this has been for me. I love him still, but I love God and His will more. I will leave it all to Father. All I can do is pray and trust. I shall live in my work and others'

happiness until such time as God shall either bring him back that I love or teach me to love another."

A few weeks later, Rose's journal reflects her joy when Carlos made the decision to return to the mission field. And this is what she wrote: "We are both going to try to do our duty and grow more worthy of our blessings. Oh Father, help us. What can we do of ourselves? But we can conquer self with your aid."

The intimate way which Rose communicated with her Father in Heaven at this time of crisis is a direct result of her testimony of the reality of what happened to Joseph Smith in the Sacred Grove. Our Father in Heaven and His Son, Jesus Christ, live and care about us, just as They cared about the Prophet Joseph Smith and sweet Rose Badger. Knowing that we have a Father in Heaven who knows us and cares about us and our concerns is one of the most profound truths that emerged from Joseph's experience in the Sacred Grove.

Finally, *God hears and answers the prayers of His children.*

My mother, Alice Badger Quinn, was the fourth child of Rose and Carlos Badger's 12 children. She is now 98 years old and has lived in our home for 21 years, since she became a widow. Before that, of course, I lived in her home for 21 years, so on the score of years we are equal. But I can never pay to my mother the debt which I owe her. She raised me in a home where I was taught from my infancy the principles of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.

A year ago my mother, who to that point had been in excellent physical and mental health, fell and broke her hip. After a lifetime of service in the Church, including service in all the auxiliaries and more recently in regular and frequent temple service, my mother was rendered helpless. She found herself in a hospital for the first time in 50 years. For a while she was in pain, confused, depressed, and hopeless, but she struggled and finally overcame. At night one of my great blessings is having the opportunity to say prayers with my mother, just as I did when I was a young girl. And her most frequent prayer is to know what she can do in her narrowed circumstances to build up the kingdom of God and to be of service to others. She has perfected in her own life the faith of a child. Her example illustrates for me the importance of approaching God in prayer with childlike faith, just as Joseph Smith did when he approached the Sacred Grove.

As Joseph recollected in his history: "While I was laboring under the extreme difficulties caused by the contests of these parties of religionists, I was one day reading the Epistle of James, first chapter and fifth verse, which reads, *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.*

"Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my heart. I reflected on it again and again, knowing that if any person needed wisdom from God, I did; for how to act I did not know, and unless I could get more wisdom than I then had, I would never know. . . .

"At length I came . . . to the determination to 'ask of God,' concluding that if he gave wisdom to them that lacked wisdom, and would give liberally, and not upbraid, I might venture" (Joseph Smith--History 1: 11-13).

I am the fifth generation of women in my maternal line who have benefited from a testimony of the reality of what happened to Joseph Smith in the Sacred Grove. Many times I have seen how God answers my own prayers and the prayers of others who ask Him in faith.

Recently I had what for me was a profound experience with an immediate answer to prayers. When I brought my mother home from the hospital, we were unprepared for the difficulties of caring for her. Remodeling needed to be done to accommodate a wheelchair. She was in pain and unable to carry her own weight. While I was able to have help during the days so that I could work, for a time my husband was gone and I cared for Mother by myself in the nights and evenings.

Fearful that she would get out of bed at night and fall again, I resolved to sleep on the floor outside of her bedroom. Because of the stress and anxiety of her situation, I was unable to sleep, which only made matters worse. The days and nights wore on, and I became more ragged. One night as I fitfully tried to sleep, I felt something bite me on the face, and my eyes swelled up. This was the last straw. I felt tired, overwhelmed, alone, inadequate, and sorry for myself. I wondered why others were not helping me, why this seemed to be my burden and responsibility alone, and how I could possibly cope.

Finally, I humbled myself, knelt in prayer, and poured out my heart to my Father in Heaven. Although I did not see a light, I heard a voice which called me by name and reassured me that my responsibilities were not too heavy for me to bear, that I would be strengthened where I needed to be strengthened and I would have assistance when I needed assistance, and that this responsibility and blessing to care for my mother was a sacred obligation. I have thought of this experience many times with great gratitude for the knowledge that a loving Father in Heaven knows me and cares about me and knows and cares about my mother, just as He knew and cared about the Prophet Joseph Smith, and answers our prayers, just as he answered the Prophet's prayers.

The sixth generation of women in my family who have benefited from the truths of the Restoration are my three daughters. The one I would like to talk about today is Mary Alice, and the seventh generation begins with her two daughters, Abigail and Mary Jane. Mary Alice served a mission in Germany and, shortly after her return, married a young man who had been her district leader in the mission field and to whom she had been writing since his return. Mary Alice has always wanted to be a mother. When I was raising her, she would quite frankly say to me, "Mother, I don't want to do what you do. When I grow up I'm going to be a mother and stay home and take care of my babies."

So after Mary Alice married, we all anticipated a prompt arrival of her babies. One year, and another year, and another year, and fruitless efforts at infertility treatments went by. Mary Alice and her husband had been married six years when they were called to be temple workers in the Washington D.C. Temple. At the time of their calling, the temple president was inspired to tell them if they would be faithful in their calling in the temple that they would indeed have the blessing of children.

Finally, after three attempts at in vitro fertilization and a very complicated pregnancy, Mary Alice gave birth to her first child (and I should say, more importantly, our first grandchild). Her name is Abigail, and Abigail is a miracle of modern science. Seventeen months later, without any scientific intervention, Mary Alice gave birth to our second grandchild, Mary Jane.

I consider this very special seventh generation to be a direct result of answers to earnest prayers and the restoration of the powers of godliness, the priesthood. Through the birth of these two children we have seen the darkness of disappointment overcome by the light of a loving and merciful Father in Heaven who hears and answers prayers. I am grateful to be one link in a chain of seven generations of women whose lives have been blessed by the Prophet Joseph Smith. The fact that the Prophet Joseph Smith had the experience he had in the Sacred Grove and of the subsequent Restoration of the gospel in its fulness is the most important event in history with the exception of the life and Atonement of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Joseph's experience has reverberated again and again in my own life, in the lives of those before me and after me, and will reverberate in all of those who obtain a testimony of the reality of his experience and the truths which he learned in the Sacred Grove. I bear my humble witness of the truths of which I have spoken, and I say this in Jesus's name, amen.