

Come Follow Me Lesson 2
January 4-10
Joseph Smith – History 1-26

“It was decreed in the counsels of eternity, long before the foundations of the earth were laid, that he, Joseph Smith, should be the man, in the last dispensation of this world, to bring forth the word of God to the people, and receive the fulness of the keys and power of the Priesthood of the Son of God. The Lord had his eyes upon him, and upon his father, and upon his father’s father, and upon their progenitors clear back to Abraham, and from Abraham to the flood, from the flood to Enoch, and from Enoch to Adam. He has watched that family and that blood as it has circulated from its fountain to the birth of that man” (*Discourses of Brigham Young*, sel. John A. Widtsoe [1941], 108)

There are at least four accounts (the 1832, the 1835, this one, the 1838 version and the Wentworth letter) of the First Vision either written or dictated by the Prophet. The variations in the details of the accounts further validates the truthfulness of the events.

Recital of 1832

This account of 1832 was recorded as a rough draft, the style was not polished, nor was it published by the Prophet. It is possible that after dictating the account, Joseph recognized the desirability of modifying certain statements or correcting concepts not accurately written by an untrained scribe. Often when people record biographical sketches or historical incidents, they write and rewrite until their ideas are clearly expressed.

Although this account of 1832 is not as well written nor as comprehensive as later recitals, Joseph revealed one concept in this version which sheds some light on the historical setting of the First Vision. Since the Prophet stated that for two or three years he had been engaged in a quest for religious truth, it is apparent that his search for God's true church was not a sudden impulse. During his investigation, he became confused. There were occasions when he reflected on the possibility that an apostasy had occurred and that "there was no society or denomination that built upon the Gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the New Testament." Nevertheless, the young man continued to examine the religious societies constituted in the place where he lived and possibly desired to learn what Christians in other parts of the world believed. In a later recital, the Prophet indicated his bewilderment when he said, "Who of all these parties are right? Or are they all wrong together? And if any one of them be right which is it? And how shall I know it?"

An 1835 Account

The shortest known recital of the First Vision which was dictated by Joseph to a scribe occurred in 1835. This account, recorded by Warren Cowdery, was included as part of a conversation between Joseph Smith and Robert Matthias, who had adopted the priestly name of Joshua. Joseph explained his first communication to this visitor. After mentioning that a personage appeared in the midst of a pillar of fire, he said that another personage soon appeared like unto the first and informed Joseph that his sins had been forgiven. Then Joseph said, according to this account, "I saw many angels in this vision."

Recital of 1838

The most comprehensive account of the First Vision was prepared for publication as part of Joseph's multi-volume History of the Church and was originally dictated by the Prophet in 1838. This recital was

undoubtedly carefully recorded and might have undergone several revisions to improve the style and wording. The version of this account which has been preserved is in the handwriting of James Mulholland, who served as scribe for the Prophet in 1839, indicating that the recital was rewritten after its initial recording.

The Wentworth Letter

A second account which was prepared for publication was written for nonmembers of the Church in 1841. At the request of John Wentworth, editor of the Chicago Democrat, Joseph was asked to prepare a brief history of the church which he had founded. Joseph complied, and added to the history thirteen unnumbered statements of belief which are widely known today as the Articles of Faith. Joseph Smith's First Vision: Confirming Evidences and Contemporary Accounts, Milton V. Backman

Joseph Smith tells of his ancestry, family members, and their early abodes—An unusual excitement about religion prevails in western New York—He determines to seek wisdom as directed by James—The Father and the Son appear and Joseph is called to his prophetic ministry. (Verses 1-20.)

1 OWING to the many reports which have been put in circulation by evil-disposed and designing persons, in relation to the rise and progress of the Church of Jesus Christ of ^aLatter-day Saints, all of which have been designed by the authors thereof to militate against its character as a Church and its progress in the world—I have been induced to write this history, to disabuse the public mind, and put all inquirers after truth in possession of the ^bfacts, as they have transpired, in relation both to myself and the Church, so far as I have such facts in my possession. (In December 1841 the Prophet Joseph Smith lamented: "Since I have been engaged in laying the foundation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I have been prevented in various ways from continuing my journal and history in a manner satisfactory to myself or in justice to the cause. Long imprisonments, vexatious and long-continued lawsuits, the treachery of some of my clerks, the death of others, and the poverty of myself and brethren from continued plunder and driving, have prevented my handing down to posterity a connected memorandum of events desirable to all lovers of truth; yet I have continued to keep up a journal in the best manner my circumstances would allow, and dictate for my history from time to time, as I have had opportunity so that the labors and suffering of the first Elders and Saints of this last kingdom might not wholly be lost to the world" (History of the Church, 4:470). The history of the Church begun in 1838 was the first fully organized attempt to place the events that had transpired in relation to the restoration of the gospel into a comprehensive and chronologically arranged record. Revelations of the Restoration, McConkie, p. 4)

2 In this history I shall present the various events in relation to this Church, in truth and righteousness, as they have transpired, or as they at present exist, being now [1838] the ^aeighth ^byear since the organization of the said Church.

3 ^aI was born in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and five, on the twenty-third day of December, in the town of Sharon, Windsor county, State of Vermont . . . My father, ^bJoseph Smith, Sen., left the State of Vermont, and moved to Palmyra, Ontario (now Wayne) county, in the State of New York, when I was in my tenth year (1815), or thereabouts. In about four years after my father's arrival in Palmyra, he moved with his family into Manchester in the same county of Ontario— **(It is evident that God directed the movements of Joseph Smith Sr.'s family, eventually guiding them to the area of Palmyra and Manchester, New York, so that they would be near the Hill Cumorah. During the first twenty years of his and Lucy's marriage, they relocated nine times. Throughout this period Joseph Sr. farmed, operated a mercantile business, crystallized ginseng root to be exported to China, and taught school. While the family was living in Lebanon, New Hampshire, typhus fever spread throughout New England. Young Joseph Jr. contracted this disease, and an abscess spread**

into the tibia of his left leg. The common medical practice of the day prescribed amputation of the afflicted limb; however, a short distance from the Smith home at Dartmouth Medical College, Dr. Nathan Smith taught another method for treating the abscess that saved the leg of afflicted individuals. The providence of the Lord placed the Smith family in the only known location in the world where such a procedure was practiced. The result was that young Joseph's leg was not amputated. Three years of crop failure in Norwich, Vermont, precipitated the family's eventual move to Palmyra, New York. The year 1816 is known as "the year without summer." The eruption of the volcanic Mount Tambora on the island of Sumbawa, east of Java, in 1815 caused changes in the atmosphere. The volcanic ash and debris shaded the sun's rays, and many believed that this caused snow to fall in June and July in the New England states. "Coming after several years of hardships, the crop failure was more than the Smith family could handle. This, with other factors, caused them to leave Vermont. Packing their belongings, they moved to Palmyra, New York, where young Joseph was to receive a series of remarkable visions and the Book of Mormon" (Bellville, "Year without a Summer," 65). *Revelations of the Restoration*, p. 4-5)

4 His family consisting of eleven souls, namely, my father, Joseph Smith (48 years old at the time of the first vision.); my ^amother, Lucy Smith (43) (whose name, previous to her marriage, was Mack, daughter of Solomon Mack); my brothers, ^bAlvin (22) (who died November 19th, 1823, in the 26th year of his age), ^cHyrum, (20) myself, (14) ^dSamuel Harrison, (12) William, (9) Don Carlos; (4) and my sisters, Sophronia, (16) Catherine, (7) and Lucy. (was born after the first vision in 1821.)

5 Some time in the second year after our removal to Manchester, there was in the place where we lived an unusual excitement on the subject of religion. (Many contemporary records confirm Joseph Smith's testimony of religious excitement in the place where he lived prior to the First Vision. Methodists held camp meetings east of the Smith farm, and many of these meetings could have been considered by an earnest seeker after truth as ones which generated unusual religious excitement. In the summer of 1819 Methodists of the Genesee Conference held an annual meeting in Phelps (then Vienna), and more than one hundred ministers, including the Reverend George Lane, attended this July gathering. Joseph Smith's First Vision: Confirming Evidences and Contemporary Accounts, Milton V. Backman) It commenced with the Methodists, but soon became general among all the sects in that region of country. Indeed, the whole district of country seemed affected by it, and great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties, which created no small stir and division amongst the people, some crying, "aLo, here!" and others, "Lo, there!" Some were contending for the Methodist faith, some for the Presbyterian, and some for the Baptist. (Matt. 24: 23 Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there; ^abelieve *it* not. Mark 13: 21 And then if any man shall say to you, Lo, here *is* Christ; or, lo, *he is* there; believe *him* not: Luke 17: 21 Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the ^akingdom of God ^bis ^cwithin you.)

6 For, notwithstanding the great ^alove which the converts to these different faiths expressed at the time of their conversion, and the great zeal manifested by the respective clergy, who were active in getting up and promoting this extraordinary scene of religious feeling, in order to have everybody converted, as they were pleased to call it, let them join what sect they pleased; yet when the converts began to file off, some to one party and some to another, it was seen that the seemingly good feelings of both the priests and the converts were more ^bpretended than real; for a scene of great confusion and bad feeling ensued—priest contending against priest, and convert against convert; so that all their good feelings one for another, if they ever had any, were entirely lost in a strife of words and a contest about opinions.

7 I was at this time in my fifteenth year. My father's family was proselyted to the Presbyterian faith, and four of them joined that church, namely, my mother, Lucy; my brothers Hyrum and Samuel Harrison; and my sister Sophronia.

8 During this time of great excitement my mind was called up to serious reflection and great uneasiness; but though my feelings were deep and often poignant, still I kept myself aloof from all these parties, though I attended their several meetings as often as occasion would permit. In process of time my mind

became somewhat partial to the Methodist sect, and I felt some desire to be united with them; but so great were the confusion and ^astrife among the different denominations, that it was impossible for a person young as I was, and so unacquainted with men and things, to come to any certain conclusion who was ^bright and who was wrong.

9 My mind at times was greatly excited, the cry and tumult were so great and incessant. The Presbyterians were most decided against the Baptists and Methodists, and used all the powers of both reason and sophistry to prove their errors, or, at least, to make the people think they were in error. On the other hand, the Baptists and Methodists in their turn were equally zealous in endeavoring to establish their own tenets and disprove all others.

10 In the midst of this war of words and tumult of opinions, (Don't get involved in the war of words. Avoid contention.) I often said to myself: What is to be done? Who of all these parties are right; or, are they all wrong together? If any one of them be ^aright, which is it, and how shall I know it? ("By searching the Scriptures," Joseph explained, "I found that mankind did not come unto the Lord but that they had apostatized from the true and living faith and there was no society or denomination that built upon the Gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the New Testament. And I felt to mourn for my own sins and for the sins of the world. For I learned in the scriptures that God was the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Backman, First Vision, 156; spelling and punctuation standardized). Revelations of the Restoration, p. 8)

11 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 ^aJames, first chapter and fifth verse, which reads: *If any of you lack ^bwisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.* (In an interview in 1893, the year before his death, William Smith, younger brother of the Prophet, recalled the background to Joseph's reading this passage of scripture. "There was a joint revival in the neighborhood between the Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians and they had succeeded in stirring up quite a feeling, and after the meeting the question arose which church should have the converts. Rev. Stockton was the president of the meeting and suggested it was their meeting and under their care and they had a church there and they ought to join the Presbyterians, but as father did not like Rev. Stockton very well, our folks hesitated and the next evening a Rev. Mr. Lane of the Methodists preached a sermon on 'what church shall I join?' And the burden of the discourse was to ask God, using as a text, 'If any man lack wisdom let him ask of God who giveth to all men liberally.'" And of course when Joseph went home and was looking over the text he was impressed to do just what the preacher had said, and going out in the woods with child-like, simple, trusting faith, believing that God meant just what He said, he kneeled down and prayed" (Deseret Semi-Weekly News, 23 January 1894, 6). Revelations of the Restoration, p. 8-9)

12 **Never did any passage of ^ascripture 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. (One of the first things that the missionaries teach investigators is to learn to pray.) I reflected on it again and again, knowing that if any person needed ^bwisdom from God, I did; for how to act I did not know, (Joseph assumes that this principle is true in his day and in our day.) and unless I could get more wisdom than I then had, I would never know; for the teachers of religion of the different sects ^cunderstood the same passages of scripture so differently as to destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible. (In the description of his feelings as he read James 1:5, Joseph Smith gives us a perfect description of the Spirit of revelation. The key elements in that description include the force with which the message of the text entered his heart, the attendant feelings, and the manner in which he reflected upon it again and again. It is an everlasting pattern that revelation begets revelation. Here Joseph Smith receives a revelation directing him to what we now know as the Sacred Grove. This may well be the most instructive passage in holy writ on how truth is found and how we as a people should present our message to those not of our faith. There is no end to the argument over the meaning of Bible texts. Those who most vehemently oppose the idea of continuous revelation while declaring that all answers

are to be found in the Bible are the least able to agree with each other on its meaning. Revelations of the Restoration, p. 9)

13 At length I came to the conclusion (Joseph received a revelation to receive a revelation.) that I must either remain in ^adarkness and confusion, or else I must do as James directs, that is, ask of God. I at length (It took Joseph about three years to decide to pray about his life and which Church to join.) came to the determination to “ask of God,” concluding that if he gave wisdom to them that lacked wisdom, and would ^bgive liberally, and not upbraid, I might venture.

14 So, in accordance with this, my determination to ask of God, I retired to the ^awoods to make the attempt. It was on the morning of a ^bbeautiful, clear day, early in the spring of eighteen hundred and twenty. (What is the date of the First Vision? John C. Lefgren has done a study of weather conditions in the spring of 1820 with the following findings. Here is what the narrative indicates. It was in the morning, of a beautiful, clear day, early in the spring of 1820. Brother Lefgren indicates his belief that a beautiful day is an indication of a moderate temperature and no strong wind. He looked for days where the temperature was at least 40 degrees Fahrenheit. Clear relates to the sky. In the mornings of the possible days there are no clouds, no snow, no sleet, and no rain. Spring in North America is March, April and May. Early spring probably means between March 1st and April 15th. During this time, the Smith family harvested maple syrup and produced it. The last day in 1820 for harvesting the sap was Friday, March 24th. On Saturday they would have been still boiling the sap all that day. The first day available for the boy to go to the grove to pray would have been March 26th, Sunday, a day of rest for the family. According to US Weather Bureau records of 1820, during the first two weeks of March, it snowed almost every day. Beginning on March 22 there is a break in the weather and it starts to warm up. March 24 the weather is clear and the temperature is above 40 degrees. Saturday, March 25th is also clear and warm. And Sunday March 26th is clear with a temperature of 56 degrees, the highest of any day that early spring. Monday, March 27th the weather turns cloudy, the temperature drops and the first week of April there is snow, sleet and rain. The weather doesn't clear again until April 15th. The most likely date is the day when they finished their maple sap harvesting and the weather is the clearest. That date is Sunday, March 26, 1820. Oh, How Lovely Was the Morning: Sun 26 Mar 1820? Although the date of the First Vision was not recorded by the Prophet, and it has not been subsequently revealed to us, using the two independent calculations, we can reasonably assume that this date is correct.) It was the first time in my life that I had made such an attempt, for amidst all my anxieties I had never as yet made the attempt to ^cpray ^dvocally.

SCRIPTURE MASTERY: 15 After I had retired to the place where I had previously designed to go, (The First Vision, as it is now known, took place in a grove of trees that the Smiths were clearing near their log home in Palmyra, New York. Recounting the experience, Joseph Smith said that he went to "a clearing, and went to the stump where I had struck my axe when I had quit work, and I kneeled down, and prayed" (Backman, First Vision, 176).) 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 ^aseized 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 ^bdarkness gathered around me, and it seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction. ("My tongue seemed to be swollen in my mouth, so that I could not utter. I heard a noise behind me like some one walking towards me. I strove again to pray, but could not; the noise of walking seemed to draw nearer, I sprang upon my feet and looked around, but saw no person or thing that was calculated to produce the noise of walking" (Backman, First Vision, 159). Telling the story of the First Vision, Orson Hyde said, "The adversary benighted his [Joseph's] mind with doubts, and brought to his soul all kinds of improper pictures and tried to hinder him in his efforts and the accomplishment of his goal" (Backman, First Vision, 174).)

16 But, exerting all my powers to ^acall 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 into ^bdespair 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 had never before felt in any being—just at this moment of great alarm, I saw a pillar of ^clight exactly over my head, above the brightness of the ^dsun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me. (We have no language that can adequately describe the glories of heaven. Joseph also used the phrases "pillar of fire" and "pillar of flame" to describe the light which appeared as part of his vision. Orson Pratt wrote the earliest published account of the First Vision in 1840. Assuming that he has accurately reflected the way Joseph Smith told the story, his account is very instructive. "While thus pouring out his soul," he wrote, "anxiously desiring an answer from God, he at length saw a very bright and glorious light in the heavens above; which, at first, seemed to be a considerable distance. He continued praying, while the light appeared to be gradually descending towards him; and as it drew nearer, it increased in brightness and magnitude, so that, by the time that it reached the tops of the trees, the whole wilderness, for some distance around was illuminated in a most glorious and brilliant manner. He expected to have seen the leaves and boughs of the trees consumed, as soon as the light came in contact with them; but perceiving that it did not produce that effect, he was encouraged with the hope of being able to endure its presence. It continued descending slowly, until it rested upon the earth, and he was enveloped in the midst of it. When it first came upon him, it produced a peculiar sensation throughout his whole system; and immediately his mind was caught away, from the natural objects with which he was surrounded; and he was enwrapped in a heavenly vision" (Backman, First Vision, 172).

17 It no sooner appeared than I found myself ^adelivered from the enemy which held me bound. When the light rested upon me I ^bsaw two ^cPersonages, whose brightness and ^dglory defy all description, ^estanding above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name (The first word spoken by God in this dispensation was "Joseph." Heb for: "he who gathers for God." God knows us personally.) and said, pointing to the other—*This is My ^fBeloved ^gSon. Hear Him!* (On another occasion Joseph Smith said, "A personage appeared in the midst of this pillar of flame, which was spread all around and yet nothing consumed. Another personage soon appeared like unto the first" (Backman, First Vision, 159). Alexander Neibaur heard Joseph Smith tell about the First Vision in Nauvoo just two months before the Prophet's martyrdom. According to his account, Joseph "saw a personage in the fire, [of] light complexion, blue eyes, a piece of white cloth drawn over his shoulders, his right arm bare. After a while another person came to the side of the first" (Backman, First Vision, 177; spelling and punctuation standardized). In the Wentworth Letter, Joseph wrote that he "saw two glorious personages, who exactly resembled each other in features, and likeness" (Smith, History of the Church, 4:536). See Wentworth Letter, page 1003. Scripture records three other occasions upon which the Father has spoken from the heavens. These are the Savior's baptism and on the Mount of Transfiguration in the Old World as well as the introduction of Christ to the Nephites in the New World.)

18 My object in going to ^ainquire of the Lord was to know which of all the sects was right, that I might know which to join. No sooner, therefore, did I get possession of myself, so as to be able to speak, than I ^basked the Personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right (for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong)—and which I should join. (Why Joseph Smith, and why now? Elder Bruce R. McConkie stated: "There was a Calvin, a Zwingli, a Luther, a Wesley; there were wise and good men—morning stars who shone more brightly than their fellows—who arose in every nation. There were men of insight and courage who were sickened by the sins and evils of the

night. These great souls hacked and sawed at the chains with which the masses were bound. They sought to do good and to help their fellowmen— all according to the best light and knowledge they had. "In Germany and France and England and Switzerland and elsewhere groups began to break away from the religion of centuries past. A few rays of light were parting the darkness of the eastern sky. Many who sought freedom to worship God according to the dictates of their conscience migrated to America. And in due course, by the power of the Father, a new nation was created, a nation 'conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men were created equal' (Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address.) The United States of America came into being. Beyond the mountains, now not many leagues away, a new day was gestating in the womb of nature. As the earth continued to turn slowly and steadily on its decreed course, as the dawn brightened and the morning light increased, as the Constitution of the United States guaranteed religious freedom, as men were tempered in their feelings and began to view each other with more equity and fairness, as the Bible was published and read by more people, as darkness fled and light increased, the time for the rising of the gospel sun was at hand" (Conference Report, April 1978, 17).)

19 I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all ^awrong; and the Personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those ^bprofessors were all ^ccorrupt; that: "they ^ddraw near to me with their lips, but their ^ehearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the ^fcommandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the ^gpower thereof." 20 He again forbade me to join with any of them; and **many other things did he say unto me, which I cannot write at this time.** When I came to myself again, I found myself ^alying on my back, looking up into heaven. When the light had departed, **I had no strength**; but soon recovering in some degree, I went home. And as I leaned up to the fireplace, ^bmother inquired what the matter was. I replied, "Never mind, all is well—I am well enough off." I then said to my mother, "I have learned for myself that Presbyterianism is not true." It seems as though the ^cadversary was aware, at a very early period of my life, that I was destined to prove a disturber and an annoyer of his kingdom; else why should the powers of darkness combine against me? Why the ^dopposition and persecution that arose against me, almost in my infancy?

Some preachers and other professors of religion reject account of First Vision—Persecution heaped upon Joseph Smith—He testifies of the reality of the vision. (Verses 21-26.)

21 Some few days after I had this vision, I happened to be in company with one of the Methodist preachers, who was very active in the before mentioned religious excitement; and, conversing with him on the subject of religion, I took occasion to give him an account of the vision which I had had. I was greatly surprised at his behavior; he treated my communication not only lightly, but with great contempt, saying it was all of the devil, that there were no such things as ^avisions or ^brevelations in these days; that all such things had ceased with the apostles, and that there would never be any more of them.

22 I soon found, however, that my telling the story had excited a great deal of prejudice against me among professors of religion, and was the cause of great ^apersecution, which continued to increase; and though I was an ^bobscure boy, only between fourteen and fifteen years of age, and my circumstances in life such as to make a boy of no consequence in the world, yet men of high standing would take notice sufficient to excite the public mind against me, and create a bitter persecution; and this was common among all the sects—all united to persecute me.

23 It caused me serious reflection then, and often has since, how very strange it was that an obscure ^aboy, of a little over fourteen years of age, and one, too, who was doomed to the necessity of obtaining a scanty maintenance by his daily ^blabor, should be thought a character of sufficient importance to attract the attention of the great ones of the most popular sects of the day, and in a manner to create in them a

spirit of the most bitter ^cpersecution and ^dreviling. But strange or not, so it was, and it was often the cause of great sorrow to myself.

24 However, it was nevertheless a fact that I had beheld a ^avision. I have thought since, that I felt much like Paul, when he made his defense before King Agrippa, and related the account of the vision he had when he saw a light, and heard a voice; but still there were but few who believed him; some said he was dishonest, others said he was ^bmad; and he was ridiculed and reviled. But all this did not destroy the reality of his vision. He had seen a vision, he knew he had, and all the ^cpersecution under heaven could not make it otherwise; and though they should persecute him unto death, yet he knew, and would know to his latest breath, that he had both seen a light and heard a voice speaking unto him, and all the world could not make him think or believe otherwise.

25 So it was with me. I had actually seen a light, and in the midst of that light I saw two ^aPersonages, and they did in reality speak to me; and though I was ^bhated and ^cpersecuted 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 ^dfalsely 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 ^cdeny it, neither dared I do it; at least I knew that by so doing I would offend God, and come under condemnation.

26 I had now got my mind satisfied so far as the sectarian world was concerned—that it was not my duty to join with any of them, but to continue as I was until further ^adirected. I had found the testimony of James to be true—that a man who lacked wisdom might ask of God, and obtain, and not be ^bupbraided.

Our Heritage Chapter One
The First Vision

The Need for a Restoration

After the death of Jesus' Apostles, the power of the priesthood and many of the truths of the gospel were taken from the earth, beginning a long period of spiritual darkness called the great Apostasy. The prophet Amos had prophetically foreseen this loss and pronounced that the time would come when there would be "a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord" (**Amos 8:11**). During the long centuries of the Apostasy, many honest men and women sought the fulness of gospel truth but were unable to find it. Clergymen of many faiths preached differing messages and called on men and women to join with them. Although most were honest in their intent, none had the fulness of the truth or the authority of God.

However, the Lord in his mercy had promised that his gospel and priesthood power would one day be restored to the earth, never to be taken away again. As the nineteenth century dawned, his promise was about to be fulfilled and the long night of apostasy was about to end.

The Courage of Young Joseph Smith

In the early 1800s, the family of Joseph and Lucy Mack Smith lived in Lebanon, New Hampshire, in the United States of America. They were humble, obscure people who earned a meager living by their hard labor. Their fifth child, Joseph Jr., was seven years old when he survived a typhoid epidemic that caused more than 3,000 deaths in the New England area. As he was recovering, a severe infection developed in the marrow of the bone in his left leg, and the almost unbearable pain lasted for more than three weeks.

The local surgeon decided that the leg would have to be amputated, but at the insistence of Joseph's mother, another doctor was sent for. Nathan Smith, a physician at nearby Dartmouth College, said that he would try to save the leg using a relatively new and extremely painful procedure to remove part of the bone. The doctor brought cords to bind the boy, but Joseph objected, saying that he would bear the operation without them. He also refused brandy, the only form of anesthetic available to him, and asked only that his father hold him in his arms during the operation.

Joseph endured the operation with great courage, and Doctor Smith, one of the most knowledgeable physicians in the country, was able to save Joseph's leg. Joseph suffered for a long time before his leg healed and he could walk without pain. After Joseph's operation, the Smith family moved to Norwich, Vermont, where they suffered three successive years of crop failure, and then moved to Palmyra, New York.

The First Vision

As a young man, Joseph Smith assisted his family in clearing land, hauling rocks, and performing a multitude of other duties. His mother, Lucy, reported that the boy Joseph was given to serious reflection and often thought about the welfare of his immortal soul. He was especially concerned about which of all the churches proselyting in the Palmyra area was right. As he explained in his own words:

“During this time of great excitement my mind was called up to serious reflection and great uneasiness; but though my feelings were deep and often poignant, still I kept myself aloof from all these parties, though I attended their several meetings as often as occasion would permit. In process of time my mind became somewhat partial to the Methodist sect, and I felt some desire to be united with them; but so great were the confusion and strife among the different denominations, that it was impossible for a person young as I was, and so unacquainted with men and things, to come to any certain conclusion who was right and who was wrong. ...

“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; for the teachers of religion of the different sects understood the same passages of scripture so differently as to destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible.

“At length I came to the conclusion that I must either remain in darkness and confusion, or else I must do as James directs, that is, ask of God” (**Joseph Smith—History 1:8, Joseph Smith—History 1:11–13**).

On a beautiful spring morning in 1820 (Most likely it was March 26, 1820.), alone in a grove of trees near his home, Joseph Smith knelt down and began to offer up the desires of his heart to God, asking for guidance. He described what then happened:

“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” (JS—H 1:15).

The adversary of all righteousness knew that Joseph had a great work to do and attempted to destroy him, but Joseph, exerting all his powers, called upon God and was immediately delivered:

“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 spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other— This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!” (JS—H 1:16–17).

As soon as Joseph gained possession of himself, he asked the Lord which of all the religious sects was right and which he should join. The Lord answered that he must join “none of them, for they were all wrong” and “all their creeds were an abomination in his sight.” He said that they had a “form of godliness,” but they denied “the power thereof” (JS—H 1:19). He also told Joseph many more things.

After the vision ended, Joseph found that he was lying on his back, still looking into heaven. He gradually recovered his strength and returned home.

When the sun rose on that morning in 1820, Joseph Smith could scarcely have imagined that with the coming of twilight, a prophet would once more walk the earth. He, an obscure boy living in western New York, had been chosen by God to perform the marvelous work and wonder of restoring the gospel and the Church of Jesus Christ to the earth. He had seen two divine personages and was now uniquely able to testify to the true nature of God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. That morning was truly the dawning of a brighter day—light had flooded a grove of trees, and God the Father and Jesus Christ had called a 14-year-old boy to be their prophet.