

# Lessons from Joseph Smith

BONNIE L. OSCARSON

**B**rothers and sisters, it is a surreal experience to be standing here talking to you today. Forty-eight years ago I first set foot on this campus as a seventeen-year-old freshman. I remember attending BYU devotionals in the Smith Fieldhouse (because there was no Marriott Center yet), listening to speakers just like you are doing.

Things have changed a lot since then. The female students were not allowed to wear pants on campus—yes, we were cold all winter long. We whitewashed the Y on the mountain every year with a very long bucket brigade, and the Y was lit with real fire. David O. McKay was the prophet, Lyndon B. Johnson was the president of the United States, and I had lost a good friend in the war in Vietnam. The good news is that I did graduate from BYU. The bad news is that it took me forty-one years to do it. I was very elated at the event, but I do not recommend that educational strategy!

I can assure you that there is nothing in my life that could possibly have given me the notion that someday I would be standing at a podium in the Marriott Center delivering a devotional address. Just as with so many events that have taken place in my life during the past three and a half years, I truly relate to Sister Marjorie Pay Hinckley, who often said that she was “wondering how a nice girl like me got into a mess like this.”<sup>1</sup> Maybe there are some lessons to be learned from this.

## Lessons from the Life of Joseph Smith

The month of December is the birth month of the Prophet Joseph Smith. With that as inspiration, I would like to talk about three principles inspired by events from the early life of Joseph Smith that might be of value in your current situations and lives.

### *Lesson 1: You Have an Important Mission to Fulfill*

President Gordon B. Hinckley once quoted Reverend Edward T. Sullivan, who said:

*When God wants a great work done in the world or a great wrong righted, he goes about it in a very unusual way. He doesn't stir up his earthquakes or send forth his thunderbolts. Instead, he has a helpless baby born.<sup>2</sup>*

After a long period of apostasy and spiritual darkness, the time had come to fulfill the promises of the Lord that the Church of Jesus Christ would be restored to the earth with all of the keys and authority found in the original Church in Christ's day. How would the Lord accomplish this great task? *A baby was born.*

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*Bonnie L. Oscarson, Young Women general president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, delivered this devotional address on 6 December 2016.*

On December 23, 1805, a poor farmer's wife by the name of Lucy Mack Smith gave birth to a baby boy who was named after his father, Joseph Smith. He was their fourth child—he had two older brothers and an older sister.<sup>3</sup> Who could have guessed that this little obscure baby boy born in a small rented log house in the woods of Vermont to a family of very meager means would one day be described like this:

*Joseph Smith, the Prophet and Seer of the Lord, has done more, save Jesus only, for the salvation of men in this world, than any other man that ever lived in it.*<sup>4</sup>

And so we can learn our first lesson from Joseph Smith's simple beginnings. I testify that Joseph Smith was foreordained in the premortal life to be the prophet of the Restoration. He was born with certain gifts and abilities that he worked hard to develop. He took advantage of every possible opportunity to learn and grow. He was willing to stretch and extend his capacity—all of which helped him fulfill his mission.

I also testify that each one of you came to earth foreordained to accomplish certain things. Just as there didn't seem to be anything very remarkable about that little baby boy born in the woods of Vermont, it is perhaps hard to understand that you have the potential to make a great difference in the world. I assure you that every single person sitting in this audience today has the capacity to become a mighty tool in the hands of the Lord in accomplishing deeds of eternal worth. I suspect that if we could see ourselves as the Lord sees us, we would all be astounded by our potential.

Each of you, both men and women, need to understand that you have been given great opportunities for a uniquely balanced education. My hope for you is that you don't sell yourselves short. We, as a people, put a high priority and premium on marriage, motherhood, and fatherhood—and rightly so. Eternal families stand front and center in our theology and doctrine. The role of mother or father is the most important calling you will ever have in this life and in the

next. This is the time to be earnestly seeking for an eternal relationship, but it is also the time for education and preparation. All of you should be aiming for the stars!

Stretch yourselves. Take advantage of every opportunity to grow, to learn, to gain experience, and to further your education and learning. There may never be another time in your life in which the opportunities for expanding your intellectual capacities will be available like they are at this phase of your life.

Everyone has a different path for his or her life. In all your learning, learn to listen to the promptings of the Holy Ghost, which will help you make important decisions regarding your future. When and if marriage opportunities come, you will be a better wife or husband, mother or father, because you have taken advantage of this time to educate yourself. If marriage is delayed for you, your life will be richer, and you will have more to contribute because you took advantage of every opportunity for learning and knowledge.

One of the first scriptures I ever memorized was from Doctrine and Covenants 130:18–19:

*Whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection.*

*And if a person gains more knowledge and intelligence in this life through his diligence and obedience than another, he will have so much the advantage in the world to come.*

The only things we take with us into the next life are the desires and character traits we have developed, our family relationships, and the knowledge we have gained. May we let that be our guide for where we spend our time and efforts in this life. May we realize that now is the prime time, "through [our] diligence and obedience," for the "gaining knowledge" phase of this equation.

Intelligence and knowledge are not just educational in nature. They also involve the quest to perfect ourselves in all areas of our lives. Are you living up to your potential and being true to your knowledge of who you are? Too often we become

content with mediocrity in our standards, in our behavior, in our relationships, and certainly in our quest for spiritual and intellectual enlightenment. If you are not living up to the privileges you have been given in this life, now is a good time to reevaluate where and who you want to be now and in a few years and to begin making the changes that will help you rise above the commonplace, which the world finds acceptable.

Joseph Smith was many things, but one thing he never settled for was being average or mediocre! And just as Joseph Smith was chosen to come at a specific time and place to fulfill the mission the Lord had in mind for him, you have also been chosen to come to the earth now and have been and will yet be given gifts, abilities, experiences, and opportunities that will help you fulfill the mission the Lord has in mind for you. Prepare yourselves, follow the promptings of the Holy Ghost, and dare to reach for the stars!

### ***Lesson 2: Stand Up to Criticism***

The second lesson I want to talk about from the early life of the Prophet Joseph comes from his experiences with the First Vision. We are all familiar with the great spiritual truths that burst upon the world as a result of young Joseph's experience in the Sacred Grove on that spring day in 1820. The heavens were once again open, and the true nature of the Godhead was revealed. But have you considered the sudden and irreversible changes that this experience caused in the life of a fourteen-year-old boy?

Here is Joseph's own description of the after-effects of this great event on his social standing in the community:

*Some few days after I had this vision, I happened to be in company with one of the Methodist preachers, . . . and . . . 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 visions or revelations in these days; that all such things had ceased with the*

*apostles, and that there would never be any more of them.*

*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 persecution, which continued to increase; and though I was an obscure 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.<sup>5</sup>*

Think back to your fourteen-year-old self. How would you have reacted if all the trusted adults outside of your family began to make fun of you and persecute you? Would you begin to doubt yourself?

What about our current culture? We all have devices that have the capacity to dispense a constant stream of information as well as misinformation to us wherever we may find ourselves—waiting for the bus, sitting in a classroom, or sitting at home in our room. What filters do we have in place for deciding what to pay attention to, what to believe, and what we let influence us?

Let me read Joseph Smith's words describing the filter he used as he was pummeled with opinions and persecution:

*I had actually seen a light, and in the midst of that light I saw two Personages, and they did in reality speak to me; and though I was hated and persecuted for saying that I had seen a vision, yet it was true; and while they were persecuting me, reviling me, and speaking all manner of evil against me falsely for so saying, I was led to say in my heart: Why persecute me for telling the truth? I have actually seen a vision; and who am I that I can withstand God, or why does the world think to make me deny what I have actually seen? For I had seen a vision; I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it, neither dared I do it; at least I knew that by so doing I would offend God, and come under condemnation.<sup>6</sup>*

Even at the tender age of fourteen, Joseph relied upon what he knew that he knew to stand up to the skeptics surrounding him. I believe we also receive help from the Lord as we exercise faith in what the Lord has given us in our lives. We have been baptized and have entered into a covenant relationship with our Heavenly Father. Many of you have made sacred covenants in the temple. As we keep moving forward with faith, we are promised by the Lord:

*I will go before your face. I will be on your right hand and on your left, and my Spirit shall be in your hearts, and mine angels round about you, to bear you up.*<sup>7</sup>

I love the lesson from Oliver Cowdery’s experience described in section 6 of the Doctrine and Covenants. The Lord asked Oliver to think back on a time when his prayers had been answered and he had received a feeling of peace. The Lord then asked him, “What greater witness can you have than from God?”<sup>8</sup>

I believe the Lord wants us to remember the times when we *have* felt the Spirit and then use our past experiences to strengthen us and enable us to defend our faith.

You have received the promise of help in times of need. You have at times felt the Spirit in your lives. And you have experienced the joyous fruits of living the gospel. When opposition comes or you are going through a trial in which it is hard to feel the Spirit, remember the times when you have received that witness and hold on to your faith with both hands and all of your strength.

In the most recent general conference, Elder Ronald A. Rasband said:

*I encourage you . . . to recall, especially in times of crisis, when you felt the Spirit and your testimony was strong; remember the spiritual foundations you have built. . . .*

*Never forget, question, or ignore personal, sacred spiritual experiences. The adversary’s design is to distract us from spiritual witnesses, while the Lord’s desire is to enlighten and engage us in His work.*<sup>9</sup>

When you are confronted with questions, skepticism, and doubts coming from the outside world, take the wise advice of an apostle of the Lord, President Dieter F. Uchtdorf: “First doubt your doubts before you doubt your faith.”<sup>10</sup> Each of you has surely received at some point in your life a witness from God similar to that of Oliver Cowdery. Don’t be too quick to reject those experiences in favor of something you read on the Internet. Let the Holy Ghost be your filter for truth.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell once observed, “Some insist upon studying the Church only through the eyes of its defectors—like interviewing Judas to understand Jesus.”<sup>11</sup> I urge you to seek truth from pure sources that you know you can trust—the scriptures, the words of the living prophets, and the whisperings of the Holy Ghost. I urge you to learn from the strength and steadiness of a fourteen-year-old boy who trusted what he had seen and felt and never wavered in his faith.

### ***Lesson 3: Understand the Principle of Repentance***

Another of the great lessons we learn from Joseph Smith’s life has to do with repentance. He was a very young prophet of only twenty-two years of age and was early in the process of translating the Book of Mormon when he gave into peer pressure and made a significant error in judgment. It resulted in the loss of the first 116 pages of the translation of the Book of Mormon. He was chastised severely by the Lord, who told him:

*You should not have feared man more than God. . . .  
. . . Thou wast chosen to do the work of the Lord, but because of transgression, if thou art not aware thou wilt fall.*<sup>12</sup>

Put yourself in the shoes of this young prophet. Can you imagine how he must have felt as this whole episode unfolded? Perhaps he understood that he had been entrusted with something of indescribable eternal importance and that he had

let the Lord down! Can we not all relate to those feelings? We are all human, which means we are all going to sin and make mistakes.

Listen to what the Lord told Joseph in this same section just a few verses later:

*But remember, God is merciful; therefore, repent of that which thou hast done which is contrary to the commandment which I gave you, and thou art still chosen, and art again called to the work.*<sup>13</sup>

What healing balm those words must have been to the Prophet Joseph. He knew that there was hope and that the Lord is loving and forgiving and will always allow us to start again.

The ability to repent of our sins is one of the most basic and yet glorious doctrines of the gospel! It is a gift extended to all of God's children, and it is possible because of the Atonement of the Savior Jesus Christ. His invitation is tender and personal and filled with love. He has said to all:

*Will ye not now return unto me, and repent of your sins, and be converted, that I may heal you?*

*Yea, verily I say unto you, if ye will come unto me ye shall have eternal life. Behold, mine arm of mercy is extended towards you, and whosoever will come, him will I receive; and blessed are those who come unto me.*<sup>14</sup>

It is easy to think of the principle of repentance as a negative thing, as something we need only for the really serious sins—those that require a visit to the bishop's office. Sincere repentance is certainly a necessary part of overcoming serious sin, but, in reality, repentance should be part of our daily thoughts and behavior. "It is a change of mind and heart that gives [us] a fresh view about God, about [ourselves], and about the world."<sup>15</sup> Daily course correction is what helps us progress, improve, and change, day by day and year by year. The Atonement of Jesus Christ is what makes it possible for us to both overcome serious mistakes and to be better people today in our habits, relationships, and thoughts than we were yesterday. It is a joyous blessing and gift that gives us

hope. Without repentance, there is no hope—only despair.

As we look at Joseph Smith's experience with the lost 116 pages, we see that he learned from his mistakes. You will notice that from this point on he didn't badger or question the Lord when he didn't like an answer he had received in prayer. I am guessing that the way he felt when he thought he had lost his prophetic call was something he remembered for the rest of his life. He was asked to do some hard things and some unpopular things, but he never wavered. I think we would all love to be more like the Prophet Joseph and learn from our mistakes. Nevertheless, take heart in the Lord's promise that, despite our sins, "his hand is stretched out still"<sup>16</sup>—and it always will be.

I love the Prophet Joseph Smith. His life, example, and experiences provide a rich resource for our learning and understanding of gospel principles. I have mentioned only three today: striving to be the best we can be, holding on to our faith in the face of criticism, and making repentance a part of our daily lives. A close study of the life of this prophet of God will yield many more rich and important life lessons.

### **Personal Witness of the Prophet Joseph Smith**

I would like to share my personal testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith and explain why it is essential that we each come to know for ourselves that he was the divinely called prophet of the Restoration.

When I was a young girl of about seven or eight years of age, I loved to read. One Sunday afternoon I was looking for a book to read and found a small volume on our bookshelves called *From Plowboy to Prophet* by William A. Morton. I took the book down and began to read a simplified version of the life and experiences of Joseph Smith. I read in that simple little book about how a young man was prompted by a verse of scripture to seek answers to his questions and went into the woods to ask the Lord which church he should join. I read the account of how that unpretentious farm boy was visited by God the Father and His



Son, Jesus Christ, in a display of glory and light brighter than the noonday sun.

Certainly I had heard the story before, but it was in reading the account that day that I remember first feeling a confirmation from the Holy Ghost that this was true. I felt the confirmation in my heart. I was thrilled to think that the Lord speaks to His children on earth and that we have prophets in our day. It was the beginning of my conviction and testimony of the restored Church of Jesus Christ being established in these latter days.

It was in the beginning a childlike faith, but it was enough. Later, as a seminary student, I read the Book of Mormon. I really didn't have to ask if it was true. As I read, I felt that now-familiar warmth and confirmation from the Spirit that this was everything Joseph Smith had claimed it to be and that it was a confirmation of his mission. If the Book of Mormon is true, then it is further proof that Joseph Smith is a prophet of God.

Later in my life I was called to be an early-morning seminary teacher, and that year the course of study was the Doctrine and Covenants and Church history. All of our children were in school during the day, and I found myself sitting at our dining room table each day with every book about Church history I could lay my hands on. I sat for hours every day immersed in reading everything I could about the life of Joseph Smith, the early accounts of Church history, and the revelations received. I couldn't get enough. I was riveted.

It is interesting that as controversial questions have arisen in more recent times about Joseph Smith and some aspects of Church history, I feel grateful for that time in my life. I read all of those things years ago as I studied the life of Joseph Smith and the history of the early days of the Church. I am already familiar with many of the slanderous reports made by the Prophet's detractors in his time, so when they begin to resurface as "new information," my response is, "Really? This old stuff again?" Accurate knowledge together with faith is the best defense against skepticism.

We are encouraged to include in our testimonies that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world and that Joseph Smith is the prophet of the Restoration. I recently found a statement by Elder Bruce R. McConkie that explains why. He said, "The prophet Joseph Smith . . . is one of the great dispensation heads, and a dispensation head is a revealer for his age and his period of the knowledge of Christ and of salvation."<sup>17</sup>

Elder McConkie went on to say that there have always been testimony meetings, and if we had lived in the days of Adam or Enoch, we would have testified of their true callings and linked them to the Savior.<sup>18</sup>

And so I testify to you that Jesus Christ is our Savior and Redeemer and that Joseph Smith was called and foreordained before this world was to stand at the head of this dispensation as the legal administrator with the keys and authority for this period of time. He is the revealer of the knowledge of Jesus Christ and of salvation for our day. I testify that from Joseph's life we can learn many important gospel lessons to inspire and guide our lives. I testify that the Book of Mormon is a true record and that it stands as a second witness of the mission of Jesus Christ. I testify that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the Lord's kingdom on the earth today. I know of these things through the power and testimony that has come through the Holy Ghost. I so testify in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

#### Notes

1. Marjorie Pay Hinckley, in *Glimpses into the Life and Heart of Marjorie Pay Hinckley*, ed. Virginia H. Pearce (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1999), 108.

2. Reverend Edward Taylor Sullivan, in Charles L. Wallis, ed., *The Treasure Chest* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 53; quoted in Gordon B. Hinckley, "These, Our Little Ones," *Ensign*, December 2007, 5; see also Frank W. Boreham, *Mountains in the Mist: Some Australian Reveries* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1919), 169.

3. See *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: 2007), 2.
4. D&C 135:3.
5. JS—History 1:21–22.
6. JS—History 1:25.
7. D&C 84:88.
8. D&C 6:23.
9. Ronald A. Rasband, “Lest Thou Forget,” *Ensign*, November 2016, 114–15.
10. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Come, Join with Us,” *Ensign*, November 2013, 23; see F. F. (Fred Francis) Bosworth, *Christ the Healer* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Chosen Books, 1924, 2008), 23.
11. Neal A. Maxwell, “All Hell Is Moved,” BYU devotional address, 8 November 1977.
12. D&C 3:7, 9.
13. D&C 3:10.
14. 3 Nephi 9:13–14.
15. “Repentance,” *True to the Faith: A Gospel Reference* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 132.
16. Isaiah 5:25.
17. Bruce R. McConkie, “Joseph Smith: A Revealer of Christ,” BYU fireside address, 3 September 1978.
18. See McConkie, “Joseph Smith.”