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But for Joseph

KATHERINE D. PULLINS

I have entitled my discussion with you today “But for Joseph,” which is appropriate since on this day, the 27th of June, we commemorate each year the end of the Prophet Joseph Smith’s earthly mission. However, let me preface my remarks with a little background information.

First, I must say that I’ll never again complain about being given an assigned topic for a talk. Any restrictiveness is far outweighed by the overwhelming feeling of having the entire universe of gospel subjects laid out before you. When I heard the date of this devotional, I knew that the Prophet Joseph would be a part of what I would address today, most likely as an excellent illustration of qualities we should cultivate in our lives. However, since I am not a Church historian, I didn’t plan to have Joseph be *the* topic. But I am a convert to the religion Joseph Smith restored, and today I will be speaking unabashedly about that conversion. If you are not a Latter-day Saint, I invite you to listen with an open mind and heart.

It is that firsthand journey from the Prophet being an example to the entire focus of this talk that I will try to describe to you today. As I researched and read, interviewed and soul searched, my testimony of the Prophet Joseph moved from the factual to the very personal. So instead of discussing in a general way “But for

Joseph, how different would the world be?” I have asked myself and I am asking you to consider now, “But for Joseph, how different would *my life* be?”

I first heard the name Joseph Smith during the summer after my sophomore year in high school. I had attended a conference with a group of teenage girls, and we were returning from Galveston to our homes in El Paso, Texas. It was a long bus ride, and I think more to preserve our chaperones’ sanity than to give us an educational experience, we stopped in San Antonio, where the HemisFair, an event akin to the world’s fair, was being held. The adults turned us loose for several hours to visit the various pavilions, and my group of six soon found its way to one entitled “Man’s Search for Happiness.” When we discovered we had accidentally stumbled into a religious presentation, we tried to exit the side door—but those clever missionaries had locked it! We were stuck, so we feigned attention until the audience moved into the next room and we could escape through some unlocked doors. When we

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boarded the bus later that afternoon for what was still a long ride home, I noticed that the only piece of reading material I had managed to hold onto—not coincidentally, I believe now—during our dash through the fair was a pamphlet with Joseph Smith’s picture on the front. I read through it, motivated only by a need to pass the time, and mentally categorized it as “curious.”

The following spring, in my American history class, I was searching for an engaging topic for a term paper. It was a time when newspaper headlines spoke of civil rights and of legally atoning for past injustices. I would have preferred to do a paper on current events and discrimination against groups the majority labeled as “different,” but it was a history class. As I looked at a time line of the 1800s in one of the reference books, the persecutions against the Mormons captured my attention. I chose to take an objective (which turned out to be far more sympathetic) look back at the events that forced this peculiar religious group westward. The name Joseph Smith turned up again as I researched the topic in history books and encyclopedias.

Over the years when someone has asked about my conversion, I have not typically included these previous two experiences. My story usually began with the events that immediately preceded my hearing the missionary lessons. I think I had discounted these two experiences because of my resistance to the message in the first instance and my factual, even sterile, approach in the second. I feel differently today. I am convinced that these incidents provided background for my later acceptance of the gospel. They were an introduction to the concept of a recent prophet and a factual placement of events in time. Without this context I feel I would not have been sufficiently primed to accept, relatively quickly, the missionaries’ message about what God revealed to a 14-year-old boy in the spring of 1820. I believe these were preparatory steps,

and the Lord, knowing me, was customizing my instruction.

For about two years prior to that evening when I sat in my living room and listened to the missionaries present the first discussion, I had been on a “spiritual quest.” I had grown up in a family that valued Christian ideals such as honesty, fair treatment of others, and kindness, but I did not have a spiritual dimension in my life, and I longed for one. I felt a growing need, an urgency, really, to fix my mind and heart on the divine, so I began to study about and visit different churches. I approached each new introduction to the members of a congregation and the denomination’s beliefs and doctrine optimistically. I didn’t understand it completely at the time, but I had a two-part screening system in place: First I would try to take a spiritual reading, a check of how I was feeling, early in the visit; then I would turn to the doctrinal aspects and ask questions about the true purpose of life, the hereafter, and how these affected the way one lived now. None of the churches I visited passed even the first part of my test, and I was getting discouraged.

Now back to that evening in 1970: After a brief discussion of the Apostasy, the missionaries reverently explained the Restoration brought about through the Prophet Joseph Smith. They presented in some detail that curious story I had quickly read about in the pamphlet two years earlier. I felt my initial optimism that this church could be my spiritual destination slip away, and doubts crowded into my mind. Did they actually believe that God had appeared to someone just last century? And to a boy younger than I was rather than to a wise, aged prophet? While I formed my questions, the missionaries moved on to a flannel-board presentation with circles and lines that depicted the plan of salvation. Before long I felt that their explanation was somehow familiar to me, and they had my full attention. I was certain that they were speaking the truth in this part of their presentation, and I felt

some hope return. As the missionaries were leaving, they scheduled our next appointment, handed me a copy of *The Joseph Smith Story*, and asked me to commit to read it carefully and pray about it. I agreed to do so.

Later that night, my roller coaster of emotions hit a low point. As I thought back on all I had heard and felt during the evening and weighed the positives and negatives in my mind, I believed that I would cancel the next appointment I had set. But first I decided to keep my promise to the missionaries. After I had read the Prophet's narrative of the First Vision and beyond, I offered up an awkward, short prayer. Sleep came quickly, so I was not left to ponder the message for long. The next morning, as I knelt again in prayer, I found that the Spirit had eased my doubts about Joseph Smith's account and confirmed the truths of which he testified. I kept the appointment with the sister missionaries, and that decision has made all the difference in my life. But for Joseph, I would not have found my spiritual home in the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.

At the time, that level of understanding and testimony was sufficient for me to go forth with my study, baptism, and confirmation. When the Lord told the members of his newly formed church, "For his word ye shall receive, as if from mine own mouth, in all patience and faith" (D&C 21:5), He most likely was admonishing some whose faith was at such an early stage as mine was then. Patience and faith are essential elements in the development of our testimonies, but our progression must be accelerated in these latter days. After visiting the Sacred Grove on one occasion, President Gordon B. Hinckley wrote in his journal that he felt an "ever-growing compulsion to bear testimony of the divinity of the Lord and of the mission of the Prophet Joseph Smith. I think this world needs this more than any other thing" (in Sheri Dew, *Go Forward with Faith* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1996], 326).

Preparing this talk has forced me to assess the testimony I began to build 30 years ago of the Prophet Joseph and the eternal truths he restored. I know that this initial and essential conviction has been strengthened by study, prayer, and life's experience; but I needed to draw closer, to look deeper at his mission. The Prophet Joseph served as a divine conduit in bringing to light marvelous and precious truths. In his eyewitness account of the Martyrdom, President John Taylor summed up Joseph's contribution:

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. . . . [He has] left a fame and name that cannot be slain. He lived great, and he died great in the eyes of God and his people; and like most of the Lord's anointed in ancient times, has sealed his mission and his works with his own blood. [D&C 135:3]

In a space of approximately 24 years, the Prophet Joseph accomplished much that has eternal, historical, and personal implications for each of us. As I attempt to list the following four of his contributions and the ways each has particular meaning in my life, I encourage you to make your own list.

1. Joseph Smith opened up communication with the heavens.

Because he was willing to ask God directly, the Prophet Joseph—and each of us through him—learned eternal truths about the nature of God and the current status of God's kingdom on earth. He learned that the forces of the adversary are real and combat all that is righteous and pure. Joseph also learned that the Father and the resurrected Lord are separate beings who knew him and spoke to him by way of instruction. He learned that none of the churches on the earth at that time had the truth and that he should join none of them. In his book *Here We Stand*, Joseph Fielding McConkie

underscored the personal implications the First Vision holds for each of us:

The way we answer questions about our faith ought to be by finding the quickest and most direct route to the Sacred Grove. That is our ground. It is sacred ground. It is where the heavens are opened and the God of heaven speaks. It is where testimonies are born and the greatest truths of heaven are unveiled. [Here We Stand (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1995), 6]

But for the Prophet Joseph’s experience in the Sacred Grove, I would not have an understanding of the loving nature of God and my literal claim to divine heritage, described in Doctrine and Covenants 25:1: “All those who receive my gospel are sons and daughters in my kingdom.” The God I had learned about before I accepted the gospel was removed, ever-judging, and powerful. However, I had an experience as a young child that was not consistent with this unapproachable image of deity. At that time I was living in rural Arkansas. Because I had no brothers or sisters, I had adopted an agreeable farm dog as my constant companion. One afternoon as we were walking home along a single-lane road, she was struck and killed by a truck as I looked on. That night, as I tried to fall asleep, my grief overwhelmed me. Before long that grief turned into fear that I, too, might die suddenly. No one was near enough in the house to console me, so I offered up a prayer, and my pleading was heard. I felt encircled by warm, loving arms and instinctively knew I was being comforted by my Father. As the missionaries explained the nature of a loving Heavenly Father who answered young Joseph Smith’s prayer, my experience 13 years earlier came immediately to my mind and validated their words.

2. Joseph Smith translated ancient scripture and recorded modern-day revelation.

With the assistance of his scribes, Joseph’s unceasing efforts resulted in the translation of

the Book of Mormon, another testament of Jesus Christ; the Pearl of Great Price; and the publication of the Doctrine and Covenants. Can you imagine your life without the precepts, the images, and the understanding that the Book of Mormon lends? We know that “the Book of Mormon [is] the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion, and a man [can] get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book” (HC 4:461). But for Joseph, we would not have this book of scripture. Think how limited our understanding would be if we did not have Father Lehi’s vision of the tree of life. What a loss if we did not have the opportunity to know Nephi, Alma, Moroni, and others through their own words. How incomplete our view of the Savior’s ministry would be if we did not have at our fingertips the tender account in 3 Nephi of Him with His “other sheep” in America. And how lacking our understanding of the creation would be without the accounts recorded in the books of Moses and Abraham. Without the intensive instruction in Church history and covenant-making and -keeping in the Doctrine and Covenants, would we be able to truly appreciate the legacy of our faith’s past and be prepared to serve in the kingdom?

3. Through his persistent and resilient efforts, Joseph Smith brought people to their Savior Jesus Christ.

In this dispensation the Prophet Joseph literally brought heaven closer to earth as he lifted the darkness of apostasy, banished it, and brought to light the Savior’s plain and precious doctrine. He was the chosen instrument of the Lord who was called both to distinguish the true, restored church from other denominations and to bring forth the power and purity of Christ’s true doctrines. Joseph F. Smith stated in *Gospel Doctrine*:

I believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ, because more than ever I come nearer the possession of the

actual knowledge that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, through the testimony of Joseph Smith . . . that he today stands before the world as the last great, actual, living, witness of the divinity of Christ's mission and His power to redeem man from the temporal death and also from the second death. . . . Thank God for Joseph Smith. [GD, 495]

Thus the Prophet Joseph provided the needed linkage to the Savior who, as the Great Mediator, connects us to the Father (see D&C 76:22–24). Indeed, Joseph taught that

the fundamental principles of our religion are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets, concerning Jesus Christ, that He died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it. [Teachings, 121]

But for Joseph, my understanding of the Atonement still would be theoretical and abstract. I would not have the information that tells me that the Savior's sacrifice was, yes, infinite and all-encompassing, but also very specifically *for me*. Understanding the personal nature and application of the Atonement allows me to know that, after all I can do, my Savior and Redeemer in His mercy can complete my circle of repentance and growth and lift my soul. He can and has changed my heart when no amount of study, willpower, or well-intended advice could affect my need. I am thankful to know that this greatest of gifts can make me, in spite of my weaknesses, more fit for His service.

4. Joseph Smith established the kingdom of God on earth today.

Under divine tutelage, the Prophet Joseph organized the Church. He directed the construction of the Kirtland and Nauvoo Temples and restored the ordinances of the house of the Lord for the benefit of individuals and families. He was ordained to the holy priesthood, and, through him, its powers and blessings were restored to the earth. Joseph saw that mission-

aries were sent forth to take the gospel not only to surrounding areas but also to Europe and the isles of the sea. He established the Relief Society for the sisters that they might have opportunities to extend charity to those in need and to save souls.

But for Joseph, I could not be a participant in the building of the kingdom of God today. Without the fellowship of my brothers and sisters in the gospel, I would not be strengthened and sustained. Since my baptism I have had only a few times when I was unable to associate with the Saints, and then it was for only a short period of time. But how I missed their kind counsel and that communication from spirit to spirit.

I can't imagine my life without the refuge and perspective of the temple. If the sacred ordinances that are performed therein were not on the earth today, I would not have the understanding of eternal marriage that stands firm in the face of trials and challenges. I am so grateful that our son, Brandt, and his wife, Lori, currently have the privilege of serving in the Washington D.C. Temple. Brandt recently wrote in an e-mail:

Last night was our night to work in the temple, and while I was officiating, I heard myself speaking the incredible blessings that are promised, and was overwhelmed by the great mercy and love that our Father shows us by extending those blessings to us and giving me the opportunity to help pronounce those blessings upon others who are anxiously waiting for them on both sides of the veil.

What a wonderful blessing it is to live when the fullness of the gospel, the fullness of the priesthood, and the fullness of the blessings of our Savior's Atonement are here and waiting for all!

I, too, marvel at the blessings that are ours because temples are now among us. In a little over a month, our son Micah will be sealed for time and all eternity to a beautiful daughter of God in the Lord's house. All of our sons, the

two daughters they have added to our family, and other loved ones will witness that all-important moment in eternity. Today my heart nearly bursts with gratitude just thinking about the occasion. But for Joseph, those priesthood keys could not be exercised in our behalf.

And without the priesthood, and a husband worthy and willing to call down blessings of comfort, healing, and strength upon our family, the world's "three Ds"—distraction, discouragement, and despair—would never be far away from our door. And without the selfless sacrifice of missionary work, I literally would not be with you today. In addition, my husband and sons would never have had the privilege of seeking out and bringing into the fold people who at first appeared so different in language and custom but soon became quite literally their brothers and sisters.

Recently our oldest son Travis traveled to Florida to be at Miami International Airport when Elder Franklyn Tavarez returned from his mission in Michigan. When he was serving in the Fort Lauderdale Mission, Travis had the privilege of baptizing Frankie when he was a young teenager. How I wish I could have witnessed the embrace that they shared as brothers and fellow missionaries upon his arrival!

Our missionary son, Taylor, who is completing his mission in Chile next month, recently shared his testimony with us in a letter:

I know this work is true. I know that the standard of truth has been erected. I feel the power of the priesthood when I humbly use it. I know that Jesus is our Savior. I will forever be grateful for the gospel in my life and will forever defend the truth and this, the Lord's Church.

Having the privilege to serve full-time and never-ending missions that bring souls unto Christ through the gospel that Joseph restored is the sweetest work to which we can devote ourselves.

But for Joseph, the Relief Society would not have been divinely organized. I love this organization and the privilege it affords me to serve with the exceptional sisters of the Church. That is another talk for another day, but let me just say that when Joseph told his beloved Emma and the sisters gathered in 1842 that he "turn[ed] the key" in their behalf, under the direction of the priesthood of God, Heavenly Father provided a structure for his daughters to have firsthand experience with both extending and receiving Christlike service (see page 32 of "Minutes of the Nauvoo Female Relief Society," 28 April 1842, LDS Church Historical Department, Salt Lake City).

Thus we are all eternally indebted to the Prophet Joseph Smith. How do we demonstrate that gratitude? Let me suggest three ways.

1. We can seek to love and honor the Prophet Joseph as we learn more of his life and his mission.

After spending this time researching the Prophet, I realized that I did not know enough about him as an individual. The first quality that comes to my mind now when I think of him is humility. From his earnest plea in the Sacred Grove to his nobility in Liberty Jail and at Carthage, Joseph set aside all pride and sublimated his will to the Father and His work. In his book *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis described a humble man not as someone with downcast eyes who is always underrepresenting his worth and contribution. Rather, he said, if you were to meet a humble man,

probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what you said to him. If you do dislike him it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all. [Mere Christianity (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 114; book 3, chapter 8, paragraph 13; emphasis in original]

This was the Prophet Joseph.

And the Prophet did enjoy life. President Joseph F. Smith described Joseph:

*O, he was full of joy; he was full of gladness; he was full of love. . . . And while he could play with children and amuse himself at simple, innocent games among men, he also communed with the Father and the Son and spoke with angels, and they visited him, and conferred blessings and gifts and keys of power upon him. [Joseph F. Smith, in Brian H. Stuy, comp., *Collected Discourses*, 5 vols. (Burbank, California: B.H.S. Publishing, 1987–92), 5:29]*

Wouldn't it have been wonderful to spend time with this man, this prophet? I believe that we would each have loved him in a very personal way. President Brigham Young expressed his feelings for Joseph with great enthusiasm:

I feel like shouting hallelujah, all the time, when I think that I ever knew Joseph Smith, the Prophet whom the Lord raised up and ordained, and to whom He gave keys and power to build up the kingdom of God on earth and sustain it. [JD 3:51]

The Prophet inspired love in those who knew him best. The Prophet's nephew, President Joseph F. Smith, also stated, "Where [Joseph Smith's name] is spoken of for good, . . . they revere him, and they love him, as they love no other man" (*GD*, 481). At the dedication of the Joseph Smith Memorial Building, President Gordon B. Hinckley summed up his feelings for the Prophet by simply exclaiming, "I love the Prophet Joseph Smith. I love the Prophet Joseph Smith!" (in "A Heroic Figure," *Ensign*, September 1990, 38). Brothers and sisters, I can now join these brethren and say I love this man, this prophet.

2. We can bear testimony of Joseph Smith's crucial role in this dispensation.

The Prophet reminded all members of the Church, "When you joined this Church you enlisted to serve God. When you did that you

left the neutral ground, and you never can get back on to it" (Daniel Tyler, in "Recollections of the Prophet Joseph Smith," *Juvenile Instructor* 27, no. 16 [15 August 1892]: 492). Our testimonies cannot be generic; they cannot be neutral on the subject of the life and mission of the Prophet. We are instructed in Doctrine and Covenants 31:4, "You shall declare the things which have been revealed to my servant, Joseph Smith." And we should never testify of revelations without acknowledging the revelator. Brigham Young's logic on this point was direct and profound:

If Jesus lives, and is the Saviour of the world, Joseph Smith is a Prophet of God, and lives in the bosom of his father Abraham. Though they have killed his body, yet he lives and beholds the face of his Father in heaven; and his garments are pure as the angels that surround the throne of God; and no man on the earth can say that Jesus lives, and deny at the same time my assertion about the Prophet Joseph. [JD 1:38]

In section 122 of the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord told Joseph:

The ends of the earth shall inquire after thy name, and fools shall have thee in derision, and hell shall rage against thee;

While the pure in heart, and the wise, and the noble, and the virtuous, shall seek counsel, and authority, and blessings constantly from under thy hand. [D&C 122:1–2]

And in section 6 the Lord admonished us, "Therefore be diligent; stand by my servant Joseph, faithfully, in whatsoever difficult circumstances he may be for the word's sake" (D&C 6:18). May we demonstrate by the testimonies we bear that we are diligently standing by him and can be counted among those who revere Joseph's name and essential role.

3. We can serve continuously and faithfully in building the kingdom.

In the *Lectures on Faith*, Joseph charged us to live as he had:

Let us here observe, that a religion that does not require the sacrifice of all things never has power sufficient to produce the faith necessary unto life and salvation; for, from the first existence of man, the faith necessary unto the enjoyment of life and salvation never could be obtained without the sacrifice of all earthly things. [Lectures on Faith 6:7]

In the Church we experience different seasons of service. In each calling we have the opportunity to sacrifice more of ourselves than we ever have before. We honor Joseph by serving well, literally consecrating our efforts in doing that which no one else can accomplish at that time and in that place to serve the Master.

As I close today, I want to thank those two sister missionaries and their stake counterparts who, 30 years ago, challenged me to read and pray about the Prophet Joseph's story. I also am immensely grateful to those who, in recent months, have helped me know Joseph better as a man and a foreordained prophet. My family and friends have expressed unwavering support and encouragement. At a moment of despair when a significant part of my text for this talk had somehow "evaporated" into cyberspace, Heidi Swinton, who wrote last year's amazing PBS production *An American Prophet*, took time she didn't have to lend me perspective. I also appreciate Liz Lemon Swindle, the gifted artist, who has brought Joseph closer to our hearts through her paintings and has allowed me to share some of them with you today.

On this occasion we are gathered here as Saints in a building that bears the Prophet's name because of what happened in that Sacred Grove. And on this anniversary of the Martyrdom, I join with President Hinckley in reminding us that the accomplishments of the life of the Prophet Joseph Smith will never be blurred. The testimony of Joseph lives on.

Now, my brothers and sisters, most of you will not be asked to make such sacrifices or to respond to such calls. But what you do with your lives as you live them from day to day is no less important. ["Let Us Move This Work Forward," Ensign, November 1985, 85]

Whatever our present calling or opportunity, may we carry on his work. By so doing, we honor Joseph's memory and bring glory to our Savior and our Father.

Brothers and sisters, I challenge all of us, at whatever level—even if we are at a very early stage in our journey of faith—to deepen our understanding of the Prophet Joseph and his divine mission, to acknowledge before our Father and all who will listen that, but for the Prophet's role in this dispensation, our lives would be barren and our hope would fail us. I speak from personal experience when I say to you that seeking this new level of testimony will not come easily; the adversary will attempt to block your progress. It will require a letting go of pride and the things of this world that confuse and distract you. You will need to make a higher level of commitment to the work that the Prophet Joseph died to further. But all the effort is worth it, and it is essential that you commit yourself to it. For me, the strengthening of my testimony of the Prophet Joseph seemed to come together in a single moment. All of the historical and spiritual pieces fell into place as I read the simple, direct statement of the Lord to his beloved servant Joseph—and to each of us—in Doctrine and Covenants 5:10: "But this generation shall have my word through you."

I have glimpsed his earnest desire, unstoppable faith, the discouragement he made productive, and his feelings of enveloping joy, and I can now testify, with a conviction born of love for the Prophet Joseph and inexpressible gratitude for his mission, that he is a prophet of God. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.