

# “Stand by My Servant Joseph”

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I am grateful, with Sister Samuelson, to be with you as we begin a new year and a new semester. I hope you share my enthusiasm for our opportunities and prospects in 2005. I also hope you have not yet broken all of your New Year’s resolutions!

As you know, the year 2005 is the bicentennial anniversary of the birth of the Prophet Joseph Smith. During this year, throughout the Church and here at BYU, we will hear much and be reminded frequently of the life and mission of our Prophet of the Restoration. I am grateful to be able to add my voice to the millions of others who will honor this great man in so many ways in the days ahead.

Just last November we were privileged to hear from Sister Heidi Swinton, who spoke at our campus devotional on the topic “Joseph Smith: Lover of the Cause of Christ.” It was a masterful address that presented history, facts, truth, and testimony. Now that our devotional presentations are so readily available, I’ll not take time to repeat much of what she said. I do want to draw attention to one of those lines or phrases that has caused me to reflect, assess, think, and recommit myself. It is one that evokes sweet memories and striking insights.

Sister Swinton mentioned a verse from section 6 of the Doctrine and Covenants that was given to Oliver Cowdery during the time

he served as Joseph’s scribe while he was translating the Book of Mormon. She also reminded us that this instruction was not just for Oliver but is for all of us as well (see D&C 25:16). This is what the Lord said: “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).

The phrase “stand by my servant Joseph” is the one that especially caught my attention. What did it mean to Oliver, and what should it mean to us?

The word *stand* has many meanings. The footnote in our scriptures suggests two words as possible synonyms for our special consideration. They are *diligence* and *loyalty*. I believe there are other definitions or constructions that might also apply. I intend to consider some of them with you.

Before I do, let me mention some of the things we know very well about the Prophet Joseph. From the very beginning, even before the Church was organized, it became clear that Joseph Smith was no ordinary young man. Although born into modest means and circumstances, he quickly was identified as someone

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very special. You are aware of his early experiences. The First Vision was an unexpected occurrence that not only changed his life forever but literally changed the history of the world. His initial interview with the angel Moroni, occurring while he was just 17 years old, taught him that his life and work would not be usual by any measure.

Listen to these words from his history:

*He called me by name, and said unto me that he was a messenger sent from the presence of God to me, and that his name was Moroni; that God had a work for me to do; and that my name should be had for good and evil among all nations, kindreds, and tongues, or that it should be both good and evil spoken of among all people. [JS—H 1:33]*

That is an amazing prophecy for any 17-year-old. Think of the statistical improbability of the assertion that his “name should be had for good and evil” so broadly around the world. Yet the name of Joseph Smith is widely known among virtually all of the nations of the earth.

Of those who have heard of Joseph, their knowledge and understanding are highly variable and usually incomplete in very important ways. The Church and its leaders, missionaries, and other representatives are doing, and will do, much to improve what the world knows and understands of Joseph Smith. All of us will have parts to play, and our roles will be important.

The understanding that people have of him occurs at different levels. Let me mention a few. I hope as I mention these that you might mentally note where you stand and which level best describes you.

*Recognition:* Increasingly, people recognize the name Joseph Smith and are able to relate him to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Book of Mormon, and other basics of our faith. Some know enough, or believe that they know enough, to have developed

opinions about him—positive or negative. Probably most people throughout the world fit into this category and are not exercised about him sufficiently to try and learn more. It is important that this group should not include any of us.

*Appreciation:* Of those who recognize the Prophet Joseph by name, there are those who know that he accomplished some things that have made a difference. They know that he organized a church and movement that has grown dramatically and has influenced many lives. Although they may or may not believe in his work or admire his contributions, they acknowledge that the world is different because of his life and efforts.

*Admiration:* Many who appreciate that Joseph made a difference also admire many of his accomplishments and contributions. Although still not necessarily subscribing to his teachings or his mission, they admire what he did in Kirtland, Missouri, and Nauvoo. They admire his ability to enlist a following and to inspire people to sacrifice greatly for the cause he espoused. Again, not all who admire his accomplishments necessarily endorse his positions, even when they speak with admiration of some of the fruits of the gospel as he taught it.

*Testimony:* A subset of those who recognize, appreciate, and admire the Prophet Joseph are those who have a testimony of the truthfulness of his mission, his teachings, and his accounts of encounters with heavenly beings. They have no reservations about him or the doctrines he revealed, but they may not have fully internalized what this should mean to them.

*True loyalty (or those who stand by him):* Some, and I hope this includes you, have a testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith and his unique and special mission. It is to you that I frame my question: What does it mean to “stand by my servant Joseph”? It means more than just recognition, appreciation—even admiration, belief, and testimony. The counsel given to

Oliver Cowdery is illustrative of what I mean. To Oliver's great credit, he never denied his testimony of the events and experiences he had with Joseph Smith. Unfortunately, he did not live up to what the Lord required of him and lost his place to one more faithful (see D&C 124:95).

Another who was trusted and given great privileges and responsibility—as well as being instructed to stand by Joseph—was John C. Bennett (see D&C 124:16). Unfortunately, he not only was disloyal to Joseph, he lost his testimony as well, which is not uncommon with those who transgress (see D&C 63:16).

As you know, the one called to replace Oliver and enjoy the privileges, responsibilities, and destiny with the Prophet Joseph was his brother Hyrum. Without contrasting Hyrum with others unnecessarily, let us examine how Hyrum responded to his charge to stand by Joseph. There are many examples. Let me focus on just one for now (see D&C 11).

Even before the Church was organized, Hyrum, Joseph's older brother by five years, knew the truthfulness of what Joseph was teaching and reporting. He wanted to do his part and hoped and pled to be called as a missionary. I believe that you will want to study carefully the entire 11th section of the Doctrine and Covenants, which is the answer given by the Lord through Joseph Smith to Hyrum's entreaty. A useful exercise is to count the number of times in these verses that Hyrum is told that his work is to "keep the commandments." Let me just repeat part of the oft-quoted verse that must have been both a test and a trial for Hyrum.

"Seek not to declare my word, but first seek to obtain my word" (D&C 11:21). I suppose, had Hyrum been inclined, that he could have been just as offended as were Oliver and others when Joseph, acting in his role as president and prophet, had to tell them the hard truth as well. To Hyrum's everlasting credit, in spite of his initial disappointment that he was not

to be a missionary at that time, he stood by Joseph and received the blessings God reserves for those most loyal and trusted. These blessings included, less than a year later, the exact opportunity that Hyrum had initially sought (see D&C 23:3).

Another who stood by Joseph was Brigham Young. Think of his loyalty. He said, "I feel like shouting hallelujah [*sic*], all the time, when I think that I ever knew Joseph Smith" (*JD* 3:51). We don't have time today to catalog all of the times Brigham demonstrated his complete fealty to Joseph, but the Prophet recognized and appreciated it. Near the end of his life Joseph said, "Of the [original] Twelve Apostles chosen in Kirtland, . . . there have been but two but what have lifted their heel against me—namely Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball" (*HC* 5:412).

Grateful are we that there were others besides Hyrum, Brigham, and Heber C. Kimball who stood by Joseph even when it may have seemed to many to be folly to do so. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, it was from this group who stood by Joseph that replacements for the Twelve and other key leadership responsibilities were later selected. Let me mention just two of them.

John Taylor, who would follow Brigham Young as Joseph's successor, was converted to the Restoration by an apostle who later wavered for a period before returning to stand by Joseph. John Taylor, however, was stalwart from the time of his baptism in 1836. During the dark days in Kirtland he attended a meeting where President Joseph Smith, not in attendance, was severely criticized by apostates who once had been Joseph's friends and associates. John Taylor courageously offered this defense:

*It was Joseph Smith, under the Almighty, who developed the first principles, and to him we must look for further instructions. If the spirit which he manifests does not bring blessings, I am very much*

*afraid that the one manifested by those who have spoken, will not be very likely to secure them. The children of Israel, formerly, after seeing the power of God manifested in their midst, fell into rebellion and idolatry, and there is certainly very great danger of us doing the same thing. [In B. H. Roberts, *The Life of John Taylor* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1963), 41]*

John Taylor saw what had happened to his colleagues and recognized the attendant spiritual risks that they faced. I submit that the danger to us as well is both great and real should we also fail to stand by Joseph.

Another who stood steadfast in the chilling wind of a contagious apostasy was Wilford Woodruff. He, like John Taylor, was called to replace those who had fallen, and he himself later succeeded President Taylor as the prophet. In discussing these matters and instruction given to him at the time of his call to the Twelve, he had the following to say:

*He [meaning Joseph Smith] taught us some very important principles, some of which I here name. . . . Brother Joseph laid before us the cause of those men's turning away from the commandments of God. He hoped we would learn wisdom by what we saw with the eye and heard with the ear, and that we would be able to discern the spirits of other men without being compelled to learn by sad experience. He then remarked that any man . . . who pursued a course whereby he would ignore or in other words refuse to obey any known law or commandment or duty—whenever a man did this, neglected any duty God required at his hand in attending meetings, filling missions, or obeying counsel, he laid a foundation to lead him to apostasy and this was the reason those men had fallen. [JD 21:190]*

Note with care the risk attendant to violating commandments and covenants.

On another occasion, Brother Woodruff bore this testimony, which witness of Joseph and his mission was consistent throughout his life:

*It has been my faith and belief from the time that I was made acquainted with the Gospel that no greater prophet than Joseph Smith ever lived on the face of the earth save Jesus Christ. He was raised up to stand at the head of this great dispensation—the greatest of all dispensations God has ever given to man. [JD 21:317]*

This testimony was beautiful and clear, but what was even more impressive and helpful was the steady and stalwart behavior that Wilford Woodruff demonstrated in clearly and consistently standing by Joseph Smith.

Some of that original group of apostles and other followers seemed to have lost their testimonies, although Oliver and others apparently had not, in spite of their differences with Joseph. They just were not able to stand by Joseph when the heat and pressure became so severe.

What does it mean to us to stand by Joseph? We do not have a doctrine of infallibility. Joseph himself was quick to admit his own shortcomings, but he was also a very good and stable boy and man. In describing his own situation and occasional errors, he said: “No one need suppose me guilty of any great or malignant sins. A disposition to commit such was never in my nature” (JS—H 1:28). His openness on these matters was lifelong, and shortly before his death he said: “I never told you I was perfect; but there is no error in the revelations which I have taught” (*Teachings*, 368).

Our testimonies are vital, but not sufficient by themselves. The Bible reminds us that even the devils believe in Jesus (see James 2:19). Our love and respect for Joseph Smith is important, but if it is not incorporated into our lives internally and consistently, we cannot stand by Joseph. We may not expect to have the same experiences that Oliver Cowdery and others had with Joseph Smith, but we can expect to have the same convictions—and to demonstrate them in the same way that Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, John Taylor, Wilford

Woodruff, and countless more anonymous thousands have since the Restoration of the gospel.

Such conviction comes to us by study, by faith, and by always acting appropriately—and it is hard work. Those who I have named, as well as legions of others, have obtained this witness and internalized it through the manifestations of the Holy Ghost. The Holy Ghost is anxious to confer this sustaining knowledge to us because the testimony of Joseph’s work and mission is key and central to our testimony of that which is most important of all: that Jesus is the Christ, our Savior and Redeemer, and the literal living Son of our living Heavenly Father.

How grateful we are to Joseph for his worthiness to witness what he did for us. How grateful we should be that we are allowed to “stand by” Joseph with our own actions and testimonies of the Father and the Son.

I have come to believe that this attitude is in large part the crux of the matter when the question of “Why BYU?” is asked. You know the account of our origins and our history. You know that our people, in their absolute poverty, have always sacrificed so that those who follow will have opportunities for excellent education in both things of the spirit and of the world. I hope you know that this is still the case. Although our collective circumstances are better than ever, we are still the beneficiaries of significant sacrifice on the part of many. Why should this be the case when the opportunities we enjoy are available to only a fraction of the worthy and desirous who wish to be where we are? I hope you are constantly thinking about this as I am.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell, in his last visit to BYU in the spring of 2004, shed some significant light on this matter. In his comments he included our excellent faculty and generous donors, as well as you special students, in his expressions of gratitude for what has been and is being accomplished here. Listen carefully to his words:

*In a way LDS scholars at BYU and elsewhere are a little bit like the builders of the temple in Nauvoo, who worked with a trowel in one hand and a musket in the other. Today scholars building the temple of learning must also pause on occasion to defend the Kingdom. I personally think this is one of the reasons the Lord established and maintains this University. The dual role of builder and defender is unique and ongoing. I am grateful we have scholars today who can handle, as it were, both trowels and muskets. [“Blending Research and Revelation,” remarks at the BYU President’s Leadership Council meeting, 19 March 2004]*

We are here not only to achieve academically, not only spiritually, but also to do our parts in establishing the Church throughout the world and defending the kingdom. Happily, in our day we do not often actually use either trowels or muskets. We must, however, keep the metaphor in mind as we build our own knowledge while contributing as we can to the expansion of understanding in the world broadly. Likewise, we are here to strengthen faith and testimony, both personally and in the lives of those we are privileged to influence. In other words, we are here to do what Brigham Young and Gordon B. Hinckley expect us to do: to “stand by” Joseph.

We proclaim that the mission of Brigham Young University “is to assist individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life” (“The Mission of Brigham Young University”). To this end, BYU seeks to develop students of faith, intellect, and character who have the skills and the desire to continue learning and to serve others throughout their lives. As has been stated repeatedly, these are the common aims of all education at BYU. We want everyone to achieve personally as much as is possible, but we do so with the important understanding that this goal is motivated by the desire to help each one of us be more effective in serving others.

Let me return to the counsel of the Lord to Oliver that provides the basis for my message today: “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). In that context, Oliver Cowdery was given this additional counsel that I share with you now as you strive to incorporate into your own lives the necessary characteristics and determination that will allow you always and forever to stand by Joseph: “Be patient; be

sober; be temperate; have patience, faith, hope and charity” (D&C 6:19). To these I would add also the necessity of the “mighty change” of heart (Alma 5:12–14) that gives one the perspective and conviction to stand by Joseph always—meaning being true constantly and consistently to the principles he taught and the Church that he established.

May we always be worthy and willing to “stand by my servant Joseph” is my prayer. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.