

Joseph Smith: Lover of the Cause of Christ

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The day was June 27, 1844. The place, Carthage, Illinois. In the early evening Willard Richards, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, dispatched sobering news to the Saints in Nauvoo: “Joseph and Hyrum are dead. Taylor wounded, not very badly. I am well. . . . The job was done in an instant” (HC 6:621–22).

A cortege left the hostile county seat of Carthage early the next morning and arrived in Nauvoo just after three in the afternoon. The mourners were waiting in the streets for the return of their prophet-leader.

“My soul sickened and I wept before the Lord,” William Hyde observed. “It seemed that the very heavens were clad in mourning” (William Hyde Journal, LDS Church Archives).

James Madison Fisher described the melancholy: “To see stout men and women standing around in group[s] crying and mourning . . . was enough to break the heart of a stone ” (Aroet Hale, Reminiscences, LDS Church Archives).

“The love the saints had for him was inexpressible,” Mary Alice Cannon Lambert lamented. “Oh, the mourning in the land!” (Mary Alice Cannon Lambert in “Joseph Smith, the Prophet,” *Young Woman’s Journal* 16, no. 12 (December 1905), 554).

These people had left homes, farms, and even families to gather for the Word’s sake.

They saw themselves as saints; they saw Joseph as a prophet called of God. For 14 years he had raised up this religion on American soil. It was a religious movement that had attracted the attention of the nation. Wrote Boston notable Josiah Quincy after an 1842 visit to the Mississippi river town of Nauvoo:

*It is by no means improbable that some future textbook, for the use of generations yet unborn, will contain a question something like this: What historical American of the nineteenth century has exerted the most powerful influence upon the destinies of his countrymen? And it is by no means impossible that the answer to that interrogatory may be thus written: Joseph Smith, the Mormon prophet. And the reply, absurd as it doubtless seems to most men now living, may be an obvious commonplace to their descendants. [Josiah Quincy, *Figures of the Past* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1926), 317; emphasis in original]*

We are those descendants. Our lives, our very salvation, hinge on our faith in the Lord Jesus

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Christ and in His gospel restored through the Prophet Joseph Smith.

It isn't the life and history of this New Englander that spurs a testimony. It is his words: "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" (JS—H 1:25). For years he stood all alone before the world and testified of his vision in the Sacred Grove. He spoke with God the Father and Jesus Christ face-to-face and shared what he had learned with us. Joseph's testimony of the Savior, "that he lives!" is as direct as it gets (D&C 76:22). Jesus Christ lives. Ponder on the significance of those words. Of his first vision of the Savior in the company of our Father in Heaven, Joseph wrote, "I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it" (JS—H 1:25).

Years later, in Hiram, Ohio, he no longer stood alone. At his side was Sydney Rigdon as they "beheld the glory of the Son, on the right hand of the Father, and received of his fulness." Ponder on their words:

And now, after the many testimonies which have been given of him, this is the testimony, last of all, which we give of him: That he lives!

For we saw him, even on the right hand of God; and we heard the voice bearing record that he is the Only Begotten of the Father —

That by him, and through him, and of him, the worlds are and were created, and the inhabitants thereof are begotten sons and daughters unto God. [D&C 76:20, 22–24]

We are those sons and daughters.

Joseph was born to two good souls—Joseph and Lucy—in Sharon, a quiet little community in the hills of Vermont. The year 2005 is the 200th anniversary of his birth. His mother wrote, "We had a son whom we called Joseph after the name of his father; he was born December 23, 1805" (Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith by His Mother*, ed. Preston Nibley [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954], 46).

His grandfather Asael had predicted that God would "raise up some branch" of the Smiths "to be a great benefit to mankind" ("Sketch of the Autobiography of George Albert Smith," *Millennial Star* 26, no. 27 [1 July 1865]: 407; also George A. Smith, "My Journal," *Instructor*, January 1946, 9; see also *HC* 2:443).

Joseph was that man.

That the Lord chose to restore His Church through a young man, not a graduate of an acclaimed school of religion or a preacher from one of the high pulpits in a well-established neighborhood, is unbelievable to those who measure in earthly terms. But this is not an earthly church, nor are we simply living out our days knowing only what is here and now.

John Taylor said:

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 lived great, and he died great in the eyes of God and his people. [D&C 135:3]

Joseph was an uncommon man. Look at what he did. He translated the Book of Mormon by the power of God, received priesthood keys from ancient prophets, built temples, gathered the faithful to Zion, and taught doctrines that were given to him by direct revelation. The Lord said, "Whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same" (D&C 1:38). When we hear Joseph speak, we hear divinity.

Joseph taught:

If you wish to go where God is, you must be like God . . . , for if we are not drawing towards God in principle, we are going from Him and drawing towards the devil. . . .

Search your hearts, and see if you are like God. [HC 4:588]

How would you answer that challenge: "Search your hearts, and see if you are like

God"? Joseph's life was one of pure integrity to the cause of Christ, who he loved. He loved what the Lord loved. He lived the Lord's way. It wasn't easy for him. It isn't easy for us.

In 1829, while serving as Joseph's scribe, Oliver Cowdery asked for direction for his part in the unfolding gospel. In the revelation from the Lord that followed, Oliver was told succinctly: "Stand by my servant Joseph, faithfully, in whatsoever difficult circumstances he may be for the word's sake" (D&C 6:18). As with all references in the Doctrine and Covenants, He wasn't speaking to just Oliver. The Lord has made it clear, "I say unto you, that this is my voice unto all" (D&C 25:16).

"Stand by my servant Joseph." What does that mean for each one of us? Where do we stand when it comes to Joseph Smith and what he called "the cause of Christ" (HC 1:468)? After his martyrdom, as Joseph was returned to his people in a pine box, the streets of Nauvoo were lined with faithful members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. They honored him both in life and in death. It was a moment of truth in the Restoration. This was not Joseph's church; it was the Church of Jesus Christ. These faithful picked up their meager belongings buttressed by a faith that commanded their hearts, and they walked west to begin again. That's what it means to stand by Joseph. We stand as witnesses that Jesus Christ lives, and if we are called to unfamiliar ground, that's where we go. Our testimony is the treasure we take with us.

Lofty words? Not really. You are going to leave this "Nauvoo" of sorts here. Brigham Young University is a haven from the world. You have gathered from all countries to learn and to serve. That was the pattern in Nauvoo. Though the Saints never built the "University of Nauvoo," they were schooled just the same from God's chosen teacher, Joseph Smith. They learned that in spite of death, disappointment, difficulty, and setbacks, the gospel is true, Jesus Christ lives and directs His work,

and eternal life is promised to all who believe and act in His name. Keep that perspective in mind as you leave here with your handcart or your wagon and go forth. Stand by Joseph as you work and raise your family. Don't be like Simonds Ryder, who turned from the truth because his name was spelled wrong on his missionary letter (see HC 1:260–61). Joseph was jailed more than 50 times for standing up for the Lord's word and His ways. What did he do when his jailers with coarse language and abhorrent behavior rabbled around outside his cell? As Parley P. Pratt recorded, Joseph stood and commanded: "Silence!"

Parley P. Pratt went on to describe:

Chained, and without a weapon; calm, unruffled and dignified as an angel, he looked upon the quailing guards, whose weapons were lowered or dropped to the ground. . . .

. . . I have tried to conceive of kings, of royal courts, of thrones and crowns; and of emperors assembled to decide the fate of kingdoms; but dignity and majesty have I seen but once, as it stood in chains, at midnight, in a dungeon in an obscure village of Missouri. [PPP, 1985, 180; emphasis in original]

Will we be so valiant? Remember Joseph's words: "If we are not drawing towards God . . . , we are going from Him." Search your heart for your testimony of the Prophet. If yours is casual, seek for a spiritual witness of Joseph Smith's calling as a prophet for the latter days. That testimony is received not through books, tapes, or even talks—like this one—but by the Spirit confirming to your spirit that Joseph Smith was and is a prophet of God.

I received my witness not from study but from the Spirit when I was standing by a fence in Fayette, New York, outside the Peter Whitmer farmhouse. That ground is sacred to me, much like the mount for Moses—"for the place where thou standest is holy ground" (Acts 7:33). The Church was established there

in 1830, in the middle of nowhere, as the world gauges place. There I received from the Spirit of God the confirmation “that Joseph was and is a prophet of God.” I remember thinking at first, “I know that. Everybody knows that.”

Then the words came a second time: “Joseph Smith was and is a prophet of God. Someday you will need to know that.”

It was like the description in Jacob: “I had heard the voice of the Lord speaking unto me in very word . . . ; wherefore, I could not be shaken” (Jacob 7:5).

Someday is here for every one of us. The world needs our firm testimony of Joseph and the Restoration—right now.

Why did he stand upon his feet the morning after being tarred and feathered and preach the gospel of Jesus Christ with great conviction? Why did he endure a dark, lonesome prison—appealing to the Lord for comfort rather than shaking his fist at the sky for the unjust treatment? Why did he bury one child, then another and another and another, and continue to proclaim his undying devotion to the Lord and a love for His work? Why did he carry on when friends turned against him, when enemies attacked and killed the faithful, when the forces of the adversary raged all around him?

The answer is best described in his own words: “I am a lover of the cause of Christ and of virtue chastity and an upright steady course of conduct and a holy walk” (letter to William W. Phelps, 31 July 1832, in Joseph Smith, *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, comp. Dean C. Jessee [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984], 246; original punctuation). His characterization of himself is so telling. “A lover of the cause of Christ” is such a simple way of describing what it means to take His name upon us and to love what He loves. When we stand by Joseph, from our perspective we see the world as “the cause of Christ.” That changes things, doesn’t it?

Joseph sent his closest allies to England to preach the word of God when he could have used them by his side in Kirtland. At that time

apostasy was rampant in Kirtland. To engage in “the cause of Christ” we have to leave our comfort zone. We have to “go where you want me to go, dear Lord,” as the song says (*Hymns*, 1985, 270). Sometimes it is a march to Zion’s Camp with no battle at the end. Do we decry the calling with “What was that all about?” or do we trust in Him whose work this is? He knows the battlefields and where the battles are best fought and what the battles really are. It is fair to say, “We fight most battles in our own hearts.” That’s why love of “the cause of Christ” is so critical.

Joseph Smith was not a self-absorbed leader demanding fealty from his followers. This was a man of God who understood the proclamation of his leader, the Lord Jesus Christ: “I came by the will of the Father, and I do his will” (D&C 19:24). Do we? Joseph lived such commitment to his death. Such devotion wasn’t easy then. It isn’t easy today in a world that cycles daily around wants, material possessions, passions, pleasures, and personal gratification. There is no peace in that lifestyle, no happiness. No matter how much glory or goods we get from the world, they will never be enough because within us is the Spirit of God. The Spirit thrives on goodness and light. The Spirit loves what the Lord loves. The Spirit seeks peace and the promise of worlds without end.

Joseph understood distractions and did not squander “the time . . . to prepare to meet God” (Alma 34:32). He said, “Wherever light shone, it stirred up darkness” (HC 6:51). Darkness fights for place in this world; it stirs around in our lives. Hopefully we are not among those “walking in darkness at noon-day” (D&C 95:6). Joseph described his difficult times: “Deep water is what I am wont to swim in” (D&C 127:2). He did not entertain the idea that he would sink. He kept swimming. The Lord’s comfort to Joseph in the dim cellar in Liberty, Missouri, was this: “Know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and

shall be for thy good" (D&C 122:7). "Hold on thy way," the Lord told Joseph (D&C 122:9).

Are we holding on to that "way," the cause of Christ? Do we define ourselves with the terms Joseph used—*virtue, chastity, holy walk*? Or do clothes that are inappropriate, language that is not fitting, or actions and choices that do not fit "a holy walk" camouflage that cause?

Joseph's description of himself is a good example for us all. He said, "All I can offer the world is a good heart and a good hand" (HC 5:498). Good hearts. Good hands. Isn't that the description of a true disciple? Think of John the Baptist as he laid his hands upon Joseph and conferred the Aaronic Priesthood. That significant event was followed weeks later by Peter, James, and John appearing to Joseph and conferring the Melchizedek Priesthood by the laying on of hands. Do we appreciate the majesty of the priesthood? Do we recognize that worlds without number were created by that power?

I have sat in what we call the blessing chair at home and had my husband lay his "good hands" upon my head and through the power of the priesthood bless me with the desires of my heart. That power has healed wounds; it has given me peace, direction, insight, clarity, strength, and comfort. I am so grateful for the blessings of the priesthood and its influence in our family. We raised all sons. We were blessed with the best of boys who have become the best of men. Their hands have rested on my head and blessed me by the power of the priesthood. They have blessed others in Germany, England, Belgium, France, and Australia with that same power. That, brothers and sisters, is the cause of Christ.

The Lord said to the Saints in 1830, "Keep the commandments which you have received by the hand of my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., in my name" (D&C 19:13). What of forgiveness in a culture that seeks retribution, that sues for spilled drinks, that is in your face and on your case rather than offering mercy, patience, and encouragement to one who is struggling? And

what of those times when we are feeling secure and successful? Do we pass by on the other side of those who are in need? What of courage to support another through the repentance process, courage to do the right thing, and courage to overcome addictions that can paralyze us in our progress home to our Heavenly Father?

Joseph's love of the Lord sustained him when the world was raging around him. He was even cheerful—cheerful because he really knew and believed the words of the Lord: "Be of good cheer, and do not fear, for I the Lord am with you, and will stand by you" (D&C 68:6). When we stand by Joseph, bearing witness of Jesus Christ, the Lord stands by us. He acts in our behalf. "I will go before your face," He has promised. "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" (D&C 84:88).

The work of angels is often quiet or in secret. It is rarely of the magnitude heralded by the world. Sometimes we are those angels for others. Joseph learned that lesson in Harmony, Pennsylvania, when he was translating the gold plates. I have a favorite account from that period that speaks to my heart. It's about Joseph Knight, Sr., who gained a witness of the young Prophet in the earliest days of Joseph's ministry. He was the age of Joseph's father—an unlikely confidant or companion to the young Joseph.

One day Joseph Knight felt impressed to take some supplies to the Smiths down in Harmony, a quiet little community on the banks of the Susquehanna River. There in those waters just down the hill from their home, Joseph baptized Oliver and then Oliver baptized Joseph—the two having received the holy priesthood from John the Baptist. This is such a sacred place. There is still a spirit in the air—and a few less pebbles on the bottom of the river, because I waded in to bring some home.

Busy translating the gold plates in the spring of 1829, Joseph had little time to farm

or make a living. Knight, who lived across the border in New York, wrote in his journal:

I bought a barrel of mackerel and some lined paper for writing . . . nine or ten bushels of grain and five or six bushels [of] taters and a pound of tea, and I went down to see him and they were in want. [Joseph Knight, Sr., Reminiscences (n.d.), LDS Church Archives, 6]

Imagine Knight standing in the country store rattling off what he needed and then pausing: “And give me some of that lined paper for writing. That will do it.” Sandwiched between the mackerel and bushels of grain was “some lined paper for writing.” Perhaps it is the writer in me that loves the image so much, but I don’t think so. I think it’s the lesson learned from an older man, the age of Joseph’s father, hearing the prompting to take what was needed to a young—and even then controversial—Joseph Smith.

Picture Joseph Knight loading up his wagon with supplies. Joseph hadn’t sent a fax or called on his cell phone. The Spirit had prompted Knight to do the work of angels. What does this say to all of us? When we dash out the door in the morning, do we load up our backpacks with our essentials and some to spare for someone else in need? Do we pray about how we can further “the cause of Christ” as we pursue our tasks? Do we listen for promptings through the day or have we dismissed the still small voice calling us to service because of our pressures, our schedules, or simply the lack of time available in our Palm Pilot-packaged life?

There is a wonderful scripture in Alma 29 that may help us keep our priorities straight and our ears ready to hear. Alma said:

I do not glory of myself, but I glory in that which the Lord hath commanded me; yea, and this is my glory, that perhaps I may be an instrument in the hands of God. [Alma 29:9]

Joseph Knight was an instrument, an angel.

What about us? I remember when I was writing about Joseph Smith for national television. When I thought about what I was doing, I was paralyzed. I could just see meeting Joseph Smith in the next life and accounting for my efforts. All I wanted to do was to get it right—for him, the Prophet of this dispensation.

I had written a working script for the documentary being produced by Lee Groberg, and it was sent off for review by the sponsoring station in Vermont. The early response was heartening. “The first part is pretty good,” the reviewer said. The script began with the Martyrdom and then backed up to place Joseph in the context of American religious history. Then the story focused on the unfolding of the Restoration through Joseph’s life.

The reviewer’s next statement was something like “When you get to New York . . .” And then she paused. I knew what she was going to say: “. . . all these angels start dropping down from the sky.” She paused again and then said, “No one is going to believe you.”

I listened.

“Take this Moroni.”

I corrected her pronunciation, saying, “It’s Mōrōnī.”

“Oh,” she said, “Mō-rō-nī. How are you going to show him? You aren’t going to hook him up to wires and then fly him through the sky?”

I explained that the show would use images of where things happened, paintings depicting the setting, and stained-glass windows.

“I hate this part,” she said, and then she hung up.

A few days later she called back: “I’ve got an idea. Why don’t you show the gold plates? You could put one of your experts there next to the shiny little volumes, and he could point to them and talk about them. Then people would believe you, because they could see something.”

"There's a problem with that," I said.

"I've thought about that," she responded.

"You've probably got them encased in some special box because of their antiquity."

"No," I said, "that's not the problem. Joseph gave the plates back to Moroni, and he buried them or took them someplace else. Anyway, we don't have them."

Long pause. "I hate this part," she said, and slam went the phone.

She had yet to read the Kirtland section where we had angels on the roof of the temple in the middle of the day.

Tell the story of the Restoration without angels? No. Tell the story of Joseph without the tutoring of Moroni? Without Peter, James, and John? Not possible. We have been called to do our part, whether it is taking lined paper for writing or standing firm about the story of the Restoration. Where you will stand depends in great measure on your testimony of Joseph Smith.

At the death of his father, Joseph Smith said, "He was the first person who received my testimony after I had seen the angel, and exhorted me to be faithful and diligent to the message I had received" (*HC* 4:190).

Each of us has a part. Hyrum, his older brother, who received his own witness of Joseph and the work, said, "Joseph has the spirit and power of all the prophets" (*HC* 6:346).

Brigham Young's testimony of the Prophet is stirring: "I feel like shouting hallelujah, all the time, when I think that I ever knew Joseph Smith, the Prophet" (*JD* 3:51).

Where are your hallelujahs? Are they reserved for your GRE score or your next statistics quiz? For dreams of a job with a car allowance? For simply a car? Those things are important; I am not discounting doing the best we can do in our preparation for this life and a career. But those efforts are not why we are

here, and they will not carry us where we want to go.

Joseph knew the struggles of making a living, the heartache of burying children, the weight of his ministry, and the tensions created by sharing and living what to his enemies was simply unbelievable. His influence with the Saints was extraordinary. The persecution they shouldered, the journeys they endured, the sacrifices they made, the fervor they manifested in support of what Joseph called "the kingdom of God on earth" (*Teachings*, 39) is without equal in latter-day religious history. Are we part of that legacy? Have we picked up the cause of Christ from them? Are we moving it forward? Will we find ourselves standing by Joseph?

Joseph taught, "*When the Lord commands, do it*" (*HC* 2:170; emphasis in original). Joseph Smith understood and exemplified that if we do what the Lord asks, "the cause of Christ" will move forward. Whether it's in the form of lined paper for writing, building a temple, or being that temple the Lord expects us to be, we each have a part. Yours is clear in the heavens. May it be clear in your hearts. Make next year the time for you to gain your own personal witness of Joseph Smith and live closer to the gospel he championed.

I bear my witness that Joseph Smith was and is a prophet of God. Gaining that testimony has changed my life. I would have stood to honor him as his body was brought back to Nauvoo. Where do you stand? Do you love the cause of Christ, and will you stand firm, no matter what difficulty you face, "for the word's sake" (*D&C* 6:18)? The word is the gospel. The Savior's gospel is the only way home to our Father in Heaven. I know that Jesus Christ lives, that my Redeemer lives, and that this is His work and His Church. And the glory be to the Father. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.