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# Joseph Smith Jr.

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(1805–1844)

“There was in the place where we lived an unusual excitement on the subject of religion,” wrote Joseph Smith of Manchester, New York. “The whole district of country seemed affected by it” (Joseph Smith—History 1:5). Multitudes united with the different religious parties, causing quite a stir in his neighborhood. “Lo here, lo there” was their cry and “priest contending against priest, and convert against convert.” Their “strife of words and a contest about opinions” left young Joseph confused (v. 6). He wondered, “Who of all these parties are right; or, are they all wrong together? . . . and how shall I know it?” (v. 10). He concluded that “so great were the confusion and strife among the different denominations, that it was impossible for a person young as I was, and so unacquainted with men and things, to come to any certain conclusion who was right and who was wrong” (v. 8).

Reading the Epistle of James, first chapter and fifth verse, “If any of ye lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not, and it shall be given him,” gave him hope, for “never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine” (Joseph Smith—History 1:12).

In the morning of a beautiful clear day in the spring of 1820, fourteen-year-old Joseph walked into the woods on his family farm to ask God which church he should join. In

answer to his prayer, he said, “I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me. . . . I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other—*This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him*” (Joseph Smith—History 1:17).

Recounting his vision with a local Methodist preacher, Joseph recalled, “Excited a great deal of prejudice against me among professors of religion, and was the cause of great persecution, which continued to increase” (Joseph Smith—History 1:22). In spite of the persecution, Joseph would not recant his testimony that “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. I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it” (v. 25).

Three and a half years after his vision, the angel Moroni appeared to seventeen-year-old Joseph and told him of a book “written upon gold plates, giving an account of the former inhabitants of this continent” (Joseph Smith—History 1:34). At length, Joseph obtained the gold plates from angel Moroni and translated the ancient writings. His translation was published in 1830—The Book of Mormon.

Family, friends, and newfound acquaintances read the Book of Mormon and believed it to be the word of God. On April 6, 1830, a few believers gathered at the Peter Whitmer Sr. log home in Fayette, New York, to organize what would become The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. From small beginnings the Church grew exponentially in spite of mounting persecution against Joseph Smith and his followers. Rather than succumb to persecution, with boldness the newly baptized declared the truths of the Book of Mormon. They accepted mission calls to spread news of the Restoration throughout the United States and Great Britain. Young and old, learned and illiterate listened to their Restoration message and embraced the teachings of the new faith.

Witnessing the rapid growth of the Church and the impact Joseph Smith had on citizens of Nauvoo, Josiah Quincy, a former mayor of Boston, wrote,

It is by no means improbable that some future textbook 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 men? And it is by no means impossible that the answer to that interrogatory may be thus written: Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Josiah Quincy, *Figures of the Past from the Leaves of Old Journals* (Boston, 1883), 376.

Why would this be so? Wandle Mace said,

[Joseph] would unravel the scriptures and explain doctrine as no other man could. What had been mystery he made so plain it was no longer mystery. . . . I ask, who understood anything about these things until Joseph being inspired from on high touched the key and unlocked the door of these mysteries of the kingdom.<sup>2</sup>

How could Joseph do this? He holds “the keys of this Last Dispensation, and will for ever hold them, both in time and eternity.”<sup>3</sup>

When Joseph was killed in Carthage Jail at age 38, the *New York Herald* reported on July 8, 1844, “They cannot get another Joe Smith. . . . The Latter Day Saints’ have indeed come to the latter day.” Such a bold erasure of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was not the plan of God. Orson Hyde boldly prophesied,

I will prophesy that instead of the work dying, it will be like the mustard stock that was ripe, that a man undertook to throw out of his garden, and scattered seed all over it, and next year it was nothing but mustard. It will be so by shedding the blood of the Prophets—it will make ten saints where there is one now.<sup>4</sup>

There are now millions of Latter-day Saints throughout the world who have embraced the word of God and Joseph Smith as a prophet, seer, revelator, and translator. They have entered baptismal waters, made sacred covenants in holy temples, and now praise the memory of his name. In congregations worldwide, they speak with wonder of his greatness, for to them he was a prophet of God.

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<sup>2</sup> Wandle Mace Autobiography (1809–1890). Church History Library. Salt Lake City.

<sup>3</sup> Brigham Young, “Intelligence, etc.,” *Journal of Discourses* (Liverpool: Latter-Day Saint Depot, 1853), 7:289–290.

<sup>4</sup> Orson Hyde quote, in Smith, *History of the Church*, 7:198.