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Lesson 7: The Three Special Book of Mormon Witnesses

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Abstract: The testimonies of the Three Witnesses were strengthened by their spiritual experiences with Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. Oliver Cowdery, Martin Harris, and David Whitmer never denied their testimonies.



LESSON DEPARTMENT

Theology—The Doctrine and Covenants

Lesson 7—The Three Special Book of Mormon Witnesses

Elder Roy W. Doxey

(Text: The Doctrine and Covenants: Sections 5, 6, 8, 9, 17)

For Tuesday, April 1, 1958

Objective: To emphasize the importance of the testimonies of the men who assisted Joseph Smith at the time of the coming forth of The Book of Mormon.

Urim and Thummim and Revelation

SECTIONS 8 and 9 of the Doctrine and Covenants are directed to Oliver Cowdery, whose acquaintanceship with the Prophet Joseph Smith began April 5, 1829. It is interesting to notice that Section 6, as also Section 3 and others, was received through the Urim and Thummim. (See the superscription.) This fact points up a use of these sacred instruments other than for the translation of ancient writings.

Oliver Cowdery Meets Joseph Smith

Oliver Cowdery had been teaching school in the New York, Manchester township area where the Prophet's father's family resided. As was customary in those times, the school teacher lived with the families in the school district "who sent to the school," and, by this means,

Oliver became acquainted with the Smith family. Before this he had heard from David Whitmer, a friend, about the Prophet having received The Book of Mormon plates.

Two days after the arrival of Oliver Cowdery in Harmony township, Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania, where the Prophet was residing, the Prophet "... commenced to translate the Book of Mormon, and he [Oliver] began to write for me" (The Pearl of Great Price, *Writings of Joseph Smith* 2:67). Sometime during this same month of April 1829, Joseph inquired of the Lord through the Urim and Thummim and received Section 6.

Joseph Smith Received Divine Revelation

The principal value of this revelation in our study is to learn wherein the testimony given to Oliver contributes to the fact that Joseph

Smith received divine revelations. The Lord herein reveals only that which Oliver Cowdery knew before meeting Joseph, but this same information was revealed to Joseph and thus the Lord sustained him as a prophet in the eyes of Oliver.

With the foregoing facts in mind, let us turn to verses 14-18 of Section 6:

Verily, verily, I say unto thee, blessed art thou for what thou hast done; for thou has inquired of me, and behold, as often as thou hast inquired thou hast received instruction of my Spirit. If it had not been so, thou wouldst not have come to the place where thou art at this time.

Behold, thou knowest that thou hast inquired of me and I did enlighten thy mind; and now I tell thee these things that thou mayest know that thou hast been enlightened by the Spirit of truth;

Yea, I tell thee, that thou mayest know that there is none else save God that knowest thy thoughts and the intents of thy heart.

I tell thee these things as a witness unto thee—that the words or the work which thou hast been writing are true.

Therefore be diligent; stand by my servant Joseph, faithfully, in whatsoever difficult circumstances he may be for the word's sake (D. & C. 6:14-18).

Notice from this scripture that Oliver would not have come to visit Joseph, if it were not for the fact that his prayers had been answered. The Lord here makes known that the thoughts and intents of the heart are known to him, and that, in this case, Oliver Cowdery had received a witness that the work of translating the plates of The Book of Mormon in which Joseph Smith was employed, was of the Lord.

Consequently, he is admonished to diligence in assisting Joseph.

In order that Oliver might not lose sight of the witness that had been given to him, and also that he might understand more fully that he was, in fact, helping a true prophet of the Lord, this revelation continues in verses 22 to 24 inclusive, with further confirmation:

Verily, verily, I say unto you, if you desire a further witness, cast your mind upon the night that you cried unto me in your heart, that you might know concerning the truth of these things.

Did I not speak peace to your mind concerning the matter? What greater witness can you have than from God?

And now, behold, you have received a witness; for if I have told you things which no man knoweth have you not received a witness? (D. & C. 6:22-24).

In this way, the Lord confirmed the witness Oliver had received. Notice the significant words: “. . . if I have told you things which no man knoweth, have you not received a witness?” Joseph Smith, by revelation, now knew what only the Lord and Oliver had known previously.

In the Prophet's history, we find this record of the witness given to Oliver:

After we had received this revelation, Oliver Cowdery stated to me that after he had gone to my father's to board, and after the family had communicated to him concerning my having obtained the plates, that one night after he had retired to bed he called upon the Lord to know if these things were so, and the Lord manifested to him that they were true, but he had kept the circumstance entirely secret, and had mentioned it to no one; so that after this revelation was given, he knew that the work was true,

because no being living knew of the thing alluded to in the revelation, but God and himself (*D. H. C. I:35*).

This circumstance resulted in the Prophet obtaining secretarial assistance which was much needed in the translation of The Book of Mormon plates. Oliver Cowdery did not return to schoolteaching, but remained with the Prophet to participate with him in many of the great spiritual blessings of this dispensation.

If you had the same experience as Oliver Cowdery in regard to Section 6, how would you have felt toward the Prophet and his work?

Oliver was promised that he might have the gift to translate even as Joseph Smith (*D. & C. 6:25*). It is further revealed that “. . . in the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established” (*D. & C. 6:28*) and that if the world accepts the word of the Lord given by the testimony of witnesses they shall be blessed (*D. & C. 6:28-31*).

Martin Harris and Section 5

We shall now turn our attention to what the Lord has said concerning the witnesses who would testify with the Prophet Joseph Smith to the truth of the gospel message. In Lesson 5 we learned that Martin Harris had received evidence of the existence of The Book of Mormon plates by receiving a translated portion of the plates which he had lost. He was still desirous to obtain further evidence, notwithstanding he had received confirmation from Professor Charles Anthon that the copied characters from the plates were true hieroglyphics. (See *D.H.C. I:20*.) As a result of this desire of Martin, the revelation

now known as Section 5 was given (*D. & C. 5:1*).

The Prophet was under covenant to show the plates only to those whom the Lord would designate (*D. & C. 5:3*). Many times today nonmembers of the Church suggest that if they could see the gold plates, they would be convinced that Joseph Smith actually had an ancient set of records. It seems that many believe, if the plates were put on exhibit, this would be sufficient evidence to them. In this revelation the Lord does not concur with such a thought. He says:

Behold, if they will not believe my words, they would not believe you, my servant Joseph, if it were possible that you should show them all these things which I have committed unto you (*D. & C. 5:7*).

The world is to have the word of the Lord through the Prophet Joseph Smith (*D. & C. 5:10*). The Lord speaks through his divinely appointed servants. What he reveals does not always agree with what man thinks is true. The prophet Isaiah revealed concerning the workings of the Lord that the Lord's thoughts are not the thoughts of men, “. . . neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts” (*Isa. 55:8-9*). Rather than the plates being put on exhibit for everyone to see, there were to be three special witnesses (*D. & C. 5:11-15*). Joseph was not to be the only testator of the existence of the gold plates, but in this way others would also bear witness of The Book of Mormon.

And their testimony shall also go forth unto the condemnation of this generation if they harden their hearts against them (D. & C. 5:18).

The rejection of their testimony would result in "a desolating scourge" to be poured out from time to time unless the people of the world would repent. (See D. & C. 5:19.) To emphasize the fact that the Lord's word is always fulfilled, he refers to the destruction of Jerusalem anciently as an example. (See D. & C. 5:20.)

Martin Harris was promised that he should be one of the three special witnesses to view the plates, but only on condition of humility. If he did see the plates, it was necessary that he should make it known to the world. (See D. & C. 5:24-28.)

Background of Section 17

As a background for our study of Section 17, which is directly connected with Section 5, a brief review of some events in the Prophet's life seems appropriate. Joseph was at this time living in Harmony township, Pennsylvania, where he had met Emma Hale whom he married on January 18, 1827. He worked at various jobs and had acquired a small farm near his father-in-law's at Harmony. By this time Oliver Cowdery had met the Prophet and the work of translating the plates was continuing. The Priesthood was restored (see Lesson 8). In June 1829, the Prophet became acquainted with Peter Whitmer of Fayette township, Seneca County, New York, who provided residence in his home for the Prophet, Emma, and Oliver. It was here that the translating of the plates was finished.

As the work of translating progressed, it was learned that there were to be three special witnesses, ". . . provided by the Lord, to whom he would grant that they should see the plates from which this work [The Book of Mormon] should be translated . . ." (D. H. C. 1:52).

These witnesses were to bear record of what they saw and heard, as indicated in the following Book of Mormon references: Ether 5:2-4; 2 Nephi 11:3; 27:12. In response to the Prophet's inquiry of the Lord concerning those who should be the three witnesses, Section 17 was received in June 1829.

A Footnote Reference Study

Section 17 begins with a promise that these witnesses were not only to see the plates, but also the breastplate, the sword of Laban, the Urim and Thummim, and the Liahona, also called the miraculous directors. (See D. & C. 17:1.) An informative experience for the reader is to consult the footnote references pertaining to each one of these items. Answers to such questions as these will result: Were the Urim and Thummim in use during the period of the Old Testament? To what extent were the Urim and Thummim used during the Nephite dispensation? What relationship is there between the breastplate and the Urim and Thummim? What is the history of the miraculous directors and the sword of Laban amongst the Nephites?

Proof That Joseph Had the Plates

The Lord made known that it would be only by faith and his power that the plates would be seen. (See D. & C. 17:2, 5.) In Sec-

tion 5 and 17 we discover proof that Joseph Smith actually had the plates. What do you believe this proof to be? Both of these revelations contain promises that on certain conditions, the plates could be seen. Verses 2 to 5 of Section 17 make this clear, as do also the following verses from Section 5.

And in addition to your testimony, the testimony of three of my servants, whom I shall call and ordain, unto whom I will show these things, and they shall go forth with my words that are given through you.

Yea, they shall know of a surety that these things are true, for from heaven will I declare it unto them.

I will give them power that they may behold and view these things as they are (D. & C. 5:11-13).

No person of intelligence would make such promises in his own name or in the name of the Lord unless he could thereafter produce the plates and have their truthfulness declared from the heavens. To be unable to do these things would show him to be a fraud before those who desired to be witnesses and all men who should later learn of his deceitfulness.

The Promise of Witnesses Fulfilled

Joseph Smith did not falsify. The promises made to the three witnesses were fulfilled. Not many days after Section 17 was received, Martin Harris, David Whitmer, Oliver Cowdery, and Joseph Smith retired into the woods on the Whitmer farm and prayed that the Lord would fulfill the promises given in this revelation.

After each one of the four persons had prayed in succession without

success, a second attempt was made in the same manner and with the same lack of success. Martin Harris then proposed that he withdraw from the others, as he believed his presence was the cause for their failure. He withdrew and the Prophet records that the angel showed them the plates and “. . . we heard a voice from out of the bright light above us, saying, ‘These plates have been revealed by the power of God, and they have been translated by the power of God. The translation of them which you have seen is correct, and I command you to bear record of what you now see and hear’” (D. H. C. I:54-55). The Prophet then went to Martin Harris and while in prayer with him, the same vision was repeated, whereupon Martin Harris cried out, apparently in an ecstasy of joy, “. . . ’Tis enough; ’tis enough; mine eyes have beheld; mine eyes have beheld,” and jumping up, he shouted, ‘Hosanna,’ blessing God, and otherwise rejoiced exceedingly” (Ibid., I:55).

The testimony of the three special witnesses to The Book of Mormon (found in the forepart of each copy of that book) verifies the divine mission of Joseph Smith. Their later experiences in and out of the Church bear solemn witness to the actuality of the things to which they bore record. Each one of these three men was excommunicated from the Church. (During the past few years evidence has been found that Martin Harris was excommunicated by a High Council Court, a fact which had not been known before. This is stated in the article, “. . . publish it upon

the mountains,' the Story of Martin Harris" by William H. Homer, Jr., in the *Improvement Era*, June 1955, page 387.)

If the three witnesses had been in collusion with Joseph Smith to deceive the world, it would have been the most normal thing for them to expose the falsehood they were attempting to perpetuate. Admitting that some people live lies, the declarations they make on their deathbeds usually reveal the truth. Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris maintained to the end of their mortal lives that an angel had appeared to them and given them a view of the plates. (Consult B. H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God*, II:157, 162, 167-8.) The fact that David Whitmer never returned to the Church strengthens the validity of his testimony.

Eight additional witnesses also testified to the existence of The Book of Mormon plates. They saw and they examined the plates with their hands. (For information about the Three and Eight Witnesses, consult Preston Nibley, *Witnesses of The Book of Mormon*.)

Additional Items on Sections

6, 8, 9, and 5

Section 6: Comment upon verse 7 will be made when we study Section 11. We are reminded in verse 13 that to be saved in the kingdom of God ". . . is the greatest of all the gifts of God. . . ."

In concluding this revelation, the Lord admonishes Joseph and Oliver to fear not to do good, ". . . for whatsoever ye sow, that shall ye also reap; therefore, if ye sow good ye shall also reap good for your reward" (D. & C. 6:33). This scrip-

ture is applicable to all Latter-day Saints. The thought in the last verse is a part of the account which begins with verse 32, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, as I said unto my disciples . . ." which suggests that Joseph and Oliver were to think and ponder over the fact that Jesus is truly the Savior of the world, and that faithfulness in keeping the commandments will bring an inheritance in the kingdom of heaven. This last verse also serves to identify the Christ as the giver of the revelation.

Section 8: Oliver Cowdery is to have the gift of revelation (verses 3, 4), which, if followed, would deliver him from his enemies. This is the same spirit by which Moses was able to bring the children of Israel through the Red Sea in safety (verse 3). In a world of unbelief, Latter-day Saints have greater reason to believe this miracle of the Old Testament. Notice the counsel given to Oliver in verse 10 concerning the necessity of faith. This is a truth which also applies to all Latter-day Saints.

Section 9: This revelation stresses the point that Oliver Cowdery failed to translate because he believed it unnecessary to expend effort in that attempt. The emotion or reaction described in verse 8 as a burning within one, frequently accompanies the giving of revelation or the witness of the truth. This "burning" was present with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, who received instruction from the resurrected Jesus. (See Luke 24:13-35, especially verse 32).

Oliver was not to translate but to continue to be Joseph's scribe.

Section 5: This appears to be the

first revelation to the Prophet where it is even hinted that he might be slain (martyred) for his witness of the truth (verse 22).

Questions for Discussion

1. In what way does Section 6 give evidence that Joseph Smith was divinely directed?

2. Discuss: If the plates of The Book of Mormon were placed on exhibit, peo-

ple would be convinced that The Book of Mormon is true.

3. How do Sections 5 and 17 give proof that Joseph Smith had The Book of Mormon plates?

4. Wherein does the testimony of the Three Witnesses differ from the Eight Witnesses?

5. Discuss: We can believe the witnesses to The Book of Mormon.

6. Are Latter-day Saints committed to a belief in miracles? Explain.

Visiting Teacher Messages— Truths to Live By From The Doctrine and Covenants

Message 7—"Look Unto Me in Every Thought; Doubt Not, Fear Not"
(D. & C. 6:36).

Christine H. Robinson

For Tuesday, April 1, 1958

Objective: To emphasize the fact that when we place our complete trust in the Lord we gain strength and peace of mind.

PRESIDENT McKay tells a story about a group of Swiss botanists who were in the Alps collecting specimens of rare flowers. The group, he says:

. . . started out one morning from a small village and after several hours' climb came to a precipice overlooking a green valley dotted with a peculiar flower, which, examined through field glasses proved to be of unusual value. From the cliff on which the party was standing to the valley was a sheer drop of several hundred feet. To descend would be impossible, and to reach the valley from another approach would mean a waste of several hours.

During the latter part of their climb a small boy had attached himself to the party and had watched with interest the maneuvers of the botanists. After discussing the situation for several minutes, one

of the party turned to the boy and said, "Young fellow, if you will let us tie a rope around your waist and lower you over this cliff so that you can dig up one of those plants for us . . . we will give you five pounds."

The boy looked dazed for an instant then ran off . . . but within a short time he returned, bringing with him an old man, bent and gray, with hands gnarled and calloused by hard labor. Upon reaching the party of botanists, the boy . . . said, "Sir, this is my dad. I'll go down in the valley if you will let my dad hold the rope." (*Cherished Experiences*, Clare Middlemiss, page 190).

The simple, unquestioning confidence this boy had in his father is the type of pure trust our Father in heaven hopes we, his children, will have in him. He knows that if we put our trust in him we will keep