

THE FIRST VISION

Time Line

Date	Significant Event
1818	Smiths purchased a farm in Farmington township
1819	Revivals intensified in the Palmyra vicinity
Spring 1820	Fourteen-year-old Joseph Smith saw the Father and the Son in a grove near his father's farm

FOR CENTURIES THE WORLD was in spiritual darkness because of the rejection of the Lord's Apostles. Except for a few glimmers of light, such as those seen by the Reformers, the heavens were closed. A young boy's experience in a grove in upstate New York in the spring of 1820 changed all of this. A day of spiritual enlightenment dawned.

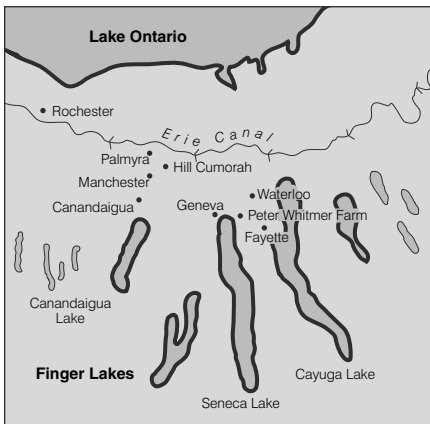
President Gordon B. Hinckley taught: "This glorious First Vision . . . was the parting of the curtain to open this, the dispensation of the fulness of times. Nothing on which we base our doctrine, nothing we teach, nothing we live by is of greater importance than this initial declaration. I submit that if Joseph Smith talked with God the Father and His Beloved Son, then all else of which he spoke is true. This is the hinge on which turns the gate that leads to the path of salvation and eternal life."¹

THE SETTING IN WESTERN NEW YORK

Joseph Smith, Sr., chose to settle in Palmyra, a small village in the Finger Lakes area of New York state. The region bore this name because the lakes resembled fingers. Sparsely inhabited at the turn of the nineteenth century, the population of the Finger Lakes area grew rapidly. By 1820 there were many communities along the shores.

Fertile soil and heavily wooded land contributed greatly to the territory's growth. The Erie Canal, a vital inland waterway designed to transport goods and persons across New York State from Albany to the Great Lakes, also brought growth to the area. Completed mostly by hand in 1825 at a cost of more than seven million dollars, this 363-mile watercourse reduced transportation time across the state from three weeks to six days and cut expenses by millions of dollars. The canal passed within a block of Palmyra's main street.

Joseph Smith, Sr., the father of a family of ten—eleven by 1821—worked hard for a living. After two years in Palmyra, he accumulated enough money for a down payment on one hundred acres of wooded land in the nearby township of Farmington. During the first year he and his sons cleared thirty acres of heavy timber, prepared the ground for cultivation, and planted wheat.² Clearing land meant not only felling trees with handsaws and axes but also removing stumps and roots by sheer physical toil of man and beast. Young Joseph later recalled that "it required the exertions of all that were able to render any assistance for the support of the Family."³ Eventually the



In 1816 when the Smiths moved to Palmyra, it was a village of about six hundred people. In 1818 or 1819 they began to clear a one-hundred-acre farm nearby in Farmington township (later Manchester township).

◀ This stained glass window depicting the First Vision was donated to the Salt Lake City Seventeenth Ward in 1907 by Annie D. Watkins. It was made by professional glass artists in Belgium.



Ground for the Erie Canal was broken on 4 July 1817.

township of Farmington was divided, and in 1822 the Smith farm became part of the newly created township of Manchester.

At this time Joseph's opportunities for schooling were limited. He attributed this to the "indigent circumstances" he was raised under. "We were deprived of the benefit of an education. Suffice it to say, I was merely instructed in reading, writing, and the ground rules of arithmetic which constituted my whole literary acquisitions."⁴

As more and more Americans crossed the Catskill and Adirondack mountains to settle in the Finger Lakes area of western New York, they tended to lose contact with established churches in their former homes. These "unchurched" settlers worried religious leaders of the main denominations, principally the Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians, who established proselyting programs for their disadvantaged brothers in the West.

The Methodists and Baptists were particularly zealous in their efforts to bring religion to those without its benefits. The Methodists employed circuit riders. These were traveling ministers who rode horseback from town to town throughout a given region, or circuit, ministering to the religious needs of the people. The Baptists used the farmer-preacher system. In this system a local man earned his living by farming but occupied a nearby pulpit on the Sabbath.

These efforts were bolstered by the enthusiasm of the Second Great Awakening which was then sweeping the United States. Nearly all churches in upstate New York conducted revivals. These were evangelistic gatherings designed to awaken the religiously inert. Revivals were often in the form of camp meetings held on the edge of a grove of trees or in a small clearing in the forest. Participants often traveled many miles over dusty or rut-filled roads to pitch their tents or park their wagons on the outskirts of the encampment. Camp meetings frequently lasted several days with some sessions lasting nearly all day and into the night. Ministers rotated, but it was not uncommon to find two or three ministers exhorting their listeners simultaneously.⁵ So fervent and enthusiastic was the religious zeal in western New York in the early 1800s that the region came to be known as the Burned-Over District. Because the Finger Lakes area was set figuratively ablaze with evangelistic fire, it is not surprising that young Joseph Smith and his family were caught up in the fervor.

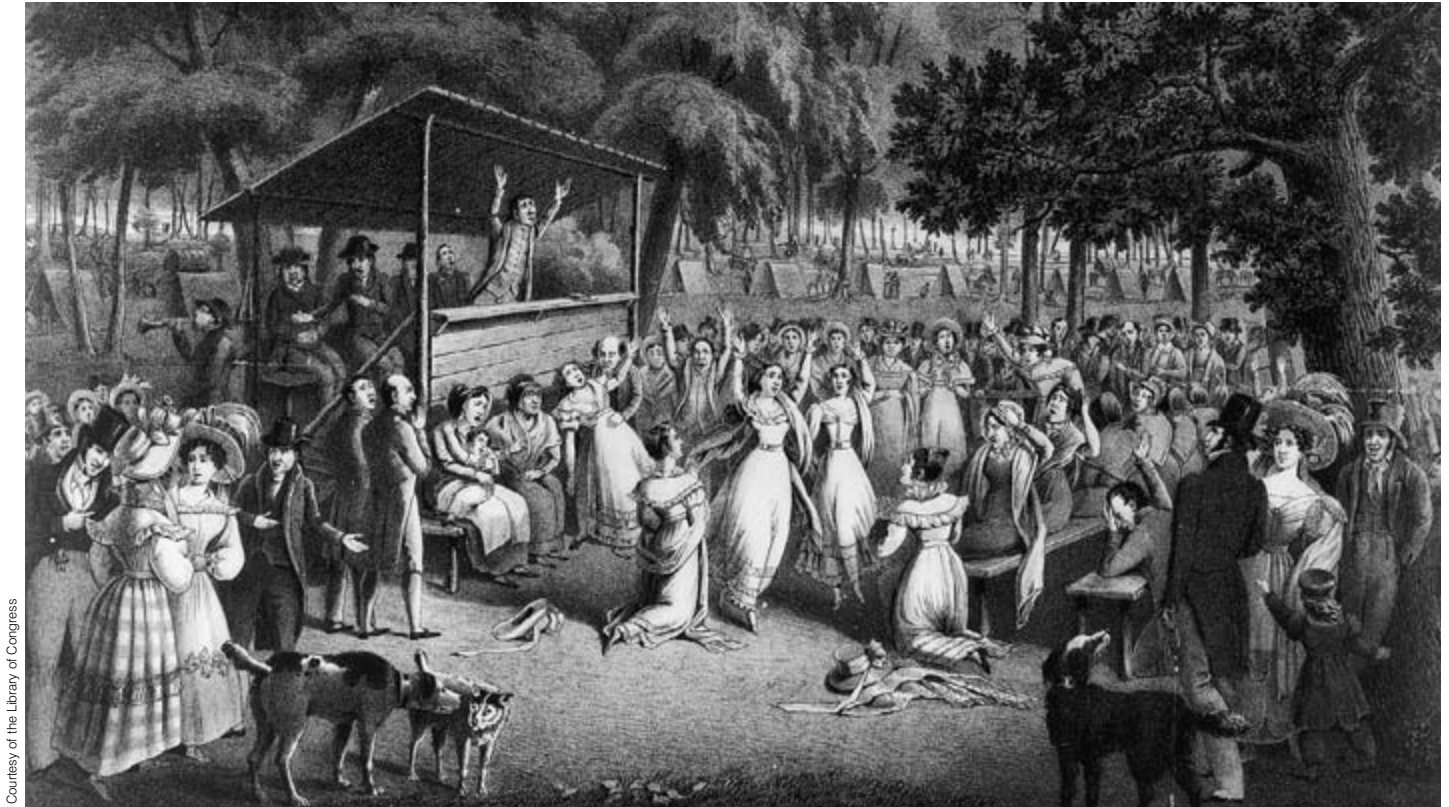
JOSEPH'S PERSONAL QUEST

Farmington (later Manchester township) was one of several settlements in its district affected by this religious enthusiasm. In later years Lucy Mack Smith remembered it as "a great revival in religion, which extended to all the denominations of Christians in the surrounding country in which we resided. Many of the world's people, becoming concerned about the salvation of their souls, came forward and presented themselves as seekers after religion."⁶ Most folks wanted to join some church but were undecided on which one to adopt. The Prophet Joseph recalled that about two years after



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

A Methodist circuit rider, drawing by A. R. Waud



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

A typical camp meeting about 1830–35, drawing by A. Rider

they moved to the farm there was “an unusual excitement on the subject of religion. It commenced with the Methodists, but soon became general among all the sects in that region of country. Indeed, the whole district of country seemed affected by it, and great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties, which created no small stir and division amongst the people” (Joseph Smith—History 1:5).

Revivals and camp meetings affected young Joseph. He wrote in his personal history that “at about the age of twelve years, my mind became seriously impressed with regard to the all important concerns for the welfare of my immortal soul.”⁷ This, in turn, led him to search the scriptures and seek for forgiveness of his sins. As for the claims put forth by the various teachers of religion, he said, “I knew not who was right or who was wrong, but considered it of the first importance to me that I should be right, in matters . . . involving eternal consequences.”⁸ Joseph said, “I attended their several meetings as often as occasion would permit. . . . 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” (Joseph Smith—History 1:8).

Joseph was also confused by the bitterness and hypocrisy he witnessed among ministers and fellow Christians. He said, “My intimate acquaintance with those of different denominations led me to marvel exceedingly, for I discovered that they did not adorn their profession by a holy walk and Godly conversation agreeable to what I found contained in that sacred

depository [the holy scriptures]. This was a grief to my soul.”⁹ When the converts began to join first one church and then another, he saw that the “seemingly good feelings of both the priests and the converts were more pretended than real for a scene of great confusion and bad feeling ensued—priest contending against priest, and convert against convert; so that all their good feelings one for another, if they ever had any, were entirely lost in a strife of words and a contest about opinions” (Joseph Smith—History 1:6).

One can only imagine the impact such conditions had on Joseph’s youthful, searching mind. The very men he thought could point the way to God “understood the same passages of scripture so differently as to destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible” (v. 12). Joseph explained, “In the midst of this war of words and tumult of opinions, I often said to myself: What is to be done? Who of all these parties are right; or, are they all wrong together? If any one of them be right, which is it, and how shall I know it?” (v. 10).

Joseph Smith came from a religious family. His mother, a sister, and two brothers had joined the Presbyterian faith, but that system of belief did not satisfy him. Nevertheless, his parents had instructed him in the Christian religion from childhood. One of the existing churches must be right, he reasoned, but which one was it? In his search for the correct church, Joseph did not intend to start his own church, nor did he think that truth was not on the earth. He simply did not know where to find the truth, but, trained to believe the scriptures, he turned there for his answer.

Like many other frontier families, the Smiths owned a Bible. Seeds planted by “goodly parents,” were nurtured by the Holy Spirit. How many days and nights he pondered, searched, and prayed for light he does not say. Nor does he tell us whether he confided his secret feelings and desires to his family. His years of preparation and his time, effort, and meditation were rewarded. He found a possible solution to his problem at age fourteen while reading this passage in the Bible: “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him” (James 1:5).

This passage had a profound impact on Joseph. “Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my heart. I reflected on it again and again, knowing that if any person needed wisdom from God, I did; for how to act I did not know, and unless I could get more wisdom than I then had, I would never know” (Joseph Smith History 1:12).

The Bible did not tell Joseph which church was true, but it told him that prayer could solve his problem. He reflected on this idea.

“At length I came to the conclusion that I must either remain in darkness and confusion, or else I must do as James directs, that is, ask of God. . . .



The exact location where Joseph Smith experienced his first vision is unknown. The grove across the street from the family home is assumed to be the most likely spot.

“So, in accordance with this, my determination to ask of God, I retired to the woods to make the attempt. It was on the morning of a beautiful, clear day, early in the spring of eighteen hundred and twenty” (vv. 13–14). It was the first time he had ever tried to pray vocally (see v. 14).

What happened next set Joseph Smith apart from his contemporaries for ever after. God the Eternal Father and his Son Jesus Christ appeared to him. The word *theophany* is used to describe a vision of deity. The Bible confirms that theophanies are real. At Peniel, Jacob rejoiced, saying, “for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved” (Genesis 32:30). With Moses, God spoke “face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend” (Exodus 33:11; see also Numbers 12:8). And Isaiah wrote, “Mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts” (Isaiah 6:5).

God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ appeared together to the fourteen-year-old Joseph Smith. Not since the resurrection of Jesus Christ had there been such a threat to the devil’s kingdom. Little wonder, then, that Satan was present that morning.

Like Moses (see Moses 1:12–22), Joseph experienced direct opposition from Satan: “After I had retired to the place where I had previously designed to go, having looked around me, and finding myself alone, I knelt down and began to offer up the desires of my heart to God. I had scarcely done so, when immediately I was seized upon by some power which entirely overcame me, and had such an astonishing influence over me as to bind my tongue so that I could not speak. Thick darkness gathered around me, and it seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction” (Joseph Smith—History 1:15).

The powers of darkness were terrible, but greater powers brought deliverance. Joseph exerted all his strength to call upon God to deliver him from the enemy that had seized him. Joseph described this experience:

“At the very moment when I was ready to sink into despair and abandon myself to destruction . . . , I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me.

“It no sooner appeared than I found myself delivered from the enemy which held me bound. When the light rested 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!*” (vv. 16–17).

Satan and his power were banished. In his place stood the Father and the Son in immortal glory. As soon as he was able to speak, Joseph asked the Personages which of the sects was right and which he should join. He reported:

“I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong; and the Personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt; that: ‘they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach

for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof.'

"He again forbade me to join with any of them. . . . When I came to myself again, I found myself lying on my back, looking up into heaven" (vv. 19–20). He was weak from the presence of deity, and it was some time before he regained his strength and returned home.

Joseph was profoundly affected by the heavenly vision. In addition to being given the answer to his question about which church was right, he was told that his sins were forgiven¹⁰ and that "the fullness of the Gospel should at some future time be made known unto [him]."¹¹ The effects of this experience influenced the Prophet throughout his life. In later years he remembered its impact vividly: "My soul was filled with love, and for many days I could rejoice with great joy, and the Lord was with me."¹²

REACTION TO JOSEPH'S VISION

Shortly after he arrived home, his mother, perhaps noticing his weakened condition, asked him what was wrong. He replied, "Never mind, all is well—I am well enough off. . . . I have learned for myself that Presbyterianism is not true" (Joseph Smith—History 1:20). Joseph did not say whether or not he told his mother more at this time. Eventually he confided his theophany to other family members. His brother William affirmed, "We all had the most implicit confidence in what he said. He was a truthful boy. Father and Mother believed him, why should not the children?"¹³ The momentous occurrence answered Joseph's question, but it did not do so for others. He reported, "I soon found, however, that my telling the story had 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).

One of the first outside the family to hear Joseph's account of what happened to him was "one of the Methodist preachers, who was very active in the before mentioned religious excitement." Joseph naively believed that the minister would welcome this great news from heaven. Joseph wrote, however: "I was greatly surprised at his behavior; he treated my communication not only lightly, but with great contempt, saying it was all of the devil, that there were no such things as visions or revelations in these days; that all such things had ceased with the apostles, and that there would never be any more of them" (v. 21).

Such an attitude was commonplace in the sectarian world. It was unthinkable that Almighty God would condescend to make himself known to a fourteen-year-old boy in 1820 the way he had made himself known to ancient prophets. Joseph's sacred experience brought on bitter persecution. The hatred of those who professed Christianity was difficult for him to understand. As he put it, "I was an obscure boy, only between fourteen and fifteen years of age, and my circumstances in life such as to make a boy of no

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The Reverend George Lane (1784–1859) was a Methodist minister who lived at the time of Joseph Smith. Smith family tradition linked Lane with the Palmyra revival.

consequence in the world, yet men of high standing would take notice sufficient to excite the public mind against me. It was often the cause of great sorrow” (vv. 22–23). William Smith later reflected: “We never knew we were bad folks until Joseph told his vision. We were considered respectable till then, but at once people began to circulate falsehoods and stories in a wonderful way.”¹⁴

The reality of what Joseph Smith experienced enabled him to endure the increasing persecution. He compared himself to Paul the Apostle who saw the risen Lord and heard his voice. Very few people believed Paul, and some even claimed he was dishonest or mentally deranged. Yet this did not destroy the reality of what Paul knew he had experienced. Joseph declared, “So it was with me. 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; and though I was hated and persecuted for saying that I had seen a vision, yet it was true” (Joseph Smith—History 1:25).

Joseph felt much like the child who has been wrongly accused and punished. He said, “I was led to say in my heart: Why persecute me for telling the truth? I have actually seen a vision; and who am I that I can withstand God, or why does the world think to make me deny what I have actually seen? For I had seen a vision; I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it” (v. 25). To deny it would place him under condemnation, and he dared not risk offending God.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FIRST VISION

The First Vision was a pivotal event in the rise of the kingdom of God on the earth in the last days. Joseph Smith, although only an unlettered youth, learned profound truths that have become the foundation of the faith of the Latter-day Saints. He had actually seen and spoken with God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ. Therefore, he learned that the promise in James is true. God will answer sincere prayer of inquiry and not chastise. To Joseph, God became an approachable reality, a vital source of truth, and a loving Heavenly Father. Joseph Smith’s belief in the reality of God was no longer a matter of faith; it was based on personal experience. Thus, he was qualified, as was the Apostle Peter, to be a witness who was chosen of God and commanded to preach and testify of Jesus Christ (see Acts 10:39–43). He could also testify that the Father and Son were separate and distinct glorious beings in whose literal image man is made.

Joseph Smith now also knew of the reality of Satan, a being who possessed formidable power and a foe determined to destroy the work of God. Satan failed in the Sacred Grove, but the conflict had just begun. Joseph would fight many battles with this adversary of righteousness before his work was done. Moreover, the Lord’s answer to his question about which church was true, was a sweeping indictment of nineteenth century Christianity, for no church then on earth had divine approval. Just as the

Savior warned his disciples against the doctrinal “leaven” of the Pharisees and Sadducees (see Matthew 16:6–12), he taught Joseph Smith that the existing churches taught the “commandments of men” (Joseph Smith—History 1:19). Therefore, he was to join none of them.

Joseph F. Smith, nephew of the Prophet and sixth President of the Church, elaborated on the importance of the First Vision: “The greatest event that has ever occurred in the world, since the resurrection of the Son of God from the tomb and his ascension on high, was the coming of the Father and of the Son to that boy Joseph Smith, to prepare the way for the laying of the foundation of his kingdom—not the kingdom of man—never more to cease nor to be overturned. Having accepted this truth, I find it easy to accept of every other truth that he enunciated and declared during his mission of fourteen years in the world.”¹⁵

ENDNOTES

1. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, Oct. 1998, pp. 90–91; or *Ensign*, Nov. 1998, p. 71.
2. See Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith*, ed. Preston Nibley (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), pp. 63–64.
3. “History of Joseph Smith By Himself,” 1832 (written in Kirtland, Ohio, between 20 July and 27 Nov. 1832), LDS Historical Department, Salt Lake City, p. 1; see also Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1984), p. 4 (contains a printing of all the known holographic writings of Joseph Smith).
4. “History of Joseph Smith By Himself,” p. 1; spelling, punctuation, and capitalization standardized; Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, p. 4.
5. This paragraph is derived from Milton V. Backman, Jr., *Joseph Smith’s First Vision*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), pp. 71, 73.
6. Smith, *History of Joseph Smith*, p. 68.
7. “History of Joseph Smith By Himself,” pp. 1–2; spelling, punctuation, and capitalization standardized; Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, pp. 4–5.
8. Joseph Smith, “History A-1,” Nov. 1835, LDS Historical Department, Salt Lake City, p. 120.
9. “History of Joseph Smith By Himself,” p. 2; spelling, punctuation, and capitalization standardized; Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, p. 5.
10. See “History of Joseph Smith By Himself,” p. 3; Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, p. 6.
11. *History of the Church*, 4:536. This statement is part of a reply written by Joseph Smith to Mr. John C. Wentworth, editor of the *Chicago Democrat*. Mr. Wentworth had written in behalf of a friend of his, Mr. Bastow (his actual name was George Barstow), who was writing a history of New Hampshire and wished to include “correct information” respecting the rise and progress of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
12. “History of Joseph Smith By Himself,” p. 3; spelling, punctuation, and capitalization standardized; Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, p. 6.
13. In J. W. Peterson, “Another Testimony, Statement of William Smith, Concerning Joseph the Prophet,” *Deseret Evening News*, 20 Jan. 1894, p. 11.
14. In Peterson, “Another Testimony,” p. 11.
15. Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, 5th ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1939), pp. 495–96.