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"The Prophet Joseph Smith" Elder D. Todd Christofferson September 24, 2013

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As a seventeen-year-old boy, Joseph Smith, Jr. was visited by a glorious angelic minister who declared "that he was a messenger sent from the presence of God to [Joseph]." ¹ This angel, Moroni by name, knew Joseph's name, and prophesied "that God had a work for [him] to do; and that [his] 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." ² Today, during this hour, the name of Joseph Smith will be spoken of for good.

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President Gordon B. Hinckley observed more than once that under the circumstances, Moroni's words were remarkable--to think that this boy growing up in a poor family, in the smallest of small towns, in a country of limited influence and prestige in the world should come to such prominence that his name would be had for good or ill among all nations, kindreds, and people--it was truly (to use an overused word) incredible. Nevertheless, it is a prophecy that has been fulfilled in significant measure and that is more fully realized year by year.

This speaks to the centrality of Joseph Smith's prophetic calling in our religion. His role in the Restoration--that is, the prophesied restitution of the Church, priesthood, and gospel of Jesus Christ to the earth--was pivotal, just as with every prophet who ever stood at the head of a gospel dispensation. It is natural that any who oppose The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints-- its work, its doctrines, its members--would strike at Joseph Smith. We should not be surprised or alarmed or even defensive. The Lord told the Prophet himself not to be surprised: "The ends of the earth shall inquire after thy name, and fools shall give thee in derision, and hell shall rage against thee." ³ However, the Lord added this reassurance: "The pure in heart, and the wise, and the noble, and the virtuous, shall seek counsel, and authority, and blessings constantly from under thy hand. And thy people shall never be turned against thee by the testimony of traitors." ⁴

We are blessed in our day to have a growing body of information about the Prophet Joseph Smith and his work, but most especially about his teaching the Church's study series, "Teachings of the Presidents of the Church," the volume published in 2007 featuring Joseph Smith's teachings and writings is



particularly valuable. I hope it is a reference you will always have close at hand in your gospel library. For some years now, the Church History Department has spearheaded a major undertaking to publish all the documents and other materials we can locate that were ever generated by or under the direction of the Prophet. It is known as the Joseph Smith Papers Project. It is anticipated that this project will produce about 24 printed volumes in six series such as Revelations, Traditions, Journals, Histories, and so on. To date, seven volumes have been published with two more set to be released this fall. Also, the Internet and electronic publishing have made it possible to access additional early, and even original source material bearing on Joseph Smith's life and times.

Our study of the Prophet's life and ministry are more than an intellectual exercise to satisfy curiosity. Insofar as we can, we want to know what he knew; we want to understand what he understood; we want to draw near to God as he did, for as Nicodemus said of the Savior so we can say of Joseph, "Rabbi, we know a teacher come from God."⁵ Brigham Young expressed it this way:

The excellency of the glory of the character of Brother Joseph Smith was that he could reduce heavenly things to the understanding of the finite. When he preached to the people--revealed the things of God, the will of God, the plan of salvation, the purposes of Jehovah, the relation in which we stand to him and all the heavenly beings--he reduced his teachings to the capacity of every man, woman and child, making them as plain as a well defined pathway. This should have convinced every person that ever heard him, of his divine authority and power, for no other man was able to teach as he could, and no person can reveal the things of God, but by the revelations of Jesus Christ.⁶

The expanding access we enjoy to the Prophet's work and teachings fills previous voids in our knowledge, confirms some things we already knew or thought, and supplies answers to questions we might have had. The information also raises new questions and highlights new areas of inquiry to pursue. Realistically, however, we ought not to expect in this life to know all the answers (or for that matter, all the questions). The Prophet himself declared:

You don't know me; you never knew my heart. No man knows my history. I cannot tell it: I shall never undertake it. I don't blame any one for not believing my history. If I had not experienced what I have, I would not believe it myself. . . . When I am called by the trump of the archangel and



Apply for graduation in the balance, you will know me then.⁷

Class schedule, you know, of course, that as prophesied by Moroni, there are those whose research relating to Joseph Smith is not for the purpose of gaining added light and knowledge but to undermine his character, magnify his flaws, and if possible destroy his influence. Their work product can sometimes be jarring, and so can issues raised at times by honest historians and researchers with no "axe to grind." I would offer you this advice in your own study: Be patient, don't be superficial, and don't ignore the Spirit.

Be Patient.
Grade Report

In counseling patience, I simply mean that while some answers come quickly or with little effort, others are simply not available for the moment because information or evidence is lacking. Don't suppose, however, that a lack of evidence about something today means that evidence doesn't exist or that it will not be forthcoming in the future. The absence of evidence is not proof. Here's one small example:

Matthew Roper in a FairMormon Blog on June 17, 2013, writes about a criticism repeated many times over the years about the mention of steel in the Book of Mormon. In 1884, one critic wrote, "Laban's sword was steel, when it is a notorious fact that the Israelites knew nothing of steel for hundreds of years afterwards. Who but as ignorant a person as Rigdon would have perpetuated all these blunders."⁸ More recently, Thomas O'Dea in 1957 stated, "Every commentator on the Book of Mormon has pointed out the many cultural and

Student Life

historical anachronisms, such as the steel sword of Laban in 600 B.C."⁹ We had no answer to these critics at the time, but as often happens in these matters, new discoveries in later years shed new light. Roper reports, "It is increasingly apparent that the practice of hardening iron through deliberate carburization, quenching and tempering was well known to the ancient world from which Nephi came. 'It seems evident,' notes one recent authority, 'that by the beginning of the tenth century B.C. blacksmiths were intentionally steeling iron.'¹⁰ In 1987, the Ensign reported that archeologists had unearthed a long steel sword near Jericho dating back to the late seventh century B.C., probably the reign of King Josiah who died shortly before Lehi began to prophesy.¹¹ The sword is now on display at Jerusalem's Israel Museum. The museum's sign reads in part, "The sword is made of iron hardened into steel,



Food Services Starting to substantial metallurgical know-how. ¹²

Health Center Where answers are incomplete or lacking altogether, patient study and patient waiting for new information and discoveries to unfold will often be rewarded with understanding.

Housing Don't Be Superficial.

I-Card services

When I say don't be superficial, I mean don't form conclusions based on

Dining Dollars unexamined assertions or incomplete research, and don't be influenced by insincere seekers. I would offer you the advice of our Assistant Church Historian,

Parking Services Rick Turley, an intellectually gifted researcher and author whose recent works include the definitive history of the Mountain Meadows Massacre. He says

Public Safety simply, "Don't study Church history too little." ¹³ While some honestly pursue truth and real understanding, others are intent on finding or creating doubts.

Scroll/I-Comm Their interpretations may come from projecting 21st Century concepts and culture backward onto 19th Century people. If there are differing interpretations possible, they will pick the most negative. They sometimes accuse the

Student Employment Ticket Office

Church of hiding something because they only recently found or heard about it-- an interesting accusation for a Church that's publishing 24 volumes of all it can find of Joseph Smith's papers. They College share BYU Passway Worldwide speculations with some glee, but either can't or won't search further to find contradictory information. Remember the verse of English poet Alexander Pope:

A little learning is a dangerous thing;
 Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring:
 There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
 And drinking largely sobers us again. ¹⁵

We should be careful not to claim for Joseph Smith perfections he did not claim for himself. He need not have been superhuman to be the instrument in God's hands that we know him to be. In May, 1844, Joseph declared: "I never told you I was perfect, but there is no error in the revelations which I have taught." ¹⁶ He had commented earlier: "Although I do wrong, I do not the wrongs I am charged with doing: the wrong that I do is through the frailty of human nature, like men. No man lives without fault. Do you think that even Jesus, if He were here, would be without fault in your eyes? His enemies said all manner of evil against



Him--they all watched for iniquity in Him."¹⁷ Joseph Smith was a mortal man striving to fulfill an overwhelming, divinely-appointed mission against all odds. The wonder is not that he ever displayed human failings, but that he succeeded in his mission. His fruits are undeniable and undeniably good.

Don't Ignore the Spirit.

Finally, don't neglect the Spirit. As regards Joseph Smith, we seek learning both by study and by faith.¹⁸ Both are fruitful paths of inquiry. A complete understanding can never be attained by scholarly research alone, especially since much of what is needed is either lost or never existed. There is no benefit in imposing artificial limits on ourselves that cut off the light of Christ and the revelations of the Holy Spirit. Remember, "By the power of the Holy Ghost, ye may know the truth of all things."¹⁹

Some of you may remember hearing about a man named Mark Hofmann, now serving a prison sentence in Utah for murder. He was an expert forger of historical documents. Some of these were tied to U.S. history, but several related to Church history. One was a purported letter from Martin Harris to W. W. Phelps reporting that Joseph Smith found the gold plates led by a spirit who "transfigured himself from a white salamander in the bottom of the hole" where the plates were. Another was a supposed transcript of a blessing given by the Prophet to his son Joseph Smith III in 1844 declaring his son to be his rightful successor as head of the Church.²⁰

Some left the Church when these documents were publicized saying it was clear that Joseph Smith's testimony concerning his visions was false or that they could no longer consider The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints the true Church. Not long afterward these and other documents were shown to be forgeries. I wondered, do those who were so troubled believe again now, and when other questions arise, as they always do, will they leave again? In matters of faith, a spiritual witness is essential if one is to avoid being "tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive."²¹ With a Spirit-derived assurance in place, you can go forward in the Lord's work and continue deepening your relationship with your Heavenly Father while pursuing or awaiting answers. If you determine to sit still, paralyzed until every question is answered and every whisper of doubt resolved, you will never move because in this life there will always be some issue pending or something yet unexplained.



Joseph Smith's prophetic calling is key to our religion. Without his commission from the Father and the Son, without his priesthood ordinations and the keys he received at the hands of duly appointed heavenly messengers, without the fullness of the gospel restored through his visions and revelations and his translations of the Book of Mormon and the Bible, what we would have is something much less than true Christianity. It is critical that we gain a witness of these things by study and above all, by the teaching of the Holy Ghost.

Despite all this, however, I remind you that Joseph Smith is not our foundation-- it is Jesus Christ and Him crucified and resurrected. Joseph Smith, Jr. was called of God "to be a translator, a revelator, a seer, and a prophet."²² Each of these titles has particular significance, but there is no more important aspect of his prophetic mission than his revelation of Jesus Christ in our time. Every element of God's plan for the salvation of His children in time and eternity hinges on Jesus Christ and faith in Him, and since there is no salvation without Jesus, it is critical that He be revealed to mankind in His true character. This becomes increasingly important as the biblical testimony of Jesus recedes in time and more and more begin to doubt, including even some professors and ministers of religion.

The Prophet Joseph Smith is the great latter-day revelator of Jesus Christ in at least three important ways: first, he is a personal witness of the fact of the Savior's resurrection, second, he is the translator and publisher of the most forceful and complete written testament of Jesus Christ in existence, and third, he presents to the world a testimony of Christ irrefutably sealed with his own blood.

His personal witness of the Savior's resurrection.

It is now and always has been the role of His apostles and prophets to bear a sure witness of the literal resurrection of Jesus Christ. When the ancient apostles met to select a successor to Judas Iscariot in their quorum, Peter stated, "Wherefore of these men which have companied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, . . . must one be ordained to be a witness with us of his resurrection."²³ His resurrection confirms the divinity of the Savior and the reality of His Atonement and its power to redeem us from death and sin. If the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a literal fact, all that is said and written about it as being nothing more than a gifted and charismatic mortal is so much hot air



and wasted paper; the arguments of atheists and humanists become meaningless; the search for purpose and meaning in life is at an end. The resurrection of Christ changes everything.

At age 14, in response to sincere and fervent prayer, Joseph Smith was visited by the Savior and God the Father. He saw the Father motion toward Jesus, and heard him say, Joseph, "This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!"²⁴ Joseph spoke to the Lord, and the Lord spoke to him. He knew firsthand that Jesus is the Son, the Beloved Son of God, and that as a resurrected being, He lives. Of his experience, Joseph Smith wrote, "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."²⁵

Some 16 years later, in the temple at Kirtland, Ohio, Joseph recorded:

We saw the Lord standing upon the breastwork of the pulpit, before us; and under his feet was a paved work of pure gold, in color like amber.

His eyes were as a flame of fire; the hair of his head was white like the pure snow; his countenance shone above the brightness of the sun; and his voice was as the sound of the rushing of great waters, even the voice of Jehovah, saying:

I am the first and the last; I am he who liveth, I am he who was slain; I am your advocate with the Father.²⁶

In Joseph Smith's testimony of these and other visitations, we find the clearest possible revelation of the resurrected Lord.

His translation and publication of the Book of Mormon.

The Book of Mormon, Another Testament of Jesus Christ, is the single most complete and compelling volume of scripture known to the world that attests to the divinity of Jesus Christ and the plan of redemption that centers in Him. It was compiled for the purpose of convincing all, both Jew and Gentile, "that JESUS is the CHRIST, the ETERNAL GOD, manifesting himself unto all nations."²⁷ It confirms and upholds the eloquent witness of both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. In translating and publishing the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith has made its testimony his own.



The Book of Mormon's witness of Christ is found throughout the book. Among the most moving declarations are those connected with the Lord's personal ministry among the Book of Mormon peoples following His resurrection. After the Father's voice from heaven introduced Jesus as "my Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased, in whom I have glorified my name,"²⁸ the Savior, standing in their midst, said to the people:

Behold, I am the light and the life of the world; and I have drunk out of that bitter cup which the Father hath given me, and have glorified the Father in taking upon me the sins of the world, in the which I have suffered the will of the Father in all things from the beginning. . . .

Arise and come forth unto me, that ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also that ye may feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet, that ye may know that I am the God of Israel, and the God of the whole earth, and have been slain for the sins of the world.²⁹

My own witness of Jesus Christ was born in the pages of the Book of Mormon. It was the first and foundational evidence leading to my testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith. Continued study of that book continues to deepen my conversion.

Sealing his testimony with his own blood.

Martyrdom endows a prophet's testimony with a special validity. Indeed the Greek root "martureo" from which the English word "martyr" is derived means "witness." The prophet Abinadi is described as "having sealed the truth of his words by his death."³⁰ Jesus' own death was a testament of His divinity and mission. He is declared in Hebrews to be "the mediator of the new testament" validated by His death, "For where a testament is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. For a testament is of force after men are dead."³¹

"Like most of the Lord's anointed in ancient time, [Joseph Smith] sealed his mission and his works with his own blood."³² In a hail of bullets on the afternoon of June 27, 1844, in Carthage, Illinois, Joseph and his brother, Hyrum, were cut down for the religion and testimony they professed. As the latter-day apostle then announced, "The testators are now dead, and their testament is in force. Their innocent blood on the banner of liberty, and on the magna charta of the United States, is an ambassador for the religion of Jesus Christ, that will touch



the hearts of honest men among all nations."³³

Joseph Smith's revelation of Christ, sealed by his blood and supported by the testimony of his fellow martyr Hyrum, is now binding upon the world. The most eloquent expression of that testimony was given in 1832 as follows:

We beheld the glory of the Son, on the right hand of the Father, and received of his fulness;

And saw the holy angels, and them who are sanctified before his throne, worshiping God, and the Lamb, who worship him forever and ever.

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.³⁴

Among mortals, the Lord Jesus Christ has had no surer witness, no more committed disciple, no more loyal advocate than Joseph Smith, His prophet, seer, and revelator. By his personal witness of the resurrected Savior, by his translation and publication of the Book of Mormon, and by his martyrdom, Joseph Smith has laid before the world the preeminent revelation of Jesus Christ for our time.

I bear witness of Joseph Smith's prophetic calling, and to his magnificent revelation of Jesus, I reverently add my own testimony of the Christ. I too know that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God and the Savior of the world. He stands at the head of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He is the Redeemer, and His grace is sufficient.³⁵ I pray that all may receive the testimony of Joseph Smith and come unto Christ, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.



¹ Joseph Smith–History 1:33. ² Ibid.

³ D&C 122:1.

⁴ D&C 122:2-3.⁵ John 3:2.

⁶ Brigham Young, *Deseret News*, Nov. 28, 1860, 305; cited in *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church*, Joseph Smith, 2007, 499-500.

⁷ *History of the Church*, 6:317, from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on April 7, 1844; cited in *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church*, Joseph Smith, 2007, 525.

⁸ Clark Braden in *Public Discussion*, 1884, 109.

⁹ Thomas O'Dea, *The Mormons*, 1957, 39.

¹⁰ Robert Maddin, James D. Muhly, and Tamara S. Wheeler, "How the Iron Age Began," *Scientific American* 237/4 [October 1977]:127.

¹¹ See "Iron Sword from the Time of Jeremiah Discovered near Jericho," *Ensign*, June 1987, 57.¹² See Matthew Roper, FairMormon Blog, "Laban's Sword of 'Most Precious Steel,'" June 17, 2013. Critics have also claimed that there were no religious revivals in the Palmyra, New York, area in 1820, as Joseph Smith reported in his history. With today's greater access to original sources, including the Palmyra Register newspaper, there is ample evidence of religious revivals in the area during 1820 and some years prior. It appears that the Methodists had a regularly used camp meeting ground, and that revivals were common enough that often they garnered no coverage in the newspapers unless something out of the ordinary occurred such as a death. (See "Joseph Smith's First Vision/Religious revivals in 1820," http://en.fairmormon.org/Joseph_Smith's_First_Vision/Religious_revivals_in_1820 accessed on 17 September 2013; See also Milton V. Backman, Jr., "Awakenings in the Burned-over District: New Light on the Historical Setting of the First Vision," *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (Spring 1969): 301-320).

¹³ Commenting on this counsel, former Church Historian Elder Marlin K. Jensen added: "There is much wisdom in that. There is great danger, I think, in picking out just one piece of [the] puzzle and looking at it in isolation. When we enjoy a perfect knowledge of Church history, many of the things that are jarring won't be jarring at all" (Marlin K. Jensen, *When It Is All Over*, Clark Memorandum, Spring, 2013, 44).

¹⁴ Recording mistakes, for example, have sometimes been seized on as evidence of misrepresentations or bumbling by the Prophet. For example, the Book of Commandments initially referred to Joseph Smith as "an elder" and Oliver Cowdery the same, rather than "First Elder" and "Second Elder" as found in the text of Doctrine and Covenants Section 20. The 1833 Book of Commandments



suggested that the Church was organized in Manchester rather than Fayette, New York. The June 1839 Manuscript History of the Church says it was Nephi who appeared to Joseph Smith in 1823 rather than Moroni. Now, however, with original manuscripts contained in the Book of Commandments and Revelations, published as part of the Joseph Smith Papers Project, and other early sources we can "peel back the onion" a little further. And we find that the supposed problems are nothing more sinister than clerical errors sometimes repeated by others.

¹⁵ Alexander Pope, *Essay on Criticism*, Part II, Line 1; cited in John Bartlett, *Familiar Quotations*, Little, Brown and Co., 1955, 310.

¹⁶ *History of the Church* 6:366; cited in *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church*, Joseph Smith, 2007, 522.

¹⁷ *History of the Church* 5:140; cited in *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church*, Joseph Smith, 2007, 522.

¹⁸ See D&C 88:118.

¹⁹ Moroni 10:5. You will recall Elder Jeffrey R. Holland's counsel from last April's General Conference: Brothers and sisters, this is a divine work in process, with the manifestations and blessings of it abounding in every direction, so please don't hyperventilate if from time to time issues arise that need to be examined, understood, and resolved. They do and they will. In this Church, what we know will always trump what we do not know. And remember, in this world, everyone is to walk by faith. (Jeffrey R. Holland, "Lord, I Believe," *Ensign*, May 2013, 94; emphasis in original).²⁰ See Richard E. Turley, Jr., *Victims: The LDS Church and the Mark Hofmann Case*, 1992.²¹ Ephesians 4:14.

²² D&C 124:125.

²³ Acts 1:21-22.²⁴ *Joseph Smith-History* 1:17.²⁵ *Joseph Smith-History* 1:25.²⁶ D&C 110:2-4.

²⁷ *Book of Mormon*, Title Page.²⁸ 3 Nephi 11:7.²⁹ 3 Nephi 11:11, 14.³⁰ Mosiah 17:20.

³¹ Hebrews 9:15-17.³² D&C 135:3.³³ D&C 135:5, 7.

³⁴ D&C 76:20-24.

³⁵ See Moroni 10:32-33. ©2013 Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Publication, distribution or reproduction for other than incidental, noncommercial Church or home purposes requires the permission of the Intellectual Property Office of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

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