

Hearing and Heeding the Message from the Grove

MESSAGES FROM THE



DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS



BY ELDER F. BURTON HOWARD

Served as a member of the Seventy from 1978 to 2005

A few years ago as Sister Howard and I were touring the Rochester New York Mission, the mission president asked if we would like to get up early and go to the Sacred Grove before the crowds came. We accepted his invitation.

As we approached the Sacred Grove, we drove a mile or so past the Smith farmhouse. Then, after the mission president had stopped the car, he said, "If you don't mind walking, I

will show you my favorite way into the grove." We walked down a little grass-covered lane on the far side of the grove, and in the distance we could see tall trees. After a while we came to a small sign made of brass with gold letters and a black background. Mounted on two wooden posts, the sign read, "The Sacred Grove." It also contained these incredible words: "God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, appeared to Joseph Smith in this grove." Period!

I had intended on going into the grove and contemplating what occurred there in 1820, but I found that I could not bring

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myself to leave the sign. Its simple message arrested my progress. It did not say “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” or “On the morning of a beautiful, clear day, early in the spring.” It didn’t purport to be a historical site. It didn’t even say, “Visitors Welcome.” Rather, it made one simple statement: “God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, appeared to Joseph Smith in this grove.”

I read it again and again. My wife said, “Don’t you want to go into the grove?” I replied, “I need to think about the message on this sign for a moment longer. Either it is true, or it isn’t. If it is, it is the greatest message in all the world. Even someone who didn’t believe it could not pass by it without being profoundly affected.”

President Marion G. Romney (1897–1988) once said that the Father’s statement—“This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!” (Joseph Smith—History 1:17)—“together with the Prophet’s declaration that ‘the Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s; [and] the Son also’ . . . (D&C 130:22) clarifies and confirms, for us of this last dispensation, all that has before been revealed and preserved for us about God. . . .

“Upon our acceptance and testimony to the truth of this vision and statement hangs our individual salvation.”¹

Those are strong words—to think that our personal salvation depends upon whether we accept and have a testimony of what Joseph saw and heard in the spring of 1820. Ultimately, his vision is a test for all of us. That test begins and ends in a grove of trees in upstate New York. Did things really happen as Joseph said they happened? Will we *hear* and *heed* the message from the grove?

A Missionary’s Testimony

As a young missionary, I was appointed to be president of our district of six elders. One day the mission president called and told me he wanted to expand the work. There was a fairly large city in our district that had never had missionaries in it before. He suggested that we go there and hold a street meeting. Having never done that, I asked him what he wanted us to do.

In Uruguay, in those pretelevision days, all cities had a public square with a large park in it. There was a cathedral on one end of the square and municipal buildings on the other end. In the evening people would dress up and go for a stroll in the park.

“I want you to take your district to the park on Friday night,” the mission president

said. “Sing some hymns. When a crowd gathers, I



want one of you to get up on one of the benches and tell the Joseph Smith story. Take the names of any interested persons, and then we will decide whether there is sufficient potential to assign a pair of missionaries to work there permanently.”

Friday came. We boarded the train and went to the city, arriving in the early evening. We went to the park and sang a few hymns we had practiced as a district. Just as the president had promised, a small crowd gathered. Nothing like that had ever happened on their evening walk before.

We sang as long as we could. Finally

one of the elders got up on a bench and began to tell of Joseph's experience in the grove. He told of Joseph's desire to know which church to join, quoted James 1:5, and spoke of how Joseph had decided to ask of God. People actually listened, so the young elder confidently pressed on.

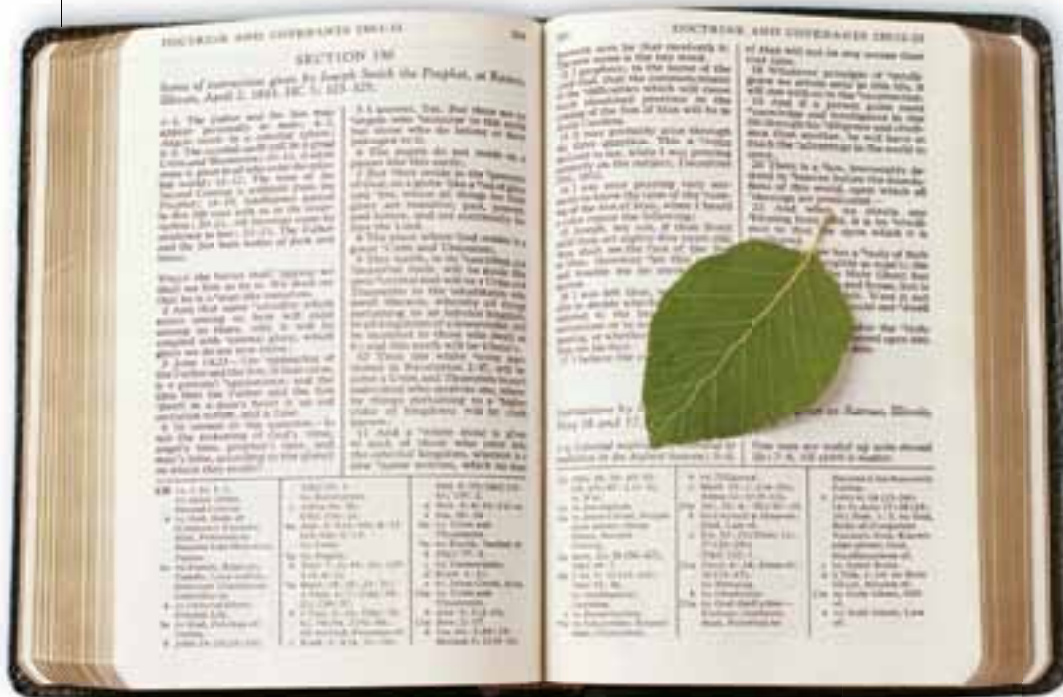
He told how Joseph knelt and began to pray, how a pillar of light descended until it fell upon him, and how he saw two personages, whose brightness and glory defied

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ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL MANN

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description. The elder had just gotten to the part where one of Them spoke to Joseph, calling him by name and saying, pointing to the other, “This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!” Suddenly, however, the script that the mission president had carefully worked out for us abruptly changed.

At the edge of the crowd, in the shadows, a group of teenage boys had gathered and began throwing rocks at us. I was the leader, and I seemed to be the main target, although I’m sure we all felt that way. I had to decide in an instant whether to continue or conclude the meeting. That decision seemed to depend on whether Joseph really went into that grove, whether he really did see a pillar of light, and whether the Father really did say, “This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!”

But there was more to consider. Had I really been called by a prophet? Had the mission president really been inspired to ask us to open that town? Were we really on the Lord’s errand? And was knowing all of that worth more than a rock in the eye?

After the Spirit had answered those questions, there didn’t seem to be any honorable alternative. We finished the story. A few small stones found their mark but did no permanent damage. We sang a hymn and closed the meeting. We didn’t convert a soul that night, but we did open the city. Some time later a small branch was organized. A ward prospers there today. None of the members there know of that street meeting held in their city nearly 50 years ago, but I have never been the same. On that night the absolute reality

of what happened in the Sacred Grove was indelibly impressed upon my mind.

The First Vision in Our Lives

If Joseph saw what he claimed to have seen, and I testify that he did, then in sharing his vision he did more than any man who has ever lived to reveal the nature, character, and mission of the Lord Jesus Christ to the world. As a consequence, we Latter-day Saints have some duties and responsibilities.

President Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008) eloquently expressed himself in this regard:

“I read this morning a part of Joseph Smith’s testimony of the First Vision. You are all familiar with it. His going into a grove, pleading with the Lord, a light shining above

him, and then the appearance of the Father and the Son. I read that testimony and thought of it. I said to myself, 'If every one of us knew in our hearts that that statement is true, then we would know that all else which follows it, which came through the restoration of the gospel, is true also.' And we would walk and live with greater faithfulness.

"Tithing would not be a problem with us. Temple service would not be a problem with us. Keeping the Sabbath day holy would not be a problem with us. . . . Missionary service would be no problem with us.

"All else that follows would be true. We would know it in our hearts if we had a solid, firm, immovable conviction of the truth and validity of that great vision wherein God the Eternal Father and the risen Lord Jesus Christ appeared to the boy Joseph Smith and the Father said, 'This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!' "²

Because of the First Vision, we do things we would not do otherwise. We teach our children, repent, pray, try to walk uprightly, and keep everlastingly at it—all because of what happened in that grove.

Because of the First Vision, we know that prayer works, that the heavens are not sealed, and that the Father and the Son are separate and distinct beings.

Because of the First Vision, we enjoy the Restoration in all its magnificence and variety.

Because of the First Vision, eight of my great-grandparents crossed the plains in response to President Brigham Young's invitation to gather to Zion, and a great-great-grandfather walked away from a 600-acre farm near what today is Kansas City, Missouri.

Every Latter-day Saint knows the story of the First Vision and, to some degree or

another, has faith in it. But we must take care to connect the events of the Sacred Grove with real life and with present circumstances, or the result will be that the great truths of the Restoration will become something we just talk about and not live.

The challenge for most of us is that, while we believe these things, the events of that day in 1820 are far away and sometimes forgotten. The wear and tear of daily living often overshadow the things we know, and we fail to heed. Without meaning to, we sometimes find ourselves doing or saying things that are inconsistent with the voices from the grove, and Joseph's experience there ceases, for a time, to have what Elder Neal A. Maxwell (1926–2004) called "operative relevancy" for our lives.³

To ensure that I do not forget the things that my eyes have seen and my heart has felt, I carry with me a reminder of the reality of the First Vision. It is a leaf from a 200-year-old beech tree. I found it in the Sacred Grove a few years ago. The tree, as nearly as I can tell, was in the grove on that spring morning in 1820. Perhaps some of the light Joseph saw shone on it and caused it to sink its roots deeper into the rocky soil. I keep the leaf in my scriptures, and every time I open them, the leaf helps remind me of what I know.

May we always remember what we know and most surely believe, and may our lives reverently reflect the reality of these things. ■

Adapted from a BYU Women's Conference address given April 28, 2005. For the full text, please visit <http://womensconference.byu.edu>.

NOTES

1. *Learning for the Eternities* (1977), 8.
2. *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* (1997), 225–26.
3. *Lord, Increase Our Faith* (1994), 9.



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