





CHAPTER 1

Ask in Faith

This is chapter 1 of the new four-volume narrative history of the Church titled Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days. The book will be available in 14 languages in print, in the Church History section of the Gospel Library app, and at saints.lds.org. The next several chapters will be published in upcoming issues until volume 1 is released later this year. Those chapters will be available in 47 languages in the Gospel Library app and at saints.lds.org.

In 1815, the Indonesian island of Sumbawa was lush and green with recent rain. Families were preparing for the dry season ahead, as they had every year for generations, cultivating rice paddies in the shadow of a volcano called Tambora.

On April 5, after decades of slumber, the mountain roared awake, coughing up ash and fire. Hundreds of miles away, witnesses heard what sounded like cannon fire. Small eruptions continued for days. Then, on the evening of April 10, the whole mountain exploded. Three fiery plumes shot skyward, merging into one massive blast. Liquid fire flowed down the mountainside, enveloping the village at its base. Whirlwinds raged through the region, pulling up trees and sweeping away homes.¹

The chaos continued all that night and into the next. Ash blanketed miles of land and sea, piling two feet high in places. Midday felt like midnight. Rough seas heaved over shorelines, spoiling crops and drowning villages. For weeks, Tambora rained cinders, stone, and fire.²

Over the next few months, the blast's effects rippled across the globe. Spectacular sunsets awed people around the world. But the vibrant colors masked the deadly effects

of the volcano's ash as it circled the earth. In the coming year, the weather turned unpredictable and devastating.³

The eruption caused temperatures in India to drop, and cholera killed thousands, destroying families. In fertile Chinese valleys, summer snowstorms replaced a normally mild climate and flooding rains destroyed crops. In Europe, food supplies dwindled, leading to starvation and panic.⁴

Everywhere, people sought explanations for the suffering and death the strange weather caused. Prayers and chants from holy men echoed through Hindu temples in India. Chinese poets grappled with questions of pain and loss. In France and Britain, citizens fell to their knees, fearful the terrible calamities foretold in the Bible were upon them. In North America, ministers preached that God was punishing wayward Christians, and they sounded warnings to stoke religious feelings.

Across the land, people flocked to churches and revival meetings, anxious to know how they could be saved from the coming destruction.⁵

The eruption of Tambora affected weather in North America through the following year. Spring gave way to snowfall and killing frosts, and 1816 passed into memory as the year without a summer.⁶ In Vermont, in the northeast corner of the United States, rocky hills had frustrated a farmer named Joseph Smith Sr. for years. But that season, as he and his wife, Lucy Mack Smith, watched their crops shrivel under the relentless frosts, they knew they faced financial ruin and



This visitors' center in Sharon, Vermont, marks the spot where Joseph Smith was born on December 23, 1805. The stone obelisk in the background rises 38 and a half feet (11.7 m) from the base, one foot for each year of his life.

me every means of proceeding on my journey, leaving me with eight little children utterly destitute.”

Mr. Howard said that he had already spent the money she paid him to drive the wagon, and he could go no farther.

“I have no use for you,” Lucy said. “I shall take charge of the team myself.”

She left Mr. Howard in the bar and vowed to reunite her children with their father, come what may.¹²

The road ahead was muddy and cold, but Lucy led her family safely to Palmyra. As she watched the children cling to their father and kiss his face, she felt rewarded for all they had suffered to get there.

The family soon rented a small house in town and discussed how to get their own farm.¹³ The best plan, they decided, was to work until they had enough money for a down payment on land in the nearby woods. Joseph Sr. and the older sons dug wells, split fence rails, and harvested hay for cash, while Lucy and the daughters made and sold pies, root beer, and decorative cloths to provide food for the family.¹⁴

As Joseph Jr. got older, his leg grew stronger and he could easily walk through Palmyra. In town, he came in contact with people from all over the region, and many of them were turning to religion to satisfy spiritual yearnings and explain the hardships of life. Joseph and his family did not belong to a church, but many of their neighbors worshipped in one of

the tall Presbyterian chapels, the Baptists' meetinghouse, the Quaker hall, or the campground where traveling Methodist preachers held revival meetings from time to time.¹⁵

When Joseph was 12, religious debates swept Palmyra. Although he read little, he liked to think deeply about ideas. He listened to preachers, hoping to learn more about his immortal soul, but their sermons often left him unsettled. They told him he was a sinner in a sinful world, helpless without the saving grace of Jesus Christ. And while Joseph believed the message and felt bad about his sins, he was not sure how to find forgiveness.¹⁶

He thought going to church could help him, but he could not settle on a place to worship. The different churches argued endlessly about how people could be free of sin. After listening to these arguments for a while, Joseph was distressed to see people reading the same Bible but coming to different conclusions about its meaning. He believed God's truth was out there—somewhere—but he did not know how to find it.¹⁷

His parents were not sure either. Lucy and Joseph Sr. both came from Christian families and believed in the Bible and Jesus Christ. Lucy attended church meetings and often brought her children with her. She had been seeking the true church of Jesus Christ since the death of her sister many years earlier.

Once, after falling gravely ill sometime before Joseph's

birth, she had feared that she would die before finding the truth. She sensed a dark and lonely chasm between her and the Savior, and she knew she was unprepared for the next life.

Lying awake all night, she prayed to God, promising Him that if He let her live, she would find the Church of Jesus Christ. As she prayed, the voice of the Lord spoke to her, assuring her that if she would seek, she would find. She had visited more churches since then, but she had still not found the right one. Yet even when it felt like the Savior's Church was no longer on the earth, she kept searching, trusting that going to church was better than not.¹⁸

Like his wife, Joseph Sr. hungered for the truth. But he felt that attending no church at all was preferable to the wrong one. Following the counsel of his father, Joseph Sr. searched the scriptures, prayed earnestly, and believed that Jesus Christ had come to save the world.¹⁹ Yet he could not reconcile what he felt to be true with the confusion and discord he saw

in the churches around him. One night he had dreamed that contending preachers were like cattle, bellowing as they dug at the earth with their horns, which deepened his concern that they knew little about God's kingdom.²⁰

Seeing his parents' dissatisfaction with local churches only confused Joseph Jr. more.²¹ His soul was at stake, but no one could give him satisfying answers.

After saving their money for more than a year, the Smiths had enough to make a payment on a hundred acres of forest in Manchester, just south of Palmyra. There, between jobs as hired hands, they tapped maple trees for their sugary sap, planted an orchard, and cleared fields to grow crops.²²

As he worked the land, young Joseph continued to worry about his sins and the welfare of his soul. The religious revival in Palmyra had quieted down, but preachers continued to compete for converts there and throughout the region.²³ Day and night, Joseph watched the sun,

This log home, located in Manchester, New York, is a replica of the home the Smiths built there after moving from Vermont. The grove where Joseph experienced his First Vision is nearby.



moon, and stars roll through the heavens in order and majesty and admired the beauty of the earth teeming with life. He also looked at the people around him and marveled at their strength and intelligence. Everything seemed to testify that God existed and had created humankind in His own image. But how could Joseph reach Him?²⁴

In the summer of 1819, when Joseph was 13, Methodist preachers gathered for a conference a few miles from the Smith farm and spread out across the countryside to spur families like Joseph's toward conversion. The success of these preachers worried other ministers in the area, and soon competition for converts was intense.

Joseph attended meetings, listened to soul-stirring preaching, and witnessed converts shout for joy. He wanted to shout with them, but he often felt like he was in the middle of a war of words and opinions. "Who of all these parties are right; or, are they all wrong together?" he asked himself. "If any one of them be right, which is it, and how shall I know it?" He knew he needed Christ's grace and mercy, but with so many people and churches clashing over religion, he did not know where to find it.²⁵

Hope that he could find answers—and peace for his soul—seemed to slip away from him. He wondered how anyone could find truth amid so much noise.²⁶

While attending a sermon, Joseph heard a minister quote from the first chapter of James in the New Testament. "If any of you lack wisdom," he said, "let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not."²⁷

Joseph went home and read the verse in the Bible. "Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine," he later remembered. "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." He had searched the Bible before as if it held all the answers. But now the Bible was telling him he could go directly to God for personal answers to his questions.

Joseph decided to pray. He had never prayed out loud before, but he trusted the Bible's promise. "Ask in faith,

nothing wavering," it taught.²⁸ God would hear his questions—even if they came out awkwardly. ■

A complete list of works cited is available at saints.lds.org.

The word *Topic* in the notes indicates additional information online at saints.lds.org.

NOTES

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