



CHAPTER 6

The Gift and Power of God

This is chapter 6 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 soon be available in 14 languages in print, in the Church History section of the Gospel Library app, and online at saints.lds.org. Chapter 5, published in the July issue, described the loss of the first 116 pages of the Book of Mormon translation in 1828.

When Joseph returned to Harmony in the summer of 1828, Moroni appeared to him again and took the plates away. “If you are sufficiently humble and penitent,” the angel said, “you will receive them again on the twenty-second of September.”¹

Darkness clouded Joseph’s mind.² He knew he had been wrong to ignore God’s will and trust Martin with the manuscript. Now God no longer trusted him with the plates or the interpreters. He felt like he deserved any punishment the heavens sent his way.³

Weighed down with guilt and regret, he went to his knees, confessed his sins, and pleaded for forgiveness. He reflected on where he had gone wrong and what he could do better if the Lord let him translate again.⁴

One day in July, as Joseph was walking a short distance from his house, Moroni appeared to him. The angel handed him the interpreters, and Joseph saw a divine message in them: “The works, and the designs, and the purposes of God cannot be frustrated, neither can they come to naught.”⁵

The words were reassuring, but they soon gave way to reproof. “How strict were your commandments,” the Lord said. “You should not have feared man more than God.” He commanded Joseph to be more careful with sacred things. The record on the gold plates was more important than Martin’s reputation or Joseph’s desire to please people. God had prepared it to renew His ancient covenant and teach all people to rely on Jesus Christ for salvation.

The Lord urged Joseph to remember His mercy. “Repent of that which thou hast done,” He commanded, “and thou art still chosen.” Once again, He called Joseph to be His prophet and seer. Yet He warned him to heed His word.

“Except thou do this,” He declared, “thou shalt be delivered up and become as other men, and have no more gift.”⁶

That fall, Joseph’s parents traveled south to Harmony. Nearly two months had passed since Joseph left their home in Manchester, and they had heard nothing from him. They worried the summer’s tragedies had devastated him. In a matter of weeks, he had lost his first child, nearly lost his wife, and lost the manuscript pages. They wanted to make sure he and Emma were well.

Less than a mile from their destination, Joseph Sr. and Lucy were overjoyed to see Joseph standing in the road



ahead of them, looking calm and happy. He told them about losing the confidence of God, repenting of his sins, and receiving the revelation. The Lord's rebuke had stung him, but like prophets of old he wrote the revelation down for others to read. It was the first time he had ever recorded the Lord's word to him.

Joseph also told his parents that Moroni had since returned the plates and interpreters. The angel seemed pleased, Joseph recounted. "He told me that the Lord loved me for my faithfulness and humility."

The record was now safely stowed in the house, hidden in a trunk. "Emma writes for me now," Joseph told them, "but the angel said that the Lord would send someone to write for me, and I trust that it will be so."⁷

The following spring, Martin Harris traveled to Harmony with some bad news. His wife had filed a complaint in court, claiming Joseph was a fraud who pretended to translate gold plates. Martin now expected a summons to testify in court. He would have to declare that Joseph had fooled him, or Lucy would charge him with deceit as well.⁸

Martin pushed Joseph to give him more evidence that the plates were real. He wanted to tell the court all about the translation, but he worried people would not believe him. Lucy, after all, had searched the Smiths' house and never found the record. And though he had served as Joseph's scribe for two months, Martin had never seen the plates either and could not testify that he had.⁹

Joseph took the question to the Lord and received an answer for his friend. The Lord would not tell Martin what to say in court, nor would He provide him any more evidence until Martin chose to be humble and exercise faith. "If they will not believe my words, they would not believe you, my servant Joseph," He said, "if it were possible that you should show them all these things which I have committed unto you."

The Lord promised to treat Martin mercifully, however, if he did as Joseph had done that summer and humbled himself, trusted in God, and learned from his mistakes. Three faithful witnesses would see the plates in due time, the Lord said, and Martin could be one of them if he stopped seeking the approval of others.¹⁰

Before closing His words, the Lord made a declaration. "If the people of this generation harden not their hearts," He said, "I will establish my church."¹¹

Joseph reflected on these words as Martin copied the revelation. He and Emma then listened as Martin read it back to check its accuracy. As they read, Emma's father came into the room and listened. When they finished, he asked whose words they were.

"The words of Jesus Christ," Joseph and Emma explained.

"I consider the whole of it a delusion," Isaac said. "Abandon it."¹²

Ignoring Emma's father, Martin took his copy of the revelation and boarded the stagecoach for home. He had come to Harmony seeking evidence of the plates, and he left with a revelation testifying of their reality. He could not use it in court, but he returned to Palmyra knowing the Lord was aware of him.

Later, when Martin stood before the judge, he offered a simple, powerful testimony. With a hand raised to heaven, he witnessed of the truth of the gold plates and declared that he had freely given Joseph fifty dollars to do the Lord's

work. With no evidence to prove Lucy's accusations, the court dismissed the case.¹³

Joseph, meanwhile, continued the translation, praying the Lord would soon send him another scribe.¹⁴

Back in Manchester, a young man named Oliver Cowdery was staying with Joseph's parents. Oliver was a year younger than Joseph, and in the fall of 1828 he had begun teaching school about a mile south of the Smiths' farm.

Teachers often boarded with the families of their students, and when Oliver heard rumors about Joseph and the gold plates, he asked if he could stay with the Smiths. At first he gleaned few details from the family. The stolen manuscript and local gossip had made them wary to the point of silence.¹⁵

But during the winter of 1828–29, as Oliver taught the Smith children, he earned the trust of his hosts. Around this time, Joseph Sr. had come back from a trip to Harmony with a revelation declaring that the Lord was about to begin a marvelous work.¹⁶ By then Oliver had proven to be a sincere seeker of truth, and Joseph's parents opened up to him about their son's divine calling.¹⁷

What they said captivated Oliver, and he longed to help with the translation. Like Joseph, Oliver was dissatisfied with modern churches and believed in a God of miracles who still revealed His will to people.¹⁸ But Joseph and the gold plates were far away, and Oliver did not know how he could help the work if he stayed in Manchester.

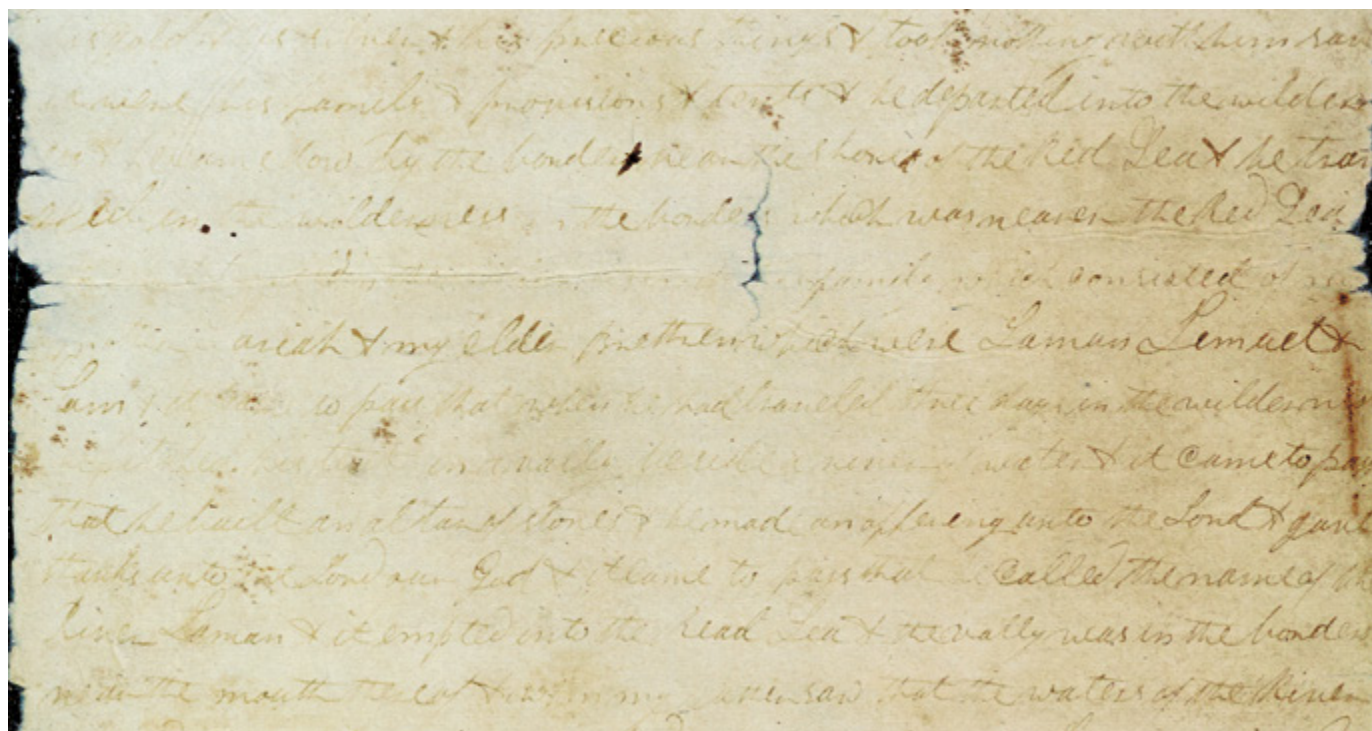
One spring day, as rain was falling hard against the Smiths' roof, Oliver told the family he wanted to go to Harmony to help Joseph when the school term was over. Lucy and Joseph Sr. urged him to ask the Lord if his desires were right.¹⁹

Retiring to his bed, Oliver prayed privately to know if what he had heard about the gold plates was true. The Lord showed him a vision of the gold plates and Joseph's efforts to translate them. A peaceful feeling rested over him, and he



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Oliver Cowdery was the scribe for this page of the Book of Mormon translation.

knew then that he should volunteer to be Joseph's scribe.²⁰

Oliver told no one about his prayer. But as soon as the school term ended, he and Joseph's brother Samuel set out on foot for Harmony, more than 100 miles (160 km) away. The road was cold and muddy from spring rain, and Oliver had a frostbitten toe by the time he and Samuel arrived at Joseph and Emma's door. Yet he was eager to meet the couple and see for himself how the Lord worked through the young prophet.²¹

Once Oliver arrived in Harmony, it was as if he had always been there. Joseph talked with him late into the night, listened to his story, and answered his questions. It was obvious Oliver had a good education, and Joseph readily accepted his offer to act as scribe.

After Oliver's arrival, Joseph's first task was to secure a place to work. He asked Oliver to draft a contract in which Joseph promised to pay his father-in-law for the small frame home where he and Emma lived, as well as the barn, farmland, and nearby spring.²² Mindful of their daughter's well-being, Emma's parents agreed to the terms and promised to help calm neighbors' fears about Joseph.²³

Meanwhile, Joseph and Oliver started translating. They worked well together, weeks on end, frequently with

Emma in the same room going about her daily work.²⁴ Sometimes Joseph translated by looking through the interpreters and reading in English the characters on the plates.

Often he found a single seer stone to be more convenient. He would put the seer stone in his hat, place his face into the hat to block out the light, and peer at the stone. Light from the stone would shine in the darkness, revealing words that Joseph dictated as Oliver rapidly copied them down.²⁵

Under the Lord's direction, Joseph did not try to retranslate what he had lost. Instead, he and Oliver continued forward in the record. The Lord revealed that Satan had enticed wicked men to take the pages, alter their words, and use them to cast doubt on the translation. But the Lord assured Joseph that He had inspired the ancient prophets who prepared the plates to include another, fuller account of the lost material.²⁶

"I will confound those who have altered my words," the Lord told Joseph. "I will show unto them that my wisdom is greater than the cunning of the devil."²⁷

Acting as Joseph's scribe thrilled Oliver. Day after day, he listened as his friend dictated the complex history of two large civilizations, the Nephites and the Lamanites. He learned of righteous and wicked kings, of people who

fell into captivity and were delivered from it, of an ancient prophet who used seer stones to translate records recovered from fields filled with bones. Like Joseph, that prophet was a revelator and seer blessed with the gift and power of God.²⁸

The record testified again and again of Jesus Christ, and Oliver saw how prophets led an ancient church and how ordinary men and women did the work of God.

Yet Oliver still had many questions about the Lord's work, and he hungered for answers. Joseph sought a revelation for him through the Urim and Thummim, and the Lord responded. "If you will ask of me you shall receive," He declared. "If thou wilt inquire, thou shalt know mysteries which are great and marvelous."

The Lord also urged Oliver to remember the witness he had received before coming to Harmony, which Oliver had kept to himself. "Did I not speak peace to your mind concerning the matter? What greater witness can you have than from God?" the Lord asked. "If I have told you things which no man knoweth have you not received a witness?"²⁹

Oliver was astonished. He immediately told Joseph about his secret prayer and the divine witness he had received. No one could have known about it except God, he said, and he now knew the work was true.

They returned to work, and Oliver began to wonder if he could translate as well.³⁰ He believed that God could work through instruments like seer stones, and he had occasionally used a divining rod to find water and minerals. Yet he was unsure if his rod worked by the power of God. The process of revelation was still a mystery to him.³¹

Joseph again brought Oliver's questions to the Lord, and the Lord told Oliver that he had power to acquire knowledge if he asked in faith. The Lord confirmed that Oliver's rod worked by the power of God, like Aaron's rod in the Old Testament. He then taught Oliver more about revelation. "I will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by

the Holy Ghost," He declared. "Behold, this is the spirit of revelation."

He also told Oliver that he could translate the record like Joseph did, as long as he relied on faith. "Remember," the Lord said, "without faith you can do nothing."³²

After the revelation, Oliver was excited to translate. He followed Joseph's example, but when the words did not come easily, he grew frustrated and confused.

Joseph saw his friend's struggle and sympathized. It had taken him time to tune his heart and mind to the work of translation, but Oliver seemed to think he could master it quickly. It was not enough to have a spiritual gift. He had to cultivate and develop it over time for use in God's work.

Oliver soon gave up on translating and asked Joseph why he had not been successful.

Joseph asked the Lord. "You have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was

to ask me," the Lord replied. "You must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right."

The Lord instructed Oliver to be patient. "It is not expedient that you should translate now," He said. "The work which you are called to do is to write for my servant Joseph." He promised Oliver other opportunities to translate later, but for now he was the scribe and Joseph was the seer.³³ ■

A complete list of works cited is available in English at saints.lds.org. The word *Topic* in the notes indicates additional information online at saints.lds.org.

NOTES

1. Lucy Mack Smith, *History, 1844–45*, book 7, [9].
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3. See Lucy Mack Smith, *History, 1844–45*, book 7, [5]–[7].
4. Lucy Mack Smith, *History, 1844–45*, book 7, [8]–[9].
5. *Doctrine and Covenants 3:1* (Revelation, July 1828, at josephsmithpapers.org); Lucy Mack Smith, *History, 1844–45*, book 7, [8]–[9]; Joseph Smith *History, 1838–56*, volume A-1, 10, in *JSP*, H1:246 (draft 2).
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7. Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1845, 138; Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–45, book 7, [8]–[11].
8. Preface to Book of Mormon, circa Aug. 1829, in *JSP*, D1:92–94; “Testamoney of Martin Harris,” Sept. 4, 1870, [4], Edward Stevenson Collection, Church History Library; Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–45, book 8, [5]; Historical Introduction to Revelation, Mar. 1829 [D&C 5], in *JSP*, D1:14–16.
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10. Doctrine and Covenants 5 (Revelation, Mar. 1829, at josephsmithpapers.org).
11. Revelation, Mar. 1829 [D&C 5], in *JSP*, D1:17.
12. Isaac Hale, Affidavit, Mar. 20, 1834, in “Mormonism,” *Susquehanna Register, and Northern Pennsylvanian*, May 1, 1834, [1]; “considered” in original changed to “consider.”
13. Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–45, book 8, [6]–[7].
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15. Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–45, book 7, [12]; “Mormonism,” *Kansas City Daily Journal*, June 5, 1881, 1; Morris, “Conversion of Oliver Cowdery,” 5–8.
16. Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–45, book 7, [12]; Knight, Reminiscences, 5; Doctrine and Covenants 4 (Revelation, Feb. 1829, at josephsmithpapers.org); see also Darowski, “Joseph Smith’s Support at Home,” 10–14.
17. Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–45, book 7, [12].
18. Oliver Cowdery to William W. Phelps, Sept. 7, 1834, *LDS Messenger and Advocate*, Oct. 1834, 1:15.
19. Doctrine and Covenants 6 (Revelation, Apr. 1829–A, at josephsmithpapers.org); Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–45, book 7, [12]; book 8, [1].
20. Joseph Smith History, 1838–56, volume A-1, 15, in *JSP*, H1:284 (draft 2); Joseph Smith History, circa Summer 1832, [6], in *JSP*, H1:16; Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–45, book 8, [1]; see also Doctrine and Covenants 6:22–23 (Revelation, Apr. 1829–A, at josephsmithpapers.org).
21. Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–45, book 8, [3]–[4]; Joseph Smith History, circa Summer 1832, [6], in *JSP*, H1:16.
22. Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–45, book 8, [4]; Joseph Smith History, 1838–56, volume A-1, 13, in *JSP*, H1:276 (draft 2); Agreement with Isaac Hale, Apr. 6, 1829, in *JSP*, D1:28–34; Oliver Cowdery to William W. Phelps, Sept. 7, 1834, *LDS Messenger and Advocate*, Oct. 1834, 1:14.
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28. Oliver Cowdery to William W. Phelps, Sept. 7, 1834, *LDS Messenger and Advocate*, Oct. 1834, 1:14; Mosiah 8:16–18; see also Omni 1:20; Mosiah 8:8–13; 28:11–15, 20; Alma 37:21, 23; and Ether 3:24–28.
29. Doctrine and Covenants 6:5, 11, 22–24 (Revelation, Apr. 1829–A, at josephsmithpapers.org).
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31. Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–45, book 8, [1]; Paul and Parks, *History of Wells, Vermont*, 81; Historical Introduction to Revelation, 1829–B [D&C 8], in *JSP*, D1:44–45; see also Baugh, *Days Never to Be Forgotten*; Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 73; and Morris, “Oliver Cowdery’s Vermont Years and the Origins of Mormonism,” 106–29. **Topic:** Divining Rods
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