

Witnesses See the Gold Plates

Purpose

To help the children desire to be witnesses of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon.

Preparation

1. Prayerfully study the historical accounts given in this lesson; Doctrine and Covenants 17; “The Testimony of Three Witnesses” and “The Testimony of Eight Witnesses” in the introduction to the Book of Mormon; 2 Nephi 27:12–14; and Ether 5:2–4. Then study the lesson and decide how you want to teach the children the scriptural and historical accounts. (See “Preparing Your Lessons,” pp. vi–vii, and “Teaching the Scriptural and Historical Accounts,” pp. vii–ix.)
 2. Select the discussion questions and enrichment activities that will involve the children and best help them achieve the purpose of the lesson.
 3. Materials needed:
 - a. A Doctrine and Covenants and a Book of Mormon for each child.
 - b. A bag or box containing an object (see the attention activity).
 - c. Picture 5-17, Moroni Shows the Gold Plates to Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer; picture 5-18, The Eight Witnesses View the Gold Plates.
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Suggested Lesson
Development

Invite a child to give the opening prayer.

Attention Activity

Display the bag or box containing the object. Describe the object without showing it to the children.

- Do you think this object is really in the bag [box]?

Point out that some of the children might believe that the object is inside the bag or box because they know and trust you, but others might not believe because no one else has seen the item. Invite three children to come up and look at the item. Ask them to describe it to the class. Explain that now it is easier to believe that the item is in the bag or box because three more people have seen, or witnessed, it.

Review with the children the account of Joseph Smith translating the gold plates. Explain that at this time Joseph Smith was the only person who had actually seen the plates. Read aloud 2 Nephi 27:12 with the children.

- What did Heavenly Father promise he would do when the Book of Mormon came forth?

Explain that Heavenly Father promised to allow witnesses to see the gold plates so that these witnesses could tell other people that the plates did exist.

Teach about the experiences of the Three Witnesses and the Eight Witnesses who saw the gold plates, as described in “The Testimony of Three Witnesses” and “The Testimony of Eight Witnesses” in the introduction to the Book of Mormon; Doctrine and Covenants 17; and the following historical accounts. Show the pictures at appropriate times.

David Whitmer Comes to Help Joseph Smith

By May 1829 the work of translating the Book of Mormon was almost complete. Although Joseph Smith had possessed the gold plates for about two years, he had only worked on the translation a total of about three months. Joseph had been careful to protect the plates and had not shown them to anyone, but he became concerned about their safety in Harmony. Oliver Cowdery, who was acting as Joseph’s scribe, wrote to his friend David Whitmer, who did not know Joseph Smith, and asked David to bring him and the Prophet to Fayette, New York, where they would be safe and could finish the translation.

Before he could take his wagon to pick up Joseph and Oliver, however, David had to prepare his fields for the spring planting. When he went out to start plowing the soil in the morning, David discovered that someone had plowed part of the fields already. This person had done a very good job and left the plow in a furrow, ready for the work to continue. At the end of a day of plowing, David found he had accomplished in one day what normally would have taken two days to do. David’s father, Peter Whitmer Sr., was impressed with this miracle and said, “There must be an overruling hand in this, and I think you would better go down to Pennsylvania as soon as your plaster of paris is sown” (quoted in Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith*, p. 148). Farmers in that area added plaster of paris to the soil to make it less acidic. The next day David went to the place he had left the plaster, near his sister’s house, but the plaster was gone. His sister told him that the day before, she and her children had seen three strangers spreading the plaster with great speed and skill. She had assumed they were men David had hired, but David knew they were helpers provided by the Lord.

David was grateful for this divine help, and he hurried off to Harmony. Joseph and Oliver came out to meet him as he neared the town, which surprised David because he had not told them when he was coming. Oliver told David that Joseph had seen David’s trip in a vision and thus knew when he would arrive. David had never met Joseph Smith before, but he soon became sure that Joseph was a true prophet, and they became good friends.

The Three Witnesses See the Plates

While finishing the translation of the Book of Mormon, Joseph learned that three other people would be allowed to see the gold plates (see Ether 5:2–4). When Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer, who had all helped with the translation, learned that three witnesses would be permitted to see the gold plates, they asked for permission to be those witnesses. Joseph Smith prayed about this, and the Lord revealed that if these three men were humble, they would be allowed to be the three witnesses (see D&C 17).

On a summer day in 1829, Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris went into the woods near the Whitmer home to prepare to see the gold plates. They knelt in prayer and each took a turn praying, but they received no answer. They each prayed again, but still there was no answer. Martin Harris

felt that they were not receiving an answer because of some things he had done, so he left the group. The others again knelt in prayer, and soon a light appeared above them and the angel Moroni stood before them. Moroni held the gold plates in his hands and turned the plates one by one so the men could see the engravings on them. Then the voice of the Lord said to them, “These plates have been revealed by the power of God, and they have been translated by the power of God. The translation of them which you have seen is correct, and I command you to bear record of what you now see and hear” (*History of the Church*, 1:55).

Joseph Smith then went to find Martin Harris. He found Martin praying earnestly and joined him in prayer. The vision that Joseph, Oliver, and David had seen was repeated for Martin Harris. The Three Witnesses testified in writing about their experience (see “The Testimony of Three Witnesses”).

The Eight Witnesses See the Plates

A few days later Joseph Smith invited eight other men, including his father and two of his brothers, to view the gold plates. This time an angel did not come. The men gathered around Joseph, and he showed them the plates. The Eight Witnesses handled the plates, turned the pages, and touched the strange engravings on the unsealed portion. They also wrote their testimony that the gold plates did exist. The Eight Witnesses were Joseph Smith Sr., Hyrum Smith, Samuel H. Smith, Christian Whitmer, Jacob Whitmer, Peter Whitmer Jr., John Whitmer, and Hiram Page (see “The Testimony of Eight Witnesses”).

All eleven of the witnesses later held important positions in the Church. Some of them later left the Church, but not one of them ever denied seeing the gold plates.

Discussion and Application Questions

Study the following questions and the scripture references as you prepare your lesson. Use the questions you feel will best help the children understand the scriptures and apply the principles in their lives. Reading and discussing the scriptures with the children in class will help them gain personal insights.

- What were Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris told to do in order to be witnesses of the gold plates? What happened when Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris went into the woods to pray about being witnesses? How were Joseph, Oliver, and David shown the gold plates? What did Joseph Smith do to help Martin Harris? Why do you think Martin was finally allowed to have the same vision as the other two witnesses? What impresses you most about the experience of the Three Witnesses?
- What were the Three Witnesses told to do about their experience? Who told them to testify that the gold plates were real? (“The Testimony of Three Witnesses.”) Why do you think Joseph Smith was glad to have other people see the gold plates? (See enrichment activity 1.)
- How were the gold plates shown to the Eight Witnesses? How was the experience of the Eight Witnesses different from the experience of the Three Witnesses?
- Why was it necessary that witnesses see the gold plates? (Ether 5:4; 2 Nephi 27:12–14.) How are the testimonies of the witnesses a blessing to us today? How can you be a witness of the Book of Mormon? (Study it, pray to know that it is true, live its teachings, and tell other people about it.)
- How many of you read the Book of Mormon at home, by yourselves or with your family? How can reading the Book of Mormon bless you and your family?

Enrichment Activities

You may use one or more of the following activities any time during the lesson or as a review, summary, or challenge.

1. Explain that Joseph Smith's mother recorded what happened when he returned to the house after the Three Witnesses had been shown the gold plates. Read or tell the following account to the children:
 "When they [Joseph and the Three Witnesses] returned to the house it was between three and four o'clock p.m. Mrs. Whitmer, Mr. Smith and myself, were sitting in a bedroom at the time. On coming in, Joseph threw himself down beside me, and exclaimed, 'Father, mother, you do not know how happy I am: the Lord has now caused the plates to be shown to three more besides myself. . . . They will have to bear witness to the truth of what I have said . . . I feel as if I was relieved of a burden which was almost too heavy for me to bear'" (Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith*, ed. Preston Nibley [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958], p. 152).
 - Why was Joseph so relieved that others had now seen the gold plates?
2. Have the children think of ways they can be witnesses of the Book of Mormon and its teachings. List their answers on the chalkboard. Have the children dramatize what they could do to be witnesses in particular situations, such as when someone asks them what their church believes or what the Book of Mormon says.
3. Point out that the witnesses were not chosen at random but were all men who helped in different ways to bring forth the Book of Mormon. Tell the following information about the Three Witnesses (or ask three children in advance to present the information):

Martin Harris

When Joseph Smith was suffering persecution in New York, Martin Harris gave him fifty dollars to help him move to Harmony, Pennsylvania. Martin also pledged his farm so that the money could be raised to publish the Book of Mormon. A portion of his farm had to be sold at auction to pay the printing costs of the Book of Mormon. He acted as a scribe for Joseph for a short time. (See *Church History in the Fulness of Times* [Church Educational System manual (32502), 1993], pp. 45–46, 62–65.)

Oliver Cowdery

Oliver Cowdery was a schoolteacher who heard about Joseph Smith's vision and the gold plates while he was living with the Smith family. He prayed to find out whether the things he had heard were true, and he received the answer that Joseph was telling the truth. He went to Harmony, Pennsylvania, to meet Joseph, and he became Joseph's scribe. Oliver also helped with the publication of the Book of Mormon, setting some of the type by hand himself. (See *Church History in the Fulness of Times*, pp. 52–53, 64.)

David Whitmer

David Whitmer received letters from his friend, Oliver Cowdery, about Joseph Smith and the translation of the gold plates. Oliver sent a few lines of the translation and bore his testimony about the records, and David shared these

letters with his family. As persecution in Harmony got worse, Oliver asked David to let Joseph Smith stay at his home to finish the translation. David experienced miracles in getting ready to go to Harmony to get Joseph. (See *Church History in the Fulness of Times*, pp. 56–57.)

4. Tell the following story in your own words:

Joseph and Emma Smith and Oliver Cowdery lived in the home of Peter and Mary Whitmer, David Whitmer’s parents, for a time during the translation of the Book of Mormon. Much of the extra work of having these guests fell on Mary Whitmer, but she never complained. One day, as she went to the barn to milk the cows, she met a kindly old man, who was actually the angel Moroni, who had the plates at that time. Moroni said to her, “You have been very faithful and diligent in your labors, but you are tired because of the increase of your toil; it is proper therefore that you should receive a witness that your faith may be strengthened.” Then he showed her the gold plates. This experience strengthened the whole Whitmer family. (See “Report of Elders Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith,” *Millennial Star*, 9 Dec. 1878, pp. 772–73; see also *Church History in the Fulness of Times* [Church Educational System manual (32502), 1993], pp. 57–58.)

5. Preview and select a portion of the video selection “The Three Witnesses” (30 min.) from the videocassette *A Voice from the Dust* (53144) to show to the children. (You may want to arrange with the Primary presidency and the other teachers to have all the eight- through eleven-year-olds watch this video selection together.)

Conclusion

Testimony	Bear your testimony that the Book of Mormon is true. Express your gratitude that you can be a witness of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon and of the Savior, Jesus Christ. Encourage the children to bear their testimonies of the Book of Mormon to their families.
Suggested Home Reading	Suggest that the children study Doctrine and Covenants 17:1–4; “The Testimony of Three Witnesses”; and “The Testimony of Eight Witnesses” at home as a review of this lesson.
Suggested Family Sharing	Encourage the children to share with their families a specific part of the lesson, such as a story, question, or activity, or to read with their families the “Suggested Home Reading.” Invite a child to give the closing prayer.