A young man with dark hair, wearing a light-colored striped shirt and tan suspenders, is shown in profile, looking out a window. He is holding a large, old book with a red cover and gold lettering. The background is a wooden wall with a window. The lighting is warm and natural, coming from the window. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

Joseph Smith's early experiences can teach us important lessons about how revelation from the Lord can flow to prophets and to each of us.



Joseph Smith's

Early Experiences with Revelation

By **Steven C. Harper**
Church History Department

About three years before Joseph Smith was born, his mother, Lucy, lay in agony. She was sick with the same disease that had killed her two sisters, and she also felt spiritually lost and separated from the Savior. She pleaded with God to preserve her life and promised to seek His ways. Finally she sensed the Savior's words fill her mind: "Seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. Let your heart be comforted."¹

Lucy recovered. But about six months later she became upset when her husband felt they should no longer attend church. She left their house, found privacy in a grove of wild cherry trees, and poured out her heart in prayer again, pleading with the Lord to soften her husband's heart to the gospel. That night Lucy dreamed that her husband would eventually hear and receive the Savior's gospel wholeheartedly.²

Like his mother, young Joseph Smith needed revelation to guide his own life long before he became a prophet who received revelation for others. In his early teens he felt sorrow and guilt for his sins and tried to learn from the churches in the area how to obtain forgiveness. But he grew perplexed and distressed by their different doctrines.³

He turned to the scriptures and read Jesus's words, "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you" (Matthew 7:7). He read James 1:5 and learned that anyone who lacked wisdom was invited to ask God.⁴

PHOTOGRAPH OF TREES COURTESY OF CHURCH HISTORY LIBRARY; SIGNATURE IN TITLE MODIFIED

A Personal Revelation

Joseph greatly desired personal revelation. “With a fixed determination,” he said, “I called upon the Lord.”⁵ Joseph prayed in faith and God answered, appearing to Joseph in company with His Son, Jesus Christ, who forgave Joseph and resolved his concerns. They did not call Joseph as a prophet then but promised to reveal the fulness of the gospel to him later.⁶

Joseph rejoiced. For days his soul was filled with joy. But when he reported his revelation to a minister, the minister rejected it, saying that God no longer gave revelations to His children.⁷

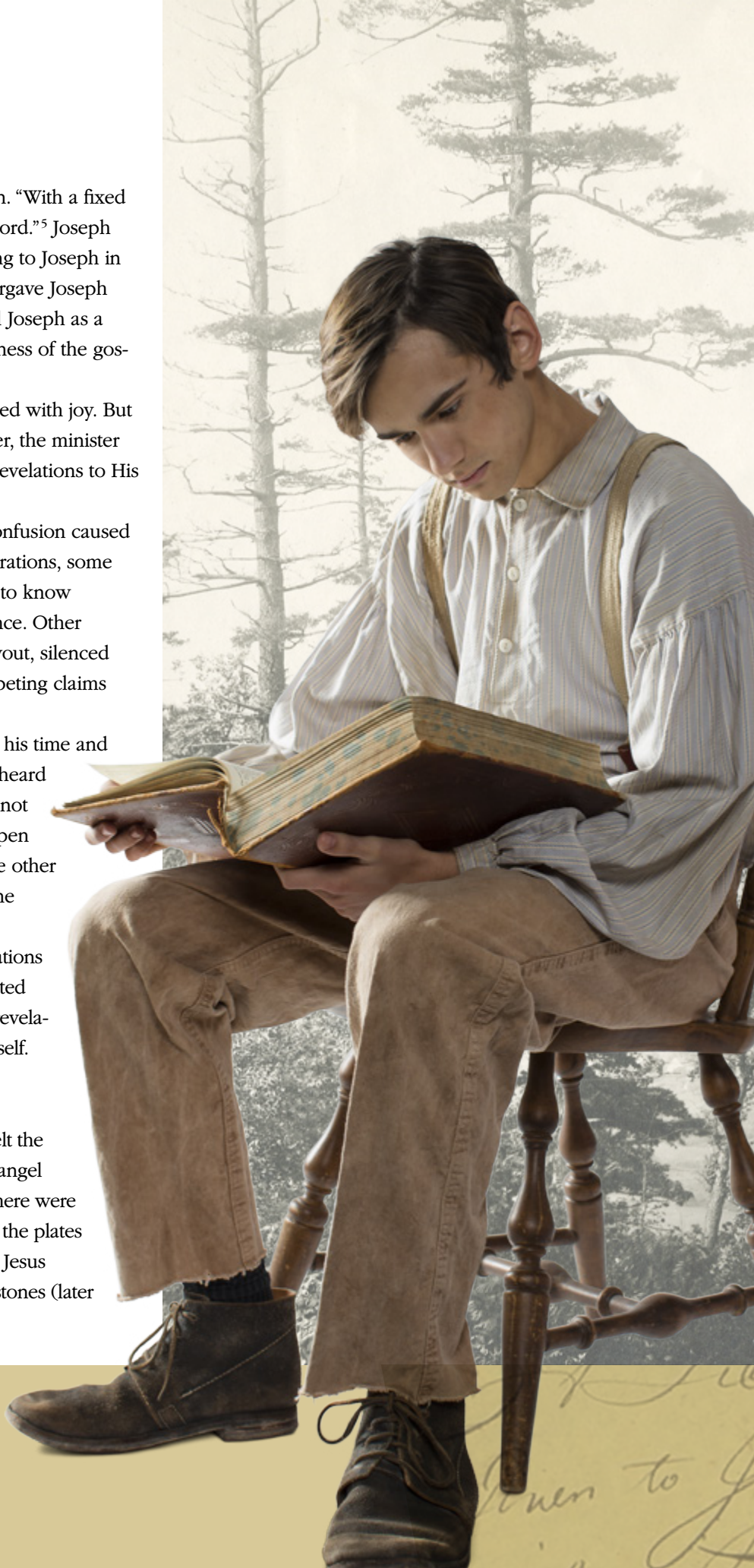
The minister was concerned about the confusion caused by competing claims to revelation. For generations, some Christians had taught that it was impossible to know the right way without God’s ongoing guidance. Other Christians, who were just as sincere and devout, silenced such claims, fearing they would create competing claims and therefore chaos.

For centuries before Joseph, as well as in his time and region, many people testified that they had heard from God, while others were sure God had not spoken. One group feared what would happen if God did not give any more revelation. The other group feared what would happen if everyone thought God would give them revelation.

Joseph believed that God had given revelations in the past and could again. But he was rejected when he testified that God had given him a revelation. So Joseph kept his vision mostly to himself.

Direction from God

Three years later, when he again keenly felt the need for forgiveness, Joseph prayed, and an angel named Moroni appeared and revealed that there were golden plates buried in a nearby hillside. On the plates ancient prophets had inscribed the gospel of Jesus Christ, and buried with the plates were seer stones (later



described by the biblical term *Urim and Thummim*) that the Lord had prepared for interpreting the writings (see Leviticus 8:8; Deuteronomy 33:8; 1 Samuel 28:6; Nehemiah 7:65).

Over the next four years, Joseph met and married Emma Hale, and Moroni taught him more before entrusting the plates and the seer stones to him.

Not long after he received the plates and the stones, Joseph asked his mother for help, hoping she would call on Martin Harris, a prosperous middle-aged farmer who lived a few miles from Joseph's family. Joseph knew Martin was open to the idea of personal revelation.

Lucy visited Martin, and he agreed to come to her home to see Joseph a few days later. Joseph was away working to get flour when Martin arrived, so Martin used the time to quiz Emma and other family members about the plates. He questioned each of them alone and then caught Joseph by the arm when he arrived. Leading him away from the family, Martin asked about the plates, and Joseph told him that the angel had instructed him to translate and publish their contents. Printing the book would be an expensive task. Joseph told Martin he had looked in the seer stones to learn what to do.

"I saw you standing before me as plainly as I do now," Joseph said to the man twice his age.

"If it is the devil's work I will have nothing to do with it," Martin vowed, "but if it is the Lord's, you can have all the money necessary to bring it before the world."

Martin wanted to be sure. "You must not blame me for not taking your word," Martin said. "If the Lord will show me that it is his work, you can have all the money you want."

Martin returned home. Arriving after midnight, he crept into his bedroom and prayed, promising God he would aid Joseph's work if he could have a revelation that it was divine.

"He showed this to me by the still small voice spoken in the soul," Martin later testified. "Then I was satisfied that it was the Lord's work, and I was under a covenant to bring it forth."⁸



Martin Harris pressed Joseph Smith to ask the Lord to let him take the Book of Mormon manuscript to show to others.

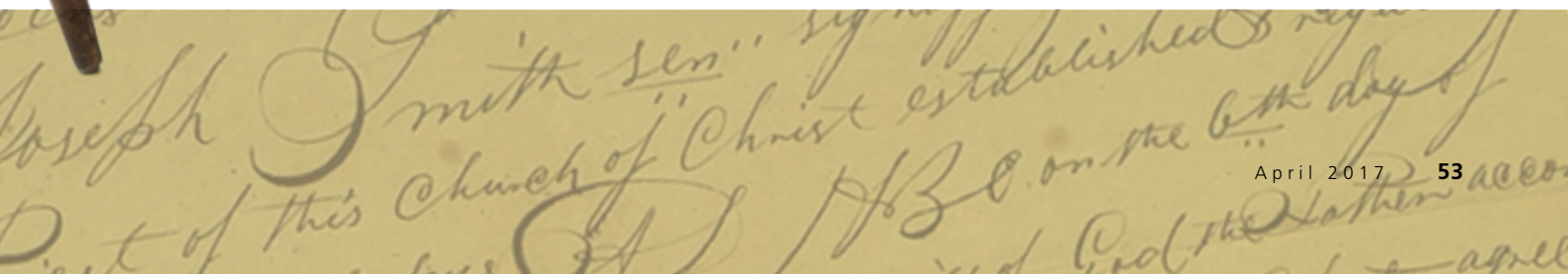
A few days later, Martin found Joseph in town. "Here, Mr. Smith, is \$50," Martin said, pulling a bag of silver coins from his pocket. "I give it to you to do the Lord's work." Joseph promised to repay, but Martin refused, insisting that he gave the money freely. It was just what Joseph needed to enable him and Emma to move to Pennsylvania and get started on the work of translation.⁹

Emma acted as scribe as Joseph dictated the words. When Martin visited them early in 1828, he took turns writing. Hour after hour, Emma or Martin sat next to Joseph as he translated the Book of Mormon.¹⁰ The scribes marveled when Joseph corrected their errors without looking up, his eyes fixed on the seer stones he received from Moroni, which were held together by a metal rim like a pair of glasses and which the Book of Mormon referred to as "interpreters." Joseph also used another stone he possessed that worked just as well.¹¹

The Persuasions of Men

Emma and Martin had penned more than 100 pages of translated words by summer. Emma was expecting a baby any day. Martin suggested he take a trip home with the manuscript. Joseph looked in the seer stones for an answer and told Martin he mustn't take the pages.

Martin was unsatisfied with that revelation and pressed Joseph. Showing the writings to his family members



would convince them of the truth, Martin reasoned.

“Inquire again.”

Joseph did so, but again the answer was no.¹²

Now Martin insisted. Things at home were difficult; the last time he had returned, his wife had made him sleep in a separate room. She kept telling neighbors that Joseph had fooled Martin but not her.¹³

Joseph wanted to please the older man, who had freely given his time and money.¹⁴ So when Martin begged again, Joseph asked for the third time.

“Let him go with them,” the Lord relented, but confiscated the interpreters.¹⁵

Joseph insisted that Martin return promptly after showing the writings to no one but his wife and a few family members. Martin readily agreed, took the writings, and left.¹⁶

“I feel so uneasy,” Emma said several days later, “that I cannot rest and shall not be at ease until I know something about what Mr. Harris is doing.” She asked Joseph to visit Martin in New York.

Joseph arrived at his parents’ home after a long stage-coach ride and an overnight walk, during which he thought about how “he had regarded man more than his Maker.” Joseph’s family invited Martin Harris to join them for breakfast. They waited till midday before they saw him walking toward the house, his eyes downcast.

They all began to eat, but then Martin dropped his utensils and cried, “I have lost my soul, I have lost my soul.”

Joseph jumped up. “Martin, have you lost that manuscript? Have you broken your oath and brought down condemnation upon my head as well as your own?”

“Yes,” Martin confessed. “It is gone and I know not where.”

“Oh, my God, my God,” Joseph uttered, “all is lost! What shall I do? I have sinned. It is me that tempted the wrath [of] God by asking Him [for] that which I had no right to ask.” He ordered Martin to return home and find the manuscript.

“It is all in vain,” Martin replied, “for I have looked in every place in the house. I have

even ripped open beds and pillows, and I know it is not there.”

“Then must I return to my wife with such a tale as this?” Joseph asked. “I dare not do it,” he said. “And how shall I appear before the Lord? Of what rebuke am I not worthy from the angel of the Most High?” Joseph wept and groaned and paced the floor, forsaken.

Around sunset, Joseph finally ate a little. Then he left the next morning to return to Emma in Pennsylvania.¹⁷

There Joseph prayed mightily for mercy, confessing weakness. When Moroni returned the seer stones to Joseph, the young prophet looked and found a stern revelation that is now Doctrine and Covenants section 3. “Remember, remember that it is not the work of God that is frustrated, but the work of men,” it said. “For although a man may have many revelations, and have power to do many mighty works, yet if he boasts in his own strength, and sets at naught the counsels of God, and follows after the dictates of his own will and carnal desires, he must fall and incur the vengeance of a just God upon him” (verses 3–4).

The Lord pierced Joseph with this revelation. “You have been entrusted with these things,” he was told, “but how strict were your commandments; and remember also the promises which were made to you, if you did not transgress them.” But Joseph had.

“How oft you have transgressed the commandments and the laws of God, and have gone on in the persuasions of men,” the Lord continued firmly. “You should not have feared man more than God.” Joseph was indeed a chosen seer, “but because of transgression,” the Lord warned him, “if thou art not aware thou wilt fall” (D&C 3:5–7, 9).¹⁸

Then, about halfway through the revelation, the Lord’s tone changed. “Remember, God is merciful,” He said. “Therefore, repent of that which thou hast done which is contrary to the commandment which I gave you, and thou art still chosen, and art again called to the work; except thou do this, thou shalt be delivered





When Martin told Joseph he had lost the manuscript, Joseph said, “All is lost! . . . I have sinned.” Later he prayed for mercy and received the revelation known as Doctrine and Covenants section 3.

up and become as other men, and have no more gift” (D&C 3:10–11).

Learning to Hear the Lord’s Voice

In the end, the rebuke soothed Joseph’s soul and steeled his resolve.¹⁹ At just 22, he was learning to hear the Lord’s voice, to listen not just for revelation he wanted but for revelation he needed—and not just for revelation he needed personally but for revelation needed to fulfill God’s promises to all His children.

The Lord taught Joseph that the plates had been preserved to give Lehi’s descendants knowledge of God’s promises, “that they may believe the gospel and rely upon the merits of Jesus Christ, and be glorified through faith in his name, and that through their repentance they might be saved” (D&C 3:20).

Through his experiences, Joseph became a prophet who received revelations that went beyond his own personal challenges and declared the gospel of Jesus Christ to all people. Joseph followed the Lord’s directions to him personally. He repented and regained his gift to translate. Then he used the gift to fulfill the Lord’s promises to His people. He brought forth the Book of Mormon, restored

the Church of Jesus Christ, and called missionaries to carry the gospel to others.

In the process, Joseph learned that whether a person is a prophet or a teenager, the Lord’s promises are the same: “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you” (Matthew 7:7). Joseph learned that anyone who lacked wisdom could ask in faith, and God would answer (see James 1:5). In addition, he learned that revelation flows when we are humble, repent, and obey the Lord’s direction. And this is a lesson that can apply to all of us. ■

Spelling, punctuation, and capitalization have been standardized in some quotations.

NOTES

1. See “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845,” book 2, pages 3–4, josephsmithpapers.org.
2. See “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1845,” 48–51, josephsmithpapers.org.
3. See Joseph Smith—History 1:5–10; see also Joseph Smith, “History, circa Summer 1832,” 1–3, josephsmithpapers.org.
4. See Joseph Smith—History 1:11; see also Joseph Smith, “Journal, 1835–1836,” Nov. 9–11, 1835, 23, josephsmithpapers.org.
5. Joseph Smith, “Journal, 1835–1836,” Nov. 9–11, 1835, 23.
6. See Joseph Smith, “Journal, 1835–1836,” Nov. 9–11, 1835, 24; Joseph Smith, “Church History,” 1 March 1842,” 706–7, josephsmithpapers.org.
7. See Joseph Smith—History 1:21; see also Joseph Smith, “History, circa Summer 1832,” 3.
8. In “Mormonism—No. II,” *Tiffany’s Monthly*, Aug. 1859, 168–70.
9. See “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845,” book 6, page 6; see also Joseph Smith, “History, circa Summer 1832,” 5; “Mormonism—No. II,” 170.
10. See Emma Smith, in “Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” *Saints’ Herald*, Oct. 1, 1879, 289–90; Joseph Smith III to James T. Cobb, Feb. 14, 1879, Community of Christ Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri.
11. See Richard E. Turley Jr. and others, “Joseph the Seer,” *Ensign*, Oct. 2015, 48–55; Michael Hubbard MacKay and others, eds., *Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831*, vol. 1 of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers* (2013), xxxi–xxxiv; “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845,” book 5, pages 7–8. Book of Mormon passages that refer to “interpreters” include Mosiah 8:13, 19; 28:20; Alma 37:21–24 (note the Savior’s prophecy in verse 23).
12. See Joseph Smith, “History, circa Summer 1832,” 5–6.
13. See Joseph Smith, “History, circa 1841, draft [Draft 3],” 13–14, josephsmithpapers.org; “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845,” book 6, page 8.
14. See “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845,” book 6, pages 10–11.
15. See Joseph Smith, “History, circa Summer 1832,” 6; Joseph Smith, “History, circa 1841, draft [Draft 3],” 14.
16. See Joseph Smith, “History, circa 1841, draft [Draft 3],” 14; “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845,” book 7, page 1.
17. See “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845,” book 7, pages 2–7.
18. See Joseph Smith, “Revelation, July 1828 [D&C 3],” including historical introduction, josephsmithpapers.org; Joseph Smith, “History, circa Summer 1832,” 6.
19. See “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845,” book 7, page 11.

