





By Elder  
Marcus B. Nash  
Of the Seventy

# Joseph Smith:

## STRENGTH OUT OF WEAKNESS

**T**housands of years ago, Joseph of old prophesied, “Thus saith the Lord unto me: A choice seer will I raise up out of the fruit of thy loins; . . . and unto him will I give power to bring forth my word . . . and out of weakness he shall be made strong” (2 Nephi 3:7, 11, 13).

I am intrigued and inspired by this prophecy that “out of weakness he shall be made strong.” It may seem counterintuitive that the Lord would call upon the weak to accomplish a mighty work. Yet those who recognize their weakness can be moved by that very weakness to seek the Lord’s strength. Those who thus humble themselves in faith will be strengthened by Him who has all power in heaven and earth (see Matthew 28:18; Mosiah 4:9).<sup>1</sup>

From the time of his youth, Joseph Smith approached the Lord on these terms. When Joseph was in his 15th year, he yearned for forgiveness of sins and longed to learn which church was right. He wrote, “Though my feelings were deep and often poignant, . . . it was impossible for a person young as I was, and so unacquainted with men and things, to come to any certain conclusion who was right and who was wrong” (see Joseph Smith—History 1:8).

Fully aware of this weakness, he went into the Sacred Grove to learn where he could find the Church of God. He inquired so that he could *do* something about it, so that he could *join* that church (see Joseph Smith—History 1:18). In response to his humble, sincere petition, God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, appeared to Joseph. In doing so, They delivered him from the power of the evil one and prepared the way for the Restoration (see Joseph Smith—History 1:14–19).

*If we, like Joseph Smith, will recognize our weakness and turn in faith to the Lord, we too will be made strong.*

*obliged to labour hard*

Joseph Smith did not contest that he was one of “the weak things of the world” (D&C 1:19; 35:13). Years later the Lord addressed him this way: “Unto this end have I raised you up, that I might show forth my wisdom through the weak things of the earth” (D&C 124:1).

### **An Obscure Boy**

Joseph described himself as “an obscure boy . . . who was doomed to the necessity of obtaining a scanty maintenance by his daily labor” (Joseph Smith—History 1:23). He was born into a low social stratum



with limited formal education. His first attempt at writing his history underscores the weak position from which he was called to the work.

“I was born in the town of Charon [Sharon] in the State of Vermont North America on the twenty third day of December AD 1805 of goodly Parents who spared no pains to instructing me in the christian religion[,] at the age of about ten years my Father Joseph Smith Seignior moved to Palmyra Ontario County in the State of New York and being in indigent circumstances were obliged to labour hard for the support of a large Family having nine children and as it required the exertions of all that were able to render any assistance for the support of the Family therefore we were deprived of the bennifit of an education suffice it to say I was nearly instructid in reading writing and the ground rules of Arithmatic.”<sup>2</sup>

Joseph felt so keenly his lack of education that he once lamented being trapped in “the little narrow prison almost as it were totel darkness of paper pen and ink and a crooked broken scattered and imperfect language.”<sup>3</sup> Despite this, the Lord called him to translate the Book of Mormon—all 588 pages of it as originally published—which he did in less than 90 days!

Any person who thinks clearly would conclude it to be impossible for the educationally weak Joseph to have accomplished such a thing on his own, and the explanations some have concocted are much more difficult to believe than the true explanation: he was a prophet who translated by the gift and power of God.

### **Emma’s Witness**

Late in her life, Emma Smith recalled that at the time her husband translated the golden plates, he “could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well-worded letter; let alone dictating a book like the Book of Mormon. And,

*Left: An entry from Joseph Smith’s history written in his own hand. Opposite page: A page from Joseph Smith’s journal. Note the words that have been crossed out.*

*New York and being in indigent  
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though I was an active participant in the scenes that transpired, it is marvelous to me, 'a marvel and a wonder,' as much so as to any one else."<sup>4</sup>

Against the backdrop of this history, it is interesting to look at page one of Joseph's first journal, dated November 27, 1832 (shown at right). He wrote this approximately three and a half years after he had concluded the translation of the Book of Mormon. Note that he writes and then strikes out the following words:

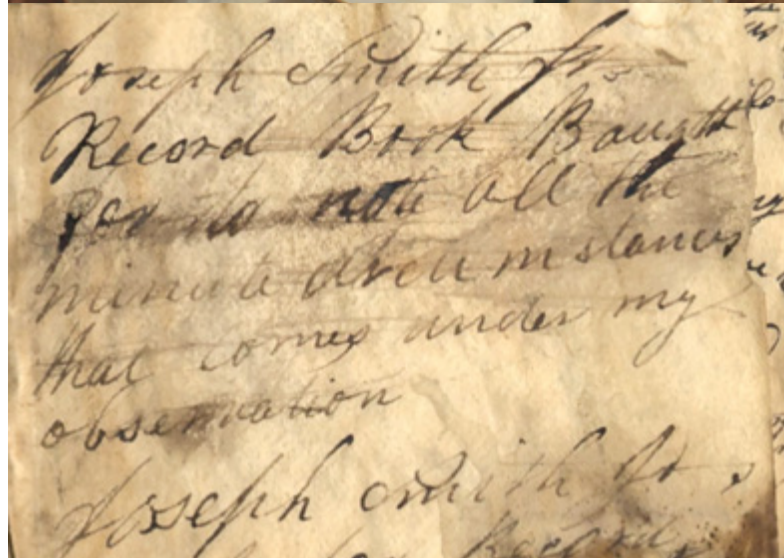
"Joseph Smith Jrs—Record Book Bought for to note all the minute circumstances that comes under my observation."

As I have held this diary and read these crossed-out words, I have imagined Joseph seated in a rustic setting in frontier America, writing the opening sentence and then thinking, "No, that's not quite right; let me try again." So he strikes out the sentence and writes, "Joseph Smith Jrs Book for Record Bought on the 27th of November 1832 for the purpose to keep a minute account of all things that come under my observation &c— —"

Finally, probably not entirely satisfied with the stilted, halting language he had just penned, he writes, "Oh may God grant that I may be directed in all my thoughts Oh bless thy Servent Amen."<sup>5</sup> I sense in this sentence Joseph feeling his inadequacy and weakness, and calling upon God in faith to direct him in all he does.

Now, contrast that journal entry with a copy of an original manuscript page of the Book of Mormon transcribed sometime between April and June 1829 (shown on the next page).

Note the flowing prose—without punctuation, without strikeouts. This was not a composition. Joseph dictated it word by word as he looked into instruments the Lord had prepared for him, including the Urim and Thummim and at times a seer stone, using a hat to shield his eyes from extraneous light in order to plainly see the words as they appeared (see 2 Nephi 27:6, 19–22; Mosiah 28:13). As you can see, there is a vast difference between the translation of the Book



of Mormon and the journal entry: one was the product of Joseph Smith, the prophet, seer, and revelator; the other was the product of Joseph Smith, the man. If you look closely at this original manuscript of the translation, you will read words that must have been encouraging to Joseph:

"And it came to pass that I, Nephi, said unto my father: I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded, for I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them" (1 Nephi 3:7).

Shortly before these words, he had translated the

DETAIL FROM FIRST VISION, BY WALTER RANE

following: “But behold, I, Nephi, will show unto you that the tender mercies of the Lord are over all those whom he hath chosen, because of their faith, to make them mighty even unto the power of deliverance” (1 Nephi 1:20).

Yes, a theme of the Book of Mormon—and the Prophet Joseph’s life—is that the weak who humbly seek the Lord in faith are made strong, even mighty, in the work of the Lord. This strengthening will occur even in seemingly small things.

For example, Joseph, a poor speller, corrected the spelling of the name *Coriantumr* (see Helaman 1:15) by his primary scribe, Oliver Cowdery. The first time Joseph dictated the name to Oliver, Oliver wrote *Coriantummer*. This was reasonable because no English words end in “mr.” However, Joseph—who was a weak enough speller to accept the spelling the Lord gave to him—corrected the spelling during the translation. We now know that while this is an unusual spelling in English, it is a perfectly good Egyptian spelling and fits well into the Old World setting. Joseph would not have known this but by revelation.<sup>6</sup>

### We Can Be Made Strong

The miracle of the translation of the Book of Mormon is one example of how Joseph, out of weakness, was made strong. There is another, more personal lesson: if we, like Joseph, will recognize our weakness and turn in faith to the Lord with all of our heart, determined to do His will, we too will be made strong out of weakness. This does not necessarily mean that the weakness is erased in mortality—but it does mean that such an individual will be made strong by God.

Joseph humbly admitted his imperfections. He remarked that during his youth he “displayed the weakness of youth, and the foibles of human nature” (Joseph Smith—History 1:28). Later in life he told the Saints in Nauvoo that he “was but a man, and they must not expect [him] to be

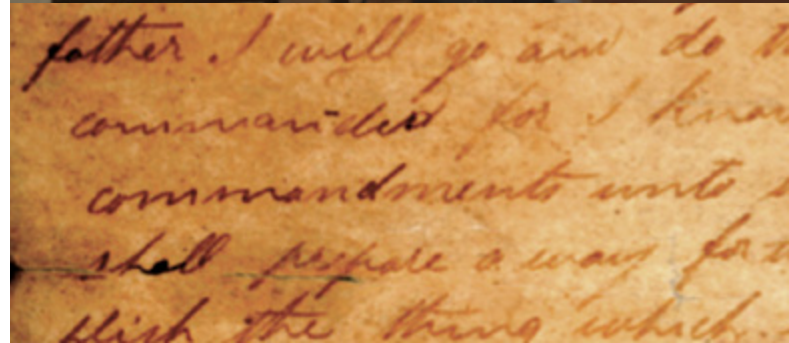
**An excerpt from the Book of Mormon manuscript corresponding to 1 Nephi 3:7.**

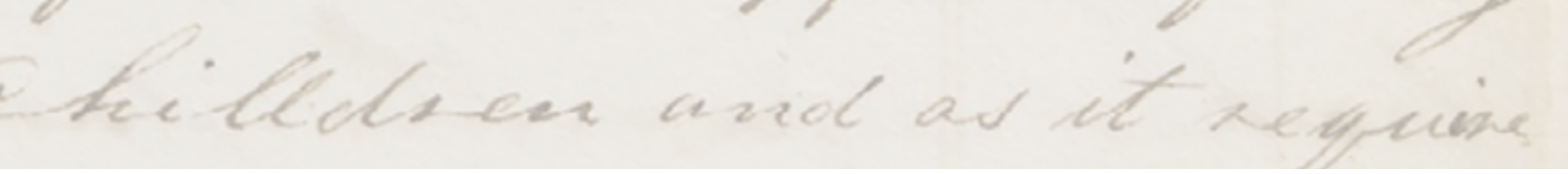
perfect; . . . but if they would bear with [his] infirmities and the infirmities of the brethren, [he] would likewise bear with their infirmities.”<sup>7</sup>

Joseph never pretended to be perfect or infallible, yet he acknowledged the power of God wielded through him when acting as a prophet: “When I speak as a man it is Joseph only that speaks. But when the Lord speaks through me, it is no more Joseph Smith who speaks; but it is God.”<sup>8</sup>

So, out of weakness, Joseph was made strong—strong enough to do “more, save Jesus only, for the salvation of men” (D&C 135:3) than any other prophet in all history.

Our unchangeable God will likewise make you and me strong out of weakness—if we will turn to Him in faith with full purpose of heart, as did Joseph.





## Prayer and Humility

According to His celestial chemistry, the Lord gives us weakness to facilitate our becoming strong in the only way that matters in time and eternity—through Him. He says: “And if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them” (Ether 12:27).

According to this scripture, we are given weakness so that we may be humble. Those who choose to humble themselves and to exercise faith in Him will be made strong. Our humility before God, then, is an essential

catalyst for the strength and power of God to be manifest in our lives.

There are those who “think they are wise, and they hearken not unto the counsel of God, for they set it aside, supposing they know of themselves, wherefore, their wisdom is foolishness and it profiteth them not” (2 Nephi 9:28). The antidote to this pride is to “consider [our]selves fools before God, and come down in the depths of humility” (2 Nephi 9:42).

From the time of his youth, Joseph understood that a great key to cultivating humility is to seek our Heavenly Father through sincere, heartfelt prayer. Daniel Tyler, an early Church member, recalled a time in Kirtland when many had turned against the Prophet. Brother Tyler, present in a meeting where the Prophet prayed with the congregation for the Lord’s help, described the experience in these words:

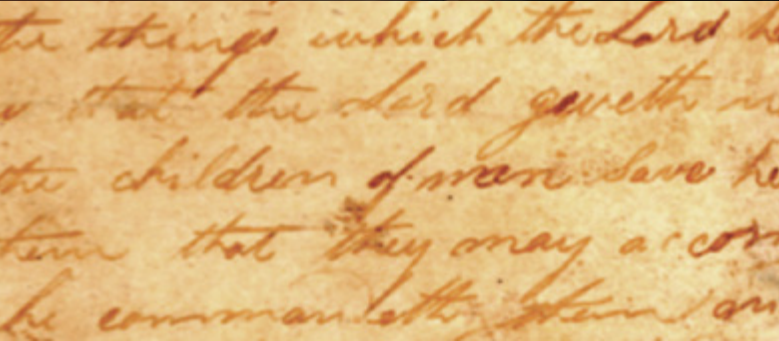
“I had heard men and women pray . . . , but never until then had I heard a man address his Maker as though He was present listening as a kind father would listen to the sorrows of a dutiful child. Joseph was at that time unlearned, but that prayer, which was to a considerable extent in behalf of those who accused him of having gone astray . . . , partook of the learning and eloquence of heaven. . . . It appeared to me as though, in case the vail were taken away, I could see the Lord standing facing His humblest of all servants I had ever seen.”<sup>9</sup>

## Out of Weakness, Strength

When Joseph was 17, Moroni told him that “God had a work for me to do; and that my name should be had for good and evil among all nations, kindreds, and tongues, or that it should be both good and evil spoken of among all people” (Joseph Smith—History 1:33).

I am confident that at the time, many thought that such a claim was evidence of delusions of grandeur; yet in today’s world with the internet, the name of that obscure farm boy is known around the globe, and of him both good and evil are spoken.

EARLY BOOK OF MORMON AND MANUSCRIPT IMAGES COURTESY OF CHURCH HISTORY LIBRARY



any assistance

Just before Joseph and Hyrum Smith went to their deaths at Carthage, Illinois, Hyrum read aloud to Joseph and others in the jail room with them and then folded the page that contains the following words:

“And it came to pass that I prayed unto the Lord that he would give unto the Gentiles grace, that they might have charity.

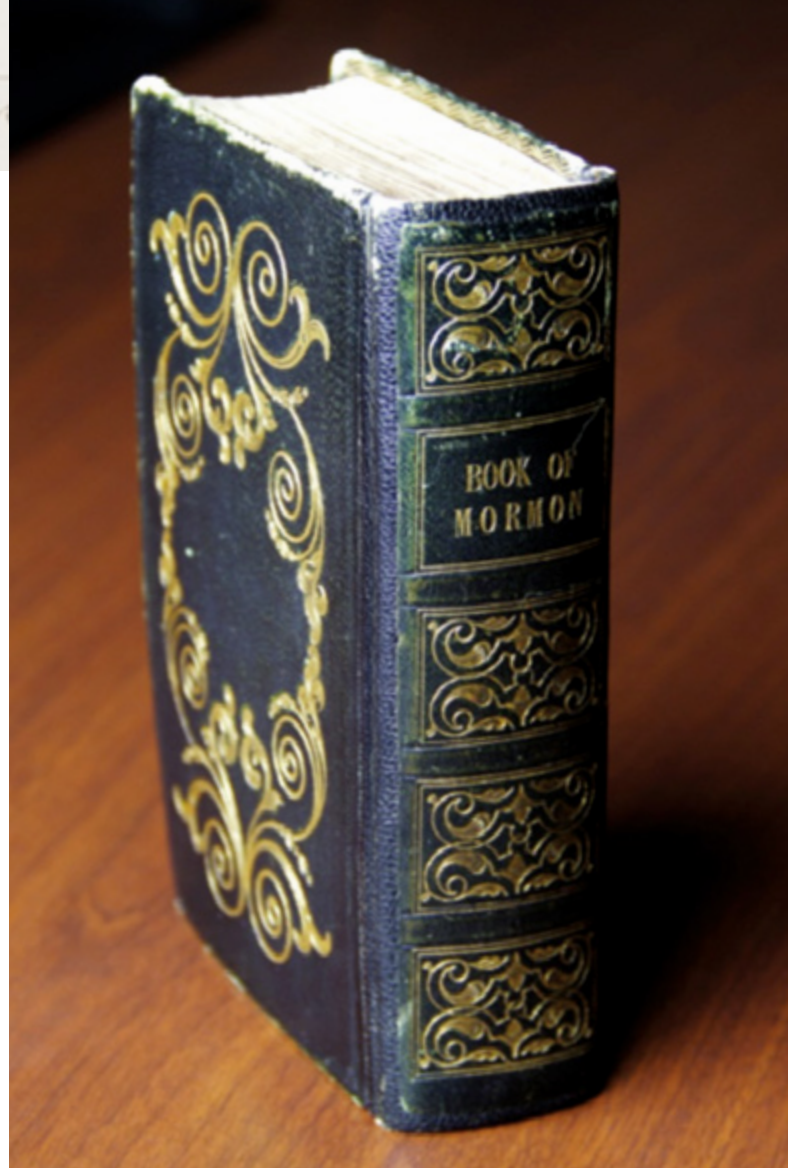
“And it came to pass that the Lord said unto me: If they have not charity it mattereth not unto thee, thou hast been faithful; wherefore, thy garments shall be made clean. And because thou hast seen thy weakness thou shalt be made strong, even unto the sitting down in the place which I have prepared in the mansions of my Father” (Ether 12:36–37).

In a literal sense it is *out of weakness* that Joseph was made strong. Motivated in part by his weakness, he sought the help of God in faith, determined to act according to His will. He approached our Father in Heaven on these terms throughout his life. As a result, he experienced the First Vision, translated the Book of Mormon, received priesthood keys, organized the restored Church of Christ, and brought to the earth the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Prophet Joseph grew in strength; he was not made mighty in a moment. It came to him, and it will come to you and me, “line upon line, precept upon precept; here a little, and there a little” (D&C 128:21; see also Isaiah 28:10; 2 Nephi 28:30).

So do not be discouraged; the process of being made strong is gradual and requires patience with a steadfast determination to follow the Savior and abide by His will, come what may.

### The Gift Has Returned

William Tyndale, who translated and published the Bible in English in the 16th century, stated to a learned man opposed to placing the Bible into the hands of common people, “If God spare my life, ere many years *I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the scripture than thou dost.*”<sup>10</sup>



***Just before Joseph and Hyrum Smith went to their deaths at Carthage, Illinois, Hyrum read aloud to Joseph and others from this copy of the Book of Mormon.***

In a curious parallel 300 years later, Nancy Towle, a famous itinerant preacher in the 1830s, visited Kirtland to personally observe the “Mormons.” In conversing with Joseph Smith and other Church leaders, she sharply criticized the Church.

According to Towle’s record, Joseph said nothing until she turned to him and demanded that he swear that an angel had shown him where to find the golden plates. He good-naturedly replied that he never swore at all! Failing to rattle him, she tried to belittle him. “Are you not ashamed, of such pretensions?” she asked. “You, who are no more than any ignorant plough-boy of our land!”

Joseph calmly responded, “The gift, has returned back again, as in former times, to illiterate fishermen.”<sup>11</sup>

So Tyndale's words were prescient: a plough-boy did grow to know more of scripture than probably any man who ever lived, save the Savior.

Certainly, the restored Church and gospel of Jesus Christ are not the work of Joseph Smith, a "plough-boy" of the American frontier. Rather, they are the work of the Lord Jesus Christ restored through Joseph Smith, the Prophet. As he reflected upon his life, Joseph may have resonated with Jacob's observation that "the Lord God showeth us our weakness that we may know that it is by his grace, and his great condescensions unto the children of men, that we have power to do these things" (Jacob 4:7).

I know that Joseph Smith was and is a prophet of God, made strong out of weakness. Said President Brigham Young (1801–77): "I feel like shouting Hallelujah, all the time, when I think that I ever knew Joseph Smith, the Prophet."<sup>12</sup> While I have not had that privilege in mortality, I take solace in the poetic promise that "millions shall know 'Brother Joseph' again."<sup>13</sup> I am profoundly grateful for the Prophet and his humility before our God, who made him strong. I am also encouraged by this history and the doctrine that the Lord will make each of us strong out of weakness if we likewise humble ourselves before Him and exercise our faith in Him with the steadfast determination to do His will. ■



#### JOSEPH'S RAPID ACQUISITION OF KNOWLEDGE AND MATURITY

"Overarching the Prophet Joseph's entire ministry was his comparative youth, his superficial formal education, and his incredibly rapid acquisition of knowledge and maturity. He was 14 at the First Vision and 17 at the first visit from the angel Moroni. He was 21 when he received the golden plates and just 23 when he

From an address, "Out of Weakness He Shall Be Made Strong," given at the 70th Annual Joseph Smith Memorial Devotional in Logan, Utah, USA, on February 10, 2013.

#### NOTES

1. I thank my colleagues, particularly Richard E. Turley Jr. and Jed Woodworth in the Church History Department, for their thoughtful input.
2. Joseph Smith, in *The Joseph Smith Papers, Histories, Volume 1: 1832–1844*, ed. Karen Lynn Davidson and others (2012), 11.
3. Joseph Smith, "Letter to William W. Phelps, 27 November 1832," 4, [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org).
4. Emma Smith, in "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," *Saints' Herald*, Oct. 1, 1879, 290; spelling standardized; see also Russell M. Nelson, "A Treasured Testament," *Ensign*, July 1993, 62–63.
5. Joseph Smith, in *The Joseph Smith Papers, Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839*, ed. Dean C. Jessee and others (2008), 9.
6. On "Coriantumr" and the spelling of proper names, see Royal Skousen, in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (1997), 61–93. Using evidence from the original manuscript, Skousen shows that the first time proper names appeared in the text, they were spelled correctly. In subsequent appearances the names may not be spelled correctly, suggesting that Joseph Smith spelled out each name the first time but relied on the scribe's memory thereafter.
7. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 522.
8. Edward Stevenson, in Hyrum L. Andrus and Helen Mae Andrus, comps., *They Knew the Prophet* (1974), 87.
9. Daniel Tyler, in "Recollections of the Prophet Joseph Smith," *Juvenile Instructor*, Feb. 15, 1892, 127; see also *Teachings: Joseph Smith*, 127.
10. William Tyndale, in S. Michael Wilcox, *Fire in the Bones: William Tyndale—Martyr, Father of the English Bible* (2004), 47.
11. *Vicissitudes Illustrated, in the Experience of Nancy Towle, in Europe and America* (1833), 156, 157.
12. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young* (1997), 343.
13. "Praise to the Man," *Hymns*, no. 27.

finished translating the Book of Mormon (in less than 60 working days). Over half of the revelations in our Doctrine and Covenants were given through the Prophet while he was 25 or younger. He was 26 when the First Presidency was organized and 30 when the Kirtland Temple was dedicated."

Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, "Joseph, the Man and the Prophet," *Ensign*, May 1996, 71.