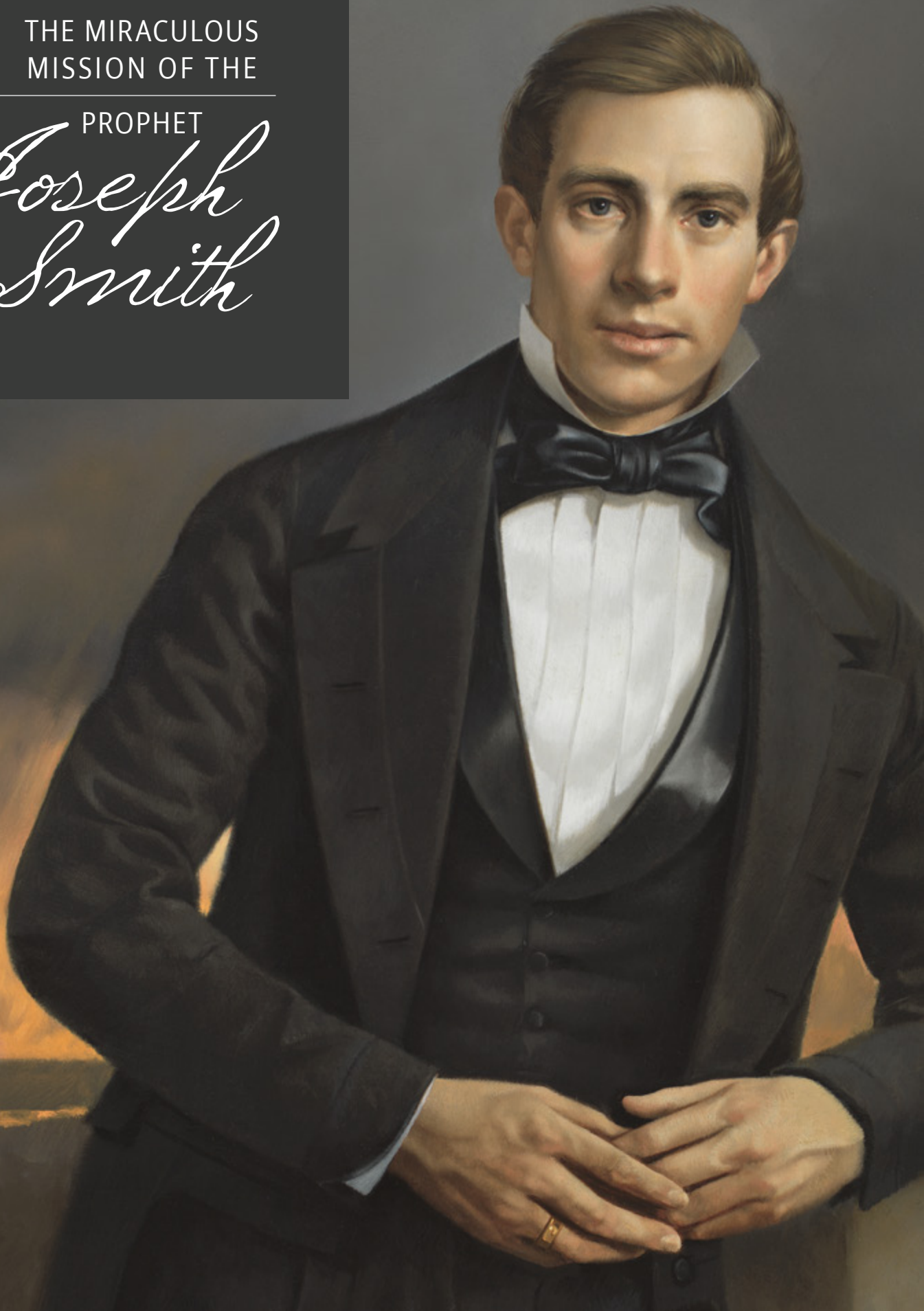


THE MIRACULOUS
MISSION OF THE

PROPHET

*Joseph
Smith*



I have chosen to speak of Joseph Smith, the Prophet and the man. In speaking of him, I hope I will contribute to your understanding of the unique and miraculous accomplishments of the founding prophet of this dispensation.

The relationship of knowledge and testimony of Joseph Smith to missionary work is vital. We all know that some investigators accept the principal doctrines of the gospel but simply cannot accept the fact that a 14-year-old was visited by the Father and the Son and that he translated the Book of Mormon and became the prophet we know him to be. Persons who have difficulty with the Prophet Joseph Smith need to learn from this teaching of President Russell M. Nelson:

“Joseph’s mission in mortality was foreordained. His receptive and pristine mind was open to the Lord’s instruction. But, by worldly standards, Joseph was most unlikely. And his task to be the Prophet of this last dispensation seemed totally impossible. This example demonstrates a principle that is often true of how the Lord works: He uses the unlikely to accomplish the impossible!”¹

It is very important that our missionaries have a testimony of the divine calling and miraculous work of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

I am a 65-year student of the life of Joseph Smith. I was



**By President
Dallin H. Oaks**

First Counselor in
the First Presidency

Joseph Smith accomplished more than any mortal man could have accomplished in so short a time. The only possible explanation is heavenly help.

At the time of his death, Joseph Smith was serving as both mayor of Nauvoo and lieutenant general of the Nauvoo Legion.

JOSEPH SMITH, BY WILLIAM WHITAKER; LITHOGRAPH COURTESY OF CHURCH HISTORY LIBRARY



born in 1932, when the Church was just over 100 years old. I believe I am typical of the faithful Latter-day Saints of this second century. We did not meet Joseph Smith, but we feel we know him, and we love him through what he revealed and taught. We are witnesses of the truth of the poetic prediction that “millions shall know ‘Brother Joseph.’”²

I. Joseph Smith, the Prophet

We all know Joseph Smith as the first prophet of this dispensation, the Lord’s instrument in the Lord’s Restoration. But what did the Lord restore through this prophet? Not all Latter-day Saints (and few nonmembers) are aware of the illuminating and massive additions the Lord inspired the Prophet Joseph to make to Christian doctrine. Here is a brief list:

- The nature of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.
- The relative functions of these three members of the Godhead and Their relationship to mortal beings.
- The nature of the Fall of man.
- The purpose of mortal life in furtherance of the Father’s plan for His children to attain their eternal destiny.
- The role of the Atonement of Jesus Christ in assuring immortality and providing the opportunity for eternal life.
- The role of earthly and eternal marriage in the Father’s plan.
- The essential role of priesthood and ordinances in the Father’s plan.
- The essential role of temples and proxy ordinances in the Father’s plan.
- The knowledge that God desires to save all of His children and that every person who has lived upon this earth—whether then knowing of Jesus Christ or not—is capable of attaining the highest heaven hereafter.

Joseph Smith was born on December 23, 1805, in Sharon, Vermont, USA.



- The relationship of the threefold sources of truth about man and the universe: science, scriptures, and continuing revelation.

Anyone who studies even a small part of this list—whether believer or nonbeliever—must acknowledge that Joseph Smith stands at the headwaters of an immense stream of bold and new and precious religious ideas. As we read in *Preach My Gospel*, the fullness of the gospel was restored to the earth through Joseph Smith.³

You may have noted that my list did not specifically mention Joseph’s bringing forth the Book of Mormon, a new volume of scripture that is, of course, the source of many of those new religious ideas. That book deserves special mention. Its title proclaims its most important function: “Another Testament of Jesus Christ.” But beyond that fundamental role, there is more. Here is what a best-selling scholar said of the book:

“The *Book of Mormon* proposes a new purpose for America: becoming a realm of righteousness rather than an empire of liberty. Against increasing wealth and inequality, the *Book of Mormon* advocates the cause of the poor. . . . Against republican government, it proposes righteous rule by judges and kings under God’s law. Against a closed-canon Bible and nonmiraculous religion, the *Book of Mormon* stands for ongoing revelation, miracles, and revelation to all nations. Against skepticism, it promotes belief; against nationalism, a universal Israel. It foresees disaster for the nation if the love of riches, resistance



Joseph Smith stands at the headwaters of an immense stream of bold, new, and precious religious ideas.

to revelation, and Gentile civilization prevail over righteousness, revelation, and Israel.”⁴

More important is just what President Nelson recently said about the Book of Mormon: it “is the instrument by which the promised gathering of Israel will be accomplished.”⁵

As we read in *Preach My Gospel*, the Prophet Joseph Smith said that the Book of Mormon is “the keystone of our religion.”⁶

Most non-Latter-day Saints do not know of Joseph Smith’s great contributions to religious thought. In a notable nationwide study, pollster Gary Lawrence found that nearly half of the people he studied thought Latter-day Saints were secluded and mysterious and had “weird beliefs.”⁷ When he asked interviewers, “What is the main claim of Mormonism?” only one in seven could describe

anything close to the idea of restoration or reestablishment of the original Christian faith. Similarly, when another national survey asked respondents to describe their impression of our religion, not one person suggested the idea of original or restoration Christianity.⁸

These findings remind us that we must not let our missionaries assume too much knowledge about our faith. Those they teach may have heard the word *Mormon*, but missionaries must not assume that most have even the most primitive understanding of the basic principles of our faith.

II. Joseph Smith, the Man

Here are some of my personal thoughts about Joseph Smith’s

remarkable life.⁹ The Joseph Smith I met in my personal research, mostly in Illinois, USA, was a man of the frontier—young, emotional, dynamic, and so loved and approachable by his people that they often called him “Brother Joseph.” His comparative youth overarched his prophetic ministry. He was 14 at the time of the First Vision, 21 when he received the golden plates, and just 23 when he 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 this prophet when he was 25 or younger. He was 26 when the First Presidency was organized and just over 33 when he escaped from imprisonment in Missouri and resumed leadership of the Saints. He was only 38 and a half when he was murdered.

During his short life, Joseph Smith had more than his share of mortal afflictions. When he was about seven, he suffered an excruciatingly painful leg surgery. Because of the poverty of his family, he had little formal education and as a youth was compelled to work long hours to help put food on the family table. He was attacked physically on many occasions. In the midst of trying to fulfill the staggering responsibilities of his sacred calling, he had to labor as a farmer or merchant to provide a living for his family. He did this without the remarkable spiritual gifts that sustained him in his prophetic calling. The Lord had told him that “in temporal labors thou shalt not have strength, for this is not thy calling” (Doctrine and Covenants 24:9).

In spiritual matters, Joseph Smith had no role models from whom he could learn how to be a prophet and a leader. He had to rely on inexperienced associates. He and they struggled and learned together. Joseph was extremely rapid in his acquisition of knowledge and maturity. He unquestionably had unique gifts. As we would say today, he was “a quick study.” He said he was taught by heavenly

messengers and by other revelations from God, and I believe him.

One of his personal gifts is evidenced by the love and loyalty of the remarkable people who followed him. When Joseph challenged his followers to overcome their mortal imperfections, he did not raise himself above them, and they loved him for it. In a sermon Joseph preached a little over a month before he was murdered, he declared, “I never told you I was perfect; but there is no error in the revelations which I have taught.”¹⁰ Joseph Smith had a “native cheery temperament” (Joseph Smith—History 1:28) that endeared him to almost everyone who knew him. One acquaintance said, “The love the saints had for him was inexpressible.”¹¹ The companionship of his friends was a delight to Joseph, who saw society building and community building as major purposes of the gospel.

I once observed: “All of his life, Joseph Smith lived on the frontier, where men had to pit their brute strength against nature and sometimes against one another. He was a large man, strong and physically active. He delighted in competitive sports, including pulling sticks—a test of physical strength (see *History of the Church*, 5:302). Our archives contain many recollections of his wrestling with friends and acquaintances. On one Sabbath, he and Brigham Young preached to the Saints in Ramus, Illinois, about a day’s ride from Nauvoo. On Monday, before departing Ramus, Joseph matched his wrestling prowess against a man someone described as ‘the bully of Ramus’ (see Joseph Smith Journal, 13 March 1843, recorded by Willard Richards, Joseph Smith Collection, LDS Church Archives). Joseph threw him. I am glad our current conference schedules do not provide the local members opportunity to test the visiting authorities in this manner.”¹²

Few men have been the targets of more assaults on their mission or their memory than Joseph Smith.

Joseph Smith was 21 when he received the golden plates, buried in the Hill Cumorah, and just 23 when he finished translating the Book of Mormon.



I investigated some of these charges by personal research in original records in Illinois, where Joseph lived the last five years of his life. One such charge arose when Joseph Smith, then mayor, and the Nauvoo City Council suppressed the *Nauvoo Expositor*, an opposition newspaper. This suppression focused hostilities against the Church and led directly to Joseph's murder.

Early Latter-day Saint historians, including Elder B. H. Roberts, conceded that this action was illegal. However, as I researched this subject as a young law professor, I was surprised to find a legal basis for this action in the Illinois law of 1844. There were many suppressions of newspapers on the frontier in the period before the Civil War. The guarantee of freedom of the press in the U.S. Constitution was not declared applicable to the actions of city and state governments until 1931, and then only by the U.S. Supreme Court's five-to-four reliance on a constitutional amendment adopted in 1868.¹³ One should judge the actions of Joseph Smith on the basis of the laws and circumstances of his day, not ours.

As students at the University of Chicago, historian Marvin S. Hill and I were intrigued with the little-known fact that five men went to trial in Illinois for the murder of Joseph Smith. For over 10 years we scoured libraries and archives across the nation to find every scrap of information about this 1845 trial and those involved in it. Our book reviewed the words and actions of Illinois citizens who knew Joseph Smith personally—some who loved him and risked their lives for him, and others who hated him



and plotted to kill him. Nothing in our discoveries in the original court records or in the testimony at the lengthy trial disclosed anything that reflected dishonor on the man who was murdered.¹⁴

The accessibility of Illinois court records led to another previously untouched area of research on Joseph Smith. Joseph I. Bentley, then a law student at Chicago, and I discovered numerous records of the business activities of Joseph Smith. We coauthored a 1976 *Brigham Young University Law Review* article on this subject.¹⁵ The 1840s followed

Age:	Event:
14	Had First Vision
21	Received the golden plates
23	Finished translating the Book of Mormon
25	Received half of the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants
26	First Presidency organized
33	Escaped from jail in Missouri, resumed leadership
38	Martyred

a period of nationwide financial panic and depression. Economic conditions in frontier states like Illinois were ruinous. For example, the biographers of Abraham Lincoln have described his financial embarrassments during this decade, when business was precarious, many obligations were in a default, and lawsuits were common.¹⁶

Joseph Smith's enemies charged him with fraud in various property conveyances, most conducted in behalf of the Church. A succession of court proceedings that extended for nearly a decade examined these charges in meticulous detail. Finally, in 1852, long after the Saints' exodus from Illinois (so there was no conceivable political or other cause for anyone to favor the Saints or their leader), a federal judge concluded this litigation with a decree

Joseph Smith ran for president of the United States in 1844. This flyer announces a speech he was scheduled to give just five days before he was martyred.



that found no fraud or other moral impropriety by Joseph Smith.¹⁷

Scholars knowledgeable about public issues in this period wrote this about Joseph Smith's campaign for the U.S. presidency:

"While he may not have had a serious chance of winning the 1844 national election, he ran shrewdly as a third-party candidate who was definitely serious about encouraging legal reforms in the United States. He hoped and worked to improve public opinions on momentous issues including slavery, religious freedom, prisons, and public lands. He and Robert F. Kennedy remain the only two Americans to be assassinated while they were candidates for the office of United States president."¹⁸

Joseph Smith's character was perhaps best apprehended by men who knew him best and stood closest to him in Church leadership. They adored him and sustained him as a prophet. "His brother Hyrum chose to die at his side. John Taylor, also with him when he was murdered, said: 'I testify before God, angels, and men, that he was a good, honorable, virtuous man . . . —that his private and public character was unimpeachable—and that he lived and died as a man of God' (*The Gospel Kingdom* [1987], 355; see also D&C 135:3). Brigham Young declared: 'I do not think that a man lives on the earth that knew [Joseph Smith] any better than I did; and I am bold to say that, Jesus Christ excepted, no better man ever lived or does live upon this earth' ["Remarks," *Deseret News*, Aug. 27, 1862, 65]."¹⁹

III. Joseph Smith and the Law

As is evident from the examples I have already cited, my longtime interest in legal history included a special interest in Joseph Smith's interactions with the American legal system of his day. Historians have traditionally stated that Joseph Smith was a party to no more than about 40 legal actions. Today, with the

benefit of the work done on *The Joseph Smith Papers*, we know that the number is more than 220. These legal actions ranged “from simple collection cases to complex [litigation] involving sophisticated legal theories. . . . Joseph retained scores of attorneys to . . . bring and defend [such] actions . . . both civil and criminal matters.”²⁰

Drawing on the remarkable wealth of knowledge we have about the Prophet’s life, Latter-day Saint scholar Jeffrey N. Walker has written: “Undeniably, Joseph Smith was intimately, actively, and consistently involved in the American legal system. To ignore these important activities is to miss much of how he spent his time and energies, brilliantly and effectively—so much so that Daniel H. Wells, himself a lawyer, judge, and attorney general, who was well acquainted with Smith, would opine: ‘I have known legal men all my life. Joseph Smith was the best lawyer that I have ever known in my life’ [as quoted in *The Journal of Jesse Nathaniel Smith: Six Decades in the Early West: Diaries and Papers of a Mormon Pioneer, 1834–1906* (1953), 456].”²¹

Three Latter-day Saint authors summarize as follows: “With his heavy involvement in the legal system, Smith quickly learned the rules of the game and legally used those rules to his full lawful advantage, striving to make full use of the new opportunities and protections afforded by the young nation’s laws. His legal choices and conduct make it clear that he was well informed about legal matters and that he took explicit steps to make every appropriate use allowed by the law, whether he was obtaining the copyright for the Book of Mormon under federal law, performing marriages under Ohio law, shaping Nauvoo city ordinances, invoking the full protections of religious freedom, making effective use of new laws that governed the sale of federal land, asserting [the] right of habeas corpus, demanding proper venue, or applying for coverage under the



newly adopted federal bankruptcy law. In his spare time, he studied law books. He knew the precise wording of the Constitution and the specific language of state statutes. No doubt he was well aware of many current legal developments at state and federal levels throughout his lifetime.”²²

Significantly, those three authors add this statement: “As a defendant, he was never convicted of any criminal offense. Whenever he was given a fair hearing, he was found to be an upstanding and honest citizen.”²³

The detailed summaries of the Prophet’s litigation selected and analyzed in the book I have quoted depended on the work of numerous J. Reuben Clark Law School students who took courses on the subject and did the detailed work that led to the book by these three authors. I was fascinated with their description of the opinions of these law students:

“The law students who have used previous iterations of this book as

“Joseph Smith was the best lawyer that I have ever known in my life.”

—Elder Daniel H. Wells, *Utah territorial attorney general*



their textbook have consistently come to the opinion that Joseph was responsible, accountable, loyal, prudent, merciful, cautious, meticulous, law-abiding, patient, positive, resourceful, astute, savvy, a good judge of character, and even legally brilliant (to use some of their own words), especially when it came to protecting the religious and civil rights of others or carrying out the duties with which he had been entrusted. . . . Joseph Smith never lost faith in the Constitution and strived to work solidly under its aegis, even though he was often frustrated, disappointed, and wary of people administering it.”²⁴

IV. Conclusion

In his life, Joseph Smith accomplished more than any mortal man could have accomplished in so short a time. The only possible explanation is heavenly help. I like this summary:

“He translated and published the Book of Mormon in New York; organized the Church in New York, and then resettled it in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois; founded cities, including Kirtland, Far West, and Nauvoo; called and trained hundreds of church leaders; studied Hebrew and the Bible; founded the Relief Society of Nauvoo; ran businesses, alone and with partners; developed real estate and built temples; wrote and published articles and editorials; had a large family and embraced a wide circle of friends; and served in several civic capacities, including commander-in-chief of a large legion of militia men,

as well as the mayor and chief judge for the city of Nauvoo. He spoke regularly in weekly worship services, dedications, and at all-too-frequent funerals; he attracted tens of thousands of followers, prompting waves of converts to immigrate to the United States.”²⁵

In a general conference talk given over 20 years ago, I said this:

“Like other faithful Latter-day Saints, I have built my life on the testimony and mission of the Prophet Joseph Smith. In all of my reading and original research, I have never been dissuaded from my testimony of his prophetic calling and of the gospel and priesthood restoration the Lord initiated through him. I solemnly affirm the testimony Joseph Smith expressed in the famous Wentworth letter of 1842:

“ . . . The standard of truth has been erected; no unhallowed hand can stop the work from progressing, persecutions may rage, mobs may combine, armies may assemble, calumny may defame, but the truth of God will go forth boldly, nobly, and independent, till it has penetrated every continent, visited every clime, swept every country, and sounded in every ear, till the purposes of God shall be accomplished and the great Jehovah shall say the work is done’ (*Times and Seasons*, 1 March 1842, 709; quoted in Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 5 vols. [1992], 4:1754).”²⁶

Brothers and sisters, I testify of Jesus Christ, our Savior, who appeared with God the Father to the boy prophet and of whom the Father said: “*This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!*” (Joseph Smith—History 1:17). We have heard our Lord Jesus Christ in revelation since that time. This is His Church. We are holders of the authority of His holy priesthood. We go forward in His cause. I testify of the calling of the Prophet Joseph Smith and of the calling of the prophets who have succeeded him in this great work in which you are engaged. ■

From an address, “Joseph Smith: The Prophet and the Man,” delivered at the mission leadership seminar on June 25, 2018.

The Prophet Joseph Smith was 38 years old when he was martyred with his brother Hyrum at Carthage Jail on June 27, 1844.





“The truth of God will go forth boldly, nobly, and independent, till it has penetrated every continent, visited every clime, swept every country, and sounded in every ear, till the purposes of God shall be accomplished and the great Jehovah shall say the work is done.”

—Joseph Smith,
in the *Wentworth letter*, March 1,
1842

NOTES

1. Russell M. Nelson, *Accomplishing the Impossible* (2015), 1–2.
2. “Praise to the Man,” *Hymns*, no. 27.
3. See *Preach My Gospel: A Guide to Missionary Service* (2004), 37.
4. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (2005), 105.
5. Russell M. Nelson, in Sarah Jane Weaver, “President Nelson Shares the ‘Hopes of My Heart’ with New Mission Leaders,” *Church News*, June 26, 2018, news.lds.org.
6. *Preach My Gospel*, 103; see also the introduction to the Book of Mormon.
7. Gary C. Lawrence, *How Americans View Mormonism: Seven Steps to Improve Our Image* (2008), 32.
8. See Gary C. Lawrence, *How Americans View Mormonism*, 42.
9. This portion through the text at note 10 is adapted from Dallin H. Oaks, “Joseph Smith in a Personal World,” in John W. Welch, ed., *The Worlds of Joseph Smith: A Bicentennial Conference at the Library of Congress* (2006), 159.
10. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 522.
11. Mary Alice Cannon Lambert, in “Joseph Smith, the Prophet,” *Young Woman’s Journal*, Dec. 1905, 554.
12. Dallin H. Oaks, “Joseph, the Man and the Prophet,” *Ensign*, May 1996, 72.
13. See Dallin H. Oaks, “The Suppression of the Nauvoo Expositor,” *Utah Law Review*, vol. 9, no. 4 (1965), 862–903.
14. See Dallin H. Oaks and Marvin S. Hill, *Carthage Conspiracy: The Trial of the Accused Assassins of Joseph Smith* (1975).
15. See Dallin H. Oaks and Joseph I. Bentley, “Joseph Smith and Legal Process: In the Wake of the Steamboat Nauvoo,” *BYU Law Review*, vol. 1976, no. 3 (1976), 735–82.
16. See David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (1995), 94–118.
17. See Dallin H. Oaks and Joseph I. Bentley, “Joseph Smith and Legal Process,” 781.
18. Gordon A. Madsen, Jeffrey N. Walker, and John W. Welch, eds., *Sustaining the Law: Joseph Smith’s Legal Encounters* (2014), x–xi.
19. Dallin H. Oaks, “Joseph, the Man and the Prophet,” 73.
20. Jeffrey N. Walker, in Gordon A. Madsen and others, eds., *Sustaining the Law*, vi.
21. Jeffrey N. Walker, in Gordon A. Madsen and others, eds., *Sustaining the Law*, vii.
22. Gordon A. Madsen and others, eds., *Sustaining the Law*, xvii.
23. Gordon A. Madsen and others, eds., *Sustaining the Law*, xvii–xviii.
24. Gordon A. Madsen and others, eds., *Sustaining the Law*, xviii.
25. Gordon A. Madsen and others, eds., *Sustaining the Law*, xi–xii.
26. Dallin H. Oaks, “Joseph, the Man and the Prophet,” 73.