

The Path to

# PALMYRA



*The path to Palmyra—the site of the First Vision and the resting place of the golden plates—was anything but a path of sweetness and light for Joseph Smith and his family.*

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**By Matthew S. Holland**

*This is the first article in a two-part series about the Prophet Joseph Smith. The second article, "The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon," will appear in next month's issue of the Ensign.*

**M**ake no mistake about it. Whether you are a full-time missionary or not, all Latter-day Saints are called to take the message of the Lord Jesus Christ to "all the world" (Matthew 24:14). We are called to share the pure principles and organizing practices of *His* gospel in *His* name. In order to do so, we must also remember that it is essential to teach and testify that Joseph Smith was His instrument in restoring those pure principles and organizing practices to the earth.

With so very much at stake, you would be wise to ask yourself if you stand ready to step forward and declare with clear conviction and sweet boldness that "on the morning of a beautiful, clear day, early in the spring of eighteen hundred and twenty,"<sup>1</sup> Joseph Smith walked into a secluded grove of trees, knelt, prayed, and the world was never the same again. If you would be the servants of God you are called to be, you must be ready to do so.

Decide now to become a student of the life of the Prophet Joseph Smith. There is power and wisdom in his life like no other, save the life of the Savior Himself. As you earnestly and prayerfully familiarize yourself with the details of Joseph's life, I promise that you will find your affection and admiration for him grow, you will find comfort and encouragement for those particularly hard days of life and service, and you will bolster your understanding against the sneer of modern critics so sure that worldly evidence proves Joseph could not be what he claimed. To those ends, consider just a few glimpses of this most remarkable man.

### **A Painful Path**

There is every reason to believe that the morning of the First Vision was as glorious and idyllic as the hymn "Joseph Smith's First Prayer"<sup>2</sup> makes it



**Following three years of failed crops in Vermont, Joseph Smith Sr. took the fateful step of moving his family 300 miles (482 km) southwest to the town of Palmyra, in upper New York.**

proceeds while spinning tales that the venture had been a bust, producing only a chest full of tea as reward.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, just as this swindle was unfolding, the payments for a large inventory of merchandise had fallen due at the Smith store. In the face of demanding creditors, the Smiths hit a desperation point. To pay their debts, Lucy gave up a wedding gift of \$1,000 that she had saved for years, and Joseph accepted \$800 for the family farm in Tunbridge.<sup>6</sup> The farm was the one thing that would have

out to be. But in relishing such a picture, we must not lose sight of what it took to get to that morning. The path to Palmyra—the general location of this sacred, singular moment—was anything but a path of sweetness and light for this boy prophet and his family.

The Prophet's parents, Joseph Smith Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith, married in Tunbridge, Vermont, USA, in 1796. After six years of fairly successful farming, the Smiths moved to nearby Randolph to try their hand at storekeeping.<sup>3</sup>

The line of goods Joseph Sr. acquired with the help of Boston-based creditors moved quickly to eager new customers—not for cash but for promises of payment once harvests came in at the end of the growing season. As he waited for promised payments to pay off his creditors, he jumped into a new investment opportunity.

In those days Chinese markets were clamoring for crystallized ginseng root. Though Joseph Sr. had a hard-cash offer from a middleman for \$3,000 for the ginseng root he had collected and prepared for shipment, he decided on the riskier but potentially more lucrative strategy of taking the product to New York himself and contracting with a ship's captain to sell his goods in China on consignment. By eliminating the middleman, he stood to make as much as \$4,500—an immense sum in those days.<sup>4</sup>

As bad luck or sinister planning would have it, Joseph Sr.'s shipment ended up on the same boat carrying the son of the middleman with whom he had declined to do business. Taking advantage of the situation, this son sold the Smith ginseng in China “at a high price” and kept the



at least guaranteed a modicum of economic stability and long-term physical security in the often harsh world of the early American frontier. Now, penniless and landless, the Smiths would be forced to move eight times in 14 years, constantly looking for a way to provide for their family.

At least one of those moves was triggered by the financial difficulty of accumulated medical bills incurred from the 1813 typhoid fever epidemic that struck all the children of the Smith family with great and debilitating force. A few weeks after Joseph's fever had passed, he experienced tremendous pain in his shoulder. A local doctor misdiagnosed the pain as a consequence of a sprain. Two weeks later, when the pain had escalated to excruciating levels, the doctor returned and discovered a pool of infection linked to Joseph's extended fever.<sup>7</sup>

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A lancing of the sore area drew out a quart of infected matter, but the procedure was incomplete, and new infection moved to Joseph's lower left leg. For this, a surgeon was summoned. He made an eight-inch (20 cm) incision from the knee to the ankle, which eased the pain somewhat. But the infection, unfortunately, shot into the bone.<sup>8</sup>

At this point the family sought the latest medical advice from leading authorities at Dartmouth Medical College. Lucy insisted that the most logical and customary procedure,

memory. There was Joseph lying in a blood-drenched bed, "pale as a corpse, [with] large drops of sweat . . . rolling down his face, whilst upon every feature was depicted the utmost agony."<sup>11</sup> Fortunately, the operation was a success, but Joseph would spend the next three years on crutches.

After this ordeal, the family hoped that a new start in Norwich, Vermont, would finally bring the stability and prosperity they so urgently sought. But once again their hopes were dashed. In their first year of trying to make a



amputation, *not* be used. Instead, the Smiths would try a new and painful procedure—one without promise of success. Doctors would open Joseph's leg and bore two holes in each side of the bone. Then they would chip off three large pieces of the bone to remove all the infected area.<sup>9</sup>

All of this was to be done without the advantages of today's general anesthesia. As a consequence, the family was urged to give Joseph alcohol or to tie him to the bed so he would not jerk away in pain during the delicate procedure. At the tender age of seven, Joseph refused both options. Instead, he made two requests—that his father hold him and that his mother leave the room.<sup>10</sup>

When Joseph's cries became so great that his mother could not be kept away, twice she entered the room over his pleading objections. What she saw seared an indelible

go of farming on rented land, their crops failed. Their crops failed again the second year. In year three, 1816, Joseph Smith Sr. determined to give it one more try, convinced that things simply had to get better.<sup>12</sup>

Half a world away in 1815, Mount Tambora in Indonesia had erupted and spewed tons of ash into the earth's atmosphere, disrupting normal weather cycles. From June to August of 1816—dubbed the "year without a summer"—four killing frosts hit New England, ruining summer crops yet again.<sup>13</sup>

With famine setting in and thousands leaving Vermont in mass exodus, Joseph Sr. took his most fateful step yet. He decided to leave the roughly 20-mile (32 km) radius of family, friends, and farmland he had known most of his adult life and headed 300 miles (482 km) southwest to the town

of Palmyra in upper New York. There, it was reported, land was fertile and long-term credit was readily available. Out of necessity Joseph Sr. left in advance, leaving behind Lucy and the eight children to pack up their household goods and follow him.<sup>14</sup>

It was winter as Lucy and her brave little band loaded everything they owned into a sleigh and later into a wagon. After paying off several creditors, Lucy had little money left for the trip. By trip's end she was giving away clothing



and medicine to pay innkeepers. She recalled arriving in Palmyra with “barely two cents in cash.”<sup>15</sup>

Along the way the man hired to drive the sleigh forced young Joseph off to make room for two pretty daughters of the Gates family, whom they had encountered traveling in the same direction. Joseph—still not fully healed—was forced to limp “through the snow 40 miles [64 km] per day for several days,” experiencing what he called “the most excruciating weariness & pain.”<sup>16</sup>

When Joseph's devoted older brothers, Hyrum and Alvin, pleaded with the man to relent, he knocked them to the ground with a violent thump from the handled end of a whip. In Utica, when it became clear that Lucy was out of cash, the man abandoned the family—but not until after a

failed attempt to steal their wagon, during which he tossed their belongings to the ground.<sup>17</sup> Somehow the family pressed on until all arrived safely in Palmyra, tearfully collapsing into the arms of Joseph Smith Sr.

Perhaps the most heart-wrenching detail of this journey, though, is found in an underappreciated postscript Joseph later added to the original account of his family's journey: “On our way from Utica I was left to ride on the last sleigh in the company, but when that came up I was knocked down by the driver, one of Gate's sons, & left to wallow in my blood until a stranger came along, picked me up, & carried me to the Town of Palmyra.”<sup>18</sup> The significance of this should not be missed.

### A Treasure of Inestimable Value

Just two miles (3 km) south of the center of Palmyra sits a grove of trees that would become the site of one of the grandest visions in human history. Three miles (5 km) beyond that sits the Hill Cumorah, repository of a then-unknown set of golden plates.

When Joseph arrived in Palmyra, the Lord had brought His foreordained prophet to the physical resting place of a treasure of inestimable value. This treasure would signal that after centuries of general spiritual darkness and confusion, the heavens were again open. This treasure would show that Jesus's ministry was far more expansive in both doctrine and geography than the Christian churches of that day could possibly know. This treasure would affirm that, in miraculous fashion, God is sweepingly active in the affairs of men across time, languages, and continents. And this treasure would promise teachings so pure and powerful that if you planted them deep into your soul, you could personally be transformed, tasting of something so delicious as to make it the ultimate and unmatched feast of your desires.

With mortal eyes, we might be tempted to envision that a more fitting path for such a man and such a moment would be a path of greater ease, efficiency, and acclaim. In recognition of the earth-shattering events about to happen as a consequence of this boy entering this town at this time, could

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not the Lord, who so carefully orchestrated the placement of the golden plates over a millennia earlier, have provided a straighter, more comfortable and heralded path of arrival?

Yes, He surely could have, but He did not.

There was no prominent, prophetic anointing of Joseph in his childhood (see 1 Samuel 16:11–13). There was no directive dream pointing him to a promised land (see 1 Nephi 5:4–5). There was no curious Liahona to help his family avoid missteps along the way (see 1 Nephi 16:10; Alma 37:38). And there certainly was no open-air limousine traveling along a sunny, streamlined parade route with cheering masses providing a triumphant welcome.

Rather, for Joseph and his family, there was a wildly meandering trail of sorrow marked with bad luck, ill health, poor judgment, natural disaster, crushing pain, callous injustice, continuing obscurity, and unrelenting poverty. This is not to suggest that the Smith family lived in one continual round of abject misery; they did not. But the path to Palmyra was anything other than direct, prosperous, and publicly notable. Lame, limp, and bloodied, the Prophet literally had to be carried to his unparalleled rendezvous with destiny by a nameless stranger.

Remember this as perhaps the first lesson of Joseph’s life and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. In spite of failure, mishap, and bitter opposition—and in many cases precisely *because* of those things—Joseph Smith got exactly where he needed to be to fulfill his mission. So, if now or on some future day, you look around and see that other perhaps less-devoted acquaintances are succeeding in their jobs when you just lost yours; if major illness puts you on

your back just at the moment critical tasks of service seem to come calling; if a call to a prominent position goes to someone else; if a missionary companion seems to learn the language faster; if well-meaning efforts still somehow lead to disaster with a fellow ward member, a neighbor, or an investigator; if news from home brings word of financial setback or mortal tragedy you can do nothing about; or if, day after day, you simply feel like a bland and beaten background player in a gospel drama that really seems made for the happiness of others, *just know this*: many such things were the lot of Joseph Smith himself at the very moment he was being led to the stage of the single most transcendent thing to happen on this earth since the events of Golgotha and the Garden Tomb nearly 2,000 years earlier.

“But,” you may say, “my life and earthly destiny will never be like that of the Prophet Joseph.”

That probably is true. But it is also true that your lives do matter to God, and your eternal potential and that of every soul you will meet is no less grand and significant than that of the Prophet Joseph himself. Thus, just like our beloved Joseph, you must never give up, give in, or give out when life in general, or missionary work in particular, gets utterly painful, confusing, or dull. Rather, as Paul teaches, you must see that “*all* things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28; emphasis added).

Just as He did with young Joseph Smith, God is shaping and directing you every single day to ends more glorious than you can know! ■

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#### NOTES

1. Joseph Smith—History 1:14.
2. *Hymns*, no. 26.
3. See Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith, the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (1853), 37, 45. For a concise summary of events related to the Smith family’s move to Palmyra, see also Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith:*

- Rough Stone Rolling* (2005), 17–29.
4. See Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 49.
5. See Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 49–50.
6. See Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 51.
7. See Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 60, 62.
8. See Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 62–63.

9. See LeRoy S. Wirthlin, “Joseph Smith’s Boyhood Operation: An 1813 Surgical Success,” *BYU Studies* 21, no. 2 (1981): 146–54.
10. See Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 64.
11. Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 65.
12. See Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 66.
13. See *Church History in the Fulness of Times*, 2nd ed.

- (2003), 24.
14. See Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 67.
15. Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 68, 70.
16. Joseph Smith, in *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, 2 vols. (1989), 1:268.
17. See *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:268.
18. Joseph Smith, in *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:268–69.