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The First Vision

A Pattern for Personal Revelation

The Prophet Joseph Smith taught from his experience in the Sacred Grove how we can receive personal revelation as a part of our daily lives.


The 200th anniversary of what we call “Joseph Smith’s First Vision” is a great opportunity for us to increase our faith in his prophetic mission and to learn from his example how to increase our own capacity to receive personal revelation from God.

When 14-year-old Joseph Smith walked out of a grove of trees in Palmyra, New York, USA, he knew for himself that God communicates with His children in mortality. He believed the words he had read in his Bible:

“If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.

“But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed” (James 1:5–6).

Joseph Smith acted fearlessly on that promise, as can we all. President Russell M. Nelson has said this about our opportunity: “If Joseph Smith’s transcendent experience in the Sacred Grove teaches us anything, it is that the heavens are open and that God speaks to His children.”¹



God keeps His promise to communicate with His children in mortality if they ask and qualify to receive that communication. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught from his experience in the First Vision, and from the great flood of revelation that came to him through the Restoration, how we can receive personal revelation as a part of our daily lives.

“When we are ready to come to Him,” Joseph taught, “He is ready to come to us.”²

The Heavens Are Open

Our challenge is to act so that we can receive the messages of truth Heavenly Father is ready to send to us as revelation and to recognize what He has already sent. Joseph Smith’s experience provides an example of that. He had likely read the book of James and other biblical books several times, as we have. But one day, by the influence of the Holy Ghost, he recognized the message that led him to the Sacred Grove. Here is his account of discovering a message from God sent long before:

“While I was laboring under the extreme difficulties caused by the contests of these parties of religionists, I was one day reading the Epistle of James, first chapter and fifth verse, which reads: *If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.*

“Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my heart. I reflected on it again and again, knowing that if any person needed wisdom from God, I did; for how to act I did not know, and unless I could get more wisdom than I then had, I would never know; for the teachers of religion of the different sects understood the same passages of scripture so differently as to destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible” (Joseph Smith—History 1:11–12).

Joseph Smith’s experience is a pattern we can follow to recognize personal messages from God. Why did a scriptural passage come with great power and enter with great force into every feeling of his heart? And why did he reflect on it again and again?

There may be many reasons God could speak so powerfully to young Joseph, but a primary reason was that his heart was ready.

A Broken Heart Is a Prepared Heart

Joseph had a broken heart for at least two reasons. He wanted forgiveness of his sins and weaknesses, which he knew could come only through Jesus Christ. And he was desperate to know which of the contending churches was right and which he should join.

Joseph had been prepared with faith that Jesus is the Christ, his Savior. With that faith and with a humble heart, he was ready. He said of his feelings at that time, “I cried unto the Lord for mercy, for there was none else to whom I could go and obtain mercy.”³

He was prepared, as we can be, to claim the promise of James. The flow of revelation that came allowed the Lord to change Joseph’s life and bless the lives of all of Heavenly Father’s children, and their families, who have come or will ever come into mortality.

A transcendent blessing for you and me is that we can learn from Joseph’s example how to receive light and knowledge from God. By following Joseph’s example, we can bring lasting joy to those we love and serve for the Lord. And then their example can pass the blessing of personal revelation along in a chain whose end we cannot see but that Heavenly Father can see.

Preparing Ourselves for Revelation

Joseph’s pattern of preparation to receive personal revelation was simple and is easy to emulate, but it is not necessarily a single set of steps, one leading to another. You are a unique child of God, so you have different capacities for learning and different ways of learning truth.



Yet from Joseph's example, you can see how a few revelations of light and truth are essential to preparing to receive continuing personal revelation. The Lord knew that fact when He gave the sacrament prayers to each of us as a template for preparing to receive personal revelation through the Holy Ghost.

It may be different for you, but when I hear the words "O God, the Eternal Father" (Doctrine and Covenants 20:77, 79), a warm feeling of love comes to me. The words of the sacrament prayers bring to my mind the memory of what I felt coming out of a baptismal font in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA, when I was eight years old. I knew then that Jesus was my Savior, and I felt the joy of being clean. Sometimes I remember a painting of Him on the cross and coming out of His tomb. Mostly what comes to me is a feeling of gratitude and love for Him.

When I hear the words that I am to witness my willingness to "always remember him and keep his commandments," I feel a humbling need for repentance and forgiveness. Then, when I hear the promise that I may have His Spirit to be with me (see Doctrine and Covenants 20:77), I feel that it is true. And every time, I feel light, peace, and confidence that I can hear revealed messages from God.

Fourteen-year-old Joseph Smith did not have the sacrament prayers

when he was being prepared for the personal revelations that came in the Sacred Grove and during the rest of his life. But he followed a pattern we can all follow to qualify for continuing personal revelation:

- He studied the words God had already revealed in the scriptures.
- He pondered what he had read and felt.
- He returned to the scriptures often and carefully.
- Out of the faith he gained by studying and pondering, he resolved to pray.
- When revelation came, he received truth and light, lived the truth he had been given, and sought more truth.
- He returned to the scriptures again and received further revelation from God, which he wrote down.
- He continued to pray and obey, thus receiving even further light and instructions.



President Nelson has described the wonderful opportunity that comes as we follow the example of Joseph Smith: “In like manner, what will your seeking open for you? What wisdom do you lack? What do you feel an urgent need to know or understand? Follow the example of the Prophet Joseph. Find a quiet place where you can regularly go. Humble yourself before God. Pour out your heart to your Heavenly Father. Turn to Him for answers and for comfort.”⁴

Satan Opposes Revelation

As you follow the example of Joseph Smith, you will study carefully his example of courage and persistence. You may not encounter the resistance he faced in the Sacred Grove as you pray, but you would be wise to remember it. Joseph described that resistance this way:

“After I had retired to the place where I had previously designed to go, having looked around me, and finding myself alone, I knelt down and began to offer up the desires of my heart to God. I had scarcely done so, when immediately I was seized upon by some power which entirely overcame me, and had such an astonishing influence over me as to bind my tongue so that I could not speak. Thick darkness gathered around me, and it seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction.

“But, exerting all my powers to call upon God to deliver me out of the power of this enemy which had seized upon me, and at the very moment

when I was ready to sink into despair and abandon myself to destruction—not to an imaginary ruin, but to the power of some actual being from the unseen world, who had such marvelous power as I had never before felt in any being—just at this moment of great alarm, I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me” (Joseph Smith—History 1:15–16).

That terrible opposition, which continued throughout Joseph’s life, came because Lucifer wanted to stop the revelation that would lead to the Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Your prayers for revelation from God will face lesser opposition, but you need to follow Joseph’s example of courage and persistence.

Satan will likely use more subtle means to oppose your efforts to receive and retain personal revelation. One way will be his intent to send you lies, his method of false revelation. He will try to reach you with messages intended to make you believe that there is no God, no

resurrected Jesus Christ, no living prophets or revelation, that Joseph Smith was deluded, and that your feelings and the whisperings from the Holy Ghost are the delusion of “a frenzied mind” (Alma 30:16).

He will launch those lies at you, just as he assailed Joseph Smith, at the very moment you are about to pray and again after you have received revelation. I have found two ways to escape those attacks.

First, never delay an impression to pray. Leave no opening for doubts to arise. President Brigham Young (1801–77) said that the person who waits to feel like praying is less likely to pray.⁵

Second, quickly write down the messages you receive from God. I have found that the spiritual impression that was clear one minute can be blurred or gone a few minutes later. Even in the middle of the night, I have learned to get up and write down impressions. Otherwise they may be lost.

In this, Joseph provides another lesson for us. He wrote down the experience of his First Vision several times, and he described it to several people over the years. Like other prophets, even the Prophet Joseph learned the importance, and difficulty, of capturing revealed truth in words.

Revelation Blesses Our Posterity

Like Joseph Smith, we can bless our children and our children’s children with words of revelation we receive from God. Because we are individuals with unique needs, perhaps only some of the revelation we

receive for ourselves will apply to those for whom we are responsible to God. But the written evidence that God has spoken to us can be to them the same blessing the Prophet Joseph gave to us.

The First Vision shows us that the heavens are open. God listens to our prayers. He reveals Himself and His Son to us. The Holy Ghost speaks to the hearts of those who are prepared to hear and feel the still, small voice. We can pass those lessons and that message on to those we love and who will follow us.

Thanks be to our benevolent Father in Heaven, who loves us, hears our prayers, and said of the Savior in our day, “*This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!*” (Joseph Smith—History 1:17). Thanks be to the Lord Jesus Christ, who restored His Church through the Prophet Joseph Smith. And thanks be to the Holy Ghost, who is eager to be our constant companion.

I testify that the answer is “Yes” to the child’s prayer:

*Heavenly Father, are you really there?
And do you hear and answer ev’ry child’s prayer?*⁶

I pray that we will, as did the Prophet Joseph Smith and as does our living prophet today, accept the invitation from our loving Heavenly Father, from our Savior, and from the Holy Ghost to receive the light and truth of personal revelation every day of our lives. ■

NOTES

1. Russell M. Nelson, “Revelation for the Church, Revelation for Our Lives,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2018, 95.
2. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 41.
3. Joseph Smith, in “First Vision Accounts,” 1832 Account, Gospel Topics Essays, ChurchofJesusChrist.org/topics/essays; punctuation modernized.
4. Russell M. Nelson, “Revelation for the Church, Revelation for Our Lives,” 95.
5. See *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young* (1997), 45.
6. “A Child’s Prayer,” *Children’s Songbook*, 12–13.

