



Joseph Smith

An Apostle of Jesus Christ

BY ELDER DENNIS B. NEUENSCHWANDER
Of the Seventy

In the Doctrine and Covenants we read that Joseph Smith was “called of God, and ordained an apostle of Jesus Christ” (D&C 20:2). The call of an Apostle is first to witness or testify of Jesus Christ. Old Testament prophets testified of His coming. The New Testament Apostles bore personal witness of Christ’s being and of the absolute reality of His Resurrection. This apostolic witness was the basis of their teaching. “Ye shall be witnesses unto me” (Acts 1:8) was Jesus’s instruction to the original Twelve. Peter testified on the day of Pentecost to the Jews who had gathered “out of every nation” (Acts 2:5) that “this Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses” (Acts 2:32). Similarly, Paul wrote to the Corinthians that Jesus “was seen of me also” (1 Corinthians 15:8). The sure witness of Christ’s being and the reality of His Resurrection is the first pillar of apostolic testimony.

The second pillar is centered on the Savior’s redemptive and saving power. Peter teaches that to the Lord “give all the Prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins” (Acts 10:43).

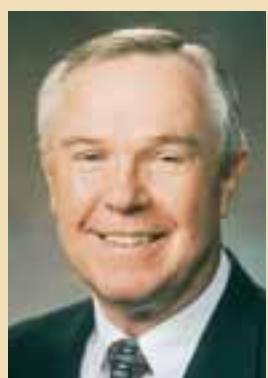
Without these twin pillars of testimony

concerning Christ, there could be no Apostle. Such testimonies are born of experience, divine command, and instruction. For example, Luke writes that Christ showed Himself to the Apostles “alive after his passion . . . being seen of them forty days, and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3).

How does the Prophet Joseph Smith fit into these apostolic requirements? The answer is “Perfectly.”

The First Vision

Joseph Smith’s apostolic instruction began in 1820. Pondering the questions of religion, he soon found that there was no way to reason or argue one’s opinion to an authoritative conclusion concerning the correctness of the various churches or their doctrines.



The Prophet Joseph Smith was called of God as a witness of Christ’s reality and Resurrection and of His redemptive and saving power.



Joseph's questions on religion were answered by the personal and physical manifestation of God the Father and His divine and living Son, Jesus Christ.

Short of a divine manifestation, young Joseph could add only one more opinion to the already existing “war of words and tumult of opinions” (Joseph Smith—History 1:10). But Joseph’s questions on religion were answered by the personal and physical manifestation of God the Father and His divine and living Son, Jesus Christ—an experience referred to as the First Vision.

Like that of the original Apostles, Joseph’s experience with Deity was direct and personal. There was no need for the opinion of others or the deliberations of a council to define what he saw or what it came to

mean to him. Joseph’s vision was at first an intensely personal experience—an answer to a specific question. Over time, however, illuminated by additional experience and instruction, it became the founding revelation of the Restoration.

As apostolic as this manifestation of Christ’s being, existence, and Resurrection was to Joseph Smith, it was not the only thing Jesus wanted to teach him. The boy Joseph’s first lesson arose from the manifestation of Christ’s absolute, omnipotent, and divine power. Joseph learned firsthand at least one meaning of the redeeming and saving power of Christ when he



prayed in the grove. As he began to pray, “Thick darkness gathered around me, and it seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction” (Joseph Smith—History 1:15). With every bit of energy Joseph had, he began to call upon God to deliver him from the grasp of this enemy.

“At the very moment when I was ready to sink into despair and abandon myself to destruction . . . , I saw a pillar of light. . . .

“It no sooner appeared than I found myself delivered from the enemy which held me bound” (Joseph Smith—History 1:16–17).

Joseph Smith’s confrontation with the adversary is reminiscent of an experience Moses had, about which the Prophet would learn some few years later. Unlike the boy Joseph, however, Moses saw God’s greatness first and then was confronted with the power of the adversary before being delivered from his influence. (See Moses 1.)

The difference in the order of events is significant. Moses was already far into maturity and had much knowledge and influence prior to this event. By displaying His magnificent power to Moses before he faced the adversary, the Lord helped Moses put his life into perspective. After experiencing God’s glory, Moses said, “Now, for this cause I know that man is nothing, which thing I never had supposed” (Moses 1:10). This incident enabled Moses to withstand the temptations of the adversary that followed.

Joseph Smith, on the other hand, was an inexperienced young man, who in his lifetime would repeatedly face adversarial power and the overwhelming problems it brings. By facing the adversary first, then being saved from his assault by the appearance of the Father and the Son, Joseph learned this indelible lesson: as great as the power of evil might be, it must always withdraw with the appearance of righteousness.

This lesson was critical in Joseph’s apostolic education. He needed this knowledge not only because of the personal trials that lay ahead of him but also because of the overwhelming opposition he would face in founding and directing the Church.

The boy Joseph went into the grove seeking wisdom, and wisdom he received. His apostolic instruction had begun. Among the great apostolic lessons of this First Vision were both the physical nature of the Savior and Heavenly Father and the initial and fundamental lessons relating to Their power—each a pillar of apostolic testimony.

The Book of Mormon

Joseph Smith’s early apostolic instruction continued with his translation of the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon gave Joseph access to “the fulness of the everlasting Gospel” (Joseph Smith—History 1:34), principles that were necessary to understand even prior to the organization of the Church. The Prophet was introduced to numerous “plain and most precious” (1 Nephi 13:26) prophetic and apostolic testimonies regarding the Savior, all of which served as models for him.

Indeed, the Book of Mormon prophets employ over 100 titles in their teachings of Christ, each of which helped Joseph understand the Savior’s divine role.¹ By virtue of these teachings, Joseph Smith became intimately acquainted with ancient prophets, giving him insight into the divine purpose of his responsibilities.

The Book of Mormon illuminates the universality of Christ’s Atonement. The Savior’s holy sacrifice is not confined to the borders of the Holy Land of His day or even restricted to the apostolic world of the original Twelve. The Atonement encompasses all of God’s creations—past, present, and future. What an impression Jacob’s teaching of the “infinite atonement” (2 Nephi 9:7) must have made on the mind of young Joseph, especially in contrast to Christian teachings at the time.

The Book of Mormon also introduces the universality of the Resurrection and other doctrines relating to it. Discourses on this doctrine by Lehi, Jacob, King Benjamin, Abinadi, Alma, Amulek, Samuel the Lamanite, and Moroni are all rich sources of instruction.

During the translation of the Book of Mormon, the Prophet received additional valuable personal instruction

The Book of Mormon is the “keystone of our religion” because it contains so many prophetic testimonies of Christ and stands as a tangible witness of the Restoration.

concerning the redemptive and saving power of Christ. In 1828 Martin Harris persuaded Joseph to lend him the first 116 pages of the Book of Mormon manuscript. When Martin Harris lost those pages, the Prophet felt an enormous despair.² His mother, Lucy Mack Smith, recorded that Joseph exclaimed: “Oh, my God! . . . All is lost! all is lost! What shall I do? I have sinned—it is I who tempted the wrath of God. . . . How shall I appear before the Lord? Of what rebuke am I not worthy from the angel of the Most High?”³

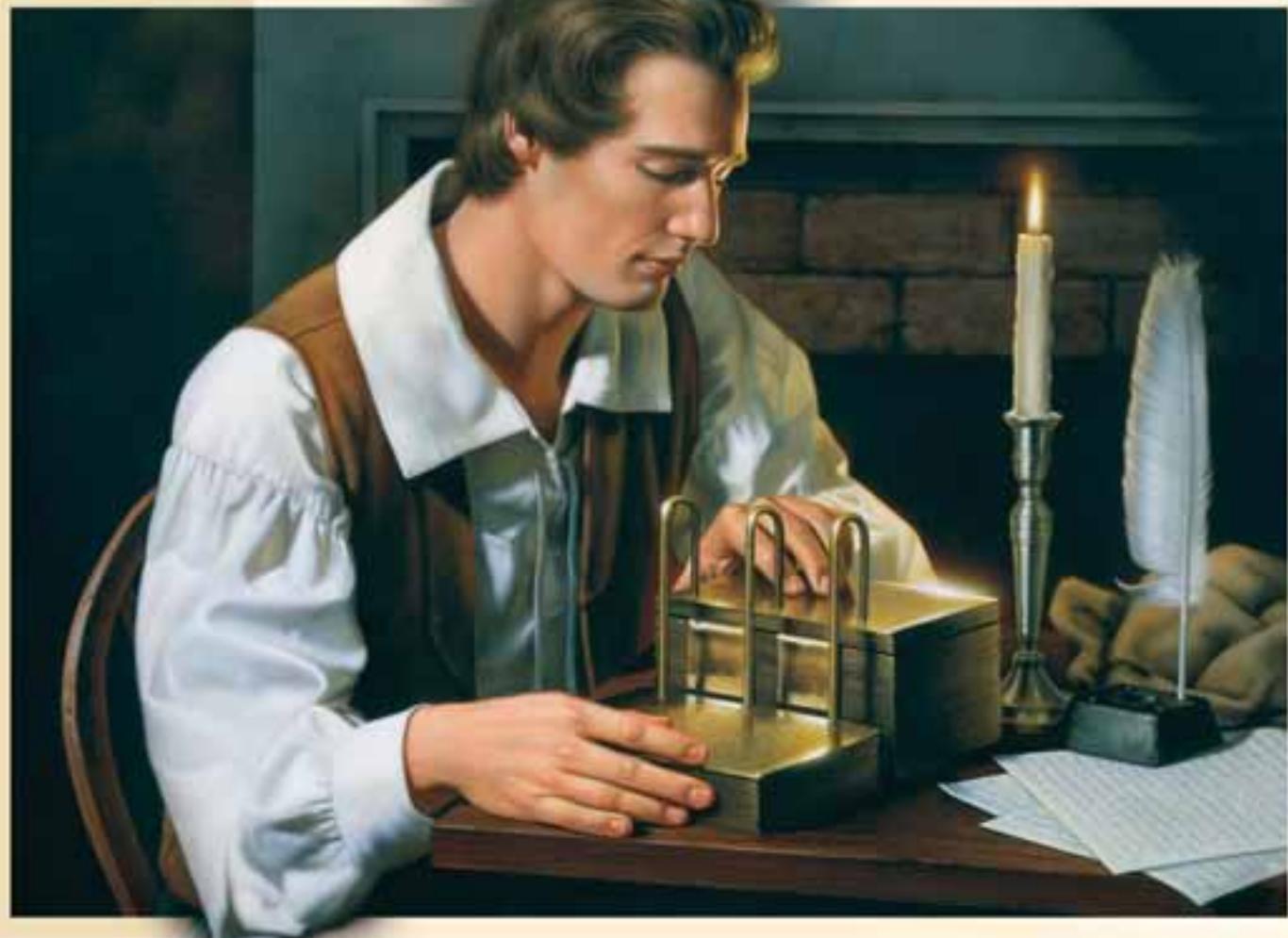
For well over a month the Lord left Joseph in this terrible condition of remorse.⁴

Then came relief and the apostolic lesson. The Lord told Joseph:

“The works, and the designs, and the purposes of God cannot be frustrated, neither can they come to naught. . . .

“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” (D&C 3:1, 4).

These words carefully describe what Joseph Smith had been experiencing. He had learned the exacting nature of the apostolic



call and to whom the Apostle, at all cost, owes his loyalty. “Although men set at naught the counsels of God, and despise his words,” Joseph was told, “yet you should have been faithful” (D&C 3:7–8). Joseph Smith had lost access to the plates for a season and had been taught an invaluable lesson. Subsequently, the plates were returned, and his position as translator restored.

How critical were the lessons provided by the translation of the Book of Mormon as Joseph Smith grew in his apostolic calling! The Book of Mormon is the “keystone of our religion”⁵ because it contains so many prophetic testimonies of Christ and stands as a tangible witness of the Restoration.

Continuing Revelation and Scripture

After finishing the translation of the Book of Mormon in 1829 and organizing the Church in 1830, Joseph Smith had the opportunity to receive continuing apostolic education through the process of translating other scripture. This included three years of translating the Bible and, beginning in 1835, translating the book of Abraham. Joseph Smith’s translation of the Bible expanded his understanding of the role of Old Testament prophets and New Testament Apostles. It also resulted in additional revelation, namely the book of Moses.

The book of Moses provided the Prophet with important knowledge about the Savior’s ministry, including His role in the Creation. “The Lord spake unto Moses, saying: . . . I am the Beginning and the End, the Almighty God; by mine Only Begotten I created these things” (Moses 2:1). Further, He said, “And worlds without number have I created; . . . and by the Son I created them, which is mine Only Begotten” (Moses 1:33).

The book of Moses clarified Christ’s relationship to the Father in the premortal existence and reinforced the Prophet’s understanding of the ascendant power of righteousness. One of the most beautiful of all the apostolic lessons that came to Joseph Smith in this revelation was the confirmation of God’s love. It was so different from the harsh, unforgiving, and judgmental personage

so many believed God to be; the book of Moses reveals a God of infinite compassion. Enoch saw that the “God of heaven . . . wept” (Moses 7:28) over those who would not receive Him. Wishing to know how it was possible, Enoch was given an answer that has a familiar biblical feel to it: “I [have] given commandment, that they should love one another, and that they should choose me, their Father. . . . Wherefore should not the heavens weep, seeing these shall suffer?” (Moses 7:33, 37; see also Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:37–39).

Through the translation of the book of Moses, the Prophet also became more acquainted with the redeeming and saving power of the Savior. As the Lord said, this earth was created “by the word of my power” (Moses 1:32) for the purpose of bringing “to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). Many long years before the Savior taught Thomas and the Twelve that “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (John 14:6), He revealed to Moses that “this is the plan of salvation unto all men, through the blood of mine Only Begotten, who shall come in the meridian of time” (Moses 6:62).

The First Vision in the grove, the translation of the Book of Mormon, the revision of the Bible, the revelation of the book of Moses, and the translation of the book of Abraham laid the basic foundation of the Church, largely through the rapidly expanding knowledge and testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith relating to Jesus Christ.

Revelations given to him and compiled in the Doctrine and Covenants contain a wealth of knowledge concerning the Savior. One could research the numerous topics and cross-references of the Topical Guide and Guide to the Scriptures referring to Jesus Christ and still not understand the breadth of information on the Savior that the Prophet Joseph Smith brought to the world. I am grateful to know that Jesus was “in the beginning with the Father” (D&C 93:21). I am grateful to know that He “suffered these things for [me], that [I] might not suffer if [I] would repent” (D&C 19:16).

I am so grateful for the revelations that teach me that the Savior's Atonement reaches to those who have lived, loved, served, and hoped for a better day yet never heard of Jesus or had the opportunity to embrace His gospel.

My Testimony of What the Prophet Revealed

I am grateful for yet one other thing about the Savior's ministry that stirs my soul deeply. From studying the promises of Malachi, Moroni's initial visit with Joseph, the Savior's words to the Nephites, and the visit of Elijah in the Kirtland Temple, I learn that God loves His children and has provided a way for each to return to Him. I know of no doctrine more just, no teaching that gives more hope than that of redemption of the dead. I am so grateful for the revelations that teach me that the



Savior's Atonement reaches to those who have lived, loved, served, and hoped for a better day yet never heard of Jesus or had the opportunity to embrace His gospel. This knowledge alone would be sufficient to convert me to the gospel if I knew nothing else at all. Here, at least for me, is the ultimate testimony of Jesus Christ and His atoning sacrifice.

What, then, can be said of the incomparable saving power of Christ? That which Joseph Smith learned in the Sacred Grove about the power of righteousness overcoming evil foreshadows the final scene. So reveals the Lord:

"I, having accomplished and finished the will of him whose I am, even the Father, concerning me—having done this that I might subdue all things unto myself—

"Retaining all power, even to the destroying of Satan and his works at the end of the

world, and the last great day of judgment" (D&C 19:2–3).

Our own testimonies of the Savior are framed by the testimony and teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith. Is it any wonder then that the Prophet taught that "the fundamental principles of our religion are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets, concerning Jesus Christ, that He died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it."⁶

Joseph Smith's apostolic testimony of the divine reality and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, as well as his knowledge of the redemptive and saving power of the Savior, can best be seen by the Prophet's own beautiful, powerful, and succinct witness:

"And now, after the many testimonies which have been given of him, this is the testimony, last of all, which we give of him: That he lives!

"For we saw him, even on the right hand of God; and we heard the voice bearing record that he is the Only Begotten of the Father—

"That by him, and through him, and of him, the worlds are and were created, and the inhabitants thereof are begotten sons and daughters unto God" (D&C 76:22–24).

How grateful I am for the apostolic call of Joseph Smith. ■

Adapted from a presentation to the Seventy.

NOTES

1. See *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (2003), 457–58.
2. See Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith*, ed. Preston Nibley (1958), 128–29.
3. *History of Joseph Smith*, 128, 129.
4. The 116 pages were lost in June 1828. In July Joseph Smith received what is now section 3 of the Doctrine and Covenants. In September the plates were returned to the Prophet. See the historical introductions to D&C 3; 10.
5. *History of the Church*, 4:461.
6. *History of the Church*, 3:30.