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The First Vision

KEY TO TRUTH

Let us not forget or take for granted the many precious truths we have learned from Joseph Smith's First Vision.

The Restoration of the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the latter days was foreseen and predicted by prophets throughout history. The Restoration, therefore, should not come as a surprise to those who study the scriptures. Dozens of prophetic statements throughout the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Book of Mormon clearly predict and point toward the Restoration of the gospel.¹

In the late 1790s, approximately 2,400 years after King Nebuchadnezzar saw in a dream that “the God of heaven [shall] set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed” (Daniel 2:44), a decades-long series of religious revivals

began in the United States. These revivals are known by historians as part of the Second Great Awakening. It was through these revival meetings’ competing notions of salvation that Joseph Smith and his family navigated their religious commitment.

Joseph was greatly influenced by the teachings and discussions of his father, who searched for but could not find among the revivalist sects any that were organized like the ancient order of Jesus Christ and His Apostles. Joseph would listen and ponder during family Bible study. By the age of 12, he began to worry about his sins and the welfare of his immortal soul, which led him to search the scriptures for himself.



As Joseph Smith searched the scriptures, he decided to “do as James directs, that is, ask of God.”

As he searched, he decided to “do as James directs, that is, ask of God” (Joseph Smith—History 1:13; see also James 1:5). The subsequent appearance of God the Father and His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to Joseph ushered in the dispensation of the fulness of times.

Four Accounts

The Prophet Joseph Smith wrote or dictated four known accounts of his First Vision. Additionally, his contemporaries recorded their memories of what they heard Joseph say about the vision; five such accounts are known. It is a blessing to have these records. They make Joseph’s First Vision the best-documented vision in history. I encourage you to visit history.lds.org to learn more about the accounts and see how they work together to paint a more complete picture.

The Gospel Topics essay “First Vision Accounts” states: “The various accounts of the First Vision tell a consistent story, though

naturally they differ in emphasis and detail. Historians expect that when an individual retells an experience in multiple settings to different audiences over many years, each account will emphasize various aspects of the experience and contain unique details. Indeed, differences similar to those in the First Vision accounts exist in the multiple scriptural accounts of Paul’s vision on the road to Damascus and the Apostles’ experience on the Mount of Transfiguration. Yet despite the differences, a basic consistency remains across all the accounts of the First Vision. Some have mistakenly argued that any variation in the retelling of the story is evidence of fabrication. To the contrary, the rich historical record enables us to learn more about this remarkable event than we could if it were less well documented.”²

1832 Account

First, the 1832 account is the earliest detailed written account of the First Vision. It is part of a six-page autobiography, most of which is in Joseph’s hand. This document has been in the Church’s possession since it was written. After the pioneers’ trek West, it remained packed in a trunk for several years and was generally unknown until it was published in a master’s thesis in 1965.³ It has since been published repeatedly, including on LDS.org and in *The Joseph Smith Papers*.

In this document, Joseph relates distress at not knowing where to find the Savior’s forgiveness. He testifies, “The Lord opened the heavens upon me and I saw the Lord.”⁴ Some have interpreted this statement to mean that Joseph referred to the appearance of only one divine being, but when read in light of the other documents, this phrase can be

understood to mean that God the Father opened the heavens and revealed His Son, Jesus Christ, to Joseph.

This account beautifully emphasizes the Savior's Atonement and the personal redemption He offered to Joseph. It says, in part: "The Lord . . . spake unto me saying, 'Joseph my son thy sins are forgiven thee. . . . I was crucified for the world that all those who believe on my name may have eternal life.'" Joseph testified that he experienced joy and love but could find no one who believed. "My soul was filled with love and for many days I could rejoice with great joy and the Lord was with me, but [I] could find none that would believe the heavenly vision. Nevertheless, I pondered these things in my heart."⁵

1835 Account

Next, the 1835 account is Joseph's description of his vision to Robert Matthews, a visitor to Kirtland, Ohio, in 1835. It was recorded in Joseph's journal by his scribe. It was not included in early editions of Joseph's history and was first published in *BYU Studies* in the 1960s. In this account, Joseph testifies that God appeared to him first, and then he saw the Savior as well: "I called on the Lord in mighty prayer. A pillar of fire appeared above my head; it presently rested down upon me and filled me with joy unspeakable. A personage appeared in the midst of this pillar of flame, which was spread all around and yet nothing consumed. Another personage soon appeared like unto the first. He said unto me, 'Thy sins are forgiven thee.'" In this account, Joseph also noted, "I saw many angels in this vision."⁶

1838 Account

The 1838 account is the best-known account and comes from Joseph's Manuscript History. The first draft was written after Joseph fled Kirtland early in 1838, and the second draft was prepared shortly after his escape from Missouri in 1839. So it was written in the context of great opposition. It was first published in 1842 in *Times and Seasons*, the Church's newspaper in Nauvoo, Illinois. It was also included in the Pearl of Great Price in 1851, which was originally a pamphlet for British Saints. It was canonized as scripture in 1880.

Multiple drafts of this account have been published in

The Joseph Smith Papers. Like the 1835 account, the central question of this account is which church is right. As a history of the Church, and not just of Joseph, this account "focuses on the vision as the beginning of the 'rise and progress of the Church.'"⁷ Therefore, it doesn't include the information about the personal forgiveness mentioned in the previous two accounts.

1842 Account

And finally, the 1842 account is in response to a request for information from John Wentworth, the editor of the *Chicago Democrat*. Joseph wrote him a letter that included not only the Articles of Faith but also a description of his First Vision. The letter was published in the *Times and Seasons* in 1842. With Joseph's permission, it was published again in 1844 by historian Israel Daniel Rupp in his book about Christian denominations in the United States.⁸ This account was intended for an audience unfamiliar with Mormon beliefs. It was written during a welcomed lull in the opposition the Prophet faced.

As with other accounts, Joseph noted the confusion he had experienced and the appearance of two personages in answer to his prayer: "I was enwrapped in a heavenly vision and saw two glorious personages who exactly resembled each other in features, and likeness, surrounded with a brilliant light which eclipsed the sun at noon-day. They told me that all religious denominations were believing in incorrect doctrines, and that none of them was acknowledged of God as his church and kingdom. And I was expressly commanded to 'go not after them,' at the same time receiving a promise that the fulness of the gospel should at some future time be made known unto me."⁹

It is a blessing to have these accounts of Joseph's First Vision. Like the individual New Testament Gospels that together more completely describe Christ's life and ministry, each of the accounts describing Joseph's First Vision adds unique detail and perspective to the total experience. Together they tell Joseph's consistent, harmonious story. They all emphasize that there was confusion and strife among Christian churches; that Joseph desired to know

which, if any, was right; that he searched the scriptures and prayed; that a light descended from heaven; and that divine beings appeared and answered his prayer.

“I Could Not Deny It”

The canonized 1838 version of Joseph Smith’s account of the First Vision is the most powerful learning experience anyone on earth could have. This experience changed Joseph’s life, it has changed my life, and I know it has or will change your life as you go to the Lord for confirmation of its reality.

As stated in the document “First Vision Accounts,” found on LDS.org: “Joseph Smith testified repeatedly that he experienced a remarkable vision of God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. Neither the truth of the First Vision nor the arguments against it can be proven by historical research alone. Knowing the truth of Joseph Smith’s testimony requires each earnest seeker of truth to study the record and then exercise sufficient faith in Christ to ask God in sincere, humble prayer whether the record is true. If the seeker asks with real intent to act upon the answer revealed by the Holy Ghost, the truthfulness of Joseph Smith’s vision will be manifest. In this way, every person can know that Joseph Smith spoke honestly when he declared, ‘I had seen a vision; I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it’ [Joseph Smith—History 1:25].”

According to President Joseph F. Smith (1838–1918), “The greatest event that has ever occurred in the world, since the resurrection of the Son of God from the tomb and his ascension on high, was the coming of the Father and of the Son to that boy Joseph Smith.”¹⁰

Truths from the First Vision

It is an amazing and enlightening experience to analyze what we learn from this sacred, awe-inspiring experience. I would like to share a sampling of truths we learn from Joseph Smith’s First Vision regarding the eternal nature of our Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ; the reality of Satan; the struggle between good and evil; and other important aspects of the great plan of salvation.

We learn that the scriptures are true and can be taken literally and applied in our lives.

We learn that pondering the scriptures brings power and insight.

We learn that knowledge alone isn’t enough; acting on what we know results in God’s blessings.

We learn to put our trust in God and look to Him for answers to life’s most important questions and not to put our trust in man.

We learn that prayers are answered according to our unwavering faith and according to Heavenly Father’s will.

We learn the reality of Satan’s existence and that he has actual power to influence the physical world, including us.

We learn that Satan’s power is limited and superseded by God’s power.

We learn that Satan will stop at nothing to destroy the work of God and that Satan must have known the





WHAT JOSEPH LEARNED

“Joseph Smith learned in those minutes [of the First Vision], however long or brief, more about the nature of God than all of the learned divines of all time had ever learned.”

President Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008), “Inspirational Thoughts,” *Ensign*, Aug. 1997, 3.

importance of Joseph Smith in his role as the Prophet of the Restoration.

We learn that we can overcome Satan by calling upon God and putting our complete faith and trust in Him.

We learn that where there is light, darkness must depart.

We learn that God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, are two separate and distinct beings, resembling each other in features and likeness.

We learn that we are created in God’s image.

We learn that Christ is risen.

We learn that God knows us personally and is aware of our needs and concerns. He called Joseph by name.

We learn of the relationship between the Father and the Son. Jesus defers to His Father, and the Father communicates with mortals here upon the earth through His Son.

We learn that Jesus Christ is beloved of His Father by the Father’s designating Jesus as His Beloved Son.

We learn that the true Church of Jesus Christ as He originally organized it was not found upon the earth at the time of Joseph Smith, confirming the reality of the Great Apostasy foretold by Paul the Apostle.

We learn that when we care enough to desire God’s input in our life, He will reveal a refining course for us. At Joseph’s time all the denominations and sects were wrong.

We learn that every dispensation of time receives the visions, blessings, and glories of God.

We learn insight into how God chooses His prophets.

We learn that God chooses the pure in heart who are righteous and have righteous

desires to do His work, confirming the teaching from the Bible that God looks upon the heart and does not choose based on outward appearance or social status or standing (see 1 Samuel 16:7).

Joseph Smith’s First Vision is the key to unlocking many truths that had been hidden for centuries. Let us not forget or take for granted the many precious truths we have learned from the First Vision. ■

From a worldwide devotional for young adults, “The Truth Restored,” delivered at the Salt Lake Tabernacle on May 1, 2016; for the full text and video, go to lds.org/broadcasts. The full text of the four accounts of the First Vision can be found at history.lds.org/firstvision.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Deuteronomy 4:27–31; Isaiah 60–62; Jeremiah 30–33; Ezekiel 37:15–28; Amos 9:11; Malachi 3:1; Matthew 17:11; Mark 9:12; Acts 3:19–21; Romans 11:25–27; Ephesians 1:9–10; 2 Thessalonians 2:1–3; Revelation 14:6; 1 Nephi 13:34–42; 2 Nephi 26:14–17; Jacob 6:1–4; 3 Nephi 21.
2. “First Vision Accounts,” Gospel Topics, topics.lds.org.
3. See Paul R. Cheesman, “An Analysis of the Accounts Relating Joseph Smith’s Early Visions” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1965), 126–32, scholarsarchive.byu.edu.
4. Joseph Smith, in *Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844*, vol. 1 of the Histories series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, edited by Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (2012), 12–13; spelling, punctuation, and capitalization modernized; see also Dean C. Jessee, “The Earliest Documented Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” in John W. Welch and Erick B. Carlson, eds., *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844* (2005), 1–34; “First Vision Accounts,” Gospel Topics, topics.lds.org.
5. See Joseph Smith, in *Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844*, 12–13; spelling, punctuation, and capitalization modernized; see also “First Vision Accounts,” Gospel Topics, topics.lds.org.
6. See Joseph Smith, in *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839*, vol. 1 of the Journals series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, edited by Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (2008), 88; spelling, punctuation, and capitalization modernized; see also “First Vision Accounts,” Gospel Topics, topics.lds.org.
7. “First Vision Accounts,” Gospel Topics, topics.lds.org.
8. See I. Daniel Rupp, *He Pasa Ekklesia: An Original History of the Religious Denominations at Present Existing in the United States* (1844), 404–10.
9. *Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844*, 494; see also “First Vision Accounts,” Gospel Topics, topics.lds.org.
10. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph F. Smith* (1998), 14.