



Chapter 2

Hear Him

This is chapter 2 of the new four-volume narrative history of the Church titled Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days. The book will be available in 14 languages in print, in the Church History section of the Gospel Library app, and at saints.lds.org. The next several chapters will be published in upcoming issues until volume 1 is released later this year. Those chapters will be available in 47 languages in the Gospel Library app and at saints.lds.org.

Joseph rose early on a spring morning in 1820 and set out for the woods near his home. The day was clear and beautiful, and sunlight filtered through the branches overhead. He wanted to be alone when he prayed, and he knew a quiet spot in the woods where he had recently been clearing trees. He had left his ax there, wedged in a stump.¹

Finding the place, Joseph looked around to make sure he was by himself. He was anxious about praying out loud and did not want to be interrupted.

Satisfied he was alone, Joseph knelt on the cool earth and began to share the desires of his heart with God. He asked for mercy and forgiveness and for wisdom to find answers to his questions. “O Lord,” he prayed, “what church shall I join?”²

As he prayed, his tongue seemed to swell until he could not speak. He heard footsteps behind him but saw no one when he turned around. He tried to pray again, but the footsteps grew louder, as if someone was coming for him. He sprang to his feet and spun around, but still he saw no one.³

Suddenly, an unseen power seized him. He tried to speak again, but his tongue was still bound. A thick darkness

closed in around him until he could no longer see the sunlight. Doubts and awful images flashed across his mind, confusing and distracting him. He felt as if some terrible being, real and immensely powerful, wanted to destroy him.⁴

Exerting all his strength, Joseph called once more to God. His tongue loosened, and he pleaded for deliverance. But he found himself sinking into despair, overwhelmed by the unbearable darkness and ready to abandon himself to destruction.⁵

At that moment, a pillar of light appeared over his head. It descended slowly and seemed to set the woods on fire. As the light rested on him, Joseph felt the unseen power release its hold. The Spirit of God took its place, filling him with peace and unspeakable joy.

Peering into the light, Joseph saw God the Father standing above him in the air. His face was brighter and more glorious than anything Joseph had ever seen. God called him by name and pointed to another being who appeared beside Him. “This is My Beloved Son,” He said. “Hear Him!”⁶

Joseph looked into the face of Jesus Christ. It was as bright and glorious as the Father’s.

“Joseph,” the Savior said, “thy sins are forgiven.”⁷

His burden lifted, Joseph repeated his question: “What church shall I join?”⁸

“Join none of them,” the Savior told him. “They teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of

godliness, but they deny the power thereof.”

The Lord told Joseph that the world was steeped in sin. “None doeth good,” He explained. “They have turned aside from the gospel and keep not my commandments.” Sacred truths had been lost or corrupted, but He promised to reveal the fullness of His gospel to Joseph in the future.⁹

As the Savior spoke, Joseph saw hosts of angels, and the light around them blazed brighter than the noonday sun. “Behold, and lo, I come quickly,” the Lord said, “clothed in the glory of My Father.”¹⁰

Joseph expected the woods to be devoured by the brilliance, but the trees burned like Moses’s bush and were not consumed.¹¹

When the light faded, Joseph found himself lying on his back, looking up into heaven. The pillar of light had departed, and his guilt and confusion were gone. Feelings of divine love filled his heart.¹² God the Father and Jesus Christ had spoken to him, and he had learned for himself how to find truth and forgiveness.

Too weak from the vision to move, Joseph lay in the woods until some of his strength returned. He then struggled home and leaned against the fireplace for support. His mother saw him and asked what was wrong.

“All is well,” he assured her. “I am well enough off.”¹³

A few days later, while talking to a preacher, Joseph told him about what he had seen in the woods. The preacher had been active in the recent religious revivals, and Joseph expected him to take his vision seriously.

At first the preacher treated his words lightly. People claimed to have heavenly visions from time to time.¹⁴ But then he became angry and defensive, and he told Joseph that his story was from the devil. The days of visions and revelations had ceased long ago, he said, and they would never return.¹⁵

Joseph was surprised, and he soon found that no one would believe his vision.¹⁶ Why would they? He was only

fourteen years old and had practically no education. He came from a poor family and expected to spend the rest of his life working the land and doing odd jobs to earn a meager living.

And yet his testimony bothered some people enough to ridicule him. How strange, he thought, that a simple boy of no consequence in the world could attract so much bitterness and scorn. “Why persecute me for telling the truth?” he wanted to ask. “Why does the world think to make me deny what I have actually seen?”

Joseph puzzled over these questions for the rest of his life. “I had actually seen a light, and in the midst of that light I saw two Personages, and they did in reality speak to me,” he later recounted, “and though I was hated and persecuted for saying that I had seen a vision, yet it was true.”

“I knew it, and I knew that God knew it,” he testified, “and I could not deny it.”¹⁷

Once Joseph discovered that sharing his vision only turned his neighbors against him, he kept it mostly to

himself, content with the knowledge God had given him.¹⁸ Later, after he moved away from New York, he tried to record his sacred experience in the woods. He described his yearning for forgiveness and the Savior’s warning to a world in need of repentance. He wrote the words out himself, in halting language, trying earnestly to capture the majesty of the moment.

In the years that followed, he recounted the vision more publicly, drawing on scribes who could help him better express what defied all description. He told of his desire to find the true church and described God the Father appearing first to introduce the Son. He wrote less about his own search for forgiveness and more about the Savior’s universal message of truth and the need for a restoration of the gospel.¹⁹

With each effort to record his experience, Joseph testified that the Lord had heard and answered his prayer. As a young man, he learned that the Savior’s church was no longer



Joseph knew he had seen a vision. God the Father and Jesus Christ had appeared to him in a brilliant light.





In this grove that still stands today near the Smith family home, Joseph knelt in prayer to know which church to join.

on the earth. But the Lord had promised to reveal more about His gospel in due time. So Joseph resolved to trust in God, stay true to the commandment he had received in the woods, and wait patiently for further direction.²⁰ ■

A complete list of works cited is available in English at saints.lds.org.

The word *Topic* in the notes indicates additional information online at saints.lds.org.

NOTES

1. Joseph Smith—History 1:14; Joseph Smith History, 1838–56, volume A-1, 3, in *JSP*, H1:212 (draft 2); Interview, Joseph Smith by David Nye White, Aug. 21, 1843, in [David Nye White], “The Prairies, Nauvoo, Joe Smith, the Temple, the Mormons, &c.,” *Pittsburgh Weekly Gazette*, Sept. 15, 1843, [3], available at josephsmithpapers.org.
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8. Interview, Joseph Smith by David Nye White, Aug. 21, 1843, in [David Nye White], “The Prairies, Nauvoo, Joe Smith, the Temple, the Mormons, &c.,” *Pittsburgh Weekly Gazette*, Sept. 15, 1843, [3], available at josephsmithpapers.org.
9. Joseph Smith—History 1:5–26; Joseph Smith History, circa Summer 1832, 3, in *JSP*, H1:13; Levi Richards, Journal, June 11, 1843; Joseph Smith, “Church History,” *Times and Seasons*, Mar. 1, 1842, 3:706, in *JSP*, H1:494.
10. Joseph Smith History, circa Summer 1832, 3, in *JSP*, H1:13.
11. Pratt, *Interesting Account*, 5, in *JSP*, H1:523.
12. Joseph Smith—History 1:20; Interview, Joseph Smith by David Nye White, Aug. 21, 1843, in [David Nye White], “The Prairies, Nauvoo, Joe Smith, the Temple, the Mormons, &c.,” *Pittsburgh Weekly Gazette*, Sept. 15, 1843, [3], available at josephsmithpapers.org; Joseph Smith History, 1838–56, volume A-1, 3, in *JSP*, H1:214 (draft 2); Joseph Smith History, circa Summer 1832, 3, in *JSP*, H1:13.
13. Joseph Smith—History 1:20; Joseph Smith History, 1838–56, volume A-1, 3, in *JSP*, H1:214 (draft 2).
14. See Bushman, “Visionary World of Joseph Smith,” 183–204.
15. Joseph Smith—History 1:21; Joseph Smith History, 1838–56, volume A-1, 3, in *JSP*, H1:216 (draft 2); Neibaur, Journal, May 24, 1844, available at josephsmithpapers.org. **Topic:** Christian Churches in Joseph Smith’s Day
16. Joseph Smith—History 1:22, 27; Joseph Smith History, 1838–56, volume A-1, 4, in *JSP*, H1:216–18 (draft 2); Interview, Joseph Smith by David Nye White, Aug. 21, 1843, in [David Nye White], “The Prairies, Nauvoo, Joe Smith, the Temple, the Mormons, &c.,” *Pittsburgh Weekly Gazette*, Sept. 15, 1843, [3], available at josephsmithpapers.org.
17. Joseph Smith—History 1:21–25; Joseph Smith History, 1838–56, volume A-1, 4, in *JSP*, H1:216–18 (draft 2).
18. Joseph Smith History, circa Summer 1832, 3, in *JSP*, H1:13; see also Historical Introduction to Joseph Smith History, circa Summer 1832, in *JSP*, H1:6.
19. Joseph wrote or supervised the writing of four accounts of this experience during his lifetime, the first being in Joseph Smith History, circa Summer 1832, 1–3, in *JSP*, H1:11–13. Five others who heard him speak of the experience wrote down their own accounts. The nine accounts can be found in “Primary Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision of Deity,” Joseph Smith Papers website, josephsmithpapers.org. For an analysis of the similarities and differences between the accounts, see “First Vision Accounts,” Gospel Topics, topics.lds.org. **Topic:** Joseph Smith’s First Vision Accounts
20. Joseph Smith—History 1:26; Joseph Smith History, 1838–56, volume A-1, 4, in *JSP*, H1:218 (draft 2).