

Joseph Smith—History 1:1-26

Lesson 3: Come, Follow Me, Doctrine and Covenants, 17 Jan 2025

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Introduction

In this lesson, we will discuss the early religious experiences of the Prophet Joseph Smith. Understanding the foundational events of the Restoration, such as the First Vision, is critical to comprehending the later history of the Church, the life of Joseph Smith, and the doctrines and practices that he instituted. We'll explore some concepts about Joseph Smith's family, his childhood, and his initial visionary encounter with God, as well as how that impacted him in 1820 and how he interpreted that experience later in life. We'll use the latest research from the Joseph Smith Papers and other original sources to look at this period of the Prophet's life.

Summary Chronology

- **Mon, 23 Dec 1805** (Sharon, VT) – Joseph Smith, Jr., born
- **1811** (Lebanon, NH) – Smith family moved to Lebanon
- **1813** (Lebanon, NH) – Joseph's leg operated on by Dr. Nathan Smith and others
- **Winter 1816-1817** (Palmyra, NY) – Smith family moved to Palmyra
- **Late 1819 or early 1820** (Manchester, NY) – Smith family moved into log home just north of their property (the home was just in Palmyra township)
- **Early spring 1820** (Manchester, NY) – Joseph experienced the First Vision in the Sacred Grove.

Joseph Smith—History 1:1-26

Introduction

Joseph Smith kept several histories in his life after being commanded to do so by the Lord (D&C 21:1). The one in this week's study, called *Joseph Smith—History in the Pearl of Great Price*, is an account taken from a history started in 1838 with Sidney Rigdon and George W. Robinson as scribe. On 27 April 1838, while in Far West, Missouri, Joseph Smith's journal records the beginning of this effort: "This day was chiefly spent in writing a history of this Church from the earliest period [period] of its existence up to this date, By Presidents, Joseph Smith Jr & Sidney Rigdon, myself [George W. Robinson, who was scribe] also was engaged in keeping this record."¹ They were compelled to start this new history because John Whitmer, the former Church historian who had been excommunicated that year, refused to surrender to Church leadership his history kept since 12 June 1831.² Joseph had arrived in Far West on 14 March 1838, fleeing persecution in Kirtland after the failure of the Kirtland Safety Society (bank) which caused many leaders and members to turn away from him. Many of his closest friends became enemies and either left or were excommunicated from the Church.

At the same time, the Church was being persecuted in Missouri. Having been driven from their homes in Independence, Church members had settled in other lands north of Jackson County. Shortly after this history is started, Joseph, Sidney, and others will be arrested and spend the winter in Liberty Jail. When they are finally released and arrive in Illinois, the work on the history will resume. All of these persecutions are in Joseph's mind as the history is recorded.

Joseph Smith and his clerks and scribes spent much time on this record for the rest of his life, and some of it was published in the *Times and Seasons*,³ *Deseret News*,⁴ and *Millennial Star* newspapers between 1842-1863. After Joseph's death, others continued to compile the record (known as the "Manuscript History of the Church") until it was finally published as *History of the Church* by B. H. Roberts in 1902-1912. Though the earliest part of the 1838 manuscript is now

¹ 27 April 1838 · Friday, in *JSP*, J1:260 ([Journal, March–September 1838, Page 34](#)).

² Whitmer called this "The Book of John Whitmer." See [John Whitmer, History, 1831–circa 1847, Page 0](#).

³ "[History of Joseph Smith](#)", [Page 726](#).

⁴ "[History of Joseph Smith](#)", [Page 1](#).

lost, two copies of it survive, one made starting in 1839 (“Draft 2”) and one from 1841 (“Draft 3”).⁵ It was Draft 2 that was used by the Prophet as the basis for the publications in Church periodicals during his lifetime.

In 1851, while in England, Franklin D. Richards used copies of the *Times and Seasons* publications (based on Draft 2) to produce a section of his booklet, *The Pearl of Great Price*, called “Extracts from the History of Joseph Smith.” As the Pearl of Great Price was published later in Utah and then canonized, the history was included in the section called “Writings of Joseph Smith,” entitled “II Extracts from the History of Joseph Smith,” then soon shortened to “Joseph Smith 2.” In 1978, it was renamed as *Joseph Smith—History*.⁶

Other histories and journal entries of Joseph Smith fill in the story of the First Vision and other early experiences of the young Prophet. Of the First Vision in particular, there are four accounts that Joseph Smith either wrote or dictated (and a fifth one that contains a passing reference to it) and several second-hand accounts written by people who heard it directly from Joseph Smith. These are well documented in Steven Harper’s book, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision* as well in in the *Joseph Smith Papers* volumes and website (see the footnotes below for references and the separate paper offering a parallel view of the four first-hand accounts).

Briefly, the 1832 account is written in Joseph Smith’s hand for a large part of it, especially the section covering the First Vision, rare among his documents. It was his first attempt at writing his own history, and is very rough. But it is also a beautiful and personal account, focusing on his own feelings and experiences during this time. Parts of it are quite poetic.⁷

The 1835 account is recorded by Joseph’s scribe, Warren Parrish, after the Prophet received a visitor going by the name of Joshua the Jewish minister or Matthias the Prophet, whose real name was Robert Matthews. Joseph told him the early history of the Church and Parrish recorded it in Joseph’s journal.⁸

The 1838 account is the one on which *Joseph Smith—History* is based, as explained in the Introduction above.

The final 1842 account is part of the well-known Wentworth letter, a document sent to John Wentworth, editor of the *Chicago Democrat*, for use by his friend George Barstow, who was writing a history of New Hampshire. Wentworth doesn’t appear to have ever published the history (though the same material was used the next year in a book by Israel Daniel Rupp), but it was published in the *Times and Seasons* in March 1842.⁹

These first-hand accounts and five other secondary accounts of the First Vision are all available on the Joseph Smith Papers website. The secondary accounts are from Orson Pratt (1840), Orson Hyde (1842), Levi Richards (11 June 1843), David Dye White, a Pittsburg newspaper editor (29 August 1843, published 15 September 1843), and Alexander Neibaur, a German convert (24 May 1844).¹⁰

Memory

Before we get into the details of these accounts, a word about memory. Several years ago, I made the decision to donate a kidney to a friend of mine in need. At first, I didn’t talk about the experience, not wanting to make a big deal about it. But my bishop convinced me that discussing it might help others decide to do the same thing, so I began to speak out. Soon I joined two non-profits promoting kidney donations and got on a speaking ‘circuit’ where I was talking regularly about my experience at schools, businesses, and clubs, often several times each month. Over the course of a few years, I must have told the story of me donating a kidney to my friend, Bill, a couple hundred times.

One day Bill joined me at a school and we decided to tell the story together. Our plan was that I would tell the story as always, and he would jump in and add color when he wanted to. What happened instead was fascinating. He did add color but he also corrected me several times—his memory of the event was quite different from my own. Though we experienced it together, and it was a pretty impactful event, we did not remember many of the details the same. Over time, we had both interpreted the experience differently, and now our memories were different, including conversations we had and things we had done together.

⁵ See Source Notes and Historical Introduction, *JSP*, H1:187-203 ([History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 \[Draft 2\]](#), [Source Note](#) and [History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 \[Draft 2\]](#), [Historical Introduction](#)).

⁶ Draper, Brown, and Rhodes, *The Pearl of Great Price*, 327-328.

⁷ Harper, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision*, 33-38; *JSP*, H1:2-23; [History, circa Summer 1832, Page 1](#).

⁸ Harper, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision*, 41-42; *JSP*, J1:53-54; [Journal, 1835–1836, Page 23](#).

⁹ Harper, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision*, 52-53; *JSP*, H1:489-501; [“Church History,” 1 March 1842, Page 706](#).

¹⁰ See [Accounts of the First Vision](#). Other publications also offer transcripts of them, including Harper, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision*. Note that quotes pulled from the various accounts will not all be individually footnoted; see the links above to find the quotes.

Steven Harper has written about this extensively in his book on the First Vision, which I highly recommend. Memories are interpretive, not recordings like something we did with a video camera, forever preserved just the way it happened. As we move through life and do other things, our memories of past events change, being impacted by our additional experiences and outlooks. For example, it's clear from Joseph Smith's accounts that in his 1838 account (in the Pearl of Great Price), his interpretation of the memory of the First Vision was impacted by the persecutions in Missouri, especially his time in the Richmond and Liberty Jails. His language is harsher and more condemnatory, even when it comes from the mouth of the Lord. In 1842, when life is peaceful in Nauvoo, that language softens. In 1832, in his first written account, it's almost not there, because he has not yet experienced Missouri.

Still, what's significant about Joseph Smith's First Vision accounts is their remarkable similarities, in spite of being told at different times and places and to different audiences and with different purposes. Each time he tells it, the fundamental points are consistent. Some of the less important details might differ, but he is telling the same story each time, unlike my kidney donation story which morphed over time to be different enough from Bill's memories that he wondered if I was thinking of someone else's kidney donation story!

The blessing of having multiple accounts becomes clear when we put them all together, including Joseph Smith's primary accounts and those recorded second-hand by those who heard him tell the story. The combination gives us a richer and fuller message than what we get from any one of them. We get a taste of this in a recent First Vision video the Church released a few years ago, which marvelously blends them all together.¹¹

Documents and Publication

The original manuscript behind Joseph Smith—History, started in 1838, is not extant, but it was copied into the manuscripts that formed the “Manuscript History of the Church” known as “History, circa June 1839—circa 1841 [Draft 2],” which is the oldest copy¹²

The history was first published in the *Times and Seasons* on 15 March 1842¹³ and in the *Deseret News* on 15 November 1851.¹⁴ It was published in the booklet *The Pearl of Great Price* in 1851 by Franklin D. Richards. On 10 October 1880, the Pearl of Great Price, including this history, was canonized by the general membership of the Church.

Outline

1. Background and early family history (1-4)
2. Search for the true church (5-13)
3. The First Vision (14-20)
4. Reactions (21-26)

Background and early family history (1-4)

1 Owing to the many reports which have been put in circulation by evil-disposed and designing persons, in relation to the rise and progress of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, all of which have been designed by the authors thereof to militate against its character as a Church and its progress in the world—I have been induced to write this history, to disabuse the public mind, and put all inquirers after truth in possession of the facts, as they have transpired, in relation both to myself and the Church, so far as I have such facts in my possession.

2 In this history I shall present the various events in relation to this Church, in truth and righteousness, as they have transpired, or as they at present exist, being now [1838] the eighth year since the organization of the said Church.

3 I was born in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and five, on the twenty-third day of December, in the town of Sharon, Windsor county, State of Vermont. ... My father, Joseph Smith, Sen., left the State of Vermont, and moved to Palmyra, Ontario (now Wayne) county, in the State of New York, when I was in my tenth year, or thereabouts. In about four years after my father's arrival in Palmyra, he moved with his family into Manchester in the same county of Ontario—

4 His family consisting of eleven souls, namely, my father, Joseph Smith; my mother, Lucy Smith (whose name, previous to her marriage, was Mack, daughter of Solomon Mack); my brothers, Alvin (who died November 19th, 1823, in the 26th year of his

¹¹ See [Ask of God: Joseph Smith's First Vision](#).

¹² See [History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 \[Draft 2\], Page 1](#).

¹³ See [“History of Joseph Smith”, Page 726](#).

¹⁴ See [“History of Joseph Smith”, Page 1](#).

age), Hyrum, myself, Samuel Harrison, William, Don Carlos; and my sisters, Sophronia, Catherine, and Lucy.

Commentary

1 owing to the many reports . . . by evil-disposed and designing persons. Over the years, many had published works that attacked the Church. In 1834, E. D. Howe worked to debunk Joseph Smith's claims in his book *Mormonism Unveiled*. Others had taken similar stances in various newspaper articles as early as 1831. In 1838, a particularly malicious book called *Brief History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Commonly Called Mormons)* was published by John Corril.¹⁵ This is perhaps the most recent publication to which Joseph was reacting, but other "reports" by former members turned against Joseph in 1837 and 1838 were especially painful to him.

1 to militate against its character as a Church. "Militate" means to have an influence or impact on something, especially a negative one.

1 I have been induced to write this history. "Induced" means moved, influenced, or compelled; while the Prophet has written his own history before, this version is designed specifically to address attacks he and the Church were experiencing.

1 to disabuse the public mind, and put all inquirers after truth in possession of the facts. The two purposes of JS-H were to correct errors and provide true facts. "Disabuse" means to help someone realize that an idea is not true.

2 being now [1838] the eighth year since the organization of the said Church. As his journal entry notes (above), this history was started in April 1838. It did not progress far that year, owing to the persecutions and threats against the Saints in Missouri that year. Later in 1838, Joseph Smith and others were jailed in the Richmond and Liberty jails, finally escaping in April 1839 for Illinois. Joseph Smith and his scribes soon resumed the work on the history, first adding to Draft 1, then making the two other copies with edits and revisions (Drafts 2 and 3). Draft 2 is demonstrated to be a copy of the early work in Draft 1 because it retains the reference to 1838, even though it was being written in 1839.¹⁶

3 I was born . . . in the town of Sharon, Windsor country, State of Vermont. See Church History Maps, 1 in the LDS scriptures. Joseph's parents, Joseph Smith, Sr., and Lucy Mack Smith, were from Topsfield, Massachusetts and Gilsun, New Hampshire, respectively, but met and married in Tunbridge, Vermont, on 24 January 1796, where she was visiting her brother and he had just moved with his father's family five years previous.¹⁷ They stayed in Tunbridge until 1802, then briefly ran a store in nearby Randolph, Vermont. When the business failed the next year, they moved to and tenant farmed in Sharon, Vermont, where Joseph Smith was born in 1805. Other moves followed, and in 1811, they moved for two years to Lebanon, New Hampshire, which is where the young Joseph had his leg operations.¹⁸ In 1814, the family then returned to Vermont, just across the Connecticut River, in Norwich, where they stayed until 1816.¹⁹

3 left the State of Vermont, and moved to Palmyra. In 1816, after three crop failures in Vermont, Joseph Smith, Sr. preceded the family to Palmyra, New York, and they joined him later that year or early 1817, after a challenging ride in the winter to Palmyra.²⁰ They likely settled in a rented place on the eastern edge of town, on the corner of Johnson and Vienna Streets (where the road comes south out of the small circle south of east Main, on Church History Map 2), but they soon moved to a house on west Main Street.²¹ In about 1819 or early 1820, they saved enough to start the purchase of 100 acres of land at the south end of town on Stafford Road, and soon built a small, four-room log cabin there, to which they later added a fifth room on the back (see Church History Photographs, 3).²²

3 he moved with his family into Manchester. It so happened that the log home they built was just off the northern edge of their property, which also happened to be the county and township line. So technically the house was in Palmyra but the

¹⁵ Draper, Brown, and Rhodes, *The Peart of Great Price*, 329.

¹⁶ *JSP*, H1:195.

¹⁷ Bushman, *Beginnings*, 19.

¹⁸ Proctor and Proctor, *History of Joseph Smith by His Mother*, 72-77.

¹⁹ Bushman, *Beginnings*, 19-40.

²⁰ Bushman, *Beginnings*, 41-42; Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 28-29; Draper, Brown, and Rhodes, *Pearl of Great Price*, 330.

²¹ Garr, Cannon, and Cowan, *Encyclopedia*, 889.

²² Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 32.

property in Manchester. Later, when the oldest son, Alvin, led the building of a frame home on the center of the property—about 200 yards south from the log house—it was in Ontario county, Manchester township (Church History Map 2). Alvin died in 1823 before the home was finished.

Though their property was in Manchester township, Palmyra was half as close and so the family did most of their business in Palmyra.²³ It was a time of major growth in Palmyra. In 1820, Palmyra consisted of about 100 families and about 700 inhabitants. By 1830 there were nearly 2,000 residents in the village, and nearly 5,500 in the township. Much of this growth was driven by the completion of the Erie Canal near the city in 1822 (Maps 2 and 3), which opened up commerce and travel to the otherwise isolated region. The entire canal was completed three years later in 1825, linking Lake Erie to the Atlantic Ocean.

4 *His family consisting of eleven souls.* The family consisted of ten people in 1820 (the parents, six boys, and two girls), dropped to nine with Alvin's death in 1823, then back up to ten in 1824 when Lucy was born (see v. 4). In other words, there were never more than eight children living. In Joseph's list, he counts Alvin among the total, bringing it to eleven, though Alvin had long since passed when this history was written, and Lucy, though she was not yet born in 1820. Joseph always considered Alvin part of the family. Joseph Sr. and Lucy had two other sons who both died shortly after birth, which are not counted here.²⁴

Joseph's family was immensely supportive of his work and calling. Both of his parents were baptized the day the Church was organized (6 April 1830) and never wavered in their support of Joseph. His other family members were likewise strong supporters, especially Hyrum, who was just older than Joseph in the family.²⁵

Search for the true church (5-13)

5 Some time in the second year after our removal to Manchester, there was in the place where we lived an unusual excitement on the subject of religion. It commenced with the Methodists, but soon became general among all the sects in that region of country. Indeed, the whole district of country seemed affected by it, and great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties, which created no small stir and division amongst the people, some crying, "Lo, here!" and others, "Lo, there!" Some were contending for the Methodist faith, some for the Presbyterian, and some for the Baptist.

6 For, notwithstanding the great love which the converts to these different faiths expressed at the time of their conversion, and the great zeal manifested by the respective clergy, who were active in getting up and promoting this extraordinary scene of religious feeling, in order to have everybody converted, as they were pleased to call it, let them join what sect they pleased; yet when the converts began to file off, some to one party and some to another, it was seen that the seemingly good feelings of both the priests and the converts were more pretended than real; for a scene of great confusion and bad feeling ensued—priest contending against priest, and convert against convert; so that all their good feelings one for another, if they ever had any, were entirely lost in a strife of words and a contest about opinions.

7 I was at this time in my fifteenth year. My father's family was proselyted to the Presbyterian faith, and four of them joined that church, namely, my mother, Lucy; my brothers Hyrum and Samuel Harrison; and my sister Sophronia.

8 During this time of great excitement my mind was called up to serious reflection and great uneasiness; but though my feelings were deep and often poignant, still I kept myself aloof from all these parties, though I attended their several meetings as often as occasion would permit. In process of time my mind became somewhat partial to the Methodist sect, and I felt some desire to be united with them; but so great were the confusion and strife among the different denominations, that it was impossible for a person young as I was, and so unacquainted with men and things, to come to any certain conclusion who was right and who was wrong.

9 My mind at times was greatly excited, the cry and tumult were so great and incessant. The Presbyterians were most decided against the Baptists and Methodists, and used all the powers of both reason and sophistry to prove their errors, or, at least, to make the people think they were in error. On the other hand, the Baptists and Methodists in their turn were equally zealous in endeavoring to establish their own tenets and disprove all others.

10 In the midst of this war of words and tumult of opinions, I often said to myself: What is to be done? Who of all these parties are right; or, are they all wrong together? If any one of them be right, which is it, and how shall I know it?

11 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.*

²³ See [Life on the Smith Farm](#) for more details. See also [The Sacred Grove](#) for more pictures and a detailed story.

²⁴ Garr, Cannon, and Cowan, *Encyclopedia*, 1141-1142.

²⁵ See Griffiths, *Scripture Central Commentary*, 1:18-20 where he gives good biographies of each family member. See also their individual biographies on the [JSP website](#).

12 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.

13 At length I came to the conclusion that I must either remain in darkness and confusion, or else I must do as James directs, that is, ask of God. I at length came to the determination to “ask of God,” concluding that if he gave wisdom to them that lacked wisdom, and would give liberally, and not upbraid, I might venture.

Commentary

5 in the second year after our removal to Manchester. This is 1818, but other First Vision accounts show that Joseph was concerned about religion as early as 1817.²⁶ It is interesting to note how personal this concern was—neither his family nor friends and neighbors later realized that he was going through anything like this.²⁷

5 an unusual excitement on the subject of religion. Historical records show that the increase in religious fervor began as early as 1799. Open-air preaching, revivals, and large groups of conversions led to great church growth and hotly contested competition for the souls of men and women of the day. This was especially predominant in western New York, causing historians to call it the “burned over district.”²⁸ Though the various faiths differed on many points of doctrine (see v. 6 below), the major one was the nature of salvation, or more specifically, the role of the individual in their own salvation. Presbyterians, who were Calvinists, believed that God elected certain people to salvation or to damnation, and the person had no influence on that outcome. But John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, rejected this notion and taught that people could choose to follow Christ and be saved by his grace. This marked controversy over the nature of salvation is what troubled Joseph Smith the most in 1832, being concerned for “the welfare of my immortal soul.” The 1835 account provides additional detail of his concern:

...respecting the subject of religion and looking ~~upon~~ <at> the different systems taught the children of men, I knew not who was right or who was wrong and I considered it of the first importance that I should be right, in matters that involve eternal consequ[en]ces.

5 It commenced with the Methodists. A huge conference of Methodist ministers in 1819 resulted in many itinerant preachers passing through the Palmyra area, generating many converts. This in turn stimulated more preaching from other groups, including Presbyterians, Baptists, Quakers, and more, who all record substantial increases in congregation sizes during this time.²⁹ Because of this religious fervor, this period is called “the Second Great Awakening”³⁰ and the area of western New York the “Burned-Over District.”³¹

6 a strife of words and a contest about opinions. We see some of this today, but in Joseph Smith’s day, antagonism between churches was very strong. Christians argued over issues that today are seldom discussed. In Palmyra, there were congregations of Presbyterians (the largest group in the area), Methodists (the fastest growing), Baptists, and Quakers.³² However, going further out in the area would add Episcopalians, Eastern Christians, and Universalists. They disputed about doctrines such as baptism; the depravity of man; pre-destination and agency; the role of the Bible; revelation and inspiration; trinitarianism (the Nicene Creed) and the nature of God; the authority to act for God; the nature of the Lord’s Supper; and Sabbath-breaking. This thought is continued in v. 9.

In other words, we see from Joseph’s accounts that he was “convicted of [his] sins” (1832) and wanted to make sure he knew the path to forgiveness and salvation. Was it just that God alone picked people to save, as the Presbyterians taught, or that you had to follow Christ’s teachings, as the Methodists taught, or did God just save everyone, as the Universalists believed? And if you had to follow Christ, as Joseph was inclined to believe (v. 8), what did you have to do?

7 in my fifteenth year. In other words, he was 14 years old, making it 1820, as he turned 15 that December.

²⁶ He notes in his [1832 account](#) that “about the age of twelve” he began to think about these things.

²⁷ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 35-36.

²⁸ Griffiths, *Scripture Central Commentary*, 1:20-21.

²⁹ Bushman, *Beginnings*, 53; Steven C. Harper, “On the Eve of the First Vision,” in Black and Skinner, *Joseph*, 33.

³⁰ Backman, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision*, 76-79.

³¹ Draper, Brown, and Rhodes, *Pearl of Great Price*, 333.

³² Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 36-37.

7 proselyted to the Presbyterian faith. As the oldest church with a building in Palmyra (just north of ‘four corners’ on Church street, across from the cemetery where Alvin will later be buried),³³ it’s no wonder they attracted the attention of several of the Smith family, including Lucy, the mother, Hyrum, Samuel, and Sophronia.³⁴ It’s significant to note that the Methodists were being more successful, in terms of growth, in that area at that time, which is reflected in Joseph’s comments in v. 8.

8 serious reflection and great uneasiness. The 1832 account gives more details about these feelings, showing how Joseph was concerned for his own salvation as well as that of his fellow humans, that he detected an apostasy and a deviation from the church of the New Testament:

At about the age of twelve years, my mind became seriously imprest with regard to the all important concerns for the welfare of my immortal Soul which led me to searching the scriptures believing as I was taught, that they contained the word of God...I pondered many things in my heart concerning the situation of the world of mankind the contentions and divi[sions] the wicke[d]ness and abominations and the darkness which pervaded the ~~of the~~ minds of mankind my mind become exceedingly distressed for I become convicted of my sins and by searching the scriptures I found that ~~man~~ <mankind> did not come unto the Lord but that they had apostatised from the true and liveing faith and there was no society or denomination that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament and I felt to mourn for my own sins and for the sins of the world.

8 my mind became somewhat partial to the Methodist sect. While Presbyterianism was the dominant religion in the early 1800s in New York, mostly because the early settlers came from areas where that religion was the prevailing one, Methodism was the most rapidly growing group in this western frontier. In 1820, the Methodists had no church building in Palmyra (the first was built in 1822) but they had many meetings in homes and camp meetings out in the woods.³⁵ Joseph related to Alexander Neibaur in 1844 that his family members “got Religion” at such revival meetings and that “he wanted to get Religion too wanted to feel & ~~sho~~ shout like the Rest but could feel nothing.”

10 Who of all these parties are right. The 1842 account says that he determined “that God could not be the author of so much confusion.” Joseph’s own family was divided on this question, with several members in the Presbyterian faith (v. 7), and his father being attached to no church, taking after his own father, Asael, who believed the Universalist notions of salvation for all.³⁶ With Joseph leaning toward Methodism but unable to commit, their dinner conversations could have been lively reflections of the same strife happening all around them.

Orson Pratt’s account gives more details into Joseph’s thinking:

If he went to the religious denominations to seek information, each one pointed to its particular tenets, saying—“This is the way, walk ye in it;”³⁷ while, at the same time, the doctrines of each were, in many respects, in direct opposition to one another. It, also, occurred to his mind, that God was not the author of but one doctrine, and therefore could not acknowledge but one denomination as his church; and that such denomination must be a people, who believe, and teach, that one doctrine, (whatever it may be,) and build upon the same. He then reflected upon the immense number of doctrines, now, in the world, which had given rise to many hundreds of different denominations. The great question to be decided in his mind, was—if any one of these denominations be the Church of Christ, which one is it? Until he could become satisfied, in relation to this question, he could not rest contented.

The 1832 account inserts here a wonderful example of farmer’s poetry, with Joseph contemplating the world around him. From other examples of Joseph’s writing at this time, we see limited abilities. But this section shows deep reflection and an unusual talent for expressing deep thoughts:

for I looked upon the sun the glorious luminary of the earth and also the moon rolling in their magesty through the heavens and also the stars shining in their courses and the earth also upon which I stood and the beast of the field and the fowls of heaven and the fish of the waters and also man walking forth upon the face of the earth in magesty and in the strength of beauty whose power and intilgence in governing the things which are so exceding

³³ Backman, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision*, 67.

³⁴ Joseph’s recollection of these four attending the Presbyterian church is backed by local records which show them attending regularly; see Backman, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision*, 67-69.

³⁵ Backman, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision*, 70-72.

³⁶ Bushman, *Beginnings*, 26-28.

³⁷ Compare Isaiah 30:21.

great and marvilous even in the likenys of him who created ~~him~~ <them> and when I considered upon these things my heart exclaimed well hath the wise man said the <it is a> fool <that> saith in his heart there is no God.³⁸

11 ***I was one day reading the epistle of James.*** Joseph’s brother, William, recounted that in 1819 Joseph heard a Methodist preacher, Rev. George Lane, use James 1:5 to answer the question, “What church should I join?” Oliver Cowdery also thought Lane had been an influence on the young man.³⁹ Going home and reading it for himself, he pondered on its meaning and eventually determined that he would do just that—ask God. Some think this could possibly be the same minister with whom Joseph shared his vision later,⁴⁰ but careful study of Lane’s itinerary shows he was not in the area long after the 1819 conference and was in many cases quite far away, so while possible, it was probably not him.⁴¹

12 ***Never did any passage of scripture come with more power.*** The 1835 account also refers to the scripture, “ask and you shall receive knock and it shall be opened seek and you shall find” (Matthew 7:7 and Luke 11:9). The 1832 account shows that he spent many hours searching the Bible, which had a great impact on him:

my mind become exceedingly distressed for I become convicted of my sins and by searching the scriptures I found that mand <mankind> did not come unto the Lord but that they had apostatised from the true and liveing faith and there was no society or denomination that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament and I felt to mourn for my own sins and for the sins of the world for I learned in the scriptures that God was the same yesterday to day and forever⁴² that he was no respecter to persons⁴³ for he was God

12 ***I reflected on it again and again.*** If William Smith is correct and Joseph heard the sermon about James 1:5 in 1819, it was nearly a year before Joseph acted on his feelings. This was a subject that weighed on him heavily for an extended time, which is reflected in the language of v. 13 where “at length” is used twice to describe this time before going into the woods.

12 ***destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible.*** The Bible was the ultimate authority for Protestants, but they offered multiple interpretations of its doctrines and teachings, thus making it impossible to determine truth by using the Bible alone.

13 ***At length I came to the conclusion.*** Only after trying everything in his power to learn the truth and spending much time talking to others who he hoped would help him, did Joseph determine that no one but God himself could actually answer his fervent question about the nature of salvation.⁴⁴

The First Vision (14-20)

14 So, in accordance with this, my determination to ask of God, I retired to the woods to make the attempt. It was on the morning of a beautiful, clear day, early in the spring of eighteen hundred and twenty. It was the first time in my life that I had made such an attempt, for amidst all my anxieties I had never as yet made the attempt to pray vocally.

15 After I had retired to the place where I had previously designed to go, having looked around me, and finding myself alone, I kneeled 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.

16 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.

17 It no sooner appeared than I found myself delivered from the enemy which held me bound. When the light rested upon me

³⁸ Compare Psalm 14:1; 53:1.

³⁹ Harper, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision*, 25; Draper, Brown, and Rhodes, *Pearl of Great Price*, 333-334.

⁴⁰ For example, Draper, Brown, and Rhodes, *The Pearl of Great Price*, 345.

⁴¹ See [Reverend George Lane—Good “Gifts,” Much “Grace,” and Marked “Usefulness” | Religious Studies Center](#) for an account of Lane’s travels during this time.

⁴² See Hebrews 13:8.

⁴³ See Acts 10:34-35.

⁴⁴ Draper, Brown, and Rhodes, *Pearl of Great Price*, 335-336.

I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other—*This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!*

18 My object in going to inquire of the Lord was to know which of all the sects was right, that I might know which to join. No sooner, therefore, did I get possession of myself, so as to be able to speak, than I asked the Personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right (for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong)—and which I should join.

19 I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong; and the Personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt; that: “they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof.”

Commentary

14 *I retired to the wood to make the attempt.* In one account recorded by David Nye White in 1843, Joseph related that the location he went to in the wood was “where my father had a clearing, and [I] went to the stump where I had stuck my axe when I had quit work.”

14 *the morning of a beautiful, clear day, early in the spring of eighteen hundred and twenty.* This account (PoGP) is the only one where the year is given. Some have made a point about a supposed contradiction with an insertion in the 1832 account where it says, “in the 16th year of my age.” But the insertion was added at a later, unknown date by Frederick G. Williams, and was not part of the original text that Joseph Smith himself wrote.⁴⁵ From all other accounts, it seems clear that 1820 is the correct year, and he was in his 15th year.

14 *I had never as yet made the attempt to pray vocally.* Not only was this his first vocal personal prayer, but it was one he deeply cared about. The 1832 account reports, “I cried unto the Lord for mercy for there was none else to whom I could go and to obtain mercy and the Lord heard my cry in the wilderness.” Joseph’s personal motivation was to obtain forgiveness of his sins, because his own salvation was at stake. He sought God’s mercy and was willing to pray out loud for the first time to obtain it.

15 *I was seized upon by some power.* In the 1835 account, Joseph adds additional details about this encounter with Satan:

I made a fruitless attempt to pray, my tongue seemed to be swollen in my mouth, so that I could not utter, I heard a noise behind me like some person walking towards me, <I> strove again to pray, but could not, the noise of walking seemed to draw nearer, I sprung up on my feet, and and looked around, but saw no person or thing that was calculated to produce the noise of walking.

Interestingly, the Church movie from the 1970s, “The First Vision,” combines these 1835 account elements in its presentation, which were known by historians at the time but not broadly by Church members. The same details are in the recent movie.

Other accounts provide additional details. Orson Pratt wrote that while praying, “At first, he was severely tempted by the powers of darkness, which endeavoured to overcome him.” The nature of the temptation was not explained, but . . .

Orson Hyde wrote that “the adversary then made several strenuous efforts to cool his ardent soul. He filled his mind with doubts and brought to mind all manner of inappropriate images” to keep him from faithful prayer. Again, the nature of these images is not explained, but they were likely images of failure or darkness or despair, more than the kinds of things we might label “inappropriate” today.

⁴⁵ JSP, H1:12n44.

16 *exerting all my powers to call upon God*. The 1835, Pratt, Hyde, and Neibaur accounts all mention the battle with darkness as then giving way and leading to another or additional prayer. The emphasis is that it was not a short prayer, but something that required effort, patience, and some amount of time. 1835: “I kneeled again my mouth was opened and my tongue liberated, and I called on the Lord in mighty prayer.” Hyde: “the overflowing mercy of God came to buoy him up and gave new impetus to his failing strength. However, the dark cloud soon parted and light and peace filled his frightened heart. Once again he called upon the Lord with faith and fervency of spirit.”

16 *I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me*. In the 1832 version, Joseph first called it “a pillar of fire” but then crossed out “fire” and changed it to “light.” The 1835 account also reads “A pillar of fire” and “a pillar of flame.” In 1842, he recounted that he was “surrounded with a brilliant light.”

Interestingly, Orson Pratt’s 1840 recording of the story adds some fascinating details about the way the flame/light descended and how Joseph perceived it:

A very bright and glorious light . . . which, at first, seemed to be at a considerable distance. He [Joseph] continued praying, while the light appeared to be gradually descending towards him; and, as it drew nearer, it increased in brightness, and magnitude, so that, by the time that it reached the tops of the trees, the whole wilderness, for some distance around, was illuminated in a most glorious and brilliant manner. He expected to have seen the leaves and boughs of the trees consumed, as soon as the light came in contact with them; but, perceiving that it did not produce that effect, he was encouraged with the hopes of being able to endure its presence. It continued descending, slowly, until it rested upon the earth, and he was enveloped in the midst of it. When it first came upon him, it produced a peculiar sensation throughout his whole system; and, immediately, his mind was caught away, from the natural objects with which he was surrounded; and he was enwrapped in a heavenly vision.

17 *I saw two personages*. The 1832 account doesn’t specifically mention two people, and some have used that to claim that Joseph Smith expanded the account over time and changed it to make it more glorious.⁴⁶ But it’s clear from all accounts that the Son did all the talking except for the Father’s introduction, a pattern followed in other scriptures (e.g., Matthew 3:17; 17:5; 3 Nephi 11:7). It’s also possible to read the 1832 account as being two people, both with the title “Lord,” an entirely appropriate way to refer to both the Father and the Son: “I was filled with the spirit of god and the <Lord> opened the heavens upon me and I saw the Lord and he spake unto me.”

In the 1835 account, the Father appears first, followed shortly by the Son (perhaps as the Father was introducing him?): “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.”

This is also how the White account records it: “I saw a light, then a glorious personage, and then another personage,” while Neibaur recorded that Joseph said he “saw a personage” and then “after a w[h]ile a[n] other person came to the side of the first.”

In the 1842 account, Joseph mentions something unique about their appearance: “I was enwrapped in a heavenly vision and saw two glorious personages who exactly resembled each other in features, and likeness.” Similar language is repeated in both the Pratt and Hyde accounts, describing the two beings as “resembling each other exactly.”

Fascinatingly, Neibaur noted that the first personage—the Father—had a “light complexion blue eyes a piece of white cloth drawn over his shoulders, his right arm bare [bare].”

Finally, the 1835 account adds that Joseph also “saw many angels in this vision.” No other account mentions that detail but other visions of God in the scriptures often include angels (e.g., Jacob’s ladder vision, Lehi’s calling vision).

18 *which I should join*. You can almost hear Joseph humbly saying, ‘I wasn’t expecting anything like this. I just wanted to know which church was right about repentance.’

The 1832 account emphasizes that he was first seeking personal forgiveness for his sins and was given that by the Lord up front: his first words were, “Joseph <my son> thy sins are forgiven thee. go thy <way> walk in my statutes and keep my commandments. behold I am the Lord of glory I was crucified for the world that all those who believe on my name may have Eternal life.”

⁴⁶ Fawn Brodie first developed this notion in her history of Joseph Smith, *No Man Knows My History*.

19 ***I must join none of them.*** The 1832 account says that right after being forgiven of his sins, Joseph was taught that “the world lieth in sin ~~and~~ at this time and none doeth good no not one they have turned asside from the gospel and keep not <my> commandments they draw near to me with their lips while their hearts are far from me.” Though he used different words in other accounts, the concept is the same.

19 ***their creeds were an abomination in his sight.*** “Creeds” refers to formal beliefs professed by various church leaders from the fourth century onward, including the Apostles’ Creed, Creed of Nicaea, Nicene Creed, Chalcedonian Creed, Athanasian Creed, and many more.⁴⁷ They were an abomination (strong language) because they incorrectly defined the very nature of God and his relationship to mankind, making it impossible for the truth about God to be known without new revelation—like the First Vision.

The harshness of the language is also best understood in the context of Joseph’s recent experiences: when he dictated this account in 1838, he and the Church had experienced great persecution by at least some people who professed (the “professors”) to belong to other Christian faiths. The earlier and later accounts use somewhat different and softer words, as mentioned above. For example, in 1842, he wrote, “all religious denominations were believing in incorrect doctrines, and that none of them was acknowledged of god as his church and kingdom.” Levi Richard’s brief account summarizes the message nicely: “re[he] received for answer that none of them were right, that they were all wrong, & that the Everlasting covenan[t] was broken.”

President Gordon B. Hinckley taught: “We do not accept the Athanasian Creed. We do not accept the Nicene Creed, nor any other creed based on tradition and the conclusions of men. . . . Two beings of substance were before him. He saw them. They were in form like men, only much more glorious in their appearance. He spoke to them. They spoke to him. They were not amorphous spirits. Each was a distinct personality. They were beings of flesh and bone whose nature was reaffirmed in later revelations which came to the Prophet.”⁴⁸

19 ***those professors were all corrupt.*** We think of “professors” as teachers at universities, but as Joseph Smith is using the term here, it simply means someone who ‘professes’ a certain belief, thus any committed member of any church.

19 ***draw near to me.*** The Lord is paraphrasing Isaiah 29:13. Though not mentioned, the next verse in Isaiah is about a “marvelous work and a wonder” coming forth, a phrase closely associated with the Restoration from the Book of Mormon and other references.

19 ***a form of godliness.*** A reference to 2 Timothy 3:5.

20 ***many other things did he say unto me.*** Joseph never recorded the entire conversation he had with the Lord in the grove. But other accounts do provide some details not in the PoGP. For example, the 1832 account has a direct reference to the Second Coming: “mine anger is kindling against the inhabitants of the earth to visit them according to their ungodliness and to bring to pass that which <hath> been spoken by the mouth of the prophets and Ap[o]stles behold and lo I come quickly as it [is] written of me in the cloud <clothed> in the glory of my Father.” The 1842 account is the only original account that mentions receiving a promise from the Lord, “that the fulness of the gospel should at some future time be made known unto me.” Hyde’s secondary account also records he was “to wait patiently until some future time, when the true doctrine and Christ and the complete truth of the gospel would be revealed to him.”

20 ***I found myself lying on my back.*** The PoGP account says he found himself on his back, “looking up into heaven.” It also says he “had no strength.” White captures this detail as well, along with a great feeling of fatigue: “The vision then vanished, and when I come to myself, I was sprawling on my back; and it was sometime before my strength returned.” Neibaur has unique language, perhaps because English was not his native tongue: He “Indeavoured to arise but felt uncomen feeble.”

20 ***I am well enough off.*** Joseph mother, Lucy, noticed his fatigue, and this was his reply. The 1832 version is the only primary account to record Joseph Smith’s emotional reaction, saying, “my soul was filled with love and for many days I could rejoice with great Joy and the Lord was with me.” Pratt also mentions this: “the vision withdrew, leaving his mind in a state of calmness and peace, indescribable,” and Hyde says, “The vision closed and peace and calm filled his mind.”

20 ***I have learned for myself that Presbyterianism is not true.*** Lucy was a member of the Presbyterian church in Palmyra, so this comment may have had an impact on her, as he told the full story. What he likely means is that he has learned that

⁴⁷ See a good listing of them at [List of Christian creeds - Wikipedia](#).

⁴⁸ Gordon B. Hinckley, “What Are People Asking About Us?” quoted in Griffiths, *Scripture Central Commentary*, 32.

God does forgive sins and expects us to repent and improve ourselves over time and that we are not pre-selected for salvation or hell.

Reactions (21-26)

21 Some few days after I had this vision, I happened to be in company with one of the Methodist preachers, who was very active in the before mentioned religious excitement; and, conversing with him on the subject of religion, I took occasion to give him an account of the vision which I had had. I was greatly surprised at his behavior; he treated my communication not only lightly, but with great contempt, saying it was all of the devil, that there were no such things as visions or revelations in these days; that all such things had ceased with the apostles, and that there would never be any more of them.

22 I soon found, however, that my telling the story had excited a great deal of prejudice against me among professors of religion, and was the cause of great persecution, which continued to increase; and though I was an obscure boy, only between fourteen and fifteen years of age, and my circumstances in life such as to make a boy of no consequence in the world, yet men of high standing would take notice sufficient to excite the public mind against me, and create a bitter persecution; and this was common among all the sects—all united to persecute me.

23 It caused me serious reflection then, and often has since, how very strange it was that an obscure boy, of a little over fourteen years of age, and one, too, who was doomed to the necessity of obtaining a scanty maintenance by his daily labor, should be thought a character of sufficient importance to attract the attention of the great ones of the most popular sects of the day, and in a manner to create in them a spirit of the most bitter persecution and reviling. But strange or not, so it was, and it was often the cause of great sorrow to myself.

Commentary

21 *one of the Methodist preachers*. Some think this was perhaps George Lane, as mentioned above, but it was more likely a local minister who was more permanent to the area. Joseph never gave any details about the identity of this person.

21 *he treated my communication not only lightly, but with great contempt*. Methodism in that day was moving away from spiritual manifestations that people then commonly expressed and which had been encouraged just a few years before, “toward a more respectable, reasonable religion.”⁴⁹ The leaders worried about excesses and wild visions and manifestations that appeared to be more “fringe” than mainstream, and such revelations made the person suspect rather than saintly. There are many reports from this time of similar revelatory experiences, and church leaders determined to stand against them to maintain respectability. “The preacher reacted quickly and negatively, not because of the strangeness of Joseph’s story but because of its familiarity.”⁵⁰ Joseph was surely unaware of this shift in position—he had seen others experience spiritual manifestations, and surely expected the minister to welcome his own experience with God. The surprise at the minister’s reaction is evident even 18 years later in this writing.⁵¹

For his part, the minister surely reacted as poorly to the message as to the experience; Joseph was telling him that God was condemning the very church the minister supported and which supplied his income. The minister’s answer that: 1) it was of the devil; 2) there were no more visions and revelations; 3) that such things had ended after the New Testament;

⁴⁹ Harper, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision*, 69.

⁵⁰ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 41.

⁵¹ As Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 40, noted, “The preacher’s contempt shocked Joseph.”

and, 4) there would never be any more, were all based on the common wisdom of the day and perhaps personal experience. After all, he had never seen a vision, so any such thing must be a lie from Satan.⁵²

Neibaur's account tells a similar but shorter story: "told the Methodist priest, said this was not a age for God to Reveal himself in Vision Revelation has ceased with the New Testament." The 1832 account summarizes the encounter without any details: "[I] could find none that would believe the hevny vision." White captured Joseph's words this way: "When I went home and told the people that I had a revelation, and that all the churches were corrupt, they persecuted me, and they have persecuted me ever since. They thought to put me down, but they hav'nt succeeded, and they can't do it."

21 ***all such things had ceased with the apostles***. In our day as it was in Joseph's, many in Christianity are confused about their own beliefs in this matter. They teach this as their doctrine—that revelation ceased with the apostles—but they also look forward to the day when it will come again, such as the two prophets in Revelation. In other words, they allow God the right to call more prophets, just not Joseph Smith.

22 ***great persecution...bitter persecution***. Lucy Smith, Joseph's mother, documented some of these persecutions, including Joseph getting shot at.⁵³ However, though the challenges of the time were very real, most of this persecution came later, so this is reflective on Joseph's part of his whole life up to 1838. As he wrote this history, he had many types of persecutions. This harassment toward him and his followers often came from people of other Christian faiths, people who professed to believe in God as he did. After being rejected in Kirtland and Missouri, it certainly felt to Joseph like "all united to persecute me" (v. 22).

The newspaper writer White summarized the outcome, focusing on the reaction of others: "When I went home and told the people that I had a revelation, and that all the churches were corrupt, they persecuted me, and they have persecuted me ever since."

24 ***I felt much like Paul . . . before King Agrippa***. Referring to Acts 26 where Festus calls Paul "mad" after he related the account of his vision on the road to Damascus. There is some irony that we have multiple, somewhat conflicting accounts of his 'first vision' on the road to Damascus, making their shared experience even more interesting.⁵⁴

25 ***I knew it, and I knew that God knew it***. Joseph surely expected a more favorable reaction to his news that God is speaking again than he initially got, but regardless, he knew it was true and knew that he had a responsibility to God to act according to the commands and instruction he had received.

26 ***I had now got my mind satisfied***. Not only had Joseph's questions about salvation, forgiveness of sins, and which church had truth been answered, but in the 1832 account, he stated that after the vision, "my soul was filled with love and for many days I could rejoice with great Joy and the lord was with me."

26 ***it was not my duty to join with any of them***. Joseph followed the instructions he received and, like his father, did not associate himself with any religious organization. It's not clear from the accounts of the First Vision that Joseph Smith had any idea of what his future mission would be at this time, only that, as the 1842 account says, "the fulness of the gospel should at some future time be made known unto me." It was not until the coming of Moroni in 1823 that he first hears directly his personal role in the latter-day restoration of divine truth.

26 ***I had found the testimony of James to be true***. Though we may not have a vision like Joseph, James' counsel is relevant to each of us—ask God and he'll reply through a divine communication, the Holy Ghost.⁵⁵

Results

Joseph struggled with his standing before God at an early age. Confused by the very different teachings about personal salvation in his small town, he decided to ask God directly for an answer. Getting likely much more than he bargained for, he did get his answer and learned much not only about salvation but about the Father and the Son themselves. He knew that they knew and loved him. From this experience, Joseph learns to expect an answer from God. Likewise, we can know that God knows and loves us and is always with us in our trials and struggles.

⁵² Harper, *Joseph Smith's First Vision*, 68-70; Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 41.

⁵³ Proctor and Proctor, *History of Joseph Smith*, 137-159.

⁵⁴ Compare Acts 9:1-9 and 22:3-10.

⁵⁵ See Hugh B. Brown, "The Profile of a Prophet," BYU Speeches of the Year, 4 Oct 1955.

With multiple accounts of this experience that share different elements, we can create a harmony that might capture the whole story, something like this:

A twelve-year-old boy was troubled by his own sins and wanted to be sure that he could achieve forgiveness from God. He investigated the churches in his area but they gave him conflicting information which he didn't know how to resolve. When he was thirteen, he heard a Methodist preacher teach from James 1:5 that anyone lacking wisdom could ask of God. Pondering this for several months, he finally went into a grove of trees behind the small home where his family lived, determining to pray near where he had been chopping a tree the day before. At first, he thought he heard a noise behind him, and leaped to his feet. Seeing nothing he continued to pray, but was overcome by darkness, tempted with inappropriate mental images and thoughts, and nearly succumbed to an unseen power. Exerting all his faith, his mouth was freed, his heart was calmed, and he was able to pray again.

Shortly he saw a light, at first far away but coming down slowly upon him. He continued to pray as the light drew closer. It resembled a pillar of fire or flame, but as it touched the trees above him, he saw that the leaves did not burn, so he began to have confidence that he would not either. The world around him fell out of his conscious view and his whole attention was focused on the light, which was brighter than the sun. As the light came upon him and fell all around him, he was filled with great joy and peace.

He saw one personage appear in the light, who had light blue eyes and a white cloth drawn over his shoulders, exposing a bare right arm. This personage was bright and glorious beyond all description. Soon another personage appeared, identical in glory and appearance to the first. The first spoke, saying, 'Joseph, this is my beloved Son, hearken to him.' The second spoke, saying he was Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and told Joseph his sins were forgiven. He was told that the world was lying in sin, drawing near to God with their lips but being far from him in their hearts, and that he should walk in the Lord's statutes and to keep the commandments. During the vision, other angels appeared as well.

Joseph asked which church he should join, in order to know who taught the truth about personal salvation. Perhaps, he wondered, it was the Methodist church, which he liked. But to his surprise, he was told to join none of them, for none were recognized by God. All were teaching incorrect and corrupt doctrines and the creeds they believed were an abomination. None of them were acknowledged by God as his church and kingdom. Joseph was commanded not to go after them but to wait patiently until, at a future day, the true doctrine of Christ would be revealed to him. The conversation went on a bit longer, and Joseph learned other things, including some things about the Second Coming of Christ.

Soon the vision closed and the light left him, lying on his back on the ground. He felt very weak but eventually rose and went home, full of peace and calm, which lasted for many days.

Joseph didn't understand God's mission for him in 1820, but as he looked back on the encounter with God in the grove of trees near his home over the course of his eventful life, he saw it as the beginning of his prophetic call and ministry, and so should we. It all started with the First Vision and the wonderful publications of the Joseph Smith Papers help us appreciate better than ever before what that fourteen-year-old saw, heard, and felt.

In a proclamation to the world given in 2020, the two hundredth anniversary of the First Vision, the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles declared:

Two hundred years ago, on a beautiful spring morning in 1820, young Joseph Smith, seeking to know which church to join, went into the woods to pray near his home in upstate New York, USA. He had questions regarding the salvation of his soul and trusted that God would direct him.

In humility, we declare that in answer to his prayer, God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, appeared to Joseph and inaugurated the "restitution of all things" (Acts 3:21) as foretold in the Bible. In this vision, he learned that following the death of the original Apostles, Christ's New Testament Church was lost from the earth. Joseph would be instrumental in its return.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ [Restoration Proclamation](#).

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