

# "Stand by My Servant Joseph"

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They called him Brother Joseph, the Saints from the eastern seaboard, Canada, and an ocean away in England. For fourteen years, Joseph Smith led this Church born on American soil. He did not emerge from the great New England universities or seminaries, nor did he preach before a highly acclaimed congregation. He was a farmer who lived on the edge of civilization but at the center of a holy war—a war fought for the hearts and souls of all our Father's children.

It all began in a grove in upstate New York. Joseph recounted, "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!*" (Joseph Smith—History 1:17).

We are here today because of that singular experience.

Five years ago, I, too, was in upstate New York visiting the Peter Whitmer farmhouse in Fayette. To the world, it is simply a small frame building in the middle of rolling fields. To members of the Church, it is much more. Here, in an upstairs room, Joseph Smith finished translating the Book of Mormon from the gold plates. Here, on the grounds, an angel showed Mary Whitmer the sacred plates. Here, on the main floor, Joseph Smith and a handful of people gathered on April 6, 1830, to establish this Church.

The missionary sister stationed in the home spoke with great reverence to our group about those significant early days. She bore her testimony of the truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ and of her love for the Prophet Joseph. As we were ushered out of the home and onto the back lawn, I felt impressed to step away from the crowd. At the edge of the grass, I leaned up against a fence to take in the setting. It was a beautiful day; the corn in the field behind me was tall; it touched my shoulders.

I was thinking about my family when into my mind came thoughts so clearly defined it was as if they were words: "Heidi, the Church was established here, just like she said. Joseph Smith was a prophet of God, and you need to know that." I remember thinking, *I know that. Everyone knows that. I have heard people bear that testimony since I was a child.* Immediately the words came again: "The Church was established here, just like she said. And Joseph Smith was and is a prophet of God . . . and someday you will need to know that."

The word *someday* stood out in my mind. *Someday*. What did that mean? Immediately I asked myself, "Why would I need to know that?"

I understand now why I needed that witness.

For the past two and a half years I have worked on a project about Joseph Smith. I wrote the script for a documentary that ran on national television and its companion book that put before the world the life of this great prophet. He is the essence of faith and goodness, determination and devotion. To capture his life and his words required that I have a strong testimony that Joseph Smith is a prophet of God.

The writing task was daunting. The story had to speak to both the Mormon and the non-Mormon audience. I call it being bilingual. Those of us whose belief is founded in faith understand how the Lord uses angels and revelation. We are grateful for the power of the priesthood. But for those who do not share that faith, miraculous events so central to Joseph's work are difficult to grasp. Add to the events the fact that many of our angels have names. At one point, the sponsoring public television station suggested showing the gold plates on screen to authenticate the visit of Moroni. Imagine explaining that Joseph gave the plates back to Moroni, who took them back to heaven or buried them, perhaps in another hill.

In the process of writing dozens of drafts, I often looked back on that bright summer day at the Peter Whitmer farmhouse, and I remembered the statement of the Book of Mormon prophet Jacob: "I had heard the voice of the Lord speaking unto me in very word, . . . wherefore, I could not be shaken" (Jacob 7:5).

Every one of us can receive that witness. It is not predicated on a writing project or years of study. It is a product of our willingness to have ears to hear. You may be saying to yourself what I said when I heard those words, "Why would I need to know that?"

Here's why.

In Doctrine and Covenants 76 Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon describe seeing a vision when Joseph was working on revisions of the Bible: "We beheld the glory of the Son, on the right hand of the Father, and received of his fulness;

"And saw the holy angels, and them who are sanctified before his throne, worshiping God, and the Lamb. . . .

“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” (vv. 20–24).

That’s why we need to know that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God. Because of his witness of the Savior. Joseph Smith saw Jesus Christ. He saw Him in the grove; he saw Him in Hiram; he saw Him in Kirtland. He talked with Him. Joseph Smith was prepared before the world was to be the prophet of these last days. He was called by Jesus Christ to lead the Restoration and gather the Saints.

Everything about Joseph Smith points to Jesus Christ. When Joseph states, “He lives,” I hear those words from the hymn:

He lives, he lives, who once was dead.  
He lives, my ever-living head.[\[1\]](#)

And everything about Jesus Christ points to our Father in Heaven.

When I began my intensive research on the Prophet Joseph, I read stacks of books, journals, articles, papers, and commentaries. I found that many who have written about him do not understand the significance of his prophetic mantle. They place him in earth time but not in God’s time. From the moment Joseph Smith visited the grove as a fourteen-year-old boy, the veil thinned. His life cannot be cast in sequence nor can interpretation necessarily explain that this happened and then this and this. So much of historical analysis is trying to make sense of date, time, and place. Yet Joseph worked beyond our mortal understanding to gain his knowledge. He received his power from those who held keys anciently. He spoke with messengers of our Lord, not once but often. Put simply, his life is not linear. It does not sit down comfortably on a chronological chart. He sits now in the timeless councils of heaven and waits for us to join him in our Father’s kingdom.

That is so important to understand. When Joseph Smith stated in 1843, “No man knows my history,” I think he was talking not about concealed facts but about misunderstood perspectives.[\[2\]](#) He saw angels. He received priesthood authority from John the Baptist and Peter, James, and John. He received the keys of the gathering of Israel from Moses. He received the keys of this dispensation from Elijah. That’s why his brother Hyrum said of him, “Joseph has the spirit and power of all the prophets.”[\[3\]](#) Joseph’s grasp of history reached before this world and beyond it.

If Joseph Smith is a casual reference in your testimony, now is the time to strengthen your witness. Consider how a scripture in Doctrine and Covenants 6 may help you. But, first, let me put it in context. This revelation is received when Joseph, living in Harmony, Pennsylvania, is translating the plates. Oliver Cowdery is serving as his scribe. The headnote to section 6 states that Oliver had already received a divine manifestation of the truth of the Prophet’s testimony respecting the plates, and he must have believed that Joseph was chosen to restore the gospel. I imagine that Oliver

wanted to know what the Lord had in mind for him to do, just as we so often ponder what the Lord would have us do. Like so many revelations to the early Saints, each of us can "hear" our own name for the one given, for as the Lord said to Emma, "I say unto you, that this is my voice unto all" (D&C 25:16.).

In Doctrine and Covenants 6:18 the Lord counsels Oliver, "Be diligent; stand by my servant Joseph, faithfully, in whatsoever difficult circumstances he may be for the word's sake."

"Be diligent" is a clear call to do all we can. Work hard. Do everything within our power and our reach.

And then what does he ask of Oliver? And of each of us? "Stand by my servant Joseph, faithfully." What does that mean?

Joseph Smith bears witness of Jesus Christ: "That he lives." When we "stand by Joseph, faithfully," we do the same. We add our testimony to Joseph's testimony that Jesus Christ is the Savior and Redeemer of the world. "That he lives." We—like Joseph—commit to work in the kingdom of God on earth. Not just when it is convenient or fits our schedule but "in whatsoever difficult circumstances," the Lord says. "Faithfully," he says. To stand by Joseph means to stand firm in our faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ and in our willingness to share our testimony with the world. Joseph said, "I will always maintain a true principle, even if I stand alone in it."<sup>[4]</sup>

Where do you stand? Do you stand by Joseph? He said of his own efforts, "I am a lover of the cause of Christ . . . and an upright steady course of conduct and a holy walk."<sup>[5]</sup> If we are to stand by him, what should be our course of conduct? Is ours a "holy walk"? Sometimes we aren't walking on smooth pavement nor is the path lined with flowers. Joseph knew about difficulty. In Liberty Jail, he petitioned the Lord, "Where art thou?" For the Church and for Joseph it was a time of crisis. Have you cried out to the Lord with the same plea? And what is the Lord's answer? "Peace be unto thy soul; thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment" (D&C 121:7). When we stand by Joseph we stand confident, come what may, knowing our Savior has promised us "angels round about . . . to bear [us] up."

At another point Joseph describes his efforts, saying, "All I can offer the world is a good heart and a good hand."<sup>[6]</sup> Do we do the same? Or have we complicated and blurred our earthly assignment with too much of the world?

We can learn a great deal from those who joined the Church in the early days and chose to stand by Joseph. Their contributions were like most of ours: quiet, often done in secret, and rarely of the magnitude heralded by the world. They would not have been noted on any chronology that earns a place on the shelves of world history, but in the Lamb's book of life, they stand out as the work of God.

Of all the accounts that speak of standing by Joseph, my favorite is from the journal of Joseph Knight Senior, who gained a witness of the young prophet in the earliest days of Joseph's ministry. Consider what he teaches us about what we should do.

One day Joseph Knight felt impressed to take some supplies to the Smiths down in Harmony, a

quiet little community on the banks of the Susquehanna River. In these waters Joseph baptized Oliver, and Oliver then baptized Joseph, the two having received the holy priesthood from John the Baptist. This is a sacred place.

Busy translating the gold plates, Joseph had little time to farm or make a living. Joseph Knight wrote in his journal, "I bought a Barrel of Mackerel and some lined paper for writing . . . nine or ten Bushels of grain and five or six Bushels [of] taters and a pound of tea, and I went Down to see him and they [were] in want."<sup>[7]</sup>

Listen closely. He took fish, grain, and some potatoes. (The only thing missing for such a compassionate service visit was green Jell-o). The food was important, but what strikes me is what was sandwiched between the mackerel and the bushels of grain—"some lined paper for writing." Every time I pick up my Book of Mormon I like to imagine that some of the words of one of those great prophets—be it Nephi, Jacob, Benjamin, or Helaman—were translated onto that "lined paper for writing." Perhaps it is the writer in me that loves the image so much, but I don't think so. I think it's the image of an older man, the age of Joseph's father, hearing the prompting to take what was needed for the work to go forward.

It isn't dramatic. No one has built a statue or named a building to recognize Joseph Knight's contributions. But he heard the prompting of the Spirit. And he acted upon it. What does this say to all of us who quietly load the wagon each morning, who prepare food for those in need, our families in particular, who do the work that brings no glory here because the glory be to the Father. The glory of God is to see his children anxiously engaged in a good cause, sisters. Joseph Smith called it "the cause of Christ."<sup>[8]</sup>

Joseph Knight Senior did not stand alone. In 1836 when Joseph Smith called Heber C. Kimball to serve a mission in England, Heber did not leave with a suitcase full of Mr. Mac suits nor was he prepared in the MTC with a diet of Lucky Charms and a plane ticket from the Church travel office. At that time, apostasy was rampant in Kirtland. Members were turning on the Prophet in droves, and it would have made sense for Heber to stay as a staunch defender of the Church. He left his wife, Vilate, and a small family with no definite return date to do what the Lord had commanded. Why? Because he knew that Jesus Christ lives and that Joseph Smith was his chosen servant on the earth to unfold the gospel. Heber left Joseph's side, but he stood by him, though his destination was thousands of miles across the Atlantic. His part was to bring the blood of Israel to Zion.

Vilate Kimball, Heber's wife, wrote in her journal: "It was June 13th . . .

"At nine o'clock in the morning of this never-to-be-forgotten day. . . . Heber bade adieu to his brethren and friends and started without purse or scrip to preach the gospel in a foreign land."

Just imagine. Vilate didn't know how long he was going to be gone. She didn't ask who was going to provide for them. She "stood by Joseph," offering her husband to the Lord.

Vilate continues in her journal, "Sister Mary Fielding, who became afterwards the wife of Hyrum Smith, gave him five dollars with which Heber paid the passage of himself and Brother Hyde to Buffalo."<sup>[9]</sup>

Mary Fielding was new to the community, not part of the inner circle of Kirtland. Money was scarce. Imagine reaching in her pocket and pulling out five dollars. That's what she had to give, and she gave it freely. "In whatsoever difficult circumstance, " the revelation says. No matter what, "stand by Joseph." For, as in the days of Nephi, "by small means the Lord can bring about great things" (1 Nephi 16:29).

In one of the most desperate periods in Mormon history, when the people were being driven from their Missouri homes in the middle of winter and Joseph was locked in Liberty Jail unable to help them, Emma Smith wrote to her husband: "[Dear Joseph] No one but God, knows the reflections of my mind and the feelings of my heart when I left our house and home, and almost all of every thing that we possessed excepting our little children, and took my journey out of the State of Missouri, leaving you shut up in that lonesome prison . . . I hope there [are] better days to come to us yet."<sup>[10]</sup>

Emma walked across the frozen Mississippi River to refuge in Quincy, Illinois. Sewn into the underskirts of her dress were Joseph Smith's revisions of the Bible. She carried in her arms their infant; by her side walked their small children. With each step she stood by Joseph. She didn't know if she would ever see him again. With hope for "better days," she carried on in the most difficult circumstances. She was seemingly alone.

Have you, like Emma, walked on carrying problems that seem insurmountable? Remember the Lord's promise if we are faithful, "I will go before your face, I will be on your right hand and on your left" (D&C 84:88).

W. W. Phelps, on the other hand, had to learn about really being alone. Here was a man who at age forty chose to do the will of the Lord. He moved to Kirtland and devoted himself to the work. When the Kirtland Temple was dedicated, the congregation sang the stirring anthem chorused at every temple dedication since: "The Spirit of God like a Fire Is Burning!"<sup>[11]</sup> Written by William Wines Phelps, the words came from his heart.

Wouldn't you think that here was a disciple Joseph could count on? Don't you feel that way about yourself when you have sung "We'll sing and we'll shout with the armies of heaven?"<sup>[12]</sup>

But Phelps didn't stand by Joseph. In fact, he contributed to one of the most desperate times in Joseph's life. Phelps stepped away in Missouri when tensions were high among the non-Mormons and the cry to kill the Prophet was heard from the highest ranks of the military. Joseph was arrested and jailed. Who signed his name to those trumped-up charges? Who spoke against the Prophet? W. W. Phelps. He had fallen into apostasy and joined with the adversary.

Joseph spent the winter in a dark, dirty prison, separated from his people and the work he loved. Did he shake his fist at the sky and call down the powers of heaven on Phelps or the others trying to thwart the work of the Lord? No, he understood the atonement of Jesus Christ. He petitioned the Lord for comfort and guidance. What was the Lord's response? "Thy God shall stand by thee forever and ever" (D&C 122:4). What a promise. And then he reminded Joseph, "The Son of Man hath descended below them all" (D&C 122:8). Clearly, the atonement of Jesus Christ had paid for the sins of W. W. Phelps.

Joseph was allowed to escape from jail. He and Hyrum—who stood by him all the time and who died at his side—made their way to Illinois, where the Saints had fled, and Joseph began to build a city from a swamp on the banks of the Mississippi. "No unhallowed hand can stop the work from progressing," Joseph told the people.<sup>[13]</sup> He knew the Lord was in charge; He is in charge today.

Phelps didn't stop the work, and he soon came to realize that he had made an enormous mistake. To his credit, he wrote Joseph and begged for forgiveness and for his friendship. You see, Phelps was standing alone. The adversary doesn't stay with people after they have done his bidding; he leaves them to loneliness and despair. Phelps was no exception.

Joseph wrote back: "The cup of gall, already full enough for mortals to drink, was indeed filled to overflowing when you turned against us. . . . 'had it been an enemy, we could have borne it.' . . .

"However, the cup has been drunk, the will of our Father has been done, and we are yet alive, for which we thank the Lord. . . .

"Believing your confession to be real, and your repentance genuine, I shall be happy once again to give you the right hand of fellowship, and rejoice over the returning prodigal.

"Come on, dear brother, since the war is past,

"For friends at first, are friends again at last."<sup>[14]</sup>

What a tender reminder of the pure love of Christ.

How is it with us? Is the war past, or are we carrying around those wrongs we can't quite forgive, those mistakes we can't quite forget? Some of them are our own. Are there friends on the other side of the fence who need our hand of fellowship? To "stand by . . . Joseph" means to follow his example, embracing one another, no matter the hurt or the circumstance. "For friends at first, are friends again at last."

W. W. Phelps had a change of heart so dramatic that after Joseph Smith was martyred, Brother Phelps wrote the stirring tribute:

Praise to the man who communed with Jehovah!

Jesus anointed that Prophet and Seer.<sup>[15]</sup>

It didn't stop with Joseph Smith. The Lord has called each one of us to do our part to "arise and shine forth, that thy light may be a standard for the nations" (D&C 115:5).

In the eternal plan, each barrel of mackerel, each sheet of lined paper, each five dollars, each hymn of praise put willingly and lovingly on the altar is counted for our good and the good of all our brothers and sisters. When Joseph Smith described his efforts he said, "All I can offer the world is a good heart and a good hand."<sup>[16]</sup> We must do the same, for, Joseph prophesied "the truth of God will go forth boldly, nobly, and independent, till it has penetrated every continent, visited every clime, swept every country, and sounded in every ear, till the purposes of God shall be accomplished, and the Great Jehovah shall say the work is done."<sup>[17]</sup>

That's why we need to know that Joseph Smith is a prophet of God: because he is a lover of the cause of Christ. What is that cause? To do the will of the Father.

Consider how our prophet today has reiterated the call to stand. Said President Gordon B. Hinckley at the concluding conference of a century: "We stand on the summit of the ages, awed by a great and solemn sense of history. This is the last and final dispensation toward which all in the past has pointed. . . .

"May God bless us with a sense of our place in history and, having been given that sense, with our need to stand tall and walk with resolution in a manner becoming the Saints of the Most High."<sup>[18]</sup>

Stand tall. Stand by Joseph. No matter where you are or what you are asked to do. By a fence near a farmhouse or on your knees by the bed. At church, in the community, or with your family—most of all, with your family. In doing so, your witness will testify that Jesus Christ lives.

And this is the Lord's promise: "Be of good cheer, and do not fear; for I the Lord am with you, and will stand by you; and ye shall bear record of me, even Jesus Christ, that I am the Son of the living God, that I was, that I am, and that I am to come" (D&C 68:6).

I know that Joseph Smith was and is a prophet of God. I feel honored to stand by him in doing the work of the Lord. Most of all, I know that my Redeemer lives.

## NOTES

<sup>[1]</sup> "I Know That My Redeemer Lives," *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 136.

<sup>[2]</sup> Joseph Smith, *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed. rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1932–51), 6:317.

<sup>[3]</sup> Smith, *History of the Church*, 6:346.

<sup>[4]</sup> Smith, *History of the Church*, 6:223.

<sup>[5]</sup> *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 246.

<sup>[6]</sup> Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938), 313.

<sup>[7]</sup> Joseph Knight Sr., *Joseph Knight Reminiscences* [n.d.], Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, 6; see also Heidi S. Swinton, *American Prophet: The Story of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1999), 57.

<sup>[8]</sup> Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 246.

<sup>[9]</sup> In Edward W. Tullidge, *Women of Mormondom* (New York: Tullidge and Crandall, 1877), 114–15; see also Karl Rick Anderson, *Joseph Smith's Kirtland* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book,



1989), 86.

[10] Emma Smith to Joseph Smith, March 7, 1839, MS, Joseph Smith Letterbook, 2, 37, LDS Church Archives; see also Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 389.

[11] "The Spirit of God," *Hymns*, no. 2.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:540.

[14] Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 165–66.

[15] "Praise to the Man," *Hymns*, no. 27.

[16] Smith, *Teaching of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 313.

[17] Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:540.

[18] Gordon B. Hinckley, "At the Summit of the Ages," *Ensign*, October 1999, 74.