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“He Was a Prophet of God”: Contemporaries of Joseph Smith Testify of His Prophetic Mission

“I feel like shouting, hallelujah, all the time, when I think that I ever knew Joseph Smith, the Prophet.”
(Brigham Young)

From the Life of Joseph Smith

In Nauvoo, the Saints often gathered together to hear the Prophet Joseph Smith speak to them. Because there was no building in Nauvoo large enough to hold all the Saints, the Prophet often spoke outside. He frequently spoke in a grove located just west of the temple, where thousands could assemble. A portable platform was constructed for Church leaders and speakers, and the congregation sat on the grass or on logs or bricks. The Prophet also spoke in other locations in Nauvoo, including the unfinished temple and private homes. A visitor to Nauvoo in early 1843 reported seeing meetings held “on the rough floor of the basement of the Temple, and then the Prophet frequently preaches.”¹

When the Prophet spoke outdoors, he often began his talks by asking the Saints to pray for the wind or rain to be calmed until he got through speaking. At a conference held in Nauvoo on April 8, 1843, the Prophet began an address by saying: “I have three requests to make of the congregation: The first is, that all who have faith will exercise it and pray the Lord to calm the wind; for as it blows now, I cannot speak long without seriously injuring my health; the next is that I may have your prayers that the Lord will strengthen my lungs, so that I may be able to make

you all hear; and the third is, that you will pray for the Holy Ghost to rest upon me, so as to enable me to declare those things that are true.”²

The Prophet’s appointments to speak were very important to members of the Church, and he sometimes spoke to congregations numbering several thousand. “None listened to him that were ever weary with his discourse,” recalled Parley P. Pratt. “I have even known him to retain a congregation of willing and anxious listeners for many hours together, in the midst of cold or sunshine, rain or wind, while they were laughing at one moment and weeping the next.”³ Alvah J. Alexander, who was a boy during the Nauvoo years, recalled that “no amusements or games were as interesting to me as to hear him talk.”⁴

Amasa Potter recalled being present at a powerful sermon the Prophet Joseph Smith preached to a large group of Saints in Nauvoo:

“When [the Prophet] had spoken about thirty minutes there came up a heavy wind and storm. The dust was so dense that we could not see each other any distance, and some of the people were leaving when Joseph called out to them to stop and let their prayers ascend to Almighty God that the winds may cease blowing and the rain stop falling, and it should be so. In a very few minutes the winds and rain ceased and the elements became calm as a summer’s morning. The storm divided and went on the north and south of the city, and we could see in the distance the trees and shrubs waving in the wind, while where we were it was quiet for one hour, and during that time one of the greatest sermons that ever fell from the Prophet’s lips was preached on the great subject of the dead.”⁵

The Saints who heard the Prophet Joseph Smith speak bore powerful and vivid testimonies of his prophetic mission. Many of them recorded their memories of discourses they heard him give and experiences they had with him, for they wanted the generations that followed them to know, as they knew, that Joseph Smith was truly a prophet of God.

Testimonies of Joseph Smith

Like the early Saints, we can know that Joseph Smith is the prophet through whom the Lord restored the fulness of the gospel.

Brigham Young, the second President of the Church: “I feel like shouting, hallelujah, all the time, when I think that I ever knew Joseph Smith, the Prophet whom the Lord raised up and ordained, and to whom he gave keys and power to build up the kingdom of God on earth and sustain it. These keys are committed to this people, and we have power to continue the work that Joseph commenced.”⁶

Eliza R. Snow, the general president of the Relief Society from 1866 to 1887: “In the cause of truth and righteousness—in all that would benefit his fellow man, his integrity was as firm as the pillars of Heaven. He knew that God had called him to the work, and all the powers of earth and hell combined, failed either to deter or divert him from his purpose. With the help of God and his brethren, he laid the foundation of the greatest work ever established by man—a work extending not only to all the living, and to all the generations to come, but also to the dead.

“He boldly and bravely confronted the false traditions, superstitions, religions, bigotry and ignorance of the world—proved himself true to every heaven-revealed principle—true to his brethren and true to God, then sealed his testimony with his blood.”⁷



Bathsheba W. Smith

Bathsheba W. Smith, the general president of the Relief Society from 1901 to 1910: “I know him to be what he professed to be—a true prophet of God, and the Lord through him restored the everlasting gospel and every ordinance and endowment that will lead us into the celestial kingdom.”⁸

Wilford Woodruff, the fourth President of the Church: “I have felt to rejoice exceedingly in what I saw of Brother Joseph, for in his public

and private career he carried with him the Spirit of the Almighty, and he manifested a greatness of soul which I had never seen in any other man.”⁹

Daniel D. McArthur, an early Church member who later led one of the first handcart companies to Salt Lake City: “My testimony is that he was a true Prophet of the living God; and the more I heard his sayings and saw his doings the more I was convinced that he had of a truth seen God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ, as also the holy angels of God. . . . It always seemed to me that if I ever did know anything on this earth I surely knew that he was a Prophet.”¹⁰

Alexander McRae, one of those imprisoned in Liberty Jail with Joseph Smith: “Such was our confidence in [Joseph Smith] as a Prophet, that when he said, ‘Thus saith the Lord,’ we were confident it would be as he said; and the more we tried it, the more confidence we had, for we never found his word to fail in a single instance.”¹¹

Lyman O. Littlefield, a member of Zion’s Camp: “The whole energies of his soul were absorbed in the glorious latter-day work to which he had been called by his Divine Master.”¹²



Mary Alice Cannon Lambert

Mary Alice Cannon Lambert, an English convert who emigrated to Nauvoo in 1843: “I first saw Joseph Smith in the Spring of 1843. When the boat in which we came up the Mississippi River reached the landing at Nauvoo, several of the leading brethren were there to meet the company of saints that had come on it. Among those brethren was the Prophet Joseph Smith. I knew him the instant my eyes rested upon him, and at that moment I received my testimony that he was a Prophet of God. . . . He was not pointed out to me. I knew him from all the other men, and, child that I was (I was only fourteen) I knew that I saw a Prophet of God.”¹³

Angus M. Cannon, a Church member who lived in Nauvoo as a youth and later became a stake president in Salt Lake City:

“On one occasion especially do I remember Brother Joseph as he addressed an assembly of the Saints, in the spring of 1844. It was under some large oak trees, in a hollow south of the Temple, near to Parley street. He was discoursing upon the fact that God, in establishing His Church, had provided that only one man was authorized, of God, to receive revelations that should be binding upon the Church. . . . It was on this same occasion that I heard the Prophet declare he had received the Melchizedek Priesthood, under the administration of Peter, James and John.

“The impression created upon my young mind in the inspired utterances of Joseph Smith has accompanied me throughout my subsequent life; and when darkness would otherwise have beclouded my mind, his testimony has come up vividly before me, giving me evidence that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has been established and governed by the manifest power and authority of God.”¹⁴

Hyrum Smith, the Prophet’s brother and the Patriarch to the Church: “There were prophets before, but Joseph has the spirit and power of all the prophets.”¹⁵

**Joseph Smith was an example we can follow
in developing a Christlike character.**



Parley P. Pratt

Parley P. Pratt, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles from 1835 to 1857: “President Joseph Smith was in person tall and well built, strong and active; of a light complexion, light hair, blue eyes, very little beard, and of an expression peculiar to himself. . . . His countenance was ever mild, affable, beaming with intelligence and benevolence; mingled with a look of interest and an unconscious smile, or cheerfulness,

and entirely free from all restraint or affectation of gravity; and there was something connected with the serene and steady penetrating glance of his eye, as if he would penetrate the deepest abyss of the human heart, gaze into eternity, penetrate the

heavens, and comprehend all worlds. He possessed a noble boldness and independence of character; his manner was easy and familiar; his rebuke terrible as the lion; his benevolence unbounded as the ocean; his intelligence universal.”¹⁶

John Needham, an early English convert: “Joseph Smith is a great man, a man of principle, a straight forward man; no saintish long-faced fellow, but quite the reverse. Indeed some stumble because he is such a straight forward, plain spoken, cheerful man, but that makes me love him the more.”¹⁷

Emmeline B. Wells, the general president of the Relief Society from 1910 to 1921: “I . . . testify that he was the greatest man and the greatest prophet and the greatest personage of this generation, the greatest, I feel safe in saying, since the days of the Savior. His majesty in appearance was something wonderful. You would think that he was much taller and much larger even than he was. Perhaps many of you have noticed men who have such a bearing when they rise up and walk. This was the way with the Prophet Joseph. There are no pictures of him extant that I know of, that compare with the beauty and majesty of his presence.”¹⁸

Mary Alice Cannon Lambert: “The love the saints had for him was inexpressible. They would willingly have laid down their lives for him. If he was to talk, every task would be laid aside that they might listen to his words. He was not an ordinary man. Saints and sinners alike felt and recognized a power and influence which he carried with him. It was impossible to meet him and not be impressed by the strength of his personality and influence.”¹⁹



John M. Bernbisel

John M. Bernbisel, a medical doctor who boarded in Joseph and Emma’s home in Nauvoo for several months during 1843 and 1844: “Joseph Smith is naturally a man of strong mental powers, and is possessed of much energy and decision of character, great penetration, and a profound knowledge of human nature. He is a man of calm judgment, enlarged views, and is eminently distinguished by his love of justice. He

is kind and obliging, generous and benevolent, sociable and cheerful, and is possessed of a mind of a contemplative and reflective character. He is honest, frank, fearless and independent, and as free from dissimulation [false appearances] as any man to be found. . . . As a religious teacher, as well as a man, he is greatly beloved by this people.”²⁰

Jesse N. Smith, a cousin of Joseph Smith: “[The Prophet was] incomparably the most God-like man I ever saw. . . . I know that by nature he was incapable of lying and deceitfulness, possessing the greatest kindness and nobility of character. I felt when in his presence that he could read me through and through. I know he was all that he claimed to be.”²¹



William Clayton

William Clayton, an English convert who served as a clerk to Joseph Smith: “The more I am with him, the more I love him; the more I know of him, the more confidence I have in him.”²²

Joseph F. Smith, the sixth President of the Church: “He was brimming over with the noblest and purest of human nature, which often gave vent in innocent amusements—in playing ball, in wrestling with his brothers and scuffling with them, and enjoying himself; he was not like a man with a stake run down his back, and with his face cast in a brazen mold that he could not smile, that he had no joy in his heart. Oh, he was full of joy; he was full of gladness; he was full of love, and of every other noble attribute that makes men great and good, and at the same time simple and innocent, so that he could descend to the lowest condition; and he had power, by the grace of God, to comprehend the purposes of the Almighty too. That was the character of the Prophet Joseph Smith.”²³

**As the prophet through whom the gospel was restored,
Joseph Smith taught God’s plan of salvation with
clarity and power.**

Brigham Young: “The excellency of the glory of the character of Brother Joseph Smith was that he could reduce heavenly things

to the understanding of the finite. When he preached to the people—revealed the things of God, the will of God, the plan of salvation, the purposes of Jehovah, the relation in which we stand to him and all the heavenly beings—he reduced his teachings to the capacity of every man, woman and child, making them as plain as a well defined pathway. This should have convinced every person, that ever heard him, of his divine authority and power, for no other man was able to teach as he could, and no person can reveal the things of God, but by the revelations of Jesus Christ.”²⁴

Howard Coray, a clerk to Joseph Smith: “I have studied the Gospel as revealed by Joseph Smith and wondered if it were possible for anyone unaided by the Spirit of God to have revealed such a system of salvation and exaltation for man. My conclusion is in the negative. I sat and listened to his preaching at the stand in Nauvoo a great many times when I have been completely carried away with his indescribable eloquence—power of expression—speaking as I have never heard any other man speak.”²⁵



Joseph L. Robinson

Joseph L. Robinson, a counselor in a bishopric in Nauvoo: “We have long since believed and verily known that Joseph Smith was a true and humble Prophet of God, but now our eyes do see him, and our ears hear his voice, which is like the voice of the mighty thunders of Heaven, yet his language is meek and instructive, edifying much. But there is a power and majesty that attends his words and preaching that we never beheld in any man before, for he is a mighty Prophet, a holy man of God. He truly had been educated in the things pertaining to the kingdom of God and was highly charged with the Holy Ghost, which was a constant companion.”²⁶

Orson Spencer, a Baptist minister who joined the Church in 1841: “In doctrine Mr. Smith is eminently scriptural. I have never known him to deny or depreciate a single truth of the Old and New Testaments; but I have always known him to explain and defend them in a masterly manner. Being anointed of God, for the purpose of teaching and perfecting the church, it is needful

that he should know how to set in order the things that are wanting to bring forth things new and old, as a scribe well instructed. This office and apostleship he appears to magnify; at his touch the ancient prophets spring into life, and the beauty and power of their revelations are made to commend themselves with thrilling interest to all that hear.”²⁷

Jonah R. Ball, a member of the Church who lived in Nauvoo: “Went to meeting. Heard the Prophet preach on the temple floor. There were several thousand to hear him. There is no mistake. The way he unfolds the scriptures is beyond calculation or controversy. His text was the 1st chapter of 2 Peter. He explained it as clear as the [noonday] sun.”²⁸

William Clayton: “We have had the privilege of conversing with Joseph Smith Jr. and we are delighted with his company. . . . He is . . . a man of sound judgment and possessed of an abundance of intelligence, and whilst you listen to his conversation you receive intelligence which expands your mind and causes your heart to rejoice. He is very familiar and delights to instruct the poor saint. I can converse with him just as easily as I can with you, and with regard to being willing to communicate instruction he says, ‘I receive it freely and I will give it freely.’ He is willing to answer any question I have put to him and is pleased when we ask him questions. He seems exceedingly well versed in the scriptures, and whilst conversing upon any subject, such light and beauty is revealed as I never saw before. If I had come from England purposely to converse with him a few days I should have considered myself well paid for my trouble.”²⁹



Mercy Fielding Thompson

Mercy Fielding Thompson, a British convert whose husband, Robert B. Thompson, served as a clerk to Joseph Smith: “I have . . . listened to his clear and masterly explanations of deep and difficult questions. To him all things seemed simple and easy to be understood, and thus he could make them plain to others as no other man could that I ever heard.”³⁰

Like the early Saints, we can treasure up the words of Joseph Smith and live the principles he taught.



Emmeline B. Wells

Emmeline B. Wells: “In the Prophet Joseph Smith, I believed I recognized the great spiritual power that brought joy and comfort to the Saints. . . . The power of God rested upon him to such a degree that on many occasions he seemed transfigured. His expression was mild and almost childlike in repose; and when addressing the people, who loved him it seemed to adoration, the glory of his countenance was beyond description. At other times the great power of his manner, more than of his voice (which was sublimely eloquent to me), seemed to shake the place on which we stood and penetrate the inmost soul of his hearers, and I am sure that then they would have laid down their lives to defend him. I always listened spell-bound to his every utterance—the chosen of God in this last dispensation.”³¹



Lorenzo Snow

Lorenzo Snow, the fifth President of the Church: “The first time I saw the Prophet Joseph was when I was a boy [about 17 years old]. He was talking to a small congregation. He told them of the visits of the angel to him. . . . The people loved to hear him, because he was full of revelation. . . . According to the promise of the Lord, those who accepted the principles he taught received from the Lord a testimony of their truth.”³²

Edward Stevenson, a member of the Seventy from 1844 to 1897: “I first saw him in 1834 at Pontiac [Michigan] and the impression made upon my mind by him at that time causes me now much pleasure in presenting the picture to his many friends. The love for him, as a true Prophet of God, was indelibly impressed upon my mind, and has always been with me from that time,

although nearly sixty years have since passed away. In that same year, 1834, in the midst of many large congregations, the Prophet testified with great power concerning the visit of the Father and the Son, and the conversation he had with them. Never before did I feel such power as was manifested on these occasions.”³³

Mary Ann Stearns Winters, a stepdaughter of Elder Parley P. Pratt: “I stood close by the Prophet while he was preaching to the Indians in the Grove by the Temple. The Holy Spirit lighted up his countenance till it glowed like a halo around him, and his words penetrated the hearts of all who heard him. . . .

“I saw the dead bodies of Brothers Joseph and Hyrum as they lay in the Mansion House after they were brought from Carthage, and also saw some of the clothing they had worn, tinged with their life’s blood. I know they were men of God, Prophet and Patriarch, true and faithful. May we be worthy to meet them in the world to come!”³⁴

Wilford Woodruff, reporting an April 6, 1837, sermon: “President Joseph Smith Jr. arose and addressed the congregation for the term of three hours, clothed with the power, spirit, and image of God. He unbosomed his mind and feelings in the house of his friends. He presented many things of vast importance to the minds of the elders of Israel. Oh, that they might be written upon our hearts as with an iron pen to remain forever that we might practice them in our lives [see Job 19:23–24]. That fountain of light, principle, and virtue that came forth out of the heart and mouth of the Prophet Joseph, whose soul like Enoch’s swelled wide as eternity—I say, such evidences presented in such a forcible manner ought to drive into oblivion every particle of unbelief and dubiety from the mind of the hearers, for such language, sentiment, principle, and spirit cannot flow from darkness. Joseph Smith Jr. is a prophet of God raised up for the deliverance of Israel as true as my heart now burns within me.”³⁵

Brigham Young: “From the first time I saw the Prophet Joseph I never lost a word that came from him concerning the kingdom. And this is the key of knowledge that I have to-day, that I did hearken to the words of Joseph, and treasured them up in my

heart, laid them away, asking my Father in the name of his Son Jesus to bring them to my mind when needed. I treasured up the things of God, and this is the key that I hold to-day. I was anxious to learn from Joseph and the Spirit of God.”³⁶

Suggestions for Study and Teaching

Consider these ideas as you study the chapter or as you prepare to teach. For additional help, see pages vii–xii.

- Read the testimonies about the Prophet Joseph Smith on pages 495–97. What impresses you about these testimonies? What is the foundation of your own testimony of Joseph Smith? How did you obtain this testimony? You may wish to write your testimony in your journal or share it with your family.
- Pages 497–99 contain statements describing Joseph Smith’s appearance, personality, and character. How do these statements influence your feelings about Joseph Smith? Think about ways you might develop some of these same character traits.
- Study the testimonies about the way the Prophet Joseph taught the gospel and explained the scriptures (pages 499–501). How can these testimonies help us as we study and teach the gospel?
- Review the final section of this chapter (pages 502–4). How can you follow the examples of Wilford Woodruff and Brigham Young in your study of this book? How can you follow their examples as you study the teachings of the living prophets? What do you think it means to allow the truth to be “written upon our hearts as with an iron pen”?

Related Scriptures: 2 Nephi 3:6–19; D&C 24:1–9; 124:1

Notes

1. Quoted in *History of the Church*, 5:408; capitalization modernized; from a letter by an unidentified *Boston Bee* correspondent, Mar. 24, 1843, Nauvoo, Illinois, published in *Times and Seasons*, May 15, 1843, p. 200.
2. *History of the Church*, 5:339; from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on Apr. 8, 1843, in Nauvoo, Illinois; reported by Willard Richards and William Clayton.
3. Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt*, ed. Parley P. Pratt Jr. (1938), p. 46.

4. Alvah J. Alexander, in "Joseph Smith, the Prophet," *Young Woman's Journal*, Dec. 1906, p. 541.
5. Amasa Potter, "A Reminiscence of the Prophet Joseph Smith," *Juvenile Instructor*, Feb. 15, 1894, p. 132.
6. Brigham Young, *Deseret News*, Oct. 31, 1855, p. 268.
7. Eliza R. Snow, "Anniversary Tribute to the Memory of President Joseph Smith," *Woman's Exponent*, Jan. 1, 1874, p. 117; punctuation modernized.
8. Bathsheba W. Smith, in "Recollections of the Prophet Joseph Smith," *Juvenile Instructor*, June 1, 1892, p. 344.
9. Wilford Woodruff, *Deseret News*, Jan. 20, 1858, p. 363; capitalization modernized.
10. Daniel D. McArthur, in "Recollections of the Prophet Joseph Smith," *Juvenile Instructor*, Feb. 15, 1892, p. 129.
11. Alexander McRae, quoted in *History of the Church*, 3:258; from a letter from Alexander McRae to the editor of the *Deseret News*, Nov. 1, 1854, Salt Lake City, Utah, published in *Deseret News*, Nov. 9, 1854, p. 1; punctuation and grammar modernized.
12. Lyman O. Littlefield, *Reminiscences of Latter-day Saints* (1888), p. 35.
13. Mary Alice Cannon Lambert, in "Joseph Smith, the Prophet," *Young Woman's Journal*, Dec. 1905, p. 554.
14. Angus M. Cannon, in "Joseph Smith, the Prophet," *Young Woman's Journal*, Dec. 1906, p. 546; spelling and grammar modernized.
15. Hyrum Smith, quoted in *History of the Church*, 6:346; from a discourse given by Hyrum Smith on Apr. 28, 1844, in Nauvoo, Illinois.
16. Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt*, ed. Parley P. Pratt Jr. (1938), pp. 45–46; paragraph divisions altered.
17. Letter from John Needham to his parents, July 7, 1843, Nauvoo, Illinois, published in *Millennial Star*, Oct. 1843, p. 89.
18. Emmeline B. Wells, "The Prophet Joseph," *Young Woman's Journal*, Aug. 1912, pp. 437–38; paragraph divisions altered.
19. Mary Alice Cannon Lambert, in "Joseph Smith, the Prophet," *Young Woman's Journal*, Dec. 1905, p. 554.
20. John M. Bernhisel, quoted in *History of the Church*, 6:468; paragraph divisions altered; from a letter from John M. Bernhisel to Thomas Ford, June 14, 1844, Nauvoo, Illinois.
21. Jesse N. Smith, in "Recollections of the Prophet Joseph Smith," *Juvenile Instructor*, Jan. 1, 1892, pp. 23–24; paragraph divisions altered.
22. Letter from William Clayton to William Hardman, Mar. 30, 1842, Nauvoo, Illinois, published in *Millennial Star*, Aug. 1, 1842, p. 76.
23. Joseph F. Smith, in "Joseph, the Prophet," *Salt Lake Herald Church and Farm Supplement*, Jan. 12, 1895, p. 211; spelling and punctuation modernized.
24. Brigham Young, *Deseret News*, Nov. 28, 1860, p. 305; capitalization modernized.
25. Letter from Howard Coray to Martha Jane Lewis, Aug. 2, 1889, Sanford, Colorado, pp. 3–4, Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.
26. Joseph Lee Robinson, *Autobiography and Journals*, 1883–92, folder 1, p. 22, Church Archives.
27. Letter from Orson Spencer to unknown person, Nov. 17, 1842, Nauvoo, Illinois, published in *Times and Seasons*, Jan. 2, 1843, pp. 56–57; punctuation modernized.
28. Letter from Jonah R. Ball to Harvey Howard, May 19, 1843, Nauvoo, Illinois; Jonah Randolph Ball, Letters 1842–43, to Harvey Howard, Shutesbury, Massachusetts, Church Archives.
29. Letter from William Clayton to Church members in Manchester, England, Dec. 10, 1840, Nauvoo, Illinois, Church Archives.
30. Mercy Fielding Thompson, "Recollections of the Prophet Joseph Smith," *Juvenile Instructor*, July 1, 1892, p. 399; paragraph divisions altered.
31. Emmeline B. Wells, in "Joseph Smith, the Prophet," *Young Woman's Journal*, Dec. 1905, p. 556; punctuation modernized; paragraph divisions altered.

32. Lorenzo Snow, *Deseret Weekly*, Apr. 13, 1889, p. 487.
33. Edward Stevenson, *Reminiscences of Joseph, the Prophet, and the Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon* (1893), p. 4; paragraph divisions altered.
34. Mary Ann Stearns Winters, in "Joseph Smith, the Prophet," *Young Woman's Journal*, Dec. 1905, p. 558; paragraph divisions altered.
35. Wilford Woodruff, reporting a discourse given by Joseph Smith on Apr. 6, 1837, in Kirtland, Ohio; Wilford Woodruff, *Journals, 1833–98*, Church Archives.
36. Brigham Young, *Deseret News*, June 6, 1877, p. 274; capitalization modernized.