

“The Morning Breaks”

THE GLORIOUS LIGHT OF RESTORATION

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Jesus and the Apostles spoke of the coming of the end of an age, the end of the dispensation of the meridian of time. There would come a day, they warned, when men and women would “not endure sound doctrine” (2 Timothy 4:3), a day when malicious persons would seek to interject “damnable heresies” (2 Peter 2:1) into the faith.

Though the political empire of Alexander the Great did not survive his death in 323 BC, the cultural empire he founded lasted for nearly one thousand years, until the rise of Islam and the Arab conquests in the seventh century. Greek or Hellenistic influence was profound—on the Roman empire, on the world of Judaism, and, unfortunately, on the early Christian Church. As Zenos had foreseen, for a time the grafting of branches from the “wild olive tree” (Gentile influence) would result in a season of strength for the Church (see Jacob 5:17). But it was only a matter of time before the teachings of the prophets and ideas of the philosophers would come in conflict; those with eyes to see were aware that attempts to merge the doctrines of the temple of God with the doctrines of Plato would be abortive to the

Christian faith. Ecumenism would lead to shared impotence. Philosophical error, mixed with truth, resulted in a heretical hybrid—a conceptual concoction foreign to the spiritually sensitive and certainly offensive to that God who delights in revealing himself to his children.

Certainly there were good and noble souls who enjoyed and hearkened to that influence we know as the Light of Christ; they strove to live according to the best light and knowledge they possessed. Having discussed the flickering and dimming of the flame of Christian faith, President Boyd K. Packer stated, “But always, as it had from the beginning, the Spirit of God inspired worthy souls. We owe an immense debt to the protesters and the reformers who preserved the scriptures and translated them. They knew something had been lost. They kept the flame alive as best they could.”¹ On another occasion he taught: “The line of priesthood authority was broken. But mankind was not left in total darkness or completely without revelation or inspiration. The idea that with the Crucifixion of Christ the heavens were closed and they opened in the First Vision is not true. The Light of Christ would be everywhere present to attend the children of God; the Holy Ghost would visit seeking souls. The prayers of the righteous would not go unanswered.”²

Elder Alexander B. Morrison of the Seventy wrote, “The view that changes in the early church resulted in the dissent of a blanket of stygian darkness over the entire earth such that humankind had no contact with God or the Spirit for nearly two millennia simply doesn’t stand up to the scrutiny of modern scholarship. Scholars of today, benefiting from perspectives and information not readily available a century ago, understand that the ‘Dark Ages’ were not nearly so dark as previously had been thought.”³ John Taylor declared that there were persons during medieval times who “could commune with God, and who, by the power of faith, could draw aside the curtain of eternity and gaze upon the invisible world . . . , have the ministering of angels, and unfold the future destinies of the world. If those were dark ages I pray God to give me a little darkness, and deliver me from the light and intelligence that prevail in our day.”⁴

Nevertheless, apostolic authority—divine direction on how to regulate the affairs of the Church of Jesus Christ and to proclaim and interpret true doctrine—was taken from the earth. That glorious luminary we know as revelation, that always comes institutionally through the ministry of apostles

and prophets, was no longer enjoyed among the people of earth. The losses included the keys of the holy priesthood as well as the essential covenants and ordinances that lead to life eternal; plain and precious truths taken or kept back from the Bible (see 1 Nephi 13:24–29, 34); the true doctrine of God, the Godhead, and man’s relationship to deity; and sacred insights into the means whereby mortals can have divine experience. These and a myriad of other treasures became mysteries to the masses and slipped into the realm of the unknowable and the unavailable.

The Dawning of a Brighter Day

The spring of 1820 heralded the dawn of a new day. The Sacred Grove in upstate New York was not to be the location of a complete restoration, a place and a time wherein God would make all things known and correct all the flaws of a faltering world. Rather, the First Vision began the era of restitution, the times of refreshing (see Acts 3:19–21), and the season of cleansing and purification and endowment that would reach a zenith in a millennial dispensation. Unable to walk fully in the light of the Lord, the people of earth had chosen their own paths and sought to direct their own destinies. The Lord’s description of the spiritual condition of earth in the morn of restoration was given as follows: “They have strayed from mine ordinances, and have broken mine everlasting covenant; they seek not the Lord to establish his righteousness, but every man walketh in his own way, and after the image of his own god, whose image is in the likeness of the world, and whose substance is that of an idol, which waxeth old and shall perish in Babylon, even Babylon the great, which shall fall” (D&C 1:15–16). The pressing problem was idolatry—devotion and dedication to anything other than the true and living God. The problem was one we observe frequently in our day: distraction from those things of greatest worth. Man had fashioned unto himself a god, an unknown god, the unreachable and the unknowable Essence, that Wholly Other. Whether Catholic or Protestant, Jew or Muslim, the religious leaders of the nineteenth century, with their congregants—even the most sincere among them, and surely there were many—had lost their way.

The Lord then set forth the medicine for earth’s malady: “Wherefore, I the Lord, knowing the calamity which should come upon the inhabitants of the earth,”—the spiritual calamity should the people of earth continue as

they were and the perilous times that lay ahead even for those whose faith was fully centered on their Redeemer—“called upon my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., and spake unto him from heaven, and gave him commandments; And also gave commandments to others, that they should proclaim these things”—the glad tidings of the Restoration—“unto the world; and all this that it might be fulfilled, which was written by the prophets—The weak things of the world shall come forth and break down the mighty and strong ones, that man should not counsel his fellow man” (D&C 1:17–19). That is, the children of God need no longer place their trust in or rely on the limited wisdom of the unilluminated, those who are not truly men and women of God (see Mosiah 23:14).

Indeed, God would call upon the weak and the simple to bring forth his great and marvelous work, “those who are unlearned and despised” (D&C 35:13), those who are teachable, who are willing to unlearn falsehood and strip themselves of pride and duplicity, whose minds and hearts are open to the will of the Almighty. The Restoration heralded a day wherein men and women could come unto God, press forward through the mists of darkness, and then fall down and worship the true and living God, in the name of the Son, by the power of the Holy Ghost. The days in which only the chosen few could come unto God, those times when only a priestly hierarchy could perform the sacraments and commune with Deity, were no more. The gospel of God, the new and everlasting covenant, was restored to earth “that every man might speak in the name of God the Lord, even the Savior of the world; that faith also might increase in the earth” (D&C 1:20–21).

The Restoration would begin by a revelation, a re-revelation of doctrine and principles and precepts. It would of necessity start with the First Vision, the beginning of the revelation of God to man. It would be followed by the coming forth of the Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ. Through the truths contained in this sacred volume—including verities long lost on such vital matters as the Creation, the Fall, and the Atonement—the fulness of the gospel could be had again. Revelation upon revelation would come to and through Joseph Smith, including the restoration of those plain and precious truths once taken away or kept back from the Bible.

But there was more, more to come by way of truth, more than theology. The Restoration was destined to be a significant revolution. It must have

been a mighty vision that filled the mind of Joseph Smith the Seer when he announced, “I calculate to be one of the instruments of setting up the kingdom [of God envisioned by] Daniel by the word of the Lord, and I intend to lay a foundation that will revolutionize the whole world.”⁵

Joseph Smith’s vision of the kingdom of God, and of the power and ultimate reach of the Restoration, was cosmic. It consisted of more than preaching and study and Sabbath services; it entailed the entire renovation of the order of things on earth, the transformation of mankind and the elevation of society. The Restoration was to be as broad and as deep as had been the long season when apostles and prophets were not on earth. Eventually the people of Zion would know and acknowledge the truth, discern and dispel error, and teach and live the truth in all they said and did, in all facets of human endeavor—intellectual, moral, and spiritual. “Behold, I, the Lord, have made my church in these last days like unto a judge sitting on a hill, or in a high place, to judge the nations. For it shall come to pass that the inhabitants of Zion shall judge all things pertaining to Zion” (D&C 64:37–38).

“Mormonism’ is destined to revolutionize the world,” President George Q. Cannon observed.

But how many are there who realize the truth of this saying? Some, no doubt, but not nearly all who have heard it, and yet that very revolution is going on, and they are helping to promote it; it commenced many years ago—the very moment the first revelation was given to the Prophet Joseph Smith.

But to revolutionize a world, with religions, political and social systems, the outgrowth of nearly six thousand years’ experience is a slow process. . . .

For this reason the Kingdom of God upon the earth will not be characterized by a wonderfully rapid growth, . . . but, grappling ever with, and never ceasing the strife until it is victor over, error and evil of every kind, its foundations will be securely laid in the hearts and affections of those who love and live by truth and righteousness only.⁶

A Window to the Past

Of Joseph Smith and all those who are called as President of the Church, the Savior said, “And again, the duty of the President of the office of the High Priesthood is to preside over the whole church, and to be like unto Moses—Behold, here is wisdom; yea, to be a seer, a revelator, a translator, and a prophet, having all the gifts of God which he bestows upon the head of the church” (D&C 107:91–92; see also 124:125). Joseph Smith would not only stand as the head of this final dispensation but preside as the “choice seer” among the fruit of the loins of Joseph (2 Nephi 3:7). A seer, Ammon explained to King Limhi, is a prophet and a revelator also (see Mosiah 8:16). “A gift which is greater can no man have,” he went on to say, “except he should possess the power of God, which no man can; yet a man may have great power given him from God. But a seer can know of things which are past, and also of things which are to come, and by them shall all things be revealed, or, rather, shall secret things be made manifest, and hidden things shall come to light, and things which are not known shall be made known by them. . . . Thus God has provided a means that man, through faith, might work mighty miracles; therefore he becometh a great benefit to his fellow beings” (Mosiah 8:16–18).

I am particularly interested in the seer’s role in making known *things past*. Ponder for a moment on what we have come to know about the past as a result of the ministry of seers in these last days. Through what has been revealed by means of the Book of Mormon, the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants, the Prophet’s translation of the King James Bible (Joseph Smith Translation), the Book of Abraham, and other inspired prophetic commentary, we sit as it were with a great Urim and Thummim before us, gazing upon the scenes of days gone by. It just may be that the Lord revealed to Joseph Smith as much or more pertaining to the past as he did in regard to the future.

Surely there could be no truth of greater worth, no insight from the Restoration of more precious value—and yet so mysterious and strange to others in the religious world—than the idea of an eternal gospel. Because of the supplementary scriptures of the Restoration, we know that Christian prophets have declared Christian doctrine and administered Christian ordinances since the dawn of time. Adam and Eve were taught the gospel. They

prayed to the Father in the name of the Son, repented of their sins, were baptized by immersion, received the gift of the Holy Ghost, were married for eternity, and entered into the order of the Son of God. They knew and they taught their children and their grandchildren the plan of salvation and the eternal fact that redemption would be wrought through the shedding of the blood of the Son of Man (see Moses 5:1–9; 6:51–68). And what was true of our first parents was true of Abel and Seth and Enoch and Melchizedek and Abraham. They had the gospel. They knew the Lord, taught his doctrine, and officiated as legal administrators in his earthly kingdom. Isaac, Israel, Joseph, Ephraim, and all the patriarchs enjoyed personal revelation and communion with their Maker. Samuel, Nathan, and those from Isaiah to Malachi in the Old World and from Nephi to Moroni in the New—all these prophets held the Melchizedek Priesthood.⁷

“We cannot believe,” Joseph Smith stated, “that the ancients in all ages were so ignorant of the system of heaven as many suppose, since all that were ever saved, were saved through the power of this great plan of redemption, as much before the coming of Christ as since; if not, God has had different plans in operation (if we may so express it), to bring men back to dwell with Himself; and this we cannot believe, since there has been no change in the constitution of man since he fell.”⁸ Further, “Now taking it for granted that the scriptures say what they mean, and mean what they say, we have sufficient grounds to go on and prove from the Bible that the gospel has always been the same; the ordinances to fulfill its requirements, the same; and the officers to officiate, the same; and the signs and fruits resulting from the promises, the same.”⁹

In one of the most informative statements in our literature on this principle—that the gospel message and ordinances are forever the same—Elder Bruce R. McConkie declared:

The everlasting gospel; the eternal priesthood; the identical ordinances of salvation and exaltation; the never-varying doctrines of salvation; the same Church and kingdom; the keys of the kingdom, which alone can seal men up unto eternal life—all these have always been the same in all ages; and it shall be so everlastingly on this earth and all earths to all eternity. These things we know by latter-day revelation.

Once we know these things, the door is open to an understanding of the fragmentary slivers of information in the Bible. By combining the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price, we have at least a thousand passages that let us know what prevailed among the Lord’s people in the Old World.

Did they have the fulness of the everlasting gospel at all times? Yes. There was not a period of ten minutes from the days of Adam to the appearing of the Lord Jesus in the land Bountiful when the gospel—as we have it in its eternal fullness—was not on earth.

Do not let the fact that the performances of the Mosaic law were administered by the Aaronic Priesthood confuse you on this matter. Where the Melchizedek Priesthood is, there is the fulness of the gospel, and all the prophets held the Melchizedek Priesthood. . . .

Was there baptism in the days of ancient Israel? The answer is in the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible . . . and in the Book of Mormon. The first six hundred years of Nephite history is simply a true and plain account of how things were in ancient Israel from the days of Moses downward.

Was there a Church anciently, and, if so, how was it organized and regulated? There was not so much as the twinkling of an eye during the whole so-called pre-Christian Era when the Church of Jesus Christ was not on earth, organized basically in the same way it now is. Melchizedek belonged to the Church. . . . Laban was a member. . . . So also was Lehi, long before he left Jerusalem.

There was always apostolic power. . . . The Melchizedek Priesthood always directed the course of the Aaronic Priesthood. All of the prophets held a position in the hierarchy of the day. Celestial marriage has always existed. Indeed, such is the heart and core of the Abrahamic covenant. . . . Elias and Elijah came to restore this ancient order and to give the sealing power which gives it eternal efficacy. . . .

People ask, Did they have the gift of the Holy Ghost before the day of Pentecost? As the Lord lives they were so endowed; such is part of the gospel; and those so gifted wrought miracles and sought and obtained a city whose builder and maker is God. . . .

I have often wished the history of ancient Israel could have passed through the editing and prophetic hands of Mormon. If so, it would read like the Book of Mormon; but I suppose that was the way it read in the first instance anyway.¹⁰

“. . . Save Jesus Only”

It is not difficult to catch an occasional glimpse of the singular role of Joseph Smith in this final age. In a spirit of tribute, a spirit of gratitude and praise, Elder John Taylor, a man not prone to hyperbole, wrote, “Joseph Smith, the Prophet and Seer of the Lord, has done more, save Jesus only, for the salvation of men in this world, than any other man that ever lived in it” (D&C 135:3). We ask, More than Enoch? More than Abraham? More than Jacob? More than Moses? What did Elder Taylor mean? Here are a few points to ponder:

1. Joseph Smith serves as the legal administrator associated with that period of time prophesied by Joel: “And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions: and also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out my spirit” (Joel 2:28–29). When Moroni first appeared in September 1823, he quoted these verses and said “that this was not yet fulfilled, but was soon to be” (Joseph Smith—History 1:41). The Spirit of God would certainly prove to be the driving influence behind the dissemination of eternal truth and the spiritual transformation of those who submitted to the terms and conditions of the gospel of Jesus Christ. But what of others outside the faith? Would not this Spirit affect them? President Joseph Fielding Smith, after having quoted the prophecy of Joel, explained:

Now, my brethren and sisters, *I am not going to confine this prophecy to the members of the Church.* The Lord said he would

pour out his Spirit upon all flesh. That does not mean that upon all flesh the Holy Ghost should be sent, and that they should be participants in the blessings which those are privileged to receive who have been baptized and endowed and become members of the Church; but *the Lord would pour out his blessings and his Spirit upon all people and use them to accomplish his purposes. . . .*

There has never been a step taken . . . , in discovery or invention, where the Spirit of the Lord (that is, the Spirit of which Joel spoke, the Light of Christ, not the Holy Ghost!) was not the prevailing force, resting upon the individual, which caused him to make the discovery or the invention. The world does not understand that, but it is perfectly clear to me; *nor did the Lord always use those who have faith, nor does he always do so today. He uses such minds as are pliable and can be turned in certain directions to accomplish his work, whether they believe in him or not.*

President Smith then provided the following insight: “There have been a great many discoveries. In fact, since the establishment of the gospel, these discoveries and inventions have been increasing more rapidly and we have seen more, perhaps . . . than was seen during all the years from the days of the revival of learning and the Reformation down to the visitation of Moroni to the Prophet Joseph Smith.”¹¹ (It is interesting to note that these words were spoken some time before 1954.) In short, the Spirit of God—meaning the Light of Christ—has been behind the rapid intellectual, scientific, and technological developments from the time of the Industrial Revolution to our own Information Age. The modern seer presides over this age of enlightenment and expansion.

2. Though we thrill in the knowledge that God continues to guide his Church and kingdom and continues to make known his mind and will to his chosen servants, we conclude that most of what we know today in the form of doctrine—thousands of pages of revelations and instructions and prophetic direction—has come to us through the instrumentality of Joseph Smith. His call initiated the “times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began” (Acts 3:21), a day of restoration that will continue throughout the

Millennium. It is the final period in which the gospel will be delivered to earth, an era that will not end in apostasy. It is called the dispensation of the fulness of times, or the dispensation of the fulness of dispensations. Joseph Smith wrote the following inspired words from Liberty Jail: “God shall give unto you knowledge by his Holy Spirit, yea, by the unspeakable gift of the Holy Ghost, [knowledge] that has not been revealed since the world was until now; which our forefathers have awaited with anxious expectation to be revealed in the last times, which their minds were pointed to by the angels, as held in reserve for the fulness of their glory; a time to come in the which nothing shall be withheld” (D&C 121:26–28). In a revelation received in January of 1841 dealing with the ordinances of the temple, the Lord stated: “I deign to reveal unto my church things which have been kept hid from before the foundation of the world, *things that pertain to the dispensation of the fulness of times*” (D&C 124:41; emphasis added). Joseph Smith was raised up to make known “those things which never have been revealed from the foundation of the world, but have been kept hid from the wise and prudent, [things that] shall be revealed unto babes and sucklings in this, the dispensation of the fulness of times” (D&C 128:18).

3. With the visit of the disembodied Savior to the postmortal spirit world, the work of the redemption of the dead began. We know from Paul’s epistle to the Corinthians that the early Christians had begun vicarious labors (1 Corinthians 15:29), and we can assume that such work continued until the priesthood was taken from the earth. That may have been no more than seventy or eighty years after the death of Christ. Thus, persons who died without a knowledge of the gospel from the beginning of time will fall within the purview of the dispensation of the fulness of times. After the period of falling away, who would have performed the appropriate saving ordinances for all humankind, ordinances not only for those after the meridian of time, but also for people from the earliest ages of the world? Other than the brief period wherein the first-century Christian Church made vicarious salvation available to some, it would appear that the responsibility for gospel ordinances for the residue of earth’s inhabitants rests with our dispensation.

Think on it! Joseph Smith and his successors are responsible for the teaching of the gospel in the world of spirits and the performance of saving ordinances for literally billions of our Father’s children. My colleague Larry E.

Dahl has written, “Without diminishing in the least the importance of the work done by earlier prophets and others of the Lord’s servants, clearly in terms of the numbers of souls to whom the saving principles and ordinances of the gospel have been made available, a monumental work has been effected through the instrumentality of ‘Joseph Smith, the Prophet and Seer of the Lord’ (D&C 135:3).”¹² President Joseph F. Smith taught, “The work in which Joseph Smith was engaged was not confined to this life alone, but it pertains as well to the life to come, and to the life that has been. In other words, it relates to those who have lived upon the earth, to those who are living and to those who shall come after us. It is not something which relates to man only while he tabernacles in the flesh, but to the whole human family from eternity to eternity. Consequently, . . . Joseph Smith is held in reverence.”¹³

Being Loyal to the Restoration

Largely because of the repeated emphasis by President Ezra Taft Benson during his administration (1985–94), we have become very much aware of the condemnation, scourge, and judgment that rest upon the members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints because of our near neglect of the Book of Mormon and modern revelation. The Lord’s censure has come because we have “treated lightly the things [we] have received.” The solution for ridding ourselves of this curse is quite simple: “They shall remain under this condemnation until they repent and remember the new covenant”—or the new testament—“even the Book of Mormon and the former commandments which I have given them, not only to say, but to do”—to incorporate, to inculcate, to live—“according to that which I have written.” The Master also explains, “I will forgive you of your sins with this commandment—that you remain steadfast in your minds in solemnity and the spirit of prayer, in bearing testimony to all the world of those things which are communicated unto you” (D&C 84:54, 57, 61).

About six centuries before the coming of Jesus in the flesh, Nephi offered a haunting warning. Speaking of those in the last days, he prophesied, “They wear stiff necks and high heads; yea, and because of pride, and wickedness, and abominations, and whoredoms, they have all gone astray save it be a few, who are the humble followers of Christ; nevertheless, they are led”—many of the humble followers of Christ —“that in many instances

they do err because they are taught by the precepts of men” (2 Nephi 28: 14). In a modern revelation, a similar warning is sounded: “And when the times of the Gentiles is come in, a light shall break forth among them that sit in darkness, and it shall be the fulness of my gospel; but they receive it not; for they perceive not the light, and they turn their hearts from me because of the precepts of men” (D&C 45:28–29). It should be clear to most of us that this prophecy will not be fulfilled solely through the rejection of Mormonism by persons of other faiths. Sadly, it will find its fulfillment also in the lives of those baptized members who choose to live beneath their privileges, who exist in twilight when they could bask in the glorious light of noonday sun (see D&C 95:5–6). The doctrines of the Restoration assist us immeasurably in sifting and sorting through the views and philosophies of men and riveting ourselves to that which is true and enduring.

Being loyal to the Restoration entails being ready and willing to bear witness of the truths made known to us in this latter day. We love the Bible. We cherish its truths, treasure its marvelous stories of faith, and seek to live according to its precepts. But the scriptures of the Restoration carry a spirit all their own, particularly the Book of Mormon. There is a light and an endowment of spiritual power that come into our lives through searching Restoration scripture that can come in no other way. Being loyal to the Restoration entails giving careful attention to and teaching from the things that have been delivered to Joseph Smith and his successors.

In a modern revelation, Thomas B. Marsh was instructed, “Lift up your heart and rejoice, for the hour of your mission is come; and your tongue shall be loosed, and you shall declare glad tidings of great joy unto this generation.” And what were those glad tidings? What, specifically, was Brother Marsh to declare? Was he to go forth and restate the truths of the New Testament? Was he to bear witness in the words of Peter, Paul, or John the Beloved? Was he to teach the Sermon on the Mount or repeat the words of the Master concerning the bread of life? No, he was to “*declare the things which have been revealed to my servant, Joseph Smith, Jun.*” (D&C 31:3–4; emphasis added). Likewise, Leman Copley was specifically instructed how to teach the gospel to those of his former faith, the Shakers. He was to “reason with them”—the Shakers—“not according to that which he has received of them, but according to that which shall be taught him by you my servants.” And note

this important detail: “By so doing I will bless him, otherwise he shall not prosper” (D&C 49:4).

Modern revelation provides an interpretive lens and a hermeneutical key to the Bible. Much of what we understand about the Testaments is clear to us because of the Book of Mormon, the Joseph Smith Translation, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. There are those, however, who hesitate to accept what we know from modern revelation and who feel that to do so is to somehow compromise the integrity or unique contribution of the Bible itself. In response to this posture, let me suggest an analogy. If one were eager to locate a valuable site, should that person use a map that is deficient in detail or inaccurate in layout simply because the map had been in the family for generations and was highly prized? Should one choose to ignore the precious information to be had on a more reliable or complete map, if such were available? Of course the whole matter is inextricably tied to the question of whether the traveler sincerely desires to reach his destination; maps have real value only to the degree that they guide us to a desired location. Furthermore, would a scholar in any discipline choose to maintain a position or defend a point of view when subsequent and current research had shed further (and perhaps clarifying) light on the subject? To do so would represent, at best, naiveté, and, at worst, shoddy and irresponsible scholarship.

In that spirit, and knowing what we do about the everlasting nature of the gospel, the Church and kingdom, and the principles and ordinances pertaining thereto, it is perfectly appropriate and perhaps even incumbent upon us to make doctrinal inferences about personalities in scripture when recorded details may be lacking. For example, I know that Eve and Sarah and Rebekah were baptized, that Jacob received the temple endowment, and that Micah and Malachi stood in the prophetic office by divine call. I know that Nephi, son of Lehi, was baptized by water and received the gift of the Holy Ghost as well as the high priesthood, although an account of the same is not stated directly in the Nephite record. These are valid inferences, based on principles of doctrine and priesthood government. Because of what has been made known through Joseph Smith, we know what it takes to operate the kingdom of God and what things the people of God must do to comply.

There is a final matter that deserves our attention, something that unfortunately is not understood by some today. As members of the Church at the

beginning of the twenty-first century, we can be loyal to Joseph Smith only to the degree that we are loyal to the leaders of the Church in our own day. Those who criticize or find fault with the present Church or its constituted authorities in the name of being true to Brother Joseph know not what they do. The spirit of Joseph is with the leaders of this Church. Of that I have no question. President Joseph F. Smith testified:

I feel quite confident that the eyes of Joseph the Prophet, and of the martyrs of this dispensation, and of Brigham and John and Wilford, and those faithful men who were associated with them in their ministry upon the earth, are carefully guarding the interests of the Kingdom of God in which they labored and for which they strove during their mortal lives. I believe they are as deeply interested in our welfare today, if not with greater capacity, with far more interest, behind the veil, than they were in the flesh. I believe they know more; I believe their minds have expanded beyond their comprehension in mortal life, and their interests are enlarged in the work of the Lord to which they gave their lives and their best service. . . . I have a feeling in my heart that I stand in the presence not only of the Father and of the Son, but in the presence of those whom God commissioned, raised up, and inspired, to lay the foundations of the work in which we are engaged.¹⁴

It is vital that members of the Church pay heed to the words and counsel of the living oracles. Just as Noah’s revelation to build an ark was not sufficient to instruct Abraham in his duties, so what the God of heaven made known to Joseph Smith is not sufficient to lead this Church today. We do well to follow the inspired counsel directed to the early missionaries of this dispensation to declare “none other things than that which the prophets and apostles have written” (D&C 52:9, 36). If the leaders of the Church do not feel the need to stress a given point that seems to be an obsession with some—to warn of coming economic crises or the eminent overthrow by foreign nations or the need to leave our present culture and reestablish an agrarian society—then we would be wise to ask ourselves why such things are not being spoken of by our leaders. Are they unaware? Are they aware but unwilling to reveal these things to us?

President Harold B. Lee passed away suddenly and unexpectedly on 26 December 1973 after serving as President of the Church for less than a year and a half. In January 1974, Elder Bruce R. McConkie delivered a remarkably insightful sermon to the students at Brigham Young University regarding principles of apostolic succession:

The Lord, in his infinite wisdom and goodness, knows what ought to be done with his servants. The other thing to note is that when the Lord calls a new prophet he does it because he has a work and a labor and a mission for the new man to perform. I can imagine that when the Prophet Joseph Smith was taken from this life the Saints felt themselves in the depths of despair. To think that a leader of such spiritual magnitude had been taken from them! . . . And yet when he was taken the Lord had Brigham Young. Brigham Young stepped forth and wore the mantle of leadership. With all respect and admiration and every accolade of praise resting upon the Prophet Joseph, still *Brigham Young came forward and did things that then had to be done in a better way than the Prophet Joseph could have done them.*¹⁵

Though as a people we have miles to go before we rest and we have much spiritual development ahead of us, I bear witness that the Church is in excellent hands, is in the line of its duty, and is preparing a people for the Second Coming of the Son of Man. What is spoken by the General Authorities of the Church is what we need to hear and what the Lord would have his Saints know; those messages should become, as President Harold B. Lee once said, “the guide to [our] walk and talk.”¹⁶ If the Lord desires to warn his people and to provide appropriate interpretation of difficult prophetic passages, then that warning will surely come, but it will come through the channels he has established. It is wonderful to be able to raise our hands to sustain the prophets, seers, and revelators. I would suggest that one very practical way to sustain them is to take ourselves off their “worry list” through staying in the mainstream of the Church, living a sane and balanced life, and serving and loving our brothers and sisters in a manner befitting the Saints of the Most High God.

In March 1844, the Prophet Joseph Smith gave an unusual assignment to a group of Church leaders: they were asked to amend the Constitution

of the United States, so as to make it “the voice of Jehovah.” Later in the week, Elder John Taylor, as a representative of a special committee of three, responded that no progress had been made toward the preparation of a constitution for the kingdom of God. The Prophet acknowledged their failure, indicating that he knew “they could not draft a constitution worthy of guiding the Kingdom of God.” He himself had gone before the Lord, seeking that such a constitution be made known by revelation. The answer came: “Ye are my Constitution and I am your God and ye are my spokesmen, therefore from henceforth keep my commandments.”¹⁷ In a revelation given to President John Taylor on 27 June 1882, the Savior said, “Verily, thus saith the Lord, I have instituted my Kingdom and my laws, with the keys and power thereof, and have appointed you as a spokesman and my Constitution, with President John Taylor at your head, whom I have appointed to my Church and my Kingdom as Prophet, Seer and Revelator.” Later in the same revelation the Lord affirmed, “Ye are my Constitution, and I am your God.”¹⁸ In short, this Church is to be governed by revelation—current, daily, modern, and ongoing divine direction—and not by written documents alone (D&C 46:2). All of God’s purposes for his children cannot be codified. Nothing is more fixed, set, and established than the fact that among the people of God the canon of scripture is open, flexible, and expanding.

Reading the Signs of the Times

On one occasion the Pharisees came to Jesus demanding a sign—some physical proof of his messiahship. The Lord took that opportunity to contrast their ability to read the face of the sky (and thus discern “signs” associated with weather patterns) with their marked inability to read the “signs of the times” (and thus discern the true meanings of messianic prophecies and testimonies). The greatest evidence that the leaders of the Jews in Jesus’ day could not read the vital signs of eternity is the simple fact that they missed the Messiah when he came among them. The Hope of Ages had arrived and was ignored or rejected, and those who thus spurned the Lord of Life were left hopeless (see Matthew 16:1–6). We face a future that is, like the Second Coming, both great and terrible. There are those things that lie in futurity that frighten us and cause us to quake and tremble. And yet there are remarkably wonderful things that lie ahead for those who prove true and

faithful. How we fare in days to come will be determined largely by how well we are able to read the signs of the times.

Reading the signs of the times not only enables one to recognize and adjust to the events of the present but also to foresee and prepare for coming events. Those outside the Church who reject its teachings and doctrines are not in a position to fully perceive and properly adapt to the present and future social, economic, and spiritual challenges. Even those within the Church who have not been wise and thus have not “taken the Holy Spirit for their guide” (see D&C 45:57) lack that discernment necessary to sense the urgency of the messages of the Lord’s servants.

To read the signs of the times is to perceive the unfolding of God’s divine drama in these last days and to have the broad perspective of the plan of life and salvation and a special appreciation for the scenes incident to its consummation. It is to understand that this is the day long awaited by the prophets of old, when God would pour out knowledge and power from on high “by the unspeakable gift of the Holy Ghost” (D&C 121:26).

On the other hand, to read the signs of the times in our day is to read the signs of wear and tear in the faces of those who have chosen to love and give devoted service to either questionable or diabolical causes. Error and wickedness take terrible tolls on the hearts and countenances of those who pursue divergent paths; the wheels of waywardness grind away slowly but inexorably to produce a character that is devoid of spirituality. To read the signs of the times is in part to recognize that Alma spoke a profound truth when he declared that “wickedness never was happiness” (Alma 41:10).

Reading the signs of the times in our day does not mean seeking signs in our day. The Savior taught that a wicked and adulterous generation may be recognized by its tendency to demand physical proof as evidence of the veracity of the Lord’s work (see Matthew 12:39; 16:4). Interestingly enough, those who are not spiritually mature enough to read the signs of the times are so often those who demand signs. “Show us the golden plates,” they cry out. “Call down the angel Moroni, and while you’re at it, furnish the complete text for the Book of Abraham.” Those who truly seek to be in tune with the divine will, on the other hand, become witnesses and recipients of those wonders and miracles that a gracious Lord always bestows upon his faithful flock. “Faith cometh not by signs,” the holy word declares, “but signs follow those that believe” (D&C 63:9).

To read the signs of the times is to make a decision in favor of the society of Zion and the Church of the Lamb of God (see 1 Nephi 14:10). This is in contrast to a decision to enter or perpetuate Babylon. Each city—Zion and Babylon—makes definite demands of its citizens, and as the Millennium approaches, each of these communities will insist upon the complete consecration of its citizenry. To read the signs of the times is to recognize that in the future there will be fewer and fewer “lukewarm” Latter-day Saints; the myopic and the misguided of the religious world will grow in cynicism and confusion; the ungodly will, as time goes by, sink ever deeper into despair; wickedness will widen and malevolence will multiply until the congregants in Babylon seal themselves to him who is the father of all lies.

Finally, to read the signs of the times is also to know that “Zion must arise and put on her beautiful garments” (D&C 82:14) and that the restored Church will continue to require the time, talents, and means of its members as an integral part of their growth toward perfect faith. Through consecrating all they have and are to the Lord, the Saints of the Most High will establish a heaven on earth and receive the precious assurance of exaltation in the highest degree of glory.

As to the destiny of the Church, as well as the specific directions to be taken by it, these matters are the responsibility of apostles and prophets. Thankfully, at the head of this Church are men of vision, true seers, those who, like Enoch, discern and behold “things which [are] not visible to the natural eye” (Moses 6:36). The Church and kingdom in this final dispensation is led by those who can see “afar off” (D&C 101:54) and can discern and expose the enemies of Christ around the corner. Thus, they prepare the Latter-day Saints and the world for what lies ahead. Speaking to the leaders of the Church in 1831—who later became members of the first Quorum of the Twelve Apostles—the Lord promised, “And he that believeth shall be blest with signs following, even as it is written. And unto you it shall be given to know the signs of the times, and the signs of the coming of the Son of Man” (D&C 68:10–11).

While each member of the Church has the sobering responsibility to cultivate the gifts of the Spirit and thereby come to see things as they really are and as they really will be (Jacob 4:13; D&C 93:24), the Almighty has his own way of directing and preparing and readying the Saints as a body. In a revelation given to President John Taylor on 14 April 1883 concerning the

organization of the priesthood and the Church, the word of the Lord came as follows:

Thus saith the Lord unto the First Presidency, unto the Twelve, unto the Seventies, and unto all my holy Priesthood, let not your hearts be troubled, neither be ye concerned about the management and organization of my Church and Priesthood and the accomplishment of my work. *Fear me and observe my laws and I will reveal unto you, from time to time, through the channels that I have appointed, everything that shall be necessary for the further development and perfection of my Church*, for the adjustment and rolling forth of my Kingdom, and for the building up and establishment of my Zion. For ye are my Priesthood, and I am your God. Even so, Amen.¹⁹

Conclusion

There are few things about which the membership of the Church need to be anxious. We need to learn the gospel. We need to live the gospel and put on Christ and put off the works of the flesh. We need to become more Christlike. We need to be anxiously engaged in publishing the message of the Restoration to all the world. We need to be worthy to receive the ordinances of salvation and then make the same available to our kindred dead. We need to rivet ourselves, our children, and our children’s children to the redemption that is in Christ, that we and they might know to what source to look for a remission of our sins (see 2 Nephi 25:26). Further, and most importantly, we need to look to the presidency of this Church and heed the counsel of those called and appointed to direct its destiny. We must follow the Brethren as they point the way to eternal life. Though there will be individual casualties from the faith as we move toward the end, we need not be anxious about the future of the Church and kingdom of God. We need not be concerned about the leadership of the Church; we need only cultivate the little plot of ground assigned to us and leave the government of the kingdom to the King. The Lord does not ask us to magnify other people’s callings.

Because of the knowledge, keys, and powers associated with latter-day revelation, salvation will come to men and women who live in this final age of the earth’s history. Most of what we know about God’s dealings with

humanity in the past, about his work and purposes in this day, and about the end of times, we know because the heavens have been opened and the Lord Jehovah has restored ancient records for the benefit and blessing of those who live in a modern time. He has spoken again through prophets and apostles, has given vision to seers, and has brought light, inspiration, and holiness to a world that had been travelling in darkness.

Where once darkness reigned, love, light, and pure religion are found. Where ignorance, doubt, and superstition were the order of the day, now hope, knowledge, and the quiet rest of spiritual certitude prevail among the faithful. Joseph Smith the Prophet laid the foundation. By revelation he set in motion a revolution whose foreordained effects will not be fully realized until that day when the Lord reigns in the midst of his Saints and evil and wickedness are done away, and when, as Isaiah foresaw, the knowledge of God covers the earth as the waters cover the sea (see Isaiah 11:9). President Spencer W. Kimball said, “Never again will the sun go down; never again will all men prove totally unworthy of communication with their Maker; never again will God be totally hidden from his children on earth. Revelation is here to remain. Prophets will follow each other in a never-ending succession, and the secrets of the Lord will be revealed without measure.”²⁰ Our charge as people of the covenant is to help these promised blessings be realized by us and by the world. That we may do so is my earnest hope and prayer.

Notes

1. Boyd K. Packer, in Conference Report, April 2000, 7.
2. Boyd K. Packer, “The Light of Christ,” *Ensign*, April 2005, 11.
3. Alexander B. Morrison, *Turning from Truth: A New Look at the Great Apostasy* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 2.
4. John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards & Sons, 1851–86), 16:197.
5. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 512; cited hereafter as *Joseph Smith*.
6. George Q. Cannon, *Gospel Truth*, ed. Jerreld L. Newquist (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 322–23.
7. *Joseph Smith*, 109.
8. *Joseph Smith*, 48–49.
9. *Joseph Smith*, 93.
10. Bruce R. McConkie, “The Bible: A Sealed Book,” in *Doctrines of the Restoration: Sermons and Writings of Bruce R. McConkie*, ed. Mark L. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), 292–93.

11. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 3 vols., comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954–56), 1:176–78, 179; emphasis added.
12. Larry E. Dahl, “The Theological Significance of the First Vision,” in *Studies in Scripture*, ed. Robert L. Millet and Kent P. Jackson, 8 vols. (Salt Lake City: Randall Book, 1985), 2:321.
13. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 481.
14. Joseph F. Smith, “In the Presence of the Divine,” in *Messages of the First Presidency*, ed. James R. Clark, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965–75), 5:6.
15. Bruce R. McConkie, “Succession in the Presidency,” in *1974 BYU Speeches of the Year* (Provo: BYU Publications, 1975), 24; emphasis added.
16. Harold B. Lee, in Conference Report, April 1946, 68.
17. Joseph Smith Diary, 10 March 1844, Church History Library, Salt Lake City; cited in Andrew F. Ehat, “‘It Seems Like Heaven Began on Earth’: Joseph Smith and the Constitution of the Kingdom of God,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 20, no. 3 (Spring 1980): 259.
18. Joseph F. Smith, Minutes of the Council of Fifty, 21 April 1880, as quoted in Ehat, “It Seems Like Heaven Began on Earth,” 259.
19. *Unpublished Revelations of the Prophets and Presidents of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*, ed. Fred C. Collier (Salt Lake City: Colliers Publishing Company, 1979), 132, 134; emphasis added.
20. *Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 433.