

# “Unless I Could Get More Wisdom, I Would Never Know”

THE FIRST VISION, A PATTERN FOR  
SPIRITUAL LEARNING

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Joseph Smith’s vision in 1820 of God the Eternal Father and his Son Jesus Christ initiated the Restoration and today is the foundation of the Latter-day Saint faith. President David O. McKay related, “That one revelation answers all the queries of science regarding God and his divine personality. . . . What God is, is answered. His relation to his children is clear. His interest in humanity through authority delegated to man is apparent. The future of the work is assured. These and other glorious truths are clarified by that glorious first vision.”<sup>1</sup> To President McKay’s list could be added the understanding that God answers prayers, Satan has real power, the nature of the Godhead is distinct, and other truths.

There is more, however, to be learned from this experience than even these wonderful insights. In regard to the First Vision, Joseph Fielding McConkie asserted: “The prophetic efforts of Joseph Smith did not center in sharing his spiritual experiences but rather in the effort to qualify us to have our own spiritual experiences. The emphasis of his ministry was not on what he had seen but on what we could see. . . . Joseph invited us to check

him by having our own Sacred Grove experience. The validity of an experience is if it can be repeated. A good seed not only bears good fruits but it always bears the same fruits—regardless of who plants it.”<sup>2</sup> By examining the various accounts of the First Vision through the framework of one seeking to help others learn for themselves, a clear pattern emerges. Each account sheds unique light on Joseph’s experience but also solidifies critical principles of a spiritual learning pattern all honest seekers of truth must follow. While most Latter-day Saints turn to accounts of the First Vision to learn historical and doctrinal truths, this paper will show how one can turn to the First Vision to discover something entirely different—the pattern for spiritual learning leading to wisdom. The principles encompassed in this spiritual learning pattern include the following: personal perplexity, cognitive dissonance, or both great effort required for personal learning; dependence and recognition that all truth comes from a divine source; and the acknowledgment of personal responsibility to learn and act.

### First Vision Accounts

Before we can gain insights into the process of spiritual learning, we must understand something of what Joseph shared in different accounts of the First Vision.<sup>3</sup> Although the First Vision occurred in 1820 when Joseph was a young boy of fourteen, his first attempt at documenting this significant theophany actually occurred much later. During a ten-year period from 1832 to 1842, Joseph wrote or dictated various accounts of the First Vision on at least four different occasions. These accounts vary based on audience, experience, purpose, and circumstance. Recent scholars typically ascribe five additional accounts indirectly to Joseph.<sup>4</sup> This paper, however, will focus on those four directly attributed to the Prophet Joseph Smith.

*The 1832 account.* The earliest known recording of the First Vision was written in 1832, when Joseph was twenty-seven. It was written in his own hand as part of a short autobiography. At this stage in his life, Joseph had received more than half of the revelations now found in the Doctrine and Covenants. In this raw and personal account, Joseph vividly relates his insatiable concern for the welfare of his soul as a youth. He also describes his confusion with religion in general because he found a great discrepancy between what he read in the scriptures and what he saw taught and practiced

in different religious groups. In this account, Joseph shared the historical events of the Restoration through the personal, heart-wrenching eyes of one who was being “chastened for his transgressions” and feeling the “affliction of soul” as he was divinely tutored and prepared by the Lord to bring forth a marvelous work on the earth. In so doing, Joseph learned for himself the purposes of the Lord and felt of his love. Clearly Joseph sought personal reprieve and answers to his soul’s sincere desire.<sup>5</sup>

*The 1835 account.* Three years later, in Kirtland, Ohio, Joseph related another account of his vision to a visitor—the self-proclaimed prophet Robert Matthews. Joseph’s scribe, Warren Parrish, recorded this 1835 retelling. Unlike what he did in the previous account, Joseph emphasized the adversarial influence prior to his prayer and his struggle as he fought the evil force that seemingly did not want him to succeed in calling upon God. He later said, the “powers of darkness strove hard against me.” Determined to follow through with his plan, Joseph recalled, “I kneeled again[,] my mouth was opened and my tongue liberated, and I called on the Lord in mighty prayer.” The contrast Joseph portrayed between the adversary and the feeling following this prayer is stark: “A pillar of fire appeared above my head, it presently rested down upon me, and filled me with joy unspeakable.”<sup>6</sup>

*The 1838 account.* Joseph Smith originally dictated the 1838 account as part of a longer history of the Church. Rewritten by James Mullholland in 1839 as part of the first volume of the 1838–56 history and published in the *Times and Seasons* in 1842, this account is the most recognizable among Latter-day Saints today because it is the version published in the Pearl of Great Price as Joseph Smith—History. Joseph stated the objective of this account was to “disabuse the public mind, and put all inquirers after truth in possession of the facts, as they have transpired, in relation both to myself and the Church, so far as I have such facts in my possession” (Joseph Smith—History 1:1). It is significant to note that at the time of this most recognizable version, Joseph and the Saints had completed their Kirtland years; in Kirtland they had received revelations and life experiences in connection with the School of the Prophets, they had built and dedicated the house of the Lord, and they had received the keys of the priesthood. Thus, the writing of this version of the First Vision was authored by a seasoned, tried, and divinely tutored prophet of God. In this account as well, Joseph described a clear, matter-of-fact, step-by-step process he followed in preparation for his

divine vision according to the knowledge he had obtained. This process will be elaborated on later in the paper.

*The 1842 account.* The final account, written in response to a request by John Wentworth, editor of the *Chicago Democrat*, was published in the *Times and Seasons* on 1 March 1842, and is known as the Wentworth letter. This straightforward account, written for a non-Mormon audience, was a response to an inquiry regarding the “rise, progress, persecution and faith of the Latter-day Saints.”<sup>7</sup> With minor modifications, Joseph Smith sent the account to historian Israel Daniel Rupp, who published it in his book, “He Pasa Ekklesia [The Whole Church]: An Original History of the Religious Denominations at Present Existing in the United States.” This 1842 account contains a more personal historical touch by the prophet, relating how, at a young age, he “began to reflect upon the importance of being prepared for a future state,” and finding, as he visited a variety of faiths, “a great clash in religious sentiment” which caused him “much confusion.” He recognized that “if God had a church” he would not teach worshiping, administering of ordinances, and principles in such ways that were so “diametrically opposed.” While “fervently engaged in supplication,” Joseph saw “two glorious personages who exactly resembled each other in features, and likeness.” They told him “that all religious denominations were believing in incorrect doctrines,” and he was “expressly commanded to ‘go not after them.’”

In all of these accounts, Joseph made it clear that he was in a deep and desperate search for knowledge, information, or wisdom and that he was willing to do all he needed to in order to obtain it.

## Pattern for Spiritual Learning

Opinions regarding what constitutes real learning are varied and are at times controversial. For some, learning may be defined by cognitive growth or additional information, where for others, learning is based on behavior outcomes. According to Robert Gagne, a highly acclaimed educational psychologist, “Learning is a change in human disposition or capability, which can be retained, and which is not simply ascribable to the process of growth.”<sup>8</sup> Elder Dallin H. Oaks aptly instructs that the process of religious learning requires more than the acquisition of knowledge. “It is not even enough,” he instructs, “for us to be *convinced* of the gospel; we must act and think

so that we are *converted* by it.” Therefore, he continues, “In contrast to the institutions of the world, which teach us to *know* something, the gospel of Jesus Christ challenges us to *become* something.”<sup>9</sup> In Ephesians, the Apostle Paul taught that teachings and teachers of the Lord were given to help all attain “the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13). Therefore, in secular learning, and more specifically in spiritual learning, the purpose is not merely for an individual to know something but rather to do and become something.

Recognizing this critical pattern and desired outcome associated with learning, Elder David A. Bednar boldly declared, “The Prophet Joseph Smith was the greatest learner in the dispensation of the fullness of times.” Continuing, he related, “He was a sincere and eager student, his teachers were members of the Godhead and angels, and his curriculum was focused upon the truths of eternity. Joseph is the quintessential example of a humble and diligent learner.”<sup>10</sup> Although applying the pattern Joseph Smith exemplified may not lead to a duplication of the First Vision, the principles of learning distilled from Joseph Smith’s accounts of the First Vision will lead one to the same fruit: gaining wisdom and becoming a new person.

*Personal perplexity and/or cognitive dissonance.* A preliminary factor in the learning process is personal perplexity and what educational psychologists term *cognitive dissonance* (an inconsistency between beliefs and behaviors), which motivates an individual to seek a resolution or answer, thus instigating true learning. J. T. Dillon clarified, “The main event at the start of [learning] is the experience of perplexity. That is the precondition of questioning and thus the prerequisite for learning. Questioning still might not follow, nor learning; without perplexity [questioning or learning] cannot follow.”<sup>11</sup> Although Joseph related that he “sought information” in the 1832 account, Joseph was seeking more than a dissemination of knowledge. He clearly yearned for the truth that could resolve his perplexity and dissonance. In addition, Joseph also recounted his struggle with inconsistencies between the beliefs and teachings of various religious sects and their actions. Personal perplexity and cognitive dissonance stimulated Joseph’s desire for resolution, which in turn led to intense pondering and questioning required for learning. A closer examination of each of Joseph’s four First Vision accounts further illustrates this primary principle of perplexity and cognitive dissonance.

In his 1832 account, Joseph related that at the age of twelve, his “mind became seriously impressed with regard to the all-important concerns for the welfare of my immortal soul.” Having a firm belief in the truths declared in the scriptures, Joseph began searching the word of God, but he began to “marvel exceedingly” as he compared what he read with what he saw in his “intimate acquaintance with those of different denominations.” He became aware that those of religious traditions “did not adorn their profession by a holy walk and Godly conversation agreeable to what [he] found contained in that sacred depository.” He expressed, “This was a grief to my soul.” As a result of this personal perplexity and cognitive dissonance, he continued, “My mind became exceedingly distressed for I become convicted of my sins.” It appears that the recognition of the seeming hypocrisy of the ungodly walk of others caused him to reflect on his own conduct, perhaps recognizing the same tendency in himself, which therefore likely led to his personal need for repentance.

Joseph’s private struggle is plainly and succinctly revealed in each of the accounts. In the 1835 account, he described being “perplexed in mind” and “being wrought up in my mind, . . . I knew not who was right or who was wrong.” In the 1838 account, Joseph further portrayed his perplexity that “the seemingly good feelings of both the priests and the converts were more pretended than real.” This dissonance became a catalyst for even greater perplexity and restlessness regarding the decision of which church to join. “During this time of great excitement my mind was called up to serious reflection and great uneasiness.” He continued, “So great were the confusion and strife among the different denominations, that it was impossible for a person young as I was, and so unacquainted with men and things, to come to any certain conclusion who was right and who was wrong.”

In the Wentworth letter of 1842, Joseph expressed his confusion concerning the “great clash in religious sentiment” regarding the “plan of salvation.” Each religious sect taught its plan to be the “summum bonum of perfection.” Joseph indicated that he believed that all of the various plans could not be right at the same time; he felt that “God could not be the author of so much confusion” and that “if God had a church it would not be split up into factions, and that if he taught one society to worship one way, and administer in one set of ordinances, he would not teach another principles which were diametrically opposed.”

Joseph described in these four accounts what Gagne referred to as a possible “learning event” and a “stimulus situation.”<sup>12</sup> However, having a learner and a stimulus does not necessarily lead to learning. Learning is dependent on the desire and effort exerted by the learner. Hence, Joseph’s accounts reflected this first principle or precondition of learning, but what he did with this stimulus situation determined if learning would actually occur.

*Effort required for personal learning.* As Dillon poignantly expressed, perplexity is a precondition to learning but does not necessarily lead to it. In Joseph’s case, however, his insatiable need for resolution and understanding indeed led him to further inquiry. Perhaps it was the very personal nature of the perplexity that necessitated resolution. “Only when learning becomes personal, when the learner makes choices and the spirit and body unite,” Russell Osguthorpe explained, “will learning find lasting place in one’s soul.”<sup>13</sup> In fact, in the 1832 account, Joseph acknowledged that it was the concern for the “welfare of my immortal soul which led me to searching the scriptures. . . . I pondered many things in my heart.” His continued search for truth as he pondered, questioned, and studied is eventually what led him to “[cry] unto the Lord for mercy.”

In the 1835 account, Joseph acknowledged that it was in his search of the Bible that he found the critical principle with the promise, “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you” (Matthew 7:7), as well as the more widely reported admonition, “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not” (James 1:5). It was James’s admonition in the scriptures that led to Joseph’s determination to retire “to the silent grove and [bow] down before the Lord.” In his 1838 account, Joseph elaborated even more on the questioning and searching process that followed his perplexity: “In the midst of this war of words and tumult of opinions, I often said to myself: What is to be done? Who of all these parties are right; or, are they all wrong together? If any one of them be right, which is it, and how shall I know it?”

Joseph’s questioning process was not casual, nor out of mere curiosity for information. Joseph described this state of being in the 1838 account (a prime example of what educators would call cognitive dissonance): “I was laboring under the extreme difficulties caused by the contests of these parties of religionists.” It was this searching, laboring, and heartfelt experience that led him to read the passage from James as sighted above. In this 1838

account, however, Joseph described his feelings following the reading of this passage: “Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine,” he declared. “It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my heart. I reflected on it again and again, knowing that if any person needed wisdom from God, I did; for how to act I did not know, and unless I could get more wisdom than I then had, I would never know.”

This search for truth, as Osguthorpe instructed, requires a different search than does traditional sectarian learning. “It demands that we have faith, that we ponder and pray, and that we open ourselves to guidance from others and from God. There must be no pretense that such a search will be easy. Exercising faith, pondering, praying and listening for guidance require our utmost commitment, our maximum energy, our whole being. . . . Once we have taken our first step on the path, we must follow it to its conclusion.”<sup>14</sup> Pondering, praying, listening, exercising faith—these are not words for the lazy or passive learner but rather are the requirements necessary for one ready to wrestle for that which is of great worth.

A later lecture attributed to Joseph Smith states, “We understand that when a man works by faith he works by mental exertion instead of physical force: it is by words instead of exerting his physical powers, with which every being works when he works by faith.”<sup>15</sup> On this assertion Robert Millet, expanded, “We are not to understand . . . that exercising faith is merely an intellectual exercise or that those with unusual mental capacities necessarily have more faith. Rather, the mental exertion of which the Prophet spoke seems to be the rigor and strenuous labor, the soul searching and personal denial associated with coming to know the mind and will of God and then acting upon it.”<sup>16</sup> Joseph had not only pondered and prayed, but he personally attended “their several meetings as often as occasion would permit” (Joseph Smith—History 1:8). He literally seemed to have done all he could to find the truth he so desperately desired.

Later, while in the sacred tutoring environment of the Liberty Jail (often described as a “temple prison”), Joseph taught the critical relationship between individual effort and spiritual learning. “The things of God are of deep import,” he declared, “and time, and experience, and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out.” Then, perhaps in his desire to expand on how far this searching must go, he continued, “Thy

mind, O man! If thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss, and the broad expanse of eternity.”<sup>17</sup>

Thus, for an individual to expect revelation on the things of eternity, one must understand the wrestle required to obtain it. Joseph Smith instructed his brethren, “After your tribulations, if you do these things, and exercise fervent prayer and faith in the sight of God always, He shall give unto you knowledge by His Holy Spirit, yea by the unspeakable gift of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>18</sup> It is interesting to note, among other things in this statement, the inclusion of tribulations for one trying to learn the things of God. In his own endeavors, even as described in his First Vision accounts, Joseph acknowledged “tribulation” as part of the learning experience. Tribulation itself does not ensure spiritual learning but rather, as was demonstrated in the 1835 account, the ability to push through the tribulation and rely on the Lord. Joseph did not cease to call upon God in the presence of the adversary but rather “kneeled again . . . and called on the Lord in mighty prayer.”

In the popular 1838 account, Joseph described the attacks of the adversary as he attempted to cry to the Lord and attempted to endure in seeking the will of God. “I had scarcely done so, when immediately I was seized upon by some power which entirely overcame me, and had such an astonishing influence over me as to bind my tongue so that I could not speak. Thick darkness gathered around me, and it seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction, . . . not to an imaginary ruin, but to the power of some actual being from the unseen world, who had such marvelous power as I had never before felt in any being.”

As part of the pattern required for all spiritual learners, Joseph, through great effort on his own, fought through the darkness, the confusion, and the tribulation and continued to call upon the Lord. Although Joseph became starkly aware of the reality of the adversary in a very personal way, this did not impede him from his continued search for truth. He humbly acted in accordance with the prescriptive truth he found in the Bible and in so doing was given even greater light. Among other things, he learned the eternal truth that God is more powerful than Satan. He witnessed the existence of them both as a direct result of taking upon himself the personal responsibility to endure to the end—giving, in a sense, whatever it took.

*Dependence and recognition that all truth comes from the divine.*

Recognizing as a young man that he was unable to make a decision based on his personal discussions with family and religious community leaders, Joseph went to the Bible, believing it to be the word of God. Through his struggle to obtain truth, however, he learned that even the Bible itself could not be interpreted by him alone, “for the teachers of religion of the different sects understood the same passages of scripture so differently as to destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible.” With this acknowledgment, he came to the conclusion that rather than finding the answer in the study of the Bible itself, he must do as the Bible taught and ask God.

It is critical to note here that Joseph trusted the Bible to be the word of God and believed it was literally from a divine source, and thus he was willing to obey its precepts. Mary Boys and Thomas Groome indicate various categories of perceptions of the Bible that in turn lead to a variety of implications. These categories of perception include, first, a “collection of ancient & diverse literature”; second, “reflection and telescoping of beliefs and experiences of communities”; third, “a classic text”; fourth, the “Word of God in human language”; and fifth, “Scripture.” Only when the Bible is perceived as scripture, according to Boys and Groome, does the reader “allow [the] text to nurture, shape [their] identity or transform [them].”<sup>19</sup>

Feeling similar sentiments to those expressed by Timothy in the Bible, Joseph found himself in a category of those who were “ever learning, but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 3:7). Thus Joseph, having learned of and considered upon the true nature of God’s invitation to ask any question, and desiring to “seek” those who “worship him in spirit and truth” decided to cry unto the Lord, for he came to the conclusion that “there was none else to whom I could go” (1832 account).

In the 1835 account, he explained, “Information was what I most desired at this time, and with a fixed determination to obtain it, I called upon the Lord for the first time.” In the 1838 account, Joseph similarly explained that he “came to the conclusion that I must either remain in darkness and confusion, or else I must do as James directs, that is, ask of God.” In the 1842 account, Joseph specifically states that he “believ[ed] the word of God” and “had confidence in the declaration of James.” In fact, he believed and

had enough confidence to take the scriptural admonition at face value and “retired to a secret place in a grove and began to call upon the Lord.”

George Albert Smith echoed the previous notion that Joseph spoke of his sacred experiences not merely to show what he had done but rather to invite others to have similar experiences. “Joseph Smith taught that every man and woman should seek the Lord for wisdom, that they might get knowledge from Him who is the fountain of knowledge.”<sup>20</sup> Note in this quote that Joseph did not merely invite others to seek wisdom; he emphasized how to receive wisdom from God. Although Joseph received an answer directly from God, it is important to note that in the 1832 addition Joseph acknowledged, “I was filled with the spirit of God.” Even though he had a personal visitation with God the Father and the Son, he still acknowledged the role of the Holy Ghost in the learning process.

On 7 April 1844, after years of spiritual learning and instruction from the Divine, Joseph expanded his explanation of the role of the Holy Ghost in his spiritual learning. “I have an old edition of the New Testament in the Latin, Hebrew, German and Greek languages. . . . I thank God that I have got this old book; but I thank him more for the gift of the Holy Ghost. I have got the oldest book in the world; but I have got the oldest book in my heart, even the gift of the Holy Ghost.” He continued, “The Holy Ghost . . . is within me, and comprehends more than all the world; and I will associate myself with him.”<sup>21</sup> President Harold B. Lee, a prophet himself and thus one of the most qualified people to write on the subject of spiritual learning, agreed: “A prophet . . . does not become a spiritual leader by studying books about religion, nor does he become one by attending a theological seminary. One becomes a prophet, a divinely called religious leader, by actual spiritual contacts. He gets his diploma, as it were, directly from God.”<sup>22</sup>

The critical role of the Holy Ghost in confirming and teaching truth cannot be overlooked. In fact, the Lord himself declared in what later would become section 50 of the Doctrine and Covenants, “He that receiveth the word of truth, doth he receive it by the Spirit of truth or some other way? If it be some other way it is not of God” (D&C 50:19–20). Or in other words, eternal learning—any learning that applies to the salvation of the soul—comes only through a member of the Godhead. Joseph recognized that God’s thoughts were higher than man’s thoughts and his ways higher

than man's ways. The closer Joseph seemed to draw to the Lord, the more he recognized his complete dependence on him and the immense gap between human and divine. In Liberty Jail, for example, Joseph meekly mused, "How much more dignified and noble are the thoughts of God, than the vain imaginations of the human heart!"<sup>23</sup> As is the case with all humble seekers of religious truth, the more they know about God, the more they recognize their complete dependence on him.

*Acknowledgment of personal responsibility to learn and act.* For this reason, as Elder David A. Bednar instructed, "Spiritual knowledge cannot be given by or borrowed from another person. Shortcuts to the desired destination do not exist. Cramming for the ultimate final examination on the day of judgment is not an option."<sup>24</sup> Perhaps one of the most critical principles of spiritual learning is that of taking responsibility for one's own learning and acting in accordance with newfound truth. Groome indicated that Jesus's whole intent as a teacher "was to empower people to become agents of their faith rather than dependents."<sup>25</sup> Thus, as Joseph Fielding McConkie asserted, "Real learning begins at the point that we assume personal responsibility for our learning. If there is a single moment of maturity, it is the moment at which we realize that the burden is ours to learn and not the teacher's to teach."<sup>26</sup> Not only had Joseph, at a young age, taken upon himself the responsibility of finding resolution to his perplexity through his intense search for truth, but he also recognized the importance of acting on the truth he had learned in order to find more truth. In so doing, his spiritual capacity expanded as he exercised his spirituality.<sup>27</sup>

In all of Joseph's accounts of the First Vision, it is clear that he searched for truth—eternal truth—with the intent to act upon what he had learned. In the 1832 account, Joseph simply recorded, "I cried unto the Lord." In the 1835 account, Joseph indicated after his study of the Bible that he "called upon the Lord for the first time." In the 1842 account, Joseph once again declared that he "began to call upon the Lord."

In the 1838 account, Joseph explained in greater detail the actions he took in preparation to ask. "After I had retired to the place where I had previously designed to go, having looked around me, and finding myself alone, I kneeled down and began to offer up the desires of my heart to God." This account provides additional understanding regarding Joseph's intent to act

in faith. "My object in going to inquire of the Lord was to know which of all the sects was right, that I might know which to join. No sooner, therefore, did I get possession of myself, so as to be able to speak, than I asked the Personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right (for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong)—and which I should join." In this account, Joseph makes it clear that he was not merely asking for an opinion or guidance but rather that he desired to know the will and mind of God in order to then act in faith by joining one of the churches. As James A. Sanders, an American scholar of the Old Testament, summarized, when the scriptures are perceived as the literal word of God to man, they typically lead to two questions: *Who are we?* and *What are we to do?*<sup>28</sup> Not only then is Joseph told what to do (or rather, what not to do) at that moment, but in the 1832 account, Joseph was told who he was: "I saw the Lord and he spake unto me saying Joseph *my son* thy sins are forgiven thee." According to this account, the first thing the Lord communicates to Joseph is his divine identity as God's son.

Indeed, after the vision, when asked by his mother about his well-being, Joseph replied, "I have learned for myself" (Joseph Smith—History 1:20). Although he was surrounded by religious leaders at the time, so many that the area of his residence became known as the "burned-over district," Joseph was not content with borrowed light, nor did he settle for the opinions of others. Although he could have easily joined one of the religions of the day, succumbed to their teachings, and placed the responsibility for his salvation on the teacher, Joseph took responsibility for his own salvation. Elder Boyd K. Packer counseled, "There are too many in the Church who seem to be totally dependent, emotionally and spiritually, upon others. They subsist on some kind of emotional welfare. They are unwilling to sustain themselves. They become so dependent that they endlessly need to be shored up, lifted up, endlessly need encouragement, and they contribute little of their own."<sup>29</sup>

Joseph's determination to act upon the will of God did not end with his prayer but clearly continued as he acted upon, testified of, and defended his new found truth, even when persecuted until death. The object of the Lord's divine tutoring for Joseph was not merely for him to know something but for him to *do* something and, as a result, lead himself and others to *become* something. Validating this observation, Joseph later penned, "The object

with me is to obey and teach others to obey God in just what He tells us to do. It mattereth not whether the principle is popular or unpopular, I will always maintain a true principle, even if I stand alone in it.”<sup>30</sup>

It is this very attribute of obedience to God that made Joseph Smith a fruitful ground for divine tutoring and thus made him a self-reliant learner. By 1834, Joseph taught, “We consider that God has created man with a mind capable of instruction, and a faculty which may be enlarged in proportion to the heed and diligence given to the light communicated from heaven to the intellect.”<sup>31</sup> Joseph was a great learner not because of a formal education or an uncommon IQ but instead because of his obedient, humble nature and compelling desire to know and do the will of God. In each of Joseph’s First Vision accounts, he portrayed himself as a humble learner, willing to accept the teachings of God over his own findings and act accordingly. In the 1838 account, for example, he explained that he came to the determination to ask God, “concluding that if he gave wisdom to them that lacked wisdom, and would give liberally, and not upbraid, I might venture.” Joseph put himself, therefore, in the category of one who lacked wisdom and recognized his complete, childlike dependence on the Lord. In so doing, he allowed the Lord to fill him with truth, line upon line, as he was able to bear.

## Conclusion

Joseph was not one who wanted a monopoly on all things spiritual but rather desired that all would become self-reliant in this realm. In fact, he and his counselors in the First Presidency affirmed, “God hath not revealed anything to Joseph, but what He will make known unto the Twelve, and even the least Saint may know all things as fast as he is able to bear them, for the day must come when no man need say to his neighbor, Know ye the Lord; for all shall know Him . . . from the least to the greatest.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, not only did Joseph Smith desire to instruct the Saints on the doctrines and truths associated with the First Vision but also desired to “qualify us to have our own spiritual experiences.”<sup>33</sup> Therefore, all who follow Joseph’s pattern of spiritual learning, by recognizing personal perplexity and cognitive dissonance, putting forth the necessary effort required to receive divine truth, and acting as an agent in responsibly applying the eternal truths, will also

come to know for themselves, and having acted on the truth, become wise and, like Joseph, no longer lack wisdom.<sup>34</sup>

## Notes

1. *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: David O. McKay* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2011), 93.
2. Joseph Fielding McConkie, “The God of Joseph Smith,” in *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History: Illinois*, ed. H. Dean Garrett (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, Department of Church History and Doctrine, 1995), 206–7.
3. For a more in-depth discussion on these accounts, see Gospel Topics, “First Vision Accounts,” [www.lds.org/topics/first-vision-accounts?lang=eng](http://www.lds.org/topics/first-vision-accounts?lang=eng). See also the works of Steven Harper, Milton Backman, and James B. Allen.
4. Gospel Topics, “First Vision Accounts.”
5. History, circa Summer 1832, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-circa-summer-1832?p=1>. Although the quotes were taken directly from the accounts of Joseph Smith, spelling for these statements and all to follow have been standardized for ease in reading and understanding.
6. Journal, 1835–1836, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/journal-1835-1836?p=24>.
7. “Church History,” 1 March 1842, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/church-history-1-march-1842?p=1>; Dean C. Jessee, “The Earliest Documented Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press; Salt Lake City: and Deseret Book, 2005), 17.
8. Robert M. Gagne, *The Conditions of Learning* (New York: Holt, 1965), 5.
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