

CHAPTER FOUR

JOSEPH SMITH'S EXPANSION OF OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE PREMORTAL LIFE AND OUR RELATIONSHIP TO GOD

RANDY L. BOTT

The stage is set, the time has arrived, and the tension can be felt in the air. Every detail has been attended to, considered, and reconsidered. Calculations numbering thousands of pages have been verified and reverified. Every possible scenario has been posed and thought through, and every possible problem has been solved. We watch the final countdown. Ignition, then liftoff! The next lunar expedition has begun.

We have heard that scenario played and replayed many times. We marvel at the attention to detail that this massive team of scientists has given. No pain is too great to avoid a catastrophe. Yet some would have us believe that this earth, traveling through space at incomprehensible speeds, held in a demandingly precise orbit around the sun, with every condition essential to keep continued life on earth unerringly in place, happened by chance. Perhaps that is one reason why the Lord called the Prophet Joseph Smith to push back the curtains of conjecture and disbelief and allowed us an illuminating look into the master plan of the entire universe. Joseph said: "In the first place, I wish to go back to the beginning—to the morn of creation. There is the starting point for us to look to, in order to understand and be fully acquainted with the mind, purposes and decrees of the Great Elohim, who sits in yonder heavens as he did at the creation of this world. It is necessary for us to have an

Randy L. Bott is a full teaching professor at Brigham Young University.

understanding of God himself in the beginning. If we start right, it is easy to go right all the time; but if we start wrong, we may go wrong, and it will be a hard matter to get right."¹

Amidst the confusion resulting from conflicting theories that attempt to explain what we see around us everyday, it is no wonder that sincere, honest people question whether there is purpose in life. Did we begin in some prehistoric ocean billions of years ago and through randomness miraculously evolve into this diverse and complex world? With our origins enshrouded in mysticism and the ever-changing theories of men, no wonder Joseph was compelled to say: "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—thou must commune with God."²

What insights did the Prophet add to our understanding of who we are, why we are here, what part, if any, our current condition plays in the eternal scheme of things? The Prophet explained:

All men know that they must die. And it is important that we should understand the reasons and causes of our exposure to the vicissitudes of life and of death, and the designs and purposes of God in our coming into the world, our sufferings here, and our departure hence. What is the object of our coming into existence, then dying and falling away, to be here no more? It is but reasonable to suppose that God would reveal something in reference to the matter, and it is a subject we ought to study more than any other. We ought to study it day and night, for the world is ignorant in reference to their true condition and relation. If we have any claim on our Heavenly Father for anything, it is for knowledge on this important subject.³

In order to survey the breadth and depth of Joseph's discourses on what God revealed to him, I will lightly touch upon the following topics.

GOD'S MASTER PLAN

Life was far from a cosmic accident; the great Jehovah (the pre-mortal Jesus Christ) knew and made provisions for every possible contingency for the mortal duration of this earth. Joseph taught:

The great Jehovah contemplated the whole of the events connected with the earth, pertaining to the plan of salvation, before it rolled into existence, or ever "the morning stars sang together" for joy; the past, the present, and the future were and are, with Him, one eternal "now;" He knew of the fall of Adam, the iniquities of the antediluvians, of the depth of iniquity that would be connected with the human family. . . . He knew the plan of salvation and pointed it out; He was acquainted with the situation of all nations and with their destiny; He ordered all things according to the council of His own will; He knows the situation of both the living and the dead, and has made ample provision for their redemption, according to their several circumstances, and the laws of the kingdom of God, whether in this world, or in the world to come.⁴

Before beginning our investigation of this earth and our premortal experience, it is instructive to put ourselves in the grand eternal picture. This earth was not the first (nor will it be the last) of God's creative ventures (see Moses 1:4). As the Prophet was fulfilling his divinely given assignment to retranslate the Bible, he learned of a vision given to the ancient prophet Moses. Moses saw countless worlds with their inhabitants. His interest was piqued, and he asked to understand about these innumerable worlds. The Savior answered:

Only an account of this earth, and the inhabitants thereof, give I unto you. For behold, there are many worlds that have passed away by the word of my power. And there are many that now stand, and innumerable are they unto man; but all things are numbered unto me, for they are mine and I know them.

And it came to pass that Moses spake unto the Lord, saying: Be merciful unto thy servant, O God, and tell me concerning this earth, and the inhabitants thereof, and also the heavens, and then thy servant will be content.

And the Lord God spake unto Moses, saying: The heavens, they are many, and they cannot be numbered unto man; but they are numbered unto me, for they are mine.

And as one earth shall pass away, and the heavens thereof even so shall another come; and there is no end to my works, neither to my words.

For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man. (Moses 1:35–39)

Joseph learned that the act of creating, peopling, and redeeming everything on these numberless earths is the very purpose, work, and glory of God (see 1 Nephi 17:36; Moses 6:44). If accepted by the world, this one divinely revealed concept might forever change the purpose of the research and many of the methods of scientists. However, even given that expanded insight, Joseph continued to probe further. He taught that Gods have existed “one above another” forever! Couching his reasoning in the teachings of other prophets, such as the ancient patriarch Abraham, John the Revelator, and the Apostle Paul, he said:

I learned a testimony concerning Abraham, and he reasoned concerning the God of heaven. “In order to do that,” said he, “suppose we have two facts: that supposes another fact may exist—two men on earth, one wiser than the other, would logically show that another who is wiser than the wisest may exist. Intelligences exist one above another, so that there is no end to them.”

If Abraham reasoned thus—If Jesus Christ was the Son of God, and John discovered that God the Father of Jesus Christ had a Father, you may suppose that He had a Father also. Where was there ever a son without a father? And where was there ever a father without first being a son? Whenever did a tree or anything spring into existence without a progenitor? And everything comes in this way. Paul says that which is earthly is in the likeness of that which is heavenly, Hence if Jesus had a Father, can we not believe that *He* had a Father also? I despise the idea of being scared to death at such a doctrine, for the Bible is full of it.⁵

It would be a monumental mistake to believe that our premortal existence was the beginning of God’s work and glory. Without an idea of the bigger picture, even Latter-day Saints run the risk of failing to comprehend God, and comprehending God is by definition eternal life (see John 17:3). The Prophet Joseph Smith further taught that regardless of how many gods there are, we will never—throughout all eternity—ever worship any other beings save God our Eternal Father and His Beloved Son, Jesus Christ.⁶

OUR PREMORTAL BEGINNING

Although it is clearly taught in the Bible that we are the literal offspring of God (see Matthew 6:9; Acts 17:28, 29; Hebrews 12:9), the world has, in an attempt to explain man's presence on earth without recognizing God's role in his creation, fictionalized that most important concept. However, the creation of man was a divine act and was revealed as such to man from the beginning. "Now this prophecy Adam spake, as he was moved upon by the Holy Ghost, and a genealogy was kept of the children of God. And this was the book of the generations of Adam, saying: In the day that God created man, in the likeness of God made he him; in the image of his own body, male and female, created he them, and blessed them, and called their name Adam, in the day when they were created and became living souls in the land upon the footstool of God" (Moses 6:8–9).

Not only did God create man in His own image (see Genesis 1:26–27), but He revealed that men and women in their exalted state can also be referred to as gods.⁷ Most people would acknowledge that offspring have the capability of growing up to be like their parents; so it is in the eternal worlds. If we begin by accepting the revealed truth that we are literal spirit offspring of God, then it should not be difficult to accept the concept that eventually we could grow up to become like God—that we have inherited a divine potential. In fact that is exactly what Joseph Smith taught:

The first principles of man are self-existent with God. God himself, finding he was in the midst of spirits and glory, because he was more intelligent, saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself. The relationship we have with God places us in a situation to advance in knowledge. He has power to institute laws to instruct the weaker intelligences, that they may be exalted with himself, so that they might have one glory upon another, and all that knowledge, power, glory, and intelligence, which is requisite in order to save them in the world of spirits.⁸

Given this understanding of the purpose of divinely mandated law (to help us progress toward our eternal destiny of becoming like God), one no longer is tempted to view commandments as restrictive

or burdensome but sees them as manifestations of divine love that help us attain our desired goal of eternal exaltation.

Continuing his teaching of what God had revealed to him, Joseph Smith expanded our understanding of truths revealed to the ancient patriarch Abraham:

Now the Lord had shown unto me, Abraham, the intelligences that were organized before the world was; and among all these there were many of the noble and great ones;

And God saw these souls that they were good, and he stood in the midst of them, and he said: These I will make my rulers; for he stood among those that were spirits, and he saw that they were good; and he said unto me: Abraham, thou art one of them; thou wast chosen before thou wast born.

And there stood one among them that was like unto God, and he said unto those who were with him: We will go down, for there is space there, and we will take of these materials, and we will make an earth whereon these may dwell;

And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them;

And they who keep their first estate shall be added upon; and they who keep not their first estate shall not have glory in the same kingdom with those who keep their first estate; and they who keep their second estate shall have glory added upon their heads for ever and ever. (Abraham 3:22–26)

THE ROLE OF AGENCY IN OUR PREMORTAL PROGRESS

From those verses we learn that many of the spirit children of God, through obedience to premortal laws (called “the gospel of God” in Romans 1:1), had distinguished themselves as “noble and great ones,” implying that there must have been others who were not so noble and not so great because of their lack of diligence in obeying God’s laws. In explaining the cause of the great schism in heaven, the Lord revealed to Joseph: “It came to pass that Adam, being tempted of the devil—for, behold, the devil was before Adam, for he rebelled against me, saying, Give me thine honor, which is my

power; and also a third part of the hosts of heaven turned he away from me because of their agency" (D&C 29:36).

Agency was a gift given to the premortal sons and daughters of God. God would never force His children to follow rules that would automatically result in exaltation and eternal happiness. Growth toward exaltation comes because of voluntary obedience, not forced submission. As Joseph retranslated the Bible, he had revealed to him more of the details concerning the War in Heaven.

And I, the Lord God, spake unto Moses, saying: That Satan, whom thou hast commanded in the name of mine Only Begotten, is the same which was from the beginning, and he came before me, saying—Behold, here am I, send me, I will be thy son, and I will redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost, and surely I will do it; wherefore give me thine honor.

But, behold, my Beloved Son, which was my Beloved and Chosen from the beginning, said unto me—Father, thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever.

Wherefore, because that Satan rebelled against me, and sought to destroy the agency of man, which I, the Lord God, had given him, and also, that I should give unto him mine own power; by the power of mine Only Begotten, I caused that he should be cast down;

And he became Satan, yea, even the devil, the father of all lies, to deceive and to blind men, and to lead them captive at his will, even as many as would not hearken unto my voice. (Moses 4:1–4)

From these verses we learn that the right to exercise our agency to our own exaltation or destruction was so prized by our Heavenly Father that He would not abridge it even if it meant that some of His children would be eternally excluded from His presence. Lucifer led a rebellion against God, failed, and was cast out with all who followed him. "Neither was their place found any more in heaven" (Revelation 12:8). Today those who choose to follow the adversary become "carnal, sensual, and devilish," while those who believe in the Son of God and repent of their sins will be saved (see Moses 5:13–15). Joseph later taught: "Satan was generally blamed for the evils which we did, but if he was the cause of all our wickedness, men could not be condemned. The devil could not compel mankind to do evil; all

was voluntary. Those who resisted the Spirit of God, would be liable to be led into temptation, and then the association of heaven would be withdrawn from those who refused to be made partakers of such great glory. God would not exert any compulsory means, and the devil could not; and such ideas as were entertained [on these subjects] by many were absurd."⁹

Later in his life, Joseph again returned to this theme. He knew that without a correct understanding of the events that transpired in the pre-earth life, mortal man was likely to misunderstand many of the seemingly senseless happenings in mortality. He taught: "The contention in heaven was—Jesus said there would be certain souls that would not be saved; and the devil said he could save them all, and laid his plans before the grand council, who gave their vote in favor of Jesus Christ. So the devil rose up in rebellion against God, and was cast down, with all who put up their heads for him."¹⁰

FOREORDAINED ROLES, A REWARD FOR PREMORTAL DILIGENCE

From the Prophet Joseph Smith's translation of the book of Abraham, we learn many other vital truths. Joseph taught that many of the noble and great spirits would be foreordained to certain works here on the earth as a result of their premortal diligence (see also Alma 13). The Lord said to Abraham, "These I will make my rulers." Rather modestly, Joseph explained his foreordained role and that of many others: "Every man who has a calling to minister to the inhabitants of the world was ordained to that very purpose in the Grand Council of heaven before this world was. I suppose I was ordained to this very office in that Grand Council."¹¹

As Joseph Smith continued to translate the papyrus of Abraham, he further learned that mortal life was intended to be a probationary experience: "And there stood one among them that was like unto God, and he said unto those who were with him: We will go down, for there is space there, and we will take of these materials, and we will make an earth whereon these may dwell; and we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them" (Abraham 3:24–25).

All who know, honor, and revere the Savior recognize that He was the one who was "like unto God," foreordained to supervise the creation of the earth. However, the antecedent to "them" in verse 22

is the “noble and great ones.” Could Joseph possibly be translating aright? Even that “many of the noble and great ones” were to help create the earth? It was the very plan of the Eternal Father to provide experiences and lessons necessary for His children to become like Him. Joseph Smith taught that the Father, “God,” is also known as “the Creator.”¹² It seems possible, therefore, that those who would eventually gain their exaltation might have played some part in the Creation of this earth to gain experience for their future creative ventures.¹³ As President Joseph Fielding Smith noted: “Adam . . . helped to create this earth. He was chosen in pre-existence to be the first man upon the earth and the father of the human race, and he will preside over his posterity forever.”¹⁴

If we knew enough and had been given sufficient power to help create the earth on which we live, we should embrace the fact that we have sufficient power to create and control our intellectual, social, spiritual, mental, and, to a degree, physical world here in mortality. Now we can transition from being an advanced organism subject to environmental control to being sons and daughters of God endowed with agency and reason in order to create and fashion our own mortal experience to some degree.

A PLACE TO BEGIN UNDERSTANDING MORTALITY

Surely the reader can see that only summary points of interest have been touched upon in this paper and that a larger, more inclusive investigation begs to be written. Perhaps that is why Joseph said: “The great plan of salvation is a theme which ought to occupy our strict attention, and be regarded as one of heaven’s best gifts to mankind. No consideration whatever ought to deter us from showing ourselves approved in the sight of God, according to His divine requirement.”¹⁵

Far from being a cosmic mistake or even a divine experiment, our mortal existence is part of an eternal story that never had a beginning and will never have an end. Nothing could be further from the truth than to believe that we are here by mistake or without a purpose. In fact, God revealed to Joseph, “I give unto you these sayings that you may understand and know how to worship, and know what you worship, that you may come unto the Father in my name, and in due time receive of his fulness” (D&C 93:19). Joseph

further taught, "If men do not comprehend the character of God, they do not comprehend themselves."¹⁶

With the correct understanding of who God is, what our relationship is to Him, and what His Divine purpose is for us, it is much easier to view the commandments and the trials of life as stepping stones toward our future exaltation. Then the satanic opposition we constantly experience, the death of loved ones, and everything that seems so senseless and meaningless are viewed as part of God's work and glory (see Moses 1:39) and begin to make perfect sense.

When we understand from our study of the pre-earth life that every person on earth is a brother or sister with the same divine Father, then the incentive to live together in love and harmony here in mortality increases. When we see, with our expanded vision of the pre-earth life, God's perfect love for us and His infinite ability to foreknow and preplan our mortal experience, then we can accept without murmuring those things that happen to us in mortality over which we have no control. "He doeth not anything save it be for the benefit of the world; for he loveth the world, even that he layeth down his own life that he may draw all men unto him. Wherefore, he commandeth none that they shall not partake of his salvation" (2 Nephi 26:24). When we know this, then our love for and adoration of God and His Beloved Son increase exponentially.

When we finally acknowledge that this life isn't the beginning of our test of godhood, that we were tutored and successfully passed many great tests for exaltation before ever coming here (as is evidenced by the exaltation of little children who die before being able to take the tests of mortality),¹⁷ then we can take courage that, with effort and faith, we can pass these remaining tests and eventually qualify for our desired prize of exaltation with God in the celestial kingdom.

When we see our true familial relationship to God with vision so greatly enlarged and amazingly clarified by the revelations through God's chosen prophet, Joseph Smith, then we can express eternal gratitude that we are able to bask in the understanding revealed through him. We feel like Brigham Young, who said, "I feel like shouting Hallelujah, all the time, when I think that I ever knew Joseph Smith, the Prophet."¹⁸

NOTES

1. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 343.
2. Smith, *Teachings*, 137.
3. Smith, *Teachings*, 324.
4. Smith, *Teachings*, 220.
5. Smith, *Teachings*, 373; emphasis in original.
6. Smith, *Teachings*, 370.
7. For further scriptural verification, see D&C 131:1–4; 132:19–20; see also Erastus Snow, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 19:270–71; Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine: Selections from the Writings and Sermons of Joseph F. Smith*, 5th ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1939), 276.
8. Smith, *Teachings*, 354.
9. Smith, *Teachings*, 187.
10. Smith, *Teachings*, 357.
11. Smith, *Teachings*, 365.
12. *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 3:19; see also Smith, *Teachings*, 190.
13. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1955), 1:74–75.
14. Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 1:94.
15. Smith, *Teachings*, 68.
16. Smith, *Teachings*, 343.
17. Bruce R. McConkie, "The Salvation of Little Children," *Ensign*, April 1977, 3.
18. Brigham Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, comp. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954), 458.