

CHAPTER NINE

“NOW THIS CAUSED US TO MARVEL”: THE BREADTH OF GOD’S HEAVEN AND THE DEPTH OF HIS MERCY

GUY L. DORIUS

The dawning of this dispensation had as its catalyst Joseph Smith’s yearnings to know where he stood in the sight of God. His desires came from both his family heritage and the religious environment of his youth. As with most of us, no doctrine had a more powerful pull upon him than the understanding of how to get to heaven, or at least how to improve one’s standing with God. There is ample evidence that the Restoration instilled in Joseph an understanding of the Atonement and its reach, which caused him to marvel not only for himself and his family but for all mankind. These new insights reversed the sectarian notions of his day and substantiated many of the ideas that he and his forefathers had about the eternal heavens. As we come to understand the fertile soil in which the doctrines of the Restoration were planted, none of the doctrines blossom more beautifully than those of the Atonement and the salvation offered to all people.

A RELIGIOUS ENVIRONMENT

Joseph Smith found himself in a religious environment that was fueled by a contest for adherents to the various sects. As Joseph himself stated:

Guy L. Dorius is an associate professor of Church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University.

There was in the place where we lived an unusual excitement on the subject of religion. . . . Indeed, the whole district of country seemed affected by it, and great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties, which created no small stir and division amongst the people, some crying, "Lo, here!" and others, "Lo, there!" Some were contending for the Methodist faith, some for the Presbyterian, and some for the Baptist.

For, notwithstanding the great love which the converts to these different faiths expressed at the time of their conversion, and the great zeal manifested by the respective clergy, who were active in getting up and promoting this extraordinary scene of religious feeling, in order to have everybody converted, as they were pleased to call it, let them join what sect they pleased; yet when the converts began to file off, some to one party and some to another, it was seen that the seemingly good feelings of both the priests and the converts were more pretended than real; for a scene of great confusion and bad feeling ensued—priest contending against priest, and convert against convert; so that all their good feelings one for another, if they ever had any, were entirely lost in a strife of words and a contest about opinions. (Joseph Smith—History 1:5–6)¹

These contests included rhetoric about the nature of heaven and hell. Most of these sects subscribed to teachings at least colored by the prolific writings of Jonathan Edwards. Although he was an eighteenth-century theologian, the effect of his writings dominated nineteenth-century thought, especially in New England.² His doctrine invited very few to heaven. Man was considered fallen and detestable. The very notion of someone being saved was so miraculous that it was almost impossible to conceive of it.³ In a sermon specifically aimed at children, Edwards stated, "You are so sinful and wicked a creature that none of your righteousness is worthy to be accepted."⁴ The odds of entering heaven were not good, even for children who had been baptized. The overall influence these philosophies had on the religious thought of the early nineteenth century created a feeling of wretchedness and despair that invited listeners to look for any promised remedy among the religionists offering such.

The religions that Joseph Smith's family would have been associated with sought to make sense of Edwardian ideas (those based on

the teachings of Jonathan Edwards) of the depraved nature of man and his quest for salvation. The Calvinist response perpetuated the idea of the sinfulness of man but suggested that because of the Fall of Adam, all of his posterity came into the world with a sinful nature. This nature led to man's sinful acts. Edwardian thought suggested that sin was simply an act of will, whereas Calvinists suggested that the Fall corrupted all human faculties and that depravity was universal and led to sinful choices.⁵ Presbyterianism was closely aligned with Calvinist theology. Out of this religious thought came slightly more hope for sinners because they could come to understand why they chose to sin, and through prescribed worship they could attempt to approach God.

While still promoting the idea of the depravity of human beings, Methodists took their message to common people such as farmers and shopkeepers. They sought to teach a more practical theology that was not tainted by the philosophies of the educated elite. The message was carried by mostly uneducated preachers and contained a healthy dose of hellfire and damnation. According to the upper class, this seemed especially well suited for the uneducated, who needed a constant reminder of their perilous state before God.⁶

A FAMILY CONTEXT

The idea of a very crowded hell caught the attention of young Joseph Smith. He was likely aware of the beliefs of his grandfather, through his father, which stood in stark contrast to a message of hellfire and damnation. Asael Smith was known for his liberal views on religion and apparently would have nothing to do with the concept of eternal hell. He aligned himself more with the teachings of the Universalists. In stark contrast to both Edwardian and Calvinist theology stood the Universalist belief that it was not in the nature of God to eternally damn His children. They promoted the doctrine of a universal salvation, which logically followed the concept of a universal atonement.⁷ Proponents of this belief taught that the love of God revealed through Jesus Christ would restore the whole family of mankind to holiness and happiness.

Although most of Asael's children aligned themselves with the Congregationalists and Presbyterians, his son Joseph did not.⁸ Joseph Smith Jr. noted, "My father's family was proselyted to the

Presbyterian faith, and four of them joined that church, namely, my mother, Lucy; my brothers Hyrum and Samuel Harrison; and my sister Sophronia," but that he leaned toward the Methodist sect (Joseph Smith—History 1:7–8).

PRAYERS ANSWERED

Finding no rest among the different religionists, Joseph petitioned the Lord in a stand of hardwood trees adjacent to his home. On that early spring day of 1820, he was told to join none of the sects, and that answer tends to be highlighted in the story of the First Vision. However, Joseph was told something that reveals a far deeper yearning. Of some eight contemporary accounts of the First Vision, five of them reveal that Joseph had a concern for the state of his soul and his future status, and that he longed for a forgiveness of his sins.⁹ Elder Henry B. Eyring of the Quorum of the Twelve commented on this fact after studying different versions of the vision: "I read an account that I had not seen before in which he emphasized that he went to the grove, not simply to know which church to join. In fact, in that particular account, that's hardly mentioned. It was that he felt overcome by the need to be forgiven and to have his sins washed away and a sense that there was no way he knew how to do that. In the visitation, he was told that his sins were forgiven."¹⁰ This very personal quest by young Joseph coupled with his search for a religion that could offer such peace were the very fuel of restoration. After returning from the grove, he remarked to his mother, "Never mind, all is well—I am well enough off" (Joseph Smith—History 1:20). It is easy to understand how "well enough off" he must have felt after having the Savior of the world declare his sins forgiven.

After the vision, Joseph was left to ponder for more than three years. He joined no sect and suffered persecution because of it. He again mentioned, "I was left to all kinds of temptations; and, mingling with all kinds of society, I frequently fell into many foolish errors, and displayed the weakness of youth, and the foibles of human nature; which, I am sorry to say, led me into divers temptations, offensive in the sight of God. In making this confession, no one need suppose me guilty of any great or malignant sins. A disposition to commit such was never in my nature" (Joseph Smith—History 1:28). Being again concerned about his sins, he stated: "In

consequence of these things, I often felt condemned for my weakness and imperfections; when, on the evening of the above-mentioned twenty-first of September, after I had retired to my bed for the night, I betook myself to prayer and supplication to Almighty God for forgiveness of all my sins and follies, and also for a manifestation to me, that I might know of my state and standing before him; for I had full confidence in obtaining a divine manifestation, as I previously had one" (Joseph Smith—History 1:29). As a result of this petition, Moroni appeared to teach the Prophet and start his preparation to receive the plates containing the Book of Mormon. Joseph must have again felt approved of by the Lord. This forgiveness and approval would be extended to the Prophet throughout his life (see D&C 29:3; 60:7; 62:3; 110:5).

Adding to Joseph's discontent about the sectarian doctrines concerning salvation was the tragic death of his older brother Alvin in November of 1823. Alvin was well-loved by the community and his family for his good nature. His final admonition to Joseph was to follow through with the work of the Restoration. Mother Smith wanted a proper Christian burial for Alvin, so she secured a Presbyterian minister to give the funeral sermon. Joseph's younger brother William reported the following: "Rev. Stockton had preached my brother's funeral sermon and intimated very strongly that he had gone to hell, for Alvin was not a church member, but he was a good boy, and my father did not like it."¹¹ This declaration must have had a chilling effect on the Smiths, particularly Joseph Sr. and the Prophet Joseph. Other personal experiences, including the death of Joseph and Emma's firstborn son, Alvin, would continue to fuel the Prophet's questions about salvation and the remission of sins.

DOCTRINE IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

Joseph's first assignment as prophet was to translate the Book of Mormon, and in that effort he was given further insight into the reaching effects of Christ's Atonement. Of particular personal interest for Joseph were the book's teachings on the salvation of children. In a reversal of the sectarian teachings of Joseph Smith's day, the Book of Mormon prophet King Benjamin declared: "Behold he judgeth, and his judgment is just; *and the infant perisheth not that dieth in his infancy*; but men drink damnation to their own souls except they

humble themselves and become as little children, and believe that salvation was, and is, and is to come, in and through the atoning blood of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent" (Mosiah 3:18; emphasis added). Abinadi's teachings on the Atonement and the Resurrection make reference to the salvation of little children. He stated, "And little children also have eternal life" (Mosiah 15:25).

The strongest Book of Mormon passages about the salvation of children occur in the book of Moroni. Mormon taught his son Moroni this doctrine by the word of the Lord, stating: "Listen to the words of Christ, your Redeemer, your Lord and your God. Behold, I came into the world not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance; the whole need no physician, but they that are sick; wherefore, little children are whole, for they are not capable of committing sin; wherefore the curse of Adam is taken from them in me, that it hath no power over them" (Moroni 8:8). Mormon went on to indict the practice of infant baptism, calling it a "mockery" and suggesting that it was their parents who needed to "humble themselves as their little children" and repent and be baptized in order to be saved with them (see Moroni 8:9–12). He suggested that anyone "that supposeth that little children need baptism is . . . in the bonds of iniquity; . . . wherefore, should he be cut off while in the thought, he must go down to hell" (Moroni 8:14). These Book of Mormon verses instilled in Joseph an understanding that there was a generous and just God who would not limit the salvation of children to the narrow definitions of the religious sects of his day. These scriptures clearly illuminated principles and doctrine, but there was still a need for clarification. What of those who never heard the gospel? What would the outcome be for the good and honest people of the earth? These were questions yet to be answered.

JOSEPH'S PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

The Lord's generosity was evident in Joseph's early experiences in his work in restoring the kingdom of God to the earth. In the process of translating the Book of Mormon, Joseph experienced some challenges which demonstrated the balance of justice and mercy. At the request of Martin Harris and after petitioning the Lord, Joseph let Martin take the original transcript of the book of Lehi, and it was lost. The Lord strongly chastened Joseph, stating: "And behold, how

oft you have transgressed the commandments and the laws of God, and have gone on in the persuasions of men. For, behold, you should not have feared man more than God. Although men set at naught the counsels of God, and despise his words—yet you should have been faithful; and he would have extended his arm and supported you against all the fiery darts of the adversary; and he would have been with you in every time of trouble” (D&C 3:6–8).

After this chastening, the Lord again rekindled hope when He offered: “Behold, thou art Joseph, and thou wast chosen to do the work of the Lord, but because of transgression, if thou art not aware thou wilt fall. But remember, God is merciful; therefore, repent of that which thou hast done which is contrary to the commandment which I gave you, and thou art still chosen, and art again called to the work” (D&C 3:9–10).

Having experienced a withdrawal of the Spirit and the reproof of the Lord, Joseph again felt the Lord’s invitation to repent and return. These very personal experiences were preparing the young prophet to receive more extensive doctrine.

In a revelation that referred to the punishment issued at the time of the lost manuscript, the Savior revealed further insights as He taught Joseph and Martin the reality of the Atonement. The revelation teaches an important doctrine concerning the punishment received by those who disobey. The Lord revealed to Joseph: “Surely every man must repent or suffer, for I, God, am endless. Wherefore, I revoke not the judgments which I shall pass, but woes shall go forth, weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth, yea, to those who are found on my left hand. Nevertheless, it is not written that there shall be no end to this torment, but it is written *endless torment*” (D&C 19:4–6; emphasis in original).

In issuing this punishment, the Lord makes an interesting observation that endless torment does not mean there would be no end to it. He further clarifies by saying, “For, behold, I am endless, and the punishment which is given from my hand is endless punishment, for Endless is my name. Wherefore, Eternal punishment is God’s punishment. Endless punishment is God’s punishment” (D&C 19:10–12).

This type of punishment was then defined when Joseph and Martin were taught: “Wherefore I command you to repent—repent,

lest I smite you by the rod of my mouth, and by my wrath, and by my anger, and your sufferings be sore—how sore you know not, how exquisite you know not, yea, how hard to bear you know not. For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent; but if they would not repent they must suffer even as I; which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit—and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink” (D&C 19:15–18).

After this graphic description of the kind of suffering the rebellious must go through, the offer was again given to Joseph and Martin to “repent, lest I humble you with my almighty power; and that you confess your sins, lest you suffer these punishments of which I have spoken, of which in the smallest, yea, even in the least degree you have tasted at the time I withdrew my Spirit” (D&C 19:20).

These revelations to Joseph illustrate that there were divine expectations but that there was also an allowance made for mercy through repentance. More important was the reality that punishment had an end. The Lord was preparing Joseph to receive in more detail the doctrine of heaven. As ordinances and priesthood were revealed to him, he was also receiving numerous revelations with regard to the reach of the Atonement.

THE VISION OF CELESTIAL WORLDS

In February of 1832, Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon were involved in the translation of the New Testament. The Prophet recorded: “Upon my return from Amherst conference, I resumed the translation of the Scriptures. From sundry revelations which had been received, it was apparent that many important points touching the salvation of man, had been taken from the Bible, or lost before it was compiled. It appeared self-evident from what truths were left, that if God rewarded every one according to the deeds done in the body the term ‘Heaven,’ as intended for the Saints’ eternal home must include more kingdoms than one. Accordingly, on the 16th of February, 1832, while translating St. John’s Gospel, myself and Elder Rigdon saw the following vision.”¹² The vision that followed was

again due to the Prophet's concern over the nature of heaven and the salvation of man.

In the revelation now found in section 76 of the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord revealed to Joseph and Sidney the eternal heavens in exquisite detail. Of greatest importance was the revelation concerning the reach of the Atonement. After seeing God the Father and the Son in the vision, they were taught about the fall of Lucifer and the state of those who follow him. Because of the nature of the sin the sons of perdition would commit and the knowledge they would have to obtain in order to commit such a sin, Joseph and Sidney recorded that sons of perdition "are they who shall go away into the lake of fire and brimstone, with the devil and his angels—and the only ones on whom the second death shall have any power" (D&C 76:36–37). They learned that these were the only children of God who would go to the traditional "hell" that they had been brought up to believe was more encompassing.

The vision further revealed to them that these were "the only ones who shall not be redeemed in the due time of the Lord, after the sufferings of his wrath. For all the rest shall be brought forth by the resurrection of the dead, through the triumph and the glory of the Lamb, who was slain, who was in the bosom of the Father before the worlds were made" (D&C 76:38–39).

Instead of limiting the accessibility of the Atonement, this revelation declared that almost all God's children would experience the reach of divine love through the administration of an infinite Atonement. Joseph and Sidney declared: "And this is the gospel, the glad tidings, which the voice out of the heavens bore record unto us—that he came into the world, even Jesus, to be crucified for the world, and to bear the sins of the world, and to sanctify the world, and to cleanse it from all unrighteousness; that through him all might be saved whom the Father had put into his power and made by him; who glorifies the Father, and saves all the works of his hands, except those sons of perdition who deny the Son after the Father has revealed him. Wherefore, he saves all except them" (D&C 76:40–44).

Joseph and Sidney were then permitted to see the different kingdoms that people would be redeemed to dependent on their choices in life. The vision was an expansion of what Paul taught the Saints in Corinth when he stated: "There are also celestial bodies, and

bodies terrestrial: but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars: for one star differeth from another star in glory" (1 Corinthians 15:40–41). They beheld the celestial, terrestrial, and telestial kingdoms and the nature of those who inherit each. In revelation received later, Joseph would come to understand more clearly that "they who are not sanctified through the law which I have given unto you, even the law of Christ, must inherit another kingdom, even that of a terrestrial kingdom, or that of a telestial kingdom. For he who is not able to abide the law of a celestial kingdom cannot abide a celestial glory. And he who cannot abide the law of a terrestrial kingdom cannot abide a terrestrial glory. And he who cannot abide the law of a telestial kingdom cannot abide a telestial glory; therefore he is not meet for a kingdom of glory. Therefore he must abide a kingdom which is not a kingdom of glory" (D&C 88:21–24).

Through these revelations, the Prophet Joseph Smith was given an expanded understanding of what it meant to be saved. The reality of a very large heaven became evident. But it was a different heaven than Universalist doctrine taught. Our Heavenly Father's children, through their use of agency, would determine where in heaven they would go. There was a place prepared even for the sinners after suffering God's wrath, which was "the glory of the telestial, which surpasses all understanding" (D&C 76:89). Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles taught:

The theology of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ is comprehensive, universal, merciful, and true. Following the necessary experience of mortal life, all sons and daughters of God will ultimately be resurrected and go to a kingdom of glory. The righteous—regardless of current religious denomination or belief—will ultimately go to a kingdom of glory more wonderful than any of us can comprehend. Even the wicked, or almost all of them, will ultimately go to a marvelous—though lesser—kingdom of glory. All of that will occur because of God's love for his children and because of the atonement and resurrection of Jesus Christ, "who glorifies the Father, and saves all the works of his hands." (D&C 76:43)¹³

A VERY PERSONAL VISION

Joseph Smith continued to receive instruction concerning the salvation of mankind. Years after having the vision of the degrees of glory, a very personal vision was unfolded before him. On January 21, 1836, in the office of the presidency on the third floor of the nearly completed Kirtland Temple, Joseph received a blessing from his aged father. The Prophet then received a vision in which he saw the celestial kingdom and its beauty. He viewed the throne of God and saw the Father and the Son. Joseph then recorded:

I saw Father Adam and Abraham; and my father and my mother; my brother Alvin, that has long since slept;

And marveled how it was that he had obtained an inheritance in that kingdom, seeing that he had departed this life before the Lord had set his hand to gather Israel the second time, and had not been baptized for the remission of sins.

Thus came the voice of the Lord unto me, saying: All who have died without a knowledge of this gospel, who would have received it if they had been permitted to tarry, shall be heirs of the celestial kingdom of God;

Also all that shall die henceforth without a knowledge of it, who would have received it with all their hearts, shall be heirs of that kingdom;

For I, the Lord, will judge all men according to their works, according to the desire of their hearts.

And I also beheld that all children who die before they arrive at the years of accountability are saved in the celestial kingdom of heaven. (D&C 137:5–10)

One can imagine the joy of father and son as they marveled over the vision of their beloved son and brother Alvin, who had been declared lost. Joseph now knew that not only was heaven a large place that would accept almost all of God's children but also that accommodation had been made for everyone to have the opportunity to accept the fulness of the gospel and return to God in the celestial kingdom. Even little children would be taken care of in this all-encompassing plan.

Further instructions from Joseph Smith would teach the Saints of their duty in doing work for the dead. In the years following these

revelations, baptisms for the dead would be performed; eventually temple ordinances would be offered for their salvation.

CONCLUSION

Recognizing the inconsistency and intolerance of the prevalent Edwardian and Calvinist thinking of his day, the Prophet Joseph searched for the truth. He was driven by his own feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness as well as his desire to understand the nature of God and the salvation of man. In response to his humble prayer, the Restoration of the fulness of the gospel ensued. The restored doctrine refutes the narrow doctrines of exclusion and offers a more generous invitation. The gospel is that Christ's Atonement is a ubiquitous offering to all of God's children. This is the good news. Through that offering, all mankind will be saved and for those who choose to obey the fulness of the celestial law, they will be in the company of God. Little children are alive in Christ, and those who die in infancy will return to the Father of their spirits. As the gospel sweeps across the worlds of the living and the dead, all will have the opportunity to accept whatever they are willing to accept and will receive that which the Father has prepared for them in His kingdom. This is the expanded vision of heaven that Joseph Smith witnessed and testified of. It is the very thing that caused him "to marvel." These beautiful and sublime doctrines in turn invite us to marvel at the reach and breadth of the offering of the Son of God.

NOTES

1. For a detailed examination of the religious excitement in Joseph Smith's region, see Milton V. Backman, "Awakenings in the Burned-over District: New Light on the Historical Setting of the First Vision," *Brigham Young University Studies* 9, no. 3 (Spring 1969): 301–20.
2. See Norman Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought and Its British Context* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 13.
3. Jonathan Edwards, *The "Miscellanies" (Entry Nos. 501–832)*, vol. 18 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Ava Chamberlain (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 64–66.
4. Jonathan Edwards, *Sermons and Discourses, 1739–1742*, vol. 22 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Harry S. Stout and others (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 177.
5. E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the*

- Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 152.
6. Holifield, *Theology in America*, 261.
 7. Holifield, *Theology in America*, 147.
 8. Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Joseph Smith's New England Heritage* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 133.
 9. James B. Allen, "Eight Contemporary Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision: What Do We Learn from Them?" *Improvement Era*, April 1970, 12.
 10. From the transcript of remarks made at the unveiling of *The Vision* statue in the Joseph Smith Building, Brigham Young University, on October 17, 1997.
 11. J. S. Peterson interview with William Smith, 1893, *Zion's Ensign*, January 13, 1894; this section was reprinted in *Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star*, February 26, 1894, 133.
 12. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1951), 1:245.
 13. Dallin H. Oaks, "Apostasy and Restoration," *Ensign*, May 1995, 87.