

# Why the Ohio?

## *Lessons from the Command to Gather to Kirtland*

SCOTT C. ESPLIN

“When you face adversity,” observed Elder Richard G. Scott (1928–2015), “you can be led to ask many questions. Some serve a useful purpose; others do not. To ask, Why does this have to happen to me? Why do I have to suffer this, now? What have I done to cause this? will lead you into blind alleys. It really does no good to ask questions that reflect opposition to the will of God.”<sup>1</sup> This futility in asking “why” was taught by the Lord to his Saints early in the Restoration. The command for the Saints to move from New York to Ohio, found in sections 37 and 38 of the Doctrine and Covenants, presented a significant “why” moment for the early members. These Saints dealt with challenges common to Church members today, including sacrificing material possessions or friends and family in following the Lord’s command. Though the Lord addressed some of their concerns in these revelations, other questions regarding the move remained unanswered, helping them learn to trust the omniscience of God and rely on his promised blessings. The revelations themselves, together with the response by Church membership, highlight principles of how to properly act when the “whys” of life are unclear. Lessons from the historical context of these sections can help us deal with similar periods of perplexity in our own lives.

## “GO TO THE OHIO” (DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS 37:1)—SETTING UP THE “WHY”

The fledgling Church faced increasing opposition in New York throughout the summer and fall of 1830. Church leaders including Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery sought safety in partial seclusion as mobs and legal proceedings hampered their ability to minister to the members. Meanwhile, the work of the Lord expanded. Obedient to a call to serve, Oliver Cowdery, Peter Whitmer Jr., Parley P. Pratt, and Ziba Peterson journeyed westward to Missouri on a mission to the Lamanites. Along the way, they experienced great success in the Ohio community of Kirtland. Following a month-long preaching tour during which the elders baptized nearly 130 converts, Church membership in northern Ohio rivaled that in New York.

Before continuing their mission to the West, Oliver Cowdery and his companions “sent word to Joseph that they wanted . . . some Elder sent to preside over the branch at Kirtland.”<sup>2</sup> The Prophet sent John Whitmer, who arrived in mid-January 1831. Upon his arrival, he found a congregation of about three hundred, more than double that previously reported.<sup>3</sup> Reacting to this growth, John Whitmer wrote a letter to Joseph stating “that the church much needed his presence and he would be glad of his assistance in setting in order the affairs of the branch where he presided.”<sup>4</sup>

Responding to the need for leadership in Kirtland, the Lord told Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon, “Behold, I say unto you that it is not expedient in me that ye should translate any more until ye shall go to the Ohio” (Doctrine and Covenants 37:1). Addressing reasons they should move, the Lord continued, “And this because of the enemy and for your sakes” (v. 1). Furthermore, the Lord expanded the directive to include all Church members: “And again, a commandment I give unto the church, that it is expedient in me that they should assemble together at the Ohio” (v. 3). Reiterating the agency of members in following the command, the Lord concluded, “Behold, here is wisdom, and let every man choose for himself” (v. 4).

These commands must have sparked a series of questions in the minds of the Prophet and his associates. Why would the Lord choose Ohio, with only the newly converted Saints in Kirtland, as the headquarters of the Church? Why was the command to relocate given in the dead of winter? How would the designation of Ohio as the first gathering place in this dispensation aid the work of the Restoration?

Like the Church itself, the state of Ohio was also undergoing an era of rapid growth. During the first three decades of the nineteenth century,

Ohio experienced a tenfold increase in population, growing from seventy-two thousand residents in 1800 to over eight hundred thousand by 1826.<sup>5</sup> During the 1830s, the decade in which the Church was headquartered there, the state's population increased by almost six hundred thousand, and by 1840 Ohio was the third most populous state in the nation behind only New York and Pennsylvania.<sup>6</sup> Kirtland itself kept pace with the growth of the state. In the decade before the Church arrived, the population of the town more than doubled.

Rapid growth in the area, coupled with the availability of land and the opportunity to expand, produced a region ripe for establishing a Church headquarters. Ohio served as an ideal location because it was centrally located within the young nation and thus mission fields across the United States and even north to Canada were easily accessible by river, canal, lake, or land. Furthermore, it was a step closer to Zion, an area of growing interest to Joseph Smith and the Church. From his home in Kirtland, the Prophet made repeated trips to Independence, Missouri, guiding members in their attempts to establish the New Jerusalem. Finally, Ohio represented a place where the Church and its leaders could get a fresh start, protected from the increasing opposition they faced in New York.



View of Kirtland, Ohio. Photograph by George Edward Anderson, 1907. Courtesy of Church History Library.

## “ALL THINGS ARE PRESENT BEFORE [HIS] EYES” (DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS 38:2)—RESPONDING TO THE CALL TO GATHER

Understandably, the response of Church members to the command to move must have been electrifying. Concerning a conference of the Church held in early January 1831, Church historian John Whitmer reported, “The solemnities of eternity rested on the congregation, and having previously received a revelation to go to Ohio, [the Saints] desired to know somewhat more concerning this matter.” In response, “the Seer enquired of the Lord in the presence of the whole congregation, and thus came the word of the Lord”—Doctrine and Covenants section 38.<sup>7</sup>

The wording of section 38 highlights the “why” questions that must have been circulating throughout Church membership regarding the move. Possibly because the Saints questioned the wisdom of leaving their homes in New York, the section begins with the Lord reiterating his omniscience, declaring that he “knoweth all things, for all things are present before [his] eyes” (v. 2). Furthermore, the Lord promised to be in their midst, with the blessing that “the day soon cometh that ye shall see me, and know that I am” (v. 8). Regarding the dangers threatening the Saints in New York, the Lord encouraged them to “go ye out from among the wicked” (v. 42), warning that “the enemy in the secret chambers seeketh your lives” (v. 28). Finally, addressing the particulars of the move and encouraging haste, he emphasized, “And they that have farms that cannot be sold, let them be left or rented as seemeth them good” (v. 37).

The initial response to this command was mixed. Though the Lord outlined that members should trust both his omniscience and his aid, John Whitmer’s history recalls, “After the Lord had manifested the above words [section 38] through Joseph the Seer, there were some divisions among the congregation, some would not receive the above as the word of the Lord: But [held] that Joseph had invented it himself to deceive the people that in the end he might get gain. Now this was because, their hearts were not right in the sight of the Lord, for they wanted to serve God and man; but our Savior has declared that it was impossible to do so.”<sup>8</sup>

News of the command to gather and of Joseph’s anticipated transfer to Ohio quickly spread outside the Church. As early as mid-January, newspapers in the Kirtland area began revealing details of the move. On January 18, 1831, the Painesville *Telegraph* announced the coming of John Whitmer to the area. Though slightly inaccurate in its assessment of Church doctrine,

the account preserves some detail regarding the anticipated arrival of Joseph Smith:

A young gentleman by the name of *Whitmer* arrived here last week from Manchester, N.Y., the seat of wonders, with a new batch of revelations from God, as he pretended, which have just been communicated to Joseph Smith. As far as we have been able to learn their contents, they are a more particular description of the creation of the world, and a history of Adam and his family, and othe[r] sketches of the anti-deluvian world, which Moses neglected to record. But the more important part of the mission was to inform the brethren that the boundaries of the promised land, or the New Jerusalem, had just been made known to Smith from God—the township of Kirtland, a few miles west of this, is the eastern line and the Pacific Ocean the western line; if the north and south lines have been described, we have not learned them. Orders were also brought to the brethren to sell no more land, but rather buy more. Joseph Smith and all his forces are to be on here soon to take possession of the promised land.<sup>9</sup>

In Ohio, local residents both in and out of the faith braced themselves for the Church's arrival.

### “LET YOUR PREACHING BE THE WARNING VOICE” (DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS 38:41)—PREPARING TO LEAVE

Back in New York, area newspapers began covering the Saints' preparations for the exodus. In Palmyra, the *Reflector* published a letter to the editor, written from Waterloo, New York, on January 26, 1831:

Elder S. Rigdon left this village on Monday morning last in the stage, for the “Holy Land,” where all the “Gold Bible” converts, have recently received a *written* commandment from God, through Jo Smith, junior, to repair with all convenient speed after selling off the property. This command was at first resisted by such as had property, (the brethren from the neighboring counties being all assembled by special summons,) but after a night of fasting, prayer and trial, they all consented to obey the holy messenger.—Rigdon has for some time past been arranging matters with Smith for the final departure of the *faithful* for the “far west.” The man of many CREEDS, (Rigdon) appears to possess colloquial powers to a considerable degree, and before leaving this vicinity left us his *blessing*. He delivered a discourse at the Court

House immediately preceding his departure, wherein he depicted in strong language, the want of “charity and brotherly love” among the prevailing sects and denominations of professing christians, and sorry I am to admit, that he had too much truth on his side with regard to this particular. After denouncing dreadful vengeance on the whole state of New York, and this village in particular, and recommending to all such as wished to flee from “the wrath to come,” to follow him beyond the “western waters,” he took his leave.<sup>10</sup>

As is evident from the above account, Church leaders including Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon obeyed the Lord’s command that “ye shall not go until ye have preached my gospel in those parts, and have strengthened up the church whithersoever it is found, and more especially in Colesville” (Doctrine and Covenants 37:2). Though some may question whether Sidney’s preaching had been “the warning voice, every man to his neighbor, in mildness and meekness” (38:41), none can question Sidney’s and Joseph’s efforts to comply with the Lord’s words. As recorded by John Whitmer, “Joseph and Sidney went to Colesville to do the will of the Lord in that part of the land: and to strengthen the disciples in that part of the vineyard, and preach the gospel to a hardened and a wicked people.”<sup>11</sup> Describing the response, Whitmer continued, “When Sidney and the Revelator arrivd there, they held prayer meetings, among the disciples, and they also held public meetings but it was all in vain, they threatend to kill them. Therefore, they knew that they were not fit for the Kingdom of God, and well nigh ripe for destruction. The Spirit of the Lord fell upon Sidney, and he spoke with boldness, and he preached the gospel in its purity; but they laughed him to scorn.”<sup>12</sup> This may have been part of the Lord’s omniscient warning to the Church that “the enemy” was “combined” (38:12) in New York.

### “THEY THAT HAVE FARMS” (DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS 38:37)—SACRIFICING POSSESSIONS, FAMILY, AND FRIENDS

After Church leaders raised the warning voice in the area, disposing of property became the primary activity. An informant from Waterloo wrote in Palmyra’s local newspaper, “The *Prophet*, Spouse, and whole ‘holy family’ (as they style themselves,) will follow Rigdon, so soon as their deluded or hypothetical followers, shall be able to dispose of what little real property they possess in this region: one farm (Whitmers) was sold a few days ago for

\$2,300. Their first place of destination is understood to be a few miles west of Painesville, Ohio.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the informant seems to be relatively correct regarding the sale of Peter Whitmer's one-hundred-acre farm in Fayette. Land records from the area indicate that it was sold to Charles Stuart of Waterloo on April 1, 1831, for \$2,200. Ironically, in what may indicate the sacrifice Church members made by disposing of property at a discount, the same farm was sold by Stuart just six weeks later for a \$300 profit.<sup>14</sup> Faithful Saints like the Whitmers learned the painful lesson that obedience to divine command sometimes requires temporal sacrifice in exchange for spiritual blessings.

Indeed, disposing of property in New York during the late winter and early spring became a chief concern for some members. Because of the directive to leave property if it couldn't be sold (see Doctrine and Covenants 38:37), "Joseph Smith's land, 13 acres and eighty perches, was either 'left or rented' until June 28, 1833, when the property was sold to a brother-in-law, Joseph McKune, Jr."<sup>15</sup> Having already left for Ohio, Joseph Knight Sr. employed attorney William M. Waterman to represent him in his land sale. An ad placed in the *Broome Republican* on May 5, 1831, announced: "FOR SALE, THE farm lately occupied by Joseph Knight, situate in the town of Colesville, near the Colesville Bridge—bounded on one side by the Susquehanna River, and containing about one hundred and forty two acres. On said Farm are two Dwelling Houses, a good Barn, and a fine Orchard. The terms of sale will be liberal—Apply to Wm. M. Waterman."<sup>16</sup> Of the difficulties in selling, Newel Knight remembered "great sacrifices of our property."<sup>17</sup>

Having made arrangements to leave their farm, Joseph and Emma were among the first to comply with the divine command to gather in Ohio. Though Emma was pregnant with twins, the couple, together with at least Edward Partridge, Sidney Ridgon, and Joseph and Polly Knight, left New York in late January, arriving in Kirtland in early February 1831.<sup>18</sup> Again, unfriendly newspaper accounts chronicled their journey. In Palmyra on March 9, 1831, the *Reflector* announced, "We also learn from the State of Ohio, that the work moves on apace. Joe Smith with his *better half*, had arrived in that country,—the prophet well clad, while the *female* exhibited a gold watch—a profusion of rings, &c.—demonstrating the fact, that even *Mormonism* is a 'living business.'<sup>19</sup> This negative assessment of the Prophet and his family characterizes one of the challenges faced by modern members seeking to obey a directive of the Lord. Obeying the Lord not only requires personal sacrifice, sometimes of property and possessions, but also opens one to ridicule and scorn.

## “THE ENEMY IS COMBINED” (DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS 38:12)—PREVENTING PHYSICAL THREATS TO THE PEOPLE

Derision for following the Lord’s command can turn to danger; knowing this, the Prophet remained concerned about the welfare of those following him from New York to Ohio. Aware of the Lord’s warning that the Saints were to go to Ohio “because of the enemy” (Doctrine and Covenants 37:1), Joseph continued to warn the Saints to be careful. On March 3, 1831, Joseph wrote to his brother Hyrum, who presided over the Saints in Colesville: “My Dearly Beloved Brother Hyrum I have had much Concern about you but I always remember you in my prayers Calling upon god to keep you Safe in spite of men or devils I think you had better Come into this Country immediately for the Lord has Commanded us that we Should Call the Elders of this Church to gether unto this plase as soon as possible.”<sup>20</sup> Appending an additional note of concern to the letter, the Prophet warned, “David Jackways has threatened to take father with a supreme writ in the spring you had beter Come to fayette and take father along with you Come in a one horse wagon if you Can do not Come threw Bufalo for they will lie in wait for you God protect you I am Joseph.”<sup>21</sup>

Fortunately, the specific threat concerning Joseph Smith Sr. and Hyrum Smith never materialized. However, members leaving New York encountered opposition, especially in Buffalo. When a group of Saints led by Lucy Mack Smith arrived in the town, the Colesville Saints who had preceded them warned them not to mention that they were members of the Church of Christ, “for if you do you will not get a boat nor a house.”<sup>22</sup> Specifically, Thomas Marsh warned her, “Now Mother smith if you do sing and have prayers and acknowledge that you are Mormons here in this place as you have done all along you will be Mobbed before morning.”<sup>23</sup> Nothing materialized with the mobs, in spite of Lucy’s determination to “sing and attend to prayers before sunset mob or no mob.”<sup>24</sup> However, one wonders if these perceived threats in Buffalo were not based, at least in some part, on fact. The Prophet himself certainly felt that some danger lay in wait for him and his family there.



“LET EVERY MAN CHOOSE FOR HIMSELF”  
 (DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS 37:4)—  
 HONORING AGENCY IN THE COMMAND

While the physical threat of opposition represented one form of resistance, an appeal to loyalty and friendship was another difficulty the Saints faced as they relocated. Like other moves in the prophetic history of mankind, the move from New York to Ohio provided an opportunity for members to prove their faith. Generally, Church members were obedient to the command to relocate. However, as the Lord indicated in his initial instruction, “every man” was free to “choose for himself” regarding his obedience (Doctrine and Covenants 37:4). As Church membership was “clean, but not all” (38:10), the call to obey a prophet provided an opportunity for the righteous to “go . . . out from among the wicked” (38:42).

Those who were well-respected citizens in their communities especially faced familial and social pressure to remain. Of Martin Harris’s leaving Palmyra with the rest of the “Mormon Emigration,” a local newspaper declared:

Several families, numbering about fifty souls, took up their line of march from this town last week for the “promised land,” among whom is Martin Harris, one of the original believers in the “Book of Mormon.” Mr. Harris was among the early settlers of this town, and has ever borne the character of an honorable and upright man, and an obliging and benevolent neighbor. He had secured to himself by honest industry a respectable fortune—and he has left a large circle of acquaintances and friends to pity his delusion.<sup>25</sup>

One local newspaper account described the dilemma faced by some early members in choosing to follow the Lord’s call. New York’s *Lockport Balance* emphasized, “In and about the town of Kirtland, Geauga County . . . the deluded followers of the false prophet are repairing. . . . Families, in some instances, have been divided, and in others, mothers have been obliged to follow their deluded husbands, or adopt the disagreeable alternative, of parting with them, and their children.”<sup>26</sup> Additional statements seem to support the claim that the call to move divided families. Joseph Hery recalled watching the various parties leave and later remarked, “My memory is that some twenty or thirty women, girls, men and boys, on foot and in two old-fashioned western emigrant wagons comprised the emigrating

party. I well remember hearing it talked that women left their husbands and families to go with Smith."<sup>27</sup>

Apparently the call to gather divided even those hoping to begin families. More than seventy years after the move, Harriet E. Shay, eyewitness to the departure, shared the following:

I distinctly remember seeing the followers of Joseph Smith, Jr., of Mormon fame, go by my fathers, George Clappers, house on the east side of the Susquehanna River in the Town of Afton County of Chenango, N.Y. between Afton, formerly South Bainbridge and Ninevah, on what is now known as the Lewis Poole Farm.

To the best of my recollection there were eight (8) or ten (10) wagons. They were covered like western emigrant wagons, and were drawn by oxen.

One reason I remember so distinctly of the wagons going by is from the fact that my Uncle Cornelius Atherton was engaged to be married to Betsy Peck daughter of Hezekiah Peck, who with his wife and son, Reed Peck went with the Mormons at that time. Hezekiah Peck forbade the marriage of Betsy and Uncle Cornelius unless he would join the Mormons and go with them; this Uncle Cornelius would not do.

That day was made impression to me as I witnessed the sorrow of Uncle Cornelius who was at our house when the wagon train went by.

I also remember an incident which occurred about the same time which later became more familiar to me as I became acquainted with the parties. Stephen Pratt was engaged to be married to a Peck girl, a relative of Hezekiah Peck, I think her name was Anna. Just before the followers of Smith started they ran away and were married, therefore, they did not go with the Mormons.<sup>28</sup>

In Palmyra, the *Reflector* similarly dramatized the choice to obey, likewise highlighting those unwilling to make the sacrifice,

Our Waterloo correspondent informs us, that two of the most responsible *Mormonites*, as it respects property, in that vicinity, have *demurred* to the divine command, through Jo Smith, requiring them to sell their property and put it into the common *fund*, and repair with all convenient speed to the New Jerusalem, lately located by Cowdery somewhere in the western region. A requisition of *twelve hundred* dollars, in cash, it is said, was made upon one of these gentlemen, (Mr. B.)—"the Lord having need of it." This request was promptly refused by the gentleman, who, at the same time informed the prophet that he would

rather risque his soul as it was (having been dipt) than trust his money or property in the hands of such agents as were applying for it.<sup>29</sup>

As one paper played up refusals to obey, another ridiculed the faithful compliance with divine command. In Painesville, Ohio, the *Telegraph* remarked:

About two hundred men, women and children, of the deluded followers of Jo Smith's Bible speculation have arrived on our coast during the last week, from the State of New York, & are about seating themselves down upon the "promised land" in this county. It is surely a melancholy comment upon human nature to see so many people at this enlightened age of the world, truckling along at the care of a miserable impostor, submitting themselves, both soul and body, to his spiritual and temporal mandates, without a murmur, or presuming to question that it is all a command direct from Heaven,—Such an abject slavery of the mind may endure for a season; but in due time, like the chains of Popery, the links which bind them will be rent asunder, and reason resume again her empire.<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, the call to gather became a test of faithfulness for the early Saints. Summarizing the results of the gathering during the summer of 1831, John Whitmer observed, "About these days the disciples arrived from State of New York. To this place Kirtland state of Ohio. They had some difficulty because of some that did not continue faithful; who denied the truth and turned into fables. . . . Therefore a part of the Revelation given at Fayette New York was fulfilled. The churches of the State of New York had moved to Ohio, with their Wives and their children, and all their Substance some purchased farms others rented, and thus they situated themselves as convenient as they could."<sup>31</sup> In total, the majority of Church membership in New York, estimated at approximately two hundred people, immigrated to Ohio between January and June of 1831.<sup>32</sup>

## "I AM IN YOUR MIDST" (DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS 38:7)—FINDING PEACE THROUGH GOD'S GUIDING HAND DURING TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY

While the revelations surrounding the commanded move to Ohio offered glimpses of the reasons the Saints should go, the Lord also made specific

promises to those who would faithfully comply with the command. The Lord reassured those doubting the divine directive that he was “in [their] midst” and that, though they couldn’t see him, “the day soon cometh that [they] shall see [him], and know that [he is]” (Doctrine and Covenants 38:7–8). Evidence of God’s guiding hand became a theme of the move.

Lucy Mack Smith’s account of the journey emphasizes the Lord’s miraculous aid. She credits the Lord with protecting them on the journey, aiding them in locating housing along the way, and, most dramatically, parting an ice jam that blocked Buffalo harbor, allowing their boat to narrowly navigate the opening. Stymied in their progress, Lucy remembered declaring to the company, “And now brethren and sisters if you will all of you raise your desires to Heaven that the Ice may give way before us and we be set at liberty to go on our way as sure as the Lord lives it shall be done.” Describing the miracle, she continued:

At that moment a noise was heard like bursting thunder and the captain cried out every man to his post and the ice parted leaving barely a pathway for the boat and that was so narrow that as it passed through the buckets were torn from the water wheel this with the noise of the ice the confusion of the spectators the word of command from the capt. and the hoarse answering of the sailors was truly dreadful—and our boat and one other had just time enough to get through and the . . . ice closed again.<sup>33</sup>

Newel Knight similarly recorded the hand of the Lord on his journey. Traveling with family and friends, he described a miraculous healing:

My aunt, Electa Peck fell and broke her shoulder in a most shocking manner. A Surgeon was called who did all he could to relieve her sufferings which was very great. My aunt dreamed that I returned and laid my hands upon her and prayed for her and she was made whole and pursued on her journey with the Company. This dream she related to the Surgeon who replied if you are able to travel in many weeks it will be a mericl, & he would be a mormon too. I arrived at the place where the Company had stoped, late in the night. On learning of the accident which had happened to my aunt I went to see her. Immediately on seing me entering the room She said: O Brother Newel if you will lay your hands upon me I shall be well and able to go on the journey with you. I s[t]eped up to the bed and in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, rebuked the pain with which she was suffering and Comanded her to be made whole. And it was done, for the next morning She arose, dressed her self, and pursued the journey with us.<sup>34</sup>

While some like these Saints saw an immediate fulfillment of the Lord's promises in the journey, several of the other promises made to the Saints in section 38 were fulfilled later in Ohio. This seems characteristic of the Lord, who fulfills promises "in his own time, and in his own way, and according to his own will" (Doctrine and Covenants 88:68). In fact, the day did come in which the Saints who had faithfully moved saw the Lord and knew that he was (see 38:8). These revelations include his appearances to the School of the Prophets and later those associated with the dedication of the Kirtland Temple (see 110:1–10; 137:1–3). Additional literal fulfillment of Doctrine and Covenants section 38 includes the giving of the law (see 38:32; 42), members being "endowed with power from on high" (38:32; 110:9), and the gospel going forth from Ohio "among all nations" (38:33; 110:10–11). As the first gathering site, Ohio also became the place where the law of consecration could be revealed, giving every man the chance to "esteem his brother as himself" (38:25) and to "be one" (38:27). Ironically, the section outlining the blessings and promises associated with the move to Ohio also included an apparent warning regarding Kirtland's fall: "And if ye seek the riches which it is the will of the Father to give unto you, ye shall be the richest of all people, for ye shall have the riches of eternity; . . . but beware of pride, lest ye become as the Nephites of old" (38:39). Indeed, the Lord, through his prophet, addressed those asking "why" by giving promises and warnings to the faithful.

## CONCLUSION: DEALING WITH THE "WHYS" OF LIFE TODAY

In our lives, we are frequently confronted with "why" scenarios. Why do we have to do certain things? Why doesn't life work out as planned? Why do good people suffer? The lessons the Lord emphasized during the commanded move to Ohio teach principles related to such questions. Moving forward with faith during periods of uncertainty is an essential element of our mortal existence.

Importantly, the Lord's revelations addressing "why" contain parallels for our lives. As with these early members, our personal times of "why" sometimes go unanswered. God offers promises, based on obedience, but he may or may not explain why he gives us a particular commandment. Regarding this phenomenon, President Dallin H. Oaks observed, "If you read the scriptures with the question in mind, 'Why did the Lord command this or why did he command that,' you find that in less than one in a

hundred commands was any reason given. It's not the pattern of the Lord to give reasons. We can put reason to revelation. We can put reasons to commandments. When we do we're on our own."<sup>35</sup>

Early Church members were given a glimpse of the reasons why they were to move, but for the most part, they were expected to act with the faith that the Lord "knoweth all things, for all things are present before [his] eyes" (Doctrine and Covenants 38:2). As he did in earlier times, God knows all things today and promises to be with us if we are obedient to his commands. Faithful obedience, as the Saints demonstrated in the move to Ohio, sometimes includes sacrificing material comforts, facing familial and social pressure, and trusting God's omniscience. It requires moving forward when we may not see God's hand, with faith that we someday will (see vv. 7–8). Not knowing all the "whys" of life may, therefore, be by divine design. Ultimately, "reasons" are not the "whys" for obedience. Rather, as President Oaks summarized, "revelations are what we sustain as the will of the Lord and that's where safety lies."<sup>36</sup>

Using the move to Ohio as an example, the Doctrine and Covenants teaches us to trust the Lord's directives even when the specific reasons for commandments are unclear. Summarizing this principle, Elder Robert D. Hales (1932–2017) remarked, "I have come to understand how useless it is to dwell on the *whys*, *what ifs*, and *if onlys* for which there likely will be given no answers in mortality. To receive the Lord's comfort, we must exercise faith. The questions Why me? Why our family? Why now? are usually unanswerable questions. These questions detract from our spirituality and can destroy our faith. We need to spend our time and energy building our faith by turning to the Lord and asking for strength to overcome the pains and trials of this world and to endure to the end for greater understanding."<sup>37</sup> The move from New York to Ohio built the faith of the early Saints. Studying their experience and applying it in our lives can do the same for us.

---

*Scott C. Esplin is a professor of Church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University.*

Scott C. Esplin, "Why the Ohio? Why Anything in My Life? Lessons from the Command to Gather," *Religious Educator* 10, no. 3 (2009): 175–88.

## NOTES

1. Richard G. Scott, "Trust in the Lord," *Ensign*, November 1995, 17.
2. Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845, book 10, pp. [1, 11], in *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/>.
3. See Milton V. Backman Jr., *The Heavens Resound: A History of the Latter-day Saints in Ohio, 1830–1838* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 42.
4. Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845, book 10, pp. [1, 12]. There is some discrepancy regarding the dating of John Whitmer's letter. Lucy Mack Smith's history reports Joseph's receiving the letter inviting him to come to Kirtland in December 1830. Because of this letter, Lucy later stated that Joseph "inquired of the Lord and received [Doctrine and Covenants 37]." However, the January 18 edition of the Painesville *Telegraph*, a local Ohio newspaper, indicated that Elder Whitmer arrived in Ohio during the middle of January. If the newspaper is accurate, one option is that he wrote the letter to Joseph before arriving in Ohio. Another option is that this letter was, indeed, written in mid-January, after John's arrival in Kirtland. If this is the case, the revelation it sparked, requiring Joseph to leave for Ohio immediately, may be different from the one recorded in section 37. The receipt of section 37 on December 30, 1830, may also have been influenced by the arrival of Sidney Rigdon and Edward Partridge in New York. The pair were introduced to the Church in Ohio and subsequently traveled to meet Joseph Smith in early December. See Revelation, 30 December 1830 [D&C 37], p. 49, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/>.
5. See Backman, *Heavens Resound*, 21.
6. See Backman, *Heavens Resound*, 21.
7. John Whitmer, History, 1831–circa 1847, p. 6, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/>; original spelling preserved.
8. Whitmer, History, 1831–circa 1847, p. 9.
9. "Mormonism," *Telegraph* (Painesville, OH), January 18, 1831.
10. *Reflector* (Palmyra, NY), February 1, 1831.
11. Whitmer, History, 1831–circa 1847, p. 9.
12. Whitmer, History, 1831–circa 1847, p. 10.
13. *Reflector*, February 1, 1831, 95.
14. See Larry C. Porter, *A Study of the Origins of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the States of New York and Pennsylvania* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2000), 150, appendix F.
15. Porter, *Study of the Origins of The Church*, 118.
16. Cited in Porter, *Study of the Origins of The Church*, 120.
17. Newel Knight, in *The Rise of the Latter-day Saints: The Journals and Histories of Newel Knight*, ed. Michael Hubbard MacKay and William G. Hartley (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2019), 32.
18. See Porter, *Study of the Origins of The Church*, 128nn47, 49.
19. "Mormonism," *Reflector*, March 9, 1831, 116.
20. Letter to Hyrum Smith, 3–4 March 1831, p. [2], <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/>.
21. Letter to Hyrum Smith, 3–4 March 1831, p. [3]. It is unclear what danger Joseph sensed for his father and brother in Buffalo. According to Dean Jessee, David Jackways is "probably David Strong Jackway or Jackways, whose father, William Jackway, . . . came to Palmyra, New York, in 1787. William Jackway owned a 500-acre farm, and he and his son David were hatters by trade. A David Jackways, in his fifties, is

- listed in the 1840 Palmyra, New York census.” *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 669n8. Apparently Joseph sensed a danger from this person.
22. Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, 1844–1845, book 10, p. [1]; book 11, p. [6].
  23. Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, 1844–1845, book 10, p. [1]; book 11, p. [7].
  24. Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, 1844–1845, book 10, p. [1]; book 11, p. [7].
  25. *Wayne Sentinel* (Palmyra, NY), May 27, 1831.
  26. *Lockport (NY) Balance*, May 31, 1831; cited in the *Daily National Intelligencer*, July 6, 1831.
  27. Cited in Porter, *Study of the Origins of The Church*, 122.
  28. Cited in Porter, *Study of the Origins of The Church*, 121.
  29. *Reflector*, March 9, 1831, 116.
  30. “Mormon Emigration,” *Telegraph*, May 17, 1831.
  31. Whitmer, *History*, 1831–circa 1847, pp. 27, 29.
  32. See Backman, *Heavens Resound*, 49.
  33. Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, 1844–1845, book 10, p. [1]; book 12, p. [2].
  34. Newel Knight, in MacKay and Hartley, *Rise of the Latter-day Saints*, 32–33.
  35. “Apostles Talk about Reasons for Lifting Ban,” *Provo Daily Herald*, June 5, 1988, 21.
  36. “Apostles Talk about Reasons for Lifting Ban,” 21.
  37. Robert D. Hales, “Healing Soul and Body,” *Ensign*, November 1998, 14.