

## **Follow Him**

### **Episode 2**

**Guest: Dr. Steven C. Harper**

**Joseph Smith--History 1:1-26**

**“I Saw a Pillar of Light”**

## **Show Notes**

### **Podcast General Description”**

Follow Him: A *Come, Follow Me* Podcast with Hank Smith & John Bytheway

Do you ever feel that preparing for your weekly *Come, Follow Me* lesson falls short? Join hosts Hank Smith and John Bytheway as they interview experts to make your study for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' *Come, Follow Me* course not only enjoyable but original and educational. If you are looking for resources to make your study fresh, faithful, and fun--no matter your age--then join us every Sunday.

### **Podcast Episode Description:**

#### **Episode 2**

Did you know that the story of the First Vision is the second greatest story ever told? BYU Professor, Historian, and Editor, Dr. Steven Harper takes us on a deep-dive into Joseph Smith History. From Joseph's humble beginnings to facing overwhelming odds, we see Joseph Smith as the hero of a great story, one that includes each one of us.

Part I focuses on the context of Joseph Smith's childhood, family relations and religious influences that culminates in the First Vision.

Part II focuses on the First Vision.

### **Timecode:**

#### **Part 1**

- (00:07) *Introduction*
- (02:27) *The Second Best Story in the Scriptures*
- (09:07) *Joseph and Lucy as Parents and a Necessary Move*
- (13:13) (15:10) *Typhoid Fever (in New Hampshire)*
- (19:57) *The Smith Family, Finally Moves to New York*
- (24:31) *The Smith Family Chooses Methodism, Presbyterianism, or None of the Above*
- (29:22) *Look for Answers in the Scriptures*

## Part 2

- (00:07) *Introduction*
- (01:56) *Is It All Lost?*
- (03:16) *“For a Time”*
- (04:09) *Seekers Discern Facts*
- (05:46) *The Most Consequential Choice*
- (9:19) *The First Words of the Restoration*
- (10:39) *1832 Autobiographical Account*
- (14:10) *The Creeds*
- (22:06) *Tell Your Story*
- (22:54) *The Accounts of the First Vision*
- (33:08) *Interrogate Your Assumptions*
- (37:34) *Testimony of Dr. Steven Harper*

## Sources:

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“Behold, I would exhort you that when ye shall read these things, if it be wisdom God that ye should read them that ye would remember how merciful the Lord hath been unto the children of men, from the creation of Adam even down until the time that ye shall receive these things, and ponder it in your hearts. And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you by the power of the Holy Ghost.” Moroni 10:3-4

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/first-vision-accounts?lang=eng>

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“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. 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” JSH 1:15).

It no sooner appeared than I found myself delivered from the enemy which held me bound. When the light rested upon me I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other— *This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!* (JSH 1:17)

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## Biographical Information:

[https://religion.byu.edu/steven\\_harper](https://religion.byu.edu/steven_harper)

Steven C. Harper is a professor of Church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University. In 2012 Steve was appointed as the managing historian and a general editor of *Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days*. He was named editor in chief of *BYU Studies Quarterly* in September 2018. He served in the Canada Winnipeg Mission (1990–91) and married Jennifer Sebring (1992). They graduated from BYU (1994). He earned an MA in American history from Utah State University, where his thesis analyzed determinants of conversion to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the 1830s. Chapters were published in the *Journal of Mormon History* and *Religion and American Culture* and awarded by the Mormon History Association with the T. Edgar Lyon Award for best article of the year and the Juanita Brooks Award for the best graduate student paper. Steve earned a PhD in early American history from Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. He began teaching courses in religion and history at BYU Hawaii in 2000 and joined the Religious Education faculty at BYU in 2002. That year he also became a volume editor of *The Joseph Smith Papers* and the document editor for BYU Studies. He taught at the BYU Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies in 2011–12. His first book was *Promised Land* (Lehigh University Press, 2006), a study of Lenape or Delaware Indians' responses to a fraudulent 1737 land deal in colonial Pennsylvania. He also authored *Making Sense of the Doctrine and Covenants* (Deseret Book, 2008), *Joseph Smith's First Vision* (Deseret Book, 2012), and *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins* (Oxford University Press, 2019), along with dozens of articles.



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# **followHim: A *Come, Follow Me* Podcast with Hank Smith and John Bytheway**

## **EPISODE 2: PART 1: JOSEPH SMITH HISTORY**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Hank Smith  
(00:04)

Welcome to followHIM. A weekly podcast dedicated to helping individuals and families with their *Come, Follow Me* study. I'm Hank Smith,

John Bytheway  
(00:13)

. . .and I'm John Bytheway.

Hank Smith  
(00:15)

We love to learn.

John Bytheway  
(00:16)

We love to laugh. We want to learn and laugh with you as together we followHIM.

Hank Smith  
(00:23)

My friends, welcome to Episode 2, John, can you believe it? We came back for Episode 2.

John Bytheway  
(00:28)

The longest-running streak ever. Yeah.

Hank Smith  
(00:32)

I rarely got a second date in high school. So this is, this is a big deal for me. Thank you for joining us on followHim. We are so excited for our interview today. John and I are going to be

the hosts each week, but we also are going to invite a guest, uh, and our guest is going to be what we would call an expert. This week, we have Dr. Steve Harper.

Dr. Steven Harper

(00:55)

Thanks, gentlemen. It's great to be with you guys.

John Bytheway

(00:59)

I can't remember how many years ago, but I picked up this, uh, *Joseph Smith's First Vision* by Steve Harper.

[\[https://deseretbook.com/p/joseph-smiths-first-vision-steven-c-harper-85529?ref=Grid%20%7C%20Search-1&variant\\_id=183479-paperback\]](https://deseretbook.com/p/joseph-smiths-first-vision-steven-c-harper-85529?ref=Grid%20%7C%20Search-1&variant_id=183479-paperback)

And, uh, I'll tell you, by the end of it, I was so uplifted, and especially the last chapter called, "Seekers Wanted" was just the mindset of being a seeker seeking truth. I just thought it was beautiful. In fact, I don't know if Steve remembers this, but I wrote him an email just to say, "Thank you for this contribution."

Hank Smith

(01:21)

I cannot say enough about him--that someone should not be that smart and that good looking. It's not fair. Now, before we get started, we should say John, that, uh, our podcast can be found on a regular podcasting channels.

I'm a dad. You're a dad. John's a dad. You know, here I am. I want *Come, Follow Me* to come alive for my family. I want to fulfill what President Nelson has in mind with this.

[\[https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2019/04/46nelson?lang=eng\]](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2019/04/46nelson?lang=eng)

And I come to this Joseph Smith History. And for a lot of people, they'll read these first 26 verses. And they'll say, "I don't know how to take this in my family. I don't know how to make this new. I don't know how to make this exciting." So, um, for just a dad, how have you done it?

Dr. Steven Harper

(02:05)

Well, guys, all I know an answer to that question is how not to do it. I set my kids down and say, we're going to go for 50 minutes, and I'm going to do the professor thing. And you're going to sit reverently and listen and enjoy it.

Hank Smith

(02:24)

And you're going to enjoy it.

And my little eight-year-olds are like . . .

John Bytheway

(02:26)

If you want dinner!

## **THE SECOND BEST STORY IN THE SCRIPTURES**

Dr. Steven Harper

(02:27)

So far, that has never worked--ever. My advice is to get out of Joseph's way.

This is the best story in the scriptures. And by that, I mean, not only that it's true. I mean, the consequential nature of this story is massive. Second, only to the Atonement of Christ, right. His suffering for us, his crucifixion for us, his resurrection for us. Second, only to that, this story is the most consequential. Certainly, it's in the top two for storytelling as well. The last week of the Savior's life is pretty compelling. Well, the story has to have a protagonist. Somebody who's inherently interesting. Somebody who is up against enormous odds, somebody for whom the stakes are high. And then, as the story goes along, they just get raised until they're extremely high. And our blood pressure goes up, and our heart rate increases, forces of antagonism get stronger. And when all is on the line and when the bad guys have closed in, and there's a dark night of the soul, then the hero does something-- makes a choice. Everything depends on the choice. Well, you can tell from that Joseph Smith History, especially these first 26 verses--they are a great story. So, the best thing for a dad to do is to get out of Joseph's way. Let him tell his story.

Hank Smith

(03:55)

I could start that with my kids. What's your favorite movie? Why, why? What's a great movie got to have?

Dr. Steven Harper

(04:01)

I had a boss when I was working on the Saints project. Uh, Rick Turley was my boss in Salt Lake at the church history library. And he said, "We want to write something that will feel like you're in an engrossing movie. And the worst thing we could do is come out onto the stage while the movie's playing and tell the good people, "Now, I'm going to give you a lecture about what's happening in this movie."

Hank Smith

(04:23)

One thing I would say, uh, as a parent that I've tried to do, at least for my older kids is, I've tried to use these first 26 verses as kind of a recipe to having your own experience with God. Let's look at what he does. What can we also do? Right. I can read scripture. I can pray. I can attend my meetings. I can, you know, reflect and ponder. You know, Joseph, it seems to me was always saying, "You need to have your own experience with God, right? You need to . . . you need to do this." And this seems to me that it could be a recipe for having your . . . your own experience.

John Bytheway  
(05:00)

I just love the fact that we can emphasize that he was a boy. He was a young man. I mean, a lot of adults just don't ask questions, and here he is. "Well, which one of these is right? They can't all be right. Or can they?"

Dr. Steven Harper  
(05:13)

The reason that was a big problem for him is he said, "I had become convicted of my sins."

[\[https://byustudies.byu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/59-2Final.pdf\]](https://byustudies.byu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/59-2Final.pdf)

Harper, Steven J., *Raising the Stakes: How Joseph Smith's First Vision Became All or Nothing.*]

So he was looking for the place to find forgiveness, and he couldn't find it. And, um, that, that resonates with a lot of teenagers. Right. They're looking for forgiveness. They want to know if, uh, if they've done something so heinous that God will not love them anymore. And if they can possibly find forgiveness, where is it? How do they get it? When I learned that myself, it was . . . really connected me to Joseph Smith. In many ways, it's a very typical family, right? They didn't know that they were going to be the first family of the Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ. They had no idea.

Hank Smith  
(05:53)

Well, they're sitting around, "Can't you wait? This is so exciting!"

## **THE SMITH FAMILY CHOOSES A CHURCH (OR NONE)**

Dr. Steven C. Harper  
(05:58)

Nobody would have necessarily thought that of them either. Although Grandpa Asael Smith, uh, thought there was something that was going to be pretty special about one of his descendants. Um, but they didn't know what that was until they looked in the rearview mirror after the First Vision. But in the meantime, uh, one of the most interesting things about them is that they are the first generation--that is, Joseph's mom and dad--the first generation in their families for a long time that is unchurched. Neither of them belong to a church. And I think it's common for us to think that all people back in the old days were more religious and church folks. And they're

actually not. They're Christians. They believe in Christ. Uh, they believe that redemption will come through Christ, but they don't agree with each other, Joseph, Sr., and Lucy, about how that will come and whether you need a church to mediate that salvation through Christ. So there's a fair amount of agreement between them--and then there's a fair amount of disagreement. And both of those things are actually quite important to, uh, the circumstances that lead to the First Vision.

Hank Smith

(07:06)

I've read before that it was Lucy who felt. Yeah, and I think Steve, I actually, this comes from you. To Lucy, any church was better than no church. To Joseph Smith, Sr., it's the opposite.

Hank Smith

(07:22)

It's better to not go to any church than to pick the wrong church. What do we know about the siblings?

Dr. Steven Harper

(07:25)

Joseph has two older brothers, an older sister. And then, as you can see, several younger siblings. He idolizes his big brother Alvin--thinks the world of him. And Alvin is that responsible cool-headed self-sacrificing brother that every family ought to have. Listeners may know if they've read *Saints* that Joseph and William don't always get along real great. William comes to see Joseph as a kind of a bossy big brother. They actually have a fistfight in 1835.

[<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/saints-v1?lang=eng>]

Hank Smith

(07:55)

Isn't Joseph Smith the President of the Church at that point?

Dr. Steven Harper

(07:55)

Yeah. Oh yeah.

Hank Smith

(07:59)

To me, personally, this is important. This is not a perfect family. They don't get together and say, "Let us pray." Right. Every moment of the day. And I think this might make a Latter-day Saint family feel a little like--breathe a sigh of relief. These adult brothers got in a fistfight. So you imagine that the chi--in the childhood, there's gotta be some things like that happening.

Dr. Steven Harper

(08:20)

For sure, there is. This is a family that's typical. They're pious, God-fearing, but they also believe in pop culture stuff. They believe in what the most critical people would call occult and what others of us would just call folk magic and so forth. They're like other people of their time and place. They get along well, and then they don't always get along well. Right. Even mom and dad, as we've seen, the tension is quite an important catalyst for Joseph. If everything is perfect in your life, you don't typically work very hard to seek and receive revelation. Joseph had a set of problems, and that set of problems led to the Sacred Grove. And that set of problems comes from the particular family. He lives in a particular time and place where he lives.

Hank Smith

(09:11)

My kids get along *perfectly*. Uh, they, they never fight. They never argue. Um, that's, and that's when they're asleep. Man, it seems like sometimes the moment my kids wake up, especially the younger ones, they're at each other, and I'm going, "What am I doing wrong?" I like to hear that our first family was a normal family, and I bet Sophronia pushed Katharine. And I bet, you know, Hyrum said something mean to Joseph or to William and said, you know, "Don't be so lazy!" And I like to picture Lucy Mack saying, "Don't, don't say that to him! You got to say-- Hey, stop yelling! Hey, everybody, just go outside!"

## JOSEPH AND LUCY AS PARENTS AND A NECESSARY MOVE

Dr. Steven Harper

09:47

One thing you noticed from reading Lucy's memoir is that she's an anxious person, right?

[\[https://www.amazon.com/History-Joseph-Smith-His-Mother-ebook/dp/B0027FF150\]](https://www.amazon.com/History-Joseph-Smith-His-Mother-ebook/dp/B0027FF150)

For those of you who have, have an anxious mother, and you can imagine how that might contribute to Joseph, pay close attention to his words. "Great anxiety," for example. And that's just one of many times where he uses words like that to describe this situation. Well, some of that is inherited from his mom, and I don't just mean in the DNA. His mom is a worrier. She worries very much about how they're going to pay the bills and whether they're going to be respected by their neighbors. And whether they're going to find salvation. She's a mom. She's a great mom, and she's a worrisome mom. And some of that worry gets reflected in Joseph for better or worse. And . . .and Joseph also inherits a lot from his dad. He's . . . he thinks in some ways more like his father thinks. He is an interesting mix of the two. His father is anxious, too, though. We shouldn't think mom's anxious and his dad's not. Dad has anxious dreams, and he worries all the time about whether he's going to be able to provide well for his family and whether he's going to be able to lead them to salvation or not.

Hank Smith

(10:57)

What we've done here, and I love this, is we've made them very relatable. And I think this is the real story is that you've got a dad who's . . . who's uh, "How am I going to pay the bills?" Cause that's a lot of the moving, right. You gotta pay the bills--

John Bytheway

(11:10)

--ginseng root investment--or whatever.

Hank Smith

(11:13)

And they lost a lot of money early on.

Dr. Steven Harper

(11:15)

And you know, like many of us, it's, it's an up or down thing. It's a rollercoaster ride. When they're on the verge of . . . of having everything work out great, it all falls apart. And that happens over and over again. Devastating diseases, uh, come through and, and afflict a family and bankruptcy, right? A few times, then there's a volcanic eruption on the other side of the planet that they don't even know about. And the whole Northern Hemisphere--the temperatures drop.

Hank Smith

(11:42)

So, is that the reason they move? It snows in June--it's Rexburg!

Dr. Steven Harper

(11:48)

Yeah and the crop in their part of the world are very devastated by it

Hank Smith

(11:55)

Can you imagine that? Losing three years in a row of losing all your income. My family couldn't survive. We'd have to do something else.

Dr. Steven Harper

(11:58)

Now, you think we'll, where is the grass greener? And the reports are in . . . in Western New York. The grass is greener--literally. And it's easier to grow wheat on it. So let's go there.

Hank Smith

(12:11)

And it's cheaper, right? Isn't the land a little cheaper out there?

Dr. Steven Harper  
(12:15)

Well, you can get it on good terms. That is, you can get it over time. What do you have to invest? You don't have a lot of cash but you have some strong backs. You got some boys, some, uh, mom and sisters and brothers, and a father who all know how to work--hard. Listen to Joseph, tell you that part of the story. "We knew how to work hard, and we did work hard."

[\[https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/site/accounts-of-the-first-vision\]](https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/site/accounts-of-the-first-vision)

And so that's what they have to invest. So, a little bit of money and a lot of hard work can turn into a hundred acres and a good house in Western New York. And that's why they go, that's what lures in there.

Hank Smith  
(12:47)

They're not thinking, "Well, we got to get over there, because there's plates." Look at the Lord, working with their everyday lives, to put them in the place they need to be.

Steven Harper  
(12:57)

You know, it might give us a bit of insight into opposition, right? I tend to view every bad thing that happens to me as a negative. Where if I look at it the way you're talking about it, it might be that I could see that the Lord is causing me to grow.

## **THE SMITH FAMILY MOVES TO NEW YORK**

Hank Smith  
(13:13)

And not only is he moving me somewhere I need to be, but He's also shaping me into the person I need to be when I get there. Right. So He could just tell him, "Hey, I need you to move to Western New York" in a dream, but you're not going to be the person you need to be when you get there. Sometimes it was my students. I say, "The Lord is playing chess with the Smith family, and he's just moving the pieces--exactly right. And they're going, "All right." You know, and they have no idea until He goes, "Checkmate!" And, and the First Vision occurs.

We didn't talk about the leg operation at all. It's not in this part of the story, but you did talk about diseases that come through the family.

Dr. Steven Harper  
(13:51)

In Lucy's memoir--the mom's memoir tells us that Sophronia is saved by the family's great faith.

[\[https://www.amazon.com/History-Joseph-Smith-His-Mother-ebook/dp/B0027FF150\]](https://www.amazon.com/History-Joseph-Smith-His-Mother-ebook/dp/B0027FF150)

They pray and seek and receive God's blessing of healing . . . Sophronia and . . . Lucy is a major part of all that, of course. And that's the story of her life. She's learned to pray in faith. And she's devastated when her sisters are killed by tuberculosis, and nearly Lucy herself. And she promises God early and often in her life that she will seek His ways and His Church--if He will preserve her life. And Lucy wants to be saved. Right. She's anxious and desperate to not meet God, not having been saved by Christ. And Joseph inherits that. This is where you can see where the disease and the concerns about salvation come together. Right. These people know people who die. Death is everywhere and it will take you tomorrow, if not today. And that's the world they live in, and they don't want to meet God, not having been redeemed by Christ. That's a major pressure that is working to get Joseph into the Grove as well.

John Bytheway

(14:59)

There's a lot of mortality all the time when everything's perfect in your life. You don't go seeking for help. I imagine Joseph often heard his mother expressed that idea of, "Am I prepared to meet God?"

## **TYPHOID FEVER**

Hank Smith

(15:10)

So the same disease that goes through the family with Sophronia, Joseph gets it. And that's what results in the leg surgery.

Dr. Steven Harper

(15:18)

The disease is typhoid fever, and it killed like hundreds of people in the Connecticut River Valley, where they were living. It's not long after Sophronia's life is spared from typhoid-- Joseph gets a bone infection that a doctor's today called osteomyelitis. It lodges in his shin. And it's excruciating. An interesting thing to notice here is this is not in his History. Right. And there is . . . here is an Appendix to Joseph Smith History. There's in the Manuscript History Book--A1, if we were looking at the actual record book, this is taken from Joseph Smith History taken from, we'd turn all the way to the back of the book.

[\[https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/doc/introduction-to-history-1838-1856-manuscript-history-of-the-church\]](https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/doc/introduction-to-history-1838-1856-manuscript-history-of-the-church)

And we'd notice that Joseph's clerk wrote in a version of the story about the leg surgery. Well, this tells us a couple of things. It tells us that it wasn't the most important part of the story to Joseph.

Hank Smith

(16:12)

Right? And I remember hearing it a lot from my Primary teachers as to why not to drink alcohol, which I just think maybe that wasn't the whole purpose of telling this story, but . . .

Dr. Steven Harper

(16:20)

That's not the purpose of it at all.

John Bytheway

(16:24)

So, a lot of Primary kids out there drinking alcohol--so we need that lesson for the Primary.

Dr. Steven Harper

(16:53)

We're worried about the CTRs tipping behind the Church.

Hank Smith

(16:32)

Talk about mixing up storylines. Because someone said, "He didn't want to drink alcohol because it was against the Word of Wisdom."

Dr. Steven Harper

(16:38)

It's quite a good clarification for us to make because it can lead to feeling disillusioned. And we sometimes have taught it as if it was a cautionary tale about the Word of Wisdom, but it's not in Joseph's History for that reason. Joseph never makes the point about not drinking alcohol. That's not relevant to him. It's his mom and her memoir who says, "You know, that good boy of mine was so faithful, wouldn't even take brandy to dull the pain of his leg surgery. He just said, 'Let dad hold me and I'll be okay.'" She was telling us about her and her family and about her husband actually even. Right. One of the differences between Lucy and Joseph, Sr. is that Joseph, Sr. drinks to avoid the pain from the hard work and the struggles of life. We're talking about the reason we know is because he told us in a patriarchal blessing that he gave to Hyrum to his son.

He said, "I'm thankful to you for being good to me when I have, in the past, been out of the way through wine." Right. Some people think that Joseph, Sr. that means he's an alcoholic. It doesn't mean he's an alcoholic. People are confusing a disease of alcoholism--that is debilitating if the person who drinks--with someone who has drunk too much alcohol from time to time. Yeah, not the same thing. No evidence whatsoever that Joseph Smith, Sr. or Jr. are alcoholics, but there's evidence, that both of them give to us that they both drink from time to time. And that, as you noted, it was before the Word of Wisdom.

Hank Smith

(18:10)

And how common is drinking there?

Dr. Steven Harper

(18:12)

Ah--you would be weird if you didn't.

Hank Smith

(18:14)

Yeah, if you put it in that Latter-day Saint lens, of course, you're going, "Oh, dad drinks . . . this is . . . the ward is going to be . . . so concerned." Right. "And, and the Bishop's going to want to come over and see our family," but completely different contexts.

Dr. Steven Harper

(18:29)

There's no Word of Wisdom for 20 more years. And then it'll be a hundred years after that before we think of it in the way we think of it now. And some people are troubled by that, but it's just because they haven't learned to think about change over time, the way a historian does.

Hank Smith

(18:44)

We do the same thing within my New Testament classes. "Jesus didn't drink real wine, did he? It was more like juice?" And I'm like, "Well, no, it was real wine. It was alcoholic wine."

Dr. Steven Harper

(18:58)

They didn't pasteurize it.

Hank Smith

(18:59)

And I talk them through it--like it's a different time, different contexts.

Dr. Steven Harper

(19:02)

It's good to realize that the Word of Wisdom is an unusual revelation. Many of the revelations were given for a problem--then. The Word of Wisdom says, yeah, "I'll address the problem you're having here, but the real value of this is to warn you and forewarn you about 'evils and designs, which do and will exist in the hearts of conspiring men' in the future" (D&C 89:4). You don't have tobacco company executives manipulating nicotine levels in 1833 and '34, but you do now. And by the time Hebrew J. Grant is the prophet, to really tell us, "We've got to get to work

on the Word of Wisdom. We need it--now!" He was the right prophet at the right time to give us emphasis on a revelation that was good for us in 1833, but we really didn't need the full effects of it until the 20th century.

Hank Smith

(19:50)

And I think we're going to see that throughout our study this year is the Lord getting things in place long before they're needed. And then, when they're needed, they're there. Yeah.

## **THE SMITH FAMILY MOVES TO NEW YORK**

John Bytheway

(19:57)

One of the things historically that I've enjoyed showing teenagers, I found at Barnes & Noble, this fold-out book, that's gotta be like 10-feet wide called, "The Wall Chart of World History." It was so fun to show here's the time of Christ. Here's the Meridian of time. Here's a time where the Apostasy begins, and here's this long period of apostasy. And why didn't the Lord restore the Church in the 1500s during the time of Martin Luther? Then, show how all of the United States of America is set up and, "Oh, here's the Declaration of Independence. Here's the Constitution finally ratified 1791." And there are these long stretches of time. And then it's like 14 years later, Joseph Smith born: Sharon, Vermont. And to show how quickly once religious freedom was sort of guaranteed that, uh, how quickly the Lord had things in place.

Dr. Steven Harper

(20:50)

The beginning of the American Revolution is between the birthplace and the birthdate of Joseph Smith, Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith.

Hank Smith

(21:01)

George Washington is a mere couple of hundred miles away.

How did they move? Like how do you move in 18-? What year did they move?

Dr. Steven Harper

(21:08)

1816 and '17. I say it that way because it takes a while. Dad goes first, and uh, he's got to go find the place and try to make the contract. If it's not a good idea, he'll send word back and say, "Nevermind." If it is, he'll send word back and say, "Come on."

Hank Smith

(21:27)

When we talk like, Oh, they're going to go from Vermont to New York. This is not a two-hour jump in the Hyundai Sonata. I'm going to zip over there and call ya.

Dr. Steven Harper  
(21:35)

Yeah. Uh, weeks of . . . of travel. You can walk it. You can ride a horse. You can take a cart. Or as Joseph's family will do, they'll load a wagon with most of their stuff, and then most of them will walk all or part of the way. The wagon is for taking the stuff in. There's not a whole lot of passenger space in it. Joseph is still hobbled at this time from the leg surgery. It's still tough for him to walk, and he walks a good chunk of the way. It's a hard trip. Mom leads the group. The family has contracted with a teamster. What we would today think of as like somebody to drive the truck that our stuff is in and get it to the place where it was supposed to go-- load it up and unload it. And, and the guy's a bully. And she finally fires him partway into it.

Hank Smith  
(22:20)

And she's little, isn't she little?

Dr. Steven Harper  
(22:21)

Yeah. Yeah. She's not a great big woman.

Hank Smith  
(22:23)

She's five foot, probably.

Steven Harper  
(22:26)

Right. And Joseph gets pushed down, uh, by the guy and the family that are there with him. He gets picked on and and they finally get to where they're going and meet dad. And it's a happy reunion, and they decide, "This we're gonna make it. We're gonna . . . we're going to get ourselves a hundred acres in the woods." They're going to move south out of Palmyra within a couple of years. And it's south a few miles south, in Manchester where the Sacred Grove is. This is an important thing for students of the First Vision. For some reason, we have Palmyra fixated on our brains as Latter-day Saints.

Hank Smith  
(22:59)

They moved there. They're clearing their own land right there. They've got to build their own house. This is a Build Your Own House Time Period. There's not a guy there saying, "Okay, what do you, what kind of floors do you want? What kind of sinks do you want?"

Steven Harper

(23:10)

Uh, "Do you like the travertine and so forth?" They are going to hire a guy later to build them a middle-class house. Right. They're aspiring to middle-class respectability, but for right now, you better build some shelter, and it better be not very time-consuming, and a better be made out of the same stuff that you're cutting down to make yourself room for a cash crop. In other words, they got to get a cash crop in the ground as fast as they can. And Lucy says, "In about a year, we cut 30 acres of hardwood trees down." I don't know if any of the listeners have ever done that. I think I may have cut one hardwood tree down over the course of my life. And it is hard.

Hank Smith

(23:53)

With a chainsaw

Dr. Steven Harper

(23:55)

It is hard--hard work.

Hank Smith

(23:57)

And then they're pulling stumps out too? Right. Some of these trees are--

Dr. Steven Harper

(24:00)

Yeah. Sometimes they'll just leave them, but still, sometimes, they'll pull them out or burn them or whatever it takes. They'll split the trunks into rails. They'll haul, they'll burn as much as they can. They'll haul the ash to an ashery. They're, they're incredibly industrious people.

Hank Smith

(24:13))

I'm going to use this on my . . . on my boys, right? When they're like, "Dad, I want to play the Switch. I cleaned my room. I want to play." I'll be like, "No, we're going to be like the Smiths. We're putting in 18-hour days. Right. We're going to go outside and cut down trees."

Dr. Steven Harper

(24:30)

Sounds good.

**THE FAMILY CHOOSES METHODISM, PRESBYTERIANISM, OR NONE OF THE ABOVE**

Hank Smith

(24:31)

Now, he starts attending church meetings. I assume that's with his mother.

Dr. Steven Harper

(24:34)

It's hard to know for absolute certainty. Um, the chronology here is difficult to pin down. Part of the reason for that is we don't know when Lucy and some of the family joins the Western Presbyterian Church. Those records are not available. We know when they get out of it, uh, later in the 1820s--well after the First Vision--but we don't know when they get in. So, what we have are just a few scraps of people remembering that Joseph, for example, "caught a spark of Methodism on the road to Vienna," which seems to be a reference to him attending the Methodist Campground--Methodist, uh, meetings that were held along the roadside. The Methodists are gaining ground on the Presbyterians rapidly here.

Hank Smith

(25:18)

Okay, so Methodism is a kind of a new idea. Methodism with Presbyterian being kind of the solid--

Dr. Steven Harper

(25:24)

Presbyterian then is the old church--the respectable church. And actually, they have two churches in town--brick buildings. This is what Lucy's family--this is her tradition that she comes from. This is what she sort of aspires to in a social sense. And the Methodists, in some ways, are new kids on the block, and they're aggressive. Uh, and they're plain. And they emphasize a lot more sort of personal responsibility and ability.

Hank Smith

(25:52)

The difference between Presbyterianism and Methodism, at least in this time, was Presbyterianism is . . . is God choosing you? Or have you been saved because God wants you? And so you can't really do anything. You just kind of wait until you feel God choosing you versus Methodism, which is you can choose God. You can go out and be saved by, you know, not by your own works, but because you're seeking Him.

Dr. Steven Harper

(26:14)

It's definitely an idea whose time has come. The Americans are saying, "We should represent ourselves, and we should have our own representatives. And we should have a say in our government." Methodism comes on the scene and says, "That's true for our religion, too."

Hank Smith

(26:28)

Brigham Young seems to lean towards Methodism. John Taylor seems to lean toward it. I think Wilford Woodruff as well, seems to lean toward it. Uh, so some are going to church, and some aren't. This is an interesting thing because there are Latter-day Saint families just like this. Some are going to church and some aren't. Mom is going to church with, uh, Hyrum, Samuel, Sophronia, uh, and everybody else is staying home, right?

Dr. Steven Harper

(27:50)

Yeah. Alvin stays home. Dad stays home. Joseph stays home. They're the more freethinking ones.

Hank Smith

(26:58)

I don't want any kid hearing this going, "See, mom, I don't have to go to Church." Right. "Joseph, didn't go to church with his mom." Uh, but that's interesting that half the family is heading to town, and it's a long walk. Right. That's a long ways to go to Church.

Dr. Steven Harper

(27:12)

You've got to work hard to get to Church. And it would be superficial to say, "Well, Joseph, Sr. and the boys are lazy or not as devoted" or something. It's really a misreading. They are just as much concerned about the salvation of their souls as the rest of the family. But they are super frustrated at the narrowness of the Presbyterian God, especially. And of the hypocrisy that they see in the clergy.

Hank Smith

(27:39)

Yeah, he says this here. He says, "their feelings were more pretended than real." Was Joseph Smith . . . was he a big-time Bible reader? Because he says, "I was one day reading the epistle of James." And I've always thought that means that's not the first time he picks up this book.

Dr. Steven Harper

(27:54)

Mom says in her memoir, "He never read the Bible through." And I think the first time he ever read the Bible through was in the mid-1830s when it was the new translation.

Hank Smith

(28:03)

Tony said that to us. He said, "Here we are starting this church, and he's thinking, 'I better read this thing all the way through.' "

Dr. Steven Harper

(28:11)

He lives in a biblically saturated culture. There's no way around it, but he's not himself, a systematic reader. Joseph is a deep reader. He is a thoughtful reader, and he'll dwell on it. Right. You can tell that from the way he talks about James 1:5, "Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of a man. And this had this time to mine. I reflected on it again and again." That's characteristic of Joseph's bible reading.

Hank Smith

(28:41)

He's one of these, um, students that I've, I've had these, that grab onto a phrase, and it stays with them forever. Versus some students who are going line by line because they want to finish the book.

Dr. Steven Harper

(28:54)

That's not Joseph. He doesn't care so much about finishing the book because he does about finding the answer to his problem. And it's important to know that there's an assumption in his culture--this is a thoroughly Protestant culture--

Hank Smith

(29:04)

And just real quick for everybody who's listening, Protestant is like a "protester," the opposition to Catholicism.

Dr. Steven Harper

(29:11)

What that means is the Bible, is it. There's not nearly so much emphasis on sacraments or ceremonies-

Hank Smith

(29:19)

-That's Catholicism, yeah?

## **LOOK FOR ANSWERS IN THE SCRIPTURES**

Steven Harper

(29:22)

Right. It's Christ and his word. Your answer will be in the Bible. Notice that that's what Joseph is assuming. Where can I find the scripture that tells me whether the Methodist Church or the Presbyterian Church is right? Where can I find the scripture that tells me where to gain forgiveness of my sins? The big epiphany for Joseph is to come to realize those scriptures are

not there. The book is not closed. It's not the archive of all God said. Instead, it says, "If you lack wisdom . . . in 1820, if you lack wisdom, you can *still* ask God." The Bible is an open book. It's a book of experiences of people who received revelations. It's a book of testimonies of God's work in the lives of His people. And Joseph has to come to realize that can be ongoing. It doesn't just have to be included in the covers of the book. That's a major departure for him. And frankly, that's the genesis of the Restored Gospel.

Hank Smith

(30:19)

My kids come to me with their problems. "Dad, I don't know what to do about this." "This class is killing me." "This friend is really driving me crazy." What do I do to say, "Let's, let's look at the scriptures." We do it so much in our family that it becomes kind of natural, right? That's what it was to Joseph. "I've got an--I've got a problem. Naturally. I'm going to go to the scriptures and try to solve my problem."

Dr. Steven Harper

(30:39)

Yeah, I love that, Hank. The thing that bugs me is when I hear Latter-day Saints cheapen the whole process too, and boil it down to four words, "Just pray about it." That's not what it says, and that's not what he did. He worked intellectually hard. He worked spiritually hard, and that's the inheritance of Latter-day Saints is . . . is to work really, really hard to sort out your problems. And to not just think that the work is with my brain or with my heart, it's both. Uh, "To seek learning by study and also by faith where God will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by the power of the Holy Ghost" (D&C 88:11).

[\[https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/dc-testament/dc/88?lang=eng\]](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/dc-testament/dc/88?lang=eng)

That's the legacy of the First Vision.

Hank Smith

(31:23)

Yeah. I think we've done that sometimes with Moroni, Chapter 10. We've said, "Read it and pray about it, and God will give you the answer." Well, there's a little bit more to it--to that. When you come to the Joseph Smith History, he didn't just read it and pray about it. There was a lot of anxiety. There was a lot of pondering in Joseph's time. There's a lot of time to ponder. You're going to walk to town. You're going to walk back. You don't have your headphones in. You're thinking the whole time you're out planting seeds, cutting down hardwood trees. You're probably thinking.

Dr. Steven Harper

(31:51)

In his 1832 autobiography, he says, "Between the age of 12 and 15, I became seriously impressed (*my mind becomes seriously impressed*) with regard to the all-important concerns for the welfare of my immortal soul."

[\[https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/first-vision-accounts?lang=eng\]](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/first-vision-accounts?lang=eng)

He spent years worrying and thinking and studying and working on this problem.

John Bytheway

(32:07)

You go back to Moroni's Promise in Moroni 10:4, and the word is "ask." But you go back to Moroni 10:3, and the word is ponder. "How merciful God has been since the time of Adam until the time you received these things."

[“Behold, I would exhort you that when ye shall read these things, if it be wisdom God that ye should read them that ye would remember how merciful the Lord hath been unto the children of men, from the creation of Adam even down until the time that ye shall receive these things, and ponder it in your hearts. And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you by the power of the Holy Ghost.” Moroni 10:3-4]

That's a . . . that's a *long* process. That's Enos wrestling. That's uh, it's going to take a while to learn everything that God has done since Adam and ponder it in your heart.

Hank Smith

(32:31)

People have said, "I've done what Merona has promised and I didn't get an answer. Why didn't I get one?" And I think part of it is God's not going to give you an answer your not prepared to actually act on it--but maybe all this pondering prepares you to act.

Narrator

(32:42)

*This concludes Part 1: Joseph Smith History. Please join us in Part 2: The First Vision.*

# **followHim: A Come, Follow Me Podcast with Hank Smith and John Bytheway**

## **EPISODE 2--PART 2: JOSEPH SMITH HISTORY**

[Note: For additional information regarding the various First Vision Accounts, please go to:

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/first-vision-accounts?lang=eng>

Or

<https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/site/accounts-of-the-first-vision>]

### **INTRODUCTION**

Hank Smith

(00:07)

Lead us up to a beautiful clear day, early in the spring of 1820. 200 years ago.

Dr. Steven Harper

(00:14)

So he decides that he's going to act. The answer is not necessarily going to be in the words I'm reading on the page. The answer might be in doing what other people have done before me. The first revelation is if you ask wisdom, ask God, and Joseph says, "I decided I would give that a try." So he's going to act in great faith, right? It requires faith for him to try this out.

Hank Smith

(00:45)

We use this phrase in the Church "have faith." And I like what you're doing is an act of great faith because what we don't realize is when I kneel down at my bedside, that's faith. When I pick up the book to open it and read and ponder, that's faith. And sometimes we don't realize that having faith sometimes we think about, I think, is like the force. Like having faith--I just sit here and have faith. Whereas "act in faith" is a completely different thing.

John Bytheway

(01:10)

I think Elder Bednar was . . . 2008, a talk called "Ask in Faith" and he said, "Joseph's question was not which church is right, his question was which church should I join." It was the idea of action that you're talking about right there.

[<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2008/04/ask-in-faith?lang=eng>]

Dr. Steven Harper

(01:19)

Elder Bednar shaped my thinking on this point and his emphasis on the agency that Joseph is using here. The choice to believe that the testimony of James might be true. It could make a difference if I go into the woods and pray. That's faith. He goes to a private place, and he starts to pray, and he's immediately, "overwhelmed by an actual being from the unseen world, had such astonishing powers to bind my tongue, I couldn't speak." He thought he would be overwhelmed. "It seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction."

["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. 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" JSH 1:15].]

## IS ALL LOST?

Dr. Steven Harper

(01:56)

Now, if this were being mapped out on a storyboard, this is the point of the story where the bad guys have closed in, and all is lost. Tom Cruise is just about to drop off the cliff with the time bomb exploding. This is so much better than any of those stories. So much more is at stake here.

Hank Smith

(02:13)

I had a student particularly tell me once. She talked about her depression that she goes through, and she said, "This verse 15 is one of the closest places," she said, "that describes what I experience. I'm seized upon by this power, this depression, it overcomes me."

Dr. Steven Harper

(02:33)

Unseen but very real.

Hank Smith

(02:34)

"I can't talk about it. It has an astonishing influence." She said, "Thick darkness is the way to describe it." I'm not saying that all depression comes from the adversary. Please don't get me

wrong. There are many youth and adults out there who struggle with depression and anxiety. They can identify with that last part of verse 15, "Yeah, I felt something similar in my life. It's unseen, but man it is real." I've always emphasized those three words, for a time, "for a time."

It will end, and he lets us know it will end. He didn't know it at the time it was going to end, but I love those three words "for a time." This is just for a time you're going through this.

## **“FOR A TIME”**

Dr. Steven Harper

(03:16)

I love that, Hank. That's insightful to me. I appreciate that. It makes me want to draw attention to the fact that what we're reading here is Joseph's factual memory, but it's also laced with interpretive memory. The factual memory is the kind he could have had when he walked out of the Grove. "I saw two personages" (JSH 1:17). They said these words, but the interpretive memory is the kind where he can say things like it seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction.

[It no sooner appeared than I found myself delivered from the enemy which held me bound. When the light rested upon me I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other—*This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!* (JSH 1:17)]

And he's going to go on later and say, "It seemed like I was Paul before Agrippa" (JSH 1:24). It felt like this. I've often thought then and since. And one of the reasons that the accounts of the Vision vary is because they have different interpretive memory woven into them. Just like you and I do.

## **SEEKERS DISCERN FACTS**

John Bytheway

(04:09)

My students ask me about near-death experiences, and there are some really interesting things in some of those, but I always tell them to separate what they saw with how they interpreted it because that part we may know something more about because of Section 137 or 38 or something, but that's a great way to put it. Factual memory, interpretive memory.

Dr. Steven Harper

(04:33)

That's a Seeker's skill. A Seeker develops the ability to discern the difference between facts that are true no matter what perspective you choose and interpretation of those facts that depend

completely on the perspective that you choose. Maybe the most important thing in these first 26 verses is the first line or two of verse 16. Right. What do you do when the bad guy has closed in, the ultimate bad guy? The stakes are enormously high. Your eternal welfare is at stake, and you're in the dark night of the soul. Thick darkness has gathered around. It seems like you're doomed to sudden destruction.

Dr. Steven Harper  
(05:11)

Joseph chose to exert, "All my powers to call upon God to deliver me out of the power of this enemy which had seized upon me. And at the very moment when I was ready to sink into despair and abandon myself to destruction, not to something I was imagining, but to a very real power. Just then, God delivered me" (JSH 1:16).

Hank Smith  
(05:36)

Yeah, verse 16. I'm going to label it the choice because he could quit, right, Steve? He could just lay down and be like, "I'm done, I'm done. Okay, okay. I don't want to know."

## **THE MOST CONSEQUENTIAL CHOICE**

Dr. Steven Harper  
(05:46)

Maybe on a smaller scale, but I think I do that all the time. And I often abandon myself. I often choose the easy way out. I often don't do the hard work of making the right choice. Here Joseph makes the right choice. This choice is the opening of the Restoration. He didn't know it then. He wouldn't know it for a long time after that. The Church, in a sense, wouldn't even know it until half a century after the fact when we finally canonized the First Vision. But when we look back, searching our past for the moment. What was the choice that was made that opened the Restoration. It's his choice? That's why I said at the beginning, this is the most consequential choice in history outside of the Savior's Atonement, outside of his choice to offer himself for us.

John Bytheway  
(06:35)

I made a note of that. You call it massively consequential. I thought, yeah, massive consequences for the planet. I mean, this is amazing.

Hank Smith  
(06:45)

Yeah. The three of us sitting here, that comes from this choice. This whole thing does.

[crosstalk 00:06:49]-

Dr. Steven Harper

(06:49)

Everybody listening to us.

John Bytheway

(06:48)

Yeah.

Dr. Steven Harper

(06:53)

And the fight against it. I mean, there's a huge, huge fight against the First Vision right now, as you all know, and there are casualties being taken. There's a war being waged. Why? Because there's so much at stake.

John Bytheway

(06:57)

It's massively consequential.

Hank Smith

(07:08)

I just had an idea that I would challenge parents, and I think I want to do this with my older teenagers is tell them my story and tell them my the moments of my decision. Like you said, "I didn't know it at the time, but as I look back in my life, there were moments of decision. They were massively consequential in my life, into my future, and to theirs as my children." I think this would be a great opportunity for moms and dads to sit down and say, "Let me tell you about one of my verse 16s where I had a choice to make."

John Bytheway

(07:43)

--a turning point.

Hank Smith

(07:40)

--And how God helped me.

John Bytheway

(07:46)

The moment where I was all in, "I mean exerting all my powers to call upon God," this is when I thought, "I am all in" (JSH 1:16).

Hank Smith

(07:53)

Yeah, because sometimes our kids look at us and go, "You were born with a shirt and tie. You never went through this." I was in the delivery room going, "Everyone gather around. We're

going to read some scripture." That's how my kids sometimes see me because they weren't around when I was in my own little 14-year-old time. Maybe obviously not as profound, but we've all had moments of decision that changed everything for us.

Dr. Steven Harper

(08:17)

If the problem just ramped up in verse 15 and early in 16, this is the resolution. And you can feel it. If you put monitors on people who are paying careful attention as they read this, you could probably see their heart rate change and their blood pressure change. And this resolution just provides the answer to Joseph's problem. He is delivered from the enemy which held him bound, and he sees two personages whose brightness and glory defile description. So we shouldn't expect Joseph in any of his accounts of the Vision to be able to do an adequate job. There's no way.

Dr. Steven Harper

(08:55)

After he first wrote the Vision himself in 1832, the very next thing he wrote in the same book was a letter, and in that letter, he prayed. He just sort of spilled his prayer out on the page. He said, "Lord, deliver me from the narrow prison of paper pen and ink and a crooked broken scattered and imperfect language." How do you write what defies all description? It can't be done.

[\[https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-william-w-phelps-27-november-1832/4\]](https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-william-w-phelps-27-november-1832/4)

Hank Smith

(09:17)

How do you describe the indescribable?

## **FIRST WORDS OF THE RESTORATION**

Dr. Steven Harper

(09:19)

Yeah. So it bugs me a little when people want to hold Joseph Smith to a standard that neither they nor anybody else can probably meet. I love to tell my students and require them to . . . to think about what are the first revealed words of the Restoration. In the 1832 Account, it's, "Joseph, my son, thy sins are forgiven." And in this account, it is, "Joseph, this is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!" (JSH 1:17)

[\[https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/site/accounts-of-the-first-vision\]](https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/site/accounts-of-the-first-vision)

The first revealed words of the Restoration are God calling Joseph by his name.

Hank Smith

(09:51)

He doesn't write the word Joseph in here. We sometimes miss it. We think in the italics, "*This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!*" (JSH 1:17)

I really want everyone to see that Joseph, He knows your name. God knows my name. I think in that first word, he finds out something we all need to find out that God knows who we are.

Dr. Steven Harper

(10:09)

Joseph here thinks he's a literary failure, right? He started off this story by telling us, "Look, I barely had a chance to go to school. Don't hold me to high standards here." But if we were just noticing how powerfully he just juxtaposed the thick darkness with the relief that comes, it couldn't be done better. I don't think. Let's say here, though, that there's a big difference if he's telling the story than if he's writing the story.

## 1832 AUTOBIOGRAPHY ACCOUNT

Dr. Steven Harper

(10:39)

The 1832 Autobiography which is like six pages long and two sentences and misplaced modifiers. It's both beautiful, and it's messy. It's kind of a disaster. So that one is handwritten by Joseph, and the first thing he says in it too after he gives a grand introduction to it, he says, "I can't write. I never barely got to go to school. I was only instructed in the ground rules of reading, writing arithmetic. So don't please expect a lot."

[<https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/site/accounts-of-the-first-vision>]

When he writes, it's a painful and difficult thing for him to do. But when he just tells this story, it turns out like this. He can tell it in a way that is powerful and beautiful. I don't mean to diminish the written one he did either. That one's beautiful for its own reasons, but this document we're reading is unbelievably powerful. I want to make sure everybody knows in case there's any question. I believe this with my whole soul. I believe this story is true, and I'm really thrilled that it is because I'm in that story. I'm the person in this story with Joseph. Not as heroic as him, but it's even better for that reason. God rescues anxious teenagers, is what this tells me. He listens to us. He calls us by name. He sends his Only Begotten Son to save us. I love those things. I'm grateful for them.

Hank Smith

(11:57)

I think I've heard you say this before, Steve or one of your contemporaries. Joseph doesn't know where to go to get forgiveness of his sins. I know where to go to get forgiveness of my sins because of him, because of Joseph. So not only does he have to go through the similar process

I have to do, but he has to show me how this works and then how I can do it. So I appreciate him on both accounts. One, he's like me. Two, he's the trailblazer to what I have now because I know where to go.

Dr. Steven Harper

(12:25)

We know that there's some conflict potentially between verses 10 and 18, or at least they can be read that way. In verse 10, Joseph says, "I'd often said to myself, is one of these churches wrong? Who of these parties are right? Are they all wrong together?" If anyone's in. Right. Which isn't, "how shall I know it?" (JSH 1:10)

So he has often said that to himself. Now, verse 18 says that when he sees the two divine beings, he asks them, "Which of the churches is right because at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong and which I should join." J(SH 1:18)

Hank Smith

(13:02)

There's definitely a conflict there with verse 10.

Dr. Steven Harper

(13:06)

There could be. I've read this stuff over and over as you have, and I've read all the other accounts over and over. I was one day reading them at lunchtime outside the Church History Library. It was this beautiful sunny day. I took them out with me. I wanted to see if there was something I was missing. I wanted to listen to Joseph again, and I was prayerful about it, and I read, read, read. I recognized something I'd never seen before that day, and that is that Joseph tries hard in his accounts to distinguish between what's happening in his mind and what's happening in his heart.

Once I saw that, I recognized that his dilemma--his big problem is--that he can't reconcile his head and his heart. How many of us have had that problem? That's really what it is. I mean, even the conflict between Methodism and Presbyterianism is one of mind and heart. So here in verse 10, Joseph says, "I had thought this in my head a thousand times. I had thought maybe they're all wrong. That's a terrible thought." (JSH 1:10)

He doesn't want to conclude that. That would be a terrible conclusion.

## **THE CREEDS**

Dr. Steven Harper

(14:10)

So rather than conclude that, he wants to try to find out for sure. He doesn't want to decide that on his own, so he seeks a revelation--he seeks to know wisdom from God, and in that wisdom, he learns your thought was right. The Christian churches you have to choose from, they're all based on Neoplatonic philosophical creeds that really do a terrible job of describing the nature of God. As a result, they're an abomination to God.

So here God shows up and says, "That's not me. The creeds are not good biographical statements of who God is. I am different and here I am. I'm going to restore the real way of thinking about God through Joseph Smith."

I'm paraphrasing the whole Restoration here in a nutshell. Joseph here says in verse 18 now, "It had never entered into my heart" (JSH 1:18).

John Bytheway

(15:02)

I wasn't convicted in my heart about that. I thought about it, but . . .

Dr. Steven Harper

(15:08)

It's easy to, especially if we're already looking for a way to convict Joseph on cross-examination, right? It's easy to get him right there. "Aha, Joseph! I caught you in a lie."

But if our goal is to listen to him explain himself and if we'll do it over and over, then what you notice is that he's completely consistent on that point. He completely consistently, through all the accounts, paints a dilemma between his head and his heart that he can't himself reconcile without more revelation, without wisdom, and here he gets it.

Hank Smith

(15:42)

One thing I've loved is in verse 8, where he says, "It was impossible for a person as young as I was, so unacquainted with men and things, to come to any certain conclusion who was right and who was wrong." And here, just ten verses later, he's like, "It's not impossible for a person as young as I was," when you add the Lord in the mix. "I came to a very certain conclusion who was right and who was wrong" (JSH 1:8,18).

John Bytheway

(16:04)

Hey, Steve. I want to hear some more about . . . because I think this is so important. I've had my students ask me, "It sounds like Heavenly Father sounds mad," or "It sounds like the Savior sounds mad." Notice what's the abomination. It wasn't the people. There were good-hearted

people. It was the creeds. So give me another sentence or two about what those creeds were and why would those be singled out here in the First Vision. Those creeds are an abomination.

Dr. Steven Harper  
(16:31)

I really appreciate the question, John, because none of us in this conversation have any desire to impugn Christians of any denomination.

Hank Smith  
(16:41)

I remember actually hearing this as a missionary that, "Why would I listen to you. You think according to your prophet, I am an abomination. God hates me because of what I believe." I had never even read it that way, but that's how some have used it as almost a weapon against Joseph.

Dr. Steven Harper  
(17:01)

The creeds are wrong about who God is. The creeds of Christianity are based on a Greek philosophical idea that ultimately, there is only one thing, and that's God. And everything else has come from God. That means that all of creation is out of nothing that you and I can't become like God. There's not a Heavenly Mother. Exaltation, right? In other words, all of the most beautiful things of the Restoration are impossible if your starting point is the creeds of Christianity.

The God of the creeds is not passable. He's not capable of anything that is human, including relationships or emotions, right? He is without body parts and passions. Well, the God of the First Vision is not like that. He knows Joseph's name. He has a Beloved Son. They can stand next to each other in the air. They can call Joseph by name, and Joseph says in his other accounts, "They filled me with joy unspeakable and for many days, I was filled with love."

[<https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/site/accounts-of-the-first-vision>]

Dr. Steven Harper  
(18:14)

When we as latter-day saints are accused of not being Christian, that is true if your definition of Christian is "Someone who believes in the God of the Christian creeds." I emphatically don't. This past Sunday. I spent two hours in an evangelical church in Gainesville, Florida, and then went to a soccer meeting. I loved it. I loved every minute of it. It was edified. There was beautiful truth taught. I've fellowshiped with other Christians. So I don't wish to be misunderstood as somebody who attacks Christianity or other Christians. I just want to say that there is great good news that the Restoration of the gospel fixes what went wrong when our apostles were all gone, and all we had left was some philosophers, and all they had to work with was some Greek philosophical ideas. And what that led to was this idea that God is just one.

Dr. Steven Harper  
(19:15)

Therefore, creation couldn't have been by God out of pre-existing materials, including intelligence and element. And therefore, there's not such a thing as agency, the way that the Restored Gospel has it. There's no possibility for exaltation and being with families forever and becoming like God. So all the things I love most about the Restoration are at stake in whether the creeds are right or wrong.

Hank Smith  
(19:38)

In Jacob 5, the Lord says, "I see a bunch of fruit on the trees and none of it is good. It doesn't produce what I want. I want exalted children and the creeds cannot produce exalted children." Just in my "Christ and the Everlasting Gospel Class" at BYU, I take my students through the creation of the Nicene Creed. Probably the most important of all the creeds, the most pivotal of all the creeds, and where it kind of goes off the rails. And what it was, it was really an argument between two church fathers. Arius and Alexander had differing views about Christ and his divinity, and it was a fight between the two.

[<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Arianism>]

Hank Smith  
(20:14)

So in that Nicene Creed, the first . . . That initial Nicene Creed where it goes off the rails is called anti-Arianism--where Alexander just wanted to beat Arius. It wasn't about scripture. It wasn't about getting the correct view. It was about making sure that Arius is out. Again, we're not anti-Christian by any means, but there is some difficulty in the . . . that creedal history.

John Bytheway  
(20:40)

Well, I like the way Steve said it. "We don't view God through the lens of the creeds." And I think just for our listeners, go find Elder Jeffrey R. Holland's talk. I think it's called "The Only True God and Jesus Christ Whom Thou Hast Sent."

[<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2007/10/the-only-true-god-and-jesus-christ-whom-he-hath-sent?lang=eng>]

It is a great Conference-level talk about the creeds--about what they are--about the possibility of . . . I mean, in John, "This is life eternal that they might know the only true God." And not a creed that says he's not knowable, but John says you can know him. "And Jesus Christ whom He has sent." He talks about the creeds a little bit, just briefly, and I think that one word most teenagers won't know creeds. A lot of my students don't know creeds and to say-

Dr. Steven Harper  
(21:21)

Except from the Rocky movies.

John Bytheway

(21:23)

Yeah, that's right. So that's what he said in [verse] 19 was an abomination. It was the creed. Stephen Covey, who I just think was from another planet, that guy was so brilliant. He just made this offhand comment once that if you look at the articles of faith, it looks like the Articles of Faith came in the same order in which things were corrupted, and the nature of God is the first Article of Faith. And I thought, "Wow, that's true." The first thing Joseph needed to know that he learned here, "Wow, God is real. He called me by name," and as you said, Steve, "My soul was filled with love, and for many days I could rejoice," from that other account. How interesting that they unfold in an order, the Articles of Faith even.

## **TELL YOUR STORY**

Hank Smith

(22:06)

Kids love to hear stories. Little kids, older kids, they love to hear stories, especially if they're about their parents. I think if you could tell your children a few times where you found out, God knew your name, who you were. To me, that's something that sits in them and has impact.

Dr. Steven Harper

(22:23)

There's a lot of research showing that families where the parents have told their story and the kind that you're talking about, those are stronger families. That was like Joseph Smith's family. His mom told the story.

Hank Smith

(22:35)

Now, Steve, I wanted to ask you about something. You've said things like 1832 Autobiography. You've said the term other accounts. There might be someone listening, "What are you talking about?" Just give us a brief overview of, I've heard you call it, the four or five accounts. Just depending on how you define "account."

[<https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/articles/primary-accounts-of-first-vision>]

## **THE ACCOUNTS OF THE FIRST VISION**

Dr. Steven Harper

(22:54)

All right. I'm a little worried about going all the way to Nerdville here.

Hank Smith

(23:04)

This is the time to go to Nerdville. This is it. The only ones who are still with us are the ones who are going, "I want everything. I want to be Steve Harper."

John Bytheway

(23:20)

The only ones who are still with us. Yeah.

Dr. Steven Harper

(23:14))

In the Book of Acts, there are three accounts of Paul's marvelous conversion experience or a couple in the Book of Acts and one later in his letters, I should say, and none of them are alike. None of them match exactly. And some of them have conflicting details. Of course, everybody knows there are four Gospels, but by four different authors. But here we have presumably Paul as our source of these three, the original knowledge. If we can realize that that's not a reason to throw Paul's conversion out, but rather we study those accounts and learn everything we can from them.

[<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/nt/acts/1?lang=eng>]

Dr. Steven Harper

(23:53)

The same thing is true in the Book of Mormon. Right. There are multiple accounts of Alma's conversion.

[Mosiah 26-8: <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/bofm/mosiah/26?lang=eng>

and

Alma 36: <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/bofm/alma/36?lang=eng>]

They all come from him. Sometimes he tells it short, sometimes he tells it long. He tells it for different reasons, and he tells it in different present contexts. Well, that's true for Joseph Smith too. Joseph told his First Vision repeatedly. It got recorded for us at least four times in primary accounts. Primary meaning it was recorded by Joseph or somebody who was working under his direction to record it as he told the story.

Dr. Steven Harper

(24:27)

The earliest of those is twelve years after the Vision in 1832, and the latest one is in 1842. It's what we sometimes call the Wentworth Letter. Between that, there was the one that we know best, the 1838 account. Joseph started it in 1838, then spent the winter in jail at Liberty,

Missouri, then finished it in 1839, and it was published in the Church's newspaper in 1842 and now is in our Pearl of Great Price.

Hank Smith

(24:58)

That's the one we've been reading today.

Dr. Steven Harper

(25:00)

That's the one we're looking at. It got put into the Pearl of Great Price in 1851, and Pearl of Great Price got made into scripture by the saints in the General Conference in 1880. So it's by far the best-known account. It's the most complete one. It's the one Joseph felt most comfortable sending out to the world. The earliest one that we've been referring to, the 1832 Autobiography--he suppressed that. He didn't share it with people. I think he didn't like it. As I told you, it's kind of a rough literary product. I find it beautiful for all of its candor and raw access to Joseph's teenage self. But I think he looked at it and thought, "The last thing I want is my raw teenage self and my terrible grammar out there in front of the whole world to look at."

Dr. Steven Harper

(25:49)

So the things I want most, probably prompted him to say, "Oh, I'm going to throw that in the garbage can and get somebody smarter than me to help me with this writing project," which is what he always did after that. He didn't throw in the garbage can, thankfully.

Hank Smith

(26:02)

But you love the 1832 Account. I've heard you talk about it.

Dr. Steven Harper

(26:09)

Yeah, I love them all. I have four favorite accounts of the First Vision. And besides that, there are five secondary ones. That means somebody who Joseph told the story to--wrote it during his lifetime. A couple of apostles who published it in Europe. Orson Pratt in Scotland and Orson Hyde in Germany on their missions. A journal entry by Levi Richards. A newspaper account by a fellow named David White. A Latter-day Saint named Alexander Neibaur recorded in his journal just a month before Joseph was killed.

John Bytheway

(26:38)

Okay. Four primary accounts, five, what'd you call them secondary accounts?

Dr. Steven Harper

(26:35)

Secondary accounts.

John Bytheway

(26:42)

Okay, awesome. Keep going.

Hank Smith

(26:45)

Four primary--All I got was two written down. 1832, the rough one. 1838-39, the one we have.

Dr. Steven Harper

(26:51)

There are two others, and they are an 1835 journal entry. Joseph was telling a visitor who had come to see him about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, and he said, "The first thing that happened in that series of events was the first vision." So this is a great example of interpretive memory. You don't know that your First Vision is your First Vision until you've had subsequent visions. You don't call World War I, World War I until after World War II.

John Bytheway

(27:19)

Until after World War II.

Dr. Steven Harper

(27:22)

So Joseph doesn't come home from the Grove and say, "Mom, Dad, I just had my First Vision. When will supper be ready?" So the first time he uses the word first to describe the Vision is in telling this fellow from the East in November of 1835. So 15 years or so after the Vision, he says, "Yeah, the Book of Mormon came forth this way. The first thing that happened is, "I was worried about my soul. I went to the woods to pray. I saw personage, he revealed another personage, and they told me that the churches were not theirs, and they filled me with joy unspeakable, said that I'd been forgiven of my sins."

Dr. Steven Harper

(27:59)

It's a beautiful, fast-moving account. It bears evidence that Joseph was more comfortable telling the story when he was orally doing it than when he was trying to be the writer himself. What I'm talking about now is what we call the 1835 Account, the journal entry, and the best place to get at these is at the Church's Gospel Topics essay titled First Vision Accounts, which has links to all these. So the best place to get at the raw documents themselves is josephsmithpapers.org, and that'll be second or third on your list if you Google First Vision Accounts. And folks should also know these are available in their Gospel Library app, in the Church History part: First Vision.

[<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/first-vision-accounts?lang=eng>

Or

<https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/site/accounts-of-the-first-vision>

Or

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/pages/mobileapps?lang=eng>

Hank Smith

(28:37)

Absolutely, yeah. Very transparent. Then what's the fourth?

Dr. Steven Harper

(28:43)

In 1842, which is what we call the Wentworth Letter. This is a letter to a newspaper editor from Chicago who wrote Joseph saying, "Hey, a buddy of mine is writing a history of New Hampshire, and we want to tell your story. It was New Hampshire where Joseph was a kid--had his leg surgery. Joseph was becoming interesting and curious . . . curiosity. So, a good way to sell books would be to include stuff like that and wanted to tell his story. That was a breath of fresh air to Joseph. One major reason there are differences in the accounts is that Joseph's present circumstances when he told the story had a big influence on how the story got told.

Dr. Steven Harper

(29:23)

So you'll notice in the one we read in the Pearl of Great Price that it is defensive, and this comes after the worst year of Joseph's life: Liberty Jail, Extermination Order, Exile from Missouri. All that. Then you write your history. The way you're going to write it is, "owing to the many reports, put in circulation by evil dispose and designing people."

I'm going to tell you the truth. I'm going to tell you the truth of hot persecution and bitter persecution. And I've been persecuted since I was an infant. And it all started a few days after the First Vision when that minister told me was all of the devil.

Hank Smith

(29:55)

That makes perfect sense. He says, "I knew it. I knew that God knew it and I could not deny it." I'm not going to. Or he says, "They did, in reality, speak to me," because you could tell people are saying, you made it up. It's in reality. It's defensive.

Dr. Steven Harper

(30:12)

Some people can read it and say, "Boy, Joseph was pretty uptight that day." Well, yeah, he was. He'd just been through the crappiest year of his life. And people were hating him and driving him, and his family, and his people. Robbing them of their property, tarring and feathering them, incarcerating them in jail, et cetera because of his testimony of the Restored Gospel. So he could either cave in and say, "Oh, it's all a fake." Or he could be defensive and resolute. In the face of that persecution, that worst year of his life, he decided to be resolute. And that's why that one has the tone that it has.

Dr. Steven Harper

(30:50)

It may even contribute to, "Oh, their creeds are an abomination. Their professors are all corrupt." In the 1842 Account, where he's writing to a newspaper editor, who's actually asking for Joseph to tell his own story, Joseph paraphrases the father and the son saying, "They told me that all the churches were believing in incorrect doctrines and that none of them was his church."

John Bytheway

(31:02)

A little softer.

Dr. Steven Harper

(31:12)

Same story but definitely a different tone to it, softer. Maybe even unconsciously so. I don't know how much Joseph thought. I should be really defensive and sound like I'm spitting venom or if that's just the way it happened because of the year of his life.

Hank Smith

(31:29)

This last year, 2020, I've been a little more defensive about just in my explanations of things, just because it's been a hard year. I mean, wouldn't it be great as a missionary. I use this quote probably every class that I teach is, "It's good to be faithful. It's better to be faithful and competent." And as a missionary, when someone says, "Well, Joseph Smith, duh, duh, duh, duh, duh." To be able to say, "Let me tell you a little bit about when he wrote that, what he was going through. Let me show you a different account where he's not so defensive." It's a tool for conversion. It's a tool for explaining.

Dr. Steven Harper

(32:06)

I think so too. To make the multiple accounts of the First Vision, a weapon against Joseph and the Vision, you have to be willing to make some assumptions. And if people will just test their assumptions, all of a sudden, it becomes a much less potent weapon. Why would I assume there shouldn't be multiple accounts of something so spectacular? I mean, there are of Paul's conversion--of Alma's. Why not Joseph's? Yeah, but they're different. Why wouldn't they be? Why would I assume they would be? Joseph didn't write him down for a long time. Why would I assume that he would? This is a guy who tells me the first time he puts his pen to paper, in both of his autobiographies, he tells me, "I don't write. I'm not well educated. It's a miracle I'm writing this at all."

Not that it took me so long. So when we test our assumptions, we find that really they're nothing more than what we imagine history should be like instead of listening to somebody who was actually there. The only eyewitness in the Grove tells us what it really was like.

## INTERROGATE YOUR ASSUMPTIONS

Hank Smith

(33:08)

If I'm going to criticize Joseph, "Well, you should have written it down." He might turn to me and say, "How much have you written down?" "Well, I'm not the same. I'm not the prophet." Sometimes we think of people in history as if they know the future like, "Well, now, I've got to go and do because we're going to end up in Salt Lake with the Conference Center and the Jazz so I've got to get all this going."

When President Uchtdorf said, "Doubt your doubts before you doubt your faith," in my mind, he might... I could take that as analyze your assumptions.

[<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2013/10/come-join-with-us?lang=eng>]

Dr. Steven Harper

(33:38)

Interrogate your assumptions. First of all, identify them. Don't confuse assumptions with facts. Facts--I tell my students--facts are something that everyone . . .that's verifiable no matter what perspective you choose. An assumption is something that just depends entirely on the perspective you choose. First of all, people need to identify their assumptions and then interrogate them and see if they're really sound. Can they withstand careful scrutiny?

Hank Smith

(34:06)

I always go to Luke 24, where the two apostles say, "Well, we thought he was the Messiah, but he wasn't because such and such didn't happen." That's all based on--

[<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/nt/luke/24?lang=eng>]

Dr. Steven Harper

(34:15)

--Assumptions.

Hank Smith

(34:16)

. . . assumptions, right? And the Lord responds with, "You fools." That is a terrible assumption. And he corrects their assumptions, and they take it. So I've often told my students and others saying, "Take your assumptions to the Lord and let Him correct them." He probably will say, "That's a bad assumption." One woman said to me once, she said, "Don't you think if the Church were true, it would be bigger?" And I said, "Why would you think that?" And she said, "Well, wouldn't you assume that if the Church were true, it would be bigger?" And I said, "Well, not really. In the scriptures, I've seen Nephi say, 'I saw the saints of God, they were few.' The

scriptures don't really give that assumption. Where did you get it?" She really just said, she just kind of told me, "I would just figured."

Dr. Steven Harper  
(35:00)

If you base your faith on assumptions, it will be easily overturned because your assumptions are nothing more than what you imagine. They have no basis in revelation, history, et cetera. And note, Hank, you said "if," right? That assumption started with an if.

Hank Smith  
(35:18)  
If--yeah.

Dr. Steven Harper  
(35:19)

I call that Hypothetical History--a dreadful way to do history. "If this, then wouldn't that be?" No, not necessarily.

Hank Smith  
(35:27)

I think I've heard you say before, "Well if I had the First Vision, I would go home and immediately tell my family." Would you? Would Joseph? Why would you expect Joseph to hurry-- go home and tell his family? I'd be scared to tell anyone, right? I'd probably keep things close to the vest going that people are going to think I'm nuts.

Dr. Steven Harper  
(35:45)

The Bible tells us that "Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19)

[\[https://biblehub.com/luke/2-19.htm\]](https://biblehub.com/luke/2-19.htm)

I think Joseph tells the Methodist minister excitedly and gets totally rejected (JSH 1:21). And then I think he clams up and doesn't tell anybody else for a good while.

John Bytheway  
(36:00)

It breaks my heart to think of Joseph in Liberty [Jail] in 1838, thinking, "Everybody is suffering because of this." And that's the time you're saying, "Okay, never mind. Made it all up." Right.

Dr. Steven Harper  
(36:15)  
Yeah.

John Bytheway

(36:16)

We talked about a First Vision, but so many of Joseph's visions later were shared visions. I just think that's amazing and so validating that, "Hey, Sidney. You were there. Oliver, you were there." And you now have a burden to share what you've seen as well.

Hank Smith

(36:33)

I just feel like I'm getting to know him, and I feel for him. He said Moroni told him that his name would be known for good and evil" (JSH 1:33).

And Steve, you said there's a war against the First Vision. But I want to be on the other side. I want to be the one speaking the good. I want to publicly announce it. "I'm standing by this guy!"

John Bytheway

(36:54)

I'm so glad. I'm so glad there's another account where he adds a detail of "my soul was filled with love and for many days I could rejoice." I love that. I love the account where he says, "I thought the forest would be consumed talking about the brightness and the..." Thank you for those extra details, especially the part of being filled with love because that just makes sense to me. You're in the presence of God. He calls you by name. What is that going to do to you to have this glorious being look at you and call you by name? I think it happened to Moses too. "Now, I know that man is nothing. I never suppose that." I love that those extra details are available.

## TESTIMONY OF DR. STEVEN HARPER

Hank Smith

(37:34)

If someone said, "Hey, I found another account of Alma's conversion story written by him," I'd be, "Wait, what? What else can I learn about it?" I wouldn't go, "Well, he didn't tell that the same." I'd be so excited about it. Steve, to finish, I think it really helps Latter-day Saints. At least it helps me to hear people who are as educated as you, and I think education has its place, educated who you know everything that the people who hate Joseph Smith. You know everything, and I want to know how you feel about Joseph and what how you feel about the Restoration?

Dr. Steven Harper

(38:10)

Well, I think the word I that I associate with this question is *marvel*. I marvel at Joseph. I marvel at what the Lord did through Joseph. Some people think this sort of love for Joseph Smith. I honestly could not care less about Joseph Smith if all he was an upstate farmer in New York. There were a hundred others there by the same name at the same time. I'm not even kidding about that. Why are we not talking about them? Because they didn't have a First Vision. They

didn't translate the Book of Mormon. How in the world is Joseph Smith different than them, right?

Dr. Steven Harper  
(38:55)

If we were to ask him, he'd say, "I was an obscure boy. I wasn't different than them. I was no one of consequence." But in hindsight, he knew, and we know that he was, right? He asked of God in great faith, and God opened the heavens on him, not just for him, but for all of us, right? There were a lot of other people in his time and place and before and since who have had just as sincere a heart, just as deep of faith, and just as desirous to know God's will for them and whether God loved them or not. And Joseph's answer is their answer too. It's my answer too.

Dr. Steven Harper  
(39:37)

I love him because the Lord loved him and opened the heavens upon him, and he loved the Lord. I love Joseph Smith because he didn't back out in those most difficult times of his life. And as you both know, he said later in his life, "If I didn't know better, I would back out. This is hard. But I can't back out. He said, "I have no doubt of the truth." Well, there have been other people who've had no doubt of the truth and backed out, and that tells you something about this kid that God hand-picked. He does not back out when the going gets unbelievably tough.

Dr. Steven Harper  
(40:22)

So the best thing to me about Joseph Smith is he undaunted. You cannot keep him down. You will have to kill him, but you won't be able to do that until his work is done. In 1838, he learned by revelation that the Lord would make sure he lived at least five more years. I joked earlier about a Tom Cruise movie where you set the time bomb ticking and all that at the end. Joseph Smith's life is more interesting and exciting than that and so much more consequential. He had a ticking clock by January 1838, and he knew that he had to get the priesthood keys implemented. Israel is beginning to be gathered.

Dr. Steven Harper  
(41:07)

The Saints endowed and sealed and all of those ordinances into the hands of the Apostles and their wives before he could be killed. And he did that. He barely did it. And once he got that work done, he said, "They can kill me now. In fact, it'll be a relief. I feel as light as a cork."

[\[https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/teachings-joseph-smith/chapter-46?lang=eng\]](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/teachings-joseph-smith/chapter-46?lang=eng)

He said the day he finished that work and he was back to that native, cheery temperament. But the most intense times of Joseph's life, that native cheery temperament was suppressed by his anxieties, his worries, his workload, the pressures that were on him.

Dr. Steven Harper

(41:49)

I love that he was willing to shoulder that load, the load of the Restoration. I don't care a lick for Joseph Smith, the farmer. I love Joseph Smith, the prophet. Anybody listening to this can tell I don't think of him as perfect. If he were perfect, I'd be so much less interested in him. I couldn't relate to him. The magic of him for me is that he's like me in a sense. He has the same teenage concerns, and he shows me the way to find a resolution to them. Joseph Smith reveals Christ.

Dr. Steven Harper

(42:25)

He revealed Christ in the Book of Mormon more powerfully and potently than anybody had ever done before. He revealed Christ more powerfully and potently through his revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants than anybody had ever done before. He revealed the plan of salvation more clearly and completely than anyone had ever done before, and he didn't have as much education as I did when I graduated from the Sixth Grade.

Dr. Steven Harper

(42:41)

He translated the Book of Mormon in a single spring between the 7th day of April and the last day of June 1829. Everybody who watched him do it marveled and knew that he did it by the gift and power of God. People since have decided that he didn't write--that he did it in this way or that way or somebody else did it--not him. Every shred of evidence in the historical record says that he did it in a single spring, dictating it almost entirely to Oliver Cowdery, who wrote it as Joseph dictated it by the gift and power of God.

Dr. Steven Harper

(43:23)

So these are the reasons why I have faith in him, why I love him. We could point out all kinds of flaws. We could point out all kinds of controversies and complexities. I'm not ignorant of those things, and I'm not denying those things, but what I want people to make sure they understand is what he did, and that can be boiled down best by saying the first revealed words of the Restoration are, "Joseph, my son, thy sins are forgiven thee." I hear that as, "Steven, my son, your sins can be forgiven you," on the exact same terms and conditions. And so can everyone else's.

Dr. Steven Harper

(44:04)

Who else solves the soteriological problem of Christianity, where there are three truths that are irreconcilable. God loves his children. Salvation is available through willing acceptance of the Atonement of Christ, and many, many, many people live and die and never hear of Christ or accept. That's only a problem because of the Apostasy because in about the Fourth Century of the Christian Era, philosophers made death the deadline that determined salvation.

Dr. Steven Harper

(44:34)

Joseph Smith obliterated that with . . . well, the Lord did through him. Right. And there are others. Right. The problem of suffering. Who else gives us a better resolution to the problem of suffering than the Lord does through Joseph Smith? So anyway, you can tell that I'm excited about this, and the first Vision is the beginning of it all. And I'm really thrilled that we're studying this year the work the Savior did through that kid that he called in the spring of 1820.

John Bytheway  
(45:03)

I think this has been great. I'm so fired up. Thank you, Steve.

Dr. Steven Harper

Thank you, both. I really appreciate what you're doing.

Hank Smith

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