

Since days of old God has designated special witnesses, or prophets, to be his voice unto the world. The term prophet comes from a classical Greek word which signifies,

*One who speaks for another, especially one who speaks for a god, and so interprets his will to man; hence its essential meaning is “an interpreter.”* (*A Dictionary of the Bible*, by William Smith, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1979), p. 534.)

One of the chief duties of the Latter-day prophet Joseph Smith was that of an interpreter of the scriptures. As a prophet, he rendered authoritative interpretations as the spirit of inspiration guided him. Often times, proper interpretation necessitated God revealing additional light and knowledge to his Prophet through visionary experiences. This article will highlight in historical context some of the marvelous doctrines God revealed through vision unto Joseph Smith as he pondered questions about Biblical passages.

Much of what Joseph Smith revealed in the initial stages of the restoration occurred while he labored to translate the Bible. Joseph Smith’s translation was not so much a rendering into English the meaning of the Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible, but rather restoring information that had been lost in the transmission of the Bible and correcting mistakes. Joseph commenced work on the inspired version of the Bible soon after completing the translation of the Book of Mormon in 1829. Historical records state that Joseph bought a King James Version Bible in October 1829 for the purpose of translation and that as early as June of 1830 major additions to the Book of Genesis had been received, such as Moses 1-5, now presently found published in the Pearl of Great Price. (*Joseph Smith’s Translation of the Bible: A History and Commentary*, by Robert J. Matthews, (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1985), pp. 26-28.) Due to the various ecclesiastical and secular matters that competed for Joseph’s time during 1830-1832 the translation efforts seesawed between complete cessation and focused fruition. The circumstances of autumn 1831 - winter 1832 are indicative of this phenomenon.

Joseph returned to Kirtland, Ohio late in August 1831, after having spent the summer months traveling to Missouri and back. At this time the Lord instructed Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon to seek a home so that they might engage in the process of translating the Bible. ((D&C 63:65.)) Therefore, Joseph and Sidney removed to Hiram, Ohio on September 12, 1831, some thirty miles to the southeast of Kirtland. (*History of the Church*, 1:215.) Even though Joseph and Sidney attempted diligently to continue the work of translation, their lack of funds, together with the necessity of preaching the gospel, overseeing the work of God and providing for the needs of their families left them little to consecrate for the task of translating. Additionally, during the months of October and November 1831 Joseph Smith was deeply engaged in compiling and securing the publication of the *Book of Commandments* (the original edition of the Doctrine and Covenants). Many revelations were received pertaining to this sacred enterprise and several Church conferences were held during those two months. Not until the Church conference of November 12, 1831 had adjourned did Joseph have an opportunity to resume translating the Bible, which was again suspended several weeks later when the Lord commanded Joseph and Sidney to lift up their voices in proclaiming the gospel message for a season. ((D&C 71:1.)) Throughout December 1831 and early January 1832 Joseph and Sidney met with both saints and sinners, urging them to accept the Lord Jesus Christ as their Redeemer. Having fulfilled the commandment to preach, God redirected Joseph’s and Sidney’s energies towards translating the Bible. ((D&C 73:3.))

### **The Inspired Translation Brings Forth the Truth**

On February 16<sup>th</sup>, 1832 Joseph read through the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of John. Inspiration came

upon Joseph when he reached verses 28-29, which speak “of the resurrection of the dead, concerning those who shall hear the voice of the Son of Man” (D&C 76:16). The spirit impressed upon his mind that the verses should read,

Marvel not at this; for the hour is coming, in the which all who are in their graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they who have done good, in the resurrection of the just; and they who have done evil, in the resurrection of the unjust. ((*Inspired Version of The Holy Scriptures*, (Independence: Herald Publishing House, 1973). Compare to the King James Version of John 5:28-29, which reads, “Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.”))

Joseph and Sidney pondered upon the significance of this doctrine and later Joseph remarked,

From sundry revelations which had been received, it was apparent that many important points touching the salvation of man had been taken from the Bible, or lost before it was compiled. It appeared self-evident from what truths were left, that if God rewarded every one according to the deeds done in the body, the term ‘Heaven,’ as intended for the Saints’ eternal home, must include more kingdoms than one. ((*History of the Church*, 1:245.))

One of the most spectacular visions ever witnessed then burst upon Joseph and Sidney. The panoramic view of the Great Plan of Salvation from the grand councils of the gods in the pre-mortal realm to the exalted joy of the righteous saints passed by the eyes of these two witnesses and the voice of God commanded them to write the vision (D&C 76:28).

Joseph and Sidney saw the glory of the Son and they testified of his reality, they testified of his creative power in forming worlds without number and they testified of his redemptive power over all that he creates. In antithesis to the Only Begotten of the Father, they saw Lucifer, an angel of authority who fell from the presence of God, cast out of heaven during the great pre-mortal battle over the gift of agency. ((See Moses 4:1-4. *Lucifer* derives from the Latin word “light bearer” indicative of his pre-mortal righteousness and spiritual beauty. Another title that Satan once held was “the son of the morning or the morning star.” However the heavens wept over him when he was cast out for rebellion and since then he was called *Perdition*, which derives from the Latin for “lost,” for truly his soul is irrecoverably lost.)) These scenes were a prelude to the awful suffering Joseph and Sidney witnessed of those who become sons of perdition, the “vessels of wrath...the only ones on whom the second death (spiritual death) shall have any power” (D&C 76:33, 37). In a revelation about eleven years later, the Lord further explained what it means to be a son of perdition,

The blasphemy against the Holy Ghost, which shall not be forgiven in the world nor out of the world, is in that ye commit murder wherein ye shed innocent blood, and assent unto my death, after ye have received my new and everlasting covenant, saith the Lord God. (D&C 132:27)

Despite the depressing nature of the doctrinal description concerning the sons of perdition, the Lord revealed a powerful and hope-filled truth in D&C 76: Jesus Christ “glorifies the Father, and saves all

the works of his hands, except those sons of perdition who deny the Son after the Father has revealed him.” ((There are relatively few souls upon the face of the earth that need fear of becoming “sons of perdition.” Elder John A Widtsoe once commented, “It is probable that only personages who have acquired similar full knowledge, who willfully and deliberately deny the truth, when they know it to be the truth, can commit the unpardonable sin and become sons of perdition. . . . They must have had a fullness of knowledge; a testimony which cannot be destroyed. One must be on a high eminence to fall so low; and few in world’s history have attained such a height” (John A Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations*, [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987], p. 212). Joseph Smith, Jr. said, “All sins shall be forgiven except the sin against the Holy Ghost; for Jesus will save all except the sons of perdition. What must a man do to commit the unpardonable sin? He must receive the Holy Ghost, have the heavens opened unto him, and know God, and then sin against him. After a man has sinned against the Holy Ghost, there is no repentance for him. He has got to say that the sun does not shine while he sees it; he has got to deny Jesus Christ when the heavens have been opened unto him, and to deny the plan of salvation with his eyes open to the truth of it; and from that time he begins to be an enemy. This is the case with many apostates of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. When a man begins to be an enemy to this work, he hunts me; he seeks to kill me, and never ceases to thirst for my blood. He gets the spirit of the Devil—the same spirit that they had who crucified the Lord of Life,—the same spirit that sins against the Holy Ghost. You cannot save such persons; you cannot bring them to repentance: they make open war like the Devil, and awful is the consequence.” (*History of the Church*, 6:314-315). Joseph Fielding Smith said, “Shedding innocent blood is spoken of in the scriptures as consenting to the death of Jesus Christ and putting him to shame. For those who have had the witness of the Holy Ghost, fighting with wicked hate against his authorized servants is the same, for if this is done to them, it is also done against him. For men who have had the light of the Holy Ghost to turn away and fight the truth with murderous hate, and those who are authorized to proclaim it, there is no forgiveness in this world, neither in the world to come.” (*Improvement Era*, July 1955, p. 494).))

The continuing vision that Joseph saw explained how a majority of souls could be redeemed from spiritual death yet inherit vastly different eternal kingdoms. The definition of “the resurrection of the just” begins to unfold at D&C 76:50 and concomitantly describes the various kingdoms of heaven. In reverse order of what is found in D&C 76 let us briefly explore the glories and blessings of each heavenly kingdom.

### **Telestial Glory**

The one defining characteristic of those who will inherit telestial glory is that they do not deny the Holy Ghost. Unfortunately, during their sojourn on earth they “received (accepted) not the gospel, neither the testimony of Jesus, neither the prophets, neither the everlasting covenant” (D&C 76:101). These individuals had an opportunity during this mortal life to accept Christ but instead they rejected the source of salvation. As a reward (or consequence) for their choice, made with the agency won in pre-mortal councils, they are doomed to suffer the pains of hell and the wrath of God “until the fulness of times, when Christ shall have subdued all enemies under his feet” (D&C 76:106) including death. After their time of suffering those who are to inherit the telestial glory will come forth in the last resurrection. Despite the price of torment these individuals must pay for their sins and wickedness they ultimately will be saved, but they will not have the presence of the Father or the Son. Rather, they will be granted the ministering of angels and the ministration of the Holy Spirit. They will be granted a kingdom of glory, albeit a lesser glory, one that ancient and modern prophets have described as the glory of the stars in contrast to the glory of the moon and the glory of the sun.

### **Terrestrial Glory**

If telestial glory is to be compared to the glory of the stars then terrestrial glory is to be compared to the glory of the moon. Indeed, those who inherit terrestrial glory receive a kingdom “which surpasses all understanding” (D&C 76:89). Those who inherit this abode will have the presence of the Son, but not a fulness of his glory. These souls are described as “the honorable men of the earth, who were blinded by the craftiness of men” (D&C 76:75). They “received not the testimony of Jesus in the flesh, but afterwards received it” (D&C 76:74). And consequently they will not receive a fulness of the glory and majesty of the Father and the Son. “These are they who are not valiant in the testimony of Jesus; wherefore, they obtain not the crown over the kingdom of our God” (D&C 76:79).

## **Celestial Kingdom**

The greatest gift God has prepared for his children is eternal life, reserved for those who inherit the celestial kingdom of glory. D&C 76:50-70 contains the most detailed and compact description of “celestial bodies” found anywhere in scripture. The following list highlights many of the important attributes of those who will become joint heirs with Jesus Christ in the celestial kingdom:

- Received a testimony of Jesus
- Baptized by immersion
- Received the Holy Ghost
- Overcame all things by faith
- Sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise

God the Father has promised his faithful saints that their “names are written in heaven” because they are “made perfect through Jesus the mediator of the new covenant” (D&C 76:68-69). They will come forth in the morning of the first resurrection and be numbered among the general assembly of the church of the Firstborn. All things shall be theirs and they “shall dwell in the presence of God and his Christ forever and ever” (D&C 76:62).

## **Theological Significance**

This vision radically challenged the common understanding of heaven and hell then current among Christians. Even some faithful members of the Church waited before fully accepting this revelation. One of these members was the Lion of the Lord, Brigham Young. In his own words he explained,

After all, my traditions were such, that when the Vision came first to me, it was directly contrary and opposed to my former education. I said, Wait a little. I did not reject it; but I could not understand it. (Journal of Discourses, 6:281) ((Found in *The Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, by Lyndon W. Cook (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1985) p. 158, footnote 7.))

At that time period the general Christian populace expressed the concept of eternal reward and punishment as a black and white issue - the wicked would be thrust down to hell while the righteous would receive the glorious rest of paradise. In one short moment, the Lord taught through Joseph Smith that all living souls (except the sons of perdition) will ultimately be saved in a kingdom of glory. Each individual will receive his or her eternal glory based upon their faithful obedience to the gospel principles that they had opportunity to learn.

## **The Power of Witnesses**

A common principle widely understood among members of the Church then and now is the need for at least two witnesses. “By the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established” (2 Corinthians 13:1). Joseph and Sidney shared the responsibility of witnessing this vision and testifying to the truth of it. Philo Dibble, a member of the Church present when the vision occurred, observed

Joseph would, at intervals, say: “What do I see?” Then he would relate what he had seen or what he was looking at. Then Sidney replied, “I see the same.” Presently Sidney would say, “What do I see?” and would repeat what he had seen or was seeing, and Joseph would reply, “I see the same.” This manner of conversation was repeated at short intervals to the end of the vision, and during the whole time not a word was spoken by any other person. Not a sound nor motion made by anyone but Joseph and Sidney, and it seemed to me that they never moved a joint or limb during the time I was there, which I think was over an hour, and to the end of the vision. Joseph sat firmly and calmly all the time in the midst of a magnificent glory, but Sidney sat limp and pale, apparently as limber as a rag, observing which Joseph remarked, smilingly, “Sidney is not used to it as I am.” (The Juvenile Instructor, 15 May 1892) ((Cook, p. 158, footnote 3.))

## **Conclusion**

The power of the vision, the purity of the doctrine and the depth of knowledge brought overwhelming joy to the Prophet Joseph. In conclusion, perhaps he can speak for all of us when he exclaimed in response to this experience:

Nothing could be more pleasing to the Saints upon the order of the kingdom of the Lord, than the light which burst upon the world through the foregoing vision. Every law, every commandment, every promise, every truth, and every point touching the destiny of man, from Genesis to Revelation, where the purity of the scriptures remains unsullied by the folly of men, go to show the perfection of the theory [of different degrees of glory in the future life] and witnesses the fact that that document is a transcript from the records of the eternal world. The sublimity of the ideas; the purity of the language; the scope for action; the continued duration for completion, in order that the heirs of salvation may confess the Lord and bow the knee; the rewards for faithfulness, and the punishments for sins, are so much beyond the narrow-mindedness of men, that every honest man is constrained to exclaim: “It came from God.” (*History of the Church* 1:252-253.)

May we too share that testimony as we plunge the depths of truth contained in Doctrine & Covenants 76.