Lesson 4

Joseph Smith—History 1:27–65; Doctrine and Covenants 3; 5; 10; 17; 20:5–15; and 84:54–62

Before you read the scriptures assigned for this lesson, I recommend that you read at least pages 5–10 of Our Heritage and, preferably, some of the fuller historical accounts of Joseph Smith and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. That reading will help you understand better the context in which the revelations of these verses were given and the incidents referred to in them.

Joseph Smith—History 1

Verse 28: What do you make of Joseph Smith’s observation that, as a boy, he “was guilty of levity, and sometimes associated with jovial company, etc., not consistent with that character which ought to be maintained by one who was called of God as I had been”? What do you think he felt was consistent with such a character?

Verse 29: Joseph says that he often felt condemned for his weaknesses. By whom? If by God, do you think that his feelings were accurate or that he was feeling more guilt than he should have?

How are this instance of prayer and that in the Sacred Grove similar? How are they different?
**Verses 30–32:** Why do you think that Joseph gives us this much detail about Moroni’s appearance?

**Verses 33–35:** Notice the contrast in detail between these verses and the previous three. In these, he gives a summary rather than a quotation, summary rather than exact detail. What might account for that difference?

**Verse 34:** A significant number of Latter-day Saint scholars today believe that the events of the Book of Mormon took place in Central America among a small group of people who were probably surrounded by others whom they do not mention, at least not directly. How does that belief square with Moroni’s statement to Joseph Smith that the Book of Mormon is “an account of the former inhabitants of this continent” (italics added)?

**Verses 36–41:** Why do you think that Moroni quoted so many scriptures? Why might they have been important to Joseph? Would he have understood their import at the time? Why or why not?

**Verse 42:** Why do you think Moroni enjoined Joseph to keep the plates and the Urim and Thummim hidden?

**Verses 44–46:** The only difference between the two revelations in these verses and the first one seems to be the additional and different warnings at the ends of these two. Why three revelations almost exactly alike on the same night (and then again the next day)? If he was given the three revelations to emphasize the importance of their content, then why weren’t they identical?
Verses 47–49: Joseph Smith has had three visitations by an angel during the night, but in the morning he gets up and goes about work as usual. What does this say about his character? What does it suggest about how we should respond to our own spiritual experiences?

Why do you think Moroni told Joseph to tell his father about the visions?

Verses 50–54: What was the purpose in having Joseph go to the hill and look at the plates but not retrieve them? Why wait four years but come back each year in the meantime?

Verse 54 tells us that Moroni taught Joseph Smith about the Restoration on these visits. Do you think he received instruction on occasions other than these visits, or was this only an annual event?

Verses 55–58: Why does Joseph include these details of his personal life?

Verse 59: How old was Joseph Smith when he received the plates? Is that relevant to how we understand his story?

Verses 60–62: Joseph tells us what his life was like during this time, but do you think his neighbors would have given a similar description? Do you think they saw him as someone persecuted? If not, why not?

Why is Martin Harris’s intervention so remarkable?

Verses 63–65: For whom was this test of Joseph’s work made? Joseph, Martin, or someone else?

Here’s what we assume was the transcript that Martin Harris took to Professor Anthon:
This is like no known script. If Martin Harris remembers Charles Anthon’s response correctly, what do you think that might tell us about Anthon?

Verses 66–67: What do you think motivated Oliver Cowdery to seek Joseph Smith out? What motivated him to become his scribe?

Doctrine and Covenants 3

Verse 1: Why can’t the works of God come to naught? What does it mean that we cannot frustrate them? If we cannot, does that mean that what we do is inconsequential—that if we do not do it, it will get done anyway? If so, why isn’t it irrelevant whether we do them or not? If the works of God cannot come to naught, how do we explain things such as our failure to build a temple in Jackson County though we were commanded to do so?
Verse 4: In what ways do we boast in our own strength? Do we ever do so implicitly rather than explicitly, without thinking that we are doing it?

How do we set at naught the counsels of God? Is there a difference between boasting in our own strength and setting his counsels at naught?

What do the scriptures mean when they speak of God’s vengeance? Does he “get even”? If he is our Father and loves as a father, how can he take vengeance on us or on our brothers and sisters?

Verse 6: Do the commandments and laws of God always run counter to the “persuasions of men”? What does that phrase mean? Why does the Lord use the word persuasion here?

Verse 7: How and when do we fear men more than God? How do we recognize when we are doing so?

Verse 8: Notice that the Lord doesn’t promise protection from the fiery darts of the adversary, but support against them. What’s the difference?

Verse 9: The Lord says, “Thou art Joseph.” Joseph knows who he is, so why does the Lord remind him of his name?

Verse 10: Had Joseph lost his calling during the time of this sin? What might that tell us about our own callings?

What does it mean to lose one’s calling in the Church? Given what we see here, is it possible for us to do that even without having been released from that calling?

Verse 12: Wicked is a strong adjective to use to describe Martin Harris. We would seldom use it to describe a person
like him who has been foolish. Why is it appropriate here? What might that say about our own mistakes?

**Verse 13:** Does this verse give an answer to the immediately previous question?

It is doubtful that Harris thought himself doing any of these things when he asked Joseph to let him have the 116 pages of the translation. And he received them only after Joseph received a revelation giving permission for him to have them. But God’s judgment is just, so in spite of whatever Harris might have thought, he “set at naught the counsels of God,” broke “the most sacred promises which were made before God,” and “depended upon his own judgment and boasted in his own wisdom.” How could Harris have recognized that was what he was doing?

Are there occasions when we convince ourselves to treat God’s counsel as nothing, break our sacred promises, depend on our own judgment, and boast in our own wisdom without recognizing that is what we are doing? How do we avoid making that mistake?

**Verses 16–20:** Compare this to the title page of the Book of Mormon. How are they the same? What differences are there?

**Doctrine and Covenants 5**

How has Martin Harris changed since the revelation of section 3? How has Joseph changed? (Consider Romans 8:28, as well as D&C 90:24, 98:3, 100:15, and 105:40 as you think about this section.)

**Verse 7:** What does this verse say about the Book of Mormon and attempts to prove it empirically or historically?
Verse 14: Is the Lord referring us to Revelation 12:6 by speaking of the Church “coming forth out of the wilderness”? If so, what might the wilderness, the desert signify? Is it related to the Israelite stay in the wilderness? What would it mean to be in the wilderness rather than dead? What does it mean that in the Restoration the church comes out of the wilderness?

What does it mean to describe the woman in the wilderness as “clear as the moon, and fair as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners”? What do you make of the fact that this extended metaphor comes from the Song of Solomon, where it is used to describe the writer’s beloved?

What is the place of the Book of Mormon in bringing the church out of the wilderness?

Verses 16–18: What purpose do the Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon serve?

Doctrine and Covenants 10

Verses 1–3: Is there a lesson for us in Joseph’s experience? When might we find ourselves in circumstances like these?

Verse 4: In concrete terms, what might this have meant to Joseph Smith? How does this advice make sense to us? How can we avoid letting it become an excuse for us not to do what needs to be done?

Verse 6: This says that Martin Harris sought to destroy Joseph Smith. Did he do so intentionally? If not, why doesn’t the Lord take that into account in condemning Harris?

Verses 10–33: The substance of these verses is that those who have the pages intend to alter them so that they can “expose”
Joseph Smith as a fraud. Therefore, Joseph ought not to translate them again. Why are these verses so repetitious?

**Verses 34–37:** How would you put the Lord’s advice in these verses in your own words? What is his explanation for why he told Joseph not to show the translation to the world?

**Verses 38–45:** How has the Lord outwitted Satan?

What is the difference between wisdom, which the Lord has, and cunning, which is Satan’s?

What is the difference between the part that Joseph has already translated and that which he will now translate?

**Verses 46–52:** According to these verses, what decided the contents of the Book of Mormon? Does that suggest anything about how we ought to read it?

What did the Book of Mormon prophets pray for regarding “this land”? To what does “this land” refer?

**Verses 53–55:** Why does verse 54 say what it does? What problem, question, or possible misunderstanding does that verse answer?

Does verse 55 teach that *all* members of the Church will enter the celestial kingdom? If not, why not?

**Verse 56:** Those who do not fear the Lord will be disturbed. In this context, what does it mean to fear the Lord?

Why in particular should the people mentioned in this verse fear the Lord?

The verse pairs disobeying the commandments with building up a church to get gain, etc. It is as if the two go together: those who are disobedient build churches for gain; those
who build churches for gain don’t obey the commandments. Is that true only for those outside of the LDS Church, or is there some sense in which it also speaks to us? Do we ever build up the LDS Church to get personal gain?

**Verses 57–70:** We have Christ’s testimony of who he is and what his work is. Do the things of which he testifies suggest things about which we, too, should bear testimony?

Verse 63 tells us that Christ has revealed the Book of Mormon “that there may not be so much contention” because Satan has created contention about Christ’s doctrines. Can you think of specific doctrinal contentions that the Book of Mormon settles?

What are we to make of the definition of the Lord’s church that we find in verses 67–68? Does this mean that some non-LDS are members of that church? If not, explain why not. Does it mean that all LDS are members of his church? If not, explain why not.

Why does verse 70 conclude this revelation with an admonition to remember the words your Lord?

**Doctrine and Covenants 17**

**Verse 1:** What does it mean that Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris should rely on the Lord’s word? Why is that a prerequisite for seeing the plates?

**Verse 4:** How will their testimony prevent Joseph from being destroyed?

**Verse 7:** When the Lord says the Three Witnesses have received the same power as Joseph, what does he mean? What
about when he says they have received the same faith? The same gift? Do we, perhaps, have the same power, faith, and gift if we, like the witnesses, testify of the truth of the Book of Mormon?

Verse 8: What are the “last commandments” that the Lord is asking them to do? What does it mean to do rather than to keep a commandment?

Doctrine and Covenants 20

Verses 5–12: Notice that this is one long sentence. What is this sentence as a whole about? One way to decide the answer to that question is to decide which clause is the main clause.

Verse 5: What does it mean to receive a remission of sin? How do we get entangled in the vanities of the world? What does “vanities of the world” mean?

Verse 6: Do we know to what angelic visitation this verse refers?

Verse 7: How can commandments inspire us?

Verse 8: We probably all know what “power from on high” means. And we all know what it means to translate the Book of Mormon. But what does it mean that Joseph was given power to translate “by the means which were before prepared”?

Verses 9–12: What are the key elements that describe the Book of Mormon (verses 9–12)? How are those relevant to the testimonies of the Three Witnesses? How are they relevant to our testimonies of the Book of Mormon?
Verse 10: When this verse says the Book of Mormon was given by inspiration, is it referring to the inspiration the Lord gave the Book of Mormon prophets, or to the inspiration he gave Joseph Smith?

When the verse says the Book of Mormon “is confirmed to others by the ministering of angels,” of whom is it speaking? Who is it that declares the Book of Mormon to the world?

Verse 11: What proves to the world that the scriptures are true? Is this verse referring to the Book of Mormon? To Joseph’s experience with repentance? To the commandments that inspired him?

Verse 12: This verse tells us that something mentioned in the sentence (verses 5 through 12) shows that the Lord is the same God yesterday, today, and forever. What shows us that?

Verse 13: The world will be judged by the great witnesses it has, witnesses that have been mentioned. Who are those witnesses? (Does the last phrase of the verse help us?)

To what does “this work” refer? To the restoration of the Church? To the Book of Mormon? To the testimony of witnesses? To something else?

Verses 14–15: Those who receive it and work righteousness will receive a crown. Those who do not receive it will be condemned. What is it?

Doctrine and Covenants 84

Verses 54–57: Verse 54 says we fail to believe, or we may believe but take our beliefs lightly. If you were listening to this
being said by Joseph, you would probably immediately take it to refer to the covenant already mentioned, the oath and covenant of the priesthood (verse 39), rather than to what is to follow, “the new covenant, even the Book of Mormon” (verse 57). How might we take the oath and covenant of the priesthood lightly? What does it mean to take lightly the Book of Mormon as a covenant?

How is the Book of Mormon a covenant? To what does “the former commandments” refer in this context?

What does it mean to not only say but do what has been written? Why does the Lord emphasize the written word?

**Verses 55–56:** These verses say the whole church is guilty of either vanity (literally “uselessness,” or taking our beliefs lightly) or unbelief. President Benson said that we are still under the condemnation pronounced in these verses. What must we do to remove the condemnation?

**Verses 60–61:** Notice something interesting about these verses: verse 61 says the assembled high priests are blessed because the Lord will forgive them and he forgives with a commandment. As used here, does with mean “by means of” or “at the same time as”? If the former, how can a commandment bring forgiveness? If the latter, what is the point of what the Lord says here? He could easily have said, “I forgive you and give you this commandment.” Why did he say “with this commandment”?

**Verse 62:** The word therefore at the beginning of the verse indicates that it follows from something that has already been said. What might that be?