



Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel

Volume 7 | Number 3

Article 4

9-1-2006

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BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Packer, Cameron R. "A Grove, a Hill, and a Mountain: Lessons on Overcoming Evil." *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 7, no. 3 (2006). <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/re/vol7/iss3/4>

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Sacred Grove, Manchester, New York, August 13, 1907

Photo by George Edward Anderson

Courtesy of Church Archives

A Grove, a Hill, and a Mountain: Lessons on Overcoming Evil

Cameron J. Packer

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The Book of Mormon contains an interesting prophecy of Joseph of Egypt in which the Lord correlates the Prophet Joseph Smith with the ancient Israelite lawgiver, Moses. “And he [Joseph Smith] shall be great like unto Moses, whom I have said I would raise up unto you, to deliver my people, O house of Israel. And Moses will I raise up, to deliver thy people out of the land of Egypt. But a seer will I raise up out of the fruit of thy loins; and unto him will I give power to bring forth my word” (2 Nephi 3:9–11). In studying the lives of both Joseph Smith and Moses, we can see several ways that the two prophets are “like unto” each other. Both spoke with God face to face, delivered their people from bondage—whether physical or spiritual—and brought forth the word of God. One early Church member, W. W. Phelps, even likened Joseph’s receiving the gold plates at the Hill Cumorah to Moses’s bringing down the law from Mount Sinai.¹

Another aspect in which the two mirror each other is in their experiences overcoming the adversary. Specifically, the experiences of Joseph Smith in the Sacred Grove and at the Hill Cumorah provide parallels with those of Moses while he “was caught up into an exceedingly high mountain” (Moses 1:1). Both Joseph Smith and Moses faced severe opposition from the adversary in their quest to know God and fulfill His will. Through difficult experiences, they learned valuable lessons on how to prevail when attacked by Satan. While the specific circumstances under which they were learned vary, the lessons Joseph Smith and Moses learned can apply to members of the Church as they seek to prevail in their personal struggles against the adversary.

The Sacred Grove

As a boy, Joseph Smith was no stranger to hardship and opposition. Before walking into the Sacred Grove, he dealt with poverty, illness, and even an attempt on his life.² Walking into the grove, however, would bring him a different—or at least more intense—experience with the opposition of the adversary. His decision to seek God brought an attack intended to disrupt what President James E. Faust called “possibly the most singular event to occur on the earth since the Resurrection.”³ Referring to the reason for this, Elder Bruce R. McConkie wrote: “Great things do not come easily; events that shake the earth run into mountains of resistance. There is an opposition in all things; every person who seeks to find the true church runs counter to the ways of the world. Joseph Smith was no exception. . . . Such are the ways of Satan that when the God of heaven seeks to send the greatest light of the ages into the world, the forces of evil oppose it with the deepest darkness and iniquity of their benighted realm.”⁴

Two accounts of the First Vision written under the direction of Joseph Smith include details about this attack. The most prominent account is canonized in the Pearl of Great Price, written in 1838. Joseph described that when he entered the grove and began to pray, the attack commenced. “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” (Joseph Smith—History 1:15). Additionally, verse 16 informs the reader that the power from this “actual being from the unseen world” filled him with feelings of despair, impending destruction, and abandonment. Before this account, Joseph included additional details in an 1835 record of the First Vision. He said, “I made a fruitless attempt to pray[.] My tongue seemed to be swollen [*sic*] in my mouth, so that I could not utter, I heard a noise behind me like some one walking towards me. I strove again to pray, but could not; the noise of walking seemed to draw nearer, I sprang upon my feet and looked round, but saw no person or thing that was calculated to produce the noise of walking.”⁵

Later Joseph Smith learned that Moses had a similar experience in overcoming the adversary. Interestingly, Moses was also attacked while seeking knowledge and wisdom from God. Moses had just finished a vision wherein he spoke with God “face to face” and had “other things to inquire of him” when Satan “came tempting him” (Moses 1:2, 18, 12).

The adversary used “darkness” and intimidation to instill fear and doubt in Moses (see Moses 1:15). “And now, when Moses had said these words, Satan cried with a loud voice, and ranted upon the earth, and commanded, saying: I am the Only Begotten, worship me. And it came to pass that Moses began to fear exceedingly; and as he began to fear, he saw the bitterness of hell” (Moses 1:19–20). The adversary endeavored through similar means to keep Joseph Smith and Moses from calling upon God. In both cases, Satan tried to prevent a miraculous vision and the accompanying light and truth from being received.

At this critical juncture, both Joseph Smith and Moses demonstrated something that can be applied by anyone who is struggling with opposition: they redoubled their efforts and continued to pray. In his 1838 account, Joseph wrote that he “exert[ed] all [his] powers to call upon God to deliver [him] out of the power of this enemy which had seized upon [him]” (Joseph Smith—History 1:16). In his 1835 account, after being unable to ascertain the source of the footsteps, he said, “I kneeled again, my mouth was opened and my tongue loosed; I called on the Lord in mighty prayer.”⁶ Likewise, Moses had to expend his best efforts in prayer in order to dispel the presence of evil. In his record, we see that as he continued to call upon God, he “received strength” (Moses 1:21), which allowed him to command the adversary to depart. In both Joseph Smith’s and Moses’s experiences, their efforts and energy in calling upon God brought deliverance from the adversary and allowed them to receive the greater knowledge they were seeking.

While their specific circumstances may differ from Joseph’s and Moses’s, many people today find themselves feeling overwhelmed by darkness, doom, and despair. These feelings always have been and always will be part of the adversary’s arsenal. As people find themselves under attack, they too can redouble their efforts and energy in prayer and find an escape from the adversary. Using Joseph Smith’s experience in the Sacred Grove, President Boyd K. Packer has emphasized the power of prayer in our day: “Remember the First Vision when young Joseph knelt in the grove. Immediately thick darkness gathered around him. He was seized by the power of the enemy, an actual being from the unseen world. He did what every one of you can do. He called upon God, and the evil power left him. There is great power in prayer. As a son or a daughter of God, you can, as Joseph did, pray to God in the name of Jesus Christ for strength.”⁷ The principle of prayer has and will continue to dispel the powers of darkness and bring relief to those who seek God.

The Hill Cumorah

Although Joseph only briefly encountered the power of the adversary in the Sacred Grove, this experience was foundational in the young prophet's growing understanding of good and evil. Three years later, beginning in 1823, an angelic tutor gave Joseph additional instruction on overcoming some of Satan's more subtle tactics. Regarding this, President Gordon B. Hinckley wrote, "Then followed the years of instruction, the instructor an angel of God who on a number of occasions taught, rebuked, warned, and comforted the boy as he grew into a young man."⁸

September 21, 1823, marked the beginning of these "years of instruction" that, as President Hinckley intimates, were quite rigorous at times. On this evening, Moroni appeared three times, giving specific instruction to Joseph about his upcoming mission. Part of the instruction included a prophecy that Joseph Smith's name would "be had for good and evil among all" peoples of the earth (see Joseph Smith—History 1:33).⁹ One of the main reasons for this was an ancient record that lay hidden in a nearby hill. Indeed, this record would prove to be a major source of both acclaim and persecution to the young prophet. During his last visit that night, Moroni added a vital caution. Joseph said: "Satan would try to tempt me (in consequence of the indigent circumstances of my father's family), to get the plates for the purpose of getting rich. This he forbade me, saying that I must have no other object in view in getting the plates but to glorify God, and must not be influenced by any other motive than that of building his kingdom; otherwise I could not get them" (Joseph Smith—History 1:46).

Moroni warned that Satan's efforts would be of a more subtle nature than the attack in the Sacred Grove and that Satan would attempt to influence Joseph's mind to keep him from obtaining the plates. This instruction was emphasized the following day when he made his first visit to the hill. After arriving at the spot and removing the stone cover, Joseph Smith looked into the stone box and saw the plates, along with the Urim and Thummim and breastplate. He made an attempt to remove the plates "but was forbidden by the messenger" and was told that "the time for bringing them forth had not yet arrived" (Joseph Smith—History 1:53).

Joseph Smith's 1832 account of this experience contains additional information regarding why Moroni forbade him from taking the plates at that time:

I immediately went to the place and found where the plates was deposited as the angel of the Lord had commanded me and straightway made three attempts to get them and then being exceedingly frightened I supposed it had been a dream of Vision but when I considered I knew

that it was not therefore I cried unto the Lord in the agony of my soul why can I not obtain them behold the angel appeared unto me again and said unto me you have not kept the commandments of the Lord which I gave unto you therefore you cannot now obtain them for the time is not yet fulfilled therefore thou wast left unto temptation that thou mightest be made acquainted with the power of the adversary therefore repent and call on the Lord thou shalt be forgiven and in his own due time thou shalt obtain them . . . for now I had been tempted of the adversary and sought the Plates to obtain riches and kept not the commandment that I should have an eye single to the glory of God therefore I was chastened and sought diligently to obtain the plates and obtained them not untill I was twenty one years of age.¹⁰

Writing in 1835, Oliver Cowdery published the following in the Church's official Kirtland publication, the *Latter-day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*,¹¹ clarifying what Joseph had written in 1832. As Joseph walked to the hill:

It seemed as though two invisible powers were influencing, or striving to influence his mind—one with the reflection that if he obtained the object of his pursuit, it would be through the mercy and condescension of the Lord, and that every act or performance in relation to it, must be in strict accordance with the instruction of that personage who communicated the intelligence to him first; and the other with the tho'ts and reflections like those previously mentioned—contrasting his former and present circumstances in life with those to come. That precious instruction recorded on the sacred page—pray always—which was expressly impressed upon him, was at length entirely forgotten, and . . . a fixed determination to obtain and agrandize himself, occupied his mind when he arrived at the place where the record was found.¹²

Oliver went on to explain that upon seeing the sacred contents in the box, Joseph reached in and tried to remove them. Three times he attempted to remove them—each time being repelled by progressively stronger shocks that drained his natural strength. In frustration, Joseph cried out, “Why can I not obtain this book?” At that instant the angel Moroni appeared again and answered, “Because you have not kept the commandments of the Lord.”¹³ Oliver Cowdery later explained, “All the former instructions, the great intelligence concerning Israel and the last days, were brought to his mind, . . . but he had failed to remember the great end for which they [the gold plates] had been kept, and in consequence could not have power to take them into his possession and bear them away.”¹⁴

The first lesson that Joseph learned at Cumorah would be one that he would immediately recognize over four years later while translating the gold plates. Approximately fourteen hundred years earlier, Moroni

had written: “The plates thereof are of no worth, because of the commandment of the Lord. For he truly saith that no one shall have them to get gain; but the record thereof is of great worth; and whoso shall bring it to light, him will the Lord bless. For none can have power to bring it to light save it be given him of God; for God wills that it shall be done with an eye single to his glory” (Mormon 8:14–15).

Joseph was taught, very poignantly, that the ancient record was divinely safeguarded against those with impure motives. At this time, the adversary used certain temptations to influence the Prophet’s motives. Although perhaps not as dramatic as the attack in the grove, this tactic just as effectively prevents anyone from being able to fulfill God’s will.

While Moroni’s chastisement would have perhaps wounded most egos, Joseph’s humility allowed him to learn further. Rather than taking offense because he had been reprimanded, he applied what he had learned in the Sacred Grove and knelt down to pray.¹⁵ As he did so, “the glory of the Lord shone round about and rested upon him,” and Joseph “stood gazing and admiring.” At this point, Moroni, apparently wanting to teach by contrast, showed Joseph another vision, this time of “the prince of darkness, surrounded by his innumerable train of associates.”¹⁶ Moroni explained: “All this is shown, the good and the evil, the holy and impure, the glory of God and the power of darkness, that you may know hereafter the two powers and never be influenced or overcome by that wicked one. Behold, whatever entices and leads to good and to do good, is of God, and whatever does not is of that wicked one: It is he that fills the hearts of men with evil, to walk in darkness and blaspheme God; and you may learn from henceforth, that his ways are to destruction, but the way of holiness is peace and rest.”¹⁷

Lucy Mack Smith, also commenting on this experience and specifically on the effect that it had on her son, wrote: “While Joseph remained here, the angel showed him, by contrast, the difference between good and evil, and likewise the consequences of both obedience and disobedience to the commandments of God, *in such a striking manner, that the impression was always vivid in his memory until the very end of his days*; . . . and he remarked, that ‘ever afterwards he was willing to keep the commandments of God.’”¹⁸

By direct contrast, Moroni showed Joseph the glory of God versus the bitterness of hell, forever convincing Joseph not to succumb to the attacks of Satan, subtle or otherwise. Similarly, Moses experienced this same contrast between good and evil. The book of Moses records that “Moses was caught up into an exceedingly high mountain, and he saw God face to face, and he talked with him, and the glory of God was upon Moses; therefore Moses could endure his presence” (Moses 1:1–2).

In vision, Moses saw the worlds that were created and “greatly marveled and wondered.” He said in verse 11: “But now mine own eyes have beheld God; but not my natural, but my spiritual eyes, for my natural eyes could not have beheld; for I should have withered and died in his presence; but his glory was upon me; and I beheld his face, for I was transfigured before him.”

After this glorious experience, Satan began his attack, tempting Moses to “worship me” (Moses 1:12). Moses, just like Joseph, had already experienced the power and glory of God and recognized the contrast. He said to Satan: “For behold, I could not look upon God, except his glory should come upon me, and I were transfigured before him. But I can look upon thee in the natural man. Is it not so, surely? Blessed be the name of my God, for his Spirit hath not altogether withdrawn from me, or else where is thy glory, for it is darkness unto me? And I can judge between thee and God. . . . For his glory has been upon me, wherefore I can judge between him and thee” (Moses 1:14–15, 18).

Because Moses and Joseph experienced the contrast, they were forever able to discern and overcome the attacks of Satan. This same lesson applies directly to the Church today. Speaking of the need and availability of discernment to this generation, President James E. Faust said:

Satan has had great success with this gullible generation. As a consequence, literally hosts of people have been victimized by him and his angels. There is, however, an ample shield against the power of Lucifer and his hosts. This protection lies in the spirit of discernment through the gift of the Holy Ghost. This gift comes undeviatingly by personal revelation to those who strive to obey the commandments of the Lord and to follow the counsel of the living prophets. This personal revelation will surely come to all those whose eyes are single to the glory of God, for it is promised that their bodies will be “filled with light, and there shall be no darkness” in them.¹⁹

While Joseph and Moses experienced amazing visions and demonstrations of good and evil, President Faust stated the need for every member to apply what these two prophets had learned. For members as well as prophets, keeping one’s eyes single to the glory of God and being worthy of the gift of the Holy Ghost provide protection from the attacks of the adversary.

Conclusion

Amid the throes of Liberty Jail, Joseph Smith wrote to the Church regarding persecution: “Dear brethren, do not think that our hearts faint, as though some strange thing had happened unto us, for we have seen and been assured of all these things beforehand.”²⁰ To Joseph, this

opposition was not strange but was surprisingly anticipated. He had learned to expect trials, opposition, and even attacks from the adversary. At key moments in Joseph's life, Satan sought to lead him away from God through a variety of attacks. At the Sacred Grove and the Hill Cumorah, Joseph learned how to pray with all his heart, keep his eye single to God's glory, and discern between good and evil in order to overcome the adversary. In so doing, Joseph Smith, like Moses, became someone through whom God was able to do a mighty work. The example of these two prophets holds out to all those who struggle with opposition and temptation the hope that they too can overcome evil and accomplish God's will. **RE**

Notes

1. See Oliver Cowdery, *Latter-day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*, October 1835, 196. Another source comparing Joseph Smith with Moses is Carlos E. Asay, "One Small Step for Man, One Giant Leap for Mankind," *Ensign*, May 1990, 62.

2. See Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith by His Mother*, ed. Preston Nibley (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979), 67–68.

3. James E. Faust, "The Magnificent Vision Near Palmyra," *Ensign*, May 1984, 67.

4. Bruce R. McConkie, "Once or Twice in a Thousand Years," *Ensign*, November 1975, 15.

5. Milton V. Backman, *Joseph Smith's First Vision* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 158–59. Contemporary accounts of this event were written by Orson Pratt, Orson Hyde, and Alexander Neibaur; see pages 170–77 of Backman, *Joseph Smith's First Vision*.

6. Backman, *Joseph Smith's First Vision*, 159.

7. Boyd K. Packer, "The Standard of Truth Has Been Erected," *Ensign*, November 2003, 24.

8. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Praise to the Man," *Tambuli*, January 1984, 1–2.

9. See also H. Donl Peterson, "Moroni: Joseph Smith's Teacher," in *Regional Studies in Latter-Day Saint Church History*, ed. Larry C. Porter, Milton V. Backman Jr., Susan Easton Black (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1992); Alexander L. Baugh, "Parting the Veil: The Visions of Joseph Smith," *BYU Studies* 38, no. 1 (1999): 23–69.

10. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 1:6–7; original usage and punctuation retained.

11. The *Latter-day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* was the paper that took over printing duties after the destruction of the *Evening and Morning Star* press in Missouri. The purpose of the *Messenger and Advocate* was to disseminate the "doctrines believed" by the Church and to advocate its "character and rights" (*History of the Church*, 2:167n).

12. Cowdery, *Latter-day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*, July 1835, 1:157–58. This account matches well with information from Lucy Mack Smith's preliminary manuscript, which states that prior to Joseph's going to the hill the

first time Moroni cautioned him, “Now, Joseph, beware or when you go to get the plates, your mind will be filled with darkness and all manner of evil will rush into your mind to prevent you from keeping the commandments of God” (Lucy Mack Smith, *The Revised and Enhanced History of Joseph Smith by His Mother*, ed. Scot Facer Proctor and Maurine Jensen Proctor [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996], 107; compare with Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith by His Mother*, 77–78).

13. Cowdery, *Latter-day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate*, October 1835, 198.

14. Cowdery, *Latter-day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate*, October 1835, 198.

15. Peterson, “Moroni: Joseph Smith’s Teacher,” 54.

16. Cowdery, *Latter-day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate*, October 1835, 198.

17. Cowdery, *Latter-day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate*, October 1835, 198.

To students of the Book of Mormon, it should be readily apparent that Moroni had recorded this same principle on the gold plates some fourteen hundred years earlier (see Moroni 7:12–13). As a result, Joseph, even before translating the plates, learned how to judge plainly between good and evil.

18. Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet* (Liverpool: S. W. Richards, 1853), 83; emphasis added. This book is an 1853 edition of Lucy Mack Smith’s history of the Prophet Joseph Smith taken from one of the earliest manuscripts of Lucy’s history.

19. James E. Faust, “Serving the Lord and Resisting the Devil,” *Ensign*, September 1995, 2.

20. Donald Q. Cannon and Larry E. Dahl, eds., *The Teachings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 474.