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The Prophet Joseph Smith dedicated the Kirtland Temple "that the Son of Man might have a place to manifest himself to his people" (D&C 109:5).

Courtesy of Community of Christ

# God's Manifestations: The Authoring and Finishing of Our Faith

*Richard D. Hawks*

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For some people, the phrase “I see” pertains only to what they can see with their natural eyes—their *sight*. For others, the phrase goes beyond what the natural eye can see to include what they understand—their *insight*. This same distinction can apply to the manifestations of God. While some people have seen God’s manifestations with their *natural* eyes, others have seen His manifestations through their *spiritual* eyes, or their understanding and insight.

This idea has motivated me to reflect on my own experience with seeing God. As a young boy going to the Los Angeles Temple for the first time to do baptisms for the dead, I fully expected to see something—or more accurately, someone. I thought I would see God, His angels, or at least the departed souls for whom I was serving as proxy. I was surprised, however, when I left the temple that day that I had not “seen” anything at all. Although that was a long time ago, I still have the same hope and faith in seeing God, only now my desires are more of the spiritual understanding type. Furthermore, latter-day prophets and the scriptures teach me that if I am faithful—if I keep my covenants, repent of my sins, and endure to the end—I will be able to enjoy a variety of God’s manifestations in my life.

There are times when the manifestations of God are both needed and deserved. Through faith, repentance, and obedience, we qualify ourselves for His gracious manifestations, even if we “can no more than desire to believe” (Alma 32:27). The principle that “God’s children qualify for his manifestations through their faith, repentance and obedience” has been observed through the ages. In the sacred valley of Adam-ondi-Ahman,

Adam “called . . . the residue of his posterity *who were righteous*. . . . And *the Lord appeared unto them*” (D&C 107:53–54; emphasis added). God told Moses at Mount Sinai, “Go unto the people, and *sanctify them* to day and to tomorrow, and let them wash their clothes, and *be ready* against the third day: for the third day *the Lord will come down in the sight of all the people* upon mount Sinai” (Exodus 19:10–11; emphasis added). As part of His instruction to build the temple, the Lord spoke to Solomon of His desire to “dwell among the children of Israel” (1 Kings 6:13). The dedicatory prayer of the Kirtland Temple, found in Doctrine and Covenants 109, teaches that the Saints, in their tribulation and poverty, gave of their substance to build a house “that the Son of Man might have a place *to manifest himself to his people*” (D&C 109:5; emphasis added). These scriptural references raise two questions: What is God’s intense interest in manifesting Himself to His people? What purposes do these manifestations serve?

God’s manifestations serve purposes in both authoring and finishing our faith (see Hebrews 12:2; Moroni 6:4). An *author* is “one who produces, creates, or brings into being.”<sup>1</sup> With the veil drawn over our natural eyes, we must look to the Savior to author our faith. We depend on Him to bring our faith into being. The word *finisher* has several meanings that apply to the Savior’s role in developing and blessing us because of our faith. He is the one who completes or perfects our faith. To *finish* means “to polish to the degree of excellence intended.”<sup>2</sup> The words *author* and *finisher* refer not only to the absolute beginning and ending of our faith but also to those things that occur in between that serve to develop and polish our faith. We therefore ought to be able to align the manifestations of God in our lives with the things that are necessary for developing and polishing our faith in Him.

Three things are necessary for the development and polishing of our faith: (1) the idea that God actually exists, (2) a correct idea of His character, perfections, and attributes, and (3) a knowledge that the life we are pursuing is harmonious with God’s will.<sup>3</sup> These three ideas blend well with the *manifestations of God* and *author and finisher of our faith* concepts, and they are represented using the following outline:

1. God is the author of our faith.
  - a. His manifestations reveal His existence.
  - b. His manifestations reveal His nature.
2. God is the finisher of our faith.
  - a. His manifestations reveal His blessings for our faith.
  - b. His manifestations reveal that our lives are acceptable.
  - c. His manifestations may reveal an assurance of personal salvation in the world to come.

Using this framework, I will show how the manifestations of God are consistent with His plan for finishing the faith of His people, leading them to joy in this life and eternal life in the world to come.

### **God Is the Author of Our Faith**

As author of our faith, God has “revealed himself *and* his perfect character” (Bible Dictionary, “Faith,” 669; emphasis added). This suggests two types of knowledge that God reveals through His manifestations: (1) knowledge that pertains to His actual existence (revealing Himself) and (2) knowledge that applies to His character, personality, and attributes (revealing His character). The explanatory introduction of the Doctrine and Covenants alerts the reader to these types of knowledge: “In the revelations one hears the tender but firm voice of the Lord Jesus Christ, speaking anew in the dispensation of the fulness of times . . . [and] the testimony that is given of Jesus Christ—his divinity, his majesty, his perfection, his love, and his redeeming power.” Through God’s manifestations, He provides the way for His children to increase their faith as they look for both evidence of His existence and disclosures of His nature.

*His manifestations reveal His existence.* Adopted children sometimes discover the existence of a parent they had never known. Similarly, the manifestations of God are designed to provide His children with an idea that He exists and help them discover Him. God revealed to Moses that one of His titles is “I AM,” for “God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM” (Exodus 3:14). Such a name declares that “He is” and reveals His actual presence or reality.

God authors faith by manifesting His existence in a personal way, suited to the needs of each individual (see 2 Nephi 31:3). To very few who exercise exceeding faith, and only after much testing, God reveals Himself directly, giving them sure knowledge, whereas He expects most to believe the words of those who know. Doctrine and Covenants 46 explains: “To some it is given by the Holy Ghost to know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and that he was crucified for the sins of the world. To others it is given to believe on their words, that they also might have eternal life if they continue faithful” (D&C 46:13–14). We also know that personal testimony excites a person to inquire after a knowledge of God.<sup>4</sup> When a person hears the testimony or declaration of true faith by another person, God confirms the truth by manifesting Himself through the power of the Holy Ghost.

Having a testimony based on the testimony of those who know, or those who have “seen,” is not a second-class blessing. The Savior declared, “Blessed are ye if ye shall believe in me and be baptized, after

that ye have seen me and know that I am. And again, *more blessed are they who shall believe in your words, because that ye shall testify that ye have seen me, and that ye know that I am*" (3 Nephi 12:1–2; emphasis added).

*His manifestations reveal His nature.* Once a person has an idea of God's actual existence, he or she is prepared to learn about His nature, what He is like physically and spiritually. The dictionary defines *nature* as "the essence, essential qualities or attributes of a thing, which constitute what it is."<sup>5</sup> Coming to a correct understanding of God's nature thus includes a clear understanding of His essence and qualities. God's manifestations are, therefore, designed to reveal His nature as a physical being with "a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's" (D&C 130:22) as well as His spiritual being—the qualities that make up His character.

Jesus declared that some sayings in the Doctrine and Covenants are given that we might "know how to worship, and know what [we] worship, that [we] may come unto the Father in [His] name, and in due time, receive of his fullness" (D&C 93:19). This stated purpose of scripture is consistent with what was taught and understood among the earlier Saints of this dispensation: "We are indebted to the revelations which he has given to us for a correct understanding of his character, perfections, and attributes; because, without the revelations which he has given to us, no man by searching could find out God."<sup>6</sup> The same Saints were taught that we are also expected to be diligent in our search of God if we hope to know Him and find out His real character: "The extent of [our] knowledge . . . will depend upon [our] diligence and faithfulness in seeking after him."<sup>7</sup>

God's plan has always been to reveal His nature, personality, and attributes to His children on the earth, making it possible for them to find Him out. His plan has not changed in the latter days. Not long ago, a colleague of mine asked me what I thought President Gordon B. Hinckley would say if asked what the greatest contribution of the Prophet Joseph Smith is. I told him I didn't know. With a smile, he said that President Hinckley actually responded to that question, and that his answer had been published in a recent news article about the Church. Here is what President Hinckley was asked, followed by his own response:

*Newsweek*: "What do you believe is [Joseph] Smith's most meaningful contribution, not only to the church but also to the world?"

*President Hinckley*: "His greatest contribution I think is defining the nature of deity. He saw the Father and the Son. He spoke with them. They were beings of substance. They were in form like a man. And they could express themselves and he could speak with them. Such an interpersonal relationship. And such a warm and reassuring thing to know the nature of God."<sup>8</sup>

President Hinckley's response suggests that God has a plan for His children to learn of Him and to understand what kind of a person He is, both physically and spiritually.

Part of God's plan includes revealing Himself to His prophets in a way that we understand Him as a person. In April 2000, President Hinckley used different titles for the Savior when he identified Him as his Friend, Exemplar, Teacher, Healer, Leader, Savior and Redeemer, and God and King.<sup>9</sup> By pondering on the meanings of each name-title, we grow to better understand the nature of God. Analyzing names and the insight they give to God's character can be done with the scriptures too. The process of searching the scriptures for words that describe God's actions can tell us much about His nature, character, and attributes.

### **God Is the Finisher of Our Faith**

The manifestations God uses to author or develop our faith may also be classified as blessings or "finishings" for our faith. God not only initiates our faith but also finishes it. The ultimate finish to our faith is the blessing of eternal life with God. However, we may not have to wait until the judgment day to see His face. The Lord has said, "Sanctify yourselves that your minds become single to God, and the days will come that you shall see him; for he will unveil his face unto you, and it shall be in his own time, and in his own way, and according to his own will" (D&C 88:68). He also declared, "It shall come to pass that every soul who forsaketh his sins and cometh unto me, and calleth on my name, and obeyeth my voice, and keepeth my commandments, shall see my face and know that I am" (D&C 93:1).

*His manifestations reveal His blessings for our faith.* One way that God "finishes" our faith is by manifesting Himself in our lives through great blessings and gifts of the Spirit. Such blessings can include visions, dreams, healings, miracles, and more. All blessings produced by true faith can be classified as God's manifestations. Some are listed in the Bible Dictionary: "Individual and personal testimony, guidance, revelation, and spiritual knowledge. Where there is true faith there are miracles, visions, dreams, healings, and all the gifts of God that he gives to his saints" ("Faith," 670). These kinds of blessings serve not only to bless us for our faith but also to continue its development. Divine manifestations we receive here in mortality give hope for things that sometimes we do not see but that are true (see Alma 32:21), such as faith that God is mindful of us during our trials.

The manifestations that God provides during our times of trial and adversity often include the spirit of peace, comfort, and consolation.

Jesus said, “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid” (John 14:27). The peace God gives is not the *world peace* for which so many pray (at least not yet). Rather, the peace He describes is peace of heart. This peace gives us the assurance and strength to be faithful in our trials. It provides us with peace that has been described as being as “calm as a summer’s morning” (D&C 135:4), despite the terror that may surround us. This assurance enables us to move forward in faith, progressing and receiving the blessings God has prepared for us.

*His manifestations reveal that our lives are acceptable.* God’s manifestations serve as evidence that the course of life we are pursuing is according to His will. With that evidence, we “have that confidence in God without which no person can obtain eternal life. It was this that enabled the ancient saints to endure all afflictions and persecutions, and to take joyfully the spoiling of their goods, knowing (not just believing) that they had a more enduring substance (Hebrews 10:34).”<sup>10</sup>

An illustration of how God provides evidence that our lives are agreeable to Him is found in the writings of Joseph Smith’s mother, Lucy Mack Smith. Prior to being expelled from Missouri, at a time of terrible sorrow and persecution, Lucy Smith enjoyed the peace and assurance of God because of her faith. She wrote:

For some time our house was filled with mourning, lamentation, and woe; but, in the midst of my grief, I found consolation that surpassed all earthly comfort. I was filled with the Spirit of God, and received the following by the gift of prophecy: “Let your heart be comforted concerning your children, they will not be harmed by their enemies; and, in less than four years, Joseph shall speak before the judges and great men of the land, for his voice shall be heard in their councils. And in five years from this time he will have power over all his enemies.” This relieved my mind, and I was prepared to comfort my children. I told them what had been revealed to me, which greatly consoled them.<sup>11</sup>

Later, at the time of Joseph’s and Hyrum’s deaths, she again described God’s manifestation:

I was swallowed up in the depths of my afflictions, and though my soul was filled with horror past imagination, yet I was dumb until I arose again to contemplate the spectacle before me. . . . As I looked upon their peaceful, smiling countenances, I seemed almost to hear them say, “Mother, weep not for us, we have overcome the world by love; we carried to them the gospel, that their souls might be saved; they slew us for our testimony, and thus placed us beyond their power;

their ascendancy is for a moment, ours is an eternal triumph.”

I then thought upon the promise which I had received in Missouri, that in five years Joseph should have power over all his enemies. The time had elapsed and the promise was fulfilled.<sup>12</sup>

Sister Smith, because of her exceeding faith, was blessed with the peace of God and with the assurance that she and her family would not be forsaken.

Like Lucy Smith, God's faithful children can know with assurance that during times of adversity their lives are acceptable to God and that if they continue faithful, their reward of eternal life can be certain. For God's children who diligently seek Him, His manifestations witness that He is pleased with them (see Hebrews 11:6). It was by faith that “Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, *by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts*” (Hebrews 11:4; emphasis added).

Perhaps the greatest witness we can have that God is pleased with the course of our lives is the companionship of the Holy Ghost. God does not require perfection before blessing us with His Spirit; rather, His spiritual gifts and blessings are for “those who love [Him] and keep all [His] commandments, and *him that seeketh so to do*” (D&C 46:9; emphasis added). It is safe to conclude that if we are enjoying a manifestation of His gifts at a time in our lives when we are seeking to love Him and to keep all His commandments, we can know that the manifestation is His confirmation to us that we are on course and that our life is pleasing to Him.

This confirming witness represents at least one purpose for the blessing of *always having His Spirit to be with us*—a covenantal promise made to us through baptism and the sacrament (see D&C 20:77, 79). Elder Dallin H. Oaks taught how the presence of the Holy Ghost signifies the blessing of a cleansing effect when he said: “Attendance at church each week provides the opportunity to partake of the sacrament, as the Lord has commanded us (see D&C 59:9). If we act with the right preparation and attitude, partaking of the sacrament renews the cleansing effect of our baptism and qualifies us for the promise that we will always have His Spirit to be with us.”<sup>13</sup>

While the presence of the Holy Ghost in our daily life cannot be understood as a final judgment on our lives, it can serve as evidence that the course we are then pursuing is approved by God. If we continue faithfully, repenting of our sins, keeping the commandments, loving the Lord and our neighbors, our faith will “take root; and behold it shall be a tree springing up unto everlasting life” (Alma 32:41).

“That which is of God [including His manifestations] is light; and he that receiveth light, and continueth in God, receiveth more light; and that light growth brighter and brighter until the perfect day” (D&C 50:24). The Savior also taught this principle when He said, “If it shall so be that they shall believe these things then shall greater things be made manifest unto them” (3 Nephi 26:9).

God’s assurance of our faithfulness is manifest to us through the Holy Spirit of Promise. The scriptures teach that the Father “sheds forth” His Holy Spirit of Promise “upon all those who are just and true” (D&C 76:53). We are also told in section 132 that all contracts or covenants must be “sealed,” or “validated” (v. 19), by the Holy Spirit of Promise if they are to have efficacy when people are dead (vv. 7, 18–19, 26). President James E. Faust explained that to have a covenant “sealed by the Holy Spirit of Promise means that the compact is binding on earth and in heaven.”<sup>14</sup> “When any ordinance or contract is sealed by the Spirit, it is approved with a promise of reward, provided unrighteousness does not thereafter break the seal, remove the ratifying approval, and cause loss of the promised blessing.”<sup>15</sup> The scriptures warn that “there is a possibility that man may fall from grace and depart from the living God” (D&C 20:32). The scriptures also provide help for preventing this loss: “Therefore let the church take heed and pray always, lest they fall into temptation; yea, and even let those who are sanctified take heed also” (D&C 20:32–34; see also D&C 132:26).

The presence of the Holy Ghost (or Holy Spirit of Promise), in addition to blessing us for our faith, signifies God’s assurance that His promises are remembered and the associated blessings will be given based on our present condition and future faithfulness. Quoting Elder Melvin J. Ballard, President Harold B. Lee taught how the Holy Ghost seals promises upon us: “The Holy Ghost is one who reads the thoughts and hearts of men, and gives his sealing approval to the blessings pronounced upon their heads. Then it is binding, efficacious, and of full force.”<sup>16</sup> Having God’s Spirit with us is His way of telling us that the covenants, ordinances, blessings, and promises are “binding, efficacious, and of full force.”

The Apostle Paul taught that ordinary members of Christ’s Church can enjoy the Spirit’s presence and the assurance of promised blessings when he told the Ephesians, “Ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession” (Ephesians 1:13–14; see also 2 Corinthians 1:22; 5:5). Paul teaches that God gave the Ephesian Saints the Holy Spirit of Promise as His earnest, or evidence, that the blessings of their

inheritance would come, as promised, at the time of their redemption. Like a family that makes an offer toward the purchase of a home, there is included in that offer a sum of “earnest” money that assures the seller that the remaining funds will be coming in due time. The Holy Spirit of Promise, given by God to His faithful children, is God’s earnest that the promised blessings will come in due time.

*His manifestations may reveal an assurance of personal salvation in the world to come.* An assurance of eternal life in the world to come should be the desire of every person. It represents a more sure word of prophecy for the faithful—that is, something more sure than the knowledge that the course of their life is pleasing to God. It is a blessing of sure knowledge that comes through the Holy Spirit of Promise in God’s “own time, and in his own way, and according to his own will” (D&C 88:68).

Scripturally, we are taught that the “other Comforter” mentioned by John in the New Testament refers to the Holy Spirit of Promise and the promise of eternal life we can receive while still in mortality. In this context, the Holy Spirit of Promise becomes an even greater (more sure) word of promise from God. Doctrine and Covenants 88:4 reads, “This Comforter is the promise which I give unto you of eternal life, even the glory of the celestial kingdom” (see also D&C 124:124). This ultimate manifestation of God—the assurance of a promised eternal life—while in mortality, represents a grand *finish* to the handiwork of faith that He *authors* in the lives of His children. Perhaps we could sing more faithfully the fourth verse of “Come, Listen to a Prophet’s Voice”:

Then heed the words of truth and light  
That flow from fountains pure.  
Yea, keep His law with all thy might  
Till thine election’s sure,  
Till thou shalt hear the holy voice  
Assure eternal reign,  
While joy and cheer attend thy choice,  
As one who shall obtain.<sup>17</sup>

The scriptures also teach plainly that we do not have to receive this promise of eternal life while in mortality in order to be saved. Good and faithful members of the Church who endure to the end and die while strong in the faith will receive the blessing of eternal life. Nephi wrote, “If ye shall press forward, feasting upon the word of Christ, and endure to the end, behold, thus saith the Father: Ye shall have eternal life” (2 Nephi 31:20). Dying while on the gospel path is sufficient to be saved, “even though [we] are far from perfect in this life.”<sup>18</sup> Elder McConkie taught:

What we are doing as members of the Church is charting a course leading to eternal life. . . . We must determine in our hearts and in our souls, with all the power and ability we have, that from this time forward we will press on in righteousness; by so doing we can go where God and Christ are. If we make that firm determination, and are in that course of our duty when this life is over, we will continue in that course in eternity. . . . If we go out of this life loving the Lord, desiring righteousness, and seeking to acquire the attributes of godliness, we will have that same spirit in the eternal world, and we will then continue to advance and progress until an ultimate, destined day when we will possess, receive, and inherit all things.<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

Wherever we find ourselves on the pathway toward eternal life, God’s manifestations can serve both to author and also to finish our faith. If we will seek God and respond faithfully to the manifestations He gives us, the day will come that we shall see Him in His fullness (see D&C 93:19)—both naturally and spiritually. In that day when we shall say “I see,” it will be for more than mere insight—“we shall see him as he is” (Moroni 7:48). President Romney provides an appropriate conclusion to this topic when he said: “I know that God our Father lives, that we are, as Paul said, his offspring. I know that we dwelt in his presence in pre-earth life and that we shall continue to live beyond the grave. I know that we may return into his presence, if we meet his terms. I know that while we are here in mortality there is a means of communication between him and us. I know it is possible for men to so live that they may hear his voice and know his words and that to receive ‘the Holy Spirit of promise’ while here in mortality is possible.”<sup>20</sup> God be praised for His initiation, development, and polishing of our faith. Let us also praise Him for His gracious finishing of our faith, both now and in the worlds to come. **RE**

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## Notes

1. Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: S. Converse, 1828), s.v. “author.”
2. *American Dictionary*, s.v. “finish.”
3. Joseph Smith, comp., *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 38.
4. Smith, *Lectures on Faith*, 24.
5. *American Dictionary*, s.v. “nature.”
6. Smith, *Lectures on Faith*, 39.
7. Smith, *Lectures on Faith*, 24.

8. "Solid, Strong, True," *Newsweek*, October 17, 2005, 58.
9. Gordon B. Hinckley, "My Testimony," *Ensign*, May 2000, 71.
10. Smith, *Lectures on Faith*, 67.
11. Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith by His Mother*, ed. Preston Nibley (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 291.
12. Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith*, 325.
13. Dallin H. Oaks, "The Gospel in Our Lives," *Ensign*, May 2002, 34.
14. James E. Faust, "The Gift of the Holy Ghost—A Sure Compass," *Ensign*, April 1996, 3.
15. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 362.
16. Harold B. Lee, *Improvement Era*, December 1970, 105.
17. "Come, Listen to a Prophet's Voice," *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 21.
18. Bruce R. McConkie, "Seven Deadly Heresies," in *Charge to Religious Educators* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1982), 150.
19. McConkie, "Seven Deadly Heresies," 150–51.
20. Marion G. Romney, *Improvement Era*, December 1965, 1116.