

JOSEPH SMITH AND THE RESTORATION

Joseph Smith Jr. was born December 23, 1805 in Sharon, Vermont. Born into a poor farming family, his family could not afford the luxury of public education. Joseph received only three years of formal schooling and was educated mainly at home from the family Bible.

Confused about religion during a time of intense religious revival in the state of New York where he lived in 1820, 14-year-old Joseph read a passage in the New Testament that, he wrote later, spoke to the depths of his soul. It was an admonition for those who lack wisdom to seek it from a divine source (James 1:5). Joseph's response was to find a place of solitude in a wooded area near his home, and pray vocally for the first time in his life.

What followed forever changed Joseph Smith and has become a central tenet of Latter-day Saint belief. Joseph records that God and Jesus Christ appeared to him as two personages – one of whom spoke Joseph's name, pointed to the other, and said, "This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!" Church members refer to this experience as the "First Vision." It began the work of restoring the Church of Jesus Christ to the earth.

Joseph Smith is perhaps best known for his translation of the Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ. Some years after his First Vision, Joseph was led to a hill near Palmyra, New York, where he received an ancient record from an angel known as Moroni. The record, engraved on metal plates, gave the history of a people who lived on the American continent during the time of Christ, including the appearance of the resurrected Christ to them. Joseph translated the record in about three months, and the resultant Book of Mormon was first published in 1830.

Latter-day Saints believe that divine authority was lost in the ancient church after the death of the apostles and required a restoration by divine intervention. The restoration of priesthood authority through Joseph Smith in the first half of the 19th century was a literal act through angelic visitations from those who held the authority anciently.

Joseph Smith's revelations introduced striking theological innovations and challenges to the churches of the day. He was strong in his defense of religious freedom for people of all faiths. His revelations introduced such concepts as temples where saving work can be done for the dead and an understanding of three broad degrees or levels of heaven and of the ultimate destiny in the next life for faithful children of God. His experience with the First Vision led to Latter-day Saint understanding of the physical nature of God and Jesus Christ and that humankind is created in their image. He spoke and wrote frequently about the latter-day gathering of Israel, and taught it not only in terms of the gathering of Jews to Israel but also the gathering of all God's people to places of refuge and holiness.

Joseph Smith presided over the Church until June 27, 1844, when he was martyred at the age of 38. The church that Joseph established in 1830 is today a global faith of close to 13 million members, and Joseph Smith himself is regarded by Latter-day Saints as the pre-eminent prophet of modern times. Contrary to assertions by some opponents of the Church, however, Joseph is not worshiped by Church members. He is honored as a prophet but was still a man with the shortcomings and faults common to other men.