



Type: Book Chapter

Third Principle: Integrity is Keeping One's Covenants with God

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Source: *Joseph and Moroni: The 7 Principles Moroni Taught Joseph Smith*

Published: Salt Lake City; Eborn Books, 2006

Pages: 34-40

THIRD PRINCIPLE: INTEGRITY IS KEEPING ONE'S COVENANTS WITH GOD

JOSEPH TEACHES HIS FAMILY ABOUT THE PEOPLE OF THE BOOK OF MORMON

The evening after that first interview with Moroni, Joseph waited until after supper, and then told the story to his whole family.⁵³

“From this time forth,” his mother recalled, “Joseph continued to receive instructions from the Lord.”⁵⁴ As time passed, Moroni not only told Joseph about the contents of the Book of Mormon, but showed him, in vision, the peoples and, events about which the book was written. In doing this, Moroni used the best possible method of preparing Joseph to participate in the work of translation. One who understands a people, their culture, their history, and the impact of their ideas upon events is far better able to translate their writings correctly than one who only has an academic background in their language.

Moroni began to teach Joseph about the Book of Mormon four full years before Joseph had the plates. There are no firsthand accounts of these visions, but in the evenings, after the day's work was done, the Smith family would gather around, “all seated in a circle...and giving the most profound attention,” while Joseph taught them.”

Occasionally during these evening conversations, Joseph told them about the culture of the people whose history was in the book that still lay buried in the box on the hill. His mother wrote:

He would describe the ancient inhabitants of this continent, their dress, mode of traveling, and the animals upon which they rode; their cities, their buildings, with every particular; their mode of warfare; and also their religious worship. This he would do with as much ease, seemingly, as if he had spent his whole life among them.⁵⁵

For Joseph to have known the ancient Americans that well, his tutorials with Moroni must have been as vivid as movements through time.

JOSEPH GOES TO THE HILL CUMORAH THE SECOND TIME

On the twenty-second of the next September, exactly one year after the day he first climbed the hill to see the plates, Joseph was to return to that same place. Because of his frequent contact with Moroni, visits from the angel must have long since ceased being a novelty to the young prophet. But if Moroni thought of them as routine, he certainly had not stopped taking them seriously. In preparation for Joseph's second attempt to get the plates, Moroni cautioned Joseph that he must beware of other people's greed. Some

would try to steal the plates to get the gold. If they were stolen and melted down, the words, which were more precious than the gold, would be lost. To emphasize the danger and to clarify Joseph's responsibility, Moroni told him that once the plates were in Joseph's custody, he must not lay them down or let them out of his hands for even a moment, until they were safely hidden. Joseph promised he would obey.

Oliver Cowdery tells us that on the appointed day, Joseph climbed the hill to the place where the stone box was buried, opened it, reached in, picked up the plates, and started back down the hill. Then he stopped, remembering he had not replaced the stone lid on the box. The other treasures were still exposed to the view of anyone who might pass by, and he realized they might be stolen. He returned, laid the plates down beside him where they would be safe, and pushed the heavy lid back into place. When the box was closed, he turned to pick up the plates. They were gone! Joseph could not understand what had happened. He had heard no one approach, yet someone had taken them. He was frightened and terribly frustrated when he knelt to ask the Lord for help.

As had happened a year before, Moroni responded to Joseph's pleadings. And, as before, Joseph's ex-general, angel tutor told him he could not have the plates until he had learned to obey. Moroni's insistence that Joseph promise to keep the plates safe and not let them out of his hands should have been taken more seriously. That golden record had been prepared as the key of the restoration of the gospel, of

the restoration of Israel, and of the fulfillment of the covenants that the Father had made in the beginning. The plates were precious beyond price and needed to be protected with the utmost care. Since Joseph could not yet be trusted to look after them, Moroni had returned the plates to their box.

Moroni gave Joseph permission to look. Once again the young man pried open the lid. When he saw the plates, he reached down to take them in his hands, “but instead of getting them, as he anticipated, he was hurled back upon the ground with great violence.”⁵⁶

He just lay there. Now the angel was gone, the box was closed, and Joseph was alone. He had been weighed in the balance of his own integrity, and found wanting. When he recovered his strength, he returned to his parents’ home, weeping with grief and disappointment.⁵⁷ One can almost hear the echo of the angel’s instructions in young Joseph’s sobbing: “*You must learn to obey!*”

ANOTHER LESSON ABOUT OBEDIENCE

The plates were the angel’s responsibility. He could protect them well enough when they were in his custody, and he would not let Joseph have them until Joseph had learned to follow his instructions explicitly. Joseph had chosen to not obey, so now he must wait another year.

Stories like this ask questions, and one of the most intriguing is, “Why?” Moroni was able to move the

plates—there can be no doubt about that. Why then did he not just pick them up and take them down to the house and give them to Joseph? Why must Joseph come to their hiding place to get them? Why must he come year after year? Those questions all suggest the same answer: There were things Joseph needed to learn that only time and experience could teach him.

When Joseph first climbed that hill to get the plates, he understood that his folks were very poor. Loving sons are conscious of those things, and his history records his memory of it. He wrote,

As my father's worldly circumstances were very limited, we were under the necessity of laboring with our hands, hiring out by day's work and otherwise, as we could get opportunity.⁵⁸

Perhaps the notion of selling the gold began there. It is not a bad thing for a young son to wish he could help his parents. The beginning of his temptation may only have been something like this: "I wonder if there might be just one page at the back that does not have writing on it, and I could sell that one to help my dad." An idea like that could have been the entree for the rest. Deceit then followed deception until the devil had manipulated Joseph's thinking.

That conjecture on my part might or might not account for Joseph's first failure to get the plates. Still, after he had once succumbed to the enticements, he ought to have recognized and avoided them. Indeed, he did. There is no

evidence that Joseph ever again entertained the notion of selling the gold.

Joseph's second attempt to get the plates was altogether different from the first. He was foiled, not because he wanted to sell the treasure, but because he wanted to protect it. This time Joseph may have thought, "After all, the angel does expect me to be responsible. Would a responsible person walk away, leaving a silver bow and breastplate lying there in the open to be stolen by whoever might pass by? If I were responsible I would have closed that lid." Convinced by his own reasoning, Joseph returned. But since he could not move the heavy stone with the plates in his hands, he had to lay them down.

So, one might ask, what was there about those two experiences that was a necessary element in the maturation of this young prophet? What did he learn?

In both of those possible scenarios, Joseph's temptation was not to do something bad, but to do what Joseph himself understood to be best. The sin was that he did not do what the Lord told him would be best. The lesson he learned was that when a prophet acts in behalf of the Lord, he does what the Lord tells him to do.

Integrity means that there is no gap between what one says and what one does. Integrity is a personal power that is either the key to our salvation or the surest way to go to hell. If we love the Lord and his children, and act in accordance to that love, and under the direction of the Holy Ghost, then integrity has become the key to salvation. However, if we support some unholy cause, then personal integrity—the

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persistence in following that unrighteous path—will prevent us from acknowledging the truth and, therefore, from repenting.

Joseph's returning to close the box was an expression of his own integrity. That would have been a good thing under any other circumstances, but this time his integrity should have caused him to do what he was told to do—to hold tightly to the plates until they were properly hidden.

The lesson he learned was this: just as a prophet must be able to tell the difference between ideas that come from the devil and those that come from the Lord; so a prophet must also be able to tell the difference between the ideas that come from the Lord and those that come from his own mind. If Joseph had not learned that principle, he could not have been a prophet.