

LIGHT REFLECTIONS

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Joseph's School

In January 1833, Joseph Smith wrote from Kirtland to Church leaders in Missouri. The Prophet included with his letter a priceless attachment—one of the longest and most breathtaking revelations of his entire career.

Joseph introduced the revelation with a reverent preface. “I send you,” he wrote, “the Olive Leaf, which we have plucked from the tree of paradise, the Lord’s message of peace to us.”

Joseph forwarded the Olive Leaf to his colleagues with something approaching awe. “You will see,” he observed,

that the Lord commanded us in Kirtland to build a house of God and establish a school for the prophets. This is the word of the Lord to us, and we must—yea, the Lord helping us, we *will*—obey, as on conditions of our obedience, He has promised us great things.¹

In my view, the “Olive Leaf” itself is one of the “great things” with which the Lord has blessed His Saints—one of the greatest revelations in our entire canon. Its theology soars and its poetry sings.

Now canonized as Section 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants, the Olive Leaf serves as “the basic constitution for Church education.”² We at BYU treasure its summons toward universal knowledge, its sweeping curriculum, its endorsement of “the best books,” and its call to “seek learning . . . by study and . . . faith” (D&C 88:118). We also love the Olive Leaf because it links us to the foundations of the Restoration, to the School of the Prophets, and to the Prophet Joseph Smith himself.³

With his “extravagant thirst for knowledge,”⁴ Joseph dreamed of founding a university that

would blend the thrilling theology of the Restoration with the tireless pursuit of truth in every domain. In an 1841 prospectus, he and his counselors announced their bold intentions.

“The ‘University of the City of Nauvoo,’” they wrote,

will enable us to teach our children wisdom—to instruct them in *all* knowledge, and [*all*] learning, in the Arts, Sciences and Learned Professions. We hope to make this institution *one of the great lights of the world*, and by and through it, to diffuse that kind of knowledge which will be of practical utility, and for the public good, and also for private and individual happiness.⁵

We at BYU are the heirs and executors of Joseph’s audacious dream.

Years ago, as a BYU freshman, I found myself—*mirabile dictu*—on a Friday night with nothing to do. A certain young woman in my family home evening group was, perhaps not by accident, nowhere to be found. (After twenty years of marriage and seven children, I am still struggling to keep up with her.) Whatever my roommates were up to—likely a video game marathon of some sort—somehow didn’t appeal. So I decided to do the unthinkable. I would spend that Friday evening at the library. Reading.

At the time I was reading *The Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*. With a recent mission call, I was trying to compensate for a misspent youth with some eleventh-hour missionary preparation. I was well into the book but had no plan to finish it that night.

I read for hours, cozily huddled in a carrel near the music stacks on the fourth floor. I read the stirring theological disclosures of Joseph’s last recorded sermons. I read the heart-rending accounts of his martyrdom. As I read, the Spirit stirred my soul with mounting intensity. When I turned over the final page, I had been permanently transformed. I had received a witness, sacred and undeniable, for which I sensed I would be forever accountable.

I felt impressed to acknowledge that accountability with a private, personal vow. I bowed my head in my carrel and silently promised my Father in heaven that, wherever I went and for as long as I lived, I would bear witness of the truthfulness of the restored gospel, and of the

prophetic calling of Joseph Smith, to anyone who would listen.

I’m not sure how well I’ve kept that promise. But as I assume the overwhelming assignment that has recently come to me, I am determined to renew that earlier commitment by doing all I can to help BYU realize the Prophet’s dream of a great Restoration university—a university that will shine as “one of the unique lights of the world.”

Although our institution proudly bears the name of his indomitable successor, in a fundamental sense BYU is, and must always remain, the Prophet Joseph’s school.

¹ Joseph Smith to William W. Phelps, 11 January 1833, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-william-w-phelps-11-january-1833/1?highlight=tree%20of%20paradise> (emphasis added).

² Dallin H. Oaks, “A House of Faith,” BYU annual university conference address, 31 August 1977, 8.

³ See John S. Tanner, Introduction to “The Basic Constitution of Church Education,” in *Envisioning BYU: Foundations and Dreams* (Brigham Young University, 2022) 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Joseph Smith, Sidney Rigdon, & Hyrum Smith, “Proclamation,” *Times and Seasons*, 15 January 1841, p. 274 (emphasis added).