



TOP 5 TAKEAWAYS FROM JOSEPH SMITH'S FIRST VISION

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IMAGINE YOU WERE given the assignment by your bishop to come to Sunday School class next week prepared to present what you believe to be the top 5 takeaways from Joseph Smith's First Vision as recorded in **Joseph Smith History 1:1-30**. You might begin your preparation by looking up the definition of a *takeaway*. Then, it might make sense to break up this assignment into two parts: First, brainstorm a list of as many of the key messages that you can think of while reading through the assigned material. Second, narrow down your list to what you consider to be the top 5 most significant of these various takeaways. We soon might discover that the challenges and rewards associated with brainstorming as many takeaways as you can, are different from the challenges and rewards associated with narrowing down the takeaway list to just the top 5. Let's go through each of these two exercises.

Merriam-Webster Definition:

take·away | \ 'tāk-ə-, wā \

1: a conclusion to be made based on presented facts or information : a main point or key message to be learned or understood from something experienced or observed

FIRST EXERCISE – BRAINSTORMING A LIST OF TAKEAWAYS

Once we begin this exercise, we will quickly discover that there are so many points and potential messages within Joseph Smith's First Vision that we can create a substantial list with very little effort. Here for example, is a list of 5 takeaways presented by a thirteen-year-old deacon who was given the topic of Joseph Smith's First Vision as his speaking assignment in a Sunday morning Sacrament meeting. In his concluding remarks this unusually tall deacon summed up his talk by saying—"the four or five takeaways of the First Vision for me are:

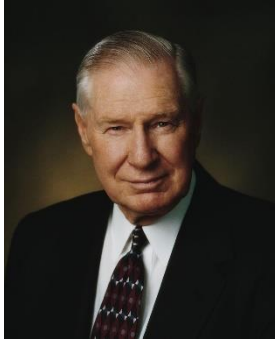
1. God hears and answers our prayers.
2. God's power is greater than Satan's.
3. God knows each of us by name.
4. God calls and works through prophets.
5. God is nearer and closer to us than we think."

This certainly is a commendable list of takeaways—particularly for a thirteen-year-old deacon. Although we agree with the young deacon that his short list of takeaways contains many of the valuable messages that are to be found within the First Vision, there is still more that can be added to the list. For example, in the young deacon's list there is no mention of the fact that Joseph came out of the Sacred Grove experience knowing that he had received a definitive answer to his specific question as to which of all the religious sects was right and as to which he should join:

Specific Question: *“My object in going to inquire of the Lord was to know which of all the sects was right, that I might know which to join.” (verse 18)*

Definitive Answer: *“I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong.” (verse 19)*

An example of a deeper doctrinal list of takeaways was presented in the February 2020 issue of the Ensign. In this article, “Eight Truths from the First Vision”, we are presented with a list of 8 takeaways compiled by a former member of the First Presidency, President James E. Faust (1920-2007).



1. *God our Father is a personal being, and men and women were made in His image.*
2. *Jesus is a personage, separate and distinct from the Father.*
3. *Jesus Christ was declared by the Father to be His Son.*
4. *Jesus was the conveyer of revelation, as taught in the Bible.*
5. *The promise of James to ask of God for wisdom was fulfilled,*
6. *Joseph learned of the reality of an actual being from an unseen world who tried to destroy him.*
7. *There was a falling away from the church that was established by Jesus Christ—Joseph was told not to join any of the sects, for they taught the doctrines of men.*
8. *Joseph Smith became a witness for God and His Son, Jesus Christ.*

As we should expect, President Faust’s takeaway list shows a more comprehensive doctrinal understanding of the First Vision than that enjoyed by the young deacon. The young deacon may have been more impressed at his age by the personal takeaway that “God knows each of us by name,” more than the doctrinal takeaway that “Jesus is a personage, separate and distinct from the Father.” So, whether or not these top takeaway lists are compiled by young deacons or apostles of the Lord, the emphasis on the number of takeaways, or any particular takeaway, is often dependent upon a person’s current age, gospel understanding, and personal interests. This explains how as we age and progress in our gospel study, we should be able to return again and again to the First Vision for more and more insights into the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.

With this in mind, we suggest another valuable strategy in understanding key takeaways from The First Vision. When analyzing any narrative, a helpful tool to get to the heart of the content, is to consider the prioritized perspectives of the key participants in the narrative.

- 1st: What is the perspective of the original sender?
- 2nd: What is the perspective of the original receiver?
- 3rd: What is the perspective of various other analysts like us?

Applying this tool to the First Vision we then ask ourselves:

- 1st: What was the takeaway message God conveyed?
- 2nd: What was the takeaway message Joseph Smith received?
- 3rd: Do the rest of us accurately comprehend God’s takeaways, and Joseph’s takeaways in priority order as we compile our own list of takeaways?



Evaluating the evidence of what the young prophet considered were *his* experience and *his* testimony, means compiling our takeaway list *not from our own personal vantage point, but rather, from the perspective of the fourteen-year-old Joseph Smith himself.* When compiling our initial list of takeaways from Joseph Smith’s First Vision, it ought to be done by asking a question like: ***What did the fourteen-year-old Joseph Smith know coming out of the Sacred Grove that he did not know going in?*** Consider, for example, the following takeaways based on what the young Joseph knew going into the Sacred Grove compared to what he knew coming out:

1. *He knew nothing of the powers of darkness ... but now he did. (verses 15, 16)*
2. *He knew nothing of the glory, power and majesty of God ... but now he did. (verses 16, 17)*

3. *He knew nothing of the nature and character of God as a Personage, that we truly were created in God's image ... but now he did. (verses 17, 25)*
4. *He knew nothing of the nature and character of the Godhead (Trinity teachings) and did not know there would be two Divine Personages standing before him in the air instead of One ... but now he did. (verses 17, 25)*
5. *He knew nothing of the nature of revelations, visions or that even such things were possible in his day—for the religious sects all taught otherwise (verse 21). Joseph believed enough in the promise of James 1:5 to give it a try (verses 11-15) ... but now knew. (verse 29)*

Consider the following list of takeaways from the main point of Joseph's **original intent and inquiry**:

1. *He did not know which religious sect was right or which to join ... but now he did. (verses 10, 12, 18, 19)*
2. *He did not know that he was to be forbidden to join any of them ... but now he did. (verses 20, 26, 28)*
3. *He did not know that the religious creeds were an abomination in the sight of God ... but now he did. (verse 16)*
4. *He did not know that the religious professors were all corrupt in the eyes of God ... but now he did. (verse 16)*
5. *He did not know that despite his imperfections he would be called to a special mission ... but now he did. (verse 28)*
6. *He did not know that he would be required to await further instruction from the Lord ... but now he did. (verse 26)*
7. *He did not know how real and impactful this vision would be on him personally and in the face of those who tried to get him to deny what he knew to be an undeniable fact ... but now he did. (verses 15-17, 24, 25)*
8. *He did not know how reviled and persecuted he would be by the religious world ... but now he did. (verses 20-25)*

When added to the lists already mentioned, we can see that it is quite possible to compile a substantial list of takeaways without much difficulty. The unique challenges and rewards associated with this first exercise of brainstorming a large list of takeaways, now prepares us for the second equally challenging and rewarding exercise.

SECOND EXERCISE – NARROWING THE LIST DOWN TO THE TOP 5

We may quickly discover that brainstorming a large list of takeaways was the easy part of the bishop's assignment and narrowing this list down to the top 5 is perhaps where the real difficulty lies. After all, there are so many messages that *could* be taken from Joseph Smith's First Vision, we may be left wondering how to possibly narrow this takeaway list down to only 5. So why force the issue of narrowing down the list, when as demonstrated by the young deacon, any random set of 5 takeaways can form an interesting discussion? Obviously, 5 is an arbitrary number but a good number, nonetheless. 5 is a number that makes it possible for us to easily keep track of the main takeaways, counting them simply on one hand, one top takeaway at a time.



The point of narrowing down this initial list of takeaways to the top 5 is twofold. First, any compiled list containing a dozen or more takeaways is unwieldy and liable to dilute the significance of the more important takeaways to such an extent that we may forget *why the young prophet went into the Sacred Grove in the first place*. Second, to arbitrarily pick out just any 5 of the dozen or more takeaways is missing out on perhaps the most valuable aspect of the bishop's assignment. It is the narrowing down of the list that requires us to *consider the importance of each takeaway in relation to all the others*. Going through the thought process of evaluating and integrating these numerous takeaways into an intelligible whole is a valuable learning exercise for a careful follower of Christ.

FIRST VISION – THE TOP 5 TAKEAWAYS

We discover from verses 18, 19, 20, and verse 26, that the Lord— *in no uncertain terms*—has revealed to us the top 5 takeaways that He intended to impress upon Joseph's young mind. These come under the controversial and unexpected headline that traditional Christianity in Joseph Smith's day was in a full and complete state of apostasy:

1. *All their religious sects were wrong. (verses 18-19)*
2. *All their creeds were an abomination. (verse 19)*
3. *All their religious professors were corrupt. (verse 19)*

Merriam-Webster defines a *sect* as “a religious denomination”, and a *creed* as “a set of fundamental beliefs”. Knowing that all the religious sects were wrong, and that their fundamental beliefs were an abomination, Joseph Smith was left

with the following directives in preparation for the latter-day Restoration that had already commenced on that very morning in the early spring of 1820.

4. *He was to join none of the religious sects. (verses 19-20, 26)*

5. *He was to await further direction. (verse 26)*

From these top 5 takeaways we clearly see the one overarching, and unifying takeaway from Joseph Smith's first vision. The undeniable fact is that the Lord was **clearing the religious ground** in Joseph's mind from all the false religious sects connected with apostate Christianity in his day. God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, considered it momentous enough to come down in person, to authoritatively establish in no uncertain terms that all the religious sects in Joseph's day were in a full and complete state of apostasy, thus requiring a full and complete restoration. Clearly these religious creeds are not only simply false, but are also theological black holes. If someone wants to study what God is *not*, what priesthood is *not*, what faith is *not*, what divine love is *not*, what grace is *not*, and what the ordinances of salvation are *not*, then they need merely study the religious creeds of apostate Christianity.

While these top 5 takeaways from Joseph Smith's First Vision are uncomfortable positions to take in this politically correct and hyper-sensitive age, they are nevertheless the top 5 takeaways that initiated the Restoration in these latter-days. The blanket condemnation by the Lord to the religious professors, preachers, and great ones of the most popular sects of the day is a hard pill to swallow for those scholars in our day who wish to shrug off this harsh language as nothing more than 19th century rhetoric, having little to do with the Lord's true attitude toward the various religious sects, creeds, and preachers in Joseph Smith's day. The condemnation falling upon the religious professors and preachers mentioned in The First Vision, was primarily because they were Christians in name only, but not in any true, heartfelt, or genuine sense of the term. *Evidence* of this corruption was not merely that their hearts were removed far from God, or that they taught the commandments of men rather than the true doctrines of Christ, or that they displayed the outer forms of godliness without its power. Instead, they spitefully and angrily denied continuing revelation in our day. Even worse, they aggressively sought to persecute with violence those who did honestly claim to receive revelation—such as Joseph Smith had.

Any attempt on our part to backtrack or soften the rebuke that the religious sects received in the First Vision from Jesus Christ Himself, diminishes the seriousness of the Restoration and undermines the strength of our own position in establishing Zion in preparation for the Second Coming of the Lord. It is only by Latter-day Saints taking the apostasy seriously—with all its upsetting implications and uncomfortable ramifications—that we are in a position to take the restoration seriously—with all its equally upsetting and uncomfortable ramifications that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is “the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth, with which I, the Lord, am well pleased” (D&C 1:30).

Verse 18: *My object in going to inquire of the Lord was to know which of all the sects was right, that I might know which to join. No sooner, therefore, did I get possession of myself, so as to be able to speak, than I asked the Personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right (for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong)—and which I should join.*

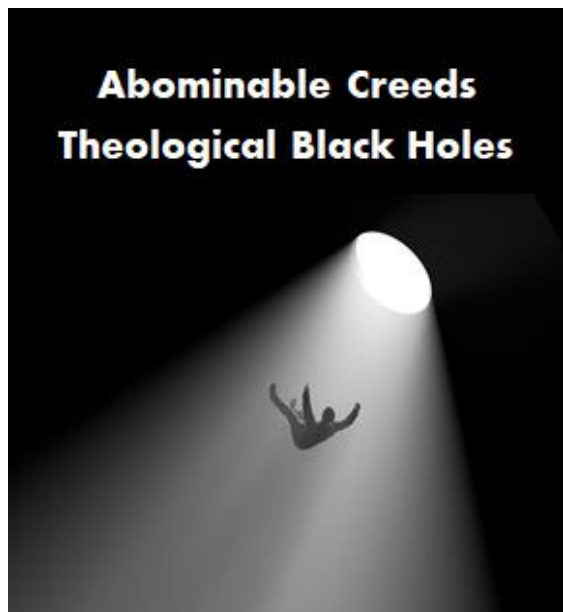
Verse 19: *I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong; and the Personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt; that: "they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof."*

Verse 20: *He again forbade me to join with any of them; and many other things did he say unto me, which I cannot write at this time.*

Joseph writes—

Verse 26: *I had now got my mind satisfied so far as the sectarian world was concerned—that it was not my duty to join with any of them, but to continue as I was until further directed. I had found the testimony of James to be true—that a man who lacked wisdom might ask of God, and obtain, and not be upbraided.*

Abominable Creeds Theological Black Holes



DOCTRINAL GOLDMINE AND EXPLOSIVE MINEFIELD

There is no question that the numerous takeaways from Joseph Smith's First Vision are both a doctrinal gold mine and an explosive minefield. A gold mine because of the great truths that were restored in these latter-days, and an explosive minefield because of the falsehoods it exposed "resulting in a spirit of the most bitter persecution and reviling". (verse 23) Whether bitterly persecuted or reviled, we Latter-day Saints likewise must press forward in boldness as did the Prophet in the following reported occasion. In 1839 Joseph Smith, Sidney Rigdon, and others traveled to Washington, D.C., to present their petitions for redress for the crimes committed against them by the Missourians. During the trip, they were invited to speak to about three thousand people in Philadelphia.

"Brother Rigdon spoke first, and dwelt on the gospel, illustrating his doctrine by the Bible. When he [Sidney Rigdon] was through, brother Joseph arose like a lion about to roar; and being full of the Holy Ghost, spoke in great power, bearing testimony of the visions he had seen, the ministering of angels which he had enjoyed; and how he had found the plates of the Book of Mormon, and translated them by the gift and power of God. He commenced by saying: 'If nobody else had the courage to testify of so glorious a message from Heaven, and of the finding of so glorious a record, he felt to do it in justice to the people, and leave the event to God.'"
(Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt, p260).

Keeping all of the above thoughts in mind, let's review each of the Top Five Takeaways from Joseph Smith's First Vision—one top takeaway at a time under the following unifying and controversial latter-day headline: ALL RELIGIOUS SECTS IN A FULL STATE OF APOSTASY.



All the religious sects were wrong.

From Joseph Smith's own testimony:

Verse 18: My object in going to inquire of the Lord was to know which of all the sects was right, that I might know which to join. ...

Verse 19: I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong.



All their creeds were an abomination.

From Joseph Smith's own testimony:

Verse 19: ... and the Personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight.



All their religious professors were corrupt.

From Joseph Smith's own testimony:

Verse 19: ... that those professors were all corrupt; that: "they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof."



Join none of the religious sects.

From Joseph Smith's own testimony:

Verse 20: He again forbade me to join with any of them; and many other things did he say unto me, which I cannot write at this time. ...

Verse 22: *I soon found, however, that my telling the story had excited a great deal of prejudice against me among professors of religion, and was the cause of great persecution, which continued to increase; and though I was an obscure boy, only between fourteen and fifteen years of age, and my circumstances in life such as to make a boy of no consequence in the world, yet men of high standing would take notice sufficient to excite the public mind against me, and create a bitter persecution; and this was common among all the sects—all united to persecute me.*

...

Verse 25: *... and though I was hated and persecuted for saying that I had seen a vision, yet it was true; and while they were persecuting me, reviling me, and speaking all manner of evil against me falsely for so saying, I was led to say in my heart: Why persecute me for telling the truth? I have actually seen a vision; and who am I that I can withstand God, or why does the world think to make me deny what I have actually seen? For I had seen a vision; I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it, neither dared I do it; at least I knew that by so doing I would offend God, and come under condemnation.*

LATTER-DAY RESTORATION

**Apostasy
(Catholic)**

**Apostasy
(Protestant)**



**RESTORATION
Starting Anew**



Await further direction.

From Joseph Smith's own testimony:

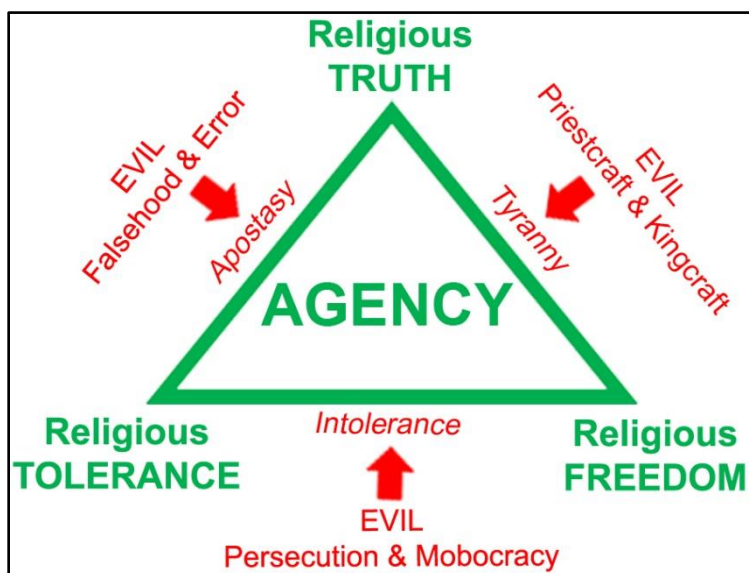
Verse 26: I had now got my mind satisfied so far as the sectarian world was concerned—that it was not my duty to join with any of them, but to continue as I was until further directed. ...

LIVING WITH OTHERS IN PEACE

It is both wrong-headed and wrong-hearted to assume that these *Top 5 Takeaways of the First Vision* are marching orders for an all-out attack against the false denominations, abominable creeds, and corrupt ministers of The Great Apostasy. Such an assumption would be a very serious, foolish, and WRONG takeaway because we are engaged in a battle against not just one evil, but three:

- 1: The falsehoods and errors associated with the Great Apostasy.
- 2: The persecution and mobocracy associated with religious intolerance.
- 3: The priestcraft and kingcraft associated with religious and political tyrants.

Strong religious convictions often lead to religious intolerance and political tyranny. For this reason, the Restoration requires not only strong convictions pertaining to RELIGIOUS TRUTHS, but equally important strong convictions pertaining to RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE and RELIGIOUS FREEDOM. Consider the modern authoritarian Islamic regimes such as those in Iran, Sudan, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Afghanistan. In these countries, church and state have combined as all-powerful agents of the dual evils of priestcraft and kingcraft in suppressing agency and religious freedom of their citizens. We should always remember that the falsehoods and errors associated with the Great Apostasy must be discussed within the larger context of religious tolerance and religious freedom in order to safeguard the agency of mankind. The same religious rights and freedoms that protect all other sects also protect the Latter-day Saints. Without these rights and religious freedoms, the religious truths associated with the First Vision would never have seen the light of day due to religious intolerance and political tyranny.



Joseph Smith himself wrote:

"I have the most liberal sentiments, and feelings of charity towards all sects, parties, and denominations; and the rights and liberties of conscience, I hold most sacred and dear, and despise no man for differing with me in matters of opinion." (Teachings of Presidents of The Church, Joseph Smith, p345)

"We ought always to be aware of those prejudices which sometimes so strangely present themselves, and are so congenial to human nature, against our friends, neighbors, and brethren of the world, who choose to differ from us in opinion and in matters of faith. Our religion is between us and our God. Their religion is between them and their God." (ibid, p345)

"Meddle not with any man for his religion: all governments ought to permit every man to enjoy his religion unmolested. No man is authorized to take away life in consequence of difference of religion, which all laws and governments ought to tolerate and protect, right or wrong." (ibid, 346).

"Although I never feel to force my doctrine upon any person, I rejoice to see prejudice give way to truth, and the traditions of men dispersed by the pure principles of the Gospel of Jesus Christ." (ibid, 346).



"If I esteem mankind to be in error, shall I bear them down? No. I will lift them up, and in their own way too, if I cannot persuade them my way is better; and I will not seek to compel any man to believe as I do, only by the force of reasoning, for truth will cut its own way." (ibid, 345).

We must never forget that strong convictions pertaining to religious truth must also be accompanied with equally strong tolerance in order to combat the persecution and mobocracy associated with religious intolerance. This is what the apostle Paul described as "speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15). In Article of Faith 11, Joseph Smith also counseled this attitude of peaceful coexistence:

"We claim the privilege of worshiping Almighty God according to the dictates of our own conscience, and allow all men the same privilege, let them worship how, where, or what they may."

Strong convictions of religious truths coupled with strong convictions of religious tolerance are what we Latter-day Saints profess in our religious, social, and political leanings. These equally strong convictions pertaining to religious tolerance and religious freedom are not discounting the Apostasy or the Restoration but are instead the very *means* by which this Restoration and these religious truths are to be promulgated throughout the world. The value of legitimate government is in putting down the many evils associated with tyranny such as those associated with priestcraft and kingcraft. It is not, therefore, religious truths that ought to be maintained by the force of a legitimate government, but rather religious tolerance and religious freedom.

CONCLUSION - SEEKING COMMON GROUND OR THE SACRED GROUND OF THE SACRED GROVE?

In our day there has been a great deal of emphasis on building bridges of understanding between our faith and others rather than burning bridges through divisive rhetoric. It is important to understand that it is one thing to build bridges of friendship, cooperation, and understanding with other religious sects. It is quite another thing to build doctrinal bridges that undermine the very foundations of the latter-day Restoration itself by failing to acknowledge the top 5 takeaways of the First Vision out of fear of offending differing religious faiths. If Latter-day saints find themselves agreeing conceptually with the various religious sects on key *doctrinal points*, then what is the point of a Restoration or the First Vision? A restoration is not needed where there is doctrinal agreement. The idea that we can sweep all our theological differences under the rug without effectively shutting down the salient points of the Restoration is—a bridge too far. Elder Parley P. Pratt described this perspective when he said:

"The sooner the present generation loses all reverence and respect for modern 'Christianity,' with all its powerless forms and solemn mockeries, the sooner they will be prepared to receive the kingdom of God." (Key to the Science of Theology, 68).

Elder Boyd K. Packer expressed these sentiments this way:

"As I grow older in age and experience, I grow ever less concerned over whether others agree with us. I grow ever more concerned that they understand us. If they do understand, they have their agency and can accept or reject the gospel as they please." (The Peaceable Followers of Christ, Ensign, April 1998, p.62)

In his timely book, "Here We Stand", Latter-day Saint scholar and writer, Joseph Fielding McConkie, writes:

"If we attempt to hide every doctrine that our critics distort, we are going to be left speechless. It is as if we revel in the fruits of the gospel but are ashamed of the tree from which they come. (p.2) ... It is fashionable among many attempting to share our message to first seek common ground with those they desire to teach. That is a rather strange notion. Can you imagine a salesman attempting to convince you that his product is just like the one you are using? If he is right, why in the world would you want to change?" (p.3)

Of the dozen or more valuable takeaways Joseph may have walked out of the Sacred Grove with, most are secondary to his main inquiry. Joseph Smith went into the Sacred Grove with the specific purpose of discovering for himself an answer to the practical problem as to which of the religious sects was right and which he should join. He was instructed by the Lord—in no uncertain terms—that they were all wrong—every last one of them. Joseph would not only learn that all the religious sects of his day were wrong, but that their most inner core beliefs—their beloved and cherished creeds—were an abomination in the sight of God. With such strong language from the First Vision in rebuke of apostate Christianity, the Lord was clearing the religious ground in Joseph's mind in preparation for the latter-day Restoration that had now begun. There could be no hope for a Restoration, if in Joseph's mind the potential existed for belief in any of these abominable religious creeds. This also means that any attempt on our part as Latter-day Saints to diminish the seriousness of the Great Apostasy will diminish the seriousness of the Latter-day Restoration.

The first directive coming from the Lord, then, was that Joseph was to join none of the religious sects of the day. The *second* directive coming from the Lord was that Joseph was to “*continue as I was until further directed*”, meaning, he was not duty bound to associate himself with any of the religious sects of the day. The simple phrase “until further directed” ended up being a period of three and one-half years (the spring of 1820 to the fall of 1823). Regarding this lengthy lapse of time, Joseph Smith wrote:

Verse 27: I continued to pursue my common vocations in life until the twenty-first of September, one thousand eight hundred and twenty-three, all the time suffering severe persecution at the hands of all classes of men, both religious and irreligious, because I continued to affirm that I had seen a vision.

With the visitation of the angel Moroni in the fall of 1823 (*verses 27-54*), the revelatory saga of the First Vision came to an end and the next revelatory saga of the Gold Plates began (*verse 34*). In both instances, however, we see the Lord’s revelatory intent to reveal—“unto the children of men line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little” (Isaiah 28:10, 13; 2 Nephi 28:30; D&C 128:21).

We can summarize the Top 5 Takeaways from The First Vision, by repeating these timely words of Joseph Fielding McConkie:

“The message of the Restoration centers on the idea that it is not common ground we seek in sharing the gospel. There is nothing common about our message. The way we answer questions about our faith ought to be by finding the quickest and most direct route to the Sacred Grove. That is our ground. It is sacred ground. It is where the heavens are opened and the God of heaven speaks. It is where testimonies are born and the greatest truths of heaven are unveiled. It is of this sacred ground that we say, here we stand.” (Here We Stand, p.6)

