

A Marvelous Work—Angel Visitation—The Book of Mormon—Evidence Calculated to Excite Faith—Testimony not Always to Salvation

Discourse by Elder Orson Pratt, delivered in the Tabernacle, Salt Lake City, Sunday Afternoon, June 16, 1878.

A very strange thing has happened in our day—a work that is considered by the Latter-day Saints, and by all people, to be a marvelous work and a wonder; something almost entirely unexpected by the great mass of the human family, something which our fathers were not looking for has happened in the land. What is it? God has sent an angel from heaven. What, an angel in the latter days come from heaven! Yes. What a strange thing! How different from the traditions of our fathers, for seventeen centuries past! Tell people of this generation that God has sent a holy angel communicating his will to man, and they will be ready to laugh you to scorn. They have formed an idea in their own hearts that angels were no more to minister to the human family. No messages from heaven to be sent by them; no voice of the Lord to be heard again speaking to man on the earth; no more revelations to be given; no more Prophets to be raised up, and no more Seers and Revelators to make known and proclaim the will of heaven to the people. Such were the traditions of our fathers; such were the traditions of some two or three hundred millions of people, calling themselves Christians. Speak to them about more of the word of God to be given to the human family, the universal idea and exclamation of the nations of Christendom would be, “the canon of Scripture is full.” Who told them this? From what source did they get their information. Did the Lord ever reveal this to them, or is it a creation of their own imagination? Did you ever hear a single individual, even the most learned and wisest of them, prove this assertion by the divine writings? Did you ever hear of any lay member, minister or priest, having substantiated these ideas and traditions in accordance with Scripture and reason? Never, never. And the simple reason why is, because they have no proof or evidence to sustain their position. There is not a man living, however learned he may be, however familiar with the Scriptures of divine truth he may be, that can bring one idea, by way of proof, to support these traditions. And yet, how general and universal these things have been circulated among the nations, and imbibed by the human family as though they were real truths!

When the Latter-day Saints came forth forty-eight years ago, testifying that God had sent an angel from heaven, how unexpected, how strange to this generation! Say they, “The Lord once had a religion on the earth, and angels were included as part and portion of the blessings connected with it; but now we do not need them.” Why? “Because we are so enlightened. We have studied the Scriptures and become so effectually acquainted with them, and also with science and everything else, that we do not need further instruction from the Almighty; we do not need Prophets in our day to foretell the future; we do not need Revelators to come forth and manifest to us the word of God. Why, we are so enlightened! The blaze of Gospel light is shining forth so brilliantly, we can get along with human learning without any revelation from the heavens.” Have I not expressed before this congregation, the real ideas of the two or three hundred millions of Christendom, so called, that live in the various civilized nations?

Now let us go back to the real principles of the Gospel, to find out whether they countenance and embrace the visitation of angels. History informs us, that before the flood angels conversed with men, as one man would with another. And we find that Abraham and Enoch conversed with God; and through faith Enoch was translated from mortality to immortality. At the time of the deluge, we learn there was one man upon the earth that received new revelation from heaven, and that he and seven others who believed on his word, were the only ones worthy to be spared from the terrible judgment which, for the time being, put an end to wickedness upon the earth. A Revelator was spared—the only man among them who could commune with the heavens, and receive information from on high.

After the days of the flood, we learn that the Lord made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, great and most precious promises—promises concerning things of eternity and things of the earth. These men were called and esteemed the “friends of God;” they were perfect in their day, and they were Revelators, to whom angels came and ministered the words of eternal life. They were the only ones who received instruction from heaven by new revelation, and who were counted worthy in that day to enjoy the divine approbation, and to be called his friends.

So likewise we may come down to the days of Moses, and the children of Israel who were in Egypt. Did the Lord bless them? He did. In what way? By speaking himself, and also by sending angels to administer in their midst; by communicating revelation by day and by night while the children of Israel sojourned in the wilderness; by revelation they were taught in all the ordinances, and by revelation they journeyed; and when the Lord commanded them to pitch their tents, they remained in such a place until another revelation was given. Angels communicated the things of God to that people, after they were brought to the Promised Land, and from generation to generation the Lord sent forth his angels to minister among his people. Prophet after Prophet was raised up in their respective generations to declare the word of the Lord in the midst of all Israel; and such men were regarded as the mouthpieces of God. And so it was continued until a few centuries before Christ. Then came a day of darkness; then came a time when, because of the wickedness of the people, no angels were sent, no Revelators or Prophets were raised up in the midst of the people. The consequences were, the people were left to themselves without the guidance of new revelation, and instead of building up and establishing the kingdom of God, they created man-made systems, dividing off into sects and parties, such as Pharisees, Sadducees, Essences, etc., numbering a great many different denominations. And they estranged themselves so far from the ways of God, and became so wicked, and Satan had so much control over them, that when Christ came preaching to them the everlasting Gospel in all its simplicity and plainness, he found them in such a condition as to love darkness rather than light, and they were fully prepared to imbrue their hands in the blood of the Savior of the world.

We find that after Christ had established his Church, that angels continued to minister; and one of the Apostles, on a certain occasion exhorted the former-day Saints to be careful to entertain strangers; for in so doing some had entertained angels unawares. And we find that, during the first century of the Christian era, angels frequently appeared; and revelations were also given by the gift and power of the Holy Ghost which rested upon the Apostles, for the guidance of the Church. Paul also testifies of angels in this wise: "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?" Showing to us clearly and plainly that these celestial inhabitants of heaven—these pure sanctified beings that dwell in the presence of God were sent forth as authorized ministers of God to those who should be heirs of salvation here upon the earth. But by and by, after the first century of the Christian era, the heavens became as brass over their heads again. The voice of inspiration was heard no more, neither did the voice of angels salute the ears of mortals. No visions among the people, the veil of darkness that hung over them, in consequence of the Lord's withdrawing his ministering agency from the earth, so befogged their minds, that they could no longer gaze upon the glorious future.

This state of apostasy continued, until about the last half century of the Christian era, and it prevailed more or less among all people. And the priests, to whom the people looked for spiritual light and instruction, have persisted one and all in teaching the people, from generation to generation, that the Bible was full, that the canon of scripture was closed, and that it was no more necessary for angels to communicate with man, nor that the miraculous gifts and graces, that once adorned the Church, should be continued. The people settled down to this belief without any evidence or testimony of its truthfulness and it became a widespread and popular tradition: and the children even down to our day, have inherited these notions and traditions of their fathers without once questioning them; they are born in the children, as it were, and they are educated and trained in this belief, and hence it has become deeply rooted, and most difficult for them to rid themselves of.

But again the long, long silence has been broken, again the voice of angels has saluted the ears of mortal man, and that too in fulfillment of a prophecy uttered by John the Revelator, while under banishment upon the Isle of Patmos. While there suffering for the gospel's sake, the Lord showed unto him by vision, things that should take place upon the earth. And among other things that passed before him, he saw that, after a length of time the darkness that would necessarily follow the rejection of the Gospel by both Jew and Gentile, and that must come upon the face of the whole earth, would be gradually dispelled by a heavenly communication from God to man. And from the 14th chapter of Revelation we learn the manner in which this message should come from the courts of heaven. John speaks of the event in this wise, "And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue and people, Saying with a loud voice, Fear God and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come," etc. Strange as it may seem, this angel spoken of, has flown from heaven to earth, parting asunder the veil of

superstition, ignorance and doubt, and bringing with him from his celestial abode, glad tidings of great joy, duly authorizing man on the earth to preach the same to all peoples of every nation. This Gospel committed by the angel has been preached among many nations wherever they would receive the bearers of this heavenly message, there the voice of inspired men has been heard; and this missionary labor has been faithfully prosecuted during almost one half of a century. And the Gospel will be preached until every nation and tongue and people upon the face of our globe shall have the privilege of hearing this glorious angelic message.

“But,” says one, “this is your testimony; you say that an angel has come, but we do not know it; you say that he has brought the everlasting Gospel, but we do not know it. What evidence have you to give us, that we may know for ourselves that an angel has really come bearing this message?” I will tell you how you may prove it, how every son and daughter of Adam now living may know whether there has been a divine message, called the everlasting Gospel, sent from heaven to the inhabitants of the earth by a holy angel. Do the will of your Father in heaven; call upon his name, and inquire of him, saying in your hearts: O Lord, hast thou indeed sent forth from the heavens thine angel, according to the prediction by thy servant John, bringing to man on the earth the everlasting Gospel? And hast thou commanded it to be preached to every people, nation and tongue under the whole heavens? If you do this in all honesty of heart and purpose, you may all know for yourselves. “What! does the Lord give us knowledge in our day by seeking unto him in prayer?” Why not? Did he not anciently, in every dispensation from the beginning down to the closing up of the first century of the Christian era, impart a knowledge concerning the truth? He did; and that same God that gave a knowledge to his people anciently, will give a knowledge to you, provided you will comply with his will. “But,” you may say, “in order that we may put such a question to the Lord, we would like to have some testimony, sufficient at least to encourage us in making this inquiry.” I do not know how much you want. So far as external evidence is concerned, he gave abundance of it before this Church arose. The Lord did not suffer the Book of Mormon to be sent forth to the nations to be published to all people, until he gave a testimony to certain individual witnesses. How many? Four persons at least—the translator of the book, Joseph Smith, and three other persons, Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer. They knew of a surety, and have given their testimony in the beginning of this record. Here, then, are four witnesses. What does Jesus say? “That in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall be established.” He saw proper, however, to give four. “But,” inquires one, “may not these four witnesses have been mistaken?” Let us examine into the nature of their testimony, to see if there is any possibility of their being mistaken. Joseph Smith, one of these witnesses, testifies that the angel came down from heaven, and that his countenance was like lightning, and the glory of God shone round about him. And the angel told him to go to a certain hill, not far from his father’s house, in the town of Manchester, Ontario County, in the State of New York, where he should find these ancient records—plates of gold, containing the everlasting Gospel, which was anciently preached among the inhabitants of this continent. He obeyed; he went and found the records in the very place which had been shown him in vision by the angel. Was there any possibility of Joseph’s having been deceived? We say, No; the circumstances were such as to preclude the possibility of any such deception. The angel also told him that with these plates there was an instrument called the Urim and Thummim, which would enable him to translate the records into our language. Joseph accomplished the work of translation between the years 1827 and 1830, through the use of this instrument, which had been hidden up with the plates. Could he be deceived, when he got the plates before him, intently looking upon the peculiar characters engraved upon them, and also upon that most singular instrument, the Urim and Thummim? Every man of common sense, possessing the least degree of judgment, will at once say that it was not possible, under these circumstances, for him to be deceived; that the testimony given is true, and the message divine, or else he was a bold impostor, a man that came forth purposely to deceive the people.

Now in regard to the other three witnesses. They testify that in the year 1829, after the plates had been translated, that an angel of God appeared unto them, clothed in light and glory, and holding these plates in his hands, turned them over leaf after leaf, showing them the characters engraved thereon. And they also say that while they stood gazing upon this heavenly being, clothed in his glory, in the act of showing them these gold plates, they heard a voice out of the heavens proclaiming to them that the plates had been translated correctly, by the gift and power of God. And what they saw and heard they bear testimony to, which is addressed to all peoples of every nation to whom this record—the Book of Mormon—should go. Let me ask, Was there any possibility of their being deceived? If there was, then we might say all men of ancient times who professed to have seen angels were deceived

themselves. But I do not see that anything could be more positive. The promise had been given that there should be three witnesses raised up to bear testimony of the truth of these records, which purport to be a history of the aborigines, or the ancient Israelites, that inhabited this country. The Lord did send the angel; they saw him come down from heaven; they saw the light and glory that radiated from his countenance; they heard the words of his mouth; they saw the plates in the hands of this heavenly personage, and they could distinguish the characters engraven thereon; and they also heard the voice of the Lord commanding them to bear testimony to all peoples of what they had seen and heard. They could not have been deceived, it was utterly impossible.

Then here are four witnesses, all bearing testimony to the divinity of this work. And, as I have already quoted to you, the Savior has said, that every word shall be established by the mouth of two or three witnesses. The Lord, therefore, did not raise up this Church, he did not commence the organization thereof until he had given sufficient evidence to a sufficient number of witnesses to commence the establishment of this work.

Again, Joseph Smith was commanded of the Lord to show these plates to eight other persons who, besides the three referred to, also became witnesses to this work. And their published testimony is, that they saw the plates and handled them, and they saw the peculiar writing thereon, which they say had the appearance of curious and ancient workmanship. And notwithstanding some of these witnesses have fallen by the wayside, having been overcome by the power of the Adversary, rendering themselves unworthy of the fellowship of the Latter-day Saints, not a single one of them has ever been known to deny the testimony which they have borne concerning this marvelous occurrence. Here, then, are twelve witnesses. Is not this external evidence sufficient to satisfy every inquiring soul whose heart is honest before the Lord? But, I will refer you to still more. When this work was first published, the Lord called upon these men to go forth among the people, proclaiming the Gospel which they themselves had received, promising that all who would yield obedience thereto should receive the Holy Ghost, which should confirm, to the entire satisfaction of the believer, the testimony of these Elders. And when this Holy Spirit descended upon such people, they knew for themselves that these men were servants of the living God, and that the power that rested upon them was indeed the Holy Ghost, of which they had read in the Scriptures. How did they know this? Because it manifested divers gifts. It enabled them to lay their hands upon the sick, rebuking in the name of Jesus the disease, and the sick were restored to health. You may say imagination had something to do with this; the sick imagined themselves better, and consequently they got better. But let me testify that little infant children, not capable of exercising the powers of imagination, have been healed in the same manner, and by the same power, which was the power of Almighty God manifested through his servants. And these first Elders of the Church were thus enabled to convert to a knowledge of our faith, multitudes of people who, like themselves, could bear testimony to the divinity and truthfulness of this latter-day work, having received the convincing assurances of this Comforter, which bears record of the things of the Father. And in this manner this whole community have received the knowledge they testify of, and hence we become, to use a Biblical term, a great cloud of witnesses, whose testimony is in force to the whole world, whether they receive it or reject it.

I have now laid before you evidence sufficient to excite the principle of faith in your hearts, provided you have a genuine desire to know of the doctrine we teach, as to whether it be of God or man. You have the testimony of twelve men to begin with, besides the testimony of scores of thousands of men and women that have received the Holy Ghost through obedience to the requirements of the Gospel, whose knowledge of this latter-day work enables them also to testify to the truth of it. And the testimony of this people speaks as with the voice of thunder to all nations and tongues, to the effect that God has spoken from the eternal worlds, and that he has sent his angels again to earth to commit to man the everlasting Gospel. If so remarkable a testimony of twelve men, together with the united testimony of a community so large as we are, is not sufficient to create faith in your hearts that God has indeed commenced his great and marvelous and strange work and a wonder in our day, then what would awaken up the people to a sense of the fact? There can be no excuse for those who hear and reject the testimony and teaching of the Elders of this Church, for the cry has been raised these many years, and it cannot but have a striking effect upon all honest-hearted people, because of its singularity and fairness, for the promise is, if you have sufficient faith to call upon God and ask him, you yourselves may obtain a testimony, and you can receive that which supersedes faith or belief—you can know of a surety that he has indeed visited the earth again in these the last days by his angels, and that Joseph Smith was and is a Prophet of the living God, and that the doctrines we

teach are not of man but of God; and they will prove the savor of life to those who obey, and of death to those who reject them.

Therefore as I said in the commencement of my remarks, a marvelous thing has occurred in the land! A wonderful work has made its appearance! The heavens no longer keep silent! Prophets again are heard among the people! The inspiration and power of the Holy Ghost rests upon the servants of God, and his power is made manifest among the various nations again, as in olden time, in healing the sick, causing the lame to walk, the blind to see, and the deaf to hear, and in pouring out his Spirit upon the children of men, as he did in former dispensations of the world!

Is not this, then, sufficient to wake up the honest-in-heart among the people? If it is not, then I know of nothing that is likely to do it. Will it be by the fulfillment of the Prophets, that have been spoken of by the former speakers? When the hand of judgment shall be laid upon the nations, and the fierceness of his wrath be made manifest, wasting away the disobedient and the wicked, and the earth becomes depopulated of all excepting the righteous? This will be a testimony they cannot resist. But such testimony will not always be unto salvation. It will be the testimony of judgment that will overwhelm them, in a time, too, they think not of; a time when they will be crying all is peace and safety—lo! sudden destruction is at their doors; and thus the Scriptural saying will be literally fulfilled, “As the days of Noah were, so shall also the coming of the Son of Man be,” etc. When that unfortunate, but disobedient and wicked people, the Antediluvians, were sinking in the waters, they could then say, “I know that Noah is a Prophet, and that the message he has declared in our ears for these many years is divine.” But alas! it was too late; they rejected the message, paying heedless regard to it as well as to him who preached the Gospel to them; they would not call upon God in all honesty of heart, but they considered Noah deceived; they obeyed not, and were destroyed by the mighty flood. Amen.