

Sermon Subject: WAS JOSEPH SMITH A PROPHET?

Scripture: Matthew 7:15-21 (24-30 Inspired Version)

And again, beware of false prophets, that come to you in sheep's clothing; but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits; for do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit, but a corrupt tree bringeth forth good fruit, but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit; neither a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit, is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore, by their fruits ye shall know them. Verily I say unto you, it is not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, that shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven.

Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants, the prophets.

Was Joseph Smith a prophet? The world says "No;" but many people who have investigated his work and his message would answer "Yes!" We ask you to listen for a few moments to some of the affirmative reasons why we believe that Joseph Smith was a prophet, and that he accomplished God's work. As a theme text at the beginning of this sermon we read for you the words of Amos, who declared that God would do nothing without revealing his secret unto his servants, the prophets. It is a rule which can be traced through the Bible from beginning to end, that whenever God has been about to move to accomplish some great purpose, he has raised up prophets -- one or more -- has revealed to them that purpose, and commanded them to tell forth that purpose to the people. Whether his purpose was the destruction of wickedness, as in the days of Lot or of Noah, or Nebuchadnezzar or Titus, or the release of his people from captivity, as in the days of Moses; or the sending of his Son into the world as it was foretold by many Old Testament Prophets and announced by John the Baptist -- God has always revealed his secret unto his servants, the prophets. There is no reason to believe that he has ever rescinded that policy.

First, let us say a word or two about what a prophet is, and what he is required to do. Far too many people have the idea that a prophet is a foreteller -- one who predicts the future, a fortune teller. This is one of the tests of a true prophet. If the thing he predicts comes to pass, that is one indication that he is a true prophet; if it does not come to pass, it is one indication that he is a false prophet. But many men can read the lessons of history, and predict the future without claiming to be a prophet of God. The principal duty and function of a prophet is not to be a fore-teller, but to be a forth - teller -- one who perceives the word of God and speaks it forth -- one who reveals new truth -- one who perceives the neglect of old truth and re-interprets it and tells it forth in a way adapted to modern needs and conditions. Incidentally, he may predict future events; and if he does, those events will come to pass to bear witness not alone to his foretelling, but to his forth-telling.

Judged by these standards, was Joseph Smith a prophet? Let us examine some of the things he told forth, and also some of the things which he predicted, to see whether he measures up to the standards of a true prophet. We have had one hundred-thirty years since his first vision of 1823 in which to judge his claims.

Joseph Smith came in a day when the world seemingly was rapidly becoming Christian. He began his work at the beginning of the great industrial and scientific revolution, when steam was just coming into its own, when science and invention began a tremendous upsurge, which made men anticipate a golden age, when great foreign missionary societies anticipated that the whole world would soon be converted to Christianity, when men confidently expected that war would soon be abolished from the earth. Men were pretty well satisfied with themselves in those days. They thought that they were serving God acceptably -- that they were good Christians. But Joseph Smith came saying that God had spoken to him and said "Every man walketh in his own ways, and after the image of his own God, whose image is the likeness of the world, and whose substance is that of an idol, which waxeth old and shall perish in Babylon, ... which shall fail." Such statements did not make him popular. Were they true? Since those days, Russia, (which was then nominally a Christian nation) has largely forsaken Christianity and turned to Communism which now poses a threat to Christianity everywhere. Though many good and God-fearing people remained then and still remain now in Germany, the Christian nation of Germany not so long ago forsook God and followed the pagan doctrines of a Hitler to destruction. Spain has been torn asunder by a civil war. France, Italy and many Latin-American nations are today almost atheistic nations, giving some lip service to Christ, but flirting with Communism, and becoming more and more apathetic about church-going and other religious observances.

Joseph Smith came back from his first vision in the woods with a declaration that God had told him that the creeds of the popular churches of his day were all wrong. That also aroused a storm of protest, denial, and persecution. A very interesting study which is far beyond the scope of this short sermon, is the study of the changes which have come about in those creeds since 1823, and the changes and modifications and out-and-out innovations in doctrinal belief which have come to every church in Christendom since Joseph Smith's day. There is hardly a church today which has not radically changed its creeds or its doctrinal beliefs in the last hundred and thirty years!

Joseph Smith gave as a reason for his forth-telling, a prediction of calamities that would come in judgment upon the earth unless men repented and truly and sincerely turned to Christ. Other men have looked at their Bibles, and have predicted general calamities; but Joseph Smith was specific. He pointed to the predictions of calamity found in Malachi, chapters three and four, and in Joel 2:28-32, and said that they would soon be fulfilled. He pointed again to the warning of Acts 3:22,23, that he who would ^{not} hear the words of Christ should be cut off from among the people, and said that that day had not yet come, but soon would come. In a day when it seemed that the Jews were soon to be accepted in Western Civilization, and when almost no Jewish heart was turned to the homeland, Joseph Smith predicted the imminence of the return of the Jews to Palestine.

In a day when men looked confidently forward to the early establishment of world peace, Joseph Smith prophetically declared on November 1, 1831 "The day speedily cometh, the hour is not yet, but is nigh at hand, when peace shall be taken from the earth ..." In March of 1831, he said: "Ye hear of wars in foreign lands; but behold I say unto you they are nigh, even at your doors, and not many years hence ye shall hear of wars in your own lands." On Christmas day, 1832, Joseph Smith gave what is commonly called "The Prophecy of the War of the Rebellion." in which he predicted that war would begin with the rebellion of South Carolina-- a prophecy which was literally and exactly fulfilled by the secession of South Carolina on December 20, 1860, followed by the bombardment of Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor the following April.

There are other interesting predictions in this prophecy, which agree with the prophecy noted above that "peace shall be taken from the earth." Joseph Smith said, regarding the rebellion of South Carolina, that "war shall be poured out upon all nations, beginning at that place," that war and other judgments should continue to be poured out "until the consumption decreed hath made a full end of all nations." There have been momentary lulls of peace since that prophecy was given, armed truces in which nations formulated their World Courts, the Hague Peace Tribunal, and League of Nations, the Kellog-Briand Peace Pact, and finally the United Nations; but war after war has followed with unceasing and relentless regularity ever since that fateful year of 1860, and we live in perpetual tension and anticipatory terror of a still greater war which no one knows how to prevent.

In September of 1832 Joseph Smith said in the name of God, "I will rend their kingdoms: ... ye can not see it now, yet a little while, and ye shall see it, and know that I am, ..." Has this prophecy been fulfilled? We have lived so close to history that we sometimes fail to realize what has happened. Since that day dozens of nations and kingdoms have been rent asunder; governments have toppled; kings and empires have disappeared. Even the great British Empire has shrunk to a fraction of its former size; and its naval, economic, and political power have dwindled. Russia, Poland, Yugoslavia, Italy, France, Spain, Portugal, Germany, Austria-Hungary, India, China, Egypt, Arabia, Japan, Ethiopia, Cuba, the Philippine Islands, Alaska, Hawaii, and all of the smaller states now comprising the Union of Soviet States -- all these and many others have undergone radical changes in government since this prophecy was given in 1832.

Joseph Smith, as a part of his appointed task as prophet, seer, and revelator, translated and published the Book of Mormon. With an airy wave of the hands, many have passed off the Book of Mormon as a bold, arrogant, presumptive piece of fabrication. But the Book of Mormon is not to be dismissed so easily. Completely aside from its doctrinal teachings, the Book of Mormon makes over 400 plain statements of fact having to do with the arts, sciences, works, inventions, buildings, domestic animals, religious observances, etc., of prehistoric Americans. Not a single one of those facts so stated was known, or could have been known with certainty by the scientists and archaeologists of Joseph Smith's day. Many were directly contrary to the accepted opinions of that day. All of them have since proved to be true statements of facts. Does not this prove some degree of prophetic insight?

Perhaps the most important of all the prophetic missions accomplished by Joseph Smith was his new revelation of Christ. The churches of Christianity had been following a historical Christ -- one whose words had been preserved in a book. But they had long since ceased to follow a living Christ, or to expect the fulfillment of his promise that he would be with them by his Spirit even unto the end of the world. When the canon of scripture was closed by action of the Council of Nicea in 397 A.D., men ceased to look for any further revelation from God. When they got into theological difficulty, they appealed to the closed Bible, not to the living Christ. They settled their controversies by means of church councils, by manufacturing creeds, and finally by appeal to the emperor, or the pope. They began to worship the idols of wealth, of political power, of military might. The cross on which Christ died became the symbol that led armies to bloody conquest in the name of the Prince of Peace. In due time reformers did their best to re-discover and re-interpret the ancient Christ, but bound by their old traditions which said that his voice could no longer be heard, they sought him only as a historical reality described in a book -- and not as a contemporary living personality to whom men could appeal directly for a solution of their controversies and problems. Joseph Smith went directly to this living Christ. He sought God claiming in expectancy the promise of James 1:5. He received the answer in a vision in which two personages appeared, and one, turning to the other, said: "This is my beloved Son; hear ye him."

It was the voice of this living Christ which Joseph Smith heard as he gave his prophetic utterances to the world. It was the voice of this living Christ which he obeyed when he proclaimed the restoration of Christ's authority on earth; when he organized Christ's church according to the ancient pattern, complete with apostles and prophets as in the beginning. It was the voice of this living Christ which he was interpreting when he preached a new social gospel of equality in temporal things; when he proclaimed a restoration of the gifts of the Spirit; when he proclaimed a restoration of the ancient and simple rites and ordinances by which men became regenerated, born-again members of his church and kingdom. It was this voice which he heard when he gave to the church the basic law of monogamy in marriage, which some have tried to repudiate and change, and others have conveniently ignored: "Thou shalt love thy wife with all thy heart, and shall cleave unto her and none else...."

Joseph Smith was a great "forth-teller." He told forth the truths given to him by a living, contemporary Christ. He established the truthfulness of his forth-telling by foretelling certain events, some of which have already come to pass, and some of which are even now being fulfilled. Latter Day Saints do not worship Joseph Smith. Rather do we point beyond him to the living Christ whom he declared and to a God who does nothing save he reveal it unto his servants, the prophets -- a God who has prophetically warned the world of judgments in the last days, and who through this prophet calls all men to repentance, and obedience to the voice of the greatest prophet of all -- Jesus, the ever-living Christ.