

## Section 3

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A respected and prosperous farmer from Palmyra, New York, Martin Harris left his home in the spring of 1828 and traveled southeast until he crossed into Pennsylvania. There he dictated as Joseph Smith, Jr., who was about half Martin's age, translated the abridged Book of Lehi by the gift and power of God.

Meanwhile, Martin's wife Lucy told neighbors that Joseph had duped her husband into giving him money. She dramatically moved her favorite pieces of furniture out of the house, claiming she did not want Martin to give them away too. Martin resented the damage Lucy was doing to his good name, and he asked Joseph to let him take the translated manuscript home to prove that he was no fool.

"The Lord said unto me that he must not take them," Joseph recalled, "and I spoke unto Martin the word of the Lord." Dissatisfied, Martin told Joseph to ask again. "I inquired again and also the third time," Joseph said, "and the Lord said unto me let him go with them."<sup>1</sup>

The Lord knew what was about to happen. Martin was sure he knew better than Joseph, and Joseph feared to disappoint him. Joseph struggled to please both Martin and the Lord. He made Martin vow solemnly to show the pages only to his wife Lucy,

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<sup>1</sup> "[History, circa Summer 1832](#)," pages 5–6, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 21, 2020.

her sister Abigail, his brother, and his parents. The Lord's answer made them free agents, but with agency came accountability. They could do their own will instead of God's, but making that choice meant that Joseph could no longer be the seer chosen to bring forth the marvelous work. Moroni confiscated the seer stones. Sincerely but unwisely, Martin left for a brief trip to Palmyra with the translated manuscript. He did not return as promised.

Finally, Joseph went to Martin and learned that he had lost the manuscript.

“It is gone and I know not where,” Martin confessed.

“Oh, my God, my God,” Joseph uttered humbly, “all is lost! What shall I do? I have sinned. It is I who tempted the wrath of God by asking him for that which I had no right to ask.” And he wept and groaned and paced the floor, forsaken. “How shall I appear before the Lord?” Joseph wondered. “Of what rebuke am I not worthy from the angel of the Most High?”<sup>2</sup>

Back home in Pennsylvania, Joseph went to the woods and prayed for redemption, poured out sorrow, and confessed weakness. Moroni appeared and returned the seer stones. Joseph looked and saw strict words:

Remember, remember that it is not the work of God that is frustrated, but the work of men; for although a man may have many revelations, and have power to do many mighty works, yet if he boasts in his own strength, and sets at naught the counsels of God, and follows after the dictates of his own will and carnal desires, he must fall and incur the vengeance of a just God upon him. (D&C 3:3–4)

It's not clear whose words they were. They could have been Moroni's. They could have been from the Lord, speaking in third person.

The words pierced Joseph. “You have been entrusted with these things, but how strict were your commandments; and remember the promises which were made to you if you did not transgress them.” Joseph recalled Moroni's commission to be responsible

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<sup>2</sup> [“Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1845,”](#) p. 131, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 22, 2020. [“Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845, Page \[6\], bk. 7,”](#) The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 22, 2020.

for the sacred records and powers and the warning that “if I should let them go carelessly, or through any neglect of mine, I should be cut off; but that if I would use all my endeavors to preserve them . . . they should be protected.”<sup>3</sup> Joseph had let Martin persuade him to transgress these commands. “You should not have feared man more than God,” the revelation said. Historian Richard Bushman wrote that these words “were hard for a young man who had lost his first-born son and nearly lost his wife, and whose chief error was to trust a friend, but there was comfort in the revelation as well.”<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, notice the way the tone of the revelation changes about halfway through. “Remember,” it says, “God is merciful.” It tells Joseph he is still chosen to translate if he will repent. Then it teaches him why the manuscript is sacred and can’t be treated as taken for granted. The plates were preserved so the Lord could keep this promise (Enos 1:15–18). And by keeping His promise to give Lehi’s descendants their ancestors’ knowledge of the Savior, “they may believe the gospel and rely upon the merits of Jesus Christ” (D&C 3:20), exercise faith, repent, and be saved.

The revelation in section 3 marked a turning point in the life of the young seer. This was the first time Joseph committed one of his revelations to writing. Only twenty-two years old, he had learned to use the prophetic voice to foretell the fulfillment of the Lord’s promises to the house of Israel. He was the seer chosen to bring forth the marvelous work that would eventually teach all nations “to rely upon the merits of Jesus Christ,” as the revelation said, “and be glorified through faith on his name, and that through their repentance they might be saved” (D&C 3:20).

Moroni kept the plates while Joseph acted on the revelation’s command to repent. Then in September 1828, one year after he first received them, Joseph received the plates again. By choosing to obey the revelation, Joseph was still chosen and again called to the work.

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<sup>3</sup> “[History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 \[23 December 1805–30 August 1834\]](#),” p. 8, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 22, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 68.