

DISCOURSE

By Elder ORSON PRATT, delivered in the Tabernacle, Salt Lake City, Feb. 24th, 1869.

REPORTED BY DAVID W. EVANS.

"Mormonism," so-called, is a strange thing in the 19th century. It has caused among the inhabitants of the earth a great deal of reflection and conversation for the last forty years. It is a very marvellous and wondrous thing to see a numerous people assembled together in these interior wilds which, but a few years ago, were a solitary waste, where the face of a whiteman had been seldom seen; the abode of savages only, who wandered about nearly naked, living upon crickets, rattlesnakes and lizards, sunk into the lowest depths of degradation. To see so large a people, all of one faith, united together in their energies, occupying a territory, which, from north to south, is several hundred miles in extent, building up towns, cities and villages, establishing common schools, sending forth their missionaries to the nations of the earth, bringing in their thousands every season by emigration, render "Mormonism," as it is generally called by the world, a wonder in our age.

We heard this morning a discourse, delivered by Elder Cannon, upon the subject of the gospel and the principles of our faith. We were told some of the principles that have been received by this people, not only in these mountains, but wherever the Latter-day Saints, as a people exist. Our people are taught to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, as one of the principles of our faith; we are taught to repent of all our sins and to refrain from everything that is forbidden by the law of God. This is included in the doctrine of repentance as taught by this people among the nations which we have visited. Having taught faith in Christ, and repentance of all sins, we next require penitent believers to be baptized in water for the remission of their sins. Thus they become subjects of the kingdom of God by being born of water. Another principle taught by this people is the doctrine of the laying on of hands for the baptism of fire and the Holy Ghost, as was taught and practiced in ancient times.

We heard this forenoon concerning the effects of the Holy Ghost when bestowed upon individuals, and its diversified gifts throughout the whole church according to the righteousness of the individuals who receive these principles. We also heard it testified that God had sent down from heaven authority to administer in these ordinances; that He had sent His angel for this express purpose.

It is my intention, this afternoon, if the Lord will lead me by His spirit, to dwell upon some subjects connected with the organization of this church, which has received the principles I have named. Strangers who may be present have heard for many years past of a man called Joseph Smith. Perhaps they have never heard much good respecting him. But this people, called Latter-day Saints, believe that man was a holy prophet of God; the world consider that he was an imposter. We consider that we have a sufficient amount of evidence to warrant us in believing that he was a prophet. It was he who organized and established this church under the direction of Almighty God. According to our faith, had it not been for that man, or some other raised up in the same manner, this people called "Mormons" or Latter-day Saints, now occupying this mountain territory, would have been dwelling among the various nations of the earth, and this Territory, at this period of time, would probably have been a barren waste, and such a thing as the Pacific railroad would probably not have been started or thought about for at least half a century to come. That man, called Joseph Smith, in our estimation, was a very good man, and the Lord recognized him as His servant and called him to perform a certain work here on the earth.

When did the Lord first manifest himself to this man? Read our history if you wish to understand all the particulars; on this occasion I shall barely refer you to the early history of this church, in print. The Lord revealed himself to that person, not in his manhood, but in his youth. We have heard much said, by those who know nothing of the matter, about "old Joe Smith." How old was Joseph Smith when the Lord first manifested Himself to him? He was about fourteen years and four months old. Was that a very aged man? Look around here in this assembly and hunt up children fourteen years of age, and you will immediately admit that they do not look very aged.

What were the circumstances that enabled him to have manifestations from Heaven at that early period of his life? He was very anxious, as most of mankind are, to be saved; and he was also very anxious to understand how to be saved. But on this point he was at a loss, he did not understand the way to be saved. He was a farmer's boy; he was not brought up and educated in high schools, academies or colleges; he was merely a poor farmer's boy. He was not acquainted with those bad habits that are usually practiced by the youth in the great and populous cities of the United States. You know boys at the age of fourteen in those cities are apt to become contaminated with the evils with which they are surrounded; but Joseph Smith, having been reared in a secluded part of the country and laboring hard on the farm with his father, had not fallen into the pernicious habits practiced by many boys. When he was about fourteen years old there was what is called a religious revival or reformation in the neighborhood in which he lived. It was not confined to any one particular sect. The Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and the various denominations in that district of country were all engaged, more or less in this revival. Several of the relatives of this youth had taken part in this revival, and had united themselves with the Presbyterian church. This young man was also requested to unite himself with this church. First one and then another of the different persuasions would come and converse with him and try to influence him to join his lot with them; and seeing so much confusion, each sect claiming that they were the true people of God, he became at a loss what to do. He occasionally devoted an hour, when his labors on the farm would permit, to reading the Bible, and while doing so his eyes happened to fall on a certain passage of scripture, recorded in the epistle of James, which says that if any man lack wisdom let him ask of God who giveth liberally to all men and upbraideth not. Now this youth, this "old Joe Smith," that we have heard so much about, was just simple enough to believe that that passage really meant what it said, he went out into a little grove near his father's house, in the town of Manchester, Ontario County, State of New York, and there he knelt down in all the simplicity of a child and prayed to the Father in the name of Jesus that He would show him which, among all the churches, was the true one. Said he, "show me, Father, who are in possession of the truth, let me know, O Lord, the right way, and I will walk therein."

He had now come to a Person who was able to teach him. All his inquiries previously, had been futile and vain, but he now applied to the right source. Did the Lord hear him? Yes. But he had to exercise faith. This young man, while thus praying, was not discouraged because he was tempted; but he continued praying until he overcame the powers of darkness which tried to prevent him from calling upon God. The Lord hearkened; being the same God who lived in ancient times. He was able to hear and answer prayers that were offered up in this sincere manner, and he answered the prayers of this youth. The heavens, as it were, were opened to him, or in other words, a glorious pillar of light like the brightness of the sun appeared in the heavens above him, and approached the spot where he was praying; his eyes were fixed upon it and his heart was lifted up in prayer before the Most High. He saw the light gradually approaching him until it rested upon the tops of the trees. He beheld that the leaves of the trees were not consumed by it, although its brightness, apparently, was sufficient, as he at first thought, to consume everything before it. But the trees were not consumed by it, and it continued to descend until it rested upon him and enveloped him in its glorious rays. When he was thus encircled about with this pillar of fire his mind was caught away from every object that surrounded him, and he was filled with the visions of the Almighty, and he saw, in the midst of this glorious pillar of fire, two glorious personages, whose countenances shone with an exceeding great lustre. One of them spoke to him, saying, while pointing to the other, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased, hear ye him."

Now here was a certainty; here was something that he saw and heard; here were personages capable of instructing him, and of telling him which was the true religion. How different this from going to an uninspired man professing to be a minister! One minute's instruction from personages clothed with the

glory of God coming down from the eternal worlds is worth more than all the volumes that ever were written by uninspired men.

Mr. Smith, this young man, in the simplicity of his heart, continued saying to these personages "which church shall I join, which is the true church?" He then and there was commanded, in the most strict manner, to go not after them, for they had all gone out of the way; he was told there was no Christian church on the face of the earth according to the ancient pattern, as recorded in the New Testament; but they had all strayed from the ancient faith and had lost the gifts and power of the Holy Ghost; they had lost the spirit of revelation and prophecy, the power to heal the sick, and every other gift and blessing possessed and enjoyed by the ancient Church. "Go not after them," was the command given to this young man; and he was told that if he would be faithful in serving the true and living God, it should be made manifest to him, in a time to come, the true church that God intended to establish.

Now we can see the wisdom of God in not revealing everything to him on that occasion. He revealed as much as Joseph was capacitated to receive. The Lord dwelt with this young man as you, parents, do when you wish to instruct your children on any subject. You do not pour out volumes of instruction on them all at once, but impart to them according to their capacity. Just so the Lord acted towards this youth. He imparted enough to let him know that the whole Christian world was without authority, as we heard this forenoon.

About, or not quite four years from that time, when Mr. Smith was between 17 and 18 years of age—and not yet old enough to be called "Old Joe Smith,"—he retired to his chamber, reflecting upon his former vision, and earnestly desiring the fulfilment of the promise made to him, that he should be made acquainted with the fulness of the gospel and have more of the things of God revealed to him. While reflecting and praying, a light began to burst into his room, which continued to grow brighter and brighter, until the whole room seemed to be lighted up with a splendor which far exceeded the brightness of the sun at noon-day. In the midst of this glorious light a personage appeared. He was dressed in a white robe, and his countenance was lighted up with the glory of God. He was not standing upon the floor of the room, but his feet appeared to be a distance from it. While looking at this personage the Spirit of God rested upon Joseph to that degree that all fear was removed from his mind; and instead of feeling alarm and terror, as would have been the case with a wicked person, he felt as though he was in the presence of a friend. This personage, on that occasion, gave him a great deal of instruction.

I shall not pretend to give you the full detail of the instructions then given, but shall merely lay before you a few of the principal items. This personage announced himself as a holy angel sent from God to communicate to him glad tidings of great joy. He was told that the day had arrived in which the Lord God was about to commence a great and marvellous work on the face of our globe, to bring about the fulfilment of the ancient prophecies in regard to the restoration to their own land of the scattered remnants of the House of Israel. He was also told that before this great work, of gathering the House of Israel, should take place, the Church of God must be built up among the Gentile nations; that the gospel must be preached to the Gentiles first, that the sound thereof must go to all people, nations and tongues, first to the Gentiles, that their times might be fulfilled; and then that the gospel should go to the nations of the House of Israel, and they should be gathered in.

This was something, of course, that a boy at this early age knew nothing about; he knew only what God communicated to him. He was, furthermore, told that the Indians, who were wandering over the face of North and South America were a branch of the house of Joseph, that same Joseph who was sold into Egypt. He was informed that their fathers were brought from Jerusalem some 600 years before Christ; that they lived here in righteousness for a long period, and had many prophets, who kept records, and that these records were handed down for the space of a thousand years amongst them, and that, finally, the nation having fallen into wickedness, God commanded His servant who kept these records to hide them up in the earth in order to preserve them from

being destroyed by the wicked and apostate nation who had turned away from God; a certain promise, however, was made, that in the latter days these records should be brought forth. Joseph was told that these records were hid some three miles from his father's house. At the same time the vision of his mind was opened so that he saw the hill in which they were deposited, and he saw the stone box which contained them; he saw the surrounding objects and understood, by the vision that was unfolded to him in the presence of the angel, concerning the place where they were deposited. He was told that if he would be faithful he should be the chosen instrument in the hands of God in bringing that sacred record of the ancient prophets to light; and that it should come forth and be united with the Jewish record, which we call the Bible, that through the united testimony of these two branches of the House of Israel, all nations might have sufficient evidence and testimony to convince them concerning the gospel of the Son of God, and the great work that was to be performed in the latter days.

This was the first visit of the angel, and it occurred on the 21st of September, 1823. After the angel withdrew Mr. Smith continued praying. He was not asleep; it was not a dream, it was not in slumber that this remarkable vision had been given. He still continued praying, and marvelling and wondering exceedingly at the things that he had seen and the great things he had heard. While praying and beseeching the Lord, the vision was renewed to him, and the angel came again and instructed him still further concerning the greatness of the work that was to be performed upon the earth in the latter days. Again the angel withdrew and the vision was closed up. Mr. Smith still continued praying and exercising faith, calling upon God; for having once tasted the good things of God, and the powers of the world to come having rested upon him, he felt a keener desire to know more concerning God and the things of the future than he had before experienced. Hence, he continued praying with much faith, and the vision was renewed the third time. On the last occasion the Lord unfolded great and marvellous things concerning the work of gathering together His people in the latter days, concerning the progress of this church and kingdom in the four quarters of the earth and the great judgments that were to be poured out upon the wicked nations of the earth.

Soon after the close of the third interview with the angel the light of day began to break into his room; he had been wrapt in vision through the whole night, without closing his eyes in sleep. He rose early in the morning to go to work, as usual, in the field with his father. But his father, perceiving that he looked pale and fatigued, inquired of him concerning his health, and advised him to go to the house if he did not feel well. Joseph felt, no doubt, something like we read of Daniel, who, after being wrapt in the visions of the Almighty, was sick for three days; it did not effect Mr. Smith, however, to the same extent. He started to go to the house, in compliance with the advice of his father, but had only got part of the way there when the angel again appeared to him, in the air, and commanded him to return and reveal his vision to his father. He did so, and the old man burst into tears, saying it was of God. The angel further commanded him, instead of going to work, to go to the hill that was shown him in vision and see the plates. His father told him to do as the angel had commanded him. He therefore started according to the instructions of the angel. When he had travelled about three miles in the direction indicated he came to the place and instantly recognized it by seeing objects which had been shown him the night previous in his vision. He uncovered the spot of ground, took off the crowning stone on the stone box, and there beheld the sacred record of the ancient inhabitants of this continent; by its side lay the Urim and Thummim, an instrument for its translation. Mr. Smith, not knowing but what it was his privilege to take the record, put forth his hand to do so, when the angel, who had appeared to him the previous night, stood before him and commanded him not to take it at that time, saying that he needed more experience, and that it was necessary that he should be more faithful and diligent in keeping the commandments of God. The angel also said "if you will be faithful before the Lord, come to this place one year from this time and I will meet you again." In 1824, one year from that time, he saw the angel again at the