

**Second Great Awakening Revivals and Camp Meetings (1801-1840)**

In the first decades of the nineteenth century in the young United States, a general enthusiasm on the subject of religion soared. A searching to feel the Spirit prevailed. The period became known as the “Second Great Awakening.” The exuberance of the era was driven by yearnings for a witness of the Holy Spirit or “the power” as an evidence of a conversion and cleansing. Thousands gathered for camp meetings and religious revivals. To put those numbers in perspective, in August of 1801, a revival in Cane Ridge, KY boasted up to 25,000 seekers. At a time the largest city in the area was Lexington, KY, with a population of 2,000. Hordes or seekers traveled for days from neighboring towns and cities to hear the spiritually-charged preachers. Yet the spiritual experiences was not peaceful. The outpourings were described: “‘The groaning, crying out, falling down and screaming’; the ‘terrible speaking’ of itinerants; the clapping, stomping, singing, roaring, and ‘hearty loud Laughter.’ . . . It was the shouting that turned into screams and screeches that especially disgusted.” One participant related, “the noise was like the roar of Niagara” (Leigh Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 66).

After 1791, as the American population spread westward over the Appalachians, itinerant preachers tracked their new settlements. Church buildings could not keep up with the missionaries or the growing population, so outdoor worship services known as “camp meetings” became popular on the frontier. Itinerant preachers carried their portable platforms from town to town and notified the community when they were arriving. At the appointed time, crowds gathered in anticipation of a spiritual experience (often without refined religious manners). Thousands flocked to these meetings. Ministers spoke for hours often without notes, relying on inspiration from the Spirit. Historians Gaustad and Schmidt estimate that by 1811, one-third of the national population—three to four million people—attended summer revivals (*Religious History*, 146). The number of preachers in the first half of the nineteenth-century tripled per capita (Hatch, *Democratization of American Christianity*, 4).

A spiritual zeal seized sophisticated intellectuals as well as passionate itinerant preachers they argued over that spanned Joseph Smith’s life. We find three main religious themes surfacing in newspapers, pamphlets, sermons, and university speeches during the first half of the nineteenth century in the young nation:

1. Revelation
2. The depravity of man
3. The trinity

In addition to these cultural hot topics, the printed word also recorded their interest in the reality of God, freedom of the will, infant baptism, universal salvation, and reason (Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 446-448).

**Burned-over-District**

Whether from Manifest Destiny or otherwise, as the borders of the new nation expanded, the newly-opened lands became a magnet for missionary work. This was especially the case in northwestern New York where the longing for a spiritual conversion spread like a wild fire. Upstate New York received the nickname, “the Burned-over District” in honor of the outpouring of itinerant preachers and religious revivals that burned through the developing towns. In 1824 nearly one-fourth of the nation’s Presbyterian ministers served in the Burned-over District. They were joined by Methodists, Episcopalians, Society of Friends, Baptists, and Freewill Baptists. More than anywhere else in the new nation, the Burned-over District kindled a fire of the Holy Spirit to new levels of enthusiasm. Historian Whitney Cross found the following numbers (*Burned-over District*, 10-12, 13, 355):

**Religious Revivals in New England and NY between 1815 and 1818**

Rhode Island	Connecticut	Pennsylvania	New Jersey	Eastern New York	Vermont	Massachusetts	Burned-over-District or upstate NY
6	15	21	21	21	45	64	80

These numbers continued to grow. Between 1819 and 1820, Milton Blackman found fifty towns in western New York with revival activities. In July of 1819, just thirteen miles south of the Smith’s farm, approximately 110 Methodist ministers gathered at the Genesee Conference (Richard Bushman, *Beginnings of Mormonism*, 53). They had an impact on the young Joseph Jr. as years later he remembered “I became somewhat partial to the Methodists (JS-H 1:8). The numbers are more significant in light of the fact “that the nation’s population did not even double during this interval” from 1776 to 1806 (Finke and Stark, *Churching America*, 58; 55-59).

Church	Membership	
	1776-84	1806-1810
Methodist	4,921	130,570
Baptists	53,101	172,972

After two centuries of Puritan thought dominating the nation, we see a change in the religious preference in the early 1800s during the Second Great Awakening. American Churches that emphasized a spiritual rebirth before baptism grew the most dramatically.

In 1800 the largest churches in the USA were:

1. Congregationalist
1. Presbyterian
2. Baptist
3. Episcopalian

By 1850, two of the smallest became the two largest:

1. Methodist
2. Catholic

### Accounts of the First Vision


The Prophet Joseph Smith Jr.'s first vision was a theophany that occurred in the early spring of 1820 when he "came to the conclusion that I must either remain in darkness and confusion or else I must do as James directs, that is, Ask of God" (JS-History 1:12) Desiring to pray aloud and in private, the fourteen year-old left the crowded log cabin where his family of eleven lived and went to their maple grove where he left his ax to ask God which church to join. His answer became known as the First Vision, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints refer to it as the beginning of the Restoration of Christ's church on earth.

#### 11 Full Accounts—6 first perso, 5 second hand

The 13 references and 11 full accounts show a "high degree of independent, cumulative corroboration among the accounts" (Welch, *Opening the Heavens*, 70). We have 8 firsthand statements of the Prophet Joseph Smith referencing his first vision—2 only reference it, while 6 give a full account directly formulated by the prophet (and transcribed by scribes—except for the first one where he wrote most by hand). Four of the five secondhand accounts that were written during Joseph's lifetime (1805-1844), mention that the light evolved into a vision of the Lord. In ten of the eleven full accounts, two heavenly personages are described—God the Father and His Son. The firsthand accounts, dictated by Joseph Smith include:

1. 1832—Joseph Smith History Account (most recorded by Joseph, part by Frederick G. Williams)
2. Nov 9, 1835—JS journal (recorded by Warren Parrish), then publish in *Messenger Advocate*
3. Nov 14, 1835—recorded conversation to Homes mentioning a "vision of angels" (by clerk Warren Cowdery), then recorded again in the prophet Joseph's journal (shortest reference)
4. 1838—canonized in Pearly of Great Price—JS History Account (recorded by James Mulholland)
5. 1842—Wentworth letter for Barstow's NH History, which was duplicated for Rupp
6. 1842—Request from an author publishing on American religions, Rupp (mainly duplicated).

The prophet retold this story at various times and places with different purpose and emphases with specificity

	1832(Smith)	1835(Smith)	1838(Smith)	1840(Pratt)	1842(Smith)	1842(Hyde)	1843(Richards)	1843(White)	1844Neibaur
Prayed		X	X	X	X				
Church?		X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Evil Powers		X	X	X		X			X
Prayed 2X		X	X	X		X			
Light		X	X	X	X			X	
Fire	X	X							X
Brtr Sun	X		X		X				
Abv Hd		X	X						
Light desc. X			X	X					X
Light JS	X	X	X	X					X
Light All		X		X	X				
2 Beings		X	X	X	X	X		X	X
Identical		X		X	X	X			
Glory			X	X	X	X			
Filled 		X		X		X			X

### Favorite First Vision Study Sources:

John Welch and Eric Carlson, eds. *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations 1820-1844* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005). Dean Jessee, *Personal Writings of Smith*, 74–77, 83–84. For other visions of the Prophet Joseph see: Alexander L. Baugh, "Parting the Veil: The Visions of Joseph Smith," *BYU Studies*, 38.1, (1999).

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1985/01/joseph-smiths-recitals-of-the-first-vision?lang=eng>.

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/first-vision-accounts?lang=eng>; Joseph Smith Papers.org;

<http://broadcast2.lds.org/ldsradio/JosephSmithPapers/2011-07-0160-first-vision-part-1-importance-64k-eng.mp3>;

<http://churchhistorylibrary.lds.org>; <http://www.fairlds.org/>; BYU Studies; Encyclopedia of Mormonism; BookofMormonCentral.org; etc.

*Oldest Recorded Account written between 1831-1832 for Joseph Smith's History*

**\*1832: 1 of 4 First Hand Accounts of Joseph Smith's Retellings of his First Vision**

**1) ~ Summer 1832 History** (Grammar, punctuation, and capitalization have been regularized)

At about the age of twelve years, my mind become seriously impressed with regard to the all-important concerns for the welfare of my immortal soul, which led me to searching the scriptures—believing, as I was taught, that they contained the word of God and thus applying myself to them. My intimate acquaintance with those of different denominations led me to marvel exceedingly, for I discovered that they did not adorn their profession by a holy walk and godly conversation agreeable to what I found contained in that sacred depository. This was a grief to my soul.

Thus, from the age of twelve years to fifteen I pondered many things in my heart concerning the situation of the world of mankind, the contentions and divisions, the wickedness and abominations, and the darkness which pervaded the minds of mankind. My mind became exceedingly distressed, for I became convicted of my sins, and by searching the scriptures I found that mankind did not come unto the Lord but that they had apostatized from the true and living faith, and there was no society or denomination that was built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the New Testament. I felt to mourn for my own sins and for the sins of the world, for I learned in the scriptures that God was the same yesterday, today, and forever, that he was no respecter of persons, for he was God.

For I looked upon the sun, the glorious luminary of the earth, and also the moon, rolling in their majesty through the heavens, and also the stars shining in their courses, and the earth also upon which I stood, and the beasts of the field, and the fowls of heaven, and the fish of the waters, and also man walking forth upon the face of the earth in majesty and in the strength of beauty, whose power and intelligence in governing the things which are so exceedingly great and marvelous, even in the likeness of him who created them. And when I considered upon these things, my heart exclaimed, "Well hath the wise man said, 'It is a fool that saith in his heart, there is no God.'" My heart exclaimed, "All, all these bear testimony and bespeak an omnipotent and omnipresent power, a being who maketh laws and decreeth and bindeth all things in their bounds, who filleth eternity, who was and is and will be from all eternity to eternity." And I considered all these things and that that being seeketh such to worship him as worship him in spirit and in truth.

Therefore, I cried unto the Lord for mercy, for there was none else to whom I could go and obtain mercy. And the Lord heard my cry in the wilderness, and while in the attitude of calling upon the Lord, in the sixteenth year of my age, a pillar of light above the brightness of the sun at noonday came down from above and rested upon me. I was filled with the spirit of God, and the Lord opened the heavens upon me and I saw the Lord.

And he spake unto me, saying, "Joseph, my son, thy sins are forgiven thee. Go thy way, walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments. Behold, I am the Lord of glory. I was crucified for the world, that all those who believe on my name may have eternal life. Behold, the world lieth in sin at this time, and none doeth good, no, not one. They have turned aside from the gospel and keep not my commandments. They draw near to me with their lips while their hearts are far from me. And mine anger is kindling against the inhabitants of the earth, to visit them according to their ungodliness and to bring to pass that which hath been spoken by the mouth of the prophets and apostles. Behold and lo, I come quickly, as it is written of me, in the cloud, clothed in the glory of my Father."

My soul was filled with love, and for many days I could rejoice with great joy. The Lord was with me, but I could find none that would believe the heavenly vision. Nevertheless, I pondered these things in my heart.

**2 of 4 First Hand Accounts of Joseph Smith's Retellings of his First Vision**

**2) Journal, 9–11 November 1835** (Retold to Jewish Visitor to Kirtland, Robert Matthews, recorded in Joseph's journal by his scribe Warren Parrish)

Being wrought up in my mind respecting the subject of religion, and looking at the different systems taught the children of men, I knew not who was right or who was wrong. And considering it of the first importance that I should be right in matters that involve eternal consequences, being thus perplexed in mind I

retired to the silent grove and bowed down before the Lord, under a realizing sense that he had said (if the Bible be true), “Ask, and you shall receive; knock, and it shall be opened; seek, and you shall find,” and again, “If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not.”

Information was what I most desired at this time, and with a fixed determination to obtain it, I called upon the Lord for the first time in the place above stated. Or in other words, I made a fruitless attempt to pray; my tongue seemed to be swollen in my mouth, so that I could not utter. I heard a noise behind me, like some person walking towards me. I strove again to pray but could not. The noise of walking seemed to draw nearer. I sprung up on my feet and looked around but saw no person or thing that was calculated to produce the noise of walking.

I kneeled again. My mouth was opened and my tongue liberated, and I called on the Lord in mighty prayer. A pillar of fire appeared above my head. It presently rested down upon me and filled me with joy unspeakable. A personage appeared in the midst of this pillar of flame, which was spread all around and yet nothing consumed. Another personage soon appeared, like unto the first. He said unto me, “Thy sins are forgiven thee.” He testified unto me that Jesus Christ is the son of God. And I saw many angels in this vision. I was about fourteen years old when I received this first communication.

### 3 of 4 First Hand Accounts of Joseph Smith’s Retellings of his First Vision

- 3) **1838 Account written between intense persecution.** First published in 1842 in the *Times and Seasons*, the Church’s newspaper in Nauvoo, Illinois, the account was part of a longer history dictated by Joseph Smith. Rather than the 1832 emphasis of Joseph’s personal story as a young man seeking forgiveness, the 1838 account emphasizes the “rise and progress of the Church” (See Joseph Smith-History 1:5-20).

### 4 of 4 First Hand Accounts of Joseph Smith’s Retellings of his First Vision

- 4) 1 March 1842 (Written in response to *Chicago Democrat* editor John Wentworth’s request for information about the Latter-day Saints, this account was printed in the *Times and Seasons* as “The Wentworth Letter”)

When about fourteen years of age, I began to reflect upon the importance of being prepared for a future state, and upon enquiring about the plan of salvation, I found that there was a great clash in religious sentiment; if I went to one society, they referred me to one plan, and another to another, each one pointing to his own particular creed as the summum bonum of perfection. Considering that all could not be right, and that God could not be the author of so much confusion, I determined to investigate the subject more fully, believing that if God had a church it would not be split up into factions, and that if he taught one society to worship one way, and administer in one set of ordinances, he would not teach another principles which were diametrically opposed. Believing the word of God, I had confidence in the declaration of James; “If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not, and it shall be given him.”

I retired to a secret place in a grove and began to call upon the Lord. While fervently engaged in supplication, my mind was taken away from the objects with which I was surrounded, and I was enwrapped in a heavenly vision and saw two glorious personages who exactly resembled each other in features and likeness, surrounded with a brilliant light which eclipsed the sun at noonday. They told me that all religious denominations were believing in incorrect doctrines and that none of them was acknowledged of God as his church and kingdom. And I was expressly commanded to “go not after them,” at the same time receiving a promise that the fulness of the gospel should at some future time be made known unto me.