

# Joseph Smith's Christlike Attributes

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In late May the Mississippi River runs swift and high, sparkling and bubbling in the midday sunlight. Birds sing; the air is redolent with fragrances; distantly you can hear a soft Sabbath bell toll; the earth and all about is richly abundant with life.

Some eleven miles to the east, across the farmlands away from the great Mississippi, stands the small town of Carthage, Illinois. On Sunday, May 21, of this year, my family and I solemnly walked the paths of Carthage and examined anew the momentous events of that place.

I could not help but look toward today's assignment, knowing I would stand before you marvelous and gifted students at BYU and your devoted administration and faculty, wanting and wishing with all my heart that each of you could feel what I was feeling at that moment as I tried to absorb it and take it all in—knowing this would be the exact anniversary of the Martyrdom of the Prophet Joseph Smith and of his brother Hyrum Smith, June 27, 1995. One hundred and fifty-one years ago today, Joseph, the prophet of the Restoration, and Hyrum, patriarch of the Church, gave their individual lives for the sake of their testimony of Jesus Christ.

In the fifth hour after noon, each suffered multiple shots. It is interesting, and I think even important, that in Jewish symbolism the number *five* denotes sanctification and /or purification. Five hours after noonday Joseph and Hyrum died.

Neither brother sought death, but it was not unforeseen. Joseph had forebodings as early as April 1829, when the Lord told him, "And even if they do unto you even as they have done unto me, blessed are ye, for you shall dwell with me in glory" (D&C 6:30). Joseph went to Carthage, in his words, "like a lamb to the slaughter" (D&C 135:4). The ruthless death of these brothers was their final witness of the Savior whom they served. As John Taylor wrote of Joseph:

*Like most of the Lord's anointed in ancient times, [he] has sealed his mission and his works with his own blood. . . .*

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*. . . The testators are now dead, and their testament is in force. [D&C 135:3, 5]*

In sealing his testimony with his blood, Joseph followed the pattern of the Savior. It was in reference to the Savior, the “mediator of the new testament,” that Paul taught, “For where a testament is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. For a testament is of force after men are dead” (Hebrews 9:15–17). I will never forget Carthage and the impression it left on my soul. Nauvoo was next. This is where I met a missionary couple whose strong and humble witness of Joseph so affected me that I asked if they would write down their feelings for me about their mission in the City of Joseph. A few weeks ago I received a reply from Elder and Sister Wood that seems appropriate here. They said:

*Since our call to serve a mission at the Nauvoo Visitors’ Center, our knowledge and testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith has grown immensely. We [already] knew that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God. . . . We also knew that he had undergone many trials for the Church, but we didn’t know or realize just what he endured and to what lengths and depths he went to help bring forth the kingdom of God and restore it to the earth.*

*One day, while testifying to a couple in front of the Christus [statue] that Jesus Christ gave his life and atoned for our sins so we, his brothers and sisters, might return to live with our Heavenly Father, I suddenly realized more fully that Joseph Smith gave [up] his life, too, . . . that we might have the fullness of the gospel.*

Both the Savior and the Prophet Joseph gave their lives in a divine cause. Yet President David O. McKay once wrote, “I confess that [Christ’s shedding His blood] has moved me less than the realization that in His life He lived for His fellow men” (“The Atonement,” *Instructor*, March 1959, p. 66). Similarly, I am more inspired by Joseph Smith’s life than by

his death. Quoting John Taylor again, he “left a fame and name that cannot be slain. He lived great” (D&C 135:3). It is vital to commemorate the Prophet’s death; we must never forget. Yet his life is a model of one possessed of mighty faith in Jesus Christ. The Lord asked the Nephites, “What manner of men ought ye to be?” and then answered his own question, “Even as I am” (see 3 Nephi 27:27). The Lord is our model and guide or, in Joseph Smith’s words, “the prototype or standard of salvation” (*Lectures on Faith*, comp. N. B. Lundwall [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1959 (1972 printing)], p. 63). To be saved is to become like our Savior. We measure our spiritual progress against this standard. Joseph Smith so faithfully emulated the Master that he too becomes a model, a standard by which we can gauge our spirituality.

Because Joseph patterned his life after the Savior, whom he knew so well, we can better follow the Savior’s pattern. Joseph Smith taught:

*When men begin to live by faith they begin to draw near to God; and when faith is perfected they are like him; and because he is saved they are saved also; for they will be in the same situation he is in, because they have come to him; and when he appears they shall be like him, for they will see him as he is. [Lectures on Faith, pp. 62–63]*

Nephi wrote, “Unless a man shall endure to the end, in following the example of the Son of the living God, he cannot be saved” (2 Nephi 31:16). By looking at some of the Savior’s divine attributes, we can compare them with Joseph Smith’s life to see how he patterned it after his Lord. This can be a powerful reminder of what we must do to be saved or to become like Jesus Christ.

The beloved disciple John stated simply, “God is love” (1 John 4:16). Kindness and compassion flowed from the Only Begotten Son’s soul as pure water from a pristine spring.

Sacrifice and service were as natural to him as eating and sleeping are to us.

One of my favorite examples of the Lord's love is his raising of Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha. Lazarus was sick, and his sisters sent for the Lord, saying, "He whom thou lovest is sick." We are also told that "Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus." Jesus had perfect faith that he could restore Lazarus to health, as he had done on numerous occasions with others. In this instance he had both temporal and spiritual purposes in mind. He had tarried two days, and Lazarus had died. He said, "I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, to the intent ye may believe; nevertheless let us go unto him." When Jesus arrived in Judea, Lazarus had lain in the grave for four days. His sisters were sorrowful. Martha said, "If thou hadst been here, my brother had not died." Even so, Martha was trusting, and said, "But I know, that even now, whatsoever thou wilt ask of God, God will give it thee." Jesus taught Martha, "I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live." When Jesus arrived at the grave, he saw the two sisters and others weeping. Jesus "groaned in the spirit, and was troubled." Then "Jesus wept." Jesus mourned for his friend Lazarus. The law of mourning instructs: "Thou shalt live together in love, insomuch that thou shalt weep for the loss of them that die" (D&C 42:45). The Lord deeply felt Mary's and Martha's anguish along with his own. Lazarus was restored to his family, and many believed on Jesus (see John 11:1–46). This gives us hope that we can indeed, one day, be like him, for we have glimpsed him as he is.

Joseph Smith taught this principle of love:

*Love is one of the chief characteristics of Deity, and ought to be manifested by those who aspire to be the sons of God. A man filled with the love of God, is not content with blessing his family alone, but*

*ranges through the whole world, anxious to bless the whole human race. [Teachings, p. 174]*

He further said, "I love your soul, and the souls of the children of men, and pray and do all I can for the salvation of all" (*Teachings*, p. 22). Among those who knew Joseph's charity and regard was a nineteen-year-old young man named William Taylor, who spent two weeks with the Prophet. William said, "I have never known the same joy and satisfaction in the companionship of any other person" (*Young Woman's Journal* 17 [1906], p. 548). It was remarked of Joseph that "he did not like to pass a child, however small, without speaking to it" (Lyman O. Littlefield, "The Prophet Joseph Smith in Zion's Camp," *Juvenile Instructor* 27, no. 4 [15 February 1892]: 109). There are stories of Joseph picking flowers for children or drying their tears or wiping mud from their shoes. Thus, Joseph humbly followed his Savior's lead in loving and blessing little children.

At the funeral of Lorenzo Barnes, he exclaimed, "O that I had the language of the archangel to express my feelings once to my friends! But I never expect to in this life" (*Teachings*, p. 296). As mayor of Nauvoo, Joseph was called upon to render judgment on Anthony, a black man who had not only been selling liquor in violation of the law but had been doing it on the Sabbath. Anthony implored Joseph for leniency, stating that he needed money to buy the freedom of his child held as a slave in a southern state. Joseph said, "I am sorry, Anthony, but the law must be observed, and we will have to impose a fine." The next day Joseph gave Anthony a fine horse to purchase the freedom of the child. Joseph's largeness of soul is legendary. He wrote, "It is a duty which every Saint ought to render to his brethren freely—to always love them, and ever succor them. To be justified before God we must love one another" (*Teachings*, p. 76). To

show love in this same spirit is a decision each of you can make today, even at this moment.

President Spencer W. Kimball, another great prophetic example of love, taught:

*One can learn to be loving. If one patterns his life in the mold of love—if he consciously and determinedly directs his thoughts, controls his acts, and tries to feel and constantly express his love, he becomes a person of love, for “As he thinketh in his heart, so is he.” (Proverbs 23:7.) [TSWK, pp. 245–46]*

You could at this moment think of someone, picture a face or think of a name, and then connect it with some act of service you could perform. If you will try this, with real intent, you will be inspired. You will know what to do. Of course, then, after you know, you must do. Act on the inspiration you receive. You will become a loving person after the pattern of Jesus and Joseph.

Love, then, is an attribute developed by choice, a deliberate decision to follow the Lord. I remind you, however, that even Jesus experienced obstacles to love, just as we do. For example, he suffered “hunger, thirst, and fatigue, even more than man can suffer” (Mosiah 3:7), but he served anyway. All of the kind, compassionate, loving things that Christ did were done in the shadow of the cross.

Consider, for example, his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus and his disciples were journeying from Judea to Galilee. The record states that he stopped at Jacob’s well, “being wearied with his journey,” and his disciples went to buy meat. Despite his weariness, he took time to teach the woman of Samaria. The record does not state whether he was ever able to rest. Apparently he did not, because the Samaritans “besought him that he would tarry with them: and he abode there two days. And many more believed because of his own word” (see John 4:1–42). We can be grateful that he sacrificed rest for responsibility. His

words about living water have refreshed and brought rest to multitudes throughout the centuries.

In a comparable way, all that Joseph Smith did was in the shadow of Carthage. Persecution of the darkest hue began the first time he recounted his experience of the First Vision.

Four months after the Church was organized, he was told, “Be patient in afflictions, for thou shalt have many” (D&C 24:8). On the one hand, picture Joseph Smith ministering to the Saints, directing the affairs of an infant church, sending missionaries abroad, building temples, and leading his family. On the other hand, picture Joseph hiding from false accusers; dealing with contrived legal charges; enduring unjust imprisonment; hearing news of the murder, rape, and torture of his beloved Saints; coping with the venom of apostates; suffering beatings, attempted poisonings, and other mob lunacy.

He once wrote, “My family was kept in a continual state of alarm, not knowing, when I went from home, that I should ever return again; or what would befall me from day to day” (*Times and Seasons* 1, p. 3). His burdens were beyond our comprehension. To paraphrase Isaiah, it is a vexation of the spirit just to hear the report of his troubles (see Isaiah 28:19).

The Prophet was not adverse to introspection, even when prompted by scurrilous tales. Stories about Joseph, many of them twisted or blatantly false, circulated constantly. Yet the Prophet said something like this:

*When I have heard of a story about me, I sit down and think about it and pray about it, and I ask myself the question, “Did I say something or was there something about my manner to give some basis for that story to start?” And often if I think about it long enough, I realize I have done something to give that basis. And there wells up in me a forgiveness of the person who has told that story,*

and a resolve that I will never do that thing again. [See *They Knew the Prophet*, comp. Hyrum L. Andrus and Helen Mae Andrus (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1974), p. 144]

Joseph's soul was enlarged through suffering. Too many in our day, even among Church members, become contracted through trials or ill fate. Rather than forgetting themselves in service, they withdraw into shells of bitterness and self-pity. All of us have trials and temptations adapted to our capacity. After all, this is mortality. It does no good to ask, "Why me?" Rather, we should concede, "Why *not* me?" and become more like him.

President Kimball also gave profound counsel in this area:

*Only when you lift a burden, God will lift your burden. Divine paradox this! The man who staggers and falls because his burden is too great can lighten that burden by taking on the weight of another's burden. You get by giving, but your part of giving must be given first.* [TSWK, p. 251]

Both the Lord and the Prophet Joseph gave and gave and gave. Both were ministers of salvation. Their service and sacrifice extended to all mankind in love.

To Moses, the Lord said, "For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" (Moses 1:39). The Savior's mission was centered on others' spiritual and temporal welfare. President J. Reuben Clark, Jr., said that the Savior left as a heritage for his Church the carrying on of two great activities:

*Work for the relief of the ills and the sufferings of humanity, and the teaching of the spiritual truths which should bring us back into the presence of our Heavenly Father.* [CR, April 1937, p.22]

Thus we see the Savior healing the lepers, giving sight to the blind, causing the infirm to

leap to their feet, and bringing comfort to all who would believe. He set a precedent of service. He went about relieving the ills and sufferings to which mortals are natural heirs.

In addition, the Savior taught gospel principles. His Sermon on the Mount, repeated and amplified among the Nephites, is unparalleled. His teachings concerning the bread of life and the living water are transcendent truths. When some of his disciples murmured because of his teachings, the Savior said, "The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life" (John 6:63). The Lord invited all to believe in him and to be born again, and in Mosiah's words, to be "changed from their carnal and fallen state, to a state of righteousness, being redeemed of God, becoming his sons and daughters" (Mosiah 27:25). Joseph emulated the Savior's devotion to the salvation of all mankind. As president of the Church, he organized the united order to bless the Saints temporarily. He taught:

*We must visit the fatherless and the widow in their affliction, and we must keep ourselves unspotted from the world: for such virtues flow from the great fountain of pure religion, strengthening our faith by adding every good quality that adorns the children of the blessed Jesus, we can pray in the season of prayer; we can love our neighbor as ourselves, and be faithful in tribulation, knowing that the reward of such is greater in the kingdom of heaven. What a consolation! What a joy! Let me live the life of the righteous, and let my reward be like his!* [Teachings, p. 76]

Joseph ministered in power to relieve the considerable suffering experienced by the Saints. On what was referred to as the "day of God's power," July 22, 1839, the Prophet lay stricken with a vile disease, as were many of the Saints. Neighbor cared for neighbor, parents for children, and children for parents. There were so many ill that the caregivers were overwhelmed and exhausted. Moved upon by



the Spirit, Joseph rose from his sickbed and went across the river to Montrose, Iowa. Dozens were immediately healed on that day. He states in his journal, “Many of the sick were this day raised by the power of God” (in B. H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God: I. Joseph Smith, the Prophet* [Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1911], p. 259). The Prophet Joseph also followed the Savior in teaching the gospel of salvation. Through modern revelation, comforting and exalting doctrines were revealed to him. The Lord told him, “This generation shall have my word through you” (D&C 5:10). In 1841 the Prophet “told the brethren that the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion, and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book” (HC 4:461). Plain and precious truths were restored through Joseph Smith’s inspired translation of sacred records, bringing generations to an understanding of their Lord and Savior. We measure our fidelity to God’s word through the principles revealed in the Book of Mormon.

Who besides Joseph has offered the world such a saving book? Who can match him? Who in this dispensation has surpassed the King Follett Discourse, for example? Where can we find a greater statement on faith than the *Lectures on Faith*, which were prepared under his tutelage? Who has mastered the ordinances and principles of temple worship better than he through whom the keys were restored? Joseph Smith was, indeed, a teacher of supernal truths. Brigham Young said of him:

*The excellency of the glory of the character of brother Joseph Smith was that he could reduce heavenly things to the understanding of the finite. When he preached to the people . . . he reduced his teachings to the capacity of every man, woman, and child, making them as plain as a well-defined pathway. [JD 8:206]*

Therefore, our duty is to minister to the needs and wants of others, both temporally and spiritually. Joseph Smith taught, “Let the Saints remember that great things depend on their individual exertion, and that they are called to be co-workers with us and the Holy Spirit in accomplishing the great work of the last days” (*Teachings*, p. 178). In the last general conference President Gordon B. Hinckley taught our responsibility:

*We are all in this great endeavor together. . . . Your obligation is as serious in your sphere of responsibility as is my obligation in my sphere. No calling in this church is small or of little consequence. All of us in the pursuit of our duty touch the lives of others. To each of us in our respective responsibilities the Lord has said: “Wherefore, be faithful; stand in the office which I have appointed unto you; succor the weak, lift up the hands which hang down, and strengthen the feeble knees” (D&C 81:5). [“This Is the Work of the Master,” *Ensign*, May 1995, p. 71]*

Your life, as President Stephen L. Richards used to say, is a mission, not a career. If you are wise, you will prepare for a life of service.

One reason for the Prophet’s serenity in distress was his total, unflinching commitment to God’s will. A dictionary definition of faith is “belief and trust in and loyalty to God.” Joseph Smith loved God with a fervor born of personal experience, for he had seen him. He knew his power and glory. His trust was complete. His loyalty was unquestioning.

Jesus was the greatest person ever to walk this earth. He had infinitely greater wisdom and power than any man. He had power over life and death. He could command the elements. Yet he said, “I can of mine own self do nothing: . . . because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me” (John 5:30). President Joseph F. Smith saw in vision “the hosts of the dead . . . who had offered sacrifice in the similitude of the great

sacrifice of the Son of God” (D&C 138:11–13). How can our sacrifices be in the similitude of the Savior’s great infinite and eternal sacrifice? We can submit our wills to the Father’s. Rather than persisting in our own “carnal wills and desires,” our will, like the “will of the Son,” should be “swallowed up in the will of the Father” (see Mosiah 16:12 and 15:7). This is how Christ lived, and this is how Joseph Smith lived. Such submission to God led ultimately to death. Joseph’s martyrdom was indeed in similitude of the Lord’s great sacrifice, for he went where he was sent and did what he did knowing full well where it would lead.

Brigham Young said, “I heard Joseph say many a time, ‘I shall not live until I am forty years of age’ ” (DBY, p. 467). Yet Joseph also stated confidently, “God will always protect me until my mission is fulfilled” (*Teachings*, p. 366). The chances that you and I will be called upon to die for our convictions is remote. How then can we offer a sacrifice in similitude of the great sacrifice of the Son of God? President Marion G. Romney said:

*I decided in my youth that for me the best approach to the solution of problems and the resolving of questions would be to proceed as Jesus proceeded: foster an earnest desire to do the Lord’s will; familiarize myself with what the Lord has revealed on the matters involved; pray with diligence and faith for an inspired understanding of his will and the courage to do it. [“What Would Jesus Do?” *New Era*, September 1972, p. 5]*

The Savior concluded his mortal life as he began it—in purity and innocence. Judas painfully recognized that he had “betrayed the innocent blood” (Matthew 27:4), and Pilate called the Lord a “just person” (Matthew 27:24). Jesus was a lamb without spot or blemish. He was the sinless Son of God. His death insured that salvation could come to all who believe and obey.

Joseph Smith also concluded his life as it began—humble and obedient. He had fulfilled his mission. He said, “I have a conscience void of offense towards God, and towards all men. I shall die innocent” (D&C 135:4). Elder Neal A. Maxwell said:

*The Prophet Joseph Smith, of course, was not a perfect man. There has been only one such—Jesus Christ. But Joseph Smith was a special witness for Jesus Christ. . . . We do not, as some occasionally charge, worship Joseph Smith, nor place him on a par with Jesus. But we do venerate him, remembering, hopefully, that the highest and best form of veneration is emulation. [“The Prophet Joseph Smith: Spiritual Statesman,” Annual Joseph Smith Memorial Sermons, Logan, Utah, 19 January 1975, p. 12]*

My friends in Nauvoo, Elder and Sister Woods, have a deep and abiding love for the Savior and his servant Joseph Smith. They said, “Every day our experiences here give more indications of [their] greatness.” To close their letter, the Woods spoke about the spirit of Joseph that still permeates the City Beautiful and related a tender experience about John.

John (not his real name), about thirty years old, walked into the visitors’ center alone, where he was greeted by the Woods and asked if he’d like to take a tour—the Woods asked how much time he had. John answered, “As long as it takes to see it all.” John said he was a member but had not been inside a church in almost twenty years.

I paraphrase Brother Woods’ story as follows:

*I was prompted to conduct him as though he knew nothing about the Church and began the tour about the founding of Nauvoo, the First Vision, the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, and the organization of the Church. I asked him often, “Do you remember hearing about that in Primary?” And many times he affirmed that he did remember.*

*I bore my testimony to John. Next I took him into the theater to see Remembering Nauvoo. John was the only one there for the film. As the movie began, I withdrew, but returned twenty minutes later just as John exited. He had enjoyed the presentation, and we continued the tour.*

*This part includes details about the city of Nauvoo and its temple—during which we arrived at the Christus statue, where we played the message of the Savior. Generally I don't bear my testimony here, but for some reason I sat down beside him and afterward bore my testimony about Jesus Christ.*

*I saw tears come to his eyes and felt impressed to say, "John, when you return home to Florida, will you seek out your bishop and tell him you want to become actively involved in the Church? Ask him what you have to do, and he will advise and help you all the way." John looked me in the eye and promised me he would do that. The tour continued to the martyrdom scene, and I again bore testimony—this time as to Joseph Smith being a true prophet. Again John's eyes moistened [and] we continued on to the Saints' arrival in Salt Lake and the temple there. I explained that my temple marriage to Sister Wood was for time and eternity—if we live worthy. John said, "Awesome."*

*We completed the tour and said our emotional good-byes. But John stopped and turned and said, "Can I ask you a very important question?" I answered, "By all means." John asked, "When you started the movie, did you stay in the theater with me or did you leave?" I told him I had left—why?*

*John answered with tears in his eyes, "All during the movie I kept looking over my shoulder to see who else was in the theater." I asked him who he thought was there. He said, "I guess my grandparents are trying to tell me to clean up my act." By this point he was crying openly. We embraced and wept joyful tears together. I told him I loved him and knew he was sent to us not by chance. Elder Wood closed this account by saying, "It is the spirit . . . of Joseph Smith [in Nauvoo] that allows experiences like this . . . and gives us the hope and courage to carry on and endure to the end."*

In closing, I testify to these words in section 135 of the Doctrine and Covenants: "Joseph Smith, the Prophet and Seer of the Lord, has done more, save Jesus only, for the salvation of men in this world, than any other man that ever lived in it" (D&C 135:3). And I say, "Praise to the man who communed with Jehovah! Jesus anointed that Prophet and Seer" ("Praise to the Man," *Hymns*, 1985, no. 27). Joseph knew Jesus! He communed with him in our behalf. He was a chosen vessel of the Lord to whom angels ministered, thus preparing "the way that the residue of men may have faith in Christ, that the Holy Ghost may have place in their hearts" (Moroni 7:32).

May we, too, come to know the Lord, commune with him, and learn to be like him, as did Brother Joseph, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.