



CHAPTER 1

A DREADED ILLNESS

When Joseph Smith, Junior, was born, no one on earth knew that someday he would be a prophet. Several years earlier, however, his grandfather Asael Smith had made a prediction. He said it had been made known to him that one of his descendants would do something that would change the world of religion. No one guessed it would be Joseph. He was just a boy growing up on a farm.

There is not much known about his early childhood. In a history of his life that he helped write as an adult, he hardly mentions his first few years. All he says is, "I was born in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and five, on the twenty-third day of December, in the town of Sharon, Windsor county, state of Vermont."

Certainly he loved his family. Surely he enjoyed playing games with his older brothers, Alvin and Hyrum, and his older sister, Sophronia, and with the younger boys, Samuel and William.

He must have learned to work hard when he was still very young, because life on a farm meant everyone had chores to do. He would have grown familiar with animals, fences, fields, and orchards. Watching or working with his

father and brothers, he would have begun early to learn farming, barrel-making, and other skills. Like most young boys, he was probably fond of sharp tools and had to be told to stay away from them, or taught to use them carefully.

When Joseph was five years old, his father, Joseph Senior, moved the family to Lebanon, New Hampshire. They all liked this new farm. One of the best things about it was that the children could go to school. Up until then they hadn't had much education other than what their parents taught them. But in Lebanon, Alvin, Sophronia, and Joseph, too, when he was old enough, could walk each day to a small school nearby. Hyrum was enrolled in a boys school connected to Dartmouth College in Hanover, a few miles away.

For a while, everything went well. The family was busy and happy. In July of 1812, a new baby girl arrived. They named her Katharine.

Then, in 1813, when Joseph was seven, there was an outbreak of typhoid fever. Thousands of people became ill, and many died. The Smiths hoped they wouldn't get it. But one day Sophronia said she didn't feel well. Hyrum came home from school with a high temperature. Both children were very tired and had red spots on their bodies. These were the symptoms of the dreaded disease.

As the days went by, Alvin and Joseph came down with the fever, too, then Samuel and William, and even baby Katharine. There wasn't much Mother Lucy could do to help them, except try to make them comfortable.

Eventually all of the children except Sophronia seemed to get well. Sophronia burned with fever and was so tired she didn't want to do anything but sleep. One day the doctor who took care of her drew Father Joseph and Mother Lucy aside and said, "There is nothing more I can do to prolong her life. The medicines will no longer help." After telling them to prepare for her death, he left.

That night Sophronia lay totally still. Her eyes were open, but she didn't appear to see anything. Mother Lucy refused even to consider that her little girl was going to die. "Please, Lord, let her get well," she prayed.

Deep into the night, she walked the floor, clutching the child to her chest.

The house was still as death, except for the sound of her footsteps. Then suddenly Sophronia sobbed. After another sob, she looked up into her mother's face and began breathing easily.

"She's going to be all right," Mother Lucy whispered gratefully.

Sophronia got well. But one morning Joseph felt a stabbing pain in his left shoulder. It was so bad that he cried out.

"Go get the doctor," Mother Lucy told Hyrum. "Hurry."

When the doctor came, he examined Joseph and said, "It will be all right, son. You've just sprained your shoulder somehow. Did you fall on it?"

Joseph shook his head. "No, it just began hurting all by itself."

The doctor insisted he had bumped it somehow. "But I'll do something to make it better," he said.

He put a small shovel in the fireplace to heat up while he rubbed liniment on the painful shoulder. When the metal of the shovel was hot, he held it against Joseph's shoulder. It wasn't quite hot enough to burn, but it hurt. Joseph tried not to cry. If it would make the ache go away, then he could stand it.

The trouble was that the pain didn't stop. As the days went by, it got worse. Then a large, ugly sore appeared under his arm. The doctor came and cut into the sore to drain it. "Now you will be well," he told Joseph.

But Joseph didn't get well. Instead, the pain shot like lightning down into his left leg and ankle. He pleaded with his parents to make it better. "It hurts so bad I can't bear it," he wailed.

To ease the pain, his mother carried him around in her arms until she was so exhausted that she got sick.

"Let me help," Hyrum said, and Mother Lucy gratefully let him take over.

For many days twelve-year-old Hyrum sat beside Joseph on a trundle bed, holding the aching leg between his hands. Joseph said that the pain wasn't as bad when Hyrum was there.

At the end of three weeks, Joseph was sicker than ever. His mother sent again for a doctor. A surgeon came and cut into Joseph's leg, making an eight-inch slice between his knee and his ankle to drain out the infection.

Joseph was so weak by now that he didn't care what they did, as long as the pain stopped. For a while it did stop, and Joseph was able to sleep peacefully for a few hours. But when the long incision began to heal, the pain came back. The leg swelled up, and Joseph again suffered from a blistering fever.

The surgeon returned and made another incision, this time cutting all the way to the bone. But it wasn't long until the leg began to swell again.

This time several doctors came to see Joseph, including Dr. Nathan Smith, who founded a medical school at Dartmouth College. He had devised a new treatment for the disease Joseph suffered from, and the other doctors had asked him to come. After they had all examined Joseph, they went into another room with his parents. Joseph heard them say a word he'd never heard before: *Amputation*.

"No," he heard his mother cry. "Can't you try something else?"

"No," one of the doctors said. "We can do nothing. The bone is so diseased that it is incurable. Amputation is absolutely necessary in order to save his life."

There was a long silence. Joseph lay quietly. *Amputation* must mean something terrible.

He couldn't hear his mother's words in reply, but her voice was firm.

The doctors and his parents came back into his room.

"My poor boy, we have come again," said one of the doctors.

"Yes," Joseph said. "I see you have. But you haven't come to cut off my leg, have you, sir?" Their faces were so serious that he guessed what *amputation* meant.

"No," said the doctor. "It is your mother's request that we should make one more effort. That's what we have come for."

Joseph whispered, "What are you going to do?"

The doctor cleared his throat. "Your mother has suggested that we cut into your leg again. Then we will take out the diseased part of the bone. This is a new treatment, but one I've tried many times, and we hope it will cure the sickness so that when it heals up again you will be well."

Joseph took a deep breath. "Then do it."

To his surprise, his father, who had hardly left his side, burst into tears. He sobbed just like little Samuel and William sometimes did.

Joseph reached out a hand. "It will be all right, Father."

The doctors began to bustle around, putting sharp instruments on a small table and covering them with a cloth so he couldn't see them. One of the doctors turned to Father Joseph. "Do you have some rope we can use to bind him?"

Joseph struggled to sit up. "No," he said. "No rope. I won't let you tie me."

The doctor said, "I'm sorry, son, but it will be painful. We must tie you down so you won't struggle."

"No," Joseph repeated.

In those days, they did not have good medicine for pain. So the doctor said, "We will give you some liquor. You must take something. Otherwise you cannot endure the operation."

"No." Joseph shook his head. "No. I don't want anything. Father will hold me." He gripped his father's hand. "That's all I need."

The doctors talked with one another for a moment, then said they would try it that way.

Mother Lucy bent over Joseph. "I'll be here, too, son," she said.

She looked so pale that he feared she might faint. He thought about the many days she had carried him around until she was ill herself.

"Mother," he said. "Please go outside. I don't want you to watch."

She knelt beside his bed, putting her arms around him. "I have to help you through it."

"No," Joseph said. "You've done enough already. Father is here, and the Lord will bless me. He made Sophronia well. He will help me, too."

Tearfully his mother nodded. She brought a pile of folded sheets to put under his leg, kissed him softly, and left the room.

The operation began. All Joseph could remember later was a blur of terrible pain. At times there was nothing he could do but cling tightly to his father and cry out. When the doctors started taking out the bad pieces of the leg bone, he screamed so terribly that his mother burst into the room.

“Oh, my poor boy,” she cried in a trembling voice. “Let me stay with you.”

“Go back, Mother,” he said with all the strength he had left. “Go back outside.”

Reluctantly she left. The doctors went on operating. They removed nine pieces of bone from Joseph’s leg. His father stayed with him through it all, whispering encouragement and sometimes singing in his ear, and praying.

The operation was successful. Much of the pain was gone. But before the leg healed, fourteen more pieces of bone came out. Joseph was still very ill. He got so thin that his mother could easily carry him around like a baby. When he wasn’t being carried, he had to either stay in bed or use crutches to help him hobble around.

Eventually the leg improved, but Joseph always had a big scar and limped slightly for the rest of his life.

It was a terrible experience for Joseph to endure, but it made him strong and helped prepare him for other difficulties to come.