

Have you ever talked with a Mormon? They sound Christian because they say all the right Christian words and phrases: they confess Jesus Christ as their Savior—they even include His name in their official church name: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. They baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. They believe in heaven and hell, and they believe you can't get to heaven without Jesus' atonement. But is using Christian terms enough to make any of us Christians? Does it mean we have saving faith? This Bible study will acquaint you with the Mormons—who they are, what they believe, and the meaning behind the Christian phrases they use. It will also equip you to more clearly share the truth of Jesus Christ the next time they knock on your door.

## **The Second Great Awakening**

Watch the Video: Session 1

The Second Great Awakening set the religious stage for the birth of Mormonism. This religious movement was characterized by large revivals and a preference for emotional experience over Creeds and doctrine. Living without the framework of the universal Creeds (Apostles, Nicene and Athanasian) that so clearly expose theological errors, the Second Great Awakening left many Christians in America like sheep without a shepherd—easy pickings for a charismatic leader.

- What similarity do you see today in people that are exploring different religions to find one that “feels right” to them?
- What is the danger of using your heart instead of your head to discern religious truth?
- How important do you find it to experience an emotional reaction in worship?
- Why do we need God's objective truth to cling to when we go through difficult struggles in our lives?

Mormon missionaries ask their prospects to read *The Book of Mormon* and then search for a “burning in the bosom” when they pray about it. This is a similar emotional reaction two disciples experienced when they shared their walk with a stranger the day Jesus rose from the dead. After Jesus disappeared into thin air at the supper table, they shared those experiences.

## **Read Luke 24:30-32**

- How did the events surrounding Jesus' crucifixion, death and resurrection intensify the emotional response of these two disciples?

Human emotions can be fickle and flighty. In the upper room Peter confidently promised to lay down his life at Jesus' side; a few hours later he stood before a servant girl vehemently denying any knowledge of Jesus. When we go through difficult times in life, God uses solid, historical facts to anchor our faith outside of our emotions. Simple, often uneducated, eyewitnesses testify to a blood-stained cross, an empty tomb, nail-marked hands, and a wound in Jesus' side from the spear. Each of these is given as evidence to assure us Jesus has turned away God's wrath. He has overcome death, and He has opened for us the door to heaven and eternal life in God's glorious presence.

- List some situations in life that can severely shake and challenge a person's faith.
- Describe a situation in your life God used to make His presence alive to you.

### **The Sacred Grove**

Mormons rest their faith squarely on the teachings of Joseph Smith, Jr. Their central moment is Smith's account of his visit from the Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ in the Sacred Grove. This event established Smith's authority as their prophet, the one person God chose to restore His Christian church, which had previously vanished from the earth. To Mormons it is as significant as God's appearance to Moses in the burning bush.

In 1998, church president Gordon B. Hinckley declared, "Our entire case as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints rests on the validity of this glorious First Vision. It was the parting of the curtain to open this, the dispensation of the fullness of times. Nothing on which we base our doctrine, nothing we teach, nothing we live by is of greater importance than this initial declaration. I submit that if Joseph Smith talked with God the Father and His Beloved Son, then all else of which he spoke is true. This is the hinge on which turns the gate that leads to the path of salvation and eternal life."

### **Read Exodus 3:1-7, 10.**

- Describe the similarities Mormons see between this account and Joseph Smith in the Sacred Grove.

Preconditioned by the Great Awakening, Mormons blindly believed Smith's account. For his part, Moses knew the Israelites living as slaves in Egypt would need firm evidence before they would be convinced.

### **Read Exodus 4:1-9.**

- Why was it important for God to give Moses miraculous signs to authenticate him as a true prophet?
- What is the significance that Joseph Smith never gave such authenticating signs—instead requiring blind faith that he had been visited by God and by angels?

## What Was the Second Great Awakening?

It was a **Protestant Christian revival** that took place roughly from **1790 to the 1840s** and emphasized:

- **Personal conversion** and emotional religious experience
- The belief that **individuals could choose salvation** (free will), rather than being predestined
- **Moral reform**, encouraging people to improve both themselves and society

Unlike earlier religious traditions that stressed formal doctrine and elite clergy, this movement focused on **ordinary people**, enthusiastic preaching, and large public gatherings.

### Key Characteristics

- **Revival meetings and camp meetings** with thousands of attendees
- Preachers who used **plain language** and emotional appeals
- Rapid growth of **Methodist and Baptist** churches
- Strong belief that society could be morally perfected

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### Why Was It Important?

The movement had lasting effects far beyond religion:

#### Social Reform Movements It Inspired

- Abolition of slavery
- Women's rights
- Temperance (anti-alcohol movement)
- Prison and Asylum Reform
- Expansion of public education

#### Broader Impact

- Helped democratize American Christianity
- Encouraged the idea that **ordinary citizens could change society**
- Strengthened the link between religion and reform in American life

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Leading up to and during the **Second Great Awakening (c. 1790–1840s)**, American society was undergoing **rapid, disorienting change**. These social, political, and economic shifts created anxiety, opportunity, and a sense that the young nation needed **moral direction**—conditions that made widespread religious revival especially powerful.

### Big Picture Summary

**The Second Great Awakening arose because America was:**

- A **new nation** unsure of its moral foundations
- Rapidly **expanding westward**
- Experiencing **economic and social upheaval**
- Becoming more **democratic and individualistic**
- Searching for **order, meaning, and reform**

Religion filled that gap by offering:

- Personal salvation
- Social purpose
- Moral structure for a changing society

Below is a structured explanation of **what was happening in American society that set the stage for the Second Great Awakening**.

## 1. A New Nation Seeking Identity (Post-Revolution America)

After the **American Revolution (1775–1783)**, the United States faced a major question: *What kind of nation—and people—are we going to be?*

Key conditions:

- The **collapse of monarchy and established churches**
- Greater emphasis on **individual liberty and equality**
- Suspicion of elite authority (including traditional clergy)

Many Americans believed that **republican government could only survive if citizens were morally disciplined**, which made religion seem essential to national stability.

**Result:** Revival preachers framed Christianity as the moral foundation of democracy.

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## 2. Decline of Traditional Religious Authority

In the late 1700s:

- Church membership was **low in many regions**
- Enlightenment ideas promoted **reason, science, and skepticism**
- Younger generations were less tied to old denominations

Many ministers feared America was becoming **morally lax and irreligious**.

**Result:** Revivalism emerged as a way to **re-energize faith**, especially among ordinary people who felt disconnected from formal churches.

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## 3. Westward Expansion and Frontier Life

As Americans moved west into **Kentucky, Tennessee, Ohio, and beyond**:

- Communities were **isolated**
- Few schools, churches, or government institutions existed
- Life was harsh, dangerous, and uncertain

Frontier settlers wanted:

- **Community**
- **Meaning**
- **Hope and order**

**Camp meetings**—large, emotional religious gatherings—met all of these needs at once.

**Result:** The frontier became the birthplace and engine of the Second Great Awakening.

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## 4. Market Revolution and Economic Change

Between 1800 and 1840:

- America shifted from subsistence farming to a **market economy**
- New factories, canals, and transportation networks emerged
- People increasingly worked for **wages** instead of family farms

This caused:

- Economic instability
- Fear of poverty or moral corruption
- Loss of traditional social bonds

**Result:** Revival preaching offered:

- Personal control through moral behavior

- Assurance that individuals could improve themselves
  - A sense of order amid rapid change
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## 5. Democratization of American Life

Politics and society were becoming more democratic:

- Expansion of **white male suffrage**
- Rise of **Andrew Jackson–era populism**
- Increased belief in **equality of opportunity**

Religion mirrored this trend:

- Anyone could preach (especially Methodists and Baptists)
- Anyone could be saved
- Emotional experience mattered more than education or status

**Result:** The Second Great Awakening fit perfectly with democratic ideals—faith was no longer controlled by elites.

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## 6. Changing Views of Human Nature and Salvation

Compared to the First Great Awakening:

- People were less focused on original sin and predestination
- More emphasis on **free will** and **personal responsibility**

Revivalists preached that:

- Individuals could choose salvation
- People could work to **perfect themselves and society**

**Result:** Religion became a motivator for **social reform**, not just personal faith.

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## 7. Rise of Social Reform Movements

Many Americans believed that if individuals improved morally, society would improve too.

The Second Great Awakening fueled movements such as:

- **Abolition of slavery**
- **Temperance (anti-alcohol)**
- **Women's rights**
- **Prison and asylum reform**
- **Public education**

Reformers often saw their work as **religious duty**.

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