



Beware the Bitter Fruits of Apostasy

“In all your trials, tribulations and sickness, in all your sufferings, even unto death, be careful you don’t betray God, . . . be careful you don’t apostatize.”

From the Life of Joseph Smith

In the weeks before and after the completion of the Kirtland Temple in the spring of 1836, the Saints experienced a time of harmony and a rich outpouring of the gifts of the Spirit. But the Prophet Joseph Smith warned the Saints that if they did not continue to live righteously, their joy and unity would not last. Daniel Tyler said of this time: “All felt that they had a foretaste of heaven. In fact, there were several weeks in which we were not tempted of the devil; and we wondered whether the millennium had commenced. At [a meeting of priesthood brethren], the Prophet Joseph addressed us. Among other things he said: ‘Brethren, for some time Satan has not had power to tempt you. Some have thought that there would be no more temptation. But the opposite will come; and unless you draw near to the Lord you will be overcome and apostatize.’”¹

As that year wore on, a spirit of apostasy grew among some of the Saints in Kirtland. Some members became proud, greedy, and disobedient to the commandments. Some blamed Church leaders for economic problems caused by the failure of a Kirtland financial institution established by Church members. This failure occurred in 1837, the same year that a banking panic swept across the United States, compounding the Saints’ economic problems. As many as two or three hundred members fell away from the Church in Kirtland, sometimes joining with those who opposed the Church to torment and even physically threaten the



Joseph Smith taught the importance of sustaining our Church leaders: “That man who rises up to condemn others, finding fault with the Church, saying that they are out of the way, while he himself is righteous, . . . that man is in the high road to apostasy.”

Saints. Some apostates openly claimed that the Prophet was fallen and tried to have other men put in his place. Sister Eliza R. Snow recalled: “Many who had been humble and faithful to the performance of every duty—ready to go and come at every call of the Priesthood—were getting haughty in their spirits, and lifted up in the pride of their hearts. As the Saints drank in the love and spirit of the world, the Spirit of the Lord withdrew from their hearts.”²

Of the Church’s situation in May 1837, the Prophet lamented: “It seemed as though all the powers of earth and hell were combining their influence in an especial manner to overthrow the Church at once. . . . The enemy abroad, and apostates in our midst, united in their schemes, . . . and many became disaffected toward me as though I were the sole cause of those very evils I was most strenuously striving against.”³

Despite these challenges, the large majority of the leaders and members of the Church remained faithful. Brigham Young, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles during this uncertain period, remembered a meeting at which some Church members were discussing how to depose the Prophet Joseph: “I rose up, and in a plain and forcible manner told them that Joseph was a Prophet and I knew it, and that they might rail and slander him as much as they pleased, [but] they could not destroy the appointment of the Prophet of God; they could only destroy their own authority, cut the thread that bound them to the Prophet and to God, and sink themselves to hell. Many were highly enraged at my decided opposition to their measures. . . .

“This meeting was broken up without the apostates being able to unite on any decided measures of opposition. This was a crisis when earth and hell seemed leagued to overthrow the Prophet and Church of God. The knees of many of the strongest men in the Church faltered. During this siege of darkness I stood close by Joseph, and with all the wisdom and power God bestowed upon me, put forth my utmost energies to sustain the servant of God and unite the quorums of the Church.”⁴

Teachings of Joseph Smith

Losing confidence in Church leaders, criticizing them, and neglecting any duty required by God lead to apostasy.

“I will give you one of the *Keys* of the mysteries of the Kingdom. It is an eternal principle, that has existed with God from all eternity: That man who rises up to condemn others, finding fault with the Church, saying that they are out of the way, while he himself is righteous, then know assuredly, that that man is in the high road to apostasy; and if he does not repent, will apostatize, as God lives.”⁵

Heber C. Kimball, while serving as a counselor to President Brigham Young, reported: “I will give you a key which Brother Joseph Smith used to give in Nauvoo. He said that the very step of apostasy commenced with losing confidence in the leaders of this church and kingdom, and that whenever you discerned that spirit you might know that it would lead the possessor of it on the road to apostasy.”⁶

Wilford Woodruff, while serving in the Quorum of the Twelve, said: “Brother Joseph used to counsel us in this wise: ‘The moment you permit yourselves to lay aside any duty that God calls you to perform, to gratify your own desires; the moment you permit yourselves to become careless, you lay a foundation for apostasy. Be careful; understand you are called to a work, and when God requires you to do that work do it.’ Another thing he said: ‘In all your trials, tribulations and sickness, in all your sufferings, even unto death, be careful you don’t betray God, be careful you don’t betray the priesthood, be careful you don’t apostatize.’”⁷

Wilford Woodruff also said: “I remember Brother Joseph Smith visited myself, Brother [John] Taylor, Brother Brigham Young and several other missionaries, when we were about to take our mission to England. We were sick and afflicted, many of us. At the same time we felt to go. The Prophet blessed us, as also our wives and families. . . . He taught us some very important principles, some of which I here name. Brother Taylor, myself, George A. Smith, John E. Page and others had been called to fill the place of

those [apostles] who had fallen away. Brother Joseph laid before us the cause of those men turning away from the commandments of God. He hoped we would learn wisdom by what we saw with the eye and heard with the ear, and that we would be able to discern the spirits of other men without being compelled to learn by sad experience.

“He then remarked that any man, any elder in this Church and kingdom, who pursued a course whereby he would ignore or, in other words, refuse to obey any known law or commandment or duty—whenever a man did this, neglected any duty God required at his hand in attending meetings, filling missions, or obeying counsel, he laid a foundation to lead him to apostasy and this was the reason those men had fallen. They had misused the priesthood sealed upon their heads. They had neglected to magnify their calling as apostles, as elders. They had used that priesthood to attempt to build themselves up and to perform some other work besides the building up of the kingdom of God.”⁸

In 1840, a small, organized body of Church members continued to live in Kirtland, Ohio, although most of the Saints had gathered to Nauwoo, Illinois. In response to news that a Church member in Kirtland was trying to destroy the Saints' confidence in the First Presidency and other authorities of the Church, the Prophet wrote to a Church leader in Kirtland: “In order to conduct the affairs of the Kingdom in righteousness, it is all important that the most perfect harmony, kind feeling, good understanding, and confidence should exist in the hearts of all the brethren; and that true charity, love one towards another, should characterize all their proceedings. If there are any uncharitable feelings, any lack of confidence, then pride, arrogance and envy will soon be manifested; confusion must inevitably prevail, and the authorities of the Church set at naught. . . .

“If the Saints in Kirtland deem me unworthy of their prayers when they assemble together, and neglect to bear me up at the throne of heavenly grace, it is a strong and convincing proof to me that they have not the Spirit of God. If the revelations we have received are true, who is to lead the people? If the keys of the Kingdom have been committed to my hands, who shall open out the mysteries thereof?

“As long as my brethren stand by me and encourage me, I can combat the prejudices of the world, and can bear the contumely [harsh treatment] and abuse with joy; but when my brethren stand aloof, when they begin to faint, and endeavor to retard my progress and enterprise, then I feel to mourn, but am no less determined to prosecute my task, being confident that although my earthly friends may fail, and even turn against me, yet my heavenly Father will bear me off triumphant.

“However, I hope that even in Kirtland there are some who do not make a man an offender for a word [see Isaiah 29:21], but are disposed to stand forth in defense of righteousness and truth, and attend to every duty enjoined upon them; and who will have wisdom to direct them against any movement or influence calculated to bring confusion and discord into the camp of Israel, and to discern between the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

“It would be gratifying to my mind to see the Saints in Kirtland flourish, but think the time is not yet come; and I assure you it never will until a different order of things be established and a different spirit manifested. When confidence is restored, when pride shall fall, and every aspiring mind be clothed with humility as with a garment, and selfishness give place to benevolence and charity, and a united determination to live by every word which proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord is observable, then, and not till then, can peace, order and love prevail.

“It is in consequence of aspiring men that Kirtland has been forsaken. How frequently has your humble servant been envied in his office by such characters, who endeavored to raise themselves to power at his expense, and seeing it impossible to do so, resorted to foul slander and abuse, and other means to effect his overthrow. Such characters have ever been the first to cry out against the Presidency, and publish their faults and foibles to the four winds of heaven.”⁹

Those who apostatize lose the Spirit of God, break their covenants, and often persecute members of the Church.

“Strange as it may appear at first thought, yet it is no less strange than true, that notwithstanding all the professed determination

to live godly, apostates after turning from the faith of Christ, unless they have speedily repented, have sooner or later fallen into the snares of the wicked one, and have been left destitute of the Spirit of God, to manifest their wickedness in the eyes of multitudes. From apostates the faithful have received the severest persecutions. Judas was rebuked and immediately betrayed his Lord into the hands of His enemies, because Satan entered into him.

“There is a superior intelligence bestowed upon such as obey the Gospel with full purpose of heart, which, if sinned against, the apostate is left naked and destitute of the Spirit of God, and he is, in truth, nigh unto cursing, and his end is to be burned. When once that light which was in them is taken from them they become as much darkened as they were previously enlightened, and then, no marvel, if all their power should be enlisted against the truth, and they, Judas-like, seek the destruction of those who were their greatest benefactors.

“What nearer friend on earth, or in heaven, had Judas than the Savior? And his first object was to destroy Him. Who, among all the Saints in these last days, can consider himself as good as our Lord? Who is as perfect? Who is as pure? Who is as holy as He was? Are they to be found? He never transgressed or broke a commandment or law of heaven—no deceit was in His mouth, neither was guile found in His heart. And yet one that ate with Him, who had often drunk of the same cup, was the first to lift up his heel against Him. Where is one like Christ? He cannot be found on earth. Then why should His followers complain, if from those whom they once called brethren, and considered as standing in the nearest relation in the everlasting covenant, they should receive persecution?

“From what source emanated the principle which has ever been manifested by apostates from the true Church to persecute with double diligence, and seek with double perseverance, to destroy those whom they once professed to love, with whom they once communed, and with whom they once covenanted to strive with every power in righteousness to obtain the rest of God? Perhaps our brethren will say the same that caused Satan



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to seek to overthrow the kingdom of God, because he himself was evil, and God’s kingdom is holy.”¹⁰

“There have always been, in every age of the church, those who have been opposed to the principles of virtue, who have loved the gain of this present world, followed the principles of unrighteousness, and have been the enemies of truth. . . . Those who have associated with us and made the greatest professions of friendship, have frequently been our greatest enemies and our most determined foes; if they became unpopular, if their interest or dignity was touched, or if they were detected in their iniquity, they were always the first to raise the hand of persecution, to calumniate [make false charges about] and vilify their brethren, and to seek the downfall and destruction of their friends.”¹¹

“Renegade ‘Mormon’ dissenters are running through the world and spreading various foul and libelous reports against us, thinking thereby to gain the friendship of the world, because they know that we are not of the world, and that the world hates us; therefore they [the world] make a tool of these fellows [the

dissenters]; and by them try to do all the injury they can, and after that they hate them worse than they do us, because they find them to be base traitors and sycophants [flatterers].”¹²

Wilford Woodruff reported: “I attended [a] meeting at the [Kirtland] Temple [on February 19, 1837]. President Joseph Smith had been absent on business for the Church, but not half as long as Moses was in the mount away from Israel [see Exodus 32:1–8]; yet many of the people in Kirtland, if they did not make a calf to worship as did the Israelites, turned their hearts away from the Lord and from his servant Joseph, and had engaged in speculation and given way to false spirits, until they were darkened in their minds; and many were opposed to Joseph Smith, and some wished to appoint David Whitmer to lead the Church in his stead. In the midst of this cloud of dark spirits, Joseph returned to Kirtland, and this morning arose in the stand. He appeared much depressed; but soon the Spirit of God rested upon him, and he addressed the assembly in great plainness for about three hours, and put his enemies to silence.

“When he arose he said, ‘I am still the President, Prophet, Seer, Revelator and Leader of the Church of Jesus Christ. God, and not man, has appointed and placed me in this position, and no man or set of men have power to remove me or appoint another in my stead, and those who undertake this, if they do not speedily repent, will burn their fingers and go to hell.’ He reproved the people sharply for their sins, darkness and unbelief; the power of God rested upon him, and bore testimony that his sayings were true.”¹³

Wilford Woodruff reported: “President Smith spoke in the afternoon [on April 9, 1837], and said in the name of the Lord that the judgments of God would rest upon those men who had professed to be his friends, and friends of humanity, and in building up Kirtland, a stake of Zion, but had turned traitors to him, and the interests of the kingdom of God, and had given power into the hands of our enemies against us; they had oppressed the poor Saints, and had brought distress upon them, and had become covenant breakers, for which they will feel the wrath of God.”¹⁴

Daniel Tyler recalled: “Soon after the Prophet’s arrival in Commerce (afterwards Nauvoo) from Missouri prison, Brother Isaac Behunin and myself made him a visit at his residence. His persecutions were the topic of conversation. He repeated many false, inconsistent and contradictory statements made by apostates, frightened members of the Church and outsiders. He also told how most of the officials who would fain have taken his life, when he was arrested, turned in his favor on forming his acquaintance. He laid the burden of the blame on false brethren. . . .

“When the Prophet had ended telling how he had been treated, Brother Behunin remarked: ‘If I should leave this Church I would not do as those men have done: I would go to some remote place where Mormonism had never been heard of, settle down, and no one would ever learn that I knew anything about it.’

“The great Seer immediately replied: ‘Brother Behunin, you don’t know what you would do. No doubt these men once thought as you do. Before you joined this Church you stood on neutral ground. When the gospel was preached, good and evil were set before you. You could choose either or neither. There were two opposite masters inviting you to serve them. When you joined this Church you enlisted to serve God. When you did that you left the neutral ground, and you never can get back on to it. Should you forsake the Master you enlisted to serve, it will be by the instigation of the evil one, and you will follow his dictation and be his servant.’ ”¹⁵

**If we follow the prophets and apostles and the
revelations of the Church, we will not be led astray.**

Orson Hyde, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, reported: “Joseph the Prophet . . . said, ‘Brethren, remember that the majority of this people will never go astray; and as long as you keep with the majority you are sure to enter the celestial kingdom.’ ”¹⁶

William G. Nelson reported: “I have heard the Prophet speak in public on many occasions. In one meeting I heard him say: ‘I will give you a key that will never rust,—if you will stay with the majority of the Twelve Apostles, and the records of the Church,

you will never be led astray.’ The history of the Church has proven this to be true.”¹⁷

Ezra T. Clark remembered: “I heard the Prophet Joseph say that he would give the Saints a key whereby they would never be led away or deceived, and that was: The Lord would never suffer a majority of this people to be led away or deceived by imposters, nor would He allow the records of this Church to fall into the hands of the enemy.”¹⁸

Suggestions for Study and Teaching

Consider these ideas as you study the chapter or as you prepare to teach. For additional help, see pages vii–xii.

- Review the account on pages 315–17. Why do you think people can change from righteousness to apostasy in such a short time? What are some influences that cause people to apostatize today? What can we do to guard against such influences?
- What are some dangers of losing confidence in our Church leaders and criticizing them? (For some examples, see pages 318–20.) What can we do to maintain a feeling of respect and appreciation for our leaders? How can parents encourage their children to respect Church leaders?
- The Prophet taught, “The moment you permit yourselves to lay aside any duty that God calls you to perform, to gratify your own desires . . . , you lay a foundation for apostasy” (page 318). What does this statement mean to you?
- Read the story told by Daniel Tyler (page 324). Why do you think that those who have apostatized from the Church often fight so strongly against it? (For some examples, see pages 320–24.) How do you think we should respond to the words and actions of such people?
- Read the last three paragraphs of the chapter (pages 324–25). Why is it important for us to understand and use this “key” given by Joseph Smith?

Related Scriptures: 1 Nephi 8:10–33; Helaman 3:33–35; D&C 82:3, 21; 121:11–22

Notes

1. Daniel Tyler, "Incidents of Experience," in *Scraps of Biography* (1883), pp. 32–33.
2. Eliza R. Snow, *Biography and Family Record of Lorenzo Snow* (1884), p. 20; punctuation modernized.
3. *History of the Church*, 2:487–88; from "History of the Church" (manuscript), book B-1, p. 761, Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.
4. Brigham Young, in Historian's Office, *Manuscript History of Brigham Young*, 1844–46, vol. 1, p. 16, Church Archives.
5. *History of the Church*, 3:385; from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on July 2, 1839, in Montrose, Iowa; reported by Wilford Woodruff and Willard Richards.
6. Heber C. Kimball, *Deseret News*, Apr. 2, 1856, p. 26; spelling and capitalization modernized.
7. Wilford Woodruff, *Deseret News*, Dec. 22, 1880, p. 738.
8. Wilford Woodruff, *Deseret News: Semi-Weekly*, Sept. 7, 1880, p. 1; punctuation modernized; paragraph divisions altered.
9. *History of the Church*, 4:165–66; from a letter from Joseph Smith to Oliver Granger, July 1840, Nauvoo, Illinois.
10. *History of the Church*, 2:23; spelling, punctuation, and grammar modernized; paragraph divisions altered; from "The Elders of the Church in Kirtland, to Their Brethren Abroad," Jan. 22, 1834, published in *Evening and Morning Star*, Apr. 1834, p. 152.
11. "John C. Bennett," an editorial published in *Times and Seasons*, Aug. 1, 1842, p. 868; punctuation and grammar modernized; Joseph Smith was the editor of the periodical.
12. *History of the Church*, 3:230; first and second sets of bracketed words in original; from a letter from Joseph Smith to Church members in Caldwell County, Missouri, Dec. 16, 1838, Liberty Jail, Liberty, Missouri.
13. Wilford Woodruff, reporting a discourse given by Joseph Smith on Feb. 19, 1837, in Kirtland, Ohio; "History of Wilford Woodruff," *Deseret News*, July 14, 1858, p. 85; capitalization and grammar modernized; paragraph divisions altered.
14. Wilford Woodruff, reporting a discourse given by Joseph Smith on Apr. 9, 1837, in Kirtland, Ohio; "History of Wilford Woodruff," *Deseret News*, July 14, 1858, p. 86.
15. Daniel Tyler, in "Recollections of the Prophet Joseph Smith," *Juvenile Instructor*, Aug. 15, 1892, pp. 491–92; punctuation and grammar modernized.
16. Orson Hyde, *Deseret News: Semi-Weekly*, June 21, 1870, p. 3.
17. William G. Nelson, in "Joseph Smith, the Prophet," *Young Woman's Journal*, Dec. 1906, p. 543; paragraph divisions altered.
18. Ezra T. Clark, "The Testimony of Ezra T. Clark," July 24, 1901, Farmington, Utah; in Heber Don Carlos Clark, *Papers*, ca. 1901–74, typescript, Church Archives.