



*While the Prophet Joseph Smith was imprisoned in Liberty Jail, he wrote a number of letters to his family and to the Saints, in which he testified of God's power to triumph over evil and to stand by His Saints "forever and ever."*



## “God Shall Be with You Forever and Ever”: The Prophet in Liberty Jail

*“In His Almighty name we are determined to endure  
tribulation as good soldiers unto the end.”*

### From the Life of Joseph Smith

**O**n December 1, 1838, the Prophet Joseph Smith, his brother Hyrum, and other brethren were taken from Richmond, Missouri, where they had been incarcerated in a log home, to the jail in Liberty, Missouri. There they would remain for more than four months, awaiting trial on false charges arising from the persecution of the Saints in Missouri. During this time, Church members were being driven from their homes in Missouri by their persecutors, causing tremendous suffering. The trials of the Saints were a source of great anxiety to the Prophet and his companions during their long imprisonment.

Liberty Jail was divided into an upper room and a 14-foot-square lower dungeon, where the prisoners were kept. The Prophet described their situation: “We are kept under a strong guard, night and day, in a prison of double walls and doors, proscribed in our liberty of conscience. Our food is scant, uniform, and coarse; we have not the privilege of cooking for ourselves; we have been compelled to sleep on the floor with straw, and not blankets sufficient to keep us warm; and when we have a fire, we are obliged to have almost a constant smoke. The Judges have gravely told us from time to time that they knew we were innocent, and ought to be liberated, but they dare not administer the law unto us, for fear of the mob.”<sup>1</sup>

The room was not tall enough to allow the men to stand upright, and Alexander McRae, one of the prisoners, said the food

was “very coarse, and so filthy that we could not eat it until we were driven to it by hunger.”<sup>2</sup>

Mercy Fielding Thompson, a Church member who visited the brethren in the jail, later wrote: “It would be beyond my power to describe my feelings when we were admitted into the jail by the keeper and the door was locked behind us. We could not help feeling a sense of horror on realizing that we were locked up in that dark and dismal den, fit only for criminals of the deepest dye; but there we beheld Joseph, the Prophet—the man chosen of God, in the dispensation of the fullness of time to hold the keys of His kingdom on the earth, with power to bind and to loose as God should direct—confined in a loathsome prison for no other cause or reason than that he claimed to be inspired of God to establish His church among men.”<sup>3</sup>

During the Prophet’s imprisonment, his wife, Emma, was able to visit him only three times. Their only other communication was through letters. On April 4, 1839, the Prophet wrote: “Dear and affectionate wife. Thursday night, I sit down just as the sun is going down, as we peek through the grates of this lonesome prison, to write to you, that I may make known to you my situation. It is, I believe, now about five months and six days since I have been under the grimace of a guard night and day, and within the walls, grates, and screeching iron doors of a lonesome, dark, dirty prison. With emotions known only to God do I write this letter. The contemplations of the mind under these circumstances defy the pen or tongue or angels to describe or paint to the human being who never experienced what we experience. . . . We lean on the arm of Jehovah and none else for our deliverance.”<sup>4</sup>

From Liberty Jail, the Prophet also wrote letters to the Saints, expressing his love for them and his faith that God will always support those who trust in Him. Most of the following material comes from a letter to the members of the Church, dated March 20, 1839, containing the Prophet’s counsel to the Saints, his pleadings with God, and God’s answers to his prayers. Portions of this letter later became sections 121, 122, and 123 of the Doctrine and Covenants.

## Teachings of Joseph Smith

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**No affliction can separate us from the love of God and fellowship with one another.**

“Your humble servant, Joseph Smith, Jun., prisoner for the Lord Jesus Christ’s sake, and for the Saints, taken and held by the power of mobocracy, under the exterminating reign of his excellency, the governor, Lilburn W. Boggs, in company with his fellow prisoners and beloved brethren, Caleb Baldwin, Lyman Wight, Hyrum Smith, and Alexander McRae, send unto you all greeting.<sup>5</sup> May the grace of God the Father, and of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, rest upon you all, and abide with you forever. May knowledge be multiplied unto you by the mercy of God. And may faith and virtue, and knowledge and temperance, and patience and godliness, and brotherly kindness and charity be in you and abound, that you may not be barren in anything, nor unfruitful [see 2 Peter 1:5–8].

“For inasmuch as we know that the most of you are well acquainted with the wrongs and the high-handed injustice and cruelty that are practiced upon us; whereas we have been taken prisoners charged falsely with every kind of evil, and thrown into prison, enclosed with strong walls, surrounded with a strong guard, who continually watch day and night as indefatigable as the devil does in tempting and laying snares for the people of God:

“Therefore, dearly beloved brethren, we are the more ready and willing to lay claim to your fellowship and love. For our circumstances are calculated to awaken our spirits to a sacred remembrance of everything, and we think that yours are also, and that nothing therefore can separate us from the love of God and fellowship one with another [see Romans 8:39]; and that every species of wickedness and cruelty practiced upon us will only tend to bind our hearts together and seal them together in love.

“We have no need to say to you that we are held in bonds without cause, neither is it needful that you say unto us, We are driven from our homes and smitten without cause. We mutually understand that if the inhabitants of the state of Missouri had

let the Saints alone, and had been as desirous of peace as they were, there would have been nothing but peace and quietude in the state unto this day; we should not have been in this hell, . . . where we are compelled to hear nothing but blasphemous oaths, and witness a scene of blasphemy, and drunkenness and hypocrisy, and debaucheries of every description. And again, the cries of orphans and widows would not have ascended up to God against them. Nor would innocent blood have stained the soil of Missouri. . . . It is a tale of woe; a lamentable tale; yea, a sorrowful tale; too much to tell; too much for contemplation; too much for human beings. . . .

“[Our persecutors] practice these things upon the Saints, who have done them no wrong, who are innocent and virtuous; who loved the Lord their God, and were willing to forsake all things for Christ’s sake. These things are awful to relate, but they are verily true. It must needs be that offenses come, but woe unto them by whom they come [see Matthew 18:7].”<sup>6</sup>

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**Adversity lasts only a small moment; if we endure well,  
we will be exalted in the presence of God.**

“O God! where art Thou? And where is the pavilion that covereth Thy hiding place? How long shall Thy hand be stayed, and Thine eye, yea Thy pure eye, behold from the eternal heavens, the wrongs of Thy people, and of Thy servants, and Thy ear be penetrated with their cries?

“Yea, O Lord, how long shall they suffer these wrongs and unlawful oppressions, before Thine heart shall be softened towards them, and Thy bowels be moved with compassion towards them?

“O Lord God Almighty, Maker of Heaven, Earth and Seas, and of all things that in them are, and who controlllest and subjectest the devil, and the dark and benighted dominion of Sheol! Stretch forth Thy hand, let Thine eye pierce; let Thy pavilion be taken up; let Thy hiding place no longer be covered; let Thine ear be inclined; let Thine heart be softened, and Thy bowels moved with compassion towards us. Let Thine anger be kindled against our enemies; and in the fury of Thine heart, with Thy sword avenge us of our wrongs; remember Thy suffering Saints, O our God! and Thy servants will rejoice in Thy name forever. . . .

“. . . My son, peace be unto thy soul; thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment; and then if thou endure it well, God shall exalt thee on high; thou shalt triumph over all thy foes.”<sup>7</sup> [The paragraphs in this section are also found in D&C 121:1–8.]

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**God’s power is greater than any evil, and the truths  
of the gospel will ultimately triumph.**

“I beg leave to say unto you, brethren, that ignorance, superstition and bigotry placing itself where it ought not, is oftentimes in the way of the prosperity of this Church, like the torrent of rain from the mountains that floods the most pure and crystal stream with mire, and dirt, and filthiness, and obscures everything that was clear before, and all rushes along in one general deluge; but time weathers tide; and notwithstanding we are rolled in the mire of the flood for the time being, the next surge peradventure, as time rolls on, may bring to us the fountain as clear as crystal, and as pure as snow; while the filthiness, flood-wood and rubbish is left and purged out by the way.

“How long can rolling water remain impure? What power shall stay the heavens? As well might man stretch forth his puny arm to stop the Missouri river in its decreed course, or to turn it up stream, as to hinder the Almighty from pouring down knowledge from heaven, upon the heads of the Latter-day Saints. [This paragraph is also found in D&C 121:33.]

“What is [Governor Lilburn W.] Boggs or his murderous party, but wimbling willows upon the shore to catch the flood-wood? As well might we argue that water is not water, because the mountain torrents send down mire and roil the crystal stream, although afterwards render it more pure than before; or that fire is not fire, because it is of a quenchable nature, by pouring on the flood; as to say that our cause is down because renegades, liars, priests, thieves and murderers, who are all alike tenacious of their crafts and creeds, have poured down, from their spiritual wickedness in high places, and from their strongholds of the devil, a flood of dirt and mire and filthiness . . . upon our heads.

“No! God forbid. Hell may pour forth its rage like the burning lava of mount Vesuvius, or of Etna, or of the most terrible of the burning mountains; and yet shall ‘Mormonism’ stand. Water, fire, truth and God are all realities. Truth is ‘Mormonism.’ God is the author of it. He is our shield. It is by Him we received our birth. It was by His voice that we were called to a dispensation of His Gospel in the beginning of the fullness of times. It was by Him we received the Book of Mormon; and it is by Him that we remain unto this day; and by Him we shall remain, if it shall be for our glory; and in His Almighty name we are determined to endure tribulation as good soldiers unto the end.

“. . . You will learn by the time you have read this, and if you do not learn it, you may learn it, that walls and irons, doors and creaking hinges, and half-scared-to-death guards and jailers . . . are calculated in their very nature to make the soul of an honest man feel stronger than the powers of hell. . . .

“. . . We are your brethren and fellow-sufferers, and prisoners of Jesus Christ for the Gospel’s sake, and for the hope of glory which is in us.”<sup>8</sup>

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**The Savior understands all our suffering, and He will be with us forever and ever.**

*The Lord comforted the Prophet with the following words:* “The ends of the earth shall inquire after thy name, and fools shall have thee in derision, and hell shall rage against thee, while the pure in heart, and the wise, and the noble, and the virtuous, shall seek counsel, and authority and blessings constantly from under thy hand, and thy people shall never be turned against thee by the testimony of traitors; and although their influence shall cast thee into trouble, and into bars and walls, thou shalt be had in honor, and but for a small moment and thy voice shall be more terrible in the midst of thine enemies, than the fierce lion, because of thy righteousness; and thy God shall stand by thee forever and ever.

“If thou art called to pass through tribulations; if thou art in perils among false brethren; if thou art in perils among robbers; if thou art in perils by land or by sea; if thou art accused with all



*The Savior before Pilate.*

*"The Son of Man hath descended below them all; art thou greater than he?"*

manner of false accusations; if thine enemies fall upon thee; if they tear thee from the society of thy father and mother and brethren and sisters; and if with a drawn sword thine enemies tear thee from the bosom of thy wife, and of thine offspring, and thine elder son, although but six years of age, shall cling to thy garments, and shall say, My father, my father, why can't you stay with us? O, my father, what are the men going to do with you? and if then he shall be thrust from thee by the sword, and thou be dragged to prison, and thine enemies prowl around thee like wolves for the blood of the lamb; and if thou shouldst be cast into the pit, or into the hands of murderers, and the sentence of death passed upon thee; if thou be cast into the deep; if the billowing surge conspire against thee; if fierce winds become thine enemy; if the heavens gather blackness, and all the elements combine to hedge up the way; and above all, if the very jaws of

hell shall gape open the mouth wide after thee, know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good.

“The Son of Man hath descended below them all; art thou greater than he?

“Therefore, hold on thy way, and the Priesthood shall remain with thee, for their bounds are set, they cannot pass. Thy days are known, and thy years shall not be numbered less; therefore, fear not what man can do, for God shall be with you forever and ever.”<sup>9</sup> [The paragraphs in this section are also found in D&C 122:1–9.]

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**The still, small voice whispers consolation to our souls  
in the depths of sorrow and distress.**

*Shortly after the Prophet had been allowed to escape his captors in Missouri, he recalled the feelings he had during his imprisonment:* “During the time I was in the hands of my enemies, I must say, that although I felt great anxiety respecting my family and friends, who were so inhumanly treated and abused, . . . yet as far as I was concerned, I felt perfectly calm, and resigned to the will of my Heavenly Father. I knew my innocence as well as that of the Saints, and that we had done nothing to deserve such treatment from the hands of our oppressors. Consequently, I could look to that God who has the lives of all men in His hands, and who had saved me frequently from the gates of death, for deliverance; and notwithstanding that every avenue of escape seemed to be entirely closed, and death stared me in the face, and that my destruction was determined upon, as far as man was concerned, yet, from my first entrance into the camp, I felt an assurance that I, with my brethren and our families, should be delivered.

“Yes, that still small voice, which has so often whispered consolation to my soul, in the depths of sorrow and distress, bade me be of good cheer, and promised deliverance, which gave me great comfort. And although the heathen raged, and the people imagined vain things, yet the Lord of Hosts, the God of Jacob was my refuge; and when I cried unto Him in the day of trouble, He

delivered me [see Psalms 46:7; 50:15]; for which I call upon my soul, and all that is within me, to bless and praise His holy name. For although I was ‘troubled on every side, yet [I was] not distressed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed.’ [See 2 Corinthians 4:8–9.]”<sup>10</sup>

## Suggestions for Study and Teaching

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

- Review the description of the jail in Liberty, Missouri (pages 359–60). As you study and discuss this chapter, think about the Prophet’s circumstances when he wrote the words recorded in this chapter. Review the third paragraph on page 363. How is the account of the Prophet in Liberty Jail an example of this truth?
- Study the third paragraph on page 361. How do difficult circumstances sometimes “awaken our spirits to a sacred remembrance”? In what ways can trials and persecution “bind our hearts” to family members and friends? What experiences have you had that relate to these truths?
- Joseph Smith declared that nothing could separate him and his brethren from the love of God (page 361). What are your thoughts or feelings as you ponder this statement? In what ways can we become separated from God’s love? What are some things we must do to abide in God’s love?
- Read the first paragraph on page 363. What can we do to receive the peace that the Lord offers us? What do you gain from the Lord’s assurance that Joseph Smith’s adversity and afflictions would be “but a small moment”?
- Review Joseph Smith’s assurances to the Saints that the enemies of the Church could do nothing to hinder the power of God (pages 363–64). Why do we sometimes forget this truth? What can we do to remember it?
- Study the words of the Lord to the Prophet on pages 364–66. How might our lives change as we remember that trials can

give us experience and be for our good? What does it mean to you to know that the Savior has descended below all things? What do you think it means to “hold on thy way”?

- Read the last paragraph of the chapter (pages 366–67). Think about when the Holy Ghost has comforted you in a time of difficulty. Have you had any such experiences that would be appropriate to share?

*Related Scriptures:* Philippians 3:8–9; Mosiah 23:21–24; Alma 7:11; 36:3

### Notes

1. Letter from Joseph Smith to Isaac Galland, Mar. 22, 1839, Liberty Jail, Liberty, Missouri, published in *Times and Seasons*, Feb. 1840, p. 52; punctuation modernized.
2. Alexander McRae, quoted in *History of the Church*, 3:257; from a letter from Alexander McRae to the editor of the *Deseret News*, Oct. 9, 1854, Salt Lake City, Utah, published in *Deseret News*, Nov. 2, 1854, p. 1.
3. Mercy Fielding Thompson, “Recollections of the Prophet Joseph Smith,” *Juvenile Instructor*, July 1, 1892, p. 398; punctuation modernized.
4. Letter from Joseph Smith to Emma Smith, Apr. 4, 1839, Liberty Jail, Liberty, Missouri; Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut; copy in Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah. In this letter, when the Prophet referred to being imprisoned for over five months, he was counting the time he was imprisoned in Independence and Richmond, Missouri, as well as in Liberty.
5. Sidney Rigdon was incarcerated in Liberty Jail with the other brethren on December 1, 1838. However, on January 25, 1839, about two months before the Prophet wrote this letter, Sidney was given permission to leave the jail on bail because he was severely ill. Because continued threats made him afraid to leave the security of the jail, Sidney chose to remain in jail until February 5.
6. *History of the Church*, 3:289–91; punctuation and grammar modernized; paragraph divisions altered; from a letter from Joseph Smith and others to Edward Partridge and the Church, Mar. 20, 1839, Liberty Jail, Liberty, Missouri; parts of this letter were later included in the Doctrine and Covenants as sections 121, 122, and 123.
7. *History of the Church*, 3:291, 293; spelling modernized; paragraph divisions altered. A number of minor changes in punctuation, capitalization, and grammar were made to prepare portions of the Prophet’s letter for publication in the Doctrine and Covenants. Therefore, there are a number of small differences between Doctrine and Covenants 121, 122, and 123, and the material presented in this chapter.
8. *History of the Church*, 3:296–98; spelling and punctuation modernized.
9. *History of the Church*, 3:300–301; paragraph divisions altered.
10. *History of the Church*, 3:328–29; paragraph divisions altered; from “Extract, from the Private Journal of Joseph Smith Jr.,” *Times and Seasons*, Nov. 1839, pp. 7–8.