



Responding to Persecution with Faith and Courage

*“Fear not, but be strong in the Lord and in the
power of his might.”*

From the Life of Joseph Smith

In the winter of 1838–39, the Missouri state militia was under orders from the governor to drive the Latter-day Saints from the state, and the Prophet Joseph Smith was imprisoned in Liberty Jail. That winter and the following spring, a scene of terrible suffering unfolded as thousands of Saints were forced to flee their homes in Missouri. Leaving much of their property behind, they began making their way 200 miles eastward to western Illinois, under the direction of Brigham Young and other Church leaders. Few of the Saints had good wagons and horses, and many slept unsheltered in the rain and snow. Some who did not have shoes wrapped their feet in rags as they walked across the snow.

In February 1839, a kind neighbor helped Emma Smith place her four children and her few belongings into a wagon lined with straw. When their party came to the frozen Mississippi River, Emma walked across the ice with her children, carrying the manuscripts of the Prophet’s Bible translation in two cloth bags tied around her waist under her skirt. She and many other destitute Saints took refuge in the community of Quincy, Illinois, where they continued to suffer from hunger, cold, and sickness, though these sufferings were alleviated by many acts of kindness from a caring community.

Although the Prophet Joseph yearned to help the Saints, he could do little but pray and give direction through letters to Brigham Young and the other brethren who were leading the Saints in his absence. In these desperate circumstances, he wrote



In February 1839, while Joseph Smith was imprisoned in Liberty Jail, Emma Smith and her children walked across the frozen Mississippi River, fleeing their Missouri persecutors.

words of encouragement and peace to Church members: “Dearly beloved brethren, let us cheerfully do all things that lie in our power; and then may we stand still, with the utmost assurance, to see the salvation of God, and for his arm to be revealed” (D&C 123:17).

On April 6, 1839, the Prophet and his fellow prisoners were transferred on a change of venue from Liberty Jail to Gallatin, Daviess County, Missouri. After a court appearance there, the brethren were given another change of venue from Gallatin to Columbia, Boone County, Missouri. But in mid-April, while the Prophet and the other prisoners were being taken to Columbia, the guards allowed them to escape. Within a week, the brethren had joined the body of the Saints in Quincy, Illinois. Elder Wilford Woodruff wrote in his journal of his reunion with the Prophet: “We . . . once more had the happy privilege of taking Brother Joseph by the hand. . . . He greeted us with great joy. He had just received deliverance from prison and the hand of his enemies and returned to the bosom of his family and friends. . . . Joseph was frank, open, and familiar as usual. Sister Emma was truly happy.”¹

The Prophet later paid tribute to his fellow Saints, who, with him, valiantly endured so much for the sake of their faith in the restored gospel of Jesus Christ: “The conduct of the Saints, under their accumulated wrongs and sufferings, has been praiseworthy; their courage in defending their brethren from the ravages of the mobs; their attachment to the cause of truth, under circumstances the most trying and distressing which humanity can possibly endure; their love to each other; their readiness to afford assistance to me and my brethren who were confined in a dungeon; their sacrifices in leaving Missouri, and assisting the poor widows and orphans, and securing them houses in a more hospitable land; all conspire to raise them in the estimation of all good and virtuous men, and has secured them the favor and approbation of Jehovah, and a name as imperishable as eternity.”²

Teachings of Joseph Smith

The enemy of truth opposes the servants of the Lord, especially as they grow closer to the Lord.

“Persecution has rolled upon our heads from time to time, . . . like peals of thunder, because of our religion.”³

“Our religious principles are before the world ready for the investigation of all men, yet we are aware that all the persecution against our friends has arisen in consequence of calumnies [false charges] and misconstructions without foundation in truth and righteousness. This we have endured in common with all other religious societies at their first commencement.”⁴

“Marvel not, then, if you are persecuted; but remember the words of the Savior: ‘The servant is not above his Lord; if they have persecuted me, they will persecute you also’ [see John 15:20]; and that all the afflictions through which the Saints have to pass, are the fulfillment of the words of the Prophets which have spoken since the world began.”⁵

“When I do the best I can—when I am accomplishing the greatest good, then the most evils and wicked surmisings are got up against me. . . . The enemies of this people will never get weary of their persecution against the Church, until they are overcome. I expect they will array everything against me that is in their power to control, and that we shall have a long and tremendous warfare. He that will war the true Christian warfare against the corruptions of these last days will have wicked men and angels of devils, and all the infernal powers of darkness continually arrayed against him. When wicked and corrupt men oppose, it is a criterion to judge if a man is warring the Christian warfare. When all men speak evil of you falsely, blessed are ye, etc. [see Matthew 5:11]. Shall a man be considered bad, when men speak evil of him? No. If a man stands and opposes the world of sin, he may expect to have all wicked and corrupt spirits arrayed against him.

“But it will be but a little season, and all these afflictions will be turned away from us, inasmuch as we are faithful, and are not overcome by these evils. By seeing the blessings of the endowment rolling on, and the kingdom increasing and spreading

from sea to sea, we shall rejoice that we were not overcome by these foolish things.”⁶

“It is thought by some that our enemies would be satisfied with my destruction; but I tell you that as soon as they have shed my blood they will thirst for the blood of every man in whose heart dwells a single spark of the spirit of the fullness of the Gospel. The opposition of these men is moved by the spirit of the adversary of all righteousness. It is not only to destroy me, but every man and woman who dares believe the doctrines that God hath inspired me to teach to this generation.”⁷

“I have learned by experience that the enemy of truth does not slumber, nor cease his exertions to bias the minds of communities against the servants of the Lord, by stirring up the indignation of men upon all matters of importance or interest.”⁸

**Those who love God will bear persecution
with courage and faith.**

“All Saints! profit by this important *Key*—that in all your trials, troubles, temptations, afflictions, bonds, imprisonments and death, see to it, that you do not betray heaven; that you do not betray Jesus Christ; that you do not betray the brethren; that you do not betray the revelations of God, whether in the Bible, Book of Mormon, or Doctrine and Covenants, or any other that ever was or ever will be given and revealed unto man in this world or that which is to come. Yea, in all your kicking and floundering, see to it that you do not this thing, lest innocent blood be found upon your skirts, and you go down to hell.”⁹

In the spring of 1830 the Saints were being persecuted as a result of the Book of Mormon being published: “The Book of Mormon (the stick of Joseph in the hands of Ephraim,) had now been published for some time, and as the ancient prophet had predicted of it, ‘it was accounted as a strange thing.’ [See Hosea 8:12.] No small stir was created by its appearance. Great opposition and much persecution followed the believers of its authenticity. But it had now come to pass that truth had sprung out of the earth, and righteousness had looked down from heaven [see Psalm 85:11; Moses 7:62], so we feared not our opponents,

knowing that we had both truth and righteousness on our side, that we had both the Father and the Son, because we had the doctrines of Christ, and abided in them; and therefore we continued to preach and to give information to all who were willing to hear.”¹⁰

In July 1839, Wilford Woodruff recorded: “Joseph addressed us in few words and said, ‘Remember, brethren, that if you are imprisoned, Brother Joseph has been imprisoned before you. If you are placed where you can only see your brethren through the grates of a window while in irons because of the gospel of Jesus Christ, remember Brother Joseph has been in like circumstances.’”¹¹

In 1841 Joseph Smith and his counselors in the First Presidency wrote: “The truth, like the sturdy oak, has stood unhurt amid the contending elements, which have beat upon it with tremendous force. The floods have rolled, wave after wave, in quick succession, and have not swallowed it up. ‘They have lifted up their voice, O Lord; the floods have lifted up their voice; but the Lord of Hosts is mightier than the mighty waves of the sea’ [see Psalm 93:3–4]; nor have the flames of persecution, with all the influence of mobs, been able to destroy it; but like Moses’ bush, it has stood unconsumed, and now at this moment presents an important spectacle both to men and angels.

“Where can we turn our eyes to behold such another? We contemplate a people who have embraced a system of religion, unpopular, and the adherence to which has brought upon them repeated persecutions. A people who, for their love to God, and attachment to His cause, have suffered hunger, nakedness, perils, and almost every privation. A people who, for the sake of their religion, have had to mourn the premature death of parents, husbands, wives, and children. A people who have preferred death to slavery and hypocrisy, and have honorably maintained their characters, and stood firm and immovable, in times that have tried men’s souls.”¹²



During the winter of 1838–39, thousands of Latter-day Saints were forced to flee from their homes in Missouri, traveling 200 miles to Illinois.

**God’s mighty power will sustain those who are
persecuted for righteousness’ sake.**

While imprisoned in Liberty Jail, Joseph Smith wrote to the Saints: “Do not think that our hearts faint, as though some strange thing had happened unto us [see 1 Peter 4:12], for we have seen and been assured of all these things beforehand, and have an assurance of a better hope than that of our persecutors. Therefore God hath made broad our shoulders for the burden. We glory in our tribulation, because we know that God is with us, that He is our friend, and that He will save our souls. We do not care for them that can kill the body; they cannot harm our souls [see Matthew 10:28]. We ask no favors at the hands of mobs, nor of the world, nor of the devil, nor of his emissaries the dissenters, and those who love, and make, and swear falsehoods, to take away our lives. We have never dissembled, nor will we for the sake of our lives. . . . We know that we have been endeavoring with all our mind, might, and strength, to do the will of God, and all things whatsoever He has commanded us. . . .

“. . . The Savior said, ‘It must needs be that offenses come, but woe unto them by whom they come.’ [See Matthew 18:7.] And again, ‘Blessed are ye when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely for my sake; rejoice and be exceeding glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so persecuted they the Prophets which were before you.’ [Matthew 5:11–12.]

“Now, dear brethren, if any men ever had reason to claim this promise, we are the men; for we know that the world not only hate us, but they speak all manner of evil of us falsely, for no other reason than that we have been endeavoring to teach the fullness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. . . .

“And now, dear and well beloved brethren—and when we say brethren, we mean those who have continued faithful in Christ, men, women and children—we feel to exhort you in the name of the Lord Jesus, to be strong in the faith in the new and everlasting covenant, and nothing frightened at your enemies. . . . Hold on even unto death; for ‘he that seeks to save his life shall lose it; and he that loses his life for my sake, and the Gospel’s, shall find it,’ saith Jesus Christ [see Mark 8:35].”¹³

Also from Liberty Jail, the Prophet and his counselors in the First Presidency wrote to Church leaders: “Brethren, fear not, but be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might. What is man that the servant of God should fear him, or the son of man that he should tremble at him? Neither think it strange concerning the fiery trials with which we are tried, as though some strange thing had happened unto us. Remember that all have been partakers of like afflictions. [See 1 Peter 4:12–13.] Therefore, rejoice in our afflictions, by which you are perfected and through which the captain of our salvation was perfected also. [See Hebrews 2:10.] Let your hearts and the hearts of all the Saints be comforted with you, and let them rejoice exceedingly, for great is our reward in heaven, for so persecuted the wicked the prophets which were before us [see Matthew 5:11–12].”¹⁴

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 369–71. What impresses you about the way Joseph Smith and his fellow Saints responded to persecution? Why do you think they were willing to endure persecution?
- Read pages 372–73, in which the Prophet Joseph teaches that righteous people will often face persecution. Why do you think this is so? How is persecution today similar to persecution in Joseph Smith’s day? How is it different today?
- On page 373, Joseph Smith shared a key to help the Saints. What experiences have shown you the value of this key? What other counsel might you give to someone who is facing persecution because of his or her faith? (For some examples, see pages 373–74.)
- Review pages 375–76, in which Joseph Smith assures us that the Lord will sustain us when we respond to persecution with faith and courage. What do you think it means to say that God has “made broad our shoulders for the burden”? How can we “glory in our tribulation” and “rejoice in our afflictions”? In what ways do you think our afflictions can help us become perfected?

Related Scriptures: Matthew 5:43–44; Romans 8:35–39; 2 Nephi 26:8; Mosiah 24:8–16; 3 Nephi 6:13

Notes

1. Wilford Woodruff, Journals, 1833–98, entry for May 3, 1839, Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.
2. *History of the Church*, 3:329–30; from “Extract, from the Private Journal of Joseph Smith Jr.,” *Times and Seasons*, Nov. 1839, p. 8.
3. *History of the Church*, 6:210; from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on Feb. 8, 1844, in Nauvoo, Illinois; reported by Wilford Woodruff.
4. *History of the Church*, 2:460; from a letter from Joseph Smith and others to John Thornton and others, July 25, 1836, Kirtland, Ohio, published in *Messenger and Advocate*, Aug. 1836, p. 358.
5. *History of the Church*, 3:331; punctuation modernized; from “Extract, from the Private Journal of Joseph Smith Jr.,” *Times and Seasons*, Nov. 1839, pp. 8–9.

6. *History of the Church*, 5:140–41; paragraph divisions altered; from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on Aug. 31, 1842, in Nauvoo, Illinois; reported by Eliza R. Snow; see also appendix, page 562, item 3.
7. *History of the Church*, 6:498; from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on June 18, 1844, in Nauvoo, Illinois. The compilers of *History of the Church* combined verbal reports by several eyewitnesses into a single account of the discourse.
8. *History of the Church*, 2:437; from a letter from Joseph Smith to Oliver Cowdery, Apr. 1836, Kirtland, Ohio, published in *Messenger and Advocate*, Apr. 1836, p. 289.
9. *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.
10. *History of the Church*, 1:84; from “History of the Church” (manuscript), book A-1, p. 41, Church Archives.
11. Wilford Woodruff, reporting a statement made by Joseph Smith on July 7, 1839, in Commerce, Illinois; Wilford Woodruff, *Journals, 1833–98*, Church Archives.
12. *History of the Church*, 4:337; punctuation modernized; paragraph divisions altered; from a report from Joseph Smith and his counselors in the First Presidency, Apr. 7, 1841, Nauvoo, Illinois, published in *Times and Seasons*, Apr. 15, 1841, pp. 384–85.
13. *History of the Church*, 3:227–29, 232–33; punctuation modernized; paragraph divisions altered; from a letter from Joseph Smith to Church members in Caldwell County, Missouri, Dec. 16, 1838, Liberty Jail, Liberty, Missouri.
14. Letter from Joseph Smith and his counselors in the First Presidency to Heber C. Kimball and Brigham Young, Jan. 16, 1839, Liberty Jail, Liberty, Missouri, Church Archives.