



On the afternoon of June 27, 1844, a mob stormed the jail in Carthage, Illinois, killing the Propbet Joseph Smith and Hyrum Smith.



The Martyrdom: The Prophet Seals His Testimony with His Blood

*“He lived great, and he died great in the eyes of
God and his people.”*

From the Life of Joseph Smith

The winter and spring of 1843–44 was a time of great tension in Nauvoo, as Joseph Smith’s enemies increased their efforts to destroy him and the Church. Knowing his mortal ministry would soon come to a close, the Prophet met frequently with members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles to instruct them and to give them the priesthood keys necessary to govern the Church. These preparations culminated in a meeting with the Apostles and a few other close associates in March 1844. In this extraordinary council, the Prophet charged the Twelve to govern the Church after his death, explaining that he had conferred upon them all the ordinances, authority, and keys necessary to do so. “I roll the burden and responsibility of leading this church off from my shoulders on to yours,” he declared. “Now, round up your shoulders and stand under it like men; for the Lord is going to let me rest awhile.”¹

On June 10, 1844, Joseph Smith, who was the mayor of Nauvoo, and the Nauvoo city council ordered the destruction of the *Nauvoo Expositor* and the press on which it was printed. The *Nauvoo Expositor* was an anti-Mormon newspaper that slandered the Prophet and other Saints and called for the repeal of the Nauvoo Charter. City officials feared that this publication would lead to mob action. As a result of the action by the mayor and city council, Illinois authorities brought an unfounded charge of riot against the Prophet, his brother Hyrum, and other Nauvoo

city officials. The governor of Illinois, Thomas Ford, ordered the men to stand trial in Carthage, Illinois, the county seat, and promised them protection. Joseph knew that if he went to Carthage, his life would be in great danger from the mobs who were threatening him.

Believing that the mobs wanted only them, Joseph and Hyrum decided to leave for the West to preserve their lives. On June 23, they crossed the Mississippi River, but later that day, brethren from Nauvoo found the Prophet and told him that troops would invade the city if he did not surrender to the authorities in Carthage. This the Prophet agreed to do, hoping to appease both government officials and the mobs. On June 24, Joseph and Hyrum Smith bade farewell to their families and rode with other Nauvoo city officials toward Carthage, voluntarily surrendering themselves to county officials in Carthage the next day. After the brothers had been released on bail for the initial charge, they were falsely charged with treason against the state of Illinois, arrested, and imprisoned in Carthage Jail to await a hearing. Elders John Taylor and Willard Richards, the only members of the Twelve who were not then serving missions, voluntarily joined them.

On the afternoon of June 27, 1844, the little group of brethren sat silent and disconsolate in the jail. One of the men asked Elder Taylor, who had a rich tenor voice, to sing to them. Soon his voice was raised: “A poor wayfaring Man of grief hath often crossed me on my way, who sued so humbly for relief that I could never answer nay.”² Elder Taylor recollected that the hymn “was very much in accordance with our feelings at the time for our spirits were all depressed, dull and gloomy.”³

Shortly after five o'clock in the afternoon, a large group of attackers stormed the jail, firing their guns at the men inside. Within a few minutes, the foul deed was done. Hyrum Smith was shot first and died almost immediately. Elder Richards miraculously received only a superficial wound; and Elder Taylor, though severely wounded, survived and later became the third President of the Church. The Prophet Joseph ran to the window and was fatally shot. The Prophet of the Restoration and his brother Hyrum had sealed their testimonies with their blood.

Teachings of Joseph Smith

God protected Joseph Smith until his earthly mission was complete.

In August 1842, Joseph Smith said: “My feelings at the present time are that, inasmuch as the Lord Almighty has preserved me until today, He will continue to preserve me, by the united faith and prayers of the Saints, until I have fully accomplished my mission in this life, and so firmly established the dispensation of the fullness of the priesthood in the last days, that all the powers of earth and hell can never prevail against it.”⁴

In October 1843, the Prophet said: “I defy all the world to destroy the work of God; and I prophesy they never will have power to kill me till my work is accomplished, and I am ready to die.”⁵

In May 1844, the Prophet said: “God will always protect me until my mission is fulfilled.”⁶

In June 1844, the Prophet said: “I do not regard my own life. I am ready to be offered a sacrifice for this people; for what can our enemies do? Only kill the body, and their power is then at an end. Stand firm, my friends; never flinch. Do not seek to save your lives, for he that is afraid to die for the truth, will lose eternal life. Hold out to the end, and we shall be resurrected and become like Gods, and reign in celestial kingdoms, principalities, and eternal dominions.”⁷

Early on June 27, 1844, in Carthage Jail, Joseph Smith wrote in a hasty letter to Emma Smith: “I am very much resigned to my lot, knowing I am justified and have done the best that could be done. Give my love to the children and all my friends . . . ; and as for treason, I know that I have not committed any, and they cannot prove one appearance of anything of the kind, so you need not have any fears that any harm can happen to us on that score. May God bless you all. Amen.”⁸

**Before his death, Joseph Smith conferred upon the
Twelve Apostles every priesthood key and power that the
Lord had sealed upon him.**

Wilford Woodruff, the fourth President of the Church, recalled: “[Joseph Smith] spent the last winter of his life, some three or four months, with the quorum of the Twelve teaching them. It was not merely a few hours ministering to them the ordinances of the gospel; but he spent day after day, week after week and month after month, teaching them and a few others the things of the kingdom of God.”⁹

Wilford Woodruff said about Joseph Smith’s meeting with the Apostles in March 1844: “I remember the last speech that [Joseph Smith] ever gave us before his death. . . . He stood upon his feet some three hours. The room was filled as with consuming fire, his face was as clear as amber, and he was clothed upon by the power of God. He laid before us our duty. He laid before us the fullness of this great work of God; and in his remarks to us he said: ‘I have had sealed upon my head every key, every power, every principle of life and salvation that God has ever given to any man who ever lived upon the face of the earth. And these principles and this Priesthood and power belong to this great and last dispensation which the God of Heaven has set His hand to establish in the earth. Now,’ said he, addressing the Twelve, ‘I have sealed upon your heads every key, every power, and every principle which the Lord has sealed upon my head.’ And continuing, he said, ‘I have lived so long—up to the present time—I have been in the midst of this people and in the great work and labor of redemption. I have desired to live to see this Temple built. But I shall never live to see it completed; but you will—you will.’ . . .

“After addressing us in this manner he said: ‘I tell you, the burden of this kingdom now rests upon your shoulders; you have got to bear it off in all the world, and if you don’t do it you will be damned.’ ”¹⁰

Members of the Quorum of the Twelve recorded: “We, the [Twelve], . . . were present at a council in the latter part of the month of March last [1844], held in the City of Nauvoo. . . .



Wilford Woodruff recalled that the Prophet Joseph Smith “spent the last winter of his life, some three or four months, with the quorum of the Twelve teaching them. . . . He spent day after day, week after week and month after month.”

“In this council, Joseph Smith seemed somewhat depressed in spirit, and took the liberty to open his heart to us . . . : ‘Brethren, the Lord bids me hasten the work in which we are engaged. . . . Some important scene is near to take place. It may be that my enemies will kill me. And in case they should, and the keys and power which rest on me not be imparted to you, they will be lost from the earth. But if I can only succeed in placing them upon your heads, then let me fall a victim to murderous hands if God will suffer it, and I can go with all pleasure and satisfaction, knowing that my work is done, and the foundation laid on which

the kingdom of God is to be reared in this dispensation of the fulness of times.

“‘Upon the shoulders of the Twelve must the responsibility of leading this church henceforth rest until you shall appoint others to succeed you. Your enemies cannot kill you all at once, and should any of you be killed, you can lay your hands upon others and fill up your quorum. Thus can this power and these keys be perpetuated in the earth.’ . . .

“Never shall we forget his feelings or his words on this occasion. After he had thus spoken, he continued to walk the floor, saying: ‘Since I have rolled the burden off from my shoulders, I feel as light as a cork. I feel that I am free. I thank my God for this deliverance.’”¹¹

Parley P. Pratt, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, wrote: “This great and good man was led, before his death, to call the Twelve together, from time to time, and to instruct them in all things pertaining to the kingdom, ordinances, and government of God. He often observed that he was laying the foundation, but it would remain for the Twelve to complete the building. Said he, ‘I know not why; but for some reason I am constrained to hasten my preparations, and to confer upon the Twelve all the ordinances, keys, covenants, endowments, and sealing ordinances of the priesthood, and so set before them a pattern in all things pertaining to the sanctuary [the temple] and the endowment therein.’

“Having done this, he rejoiced exceedingly; for, said he, the Lord is about to lay the burden on your shoulders and let me rest awhile; and if they kill me, continued he, the kingdom of God will roll on, as I have now finished the work which was laid upon me, by committing to you all things for the building up of the kingdom according to the heavenly vision, and the pattern shown me from heaven.”¹²

Brigham Young, the second President of the Church, taught: “Joseph conferred upon our heads all the keys and powers belonging to the Apostleship which he himself held before he was taken away, and no man or set of men can get between Joseph and the Twelve in this world or in the world to come.

How often has Joseph said to the Twelve, 'I have laid the foundation and you must build thereon, for upon your shoulders the kingdom rests.' ”¹³

The Prophet Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum lived great and died great for their testimonies of the gospel.

*As recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 135:1–6, John Taylor, while serving as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, wrote: “To seal the testimony of this book and the Book of Mormon, we announce the martyrdom of Joseph Smith the Prophet, and Hyrum Smith the Patriarch. They were shot in Carthage jail, on the 27th of June, 1844, about five o’clock p.m., by an armed mob—painted black—of from 150 to 200 persons. Hyrum was shot first and fell calmly, exclaiming: *I am a dead man!* Joseph leaped from the window, and was shot dead in the attempt, exclaiming: *O Lord my God!* They were both shot after they were dead, in a brutal manner, and both received four balls.*

“John Taylor and Willard Richards, two of the Twelve, were the only persons in the room at the time; the former was wounded in a savage manner with four balls, but has since recovered; the latter, through the providence of God, escaped, without even a hole in his robe.

“Joseph Smith, the Prophet and Seer of the Lord, has done more, save Jesus only, for the salvation of men in this world, than any other man that ever lived in it. In the short space of twenty years, he has brought forth the Book of Mormon, which he translated by the gift and power of God, and has been the means of publishing it on two continents; has sent the fulness of the everlasting gospel, which it contained, to the four quarters of the earth; has brought forth the revelations and commandments which compose this book of Doctrine and Covenants, and many other wise documents and instructions for the benefit of the children of men; gathered many thousands of the Latter-day Saints, founded a great city, and left a fame and name that cannot be slain. He lived great, and he died great in the eyes of God and his people; and like most of the Lord’s anointed in ancient times, has sealed his mission and his works with his own blood; and so has

his brother Hyrum. In life they were not divided, and in death they were not separated!

“When Joseph went to Carthage to deliver himself up to the pretended requirements of the law, two or three days previous to his assassination, he said: ‘I am going like a lamb to the slaughter; but I am calm as a summer’s morning; I have a conscience void of offense towards God, and towards all men. I shall die innocent, and it shall yet be said of me—he was murdered in cold blood.’—The same morning, after Hyrum had made ready to go—shall it be said to the slaughter? yes, for so it was—he read the following paragraph, near the close of the twelfth chapter of Ether, in the Book of Mormon, and turned down the leaf upon it:

“And it came to pass that I prayed unto the Lord that he would give unto the Gentiles grace, that they might have charity. And it came to pass that the Lord said unto me: If they have not charity it mattereth not unto thee, thou hast been faithful; wherefore thy garments shall be made clean. And because thou hast seen thy weakness, thou shalt be made strong, even unto the sitting down in the place which I have prepared in the mansions of my Father. And now I . . . bid farewell unto the Gentiles; yea, and also unto my brethren whom I love, until we shall meet before the judgment-seat of Christ, where all men shall know that my garments are not spotted with your blood. [Ether 12:36–38.] The testators are now dead, and their testament is in force.

“Hyrum Smith was forty-four years old in February, 1844, and Joseph Smith was thirty-eight in December, 1843; and henceforward their names will be classed among the martyrs of religion; and the reader in every nation will be reminded that the Book of Mormon, and this book of Doctrine and Covenants of the church, cost the best blood of the nineteenth century to bring them forth for the salvation of a ruined world; and that if the fire can scathe a green tree for the glory of God, how easy it will burn up the dry trees to purify the vineyard of corruption. They lived for glory; they died for glory; and glory is their eternal reward. From age to age shall their names go down to posterity as gems for the sanctified.”¹⁴

Joseph Smith fulfilled his earthly mission and sealed his testimony with his blood.

Brigham Young declared: “Though the enemy had power to kill our prophet, that is, kill his body, did he not accomplish all that was in his heart to accomplish in his day? He did, to my certain knowledge.”¹⁵



Brigham Young

Brigham Young also taught: “Who delivered Joseph Smith from the hands of his enemies to the day of his death? It was God; though he was brought to the brink of death time and time again, so that to all human appearance there could be no prospect of his being saved. When he was in jail in Missouri, and no person expected that he would ever escape from their hands, I had the faith of Abraham, and told the Brethren as the Lord God lived, he shall come out of their hands. Though he had prophesied that he would not live to be 40 years of age, yet we all cherished hopes that that would be a false prophecy, and we should keep him forever with us. We thought our faith would outreach it, but we were mistaken—he at last fell a martyr to his religion. I said it is all right; now the testimony is in full force; he has sealed it with his blood.”¹⁶

Wilford Woodruff testified: “I used to have peculiar feelings about his death and the way in which his life was taken. I felt that if . . . Joseph could have had his desire, he would have pioneered the way to the Rocky Mountains. But since then I have been fully reconciled to the fact that it was according to the programme, that it was required of him, as the head of this dispensation, that he should seal his testimony with his blood, and go hence to the spirit world, holding the keys of this dispensation, to open up the mission that is now being performed by way of preaching the Gospel to the ‘spirits in prison.’ ”¹⁷

Joseph F. Smith, the sixth President of the Church, taught: “What does the martyrdom [of Joseph and Hyrum Smith] teach

us? The great lesson that ‘where a testament is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator’ (Heb. 9:16) to make it of force. Moreover, that the blood of martyrs is indeed the seed of the Church. The Lord permitted the sacrifice that the testimony of those virtuous and righteous men should stand as a witness against a perverse and unrighteous world. Then, again, they were examples of the wonderful love of which the Redeemer speaks: ‘Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.’ (John 15:13.) This wonderful love they manifested to the Saints and to the world; for both realized and expressed their conviction, before starting on the journey to Carthage, that they were going to their death. . . . Their courage, their faith, their love for the people were without bounds, and they gave all that they had for their people. Such devotion and love left no doubt in the minds of those who enjoyed the companionship of the Holy Spirit that these good men and true, were indeed the authorized servants of the Lord.

“This martyrdom has always been an inspiration to the people of the Lord. It has helped them in their individual trials; has given them courage to pursue a course in righteousness and to know and to live the truth, and must ever be held in sacred memory by the Latter-day Saints who have learned the great truths that God revealed through His servant, Joseph Smith.”¹⁸



George Albert Smith

George Albert Smith, the eighth President of the Church, declared: “Joseph Smith performed his mission; and when the time came that he was face to face with death, he said, ‘I am going like a lamb to the slaughter, but I am calm as a summer morning. I have a conscience void of offense toward God and toward all men. If they take my life, I shall die an innocent man, and my blood shall cry from the ground for vengeance, and it shall yet be said of me, “He was murdered in cold blood.”’ [See D&C 135:4.] He was not afraid to stand before the pleasing bar of our Father in heaven and answer for the deeds done in the

body. He was not afraid to meet the charge that had been made against him, that he was deceiving the people and dealing unjustly with them. He was not afraid of the result of his life's mission, and of the final triumph of the work which he knew was of divine origin, and for which he gave his life."¹⁹

*Gordon B. Hinckley, the fifteenth President of the Church, testified: "So certain was [Joseph Smith] of the cause he led, so sure of his divinely given calling, that he placed them above the value of his own life. With prescient knowledge of his forthcoming death, he surrendered himself to those who would deliver him defenseless into the hands of a mob. He sealed his testimony with his life's blood."*²⁰

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.

- Shortly before Joseph and Hyrum Smith were killed, Elder John Taylor sang “A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief” (page 530). Read or sing the words of this hymn (*Hymns*, no. 29), and think about how they relate to the life of the Prophet Joseph Smith. Why was this a fitting hymn under the circumstances?
- Review the statements testifying that Joseph Smith conferred priesthood keys on the Twelve Apostles (pages 532–35). Why do you think the Apostles felt it was important to testify of these experiences? What is your testimony of succession in the Presidency of the Church?
- Study John Taylor’s account of the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith (pages 535–36). How might you defend the statement that Joseph Smith “has done more, save Jesus only, for the salvation of men in this world, than any other man that ever lived in it”? Before going to Carthage Jail, Hyrum read Ether 12:36–38 and turned down the page. In what ways did this passage apply to Joseph and Hyrum? What are your feelings as you think about the sacrifices Joseph and Hyrum Smith made for their testimonies of Jesus Christ?

- Read the testimonies of latter-day prophets on pages 537–39. What words of gratitude and testimony can you add to theirs?

Related Scriptures: Hebrews 9:16–17; D&C 5:21–22; 98:13–14; 112:30–33; 136:37–40

Notes

1. Quoted in declaration of the Twelve Apostles (undated draft), reporting Mar. 1844 meeting; in Brigham Young, Office Files 1832–78, Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.
2. “A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief,” *Hymns*, no. 29.
3. John Taylor, quoted in *History of the Church*, 7:101; from John Taylor, “The Martyrdom of Joseph Smith,” in Historian’s Office, History of the Church ca. 1840s–1880, p. 47, Church Archives.
4. *History of the Church*, 5:139–40; 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.
5. *History of the Church*, 6:58; from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on Oct. 15, 1843, in Nauvoo, Illinois; reported by Willard Richards; see also appendix, page 562, item 3.
6. *History of the Church*, 6:365; from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on May 12, 1844, in Nauvoo, Illinois; reported by Thomas Bullock.
7. *History of the Church*, 6:500; 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. Letter from Joseph Smith to Emma Smith, June 27, 1844, Carthage Jail, Carthage, Illinois; Community of Christ Archives, Independence, Missouri; copy in Church Archives.
9. Wilford Woodruff, *Deseret News: Semi-Weekly*, Dec. 21, 1869, p. 2.
10. Wilford Woodruff, *Deseret Semi-Weekly News*, Mar. 15, 1892, p. 2; punctuation modernized.
11. Declaration of the Twelve Apostles (undated draft), reporting Mar. 1844 meeting; in Brigham Young, Office Files 1832–78, Church Archives.
12. Parley P. Pratt, “Proclamation to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” *Millennial Star*, Mar. 1845, p. 151.
13. Brigham Young, quoted in *History of the Church*, 7:230; paragraph divisions altered; from a discourse given by Brigham Young on Aug. 7, 1844, in Nauvoo, Illinois.
14. Doctrine and Covenants 135:1–6.
15. Brigham Young, *Deseret News*, Apr. 30, 1853, p. 46; italics deleted.
16. Brigham Young, discourse given on Aug. 1, 1852, in Salt Lake City, Utah; in Historian’s Office, Reports of Speeches ca. 1845–85, Church Archives.
17. Wilford Woodruff, *Deseret News*, Mar. 28, 1883, p. 146.
18. Joseph F. Smith, “The Martyrdom,” *Juvenile Instructor*, June 1916, p. 381; punctuation modernized; paragraph divisions altered.
19. George Albert Smith, in Conference Report, Apr. 1904, p. 64; spelling modernized.
20. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, Oct. 1981, pp. 6–7; or *Ensign*, Nov. 1981, p. 7.