

A LESSON FROM THE MARTYRDOM
OF JOSEPH SMITH

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Joseph Smith turned his steps toward Carthage and martyrdom with the sad comment, "If my life is of no value to my friends, it is of none to myself."¹ Before making the fateful decision to go to Carthage, the Prophet received a revelation directing him in the course he should take to preserve his life. But the Saints at Nauvoo failed to sustain him in that action, so he set his face resolutely toward Carthage with the repeated declaration: "I am going like a lamb to the slaughter."²

Years later Brigham Young spoke to the Saints in Salt Lake City about the Prophet's decision. "If Brother Joseph Smith had been led by the Spirit he had, he would never /have given himself up and gone to Carthage, explained, "but he would have gone right to these mountains, and would have been alive today to lead this people." The lesson the Saints should have learned from the Prophet's death, President Young stressed, was that "the sheep must follow the shepherd, not the shepherd follow the sheep."³

As early as the day the Church was organized, the Lord impressed upon the Saints the fact that they had an obligation to sustain and behold the Prophet, Seer, and Revelator of the Church. "Wherefore, meaning the church," a revelation said, "thou shalt give heed unto all his words and commandments which be shall give unto you as he receiveth them, walking in all holiness before me; for his words ye shall receive, as if from mine own mouth, in all patience and faith."⁴

The Lord later made clear this obligation on two separate occasions.⁵ Great blessings were promised to the Saints if they would

uphold God's prophet and sustain this divine order. "By doing these things the gates of hell shall not prevail against you," the Lord explained; "yea, and a the Lord God will disperse the powers of darkness from before you, and cause the heavens to shake for your good, and his name's glory."⁶ Again the Lord declared: "...inasmuch as ye do this, glory shall be added to the kingdom which ye have received. Inasmuch as ye do it not, it shall be taken, even that which ye have received."⁷

But the Saints at Nauvoo failed to learn this lesson and be as attentive to its obligation as they should have been. Their failure cost the Prophet Joseph Smith his life.

The questions are sometimes discussed, Did Joseph Smith have to die? If so, did he have to seal his testimony at the time he did? Many great prophets of the past have not had to seal their testimony with their life's blood, including Adam, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Nephi, Alma, and others. However, Joseph Smith stood as a unique figure among the prophets by virtue of his calling at the head of the Dispensation of the Fullness of Times--a dispensation in which he stood as a witness to the world and in which the purposes of God for the whole human family must be consummated. His testimony was largely rejected by the people of his day, and for this reason it was written that he, like several of "the Lord's anointed in ancient times,...sealed his mission and his words with his own blood."⁸

But evidence indicates that Joseph Smith did not necessarily have to die when he did. A major reason why he was martyred June 27, 1844, was because many of the Saints did not sustain him in his prophetic calling as they should have done. They did not fulfill their responsibility to him as the Lord's prophet on earth. Stephen Markham was one of the Prophet's trusted friends, and was closely associated with Joseph in the period before the martyrdom. "I asked him how this thing was going to come out," Markham later reported. "He replied, if the brethren would let him manage the business there should be no blood shed, but if not it would be the hardest blow the Church ever had or would receive, that if he and Hyrum were ever taken again they would be massacred, or he was not a prophet of God."⁹

When the events which led to the Prophet's death began to press heavily upon him, he contemplated the alternatives that lay before him. His countenance brightened as the inspiration of God illuminated his mind. "The way is open," he declared. "It is clear to my mind what to do. All they want is Hyrum and myself ; then tell everybody to go about their business, and not to collect in groups, but to scatter about. There is no doubt they will come here and search for us. Let them search; they will not harm you in person or property, and not even a hair of your head. We will cross the river tonight, and go away to the West."¹⁰ The Prophet's intention was to organize an exploring expedition to go to the West and find a location for the Saints to settle, then return to Nauvoo after the prevailing emotions and feelings had settled down somewhat.¹¹ With the emotional tensions which then existed allayed by time, he could meet the legal charges which were being made against him when, as Mayor of Nauvoo, he ordered the destruction of the libelous press, the Nauvoo Expositor.

But many of the Saints, lacking insight, inspiration, and confidence in the prophet, failed to sustain him in this course, even though Hyrum informed them of the revelation of God to his brother, saying: "The Lord has warned him to flee to the Rocky Mountains to save his life."¹²

Joseph began immediately to carry out the Lord's instructions to him. About two o'clock in the morning of June 23rd, he, Hyrum and Willard Richards were rowed across the Mississippi River by Orrin Porter Rockwell, to Montrose, where they went to the home of William Jordon and began preparing for their journey to the West while Brother Rockwell returned to Nauvoo for horses to make the trip.

Meanwhile, a constable and his party arrived in Nauvoo to arrest Joseph and Hyrum. Not finding them, the constable went to Carthage leaving the threat that the Governor would send troops to Nauvoo and wait three years, if necessary, to arrest the Prophet. Many of the Saints became frightened. "They wanted to get a council formed and send a committee to invite Joseph back," Stephen Markham reported. "They said it was a viable case and there was no danger, as they would bail him to any amount they might ask. Said it would break up the place [Nauvoo] and lessen the value of property,

also ruin a number of men [financially] for Joseph to leave."¹³ Their interest in monetary matters and in their own personal affairs blinded them from seeing that the mob only wanted to get Joseph to Carthage where they would deal with him in their own way, not according to the processes of law. Accordingly, a committee was sent to entreat Joseph to return and give himself up. Rockwell was sent with them to show them where the Prophet was staying. Upon finding the Prophet and his brother, members of the committee accused Joseph of "cowardice for wishing to leave the people, adding that their property would be destroyed, and they left without house or hams." This base accusation cut Joseph to the depths of his sensitive soul, and it was then that he replied: "If my life is of no value to my friends it is of none to myself."¹⁴

What can a prophet do when circumstances place him in a position of choosing between following the light of truth and revelation which opens the vision of the future, or yielding to the fears and accusations of his friends? What can he do when, under such circumstances, his own life hangs in the balance? Turning to Rockwell, who had observed the fears which the Saints had expressed at Nauvoo, Joseph asked, "What shall I do?" Rockwell replied, "You are the oldest and ought to know best; and as you make your bed, I will lie with you."

Joseph turned to Hyrum and said, "Brother Hyrum, you are the oldest, what shall we do?"

Hyrum replied, "let us go back and give ourselves up, and see the thing out."

After studying a few moments, Joseph said, "If you go back, I will go with you, but we shall be butchered."

Hyrum said, "No, no; let us go back and put our trust in Cod, and we shall not be harmed. The Lord is in it. If we live or have to die, we will be reconciled to our fate."¹⁵

With this, the Prophet returned to Nauvoo, and then went to Carthage. On the way to Carthage, he met Stephen Markham, who had been sent away earlier on business for the brethren. "Be...told me about the committee going to him in Iowa saying that he had

always said he would stand by them until death, but now the wolf had come he left the flock for them to be destroyed," Markham related. "Be remarked, I could not stand such language as that and said, if the people do not want me to live for their sakes, I do not want to live for my own."¹⁶

Having started for Carthage, the Prophet returned to Nauvoo for a short time to see that the state arms which the Nauvoo Legion had were peacefully delivered up to an emissary from the Governor.¹⁷ "While the arms were being delivered up, General Smith, in advising Col. Scott to give up the cannon, said that he had gone away by the council of the Spirit of the Lord." "But," the Prophet continued, "I have been forced back by the brethren."¹⁸

On the fateful day of June 27, Stephen Markham was sitting with the Prophet on the bed in the Carthage Jail. "I wish you would tell

me how this fuss is going to come out, as you have at other times before-hand," Joseph's devoted friend remarked.¹⁹ Markham had been with the Prophet when he was incarcerated in Missouri, and when an attempt was made at Dixon, Illinois, to take Joseph to Missouri. During the night of April 11, 1839, "the visions of the future were opened" to Joseph, and he "saw the ways and means" of his escape from his enemies in Missouri, and the danger his "beloved Brother Markham was in." He then awakened Markham and instructed him how to make his escape, which he did.²⁰ Now the Prophet's valiant friend was asking him to do the same in the difficulties at Carthage.

The Prophet replied, "Brother Markham, the Lord placed me to govern his kingdom on the earth. But-the people have taken away from me the reins of government by the committee [which was sent across the river to get him to return and give himself up] making the statements they did concerning me leaving the flock. I gave way to them, and the whisperings of the Spirit left me, and I am now no more than a common man. And I can do nothing for myself except they place me back to my former position; and if they do not do it, I am gone."²¹

Another report of this conversation states: "On the 27th, June, Col. Markham asked Can. Smith if he could not tell by the Spirit, as he did at Dixon, how he would come out, to which he said, I have heard [adhered] to the brethren and gone contrary to the council of the Spirit, and I am now no more than another man. I can do nothing for myself. If there is anything done, the brethren have got to do it."²²

After the death of Joseph and Hyrum, Brigham Young, who had ascertained the facts leading up to the martyrdom, spoke to the people of the death of the Prophet. "Joseph so loved this people that he gave his life for them," he explained. "You did not know it until after his death; he has now sealed his testimony with his blood." Continuing, President Young said: "If the twelve had been here we would not have seen him given up--he should not have been given up....He has been taken away, for the people are not worthy of him."²³

Apparently President Young had heard and accepted the testimony of Stephen Markham, and possibly of others, concerning Joseph going to Carthage contrary to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, for on Sunday, March 21, 1858, he spoke to the Saints in Salt Lake City regarding "the Prophet Joseph Smith, that if he had followed the revelations given to him he would be here in our midst this day." "But he hearkened to some of our first elders who treated [i.e., accused] him of cowardice, etc." President Young continued, "and as soon as this was done to him his noble soul could not bear it; hence he said he would come and die as a lamb by the slaughter, innocent; and as soon as he crossed back he lost his power."²⁴

By studying the facts of history, men may acquire the wisdom of the past, and profit from the mistakes of those who have lived before their time. The Lord's admonition for the Saints to give heed to the inspiration which He gives to His living prophet is as real today as it was in the time of Joseph Smith. And the Alternatives are still before the Saints to which the Lord referred when He said: "...inasmuch as ye do this [i.e., give heed to the words of the living prophets], glory shall be added to the kingdom which ye have received. Inasmuch as ye do it not, it shall be taken, even that which ye have received."²⁵ Today is a time of increasing challenge and conflict for the Saints.

They should think seriously of their obligation to give diligent heed to the words of God's living prophet.

Endnotes

¹ History of the Church, VI, p. 549.

² Ibid., p. 555.

³ Journal of Charles W. Walker, Brigham Young University Library, under date of March 21, 1858. For another report of President Young's statement, see the journal of George Laub, under the same date, Brigham Young University Library, p. 15.

⁴ Doctrine and Covenants 21:4-5 thereafter referred to as D&C.

⁵ D&C 28:1-7; 43:1-10.

⁶ D&C 21:6.

⁷ D&C 43:10.

⁸ D&C 135:3.

⁹ Stephen Markham's statement on the martyrdom of Joseph Smith, Church Historian's Library. Another statement in a collection of Joseph Smith's papers, found in the Church Historian's Library, states: "On Friday, before going over the river, Gen. Smith said to Markham, that if the brethren would be still and let him manage [the] business himself there would be no blood shed, but if they did not there should something great come upon them that they did not expect."

¹⁰ History of the Church, VI, pp. 545-546.

¹¹ Markham, op. cit.

¹² History of the Church, VI, p. 547.

¹³ Markham, op. cit.

¹⁴ History of the Church, VI, p. 549.

¹⁵ History of the Church, VI, p. 549-50.

¹⁶ Markham, op. cit.

¹⁷ History of the Church, VI, p. 555-556.

¹⁸ Handwritten document entitled "June 27th, 1844: Proceedings in Nauvoo," in a collection of material in the Stephen Markham file, Church Historian's Library.

¹⁹ Markham, op. cit.

²⁰ History of the Church, III, p. 316.

²¹ Markham, op. cit.

²² Handwritten document entitled "June 27th, 1844: Proceedings in 'Nauvoo,'" op. cit. For an account of the Dixon affair, see History of the Church, V pp. 431-460. Markham figured largely in this experience of the Prophet.

²³ History of the Church, VII, p. 240.

²⁴ Journal of George Laub, under date; Brigham Young University Library, p. 15.

²⁵ D&C 43:10.