

Lessons from  
**LIBERTY JAIL**



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**The Prophet in Liberty Jail**

**O**ne of the most trying times in the history of the Church, both in terms of its impact on the Church generally and in the life of the Prophet Joseph Smith personally, occurred during the winter of 1838–39. The Prophet, who bore the brunt of the persecution in that period, had been imprisoned in the ironically named Liberty Jail. Until his martyrdom five and a half years later, there was no more burdensome time in Joseph’s life than this cruel, illegal, and unjustified incarceration.

Liberty Jail, one of the more forbidding structures in that region, was considered escape proof, and it probably was. Surrounded by stone walls four feet thick, the floor-to-ceiling height in the dungeon was barely six feet. Inasmuch as some of the men, including the Prophet Joseph, were over six feet tall, this meant that when standing they were constantly in a stooped position. When they lay down, it was mostly upon the rough, bare stones of the prison floor covered here and there by a bit of loose, dirty straw or an occasional dirty straw mat.

The food given to the prisoners was coarse and sometimes contaminated, so filthy that one of them said they “could not eat it until [they] were driven to it by hunger.”<sup>1</sup> On as many as four occasions poison was administered to them in their food, making them so violently ill that for days they alternated between vomiting and a kind of delirium, not really caring whether they lived or died.

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LETTER WRITTEN BY JOSEPH SMITH WHILE IN LIBERTY JAIL. THE LETTER LATER BECAME SECTION 121 OF THE DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS COURTESY CHURCH HISTORY LIBRARY. INSET LEFT: LIBERTY JAIL BY C. C. CHRISTENSEN. INSET RIGHT: JOSEPH SMITH IN LIBERTY JAIL © GREG K. OLSEN MAY NOT BE COPIED.



In the Prophet Joseph's letters, he spoke of the jail being a "hell, surrounded with demons . . . 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."<sup>2</sup> "We have . . . not blankets sufficient to keep us warm; and when we have a fire, we are obliged to have almost a constant smoke," he said.<sup>3</sup> "Our souls have been bowed down"<sup>4</sup> and "my nerve trembles from long confinement," Joseph wrote.<sup>5</sup> "Pen, or tongue, or angels," could not adequately describe "the malice of hell" that he suffered there.<sup>6</sup> All of this occurred during what, by some accounts, was considered the coldest winter on record in the state of Missouri.

### A Prison-Temple Experience

Most of us, most of the time, speak of the facility at Liberty as a "jail" or a "prison"—and certainly it was that. But Elder Brigham H. Roberts (1857–1933) of the First Council of the



FULL SCALE CUT AWAY MODEL OF LIBERTY JAIL, COURTESY VISUAL RESOURCE LIBRARY

Seventy, in recording the history of the Church, spoke of the facility as a temple, or, more accurately, a "prison-temple."<sup>7</sup> Elder Neal A. Maxwell (1926–2004) used the same phrasing in some of his writings. Certainly this prison-temple lacked the purity, beauty, comfort, and cleanliness of our modern temples. The speech and behavior of the guards and criminals who came there were anything but temple-like. In fact, the restricting brutality and injustice of this experience at Liberty would make it seem the very antithesis of the liberating, merciful spirit of our temples and the ordinances performed in them.

So in what sense could Liberty Jail be called a "temple," and what does such a title tell us about God's love and teachings, including where and when that love and those teachings are made manifest? In precisely this sense: that you can have sacred, revelatory, profoundly instructive experiences with the Lord in *any* situation you are in. Indeed, you can have sacred, revelatory, profoundly instructive experiences with the Lord *in the most miserable experiences of your life*—in the worst settings, while enduring the most painful injustices, when facing the most insurmountable odds and opposition you have ever faced.

In one way or another, great or small, dramatic or incidental, every one of us is going to spend a little time in Liberty Jail—spiritually speaking. We will face things we do not want to face for reasons that may not be our fault. Indeed, we may face difficult circumstances for reasons that were absolutely right and proper, reasons that came *because* we were trying to keep the commandments of the Lord. We may face persecution, we may endure heartache and separation from loved ones, we may be hungry and cold and forlorn.

Yes, before our lives are over we may all be given a little taste of what the prophets faced often in their lives.

But the lessons of the winter of 1838–39 teach us that every experience can become a redemptive experience if we remain bonded to our Father in Heaven through it. These difficult lessons teach us that man's extremity is God's opportunity, and if we will be humble and faithful, if we will be believing and not curse God for our problems, He can turn the unfair and inhumane and debilitating prisons of our lives into temples—or at least into a circumstance that can bring comfort and revelation, divine companionship and peace.

## Lessons from Liberty Jail

The truths Joseph received while in Liberty Jail reveal that God was not only teaching Joseph Smith in that prison circumstance, but He was also teaching all of us, for generations yet to come. How empty our lives as Latter-day Saints would be if we did not have sections 121, 122, and 123 of the Doctrine and Covenants! They are contained in a mere six pages of text, but those six pages touch our hearts with their beauty and their power. And they remind us that God often “moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform.”<sup>8</sup> He certainly turned adversity into blessing in giving us those sacred writings and reflections—so pure, noble, and Christian in both tone and content, yet produced in such an impure, ignoble, and unchristian setting.

### 1. Everyone Faces Trying Times

**T**he first lesson from Liberty Jail is inherent in what I’ve already mentioned—that everyone, including, and perhaps especially, the righteous, will be called upon to face trying times. When that happens we can sometimes fear that God has abandoned us, and we might be left, at least for a time, to wonder when our troubles will ever end. As individuals, as families, as communities, and as nations, probably everyone has had or will have an occasion to feel as Joseph Smith felt when he cried from the depth and discouragement of his confinement: “O God, where art thou? . . . How long shall thy hand be stayed . . . ? Yea, O Lord, how long shall [thy people] suffer . . . before . . . thy bowels be moved with



JOSEPH SMITH IN LIBERTY JAIL © LIZ LEMON SWINDLE FOUNDATION ARTS. MAY NOT BE COPIED

compassion toward them?” (D&C 121:1–3).

Whenever these moments of our extremity come, we must not succumb to the fear that God has abandoned us or that He does not hear our prayers. He *does* hear us. He *does* see us. He *does* love us. When we are in dire circumstances and want to cry, “Where art Thou?” it is imperative that we remember He is right there with us—where He has always been! We must continue to believe, continue to have faith, continue to pray and plead with heaven, even if we feel for a time our prayers are not heard and that God has somehow gone away. He *is* there. Our prayers *are* heard. And when we weep He and the angels of heaven weep with us.

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**JOSEPH WAS TO REMEMBER THAT THE SAME THING HAD HAPPENED TO THE SAVIOR OF THE WORLD. “THE SON OF MAN HATH DESCENDED BELOW THEM ALL. ART THOU GREATER THAN HE?” (D&C 122:8).**

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When lonely, cold, hard times come, we have to endure, we have to continue, we have to persist. That was the Savior’s message in the parable of the importuning widow (see Luke 18:1–8; see also Luke 11:5–10). Keep knocking on that door. Keep pleading. In the meantime, know that God hears your cries and knows your distress. He is your Father, and you are His child.

When what has to be has been and when what lessons to be learned have been learned, it will be for us as it was for the Prophet Joseph. Just at the time he felt most alone and distant from heaven’s ear was the very time he received the wonderful ministration of the Spirit and the glorious answers that came from his Father in Heaven:

“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” (D&C 121:7–8).

Even though seemingly unjust circumstances may be heaped upon us, and even though unkind and unmerited things may be done to us—perhaps by those we consider enemies but also, in some cases, by those whom we thought were friends—nevertheless, through it all, *God is with us*.

We are not alone in our little prisons here. When suffering, we may in fact be nearer to God than we’ve ever been in our entire lives. That knowledge can turn every such situation into a would-be temple.

Regarding our earthly journey, the Lord has promised, “I will go before your face. I will be on your right hand and on your left, and my Spirit shall be in your hearts, and mine angels round about you, to bear you up” (D&C 84:88). That is an everlasting declaration of God’s love and care for us, including—and perhaps especially—in times of trouble.

## 2. Even the Worthy Will Suffer

**S**econd, we need to realize that just because difficult things happen, it does not mean that we are unrighteous or that we are unworthy of blessings or that God is disappointed in us. Of course, sinfulness does bring suffering, and the only answer to that behavior is repentance. But sometimes suffering comes to the righteous too. You will recall that from the depths of Liberty Jail when Joseph was reminded that he had indeed



powers of heaven cannot be controlled nor handled only [or ‘except’] upon the principles of righteousness” (D&C 121:36). Therefore, even when we face such distressing circumstances in our life and there is something in us that wants to strike out at God or man or friend or foe, we must remember that “no power or influence *can* or *ought* to be maintained . . . [except] by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned; . . . without hypocrisy, and without guile” (D&C 121:41–42; emphasis added).

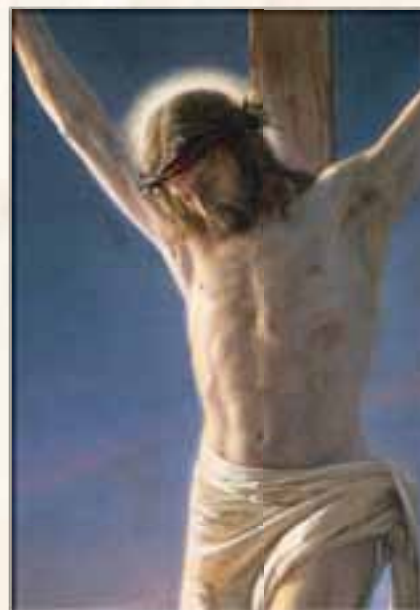
It has always been a wonderful testimony to me of the Prophet Joseph’s greatness and the greatness of all of our prophets, including and especially the Savior of the world in His magnificence, that in the midst of such distress and difficulty they could remain calm and patient, charitable and forgiving—that they could even talk that way, let alone live that way. But they could, and they did. They remembered their covenants, they disciplined themselves, and they knew that we must live the gospel at all times, not just when it is convenient and not just when things are going well. Indeed, they knew that the real test of our faith and our Christian discipleship is when things are *not* going smoothly. That is when we get to see what we’re made of and how strong our commitment to the gospel really is.

Surely the classic example of this is that in the most painful hours of the Crucifixion the Savior could say, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). That is a hard thing to ask when we’re hurting or have been offended, are tired or stressed out or suffering innocently. But that is when Christian behavior may matter the most. As Joseph was taught

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in his prison-temple, even in distress and sorrow we must “let [our] bowels . . . be full of charity towards all men . . . ; then [and only then] shall [our] confidence wax strong in the presence of God; and . . . the Holy Ghost shall be [our] constant companion” (D&C 121:45–46).

Remaining true to our Christian principles is the only way divine influence can help us. The Spirit has a near impossible task to get through to a heart that is filled with hate or anger or vengeance or self-pity. Those are all antithetical to the Spirit of the Lord. On the other hand, the Spirit finds instant access to a heart



THE CRUCIFIXION BY CARL HEINRICH BOCH

striving to be charitable and forgiving, long-suffering, and kind—principles of true discipleship. What a testimony that if we strive to remain faithful, the triumph of a Christian life can never be vanquished, no matter how grim the cir-

cumstance might be. How I love the majesty of these elegant, celestial teachings taught, ironically, in such a despicable setting and time.

### **Do All Things Cheerfully**

As a valedictory to the lessons from Liberty Jail, I refer to the last verse of section 123: “Therefore . . . 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; emphasis added).

What a tremendously optimistic and faithful

concluding declaration to be issued from a prison-temple! When he wrote those lines, Joseph did not know when he would be released or if he would ever be released. There was every indication that his enemies were still planning to take his life.

Furthermore, his wife and children were alone, frightened, often hungry, wondering how they would fend for themselves without their husband and father. The Saints, too, were without homes and without their prophet. They were leaving Missouri, heading for Illinois, but who knew what tragedies were awaiting them there? Surely, to say it again, it was the bleakest and darkest of times.

Yet in these cold, lonely hours, Joseph says let us do all we can *and do it cheerfully*. And then we can justifiably turn to the Lord, wait upon His mercy, and see His arm revealed in our behalf.

What a magnificent attitude to maintain in good times or bad, in sorrow or in joy!

I testify that the Father and the Son live and that They are close, perhaps even closest via the Holy Spirit, when we are experiencing difficult times. I testify that heaven's kindness will *never* depart from you, regardless of what happens (see Isaiah 54:7–10; see also 3 Nephi 22:7–10). I testify that bad days come to an end, that faith always triumphs, and that heavenly promises are always kept. God is our Father, Jesus is the Christ, and this is the true and living gospel—found in this, the true and living Church. I testify that President Thomas S. Monson is a prophet of God, our prophet for this hour and this day. I love him and sustain him as I know you do. In the words of



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the Liberty Jail prison-temple experience, “Hold on thy way. . . . Fear not . . . , for God shall be with you forever and ever” (D&C 122:9). ■

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#### NOTES

1. Alexander McRae, in B. H. Roberts, in *A Comprehensive History of the Church*, 1:521.
2. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 3:290.
3. Letter to Isaac Galland, Mar. 22, 1839, in *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, comp. Dean C. Jessee (2002), 456.
4. Letter to the Church in Caldwell County, Dec. 16, 1838; “Communications,” *Times and Seasons*, Apr. 1840, 85.
5. Letter to Emma Smith, Mar. 21, 1839, in *Personal Writings*, 449.
6. Letter to Emma Smith, Apr. 4, 1839, in *Personal Writings*, 463, 464; spelling and capitalization standardized.
7. See *Comprehensive History*, 1:521 chapter heading; see also 526.
8. “God Moves in a Mysterious Way,” *Hymns*, no. 285.

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