



The Path to Martyrdom: The Ultimate

We need not visit Carthage Jail to strengthen our testimonies of Joseph's calling as a prophet of God. We need only study patterns of prophets in the scriptures and learn of Joseph's life.

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Of the Seventy

Several years ago I stood in the upper bedroom of Carthage Jail surrounded by my wife and our six children.

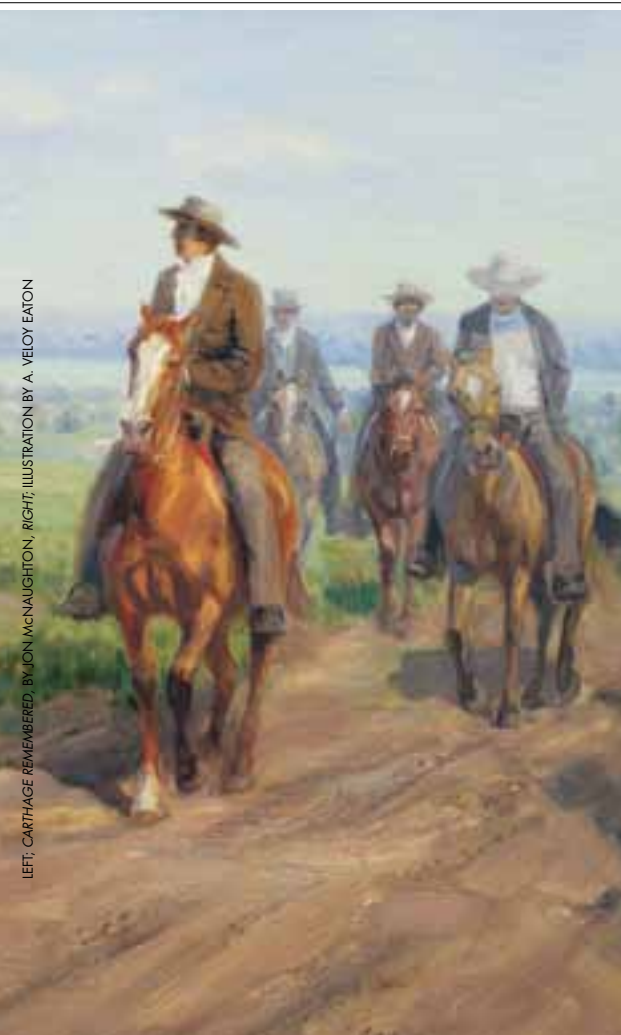
Over the prior week, our family had visited the various locations of Joseph Smith's remarkable life and mission. As we traveled, each family member felt the Spirit testify of Joseph's divine calling as the Prophet of the Restoration. We felt that same witness as we exited this room in Carthage, Illinois, where Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum, "the best blood of the nineteenth century" (D&C 135:6), were martyred by an angry mob.

Since that day I have learned more about the life and death of the Prophet. I know that studying the Martyrdom of Joseph Smith has strengthened my testimony of his calling as a prophet of God.

The term *martyr* comes from a Greek word for "witness."¹ Joseph Smith's path to Carthage followed four steps walked by ancient apostles and prophets who also died as witnesses of the truth.

Step 1: Persecuted for Bearing Testimony of the Son of God

When the Book of Mormon prophet Lehi testified to the inhabitants of Jerusalem



Joseph Smith's last glimpses of Nauvoo came after 24 years of persecution that included nearly 20 attempts on his life.

More than 600 years after Lehi testified in Jerusalem, a young priesthood leader named Stephen was called to stand before the Sanhedrin. When he testified of the apostasy of Israel, these religious leaders “were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth.” But when he testified of Jesus “standing on the right hand of God,” these leaders “cast him out of the city, and stoned him” (Acts 7:54–55, 58).

Joseph Smith's life follows the pattern of Lehi, Zenos, Zenock, and Stephen. A few days after experiencing the First Vision in 1820, Joseph shared his experience and bore personal testimony of God the Father and His Beloved Son. According to Joseph, the almost immediate response was “a spirit of the most bitter persecution and reviling” (Joseph Smith—History 1:23). As with ancient prophets, the Prophet of the Restoration taught truths regarding the nature of God that ran counter to the inherited traditions of religious sects. During the next 24 years, nearly 20 attempts were made on Joseph's life.²

Step 2: Forewarned of Death

After His resurrection, Jesus prophesied to the senior Apostle, Peter: “When thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not.

“This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God. And when he had spoken this, he saith unto him, Follow me” (John 21:18–19; see also 2 Peter 1:14).

On another occasion the Lord described Paul to Ananias: “He is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel:

“For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake” (Acts 9:15–16).

The Prophet Joseph Smith was 17 years old when first visited by the angel Moroni in 1823. Moroni prophesied that Joseph Smith's name

Witness

“of their wickedness and their abominations,” they mocked him. But when he testified “of the coming of a Messiah, and also the redemption of the world,” the people “were angry with him . . . and they also sought his life” (1 Nephi 1:19–20). The people wanted to do to Lehi what had been done to the prophets Zenos and Zenock. Because Zenos “did testify boldly” of Christ, “he was slain,” and because Zenock had “testified of the Son of God, and because the people would not understand his words they stoned him to death” (Helaman 8:19; Alma 33:17).



ILLUSTRATION BY WALTER RANE

Joseph's life followed the pattern of martyrs like Stephen, who was cast out and stoned after he testified that he saw Jesus “standing on the right hand of God.”

Moroni told Joseph that his name would be had for good and evil “among all people.”



HE CALLED ME BY NAME, BY IIZ LEMON SWINDIE



ILLUSTRATION BY SAM LAWLOR

“There are many that lie in wait to destroy thee,” the Lord warned the Prophet.

“should be both good and evil spoken of among all people” (Joseph Smith—History 1:33). In March 1829, when Joseph was just 23, the Lord warned, “There are many that lie in wait to destroy thee

from off the face of the earth” (D&C 5:33). One month later, the Lord revealed, “Even if they do unto you even as they have done unto me, blessed are ye, for you shall dwell with me in glory” (D&C 6:30).

In the remaining 15 years of his life, “on at least 19 different occasions . . . Joseph Smith told the Saints that he would probably not leave this life peacefully.”³

Step 3: Remained Confident in Finishing Work

After the prophet Abinadi’s initial preaching to King Noah and his council of wicked priests, King Noah said, “Away with this fellow, and slay him.” But Abinadi boldly responded, “Touch me not, for God shall smite you if ye lay your hands upon me, for I have not

delivered the message which the Lord sent me to deliver; . . . therefore, God will not suffer that I shall be destroyed at this time. . . . But I finish my message” (Mosiah 13:1, 3, 9).

Later, the prophets Alma and Amulek were forced by the rulers of Ammonihah to watch believers be martyred by fire.

“Now Amulek said unto Alma: Behold, perhaps they will burn us also.

“And Alma said: Be it according to the will of the Lord. But, behold, our work is not finished; therefore they burn us not” (Alma 14:12–13).

Joseph gained confidence that his mission would be completed before his life on earth could be cut short. In March 1839, while in jail at Liberty, Missouri, the Lord declared:

“If thou shouldst be cast into the pit, or into the hands of murderers, and the sentence of death passed upon thee. . . .

“ . . . Thy days are known, and thy years shall not be numbered less; therefore, fear not what man can do” (D&C 122:7, 9).

The Prophet’s father, Joseph Smith Sr., gave his son a blessing in September 1840, telling him, “You shall live to finish your work.”

“At this Joseph cried out, ‘Oh! Father, shall I?’

“‘Yes,’ said his father, ‘you shall. You shall live to lay out all the plan of all the work that God requires at your hand.’”⁴

During the latter years of his life, Joseph Smith focused on finishing his work. Building a temple, revealing its sacred ordinances, and conferring the priesthood power to perform those ordinances provided a sense of urgency.⁵ Finally, in a climactic meeting in late March 1844, Joseph imparted to the Twelve Apostles all of the priesthood keys and power necessary to lead the Church.

“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.’”⁶

Elder Parley P. Pratt quoted Joseph as saying, “The Lord is about to lay the burden on your shoulders and let me rest awhile; and if they kill me . . . the kingdom of God will roll on, as I have now finished the work which was laid upon me.”⁷

Step 4: Executed While Imprisoned for Treason

Early Christian history records that many Christians, including the Apostles Peter and Paul, were executed in Rome under the direction of the emperor Nero. They were accused of subversion, starting a fire in Rome, and unwillingness to sacrifice to Roman gods or the emperor’s image.⁸

In the Book of Mormon, Abinadi was found “worthy of death” because he had said “that God himself should come down among the children of men.” The accusation was blasphemy, but after Abinadi had powerfully defended himself, “king Noah was about to release him.” The priests then asserted that Abinadi had “reviled the king,” invoking a new charge of crime against the state, or treason. Abinadi was then delivered up “that he might be slain,” suffering death by fire, “having sealed the truth of his words by his death” (Mosiah 17:7–8, 11–12, 20).

Despite being acquitted of charges related to the June 10, 1844, destruction of the *Nauvoo Expositor* press, Joseph and Hyrum faced new charges of riot.⁹ “On June 24, Joseph and Hyrum Smith bade farewell to

Like Abinadi in the Book of Mormon, Joseph “sealed the truth of his words by his death.”

ILLUSTRATION BY ARNOLD FRIBERG



Building a temple and conferring priesthood power to perform sacred ordinances provided a sense of urgency for Joseph to finish his work.

The path to martyrdom walked by Joseph Smith and ancient prophets is the same path walked by Him who said, “Come, follow me.”



JOSEPH, A POOR WAYFARING MAN OF GRIEF, BY JARED BARNES



ILLUSTRATION BY GARY SMITH

Nineteenth-century political leaders, like their ancient counterparts, chose not to intervene while Joseph Smith was murdered.

their families and rode . . . toward Carthage, voluntarily surrendering themselves to county officials. . . . 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.”¹⁰ Nineteenth-century political leaders, like their ancient counterparts, chose not to intervene while Joseph Smith was murdered by a group of attackers, some of whom belonged to the militia responsible for defending Carthage Jail.

Elder John Taylor, who was in the

Carthage Jail and witnessed the Martyrdom, wrote, “Like most of the Lord’s anointed in ancient times, [Joseph Smith] has sealed his mission and his works with his own blood” (D&C 135:3). The Lord, through President Brigham Young revealed, “Many have marveled because of his death; but it was needful that he should seal his testimony with his blood, that he might be honored and the wicked might be condemned” (D&C 136:39).

Jesus Christ Showed the Way

The path to martyrdom walked by Joseph Smith and ancient prophets is the same path walked by Him who said, “Come, follow me” (Luke 18:22). During his three-year mission, Jesus Christ was persecuted for

bearing testimony of His Father and not refuting the testimonies of those who proclaimed Him as the Messiah (see Luke 4:16–24, 28–29; John 8:53–59; 10:24–39). He knew in advance of His coming death and taught His disciples that He must be lifted up (see Matthew 16:21; 21:33–39; John 3:14).

Despite repeated attacks on His life, the Savior was confident that He would finish His divine work of atoning for the sins of the world (see John 10:17–18; 19:10–11). After Jewish leaders found Jesus guilty of blasphemy and Roman political leaders convicted Him of high treason,¹¹ He was crucified (see Matthew 26:65; Luke 23:2).

A Branch of the True Vine

The night before His Atonement and Crucifixion, Jesus taught the Twelve many important doctrines. As part of these teachings He said, “I am the true vine. . . . Ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing” (John 15:1, 5).

At the conclusion of His discourse on the true vine, the Savior said to His Apostles, “Ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me” (John 15:27). He prophesied, “Yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service” (John 16:2).

As with the ancient apostles and prophets, Joseph Smith never wavered in his testimony of the Son of God, and as a result he was slain. But the restored gospel continues to expand across the world on the foundation laid by the Prophet, and as we sing in the hymn, “millions shall know ‘Brother Joseph’ again.”¹²

Sometimes I reflect on the feelings we experienced during our family’s trip to sites associated with the life of the Prophet. We entered the Sacred Grove, where the heavens had opened again. We climbed the Hill Cumorah and walked the streets of Palmyra, New York, where the Book of Mormon came forth. We stood in



ILLUSTRATION BY AVIN GITTINS

As with ancient apostles and prophets, Joseph Smith never wavered in his testimony of the Son of God.

Peter Whitmer Sr.’s small home in Fayette, New York, where the Church was organized. We visited sites in and around Kirtland, Ohio, where visions and revelations poured forth. We walked the streets of Nauvoo the Beautiful and saw the temple on the site where temple ordinances were restored. We marveled at the fruits brought forth by Joseph, a branch of the True Vine. And we felt the Spirit in an old jail in Carthage, where the Prophet sealed his mission.

We need not visit Carthage Jail to strengthen our testimony of Joseph’s calling as a prophet

of God. We need only study patterns of prophets in the scriptures and learn of Joseph’s life. My testimony has grown by seeking to understand the Martyrdom at Carthage Jail—Joseph Smith’s ultimate witness.

We will not likely be required to die for our testimony of the Son of God, as did Joseph and the ancient prophets. We need only stay “true to the truth for which martyrs have perished.”¹³ Elder Robert D. Hales of the Quorum of the Twelve said, “They were called to *give* their lives for the gospel. We are called to *live* our lives for the same purpose.”¹⁴ ■

NOTES

- 1 . See Robert C. Patch, “Martyrs,” in Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 5 vols. (1992), 2:862; and James E. Talmage, *The Great Apostasy* (1981), 70.
- 2 . See Craig K. Manscill and Derek R. Mock, “‘That Thy Days May Be Prolonged’: Attempts on the Life of Joseph Smith,” in *Joseph Smith and the Doctrinal Restoration* (2005), 253–71.
- 3 . *Our Heritage* (1996), 62.
- 4 . Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith by His Mother*, ed. Scot Facer Proctor and Maurine Jensen Proctor (1996), 434.
- 5 . See Ronald K. Esplin, “God Will Protect Me until My Work Is Done,” *Ensign*, Aug. 1989, 16.
- 6 . *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 534.
- 7 . *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith*, 534.
- 8 . See Richard Lloyd Anderson, “The Church and the Roman Empire,” *Ensign*, Sept. 1975, 14; see also S. Kent Brown, “Whither the Early Church?” *Ensign*, Oct. 1988, 8.
- 9 . See Reed Blake, “Martyrdom at Carthage,” *Ensign*, June 1994, 30.
- 10 . *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith*, 530.
- 11 . See James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (1983), 587.
- 12 . “Praise to the Man,” *Hymns*, no. 27.
- 13 . “True to the Faith,” *Hymns*, no. 254.
- 14 . Robert D. Hales, “Preparations for the Restoration and the Second Coming: ‘My Hand Shall Be over Thee,’” *Ensign*, Nov. 2005, 91.