
“All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience”

D&C 122:3–7

In this section of the Doctrine and Covenants, the Prophet Joseph is promised,

If thou art called to pass through tribulation, ... if thou art accused with all manner of false accusations, ... if thou shouldst be cast into the pit, or into the hands of murderers and the sentence of death passed upon thee, ... if the very jaws of hell shall gape open the mouth wide after thee, know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good. (D&C 122:5–7)

The Prophet Joseph, like the ancients, knew that “when thou art in tribulation ... turn to the Lord” (Deuteronomy 4:30). As he dictated the March 20–25, 1839, letter in Liberty Jail, he cried unto the Lord for relief from tribulation. By this point, he had been 110 days in Liberty Jail. He had endured abuse by jailers—Samuel Hadley, Samuel Tillery, and James H. Ford. From the prisoners’ written accounts, affidavits, and memoirs, these state-appointed officers fell woefully short in fulfilling their responsibility to attend to the physical needs of the prisoners.

However, the Prophet Joseph did not lay full blame on the jailers, believing the genesis for his suffering lay at the feet of “renegade ‘Mormon’ dissenters” who were “running through the world and spreading various foul and libelous reports against us.” After calling such dissenters “ill-bred and ignorant,” Joseph named William McLellan, John

Whitmer, David Whitmer, Oliver Cowdery, Martin Harris, and others for causing him to wade “through an ocean of tribulation, and mean abuses.”¹

Joseph’s letter presents further glimpses of the “ocean of tribulation and mean abuses”:

We are kept under a strong guard, night and day, in a prison of double walls and doors. ... We have been compelled to sleep on the floor with straw, and not blankets sufficient to keep us warm; and when we have a fire, we are obliged to have almost a constant smoke. ... Our food is scant, uniform, and coarse; we have not the privilege of cooking for ourselves.”²

Visitor Mercy Thompson, the sister of Mary Fielding Smith, wrote an anecdotal account of what she witnessed in the jail:

It would be beyond my power to describe my feelings when we were admitted into the jail by the keeper and the door was locked behind us. We could not help feeling a sense of horror on realizing that we were locked up in that dark and dismal den, fit only for criminals of the deepest dye, but there we beheld Joseph, the Prophet, the man chosen of God, in the dispensation of the fullness of time to hold the keys of His kingdom on the earth, with power to bind and loose as God should direct, confined in a loathsome prison for no other cause or reason than that he claimed to be inspired of God to establish his church among men.³

Prisoner Alexander McRae recalled the men of Liberty gathered about the jail making plans to kill the prisoners:

I should judge, from the number, that all the town, and many from the country, gathered around the jail, and every mode of torture and death that their imagination could fancy, was proposed for us, such as blowing up the jail, taking us out and whipping us to death, shooting us, burning us to death, tearing us to pieces with horses, &c. But they were so divided among themselves that they could not carry out any of their plans.⁴

¹ “Copy of Letter from J. Smith, Jun. to Mr. Galland,” *Millennial Star*, February 15, 1846, 50.

² “Copy of Letter from J. Smith, Jun. to Mr. Galland,” 50.

³ “Recollections of the Prophet Joseph Smith,” *Juvenile Instructor*, July 1, 1892, 398.

⁴ “Incidents in History of Joseph Smith,” *Millennial Star*, March 3, 1855, 136.

Joseph Smith wrote to his wife Emma on April 4, 1839,

Dear— and affectionate—Wife.

Thursday night I sat down just as the sun is going down, as we peak through the grates of this lonesome prison, to write to you, that I may make known to you my situation. It is I believe now about five months and six days since I have been under the grimace, of a guard night and day, and within the walls grates and screeching iron doors, of a lonesome dark dirty prison. With emotions known only to God, do I write this letter, the contemplations, of the mind under these circumstances, defies the pen, or tongue, or Angels, to describe, or paint, to the human being, who never experience what we experience. This night we expect; is the last night we shall lay our weary joints and bones on our dirty straw couches in these walls, let our case hereafter be as it may, as we expect to start tomorrow, for our trial. ... We lean on the arm of Jehovah, and none else, for our deliverance.⁵

The prisoners were taken from Liberty Jail to Gallatin on April 6, 1839, never to return to the loathsome prison again.

⁵ Joseph Smith to Emma Smith, 4 April 1839. Joseph Smith Papers.