

Joseph Smith Prophecies of his Own Martyrdom

Compiled by Glen W. Chapman- July 2001

Joseph Smith had received early warnings from the Lord about what the future might hold. In March of 1829 the Lord had counseled Joseph to be

firm in keeping the commandments where-
with I have commanded you; and if you do
this, behold I grant unto you eternal life, even
if you should be slain. (D&C 5:22)

The next month the Lord told his Prophet,

And 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)

But even facing the prospect of violent death, Joseph had a promise to cling to:

Therefore, hold on thy way, and the priest-
hood shall remain with thee; for their bounds
are set, they cannot pass. Thy days are known,
and thy years shall not be numbered less;
therefore, fear not what man can do, for God
shall be with you forever and ever. (D&C
122:9)

These divine warnings and the conspicuous animosity of his antagonists sounded the warning for Joseph. He watched the hatred increase as the days and weeks of his life passed. In a discourse probably from the summer of 1840, Joseph declared:

Now brethren I obligate myself to build as
great a temple as ever Solomon did if the
church will back me up.. And if it should be
the will of God that I might live to behold that
temple completed and finished from the foun-
dation to the top stone I will say Oh Lord it is
enough Lord let thy servant depart in
peace..¹

Lucy Mack Smith wrote of her husband's dying blessing to his son, the Seer. The elder Smith died in September of 1840.

The father assured his son, "you shall live
to finish your work." The Prophet burst into
tears and cried out, "Oh, father, shall I?"
"Yes," said his father, "you shall lay out the
plan of all the work God requires at your hand,
and you shall be faithful to the end."²

On April 9, 1842, Wilford Woodruff recorded in his journal this statement from Joseph Smith:

“Some has supposed that Brother Joseph could not die; but this is a mistake; it is true there have been times when I have had the promise of my life to accomplish such and such things, but, having now accomplished those things, I have not at present any lease of my life, I am as liable to die as other men.”³

In the minutes of the organizational meeting of the Relief Society, April 28, 1842, we read that Joseph said that he did not know that he should have many Opportunities of teaching them, as they were going to be left to themselves; they would not long have him to instruct them; that the Church would not have his instructions long, and the world would not be troubled with him a great while, and would not have his teachings.⁴

Again from the Wilford Woodruff journals:

“I understand my mission and business. God Almighty is my shield; and what can man do if God is my friend? I shall not be sacrificed until my time comes; then I shall be offered freely.”⁵

Orson Hyde wrote this for the Times and Seasons:

“Before I went East on the 4th of April last [1843] we were in council with Brother Joseph almost every day for weeks, says Brother Joseph in one of these councils there is something going to happen; I don't know what it is, but the Lord bids me to hasten and give you your endowment before the temple is finished. He conducted us through every ordinance of the holy priesthood, and when he had gone through with all the ordinances he rejoiced very much, and says, now if they kill me you have got all the keys, and all the ordinances and you can confer them upon others, and the hosts of Satan will not be able to tear down the kingdom, as fast as you will be able to build it up; and now says he on your shoulders will the responsibility of leading this people right, for the Lord is going to let me rest a while.”⁶

Willard Richards was Joseph's personal secretary in the 1840's. He often wrote the Prophet's words in the Prophet's journal. In October of 1843, he recorded a remark which seems to show Joseph's awareness of his impending death, but also his determination to see his work through to the end before it happened.

“I defy all the world, and I prophesy they
will never overthrow me till I get ready”⁷

Many of these later statements of the Prophet carry a sense of foreboding and urgency. The following is from an undated document provided by the Twelve in 1844 or 1845:

“Brethren, the Lord bids me hasten the
work... 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 upon me not be imparted to
you, they will be lost from the Earth; but if I
can only succeed in placing them on 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.”⁸

On April 7 of 1844 Joseph prophesied, "I cannot lie down until my work is finished."⁹ Five weeks later he declared,

“God will always protect me until my mission is fulfilled.”¹⁰

In his own journal, in June of 1844, George Laub recorded this from the Prophet:

“The enemy is seeking my life and are lay-
ing plans to kill me, but if they kill me they
kill an Inocent man. This I will call on God,
angels & men to witness. They will take me
out to Carthage and I am going inocent as a
lamb to the Slauter. But I have Laid the foun-
dation of the work of what the Lord hass gave
me to doo, therefore have noe longer leas of
my life. I have accolmplished my work that
was given me & others can build on the same,
& I have noe more leas of my life any longer
than any other man & my enemys are blood
thirsty & they have laid meny planns and hel-
ish designs for my life...”¹¹

A non-Mormon editor who interviewed Joseph Smith in Carthage Jail on June 26, 1844, the day before the martyrdom, wrote this:

“I had an interview with Joe Smith after the Governor announced his intention of going to Nauvoo. . .in this interview Joe Smith proved himself a prophet, for he said to me, on parting that he should not live to see another day, so fully was he impressed with the belief that he would be murdered, all of which proved true.”¹²

Joseph did not want to be a martyr. He did not want to seal his testimony with his blood. He wanted to be a father and a prophet and a teacher.

He said it even more explicitly:

“I prophesy they never will have power to kill me till my work is accomplished and I am ready to die.” (HC 6:58)

In a sermon on Sunday 12 May 1844 he declared: "I once offered my life to the Missouri mob as a sacrifice for my people, and here I am" (HC 6:365).

The same thread is found in his last speech to the Nauvoo Legion on 18 June 1844

“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.... God has tried you. You are a good people; therefore I love you with all my heart. Greater love hath no man than that he should lay down his life for his friends. You have stood by me in the hour of trouble, and I am willing to sacrifice my life for your preservation”. (HC 6:500)

Others remembered Joseph as saying he was going to Carthage to sacrifice his life. Gilbert Belnap recorded in his autobiography:

"They, however, surrendered the public arms and he gave himself a sacrifice for the people. Well I remember his saying, 'Although I possessed the means of escape, yet I submit without a struggle and repair to the place of slaughter'"

(Andrus and Andrus 181).

Dan Jones recalled that before Joseph left for Carthage, his mother reminded him that she had seen him dragged from her many times before and he always told her he would return. "What say you now, my son?" she asked. Jones reported that Joseph replied:

Hundreds gathered at the Mansion House the next morning to see the brethren depart for Carthage . In the early morning light they seemed filled with a solemn apprehension of forthcoming danger. Many implored the Prophet to change his mind. His small sons were clinging to his clothing, with Emma weeping by his side.

Finally Joseph's mother, Lucy, expressed the fear they all felt.

"My son, my son," she said, "can you leave me without promising to return? Some forty times I have seen you from me dragged, but never before without saying you would return. What say you now, my son?"

Joseph raised his hand for silence and spoke to those assembled.

"My friends, my brethren, I love you," he said. "I love the city of Nauvoo too well to save my life at your expense. If I go not to them, they will come here and act out the horrid Missouri scenes in Nauvoo. I may prevent it. I fear not death; my work is done. Keep the faith and I will die for Nauvoo."¹³

"This is the loveliest place and the best people under the heavens. Little do they know the trials that await them"¹⁴

At the outskirts of the city, the riders stopped at the home of a friend named Squire Daniel Wells, who was confined to his sickbed. After Joseph visited with him, he took his leave, saying,

"Squire Wells, I wish you to cherish my memory, and not think me the worst man in the world either."¹⁵

Joseph then came across the yard to where we were standing.

"I am going like a lamb to the slaughter," he said, "but I am calm as a summer's morning. I have a conscience void of offense toward God and toward all men. I shall die innocent, and it shall yet be said of me, 'He was murdered in cold blood.'"¹⁶

At the jail, Hyrum attempted to raise Joseph's spirits by reading Book of Mormon accounts of God delivering his servants from prison.' He read the accounts of Alma and Amulek in the prison at Ammonihah, and of Lehi and Nephi in the Lamanite prison. He also spoke of the three Nephites who were delivered from prison by the power of God.

"Joseph," he asked, "Don't you believe the Lord can do that for us?"

"Yes, I believe he can," replied the prophet, "but I do not believe he will."¹⁷

References

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4. Eliza R. Snow, minutes, 28 April 1842.
5. Wilford Woodruff Journals, 22 January 1843.
6. Orson Hyde's Testimony, *Times and Seasons*, 5:651 (Sept. 15, 1844)
7. Willard Richards, *Joseph Smith's Journal*, October 15, 1843.
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9. *Times and Seasons*, 5:617.
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12. Col. J. W. Woods. "The Mormon Prophet," *Daily Democrat*, Ottowa, Iowa, May 10, 1885.
13. Jones, Dan. *The Martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith*. This document, 26 pages in length, was written and submitted at the request of Church historians George A. Smith and Thomas Bullock. The passage quoted is on pages 2 and 3
14. MS XXIV, p. 342.

15. Ibid., p.555.
16. D&C 135:4.
17. Roberts, B. H. The Rise and Fall of Nauvoo, p. 307