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Liberty Jail: Winter 1838-1839/"In This Moment"

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Far West in Caldwell County became the headquarters of the Church in 1838, but the Saints would not remain there long. Anti-Mormon sentiment continued to grow in Missouri and, on 27 October 1838, Governor Lilburn W. Boggs issued his infamous extermination order, declaring that “The Mormons must be treated as enemies and must be exterminated or driven from the state.”⁴⁰ Three days later, approximately 240 armed men attacked the Saints at Haun’s Mill, killing at least seventeen people and wounding about thirteen. At Far West, anti-Mormon militia forces prepared to attack. On 31 October the Prophet Joseph and four others were betrayed and taken as prisoners by General Lucas. Later that night, Hyrum Smith and Amasa Lyman were also captured. Their lives were spared because the courageous General Alexander Doniphan refused to obey the illegal order of execution issued by General Lucas.

The prisoners were taken to Independence on 2 November. For two weeks they were chained together in a vacant house guarded by abusive guards, who one night were silenced by the majestic rebuke of the shackled, unarmed prophet. At the end of the month, following a thirteen day trial, Joseph and Hyrum Smith, Sidney Rigdon, Lyman Wight, Caleb Baldwin, and Alexander McRae were committed to the Liberty Jail where they would remain until the following April. The poorly heated jail was twenty-two feet square and had four-foot walls constructed of stone and lined with very thick timbers on the inside. The space between the stone and timbers was filled with loose stone.

The ceiling of the lower level, where the prisoners were confined for most of their imprisonment, was so low that several of the men could not stand upright. The entrance to the room, an opening in the floor above, was accessed by a rope ladder. The only daylight came from two slits in the walls. While Joseph and his brethren suffered in these cold and filthy conditions, faithful Saints were driven from the state. Finally, during the fourth month of imprisonment, the Lord revealed to the despairing Prophet wonderful spiritual truths which Joseph sent in a letter to the Church. Parts of his epistle comprise sections 121, 122, and 123 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Because of these glorious revelations, Liberty Jail has been called a prison-temple.⁴¹

In April Joseph and his companions were taken to Daviess County to be tried. When a change of venue was obtained, they were sent to Boone Country. The prisoners were allowed to escape on the way, because some of the officials involved in the case believed they could not be successfully prosecuted. By 1 May Joseph was in Illinois purchasing lands in a settlement called Commerce. Here the Saints would build the beautiful city of Nauvoo.

In This Moment

Injustice presses upon
the upright, bending their bodies.
False accusations, thicker than
timber, bricks and stone
of four-foot walls, confine
Joseph and his brethren
to a single cell guarded
by craftiness and corruption,
while the oppressed, distressed,
leave the mass grave
of mangled martyrs,
flee Caldwell County and
Far West driven by the cold,
exterminating breath of mobs.
Emma, with children clinging
to skirts, carries her babies
across the frozen Missouri.

In this five-month moment
of affliction, Joseph, enduring
the weight of wickedness,
waits for the hiding place
of God to be revealed.
From dungeon depths
he pleads for justice, mercy.
Foul, meager meals measure
his longing to comfort
suffering Saints. Encouragement

and counsel, penned and signed
by precious candlelight,
is passed through prison bars.
Tenderness is refined.

Finally, the Almighty speaks
patience, peace. *My Son*
Knowledge will be
poured out liberally,
principalities, dominions,
thrones set forth.
Treachery will not triumph.
Prisoners shall go free.

...know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good (D&C 122:7).