

# Section 118

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Imagine that one-third of the members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles have just been released or excommunicated for dissent. That's what happened in 1838, along with a host of other problems. A council including Joseph, his counselors, his secretary, the bishopric in Missouri, and Thomas Marsh, president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, met to seek revelation. "Show unto us thy will O Lord concerning the Twelve," Joseph prayed, and section 118 followed.<sup>1</sup>

The Lord calls for a conference to immediately fill the vacancies in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Thomas Marsh, who besides presiding over the quorum was the Church's publisher in Missouri, is to continue in that role. The other apostles are to continue preaching. The Lord covenants with them that if they endure in their ministries meekly and humbly, he will provide for their families and give them success.

In verse 4 the Lord elaborates on a call he mentioned in section 114 for the apostles to cross the Atlantic Ocean early in 1839 for a mission to Great Britain. This time the call is very specific: "Let them take leave of my saints in the city of Far West, on the twenty-sixth day of April next, on the building spot of my house, saith the Lord" (D&C 118:5). The Lord then names the men he chose to replace the fallen apostles and commands that they be officially notified.

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<sup>1</sup> "[Revelation, 8 July 1838–A \[D&C 118\]](#)," 105, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 2, 2020.

The next day, the apostles who were in Far West met with the First Presidency and acted on section 118's command to officially notify the new apostles. Sidney Rigdon wrote to Willard Richards, who was already serving in England. Willard was later ordained there by Brigham Young in 1840. Wilford Woodruff was serving in the islands off the New England coast when, according to his journal, "I received a letter from Thomas B. Marsh, informing me of my appointment to fill the place, in the Quorum of the Twelve, of one who had fallen, and I was requested to come to Far West as soon as possible, to prepare for a mission to England in the spring."<sup>2</sup>

Obeying the rest of the revelation proved to be more problematic. In October 1838, the governor of Missouri issued an executive order to the state militia to drive the Saints from the state. The Saints lost their property and retreated east to the relative safety of Illinois. There, as April 1839 approached, the apostles and others counseled about section 118's specific instructions to leave for England from the Far West, Missouri, temple site on April 26. Quorum president Thomas Marsh had since been excommunicated for rebellion and apostle David Patten had been killed in the Missouri violence, leaving Brigham Young as the senior apostle.

Wilford Woodruff reported that

as the time drew nigh for the accomplishment of this work, the question arose, "What is to be done?" Here is a revelation commanding the Twelve to be in Far West on the 26<sup>th</sup> day of April, to lay the cornerstone of the Temple there; it had to be fulfilled. The Missourians had sworn by all the gods of eternity that if every other revelation given through Joseph Smith should be fulfilled, that should not be, for the day and date being given they declared it would fail. The general feeling in the Church, so far as I know, was that, under the circumstances, it was impossible to accomplish the work; and the Lord would accept the will for the deed.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Wilford Woodruff, *Journal*, August 9, 1838, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah. Thomas B. Marsh to Wilford Woodruff, July 14, 1838, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

<sup>3</sup> Wilford Woodruff, *Journal of Discourses*, 13:159.

But Brigham Young was presiding over the apostles, and the Lord had commanded them to leave from the Far West temple site on April 16, 1838. Anyone who wonders whether the apostles would do so is probably not familiar with Brigham's iron resolve.

Wilford joined Brigham Young and others on a journey west over the Mississippi River and into hostile Missouri. Wilford noted that the roads were full of Saints heading east, "fleeing from Missouri to Illinois for they were driven from their houses & lands by the State." Brigham, Wilford, and their party arrived at Far West on April 25.

In his journal entry for April 16, 1839, Wilford wrote about all the obstacles between the apostles and their revealed instructions to leave for their mission to England from the Far West temple site that day. Then Wilford wrote, "We moved forward to the building spot of the house of the Lord in the City of far west & held a Council & fulfilled the revelation & Commandment."

Wilford noted that they also fulfilled section 115's command to begin to lay the foundation for the temple on that day. They rolled a large stone to the southeast corner of the temple site (D&C 115:11). Wilford sat on that stone as the apostles led by Brigham Young ordained him an apostle. George A. Smith was also ordained to replace Thomas Marsh. Each of the apostles prayed, and Alpheus Cutler placed the cornerstone before, as Wilford put it, "in consequence of the peculiar situation of the Saints he thought it wisdom to adjourn until some future time when the Lord should open the way expressing his determination then to proceed with the building."<sup>4</sup>

A few days later, William Phelps, who had apostatized and remained in Missouri, reported the event to his wife in a mocking, critical tone. "One of the least of all the forcible tricks of the Mormons, was performed in the morning of the 26<sup>th</sup> April, in secret darkness about three o'clock in the Morning." He said they

assembled at the big house cellar, and laid one huge stone, in addition to those already there, to fulfill the revelation given the 26<sup>th</sup> of April one year ago. I think they strained at a camel and swallowed a gnat. . . . I have also learned that, at the sham meeting at the big house cellar, there not being a quorum of the old "Twelve" present,

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<sup>4</sup> Wilford Woodruff, Journal, April 16, 1839, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

they had recourse to “shift,” and ordained Wilford Woodruff, and Geo. Smith as apostles, which with HC Kimball Orson Pratt, Brigham Young (old ones) and John E Page and John Taylor (new ones), made seven. They prayed (in vain) sung Adam ondi Ahmah, and closed. There were others there. This looks a little like choosing or loving darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil.

Phelps continued with profound irony,

You know I think as much of pure religion as ever, but this foolish mocking disgusts me and all decent people. Force the fulfillment of Jo’s revelation! You might as well damn the waters of Missouri River with a lime riddle. It was undoubtedly done to strengthen the faith of weak members, and for effect abroad: as I understand the Twelve are a going to try their luck again among the nations: It’s really a pity they cannot get a Looking Glass large enough to see the saw log in their own eyes while they are endeavoring to pull the slab out of the neighboring nations. All I can say is “Physician save thyself”! Whether you laugh or cry, I have one thing to confess, and that is: I never was so lonesome before.<sup>5</sup>

While William Phelps pitied himself and mocked the apostles, they turned east and continued to obey section 118. They returned to Illinois to make final preparations for their mission to Great Britain. They left their families sick and destitute and, some suffering from malaria, struggled to make their way to England. There they experienced an unprecedented harvest, converting thousands of souls.

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<sup>5</sup> William W. Phelps to Sally Phelps, May 1, 1839, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.