

Section 121

Section 121 puts a counterintuitive twist on the age-old problem of suffering and power. If God is benevolent and powerful, why do people suffer?

The problem becomes acute for those who assume that God should exercise his benevolence and power by preventing all suffering. That is apparently incongruous with his plan, in which Jesus Christ, the most innocent and loving being, suffered more than anyone and everyone else. Joseph internalized these lessons in a tiny, squalid, freezing cell near the Missouri River. It happened like this.

The Missouri governor issued an order for the militia to expel Latter-day Saints, who were abused, raped, and compelled to give up their property as citizen soldiers shot their livestock and pillaged their homes. General Lucas arrested Joseph. Emma and her children clung to Joseph as a guard cursed at six-year-old Joseph III and threatened to kill him if he didn't back off.¹ Joseph was carted off to Richmond, Missouri, where he wrote to Emma, as positively as he could, that he was shackled to his brethren "in chains as well as in the cords of everlasting love."²

On December 1, 1838, Joseph Smith and five of his brethren were committed to jail in Liberty, Missouri, having been charged with treason against the state in a preliminary hearing. A committee of the Missouri legislature later concluded that the one-sided

¹ "[Journal, December 1842–June 1844; Book 1, 21 December 1842–10 March 1843](#)," p. 15, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 5, 2020.

² "[Letter to Emma Smith, 12 November 1838](#)," p. [1], The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 5, 2020.

hearing was “not of the character which should be desired for the basis of a fair and candid investigation.”³ Joseph’s brother Hyrum called it a “pretended court” after the judge said “there was no law for us, nor for the ‘Mormons’ in the state of Missouri.”⁴

Four winter months and five days later, Joseph and his brethren still languished in jail at Liberty, Missouri, a cramped dungeon without beds or a bathroom, awaiting trial on a capital charge without hope for due process. Meanwhile, the Saints had been driven midwinter by a mob under the guise of official orders from the governor, aided and abetted by a host of apostates.

Indeed, many of Joseph’s most trusted and stalwart friends had forsaken him. Most of the Book of Mormon witnesses, still certain of their testimony, turned against him. Some of the apostles were antagonistic, including Thomas Marsh and Orson Hyde, who had said it was treasonous for Joseph to prophecy the coming kingdom of God (see section 65). William Phelps turned his powerful pen against Joseph. Former apostle William McLellin, who had no doubts that Joseph was a prophet (see section 66), plundered the Saints and expressed his desire to beat Joseph.⁵

Some of the Saints lost all faith “that God has been our leader.” They had hoped for deliverance, but none came.⁶ Even Sidney Rigdon, counselor in the First Presidency and fellow sufferer in jail, resented God for not using his power to spare the Saints from suffering. “If ever there was a moment to give up the cause, this was it,” Richard Bushman wrote.

Joseph puzzled over the Saints’ suffering and God’s power. Why had they been defeated? He never questioned his own revelations, never doubted the validity of the commandments. He did not wonder if he had been mistaken in sending the Saints to

³ *Correspondence, Orders &c. in Relation to the Disturbances with the Mormons; and the Evidence* (Fayette, Missouri: Missouri General Assembly, 1841), 2.

⁴ Hyrum Smith, Affidavit before Nauvoo Municipal Court, July 1, 1843, in Joseph Smith, et al., *History of the Church*, 7 volumes, edited by B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1980), 3:402–23; also in Clark V. Johnson, editor, *Mormon Redress Petitions: Documents of the 1833–1838 Missouri Conflict* (Provo: Religious Studies Center, BYU, 1992), 619–39, quote drawn from pages 632–35. Gordon A. Madsen, “Joseph Smith and the Missouri Court of Inquiry: Austin A. King’s Quest for Hostages,” *BYU Studies* 43:4 (2004): 93–136.

⁵ Smith, et al., *History of the Church*, 3:215.

⁶ John Corrill, *A Brief History of the Church of Christ of Latter Day Saints* (St. Louis: Printed for the Author, 1839), 48.

Missouri or requiring them to gather. He questioned God’s disappearance. Where was he when the Saints needed him?⁷

Joseph put these questions to the Lord in a March 1839 letter to the Saints. Sections 121, 122, and 123 all come from this one profound letter.⁸ Section 121:1–6 follows Joseph’s description of the jail as “hell surrounded with demons.” Even more concerning to him were the widows and orphans of the men murdered at Haun’s Mill and “the unrelenting hand” of oppression. It is about the duration of these injustices that Joseph inquired “how long ... yea, O Lord, how long?” (D&C 121:1–3).

Joseph reviewed the actions of apostates, judges, lawyers, the governor, “and the one sided rascally proceedings of the Legislature” before saying how letters from Emma, his brother, and Bishop Partridge had warmed his heart. “And when the hart is sufficiently contrite,” his letter says, “then the voice of inspiration steals along and whispers,” followed by the answer to his prayer in verses 7–25.

The Lord’s answer to “how long” was “a small moment,” accompanied by a curse on Joseph’s enemies and the identification of their real motive—personal sinfulness (D&C 121:17). The Lord severs them “from the ordinances of mine house” and promises just punishments for their sins (v. 20). Verses 26–33 are the promised blessings of a covenant, the terms and conditions of which precede the promises but were not included in the canonized part of Joseph’s letter:

Let honesty and sobriety, and candor and solemnity, and virtue, and pureness, and meekness, and simplicity, Crown our heads in every place, and in fine becom as little Children without malice guile or Hypocrisy: and now Bretheren after your tribulations *if* you do these things, and exercise fervent prayer, and faith in the sight of God, *then* God will grant the exalting blessings promised in verses 26–33.

Verses 34–46 make the most sense in the context of consecration. The portion of the letter preceding those verses cautions against “any among you who aspire after their own aggrandizement and seek their own oppulance while their brethren are groning

⁷ Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 380.

⁸ “[Letter to the Church and Edward Partridge, 20 March 1839](#),” The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 5, 2020. The entire letter was published in Dean C. Jessee and John W. Welch, editors, “Revelations in Context: Joseph Smith’s Letter from Liberty Jail, March 20, 1839,” *BYU Studies* 39:3 (2000): 125–45.

in poverty and are under sore trials.” Then Joseph explains why many are called but few are chosen: “Because their hearts are set so much upon the things of this world and aspire to the honors of men that they do not learn this one lesson,” that a person who hides their sins, gratifies pride, has vain ambition, or exploits the weak and poor cannot have priesthood.

Sadly, most mortals choose not to submit to the Savior’s power to change the nature and disposition. Most mortals oppress their neighbors as soon as they can. This is forbidden by the gospel generally and by section 121 specifically. It prescribes the antidote of God-like qualities: persuasion, long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, pure love, and knowledge. Reproof should come at precisely the right time, which is “when moved upon by the Holy Ghost,” and removing the problem should be done with sharpness, like a surgeon’s scalpel, leaving as little scar tissue and collateral damage as possible and “showing forth afterwards an increase of love toward him whom thou hast reproved” (D&C 121:43).

That is God’s way of governing—righteous dominion. Verses 45–46 sum how it works. Those who choose charity over covetousness and virtue over self-interest inherit “an everlasting dominion” (D&C 121:46). Those who choose to share and not coerce when they have a little power are the only ones God trusts with more power. The maxim is wrong: absolute power does not corrupt absolutely. Rather, a little power, when misused, leads to the loss of priesthood, while faithfulness to priesthood accumulates more power—gently, like dew from heaven (v. 45).

What an ironic place was the jail at Liberty. Joseph was powerless—except profoundly not. He was the only person on earth at the time in full possession of the priesthood keys restored by ministering angels. The powerful people who oppressed him—former friends and arch foes—were about to become powerless. Perhaps because it was a place of suffering, Liberty (a microcosm of mortality) was an ideal environment in which to internalize the truth that mortals who overcome their nature and choose to wield power in the service of others as God does, with sacrifice and suffering, won’t have to compel anyone or anything, and yet their kingdom will grow forever.