
The Martyrdom

D&C 135:1–2

In May 1844 Thomas Sharp, editor of the *Warsaw Signal*, wrote, “We would not be surprised to hear of [Joseph Smith’s] death by violent means in a short time. He has deadly enemies. ... The feeling of this country is now lashed to its utmost pitch, and will break forth in fury upon the slightest provocation.”¹ In spite of the publicized threat of murder, the Prophet Joseph Smith was calm. He said,

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. 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.²

Joseph’s calm resolve was tested in June 1844. It began with the printing of the *Nauvoo Expositor*—the first and only newspaper issued in the City of the Saints charging the prophet with whoredoms and abusing political power. As mayor of Nauvoo, Joseph met with the Nauvoo City Council to discuss accusations stemming from the *Expositor*. At the end of their discussion, the council voted to denounce the *Expositor* as a public nuisance.

When the *Nauvoo Expositor* press and building were destroyed, proprietors of the *Expositor* charged Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum with the destruction. The Smith brothers stood trial twice in Nauvoo on the charge and were released. Legal proceedings did not pacify the proprietors. Hoping to escape from further court proceedings and threats of death, Joseph and Hyrum left Nauvoo on June 23, 1844, and crossed the Mississippi River

¹ *Warsaw Signal*, May 29, 1844.

² History, 1838–1856, volume D-1 [1 August 1842–1 July 1843], 6 [Addendum]. Joseph Smith Papers.

to reach the banks of Iowa. They then made plans to go west. Their plans were thwarted when ill-advised friends asked them to go to Carthage and accede to the law.

Early on Monday morning, June 24, 1844, the Prophet Joseph and Hyrum began their journey to Carthage. On the journey, Joseph paused to gaze over the city of Nauvoo. "This is the loveliest place and the best people under the heavens," he said. "Little do they know the trials that await them."³ To his friend Dan Jones, Joseph confessed, "I love the city of Nauvoo too well to save my life at your expense. If I go not to them [Carthaginians], they will come and act out the horrid Missouri scenes in Nauvoo. I may prevent it. I fear not death. My work is well nigh done. Keep the faith and I will die for Nauvoo."⁴ In Carthage, Joseph mused, "Could my brother Hyrum but be liberated, it would not matter so much about me."⁵ To his wife Emma he confided, "I am very much resigned to my lot, knowing I am justified and have done the best that could be done. Give my love to the children and all my Friends."⁶

On June 27, 1844, John Taylor and Willard Richards visited the Smith brothers in Carthage Jail. In the bedroom on the second floor of the jail, John Taylor was asked to sing a hymn that harmonized with their feelings that fateful day:

In pris'n I saw him next, condemned
To meet a traitor's doom at morn.
The tide of lying tongues I stemmed,
And honored him 'mid shame and scorn.
My friendship's utmost zeal to try.
He asked if I for him would die.
The flesh was weak; my blood ran chill,
But my free spirit cried, "I will."⁷

Around five o'clock in the afternoon of June 27, "an armed mob—painted black—of from 150 to 200 persons" stood outside the jail waiting to attack. In spite of early attempts to defend themselves from lawless mob violence, the prisoners and their visitors, Willard

³ History, 1838–1856, volume F-1 [1 May 1844–8 August 1844], 151. Joseph Smith Papers.

⁴ Dan Jones, "History of the Latter-day Saints, from their establishment in the year 1823, until the time that three hundred thousand of them were exiled from America because of their religion, in the year 1846," 73–83, as published and translated from Welsh in Ronald D. Dennis, trans., "The Martyrdom of Joseph Smith and His Brother Hyrum," *BYU Studies* 24, no. 1 (1984), 96.

⁵ History, 1838–1856, volume F-1 [1 May 1844–8 August 1844], 168.

⁶ Letter to Emma Smith, 27 June 1844, 1–2. Joseph Smith Papers.

⁷ "A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief," *Hymnal of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), 29.

Richards and John Taylor, could not stop the brutal assassins. Hyrum Smith was the first to fall from an assassin's bullet. He fell to the ground exclaiming, "I am a dead man!" Upon seeing him fall, Joseph sobbed, "Oh dear, brother Hyrum!"⁸ Joseph then stepped toward the bedroom window. As he did so, bullets shot from the doorway struck him as did two shots from outside. He fell from the window to the ground below exclaiming, "O Lord my God!" (D&C 135:1).

When news of the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith reached Nauvoo, Latter-day Saints mourned. "Yea, every heart is filled with sorrow, and the very streets of Nauvoo seem to mourn. Where it will end the Lord only knows," wrote Vilate Kimball.⁹ Eliza R. Snow expressed the Saints' anguish in verse:

Oh Illinois, thy soul has drunk the blood,
Of prophets martyred for the Cause of God.
Now Zion mourns—she mourns an earthly head
The Prophet and the Patriarch are dead.¹⁰

⁸ Historian's Office, Martyrdom Account, Draft, 53–54a. Joseph Smith Papers.

⁹ Ronald K. Esplin, "Life in Nauvoo, June 1884: Vilate Kimball's Martyrdom Letters," *BYU Studies* 19 (Winter 1979), 238.

¹⁰ Eliza R. Snow, *Biography and Family Record of Lorenzo Snow, One of the Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1884), 80–82.