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The Evidence of Martyrdom

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CHAPTER XXXII.

THE EVIDENCE OF MARTYRDOM.

The highest evidence that one man can give another of friendship is that he sacrifices his life for him. "Greater love hath no man than this," said Jesus, "that a man lay down his life for his friends."^a When a man does that he gives all that he has, and hence can give no more. The highest evidence of sincerity that a man can give his fellow-men—the highest proof that he has spoken the truth in any given case—is that he perseveres in it unto death, and seals his testimony with his blood. When he does that he affixes the broadest possible seal to that of which he testified, and thenceforth the truth so testified of must be in force in all the world.

So important did such a testimony become in the estimation of Paul that he said:

"Where a testament is there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. For a testament is of force after men are dead: otherwise it is of no strength at all while the testator liveth."^b

In the light of this principle, and when the importance of the great testimony which he bore to the world is taken into account, it is not to be wondered at that Joseph Smith was called upon to affix the broad seal of martyrdom to his life's work. Something of incompleteness in his work would likely have been complained of had this been lacking; but now, not so; his character of prophet was rounded out to

^a John xv: 13.

^b Heb. ix: 16, 17.

complete fullness by his falling a martyr under the murderous fire of a mob at Carthage, in the State of Illinois.

The circumstances attendant upon the prophet's death, briefly told, are as follows: The extreme bitterness of his enemies culminated in the spring and early summer of 1844, in a charge against himself as mayor of Nauvoo, and some members of the City Council, of riot in suppressing in their official capacity what was regarded as a scurrilous and libelous paper, known as the *Nauvoo Expositor*. A warrant for the arrest of Joseph Smith and the City Council was issued by a Mr. Morrison, justice of the peace, at Carthage, and made returnable to the justice at Carthage "or some other justice of the peace." Mr. Smith and the City Council being assured that it was unsafe for them to go to Carthage, insisted upon being taken before "some other justice of the peace," as provided in the warrant. To this the constable refused to assent, whereupon the parties under arrest applied for a writ of *habeas corpus* made returnable before the municipal court of Nauvoo. A hearing was granted and the case dismissed. Subsequently, however, at the instance of Judge Thomas, the circuit judge of the judicial district which included Nauvoo, Joseph and the City Council submitted to a new trial on the same charge before Squire D. H. Wells, a justice of the peace, and were again acquitted. But the course pursued by the mayor and City Council was declared to be resistance to the law by the prophet's enemies, and was made use of to influence the public mind against the saints.

Mobs assembled about Carthage and the work of violence was inaugurated by kidnapping, whipping, and otherwise abusing the saint living in the outlying districts of Nauvoo. For protection the people thus assailed fled to Nauvoo, and this was heralded abroad as the massing of the

Mormon forces. The Governor of the State—Thomas Ford—was kept informed of all that was taking place in Nauvoo by the city authorities, and in answer to the question, “What course shall we pursue in the event of an armed mob coming against the city?” he replied that Joseph Smith was Lieutenant-General of the Nauvoo Legion, and it was his duty to protect the city and surrounding country, and issued orders to that effect. Thus declared, qualified and directed to act by the Governor of the State, the Nauvoo Legion was called together and measures were taken for the defense of the city; and as the mob forces grew bolder every day, Nauvoo was at last placed under martial law.

Meantime the mob forces were active in making misrepresentations to the Governor, until finally in his perplexity he resolved on visiting the scenes of the disturbances, and for that purpose went to Carthage. Here he was met by a delegation from Nauvoo—Elder John Taylor^c and Dr. John M. Bernhisel^d—to represent the mayor and City Council. They presented to him a full statement of the case and submitted all the documents. The Governor was of the opinion that in order to prove to the people that the saints were willing to submit to the law, it would be best for Joseph Smith and all concerned in the destruction of the *Expositor* to come to Carthage for examination. Elder Taylor called the Governor’s attention to the fact that they had already been examined before two competent courts and acquitted; that they had fulfilled the law in every particular, and that their enemies had murderous designs and were only making use of this matter to get Joseph Smith into their power. The Gov-

^c John Taylor subsequently became the President of the Church, succeeding Brigham Young in 1877.

^d Dr. Bernhisel afterwards was Utah’s delegate in Congress for a number of terms.

ernor, however, insisted that the proper thing for the prophet to do was to come to Carthage.

Elder John Taylor then stated that in consequence of the excitement prevailing, it would be extremely unsafe for Joseph Smith and his friends to come to Carthage; that they had men and arms to defend themselves, but if their forces and those of the enemy should be brought into close proximity the most probable result would be a collision. In reply to this the Governor "strenuously advised us," says Elder Taylor, "not to bring our arms, and pledged his faith as Governor, and the faith of the State, that we should be protected, and that he would guarantee our perfect safety."^e

As soon as the delegation returned from Carthage a meeting of the prophet and a few of his friends was called and the demands of the Governor considered. It was finally determined that it would be unsafe for the Prophet Joseph to go to Carthage, and he himself felt inspired to go west. He crossed the Mississippi that night, and expected to continue his journey as soon as arrangements could be perfected.

Some of the prophet's "friends," when they learned of his determination to leave Nauvoo and seek an asylum for the Church in the west, accused him of taking the part of the unfaithful shepherd, who, when the wolves were about to come upon the flock, was taking to flight. They entreated him to return and give himself up, trusting to the pledges of the Governor for a fair trial. Influenced by these entreaties and stung by the charge of cowardice from those who should

^e Governor Ford himself admits in his "History of Illinois" that he made the pledge: "If these men [Joseph and Hyrum Smith] were the incarnation of Satan himself, as was believed by many, their murder was a foul and treacherous action, alike disgraceful to those who perpetrated the crime, to the state, and to the governor, whose word had been pledged for the protection of the prisoners in jail and which had been so shamefully violated," —Ford's Hist. Illinois, p. 367.

have known better and should have aided him in his flight, the prophet said: "If my life is of no value to my friends, it is of none to myself." And against his own better judgment, and with the conviction in his soul that he would be killed he resolved to return. He besought his brother Hyrum to leave him, but nothing could induce Hyrum to forsake the prophet. Having stood by him through well nigh all the storms of his career, it was not in Hyrum Smith's nature to forsake the prophet in the darkest hour of his life.

Arriving at Nauvoo, the prophet promptly sent a message to Governor Ford that he would be at Carthage next day. Early next morning the prophet and a company of his friends set out for Carthage. *En route* they met Captain Dunn, an officer of the militia of the state, with a requisition from the Governor for the state arms in possession of the people of Nauvoo. He earnestly entreated the prophet to return to Nauvoo with him, thinking doubtless that his task would be easier of accomplishment if the prophet was present, and Joseph Smith complied with the request. It was on the occasion of meeting Captain Dunn's company, some four or five miles out of Carthage, that Joseph uttered these prophetic words:

"I am going like a lamb to the slaughter, 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.'"

Hyrum Smith that morning before leaving Nauvoo, and in spite of an assumed cheerfulness, also left evidence that the fate awaiting his brother and himself at Carthage had been foreshadowed in his mind. He read a passage in the Book of Mormon, near the close of the twelfth chapter of Ether:

"And it came to pass that I prayed unto the Lord that he

would give unto the Gentiles grace that they might have charity, and it came to pass that the Lord said unto me, if they have not charity it mattereth not unto thee, thou hast been faithful; wherefore thy garments shall be made clean, and because thou hast seen thy weakness thou shalt be made strong, even unto the sitting down in the place which I have prepared in the mansions of my Father. *And now I bid farewell unto the Gentiles, yea, and also to my brethren whom I love, until we shall meet before the judgment seat of Christ, where all men shall know that my garments are not spotted with your blood.*"

On this passage he turned down the leaf, and there it remains turned down to this day, a silent witness that he, too, knew that he was "going like a lamb to the slaughter!"

The state arms secured as per the requisition of Governor Ford the prophet and his friends, attended by Captain Dunn's company of militia, set out again for Carthage, where they arrived about midnight. One militia company encamped on the public square—the Carthage Greys—were aroused by the passing cavalcade, and gave vent to ominous threats and a volley of imprecations.

The next morning Joseph Smith and a number of the Nauvoo City Council appeared before a justice of the peace in Carthage, and were bound over to appear before the circuit court at its next session on a charge of riot. No sooner, however, was this matter so adjusted than Joseph and Hyrum Smith were arrested on a charge of treason against the state of Illinois, at the instance of Henry O. Norton and Augustine Spencer—men of no character, and whose words were utterly unreliable. The prisoners were arbitrarily thrust into jail, where they were at last completely at the mercy of their enemies. The friends of the prophet protested to the Governor against such treatment, but to no purpose. Governor Ford was sorry that the thing had occurred—he did not believe the charge, but thought the best thing to do would be to let the law take its course.

The day following, the 26th of June, there was a long interview between the prophet and the governor in the prison. All the difficulties that had arisen in Nauvoo were related by Joseph and the action of himself and associates explained and defended. In concluding the conversation the prophet said: "Governor Ford, I ask for nothing but what is legal; I have a right to expect protection at least from you; for independent of law, you have pledged your faith and that of the state for my protection, and I wish to go to Nauvoo." "And you shall have protection, General Smith," replied the Governor. "I did not make this promise without consulting my officers, who all pledged their honor to its fulfillment. I do not know that I shall go tomorrow to Nauvoo, but if I do, I will take you along."

The next day—the ever memorable 27th of June—the Governor broke the promise he had made to Joseph Smith the day previous, viz: that if he went to Nauvoo he would take him along. Governor Ford disbanded the militia except a small company he detailed to accompany him to Nauvoo, and the Carthage Greys, a company composed of the very worst enemies the prophet and his friends had—these he left to guard the prisoners! It was the public boast of the disbanded militia that they would only go a short distance from the town and then after the Governor left for Nauvoo they would return and kill the prophet. When this fact was stated to the Governor by Dan Jones, one of the Elders of the Church, who heard the boasts, Governor Ford replied, that Jones was over anxious for the safety of his friends.

The events of that day proved that the boasts of the prophet's enemies were not idle. About five o'clock in the afternoon the prison was suddenly surrounded by an armed mob, of from one hundred and fifty to two hundred persons. They forced the prison doors and ruthlessly murdered the

brothers Smith. Hyrum was shot first and fell, calmly saying: "I am a dead man!" For a moment the prophet bent over the prostrate form of Hyrum, and said, "Oh! my poor, dear brother Hyrum!" Then instantly rising to his feet he stepped to the half-open door, through which the mob was firing their guns, and discharged at them a pistol left in his hands that morning by Cyrus Wheelock, one of the brethren who had visited him in prison. He then turned from the door and attempted to leap from the window; as he did so he was shot and fell to the ground, exclaiming, "*Oh Lord, my God!*" Instant terror seized his murderers and they fled.

By the side of the well-curb just under the window from which he had half leaped, half fallen—the sands of the young prophet's life ebbed away, and another soul was added to the number under the altar "that were slain for the word of God and the testimony which they held."

Joseph Smith was innocent of any crime; his death was the direct result of that bitter and relentless persecution which had followed him from the time the Lord first appeared to him and made him a prophet to the nations; and in his death, so tragic, and so pitiful, he affixed a broad seal to the message he bore to the world—a seal that makes his testimony of binding force—"For where a testament is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator; for a testament is of force after men are dead: otherwise it is of no strength at all while the testator liveth."^f Not in vain fell the prophet! Not in vain did his blood make crimson the soil of the great state of Illinois! It was fitting that the prophet of the great Dispensation of the Fullness of Times should complete his great work by sealing his testimony with his blood, that his martyr-cry, "*Oh Lord, my God!*" might

^f Hebrews ix: 16, 17.

mingle with the martyr-cries of so many of the prophets who, like him, were sent to bear witness for God.

And now let me say in conclusion—it is a fact; the world needed a New Witness for God; the church of Christ was destroyed; there was an apostasy from the Christian religion so complete and universal as to make necessary a New Dispensation thereof; the ancient prophets of God foretold the coming forth in the last days of a New Dispensation of the gospel; God has sent forth his angel with that New Dispensation; God did raise up a New Witness for himself, in the person of Joseph Smith, and divinely commissioned him to preach the gospel, administer its ordinances and speak in his name, and God has given to the world abundant evidence of the divine authority and inspiration of that Witness.
—THE PROPHET JOSEPH SMITH.

THE END.