# In the Hands of the Dotter The Crucibles of Light

"If ever you are brought into the presence of God, . . . you have got to be proved, not only by being tempted by the devil, but the Priesthood will try you—it will try you to the core. If one thing won't try you, something else will be adopted, until you are like the passive clay in the hands of the Potter, . . . as in a crucible."

t the dawn of the dispensation of the fulness of times, Joseph Smith entered the sacred grove to inquire of God. He had scarcely begun to pray when, in the midst of the secluded grove, "thick darkness gathered." The increasing darkness would have frightened anyone, especially a fourteen-year-old boy. Nevertheless, while facing heaven, Joseph exerted all his "powers to call upon God." At the "moment of great alarm," the debilitating darkness was suddenly dispelled by a light "above the brightness of the sun" (Joseph Smith—History

1:15–16). And with the appearance of the Light, Joseph was delivered.

This pivotal moment in history became a pattern in the life stories of Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum. The struggle between darkness and light became the theme of their lives—the crucible in which their character was shaped. Their journey illustrates that it is sometimes necessary to endure darkness before we can face, embrace, and then radiate light.

## Light and Leadership

Radiating Christ's light—letting his light shine through us—is at the very center of effective leadership. Everyone born into this world is given "the light of Christ" (Moroni 7:18) and so has the potential to lead others through the darkness of the world. Too often, however, the light within us is quenched in the crucible of adversity, and we find ourselves unable to lead the way.

Anciently, a crucible was an earthen vessel in which alchemists attempted to turn base metals into gold.<sup>2</sup> However, more recently, crucibles have come to be defined as "a severe test, . . . a place or situation in which concentrated forces interact to cause or influence change or development." Such experiences occur in differing degrees in each of our lives.

According to scripture, the Lord sent us all into the world to prove us, to try us, to help us learn and grow (see Abraham 3:25). Thus as part of this life we will each find ourselves in crucibles, agonizing turning points that force us to question our assumptions, examine our values, and assess our faith. These experiences of deep reflection change us profoundly, and we are forever different because of them. A crucible experience might be intensely private or very public; it might last a day or two or the span of a lifetime; it might come about through our own actions or the actions of others. Each person is tried in his or her own crucible. Regardless of the circumstances,

our response to the crucible experience is all-important. For some, the experience adds up to meaningless suffering and leaves bitterness and disillusionment in its wake. But for those who seek the Lord's hand in it and call forth the enabling power of Christ, the crucible of adversity can be the greatest of blessings. For one thing, it will provide a context for the grace of Christ to be more clearly manifest-moments when our backs are strengthened and our burdens become light (see Mosiah 24:14-15). Such experiences can temper and purify us to such a degree that the light of Christ can shine forth and reveal in us the character of Christ.<sup>5</sup> One management scholar has noted: "The most reliable indicators and predictors of true leadership is an individual's ability to find meaning in negative events and to learn from even the most trying circumstances. Put another way, the skills required to conquer adversity and emerge stronger and more committed than ever are the same ones that make for extraordinary leaders."6

Interestingly, little research has been done on this developmental process in the leadership of Joseph and Hyrum. Some attribute their leadership skills to charisma,<sup>7</sup> arguing that from the start they had the magnetic appeal of "born leaders." A careful examination of historical sources suggests otherwise. Joseph and Hyrum's leadership capabilities did not come forth fully formed from some innate source. Their leadership abilities and their relationship with each other developed in parallel; as their brotherly unity deepened, so did their ability to lead. By their increased "union of feeling," they obtained increased "power with God." And the source of this unity was shared "crucible" experiences—in particular, the crucible of Liberty Jail.

During their confinement at the jail in the winter of 1838–39, the brothers were forced to ponder their lives up to that time—including the assumptions they had lived by, the disaster that had befallen the Saints, and the meaning of suffering. Richard L. Bushman notes, "While in prison, Joseph

mulled over the problems of the past year. . . . He now saw that the Church had erred, and he had made mistakes himself, . . . [and he] resolved not to repeat his own errors." In addition, Leonard J. Arrington observed, "The Liberty Jail experience gave [Joseph and Hyrum] time to ponder [their] course, to synthesize ideas, to formulate goals, and to communicate in an unhurried manner with the Lord." 10

From the darkness of Liberty Jail, Joseph tenderly reached out to the Saints from the deepest corners of his heart, writing to teach and encourage them. His writings reveal his struggle to understand his own sufferings and those of the Saints scattered across Missouri and Illinois, and to discern the Lord's purposes in those sufferings:

[The Lord] has chosen His own crucible, wherein we have been tried; and we think if we get through with any degree of safety, and shall have kept the faith, that it will be a sign to this generation, altogether sufficient to leave them without excuse; and we think also, it will be a trial of our faith equal to that of Abraham, and that the ancients will not have whereof to boast over us in the day of judgment, as being called to pass through heavier afflictions; that we may hold an even weight in the balance with them. . . . Nevertheless we would suggest the propriety of being aware of an aspiring spirit, which spirit has often times urged men forward to make foul speeches, and influence the Church to reject milder counsels, and has eventually been the means of bringing much death and sorrow upon the Church.<sup>11</sup>

In the crucible of prison, Joseph and Hyrum were humbled enough to see where mistakes had been made and why the Saints were being tried. Their mutual search for greater light while they were in the prison's darkness brought greater understanding, which made them more insightful leaders. Through examining their experience, we can see how the inevitable crucible experiences we face as leaders can become

the mechanism that shape and hone our ability to authentically lead and light the way for others.

# Enduring the Darkness

October 31, 1838, began one of the darkest seasons of Joseph's and Hyrum's lives. The battle at Crooked River, the Haun's Mill massacre, and other harrowing events of the socalled Mormon War had moved Governor Lilburn W. Boggs of Missouri to issue his infamous extermination order to drive the Mormons from the state. Joseph's vision to establish Zion the New Jerusalem would have to wait. In an attempt to spare the Saints this government-issued extermination order, Joseph, Sidney Rigdon, Parley P. Pratt, Lyman Wight, and George W. Robinson went under a flag of truce to meet with the state militia to negotiate a possible settlement; they were betrayed by one of their own, General George W. Hinkle, who among other state officials arrested the five men on false charges of treason, murder, rape, larceny, and robbery.<sup>12</sup> Two days later Hyrum and Amasa Lyman were also arrested for the same charges.<sup>13</sup> What added to their trials, men who had been some of their closest associates—Martin Harris, William McLellin, David Whitmer, Oliver Cowdery, Orson Hyde, and W. W. Phelps—had turned against them. Some of them even swore affidavits against them, lending credibility to the false charges. Joseph and Hyrum were initially kept for a brief period at Richmond Jail and then transported and confined in Liberty Jail for a period that lasted for over four months.

The conditions in Liberty Jail were inhumane and deplorable. The jail was about fourteen by fourteen feet square with a ceiling not quite six feet high. This meant neither Joseph nor Hyrum could stand up straight during their confinement. <sup>14</sup> The cell's sole sources of light were two small, barred windows about six by twelve inches, which let more chill air than light into the room. For beds the men slept on the rocky, uneven

floor; there were no accommodations for bathing, washing, or shaving. The terrible living circumstances within the jail were only surpassed by the guard's inhumane treatment. Joseph, Hyrum and the others were treated roughly by the guards, both verbally and physically and were even poisoned on several occasions. According to Hyrum's record: "Poison was administered to us three or four times. The effect it had upon our system was, that it vomited us almost to death . . . we would lie some two or three days in a torpid, stupid state, not even caring or wishing for life. The poison . . . would inevitably have proved fatal, had not the power of Jehovah interposed in our behalf." 15

In February 1839, Elder Heber C. Kimball made the last legal attempt to secure the brothers' release, but without success. Weighted down by this failure, Heber went to the jail to deliver the news and was lowered down through the jail's trapdoor. After hearing the news, Joseph asked that everyone pray with him. As the men began to pray, a guard pointed his gun at the men and shouted, "No prayer in here!" Like Alma of old, they could only wait in the faith that God would answer the petitions of their silent prayers (see Mosiah 24:12). Through the next three months, Joseph and Hyrum endured agonies, not the least of them the knowledge that they could not render aid to the suffering Saints.

## Facing the Light

Amid the weeks and months of seemingly endless sufferings, Hyrum, in a letter to his wife, was the first to exclaim, "O God, how long shall we suffer these things?" Shortly thereafter, Joseph also cried out from the depths of his heart, "O God, where art thou?" (D&C 121:1). The two brothers, who like Moses and Aaron had so oft communed with God, now felt alone and abandoned. As leaders, they had never borne such a

weight of helplessness. Indeed, "if ever there was a moment to give up the cause, this was it." <sup>18</sup>

The pain of such crucible experiences is real and deep—so much so that it is only natural to feel abandoned by God. Yet it is at such times that the leader must decide to hold on his way, to confront and face the experience rather than giving in to despair. At such times the leader must continue to turn to God even when the heavens seem blocked by a steel ceiling.

In the crucible of Liberty Jail, Joseph and Hyrum turned to God from a depth of need they had never felt before. As a result, they were blessed with a far deeper understanding of God's purposes. The light they gained helped them lead the Saints through the darkness of their own sufferings. Hyrum wrote to them with hard-won insight: "Bonds and imprisonments and persecutions are no disgrace to the Saints. It is that that is common in all ages of the world since the day of Adam. . . . The same things produce the same effect in every age of the world. We only want the same patience, the same carefulness, the same guide, the same grace, the same faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . And without this we cannot be saved in the Celestial glory." 19

Unfortunately, the crucible experience does not make great leaders of everyone; many refuse to pay the price of seeking the Lord in the midst of intense trial. As a result, they are crippled by the futility of their pain and end up incapable of leading by the light. The experience produces in them bitterness, skepticism, pessimism, self-pity, and darkness. Sidney Rigdon, for example, who suffered in Liberty Jail with Joseph and Hyrum, was deeply affected by the experience. After Sidney was released in January 1839, his interest in the Church began to wane. He told Brigham Young that he "never would follow Brother Joseph's revelations any more, contrary to his own convenience" and that "Jesus Christ was a fool [compared] to him in sufferings." Perhaps Sidney found no redeeming value

in his suffering, and therefore his once-effective ability to lead declined.

In stark contrast to Sidney, Joseph and Hyrum emerged from Liberty Jail with an increased capacity to lead. Indeed, "the abuse, the injustice, the horror—all were for experience."<sup>21</sup> In the heart-wrenching darkness of Liberty Jail, Sidney turned away from the light, while Joseph and Hyrum steadfastly chose to face the light, however faint and far away.

## Embracing the Light

The light they found in the jail enabled Joseph and Hyrum to reach beyond their sufferings, to serve the afflicted even in their own afflictions (see D&C 30:6). For example, in February 1839 Emma and Mary Fielding Smith brought their children to visit their imprisoned fathers. In this setting Hyrum held his youngest son, Joseph F. Smith, for the first time, while Joseph must have spent considerable time reassuring his six-year-old son, Joseph III. Shortly after the group arrived, they sang hymns and prayed together much. Later, in the darkness of the jail, the Prophet and the Patriarch placed their hands on their sons' heads to bless them. Hyrum blessed his infant son and then his wife, Mary, and her sister Mercy, 22 and Joseph blessed Joseph III. 23 Though the jail was as dark as usual, that night it brought forth heavenly light.

"My heart bleeds continually when I contemplate the distress of the Church," Joseph wrote. "Oh that I could be with them I would not shrink at toil and hardship to render them comfort and consolation." While they could do little else, they wrote extensively to their loved ones, friends, and the Saints at large. In their letters they shared their love freely, gave counsel, acknowledged kindnesses and righteous conduct, requested assistance, expressed encouragement, gave direction, displayed gratitude, and declared revelation. The ponderings, principles, and doctrines contained in these letters are still treasured by

the Church today. Like Joseph and Hyrum, often in the midst of pain we are better able to reach out and teach those who are suffering pain of their own.

Sometime in March 1839, God sent light through the barred windows of Liberty Jail in the form of fundamental insights into our purposes on earth, but only after the brothers had endured long months of imprisonment. Apparently, the souls of these two prophets had to be tried before they were prepared to receive the light. But the light came, a revelation that helped explain why the Saints had suffered—and why we face adversity in this life: "Know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good. The Son of Man hath descended below them all. Art thou greater than he?" (D&C 122:7–8).

Additionally, Joseph and Hyrum learned from the Lord that too often we bring our trials on ourselves through pride and worldliness. Part of the revelation now known as Doctrine and Covenants 121 was sent as a letter to the Saints signed by both Joseph and Hyrum, as well as the other prisoners.<sup>25</sup> The letter says, in part:

We ought at all times to be very careful that such high-mindedness shall never have place in our hearts; but condescend to men of low estate, and with all long-suffering bear the infirmities of the weak.

Behold, there are many called, but few are chosen. And why are they not 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 the rights of the Priesthood are inseparably connected with the powers of heaven, and that the powers of heaven cannot be controlled nor handled only upon the principles of righteousness. That they may be conferred upon us, it is true; but when we undertake to cover our sins, or to gratify our pride, our vain ambition, or to exercise control, or dominion, or compulsion, upon the souls of the children of men, in any degree of unrighteousness, behold, the heavens

withdraw themselves; the Spirit of the Lord is grieved; and when it is withdrawn, *Amen to the Priesthood*, or the authority of that man.<sup>26</sup>

This heavenly pattern of leadership arose from the confines of Liberty Jail, which was to Joseph and Hyrum a "temple-prison." As B. H. Roberts explained, "A temple, first of all, is a place of prayer; and prayer is communion with God. It is the 'infinite in man seeking the infinite in God.' Where they find each other, there is holy sanctuary—a temple."<sup>27</sup>

As in this case, the crucible experiences we encounter so often in carrying out our leadership roles can bring revelatory insights, they can be to us like temples providing "sacred, revelatory, profoundly instructive experience with the Lord *in the most miserable experiences of life.*" Joseph would later say of the crucible of Liberty Jail, "My heart will always be more tender after this than ever it was before."

## Radiating the Light

Often, doubt and uncertainty are the most painful things about crucible experiences. As one scholar has noted, "If we only knew if and when we would . . . find a job, get married, have a wayward child or spouse return, recover from cancer, and so forth—why then we could pluck up the courage to bear our present portion of pain. It is the *uncertainty* as much or more than the *actuality* of suffering that most vexes us and tries our patience."<sup>30</sup> Crucible experiences often end in unexpected or miraculous ways, but only in the Lord's time. Discouragement can destroy us; however, if we are patient and long-suffering, we will eventually learn what the experience has to teach us. The Lord had revealed to Joseph the life-changing necessity of such crucible experiences: "I have refined thee . . . ; I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction" (1 Nephi 20:10). If we wish to be chosen, we must not shrink from the Lord's crucible.

After five long months of confinement, Joseph and Hyrum were taken from Liberty Jail to be tried in another town and eventually managed to escape from their guards.<sup>31</sup> Fittingly, the day they left that dark dungeon was April 6, 1839, the anniversary of the organization of the latter-day Church (see D&C 20:1). This day also signified for the brothers a rebirth into a new life: they were not the same men who entered Liberty Jail. They had grown immensely in courage, vision, and empathy for others—traits that fitted them even more for leadership in a divine cause.

Abraham Zaleznik, a lifetime scholar of leadership, noted that great leaders are often born again in a sense: "In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James described two basic personality types, 'once born' and 'twice born.' . . . Twice-borns . . . have not had an easy time of it. Their lives are marked by a continual struggle to attain some sense of order." Zaleznik then says that personal mastery "impels an individual to struggle for psychological and social change. . . . Leaders emerge through [this process]."<sup>32</sup>

Liberty Jail was the temple-prison from which Joseph and Hyrum emerged as "twice-born" leaders of God's Church. Through patience in distress, they had learned much about mastering self. Because of the deep injustices they had suffered, they understood even more keenly the need for change in the world they knew.

Joseph and Hyrum reunited with the Saints in Illinois on April 22, 1839. Thereafter, the brothers led the Church with renewed energy, bringing new and wonderful revelations to the Saints. Joseph went on to found the city of Nauvoo and to become its mayor and a candidate for the president of the United States. For his part, Hyrum took on heavier responsibilities in the First Presidency and was ordained Patriarch to the Church. An 1841 revelation designated Hyrum as "a prophet, and a seer, and a revelator unto my church, as well as my servant

Joseph; that he may act in concert also with my servant Joseph" (D&C 124:94–95). Hyrum went on to become a member of the Nauvoo City Council and a general in the Nauvoo Legion and intended to run for the Illinois State Legislature.

### The Lord's Pattern

Joseph and Hyrum were the first but not the only latter-day prophets to undergo crucible experiences. The lives of the prophets show that they all passed through such trials to become the leaders God required. Speaking of a time when his character came under public attack, President Gordon B. Hinckley remarked, "I guess these episodes were my crucible. They were vicious." President Harold B. Lee once confided to President Hinckley that "every man who became President of the Church had first been tested in the crucible of affliction." Similarly, Brigham Young said that Joseph Smith became more nearly perfect in his nearly thirty-nine years of trial and persecution than he could have in a thousand years without consecrating crucible experiences.

In her book *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories That Heal*, cancer physician Dr. Rachel Remen tells stories of people tried in the crucible of life-threatening illness. One of her patients, a twenty-four-year-old man who had lost his leg to a rare cancer, had become bitter, angry, and full of hatred because of his illness. But gradually, over his two years of therapy, she saw changes in him: he began to reach out to his fellow sufferers. Once he tried to cheer up a young woman who was deeply depressed at the loss of her breasts. He came into her room wearing running shorts so she could see his artificial leg, but she ignored him. Nurses had left a radio playing to lift her spirits, so he unstrapped the artificial leg and danced around the room on his remaining leg while snapping his fingers to the music. At last the depressed woman looked at him and began to laugh.

At the end of his therapy, the young man showed Dr. Remen a picture he had drawn nearly two years before of a vase with a deep black crack down the middle, which he had traced over and over with a black crayon. The vase was obviously a symbol of his body, which he had viewed as useless. Then he said to her, "This drawing isn't finished"; he took a yellow crayon and drew rays of light radiating from the crack in the vase. He said, "You see, here—this is where the light comes through." 36

It is no different for us. We will each encounter our own crucibles, times of real darkness in our lives; still, depending on how we face them, those are the times when "light comes through." The Apostle Paul similarly iterated this truth, encouraging and reassuring each of us in our crucibles: "God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, [now] hath shined in our hearts" (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Just as he was for Hyrum and Joseph, the Lord can be in the crucibles of our lives. If we are faithful, no matter the density of the darkness, the Light will appear and we will be delivered. The Light that shined through a broken vase, that dispelled the darkness that Joseph both felt and saw in the Sacred Grove; the same Light that shined through two barred windows into the dark dungeon of Liberty Jail—that Light will shine out of our crucibles and enable us to lead the way.

Without this awareness, we might see our crucibles as bleak, torturous ordeals to be endured rather than learned from, that break us rather than build us up, that darken rather than lighten our souls. But by enduring in faith, relying upon the strength of Christ, and facing and embracing light, we will grow into leaders that radiate the Light at home, at church, and in our communities. We will become as "lightning out of heaven,"<sup>37</sup> guiding others toward the Light.

#### JOSEPH AND HYRUM—LEADING AS ONE

## Notes

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