William Wines (W.W.) Phelps was living in Canandagua, New York when he and his family first heard the message of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. The date was July 9, 1830, three months after the Church founded by Joseph Smith was organized. A printer and a newspaper publisher, Phelps was in the unique position to receive and distribute news, and, of course, Mormonism was now big news.

Six months later, when Church leader Parley P. Pratt travelled through the region, he met Phelps and gave him a copy of the newly published Book of Mormon. Phelps and his wife read it all through the night, comparing the book’s teachings with the Bible, and in the morning, they had received a spiritual witness that the Book of Mormon was the word of God.

Burning with conviction, Phelps could not withhold, and he began to testify of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon to the people in his vicinity. Immediately, he was imprisoned, but he considered it a privilege to be persecuted for Christ’s sake.

When he was released, he packed up his family and headed for Fayette, New York to find Joseph Smith, the translator of the Book of Mormon, the president of The Church of Christ and the Prophet of God. Phelps was not disappointed when he met Joseph, and declared to him that he was ready to do the will of the Lord. The Prophet recognized in Phelps a man of God. He petitioned the Lord and learned that Phelps was a man called and chosen to perform special assignments in the work of the ministry.

Phelps’s contribution to the newly established Church cannot be overstated. In the early 1800s, the skills of writing, editing and printing were rare, but Phelps was uniquely qualified. No wonder, then, that Joseph Smith was pleased to find someone who could professionally print scriptures and other sacred writings, plus describe in writing the unfolding of the restoration of the gospel and Church of Jesus Christ.

In a revelation given through the Prophet, the Lord urged Phelps to immediately be baptized into the Church and to be ordained to the priesthood under the hands of Joseph Smith. Additionally, the Lord assigned Phelps to assist Oliver Cowdrey with “the work of printing and of selecting and writing books for schools in the church” (D&C 55:1-4). One of his great contributions was to help Emma Smith, the Prophet’s wife, compile the Church’s first hymnbook, for which he wrote lyrics to twenty-nine hymns.

The Lord designated him to be one of seven select brethren to accompany Joseph to Missouri to locate the land of Zion. Thus, three days after his baptism, Phelps and his six companions set off for Missouri, the border of the western frontier, to find and establish the place that generations of Biblical prophets had seen in vision: the center place of the gathering of Israel, the home of latter-day Zion, the New Jerusalem.

When the Prophet set foot in Independence, Missouri, he learned by revelation that this was once the location of the Garden of Eden and the prophesied location of Zion. The Lord commanded the Prophet that a temple was to be erected there in preparation for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Phelps delivered the
first sermon and offered prayer in this sacred land. By revelation to the Prophet, Phelps was commanded “to be planted in this place and be established as a printer unto the church” (D&C 57:11). Thereafter, the Church raised money to purchase a printing press and ship it to Missouri. Phelps returned to New York to fetch his family, and they, along with other Latter-day Saints, moved to the land of Zion.

Phelps loved Missouri. With John Whitmer, he served the Saints in a presidency position, helping to oversee the administration of the Church in that region. There, he typeset the Book of Commandments, an important compilation of the revelations of the Lord to establish the Church and its doctrines. Phelps had the innate ability to poetically describe these doctrines and the seminal events of restoration of the gospel.

As the Church grew, it needed a publication to establish its positions. The Prophet assigned Phelps to publish The Evening and The Morning Star, which became the official periodical of the Church, and Phelps’s editorship made him one of the Church’s primary spokesmen. Of Phelps, Joseph Smith said that he had “most implicit confidence in him as a man of God, having obtained this confidence by a vision of heaven.”

Without doubt, few men enjoyed such widespread influence in the Mormon community as did W.W. Phelps. He became the writer of key doctrinal essays; he was the co-compiler of the Doctrine and Covenants; he represented the Church in political and legal matters; he wrote official letters and petitions, and he engaged in lobbying governmental officials in behalf of the Church and its leaders.

When persecutions boiled over in Jackson County, Missouri in 1833, much of it was aimed at him because he was a Church leader and the Church’s publisher. On July 20, a mob attacked his print shop. They destroyed the presses, the Phelps home, and they scattered the type and galleys of the Book of Commandments into the street. He and his wife escaped separately, neither knowing where the other was. All the children escaped except two, who were left buried, but uninjured, in the rubble of the home. When the mob demanded that all the Mormons leave or be slaughtered, he offered himself as a ransom.

He stood for the Saints and negotiated a settlement: the leaders and half Saints would leave Jackson County by January 1834 and the remainder would leave by April. This arrangement temporarily appeased the mob, but within months, tempers flared again as the mob grew impatient and finally deadly. Breaking its promise of no violence, the mob attacked the Saints on October 31, 1833, sending the Saints fleeing in all directions. The mob burned homes, pillaged, plundered, ravished women, murdered and drove the Saints into the frigid winter with neither adequate clothing nor food.

On 13 November, the Saints huddled in freezing rain on the muddy banks of the Missouri River, trying to procure a ferry to escape into Clay County. In this situation of defeat, suffering, privation, homelessness, hunger, they experienced a miracle. On the very night that the mob was pressing down with the intention to slaughter them, a magnificent meteor shower occurred. Once every thirty-three years on the night of November 13, the Leonid meteors pass by the earth. On this November 13, the “celestial fireworks” were exceptionally
vivid. Some reported that “every star hurled from its decreed course.”

Over one thousand meteors per hour shot through the night sky, stopping the awe-stricken mob in its tracks.

The murders watched the spectacle until morning, then simply turned their horses back and went home. Inspired by the miraculous deliverance, Phelps penned the words to a now-famous hymn, “Now Let Us Rejoice in the Day of Salvation.”

Phelps settled his family in Clay County, Missouri and was called to travel to Kirtland, Ohio, the headquarters of the Church. He assignment was to continue printing. For nearly two years, he lived with Joseph and Emma Smith as a family member. It was during that period that the Saints built their first temple. Phelps captured the glory of the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the temple dedicatory experience by penning the lyric, “The Spirit of God Like A Fire is Burning.” The words so impressed the Prophet that he had them printed on white satin and sung at the Kirtland Temple dedication. Those words have been sung at every subsequent temple dedication.

Phelps’s words proved prophetic. On the occasion of the Kirtland Temple dedication and for several weeks following, the Saints enjoyed continuous ministrations of heavenly visitors and visions. At least three times the Father and the Son were seen; the Savior himself came to the Kirtland temple on more than one occasion; Moses, Elias, and Elijah returned to deliver specific priesthood powers. A multitude of angels came to the dedication of the Kirtland Temple. “The visions of eternity were opened to many, angels visited in the congregations of the saints, the Lord himself was seen by many, and tongues and prophecy were multiplied.” (History of the Church, 2:379, 436). One day, Phelps stood with Brigham Young in the streets of Kirtland and for a long time watched angels in the temple windows.

On Sunday, March 27, 1836, in the dedicatory service itself, an almost exact repetition of the events of the New Testament day of Pentecost took place. “Brother George A. Smith arose and began to prophesy,” Joseph Smith recorded, “when a noise was heard like the sound of a rushing mighty wind, which filled the Temple, and all the congregation simultaneously arose, being moved upon by an invisible power; many began to speak in tongues and prophesy; others saw glorious visions; and I beheld the Temple was filled with angels, which fact I declared to the congregation. The people of the neighborhood came running together (hearing an unusual sound within, and seeing a bright light like a pillar of fire resting upon the Temple), and were astonished at what was taking place.” (History of the Church, 2:428).

It is safe to say that Joseph Smith trusted and loved few men as he loved and trusted W.W. Phelps. In 1836, he returned to Missouri to resume his leadership position and to help the Saints move to Caldwell County to build the settlement of Far West, Missouri. And that is when his downfall began. In laying the foundation of Far West, he and John Whitmer, both presiding Church officers in Missouri, used consecrated Church funds to purchase land for their benefit, half the land in either man’s name.

Their intent was to profiteer as they portioned off the parcels to the incoming, impoverished Saints. Whitmer and Phelps rationalized that they were entitled to money to sustain their own families. The following is a list of events that caused the downfall of two of the most prominent Latter-day Saint leaders:

- April 5, 1837–A Church council was assembled to investigate their behavior, and they were com-
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manded to repent and desist. They did not obey.

- September 4, 1837-The Lord chastised them in a revelation given through Joseph Smith. They did not obey.

- November 7, 1837–Joseph Smith, now living in Far West, Missouri, held a conference and chastised them for their behavior. They publicly offered their confessions, whereupon the people forgave them and unanimously sustained in their callings as Church leaders. But soon Whitmer and Phelps returned to their bad conduct.

- February 5, 1838–Another conference was held, and they were stripped of their leadership callings.

- March 10, 1838–During a Church disciplinary council, which they refused to attend, they were tried for unchristian-like behavior and were disfellowshiped from the Church.

Thereafter, W.W. Phelps, the once great proponent and spokesman for the Church, became one of its worst enemies. He used his writing talent to incite the Church’s enemies to bring vexatious lawsuits. He spread false rumors and published slanderous reports, all of which fueled the anger of mobs. He joined with groups of dissidents for the purpose of undercutting the work of Joseph Smith.

On July 8, 1838, the Lord spoke through the Prophet and offered Phelps a chance to repent. He refused. Over the next months, Phelps continued his slander, finally contributing to Governor Lilburn Boggs’s infamous Extermination Order on October 27, 1838. The Order contained murderous intent. “The Mormons must be treated as enemies, and must be exterminated or driven from the State if necessary for the public peace… their outrages are beyond all description.”

Now that killing Mormons was legal, the emboldened mob formed up quickly, and on October 30, 1838, brutal armed men attacked the small Mormon settlement of Hawn’s Mill, slaying eighteen men and boys.

Hawn’s Mill was a tiny settlement of just seventy-five families. Intent on exterminating them, a mob of 240 bloodthirsty men led by Colonel Jennings, descended on the residents. Having surrounded the resi-
mon who had taken up arms was to sell his property to pay for costs of the “Mormon War,” then all Mormons were to leave the state.

Hinkle negotiated a peace with General Lucas, which included the surrender of church leaders to the “custody” of Lucas. This “custody” was veiled betrayal, and W.W. Phelps was involved. With the lives of the Saints at risk, the Prophet attempted to negotiate for their Saints’ safety. Phelps was privy to Hinkle’s negotiation for “custody,” and consorted with Hinkle and an apostate, James Corrill, to betray the Prophet into the hands of the mob for trial. Their actions were portrayed as “deceit, stratagem and treachery.” Joseph Smith and the other leaders were arrested and held overnight under guard in General Lucas’ camp, where they were left exposed to the elements.

Phelps helped to betray Joseph Smith into the hands of his worst enemies. Then under the pretext of negotiation, the mob agreed that the Mormons could leave the state unharmed if they would surrender their property to be sold to pay the costs that the mob had incurred to attack the Saints. Furthermore, the Saints were to surrender their arms to the mob. Having little choice and with their Prophet leader in chains, the Mormon fathers and sons, gave up their guns and gathered into the center of Far West where they were surrounded by General Lucas and his men. Then came the General’s infamous command to his men: “Go and do as you please with their women.”

As terrified women began screaming and running for safety, their corralled husbands tried to break out to protect them, but they were gunned down. Some of the women and children were also murdered. Then came the pillaging of Far West, while the shackled, incarcerated Prophet and leaders could do nothing.

An illegal, secret court martial was held of which Joseph and his companions were not apprised. At about midnight, November 1, General Lucas issued the following order to General Alexander Doniphan: “Sir:—You will take Joseph Smith and the other prisoners into the public square at Far West, and shoot them at 9 o’clock tomorrow morning.”

General Doniphan refused to obey the order. “It is cold-blooded murder. I will not obey your order. My brigade shall march for Liberty [township] tomorrow morning at 8 o’clock; and if you execute these men, I will hold you responsible before an earthly tribunal, so help me God.”

The Prophet’s life was spared, but Mormons were forced to sign a deed of trust transferring all property to the mob to defray “expenses of war.” Later, the Mormons appealed to the Missouri legislature and were appropriated $2,000 for $1.4 million in losses. The mob was appropriated $200,000 to reimburse their costs to wage war on the Mormons and enact the Governor’s Extermination Order.

Arrest of Joseph Smith Jr. at Far West

General Doniphan refuses General Lucas’ Order
But Phelps was not satisfied. Several weeks later, in November 1838, when Joseph Smith and other Mormon leaders stood trial, Phelps gave false testimony, which contributed to the Prophet’s incarceration in Liberty Jail. Now condemned, the prisoners were chained hand and foot, thrust into a large, heavy wagon, and paraded along roadways and in towns, exhibited like a carnival sideshow to mocking curious onlookers as they were escorted to prisons in Richmond and Liberty, Missouri.

As they travelled, snow fell on the exposed prisoners. The weather was freezing, but Joseph and his companions were not allowed adequate clothing. Joseph’s brother, Hyrum, became very sick and did not recover for months. When the prisoners finally arrived at Liberty Jail, many residents turned out to watch the spectacle, but they were disappointed to see men of ordinary appearance. As the prisoners climbed the stairs and entered the jail, Joseph Smith paused, turned to face the crowd, raised his hat and said “Good afternoon, gentlemen” then entered the jail.

Meanwhile, leaderless, the Saints fled to Illinois, leaving a bloody trail in the snow. The Missouri winter of 1838-39 was the coldest on record. Liberty Jail was built of stone walls and floors. The main floor was for the jailors and the basement was for the prisoners. To ventilate the basement prison, small windows were cut into the stone through which cold air flowed, making the temperature perpetually as cold as the coldest day that winter. The prisoners never warmed up. Ice formed on the walls and never melted. No fire could be built because of inadequate ventilation. There was no light except candlelight and what little light seeped through the tiny open-air windows. The ceiling was low, so the prisoners were forced to constantly crouch. Beds were hewn logs and the floor was dirty straw.

Three buckets were provided for drinking, washing and human waste. Food was occasionally provided, and then in small quantities. Scraps from the jailors’ tables were considered supplements. The guards brought the prisoners rations in filthy baskets where chickens had roosted and deposited their droppings. On several occasions, the guards attempted to feed the starving prisoners meat that was suspect. They called it “Mormon Beef,” human flesh from Mormons whom they had massacred. On other occasions, the guards administered small amounts of poison to the prisoners. Joseph recalled vomiting so violently that he dislocated his jaw. The Prophet entered Liberty Jail in November 1838 at 210 pounds. When he escaped about five months later, he weighed 138 pounds.

William Wines Phelps was officially excommunicated from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in April 1839, the same month that Joseph Smith and his companions finally broke loose from captivity and fled to Illinois, where the Prophet built the city of Nauvoo. Phelps moved his family to Dayton, Ohio and lost complete contact with the Church for several years.

To say that Phelps experienced a living hell is an understatement. His mind became tortured with the realization of the lies he had told and the misery he had caused the Prophet and the Saints. He could not find employment, and in time he became completely destitute. Then his entire family became very ill and he fell into a terrible remorse, which is a condition often described as the “buffetings of Satan.”

When he had reached rock bottom and considered his soul lost forever, Orson Hyde and John Page, two Elders from the Church, sought him out when they travelled to Dayton to proselyte. As they talked with him, he expressed his great sorrow and exhibited a spirit of repentance. The Elders encouraged him to write the Prophet and ask for forgiveness with the promise that they would deliver the letter into the Prophet’s hands.

Phelps penned a letter, but he was not convinced that Joseph would respond favorably. How could he?
Phelps had given false testimony that had sent Joseph to jail. He had incited the mob to abuse and pillage the Saints and drive them from Missouri. He had sided with the enemy and betrayed the Prophet and other Church leaders into the hands of inhumane, bloodthirsty degenerates. Now he was asking to return?

Here is part of the letter he wrote:

“BROTHER JOSEPH: I am alive, and with the help of God I mean to live still. I am as the prodigal son, though I never doubt or disbelieve the fulness of the Gospel. I have been greatly abused and humbled…. I have seen the folly of my way, and I tremble at the gulf I have passed. So it is, and why I know not. I prayed and God answered, but what could I do? Says I, I will repent and live, and ask my old brethren to forgive me, and though they chasten me to death, yet I will die with them, for their God is my God. The least place with them is enough for me, yea, it is bigger and better than all Babylon.’ …I know my situation, you know it, and God knows it, and I want to be saved if my friend will help me…. I have done wrong and I am sorry. The beam is in my own eye. I have not walked along with my friends according to my holy anointing. I ask forgiveness in the name of Jesus Christ of all the Saints, for I will do right, God helping me. I want your fellowship; if you cannot grant that, grant me your peace and friendship, for we are brethren, and our communion used to be sweet, and whenever the Lord brings us together again, I will make all the satisfaction on every point that Saints or God can require. Amen.”

For several long weeks, Phelps awaited the Prophet’s reply. In the meantime, in Nauvoo, Illinois, a miracle was taking place. This miracle bespeaks the Christ-like character of the Prophet Joseph Smith and the gospel of Jesus Christ that he taught his followers. Joseph Smith read Phelps’s letter to the ranking leaders of the Church, particularly those who had shared a prison cell with him. Then united in their decision, the Prophet called together the entire population of the Saints, each one a victim of Phelps’s tyranny and betrayal—widows and orphans, ravished women, the homeless and destitute—and read them Phelps’s letter. Afterwards, the Prophet asked for a vote. Who would be willing to forgive Brother Phelps and consent to his return in full fellowship? Remarkably, every hand shot up.

Thereafter, Joseph wrote a letter of reconciliation to his friend.

“Dear Brother Phelps: — I must say that it is with no ordinary feelings I endeavor to write a few lines to you in answer to yours of the 29th ultimo; at the same time I am rejoiced at the privilege granted me.

You may in some measure realize what my feelings as well as Elder Rigdon’s and Brother Hyrum’s were, when we read your letter — truly our hearts were melted into tenderness and compassion when we ascertained your resolves, etc. I can assure you I feel a disposition to act on your case in a manner that will meet the approbation of Jehovah, (whose servant I am), and agreeable to the principles of truth and righteousness which have been revealed; and inasmuch as long-suffering, patience, and mercy have ever characterized the dealing of our Heavenly Father towards the humble and penitent, I feel disposed to copy the example, cherish the same principles,
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and by so doing be a savior of my fellow men. It is true, that we have suffered much in consequence of your behavior — the cup of gall, already full enough for mortals to drink, was indeed filled to overflowing when you turned against us. One with whom we had oft taken sweet counsel together, and enjoyed many refreshing seasons from the Lord — had it been an enemy, we could have borne it.' In the day that thou stoodest on the other side, in the day when strangers carried away captive his forces, and foreigners entered into his gates, and cast lots upon [Far West], even thou wast as one of them; but thou shouldst not have looked on the day of thy brother, in the day that he became a stranger, neither shouldst thou have spoken proudly in the day of distress.

However, the cup has been drunk, the will of our Father has been done, and we are yet alive, for which we thank the Lord. And having been delivered from the hands of wicked men by the mercy of our God, we say it is your privilege to be delivered from the powers of the adversary, be brought into the liberty of God’s dear children, and again take your stand among the Saints of the Most High, and by diligence, humility, and love unfeigned, commend yourself to our God, and your God, and to the Church of Jesus Christ.

Believing your confession to be real, and your repentance genuine, I shall be happy once again to give you the right hand of fellowship, and rejoice over the returning prodigal.

Your letter was read to the Saints last Sunday and an expression of their feeling was taken, when it was unanimously Resolved, that W. W. Phelps should be received into fellowship.

Come on, dear brother, since the war is past,
For friends at first, are friends again at last.
Yours as ever, Joseph Smith, Jun.”

The story is told that several months later, as Joseph was sitting down to his evening meal, he looked out his window and saw the figure of a familiar, yet bedraggled, man. It was his prodigal friend W.W. Phelps. Joseph jumped from the table, ran down the road, threw his arms around his long-lost brother, and they both wept.

William Wines Phelps was true to the end. He accompanied the Prophet to Carthage, Illinois when Joseph was incarcerated for the last time and martyred. Phelps offered to take his place and die for him, but, of course, that was not possible.

He recorded the Prophet’s last dream and visited him on the morning of June 27, 1844, hours before the Prophet and his brother Hyrum were murdered. During the ensuing chaos, when apostates attempted to take control of the leadership of the Church, he stood with Apostle Willard Richards and asserted the Twelve Apostles’ right to presidency, Phelps having been in the meeting in which the Prophet Joseph Smith laid the burden of the kingdom on the apostles’ shoulders, just as Jesus Christ had done centuries earlier.

Phelps gave the funeral address for Joseph Smith. Then a few weeks later, still mourning for his beloved friend who had forgiven and saved him, he penned the words to the beloved hymn, “Praise to the Man” who communed with Jehovah.