Waiting for the Word of the Lord
D&C 97, 98, 101
by David W. Grua

On July 20, 1833, leaders of a mob in Jackson County, Missouri, called a meeting with William W. Phelps and other Church leaders. The mob leaders had a number of complaints about the Saints. They felt threatened by the Saints’ belief that Jackson County was a promised land that they called Zion. They objected to the large number of people, many of them poor, who had come to their county over the previous two years to build up Zion. And because of an article Phelps had recently published in the Evening and the Morning Star—discussing the legal requirements designed to inhibit the immigration of free blacks to Missouri—the mob was afraid that free black Church members would soon begin gathering to Zion, disrupting the racial dynamics in their slaveholding state.

In a follow-up editorial, Phelps tried to diffuse tension between the Saints and Jackson County leaders, but nothing he wrote changed their minds about the Saints’ intentions. As far as the mob was concerned, the time for explanations was over. They gave Phelps and his fellow Church leaders 15 minutes to agree to move the whole Mormon community away by the next spring—or suffer the consequences.2

Phelps and other Church leaders hesitated. Revelation to Joseph Smith had declared Jackson County to be “the place for the City of Zion.” Revelation had called Phelps to move his family there, set up a print shop, and “be established as a Printer unto the Church.”3 The Saints had sacrificed a great deal to build Zion. Could they simply leave it?

Without a promise that the Saints would leave, the mob began a campaign of violent intimidation. They battered down the door of Phelps’s house, threw the printing press out of the second story onto the street below, and then destroyed the building.4 The Phelps family was left to seek shelter that night in an abandoned stable.5 Other Saints also suffered that day: Bishop Edward Partridge and Charles Allen were tarred and feathered, and Sidney Gilbert’s store was attacked. Three days later, Partridge, Phelps, and other Church leaders, seeing no alternative, formally agreed that all the Saints would evacuate the county by April 1834.6

“In our present situation I have nothing to write,” the ordinarily verbose Phelps wrote to the Prophet Joseph Smith in Kirtland, Ohio, a few days later. Phelps wanted to fulfill his calling to build up Zion but could not
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see how he could do so under the current conditions. “I wait for the word of the Lord,” Phelps stated, hoping that Joseph would seek revelatory answers for why the Lord had allowed these things to happen to Zion. “If the Lord will yet speak to his children, it may be well to inquire every matter concerning the destruction of the printing office,” he suggested. In the meantime, Phelps tried to see his trials in a positive light. “I know from the experience I have had,” he assured the Saints in Kirtland in a letter, “that it is a good thing to have our faith thoroughly tried.”

Receiving Divine Guidance
D&C 97

Joseph Smith did not receive detailed news of these events until August 9, 1833, when Oliver Cowdery—the Missouri Saints’ emissary—arrived in Kirtland after a two-and-a-half-week journey. The 900 miles that separated Independence from Kirtland ensured that written accounts sent through the mail or published in newspapers did not reach Ohio until mid-August. In the meantime, Joseph Smith had received two revelations (D&C 97 and 98) in early August that, although they did not address the specific difficulties experienced by Church members in Jackson County on July 20, nevertheless offered words of divine consolation and guidance that Phelps and the other Missouri Saints could later use to help them make sense of their experiences and sufferings.

On August 2, 1833, Joseph Smith dictated the first
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Bishop Edward Partridge was target and feathers by the mob.

revelation, now Doctrine and Covenants 97. In it, the Lord commended the Church’s school in Jackson County and reiterated the command that “an house should be built unto me in the land of Zion.” The revelation stated that “if Zion do these things she shall prosper and spread herself and become very glorious. . . . Let Zion rejoice (for this is Zion the pure in heart).” However, the Lord warned that “vengeance cometh speedily upon the ungodly.” Zion would escape these calamities only “if she observe to do all things whatsoever I have commanded her.” If not, “I will visit her according to all her works, with sore afflictions.”10

D&C 98

Joseph Smith received the second revelation, now Doctrine and Covenants 98, on August 6, 1833. Although the Lord encouraged the Saints to support the U.S. Constitution and the rule of law, the revelation warned that “when the wicked rule the people mourn.” Anticipating coming persecutions, the revelation commanded Church members to “renounce war and proclaim peace.” When they suffered abuse from enemies of the Church, the Saints were commanded to “bear it patiently,” forgive their oppressors, and allow the Lord to avenge the wrong.11 These revelations were sent in a letter to the Missouri Saints on August 6, three days before Cowdery’s arrival in Kirtland.12 When received in Jackson County around the beginning of September, the revelations were doubtless a source of comfort and direction for Saints such as Phelps, who had been waiting to receive divine guidance.

“After Much Tribulation Cometh the Blessing”

Taking counsel from Joseph’s revelations, Missouri Church leaders worked to find legal protection from the mob and from its demand that they leave by spring. In September and October 1833, they sought redress from state officials and hired attorneys to represent the Mormons’ cause in the courts. The Saints’ legal actions had convinced the mob that Church members wouldn’t leave unless driven out. Before their case could be heard in court, mob violence broke out again.

D&C 98
In late October and early November, Jackson County vigilantes threatened the Saints and then drove them from their homes. Although Church members made some effort to defend themselves, they evidently sought to follow the Lord’s counsel in the August 6 revelation (D&C 98) to endure their persecutions patiently. On November 6 and 7, while living as a refugee in Clay County, just north of Jackson County, Phelps wrote the first detailed account to Joseph Smith of the violence, describing beatings of Church members, destruction of their houses, and even bloodshed on both sides. He signed it, “Yours in affliction.” Over the next week, as Phelps continued to think about what had happened, a passage from the New Testament came to his mind. “The Savior said, Blessed are ye when ye are hated of all men for my name’s sake,” he wrote on November 14, “and I think we have come to that.”

As this letter and other reports of the expulsion trickled into Kirtland in late November and early December, Joseph Smith prayerfully sought the revelatory guidance that Phelps and other Saints desperately desired. In a December 10 letter, Joseph reminded Church leaders in Missouri that in 1831 the Lord had previously warned Church members “that after much tribulation cometh the blessing.” Although the Lord had not yet revealed why the “great calamity” had “come upon Zion” or “by what means he [the Lord] will return her back to her inheritance,” Joseph remained confident that Zion would be redeemed in God’s “own due time.” The Prophet advised the Saints not to sell their lands in Zion and encouraged them to seek legal redress from state and federal officials. If the government failed the Saints, they were to plead with the Lord “day and night” for divine justice. Joseph concluded with a prayer that God would remember His promises regarding Zion and deliver the Saints.

On December 16 and 17, Joseph dictated an extended revelation, now Doctrine and Covenants 101, that provided answers to the questions that he, Phelps, and other Saints had been asking. The Lord had allowed the calamity to occur “in consequence of their [the Saints’] transgressions.” Nevertheless, the Lord stated, “Notwithstanding their sins my bowels are filled with compassion towards them.” Although the Saints were scattered, Zion would “not be moved out of her place.” Concerning Zion’s redemption, the revelation related a parable of “a certain noble[man]” who had commissioned his servants to protect his vineyard. While the servants disputed among themselves, “the enemy came by night” and “destroyed their works and broke down the Olive trees.” The Lord commanded his servant to “take all the strength of mine house” and “redeem my vineyard.” Reiterating the affirmation of the U.S. Constitution from Doctrine and Covenants 98, the revelation repeated Joseph Smith’s earlier counsel that the Missouri Saints seek redress from civil authorities, with a promise that if government officials rejected Church members’ pleas, the Lord would “come forth out of his hiding place & in his fury vex the nation.”
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and Covenants 101 provided the Prophet a divinely inspired plan for Zion’s redemption—a project that would occupy his attention for the remainder of his life. By early 1834, a copy of the revelation that would become Doctrine and Covenants 101 had arrived in Missouri, providing William W. Phelps the “word of the Lord” that he had been waiting for. On February 27, he wrote to Joseph Smith, updating him on the Saints’ efforts to receive justice in the Missouri court system. As Phelps closed his letter, he alluded to the revelation. Phelps wondered if “the servants of the Lord of the vineyard, who are called and chosen to prune it for the last time” would “fear to do as much for Jesus as he did for us”? “No,” he answered, “we will obey the voice of the Spirit, that good may overcome the world.”

Footnotes
3. “Revelation, 20 July 1831 [D&C 57],” in Revelation Book 1, 93–94, josephsmithpapers.org; see also D&C 57:2, 11.
11. “Revelation, 6 August 1833 [D&C 98],” in Sidney Rigdon, Frederick G. Williams, and Joseph Smith letter to “Beloved Brethren,” Aug. 6, 1833, 3, josephsmithpapers.org; see also D&C 98:5–6, 10, 16, 26. However, the revelation also stated that “if that enemy shall escape my vengence . . . thine enemy is in thine hands and if thou reward him according to his works thou art justified if he has sought [sought] thy life” (“Revelation, 6 August 1833 [D&C 98],” 3; see also D&C 98:28, 31).
15. “Letter from William W. Phelps, 14 November 1833,” 119; see also Matthew 10:22.
16. Joseph Smith, “Letter to Edward Partridge and Others, 10 December 1833,” in Joseph Smith Letterbook 1, 71, 73, josephsmithpapers.org; see also “Revelation, 1 August 1831 [D&C 58],” in Revelation Book 1, 94, josephsmithpapers.org.