On December 1, 1838, a Latter-day Saint named Caleb Baldwin was incarcerated in the lower level of Liberty Jail in Clay County, Missouri, on charges of “crimes of High Treason.” His prison companions included members of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Joseph Smith, Hyrum Smith, and Sidney Rigdon, as well as Lyman Wight and Alexander McRae. The six detainees’ nearly four-month confinement became the final episode of an eventful and often troubled history of the Latter-day Saints in Missouri.

Within the walls of Liberty Jail, Baldwin scribed some of Joseph Smith’s most profound reflections in letters to the scattered and destitute Latter-day Saints—portions of which were later canonized as Doctrine and Covenants sections 121, 122, and 123. Some of these passages have become scriptural gems, often cited in Latter-day Saint discourse over the years.

While the story of Liberty Jail has been told and retold from the perspective of Joseph Smith, the experience of the other incarcerated men provides additional insight. Baldwin, who was the most senior of the group, struggled physically and emotionally in the dungeon level of Liberty Jail. The inspiring words that came to Joseph as he dictated his letter provided comfort and counsel to Baldwin, the 47-year-old father of 10 who longed to be with his family during his four-month confinement.

Early Conflict in Missouri

The Latter-day Saints’ eventful history in Missouri began in 1831, when a revelation to Joseph Smith identified Jackson County as the site of Zion, the New Jerusalem (see D&C 57:1–3). By 1833, the Latter-day Saints in Jackson County numbered more than a thousand—about a third of the county’s population—and religious, political, and cultural differences created inevitable tension between the new and old settlers. After peaceful requests that the Latter-day Saints relocate their faith and families went unheeded, a large group of organized Missourians raided the home of William W. Phelps, destroyed the printing press of the Evening and Morning Star, and tarred and feathered Edward Partridge and Charles Allen.

While the Latter-day Saints sought redress through written petitions, they also organized themselves militarily to protect their families in case of armed conflict. Even after the Latter-day Saints moved to Caldwell County in northwestern Missouri, which had been created by the state legislature exclusively for them, “battles” were fought at Gallatin, DeWitt, Blue River, Crooked River, and Hawn’s Mill in what became known as the Missouri-Mormon War.

In October and November 1838, General Samuel D. Lucas, a leader in the Missouri Militia, imprisoned several prominent Latter-day Saints, including Joseph Smith, Hyrum Smith, Sidney Rigdon, Parley P. Pratt, George W. Robinson, and Amasa Lyman. Caleb Baldwin, Lyman Wight, and other indicted Latter-day Saints joined Joseph and his cohorts at a preliminary hearing in Richmond, Missouri, bringing the total number of arraigned Latter-day Saints to 64. During the hearing, Judge Austin A. King singled out Baldwin and offered him his freedom if he would renounce his religion and forsake the Prophet Joseph—an offer Baldwin rejected. The same deal was then made to the other detainees, all of whom “returned an answer similar to that of Mr. Baldwin.”

Judge King ultimately found sufficient probable cause to lock away a number of the Latter-day Saint leaders. Joseph Smith, Hyrum Smith, Sidney Rigdon, Lyman Wight, Alexander McRae, and Caleb Baldwin
were to be taken to Liberty Jail in Clay County, as the jails in the counties where the alleged crimes occurred were not large enough for so many prisoners. On December 1, 1838, Joseph Smith entered the jail and “lifting his hat, he said, in a distinct voice, ‘Good afternoon, gentlemen.’ The next moment he had passed out of sight. The heavy door swung upon its strong hinges and the Prophet was hid from the gaze of the curious populace who had so eagerly watched.”

Liberty Jail

Spending more than four months in the snug jail proved a daunting experience. Four-foot-thick stone walls, a six-foot ceiling, and constant harassment by guards caused Joseph and his companions to describe the structure as “hell surrounded with demons.” The detainees were placed in the lower-level dungeon, where temperatures dropped, light dimmed, odors reeked, and time seemed to slow. Only “dirty straw couches” prevented the prisoners from sleeping on the stone floor, but even those wore out after a while.

As was the case in other 19th-century county jails, the food sickened the prisoners. Joseph and his companions described their daily meals as “very coarse and so filthy that we could not eat it until we were driven to it by hunger.” When the prisoners finally ate their servings, the food caused them to vomit “almost to death.” Some of the detainees suspected the guards of poisoning their food and water or even feeding them human flesh.

“Joseph and his companions described their daily meals as ‘very coarse and so filthy that we could not eat it until we were driven to it by hunger.’”

Word spread of the Latter-day Saint prisoners at Liberty Jail, and “the place took on some aspects of a zoo.” Locals visited the jail in droves to gape at the prisoners, and their taunts and jeers echoed through the stone walls. Hyrum Smith complained, “We are often inspected by fools who act as though we were elephants or dromedarys or sea hogs or some monstrous whale or sea serpents.”

Day after day the men languished in jail, and the emotional sting slowly and continuously tested their faith. “Our souls have been bowed down and we have
suffered much distress . . . and truly we have had to wade through an ocean of trouble,” Joseph wrote.10

The four-month confinement in Liberty Jail also took a heavy physical toll on the prisoners. Sunlight barely crept through two small, iron-barred windows that were too high to see through, and long hours in the darkness caused the men’s eyes to strain, as one of the jailers later remembered. While a small fire was allowed, without a chimney to channel the smoke, the prisoners’ eyes became even more irritated. Their ears ached, their nerves trembled, and Hyrum Smith even went into shock at one point. Sidney Rigdon, the second-oldest member of the company next to Baldwin, was in such poor health that, lying in an inclined bed, he petitioned for an early release. His eloquent speech and severe infirmity caused the judge to discharge Rigdon ahead of schedule.11

Perhaps most disheartening to the remaining prisoners was the idea of Latter-day Saint families, including their own, scattered, destitute, and driven throughout the state of Missouri. Baldwin and his fellow prisoners felt loneliness and separation in Liberty Jail, but while the other inmates were regularly reassured of their friends’ and families’ well-being through visits and letters, Baldwin received only one brief visit from his wife, Nancy, just before Christmas in 1838, and there is no record of further communication with her or their 10 children during the three months that followed.12

Seemingly helpless, the prisoners twice attempted to flee the jail, on February 6 and March 3, 1839, but watchful guards put a stop to their daring getaways. Two weeks later, on March 15, the five men petitioned to be released for unlawful detention. Baldwin’s two-page appeal evidenced his desperate desire to be reunited with his family, who had “been driven out of the State since his confinement without any means for their support.”13 In addition, Baldwin had learned that his son, also named Caleb, had been “beaten nearly to death by Missourians with hickory sticks.”14 Thus, having been detained “without the least shadow of testimony against him,” Baldwin asked that the “high hand of oppression” cease and he be acquitted of all charges.15 Despite the prisoners’ petitions, sufficient evidence apparently existed to keep them detained.16

Two days later, on March 17, Samuel Tillery, one of the jailers, inspected the lower-level dungeon and found an auger handle, which he believed was being used by the prisoners to chisel their way through the thick walls. Tillery ordered 25 men downstairs to finish the search, then ordered his contingent to chain Joseph Smith and the prisoners to the floor. Having already bottled up three and a half months of stress, anguish, and frustration, Baldwin furiously rose to his feet, looked the jailer in the eye, and affirmed, “Tillery, if you put those chains on me I will kill you, so help me God!”17 In the words of Hyrum Smith, Tillery “soon calmed down and agreed to call again and settle the matter.”18 While Baldwin’s fiery threat temporarily settled the dispute, the prisoners were put under even heavier guard.

Just three days after the scuffle with Samuel Tillery, Baldwin was still on edge and wondered if he
would ever see or hear from his family again. Joseph Smith began dictating a letter that undoubtedly lifted Baldwin’s spirit—a letter that has since brought comfort and counsel to millions of Latter-day Saints.

Letter to the Saints

Alexander McRae scribed most of the letter addressed to “the church of Latterday saints at Quincy Illinois and scattered abroad and to Bishop Partridge in particular,” although Baldwin helped pen 2 of the letter’s 29 pages. Historians Dean Jessee and John Welch noted that Joseph Smith’s lengthy missive is a Pauline-like epistle. For example, Joseph called himself “a prisoner for the Lord Jesus Christ’s sake” and wrote that “nothing therefore can separate us from the love of God,” language similar to the Apostle Paul’s writings to the Ephesians and Romans.19 Joseph then detailed the sufferings of the “poor and much injured saints,” including the families wandering helplessly and hopelessly between Missouri and Illinois, as well as the dismal experience he and his companions were having in Liberty Jail.20

After rendering a soul-wrenching account of the callous and merciless acts of some of their Missouri neighbors, Joseph uttered the first words of what is now section 121 of the Doctrine and Covenants: “O God where art thou and where is the pavilion that covereth thy hiding place how long shall thy hand be stayed and thine eye yea thy pure eye behold from the eternalm heavens the rongs of thy people and of thy servants and thine ear be penetrated with their cries yea o Lord how long shall they suffer these rongs and unlawfull oppressions before thine hart shall be softened towards them and thy bowels be moved with compassion to-words them.”21

Joseph’s heavenly plea was not immediately answered. He continued to reflect on the violent acts against the Latter-day Saints and wondered when justice would come upon his oppressors. Finally, after narrating seven pages of misery and angst, a consoling reassurance came to the Prophet Joseph: “My son pease be unto thy soul thine adversity and thy afflictions shall be but a small moment and then if thou endure it well God shall exalt the[e] on high thou shalt triumph over all [thy] foes.” The Lord also assured Joseph that “if the verry jaws of hell shall gap[e] open her mouth wide af-

D&C 122
the land would “be of grate benefite to the church” and counseled Edward Partridge and others on how to properly negotiate the transaction, emphasizing the importance of doing so without greed or self-indulgence. He also advised Church leaders to remember those in need and “bare the infermities of the weak.”

The letter then turned to why many are called but few chosen, words Jesus used in the New Testament (see Matthew 22:14). Joseph lamented that he and the Latter-day Saints had learned “by sad experience” of the destructive power of pride. Joseph may have been reflecting on some of his close friends, such as William W. Phelps and Frederick G. Williams, who had recently apostatized. (Both would eventually return to full fellowship in the Church.) Joseph laid out attributes that holders of the priesthood and all Latter-day Saints should seek to attain if they hope to have influence with others: gentleness, meekness, persuasion, long-suffering, kindness, charity, virtue, and love.

Near the end of the letter, Joseph returned to the persecution the Latter-day Saints had suffered in Missouri. Joseph believed the Constitution of the United States to be “a glorious standard” that ensured freedom of worship, and he asked the Saints to sign affidavits detailing their grievances and maltreatment. Without a guarantee of receiving anything in return, Joseph and the Saints were determined nonetheless to “present [their affidavits] to the heads of government,” fulfilling a commandment given by the Lord.

Joseph Smith’s lengthy letter has had a lasting impact. It not only counseled poor Baldwin in prison and the Saints suffering mayhem in Missouri but was continually republished for many years in the Times and Seasons, Millennial Star, and Deseret News. Eventually, extracts were canonized as Doctrine and Covenants sections 121, 122, and 123, and those passages continue to provide comfort and direction to anyone mining the scriptures for meaning.

The prison companions eventually managed to “escape” legal authorities while being escorted to a hearing in Boone County, Missouri, in April 1839. Their guards turned a blind eye and allowed the prisoners to flee from custody after leading them away from enemies of the Latter-day Saints in Clay County. Baldwin became separated from Joseph and the others on several occasions after their getaway, but all the prisoners ultimately crossed into Illinois, finally reuniting with family, friends, and the rest of the Latter-day Saint refugees.

Footnotes
Within the Walls of Liberty Jail
D&C 121, 122, 123

13 Caleb Baldwin petition, Liberty, Missouri, Mar. 15, 1839, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
14 “John Gribble, Paragoonah, 1864 July 7,” Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
15 Caleb Baldwin petition.
17 Obituary of Caleb Baldwin, in Journal History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, June 11, 1849, Church History Library, Salt Lake City; see also Elden J. Watson, ed., Manuscript History of Brigham Young, 1847–1850 (Salt Lake City: J. Watson, 1971), 211.
20 “Letter to the Church and Edward Partridge,” 7; see also Jessee and Welch, “Revelations in Context,” 135.
21 “Letter to the Church and Edward Partridge,” 3–4, joesphsmithpapers.org; see also Doctrine and Covenants 121:1–3.
22 “Letter to the Church and Edward Partridge,” 4, 8; see also Doctrine and Covenants 121:7–8.
23 “Letter to the Church and Edward Partridge,” 10; see also Jessee and Welch, “Revelations in Context,” 136.
24 “Letter to the Church and Edward Partridge,” 1, 2; see also Jessee and Welch, “Revelations in Context,” 140.
26 “Letter to the Church and Edward Partridge, 20 March 1839–B,” 8, joesphsmithpapers.org; see also Doctrine and Covenants 123:1–6; Jessee and Welch, “Revelations in Context,” 130.
27 Jessee and Welch, “Revelations in Context,” 144.
28 For additional information regarding the escape from Liberty Jail, see Alexander L. Baugh, “‘We Took Our Change of Venue to the State of Illinois’: The Gallatin Hearing and the Escape of Joseph Smith and the Mormon Prisoners from Missouri, April 1839,” Mormon Historical Studies, vol. 2, no. 1 (Spring 2001), 59–82.