

Summary Handout

“To Seal the Testimony”

Lesson

32

Summary

Scripture Summary:

Doctrine and Covenants 135; Martyrdom of Joseph Smith the Prophet and his brother, Hyrum Smith the Patriarch, at Carthage, Illinois, June 27, 1844. HC 6: 629—631. This document was written by Elder John Taylor of the Council of the Twelve, who was a witness to the events. 1—2, Joseph and Hyrum martyred in Carthage Jail; 3, Preeminent position of the Prophet acclaimed; 4—7, Their innocent blood testifies of the truth and divinity of the work.

Supplemental Holy Land and Jewish insights:

Joseph Smith’s Martyrdom Seen Through Past Prophets: Their persecutions and martyrdoms only reflected the future or the past and teach us something about the ultimate sacrifice of the Lord. These prophets were models of their Master, the Savior, who would prophesy against the corrupt part of the Jewish government and the people who followed their wickedness. “And after all this, after working many mighty miracles among the children of men, he shall be led, yea, even as Isaiah said, as a sheep before the shearer is dumb . . . the will of the Son being swallowed up in the will of the Father.” (*Mosiah 15:6-7*)

Righteous Versus Evil Martyrdom: Let me add some Jewish thought on martyrdom. It may have some significance in understanding the difference between righteous martyrdom and those would cause themselves to die in their evil intent destroying and killing others. “Martyrdom is permitted only in the most exceptional circumstances; to lay down one's life, even for the fulfillment of divine laws, when such sacrifice is not required by law, is regarded as a mortal offense.” (*Encyclopedia Judaica Jr.*)

When Does a Jew Choose Death? “The willingness to sacrifice life rather than faith, is one of the most significant concepts of Judaism, and has paradoxically been a factor in Jewish survival, where other oppressed groups have assimilated and disappeared. The laws of martyrdom were first formulated at the rabbinic council of Lydda in the second century C.E. when *kiddush ha-Shem* (“Sanctification of the Name [of God]”) was declared obligatory with regard to three situations: idolatry, unchastity, and murder. Rather than worship idols, commit an unchaste act, or murder, the Jew is commanded to choose death. All other commandments may be violated rather than suffer death. But should a Jew be forced into breaking any commandment in the presence of ten Jews (or more) in order to demonstrate his apostasy (abandonment of faith) he is obliged to sanctify God's name by choosing death. If ten Jews are not present, he should transgress rather than be killed. These rules were to apply in ‘normal’ times. In periods of persecution of the whole community, however, death was to be chosen even if no other Jews were present. The rabbis understood the first verse of the *Shema*, ‘And you shall love the Lord your God . . . with all your soul,’ as meaning even if He demands your soul from you, and, indeed, the proclamation of the *Shema*, ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One,’ was the phrase with which martyrs went to their death.” (*Encyclopedia Judaica Jr.*)

Historical Willingness: “Jewish history is replete with examples of those willing to die for their faith from Shadrach, Meshach and Abednigo, who in the Book of Daniel refused to worship an idol and thus endangered their lives, up to the present generation of Soviet Jews who suffer indescribable hardships rather than give up their Jewishness. Under Antiochus Epiphanes, Hellenizers applied violent methods toward the Jews. The Fourth Book of Maccabees is almost entirely a sermon on the meaning and glory of self-sacrifice. Whereas in Christian and Muslim thought martyrdom is chiefly regarded as the act of individuals warranting canonization as saints, in Judaism it remains a task for each and every Jew to fulfill if the appropriate moment should come.” (*Encyclopedia Judaica Jr.*)

Life Threats of Dietary Laws: “Throughout the ages Jews have endangered their lives and even died as martyrs to faithfully observe the dietary laws. During the period of the Greek rule of Erez Israel (second century B.C.E.) many Jews chose to die rather than eat the unclean foods which the Greeks forced upon them. In peril of their lives, Jews carried out the laws of ritual slaughter during the Crusades. The Marranos of the Inquisition, the Cantonists of Czarist Russia, and the inmates of Nazi concentration camps all remained steadfastly faithful to the laws of Kashrut, despite all threats.” (*Encyclopedia Judaica Jr.*)

Challenge of Gentile Customs: “Jews were forbidden to emulate gentile customs of an idolatrous or superstitious nature. The prohibition (*bukkat ha-goi*) was derived from the biblical commandment ‘ye shall not walk in the customs of the nation’ (Leviticus 20:23 and 18:13). Its purpose was to prevent Jews from being converted to other religions. In Talmudic literature the term ‘the customs of the Amorites’ (*darkei ha-Emori*) was also used to cover all heathen practices of the gentiles of that time. Even gentile dress associated with non-Jewish religious practice was forbidden (‘martyrdom should be accepted rather than changing the style of a shoelace’). Jewish garb thus became an emblem of traditional Judaism, especially in eastern Europe, and modern dress was frowned on as a cunning method of Christianization. Many of the restrictions against involvement with gentiles made during Talmudic times were reduced as economic contact increased between the Jewish and gentile communities during the Middle Ages.” (*Encyclopedia Judaica Jr.*)

Honorable Death Often Unknown: “In modern times, the lessening of religious fanaticism, and growing secularization of Jewish life, accompanied by trends toward assimilation and emancipation, have led to the disintegration of Jewish values; as the necessity for self-sacrifice diminished, so the idea of *kiddush ha-Shem* appeared to lose its significance. However, renewed persecution under the Nazis revived the ancient tradition in the ghettos and concentration camps of Europe and very many cases of honorable death among the six million who perished must have gone unrecorded.” (*Encyclopedia Judaica Jr.*)

“Wings” to Heaven: There is a wall sculpture at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, that carries a similar message. Naphtali Bezem’s sculpture includes a panel depicting the Jews being brought into the slave/extermiation camps. Underneath is a “broken woman” representing the broken Jewish family line. Next to her is a broken fish with wings. A fish is sometimes used as an art metaphor for the spirit. It’s wings seem to represent an ascension to heaven, a reward for martyrdom. It reminds me of Alma’s response to Amulek’s plea to have Alma use his prophetic priestly power to stop the carnage. “And when Amulek saw the pains . . . he said unto Alma . . . let us stretch forth our hands, and exercise the power of God which is in us, and save them from the flames. But Alma said unto him: The Spirit constraineth me . . . for behold the Lord receiveth them up unto himself . . . and the blood of the innocent shall stand as a witness against them, yea, and cry mightily against them at the last day.” (*Alma 14:10-11*)

Results of Martyrdom—the One: Also in the Book of Mormon, one may get a glimpse of impending martyrdom as we picture Abinadi’s countenance rebuking the wickedness of the people listening to him. They rejected Abinadi. In reflection, the Children of Israel did not reject the Lord completely. They accepted a “lesser law,” one with strict rules and regulations rather than accept the spirit-guided “higher law.” In another case, the people of Nineveh repented when Jonah preached to them. Yet, hearing Abinadi, the people of King Noah rebelled even more, resulting in his martyrdom. As Abinadi gave his life, he succeeded in reaching through the crowd of wickedness to one soul. One Alma hears the voice of the prophet. More importantly, he feels the spirit of the Lord and he becomes a prophet to speak to the people for God.

Lives Sacrificed in Preparing the Way: In the New Testament, both Zacharias and his son John were killed by a wicked generation and a priesthood (or priestcraft) that existed along side of righteous priestly men and women who anticipated the impending arrival of the Messiah.

Pretenders Versus True Prophets: In these modern times, evil pretenders “give their lives” to further their misguided cause. They pretend that they are using religion as a worthy reason for their and other’s deaths. These are false martyrs that tear down and destroy. True martyrs seal their testimonies of the Redeemer, the Savior, the Giver of Life with their lives. These are true prophets who leave a legacy of life. As tragic as their deaths may be for those so close to them, they build a future. They lead us to God.

Daniel Rona, born in Israel and living in Jerusalem has authored Old & New Testament, Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants and Church History Supplement Study Materials to be used in conjunction with the weekly LDS Gospel Doctrine Lesson study. NOTE: Three versions of the supplemental study materials are available FREE at www.HolyLandsRevealed.com. (Just click “LDS SUPPLEMENTS”)

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