

Excerpts from “Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo”

Gospel Topics Essay (topics.ChurchofJesusChrist.org)

Latter-day Saints believe that monogamy—the marriage of one man and one woman—is the Lord’s standing law of marriage. In biblical times, the Lord commanded some of His people to practice plural marriage—the marriage of one man and more than one woman. Some early members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints also received and obeyed this commandment given through God’s prophets.

After receiving a revelation commanding him to practice plural marriage, the Prophet Joseph Smith married multiple wives and introduced the practice to close associates. This principle was among the most challenging aspects of the Restoration—for Joseph personally and for other Church members.

The Beginnings of Plural Marriage in the Church

Joseph told associates that an angel appeared to him three times between 1834 and 1842 and commanded him to proceed with plural marriage when he hesitated to move forward. During the third and final appearance, the angel came with a drawn sword, threatening Joseph with destruction unless he went forward and obeyed the commandment fully.

Joseph and Emma

Plural marriage was difficult for all involved. For Joseph Smith’s wife Emma, it was an excruciating ordeal. Records of Emma’s reactions to plural marriage are sparse; she left no firsthand accounts, making it impossible to reconstruct her thoughts. Joseph and Emma loved and respected each other deeply. After he had entered into plural marriage, he poured out his feelings in his journal for his “beloved Emma,” whom he described as “undaunted, firm and unwavering, unchangeable, affectionate Emma.” After Joseph’s death, Emma kept a lock of his hair in a locket she wore around her neck.

Trial and Spiritual Witness

According to Helen Mar Kimball, Joseph Smith stated that “the practice of this principle would be the hardest trial the Saints would ever have to test their faith.” . . .

The decision to accept such a wrenching trial usually came only after earnest prayer and intense soul-searching. Brigham Young said that, upon learning of plural marriage, “it was the first time in my life that I had desired the grave [Journal of Discourses, 3:266].” “I had to pray unceasingly,” he said, “and I had to exercise faith and the Lord revealed to me the truth of it and that satisfied me.” . . .

Lucy Walker recalled her inner turmoil when Joseph Smith invited her to become his wife. “Every feeling of my soul revolted against it,” she wrote. Yet, after several restless nights on her knees in prayer, she found relief as her room “filled with a holy influence” akin to “brilliant sunshine.” She said, “My soul was filled with a calm sweet peace that I never knew,” and “supreme happiness took possession of my whole being.”

Conclusion

The challenge of introducing a principle as controversial as plural marriage is almost impossible to overstate. A spiritual witness of its truthfulness allowed Joseph Smith and other Latter-day Saints to accept this principle. Difficult as it was, the introduction of plural marriage in Nauvoo did indeed “raise up seed” unto God. A substantial number of today’s members descend through faithful Latter-day Saints who practiced plural marriage.