

## Letter to Michael

By Chauncey C. Riddle

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*Persecution—the word probably makes you think of Rome and Liberty Jail, but what does it mean in the 20th century?*

Dear Michael,

Thanks for your letter; it was good to hear that things are going well with you. You said you wonder about persecution. May I give you my thinking on that topic? First, some background.

I believe that the first and foremost thing for us to remember is that our beloved Master is in charge. In him we live and move and have our being. He has placed controls on the course of the heavens, the forces and events of nature, the course of nations, and the life of every human being. He grants each of us on this earth enough agency to show our true nature, but never enough to destroy his own purposes. Because men have agency, there is evil. But that evil always has bounds. Two passages from Paul delight my soul as they drive this point home:

“And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God.”

“For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come,

“Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (*Rom. 8:28, 38–39.*)

The acknowledgement that the Savior’s work is only to bless and that his hand is in all things is the foundation of faith. When this eternal perspective is surely planted in our souls by the ministrations of the Holy Spirit, we can have that hope, born of faith, which “maketh an anchor to the souls of men, which would make them sure and steadfast, always abounding in good works.” (*Ether 12:4.*) We all need that security. Persecution brings insecurity to those who are weak and ungrounded. But the faithful can look on persecution with equanimity, knowing that their security is spiritual. No persecution can rob them of anything essential.

That, of course, raises the question as to what is essential. I count as essential the opportunity to be obedient to my Savior, to have the covenants and the priesthood, to have my dear wife and our wonderful children in eternity. I count as nonessential my job, my reputation, my home, my farm, my friends, my health, my life. Now don’t mistake me. I enjoy and desire all of those things. But if I ever had to choose between my enjoyment of them in this world and partaking of the Savior’s love through the Spirit, I would not hesitate. The Lord has so blessed me and answered my prayers that I trust his promise of the blessings of the next world as being far greater than any temporary enjoyment of this world.

I can hear you say, “Brave words. What about deeds?” I know that it is what one does under stress that really counts. But I also know I can’t guarantee anything about the future. As I look at some of my friends who seem to have thrown in the towel and to have given themselves over to Satan, I can only say, “There, but

for the grace of God, go I.” My hope is in that grace. God being willing, I will meet the tests. All I am sure of is that at this moment I have a burning desire to do all that the Savior would have me do. I hunger to bring souls unto him, that they may share my joy in the sweetness of the companionship of his Spirit and in the opportunity to bless others.

But on to persecution!

The word *persecute* itself means “to pursue.” Thus persecution is pursuit to do harm. Its opposite is to bless, to help. Its contrary is to live and let live. Though this subject does not readily yield itself to neat subdivision, some broad types are obvious. We could mention physical, social, and intellectual persecution.

Last Sunday I saw again the film *And Should We Die*. That brought vividly to mind the importance of being spiritually ready for physical persecution. Raphael Monroy and his companion Vicente Morales were ready to meet death for their testimony, senseless and fortuitous though the circumstances might have been. President Bentley was able to lead the people of the colony in their narrow escape through fasting and prayer. But while we all hope to escape, we know not all will. Raphael and Vicente had to join the Prophet Joseph, his brother Hyrum, Parley P. Pratt, the Savior, John the Baptist, Abinadi, Abel, and countless others in the death of deliberate persecution. In view of the burning and bombing and the hateful murders of our own time, it may be that some of us or some of the rising generation must face death for our Master. Whether we, as individuals, will face it or not is not the point. I think the point is, we must be ready.

Now if each of us had several days to decide whether or not to die for the Savior, most of us would do well. But is not the real test what we would do under immediate attack? I remember the words of Joseph F. Smith at a campfire in California when challenged by horsemen intent on killing Mormons. I hope I can always reply in his spirit when he was asked if he were a Mormon: “Yes, siree; dyed in the wool; true blue, through and through.” (Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, Deseret Book Co., 1939 ed., p. 518.) Many of us might not mind dying gloriously, with much fanfare and publicity. But die for chastity when accosted on a freeway? Die for honesty in a prison camp? Die for belief in God at the hands of a mob? If our testimony means enough to us that we prepare each morning either to live for the Savior or to die for him that day, we will always be prepared.

But perhaps we will not be murdered; just robbed, looted, burned, driven. Kirtland, Independence, Far West, Nauvoo should always be in our minds. Those persecutions are our heritage; we must again be ready should they need to become our legacy. The Lectures on Faith make it clear where we must stand: “An actual knowledge to any person, that the course of life which he pursues is according to the will of God, is essentially necessary to enable him to have that confidence in God without which no person can obtain eternal life. It was this that enabled the ancient saints to endure all their afflictions and persecutions, and to take joyfully the spoiling of their goods, knowing (not believing merely) that they had a more enduring substance.

“Having the assurance that they were pursuing a course which was agreeable to the will of God, they were enabled to take, not only the spoiling of their goods, and the wasting of their substance, joyfully, but also to suffer death in its most horrid forms; knowing (not merely believing) that when this earthly house of their tabernacle was dissolved, they had a building of

God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” (Lectures on Faith, p. 57.)

Only that faith nurtured in the privacy of peace will weather turmoil of trial.

When I think of social persecution, two classic examples come to mind. One is the story of a Welsh family, beautifully told in the article entitled “Persecution, 1924” in the January 1975 *Ensign*. That remarkable father led his family ten miles to church over mountain and dale, through rain and mud when necessary. And when confrontation was the right thing to do, he had the courage to do it. Persecution for his family was the hammer and anvil by which they all acquired that temper which makes saints out of faint hearts and well-wishers.

The other example is connected with the controversy over the laws of the Utah Territory and federal law in the last century. I honor the memory of George Reynolds, who, loyal both to his people and to his government, stood trial and suffered imprisonment so that the laws could be clarified. This man, secretary to four First Presidencies, General Authority, legislator, businessman, and editor, willingly absorbed the attack of the enemies of the Church so that others might not need to suffer in that way. Then to cap it off, he used his time in prison to produce our concordance to the Book of Mormon. Perhaps you know the brief account of his life and sufferings found in the preface to that work. (*A Complete Concordance to the Book of Mormon*, Salt Lake City, 1900, pp. 3–4.)

Recent commendation of the Church and some of its members is a pleasant change for our peculiar people. The changed climate has helped us to bear testimony, to gain the ear of some who otherwise would not have heard. But while we rejoice in that change we must remember that it is not universal. Throughout the world there is yet ostracism, discrimination, defamation, and harassment. What a challenge both to be humble under praise and steady under persecution, not really knowing which will come next! Our path is to be constant, in season and out of season, bearing our witness as the Spirit directs, come what may. When I think of the “come what may,” I am comforted by the saying of Elder Boyd K. Packer: “The truth doesn’t make enemies; it uncovers them.” We are sent to perform a task that includes the uncovering of enemies along with the joy of finding the lost sheep of our Master. If we fear his enemies, we are not likely to find his sheep.

Bad as physical and social persecution can be, I think that intellectual persecution is the most devastating. The former are by nature opposition from outside, and as such they may actually serve to strengthen the Church. But the intellectual attack also works within the Church. It divides and dilutes us when it comes from members. Let me give you two examples of ideas for which we are persecuted at various times and places.

The first is personal revelation. To me, one of the great glories of the Restoration is the promise “that every man might speak in the name of God the Lord, even the Savior of the world.” ([D&C 1:20](#).) Personal revelation makes every man a prophet, every woman a prophetess, to know the voice of the Lord and to bear witness of him, not needing to depend upon the arm of flesh. Oh, how personal revelation pulls down intellectual tyranny, priestcraft, and private interpretation of scripture! How it assuages the confused mind, the aching heart, the yearning soul! How it

builds faith in our Lord, hope for eternity! How it clothes all with a mantle of charity, the pure love of Christ!

Forgive me; I know I don’t need to sing the praises of personal communication with the Savior to you. But I can’t help being excited when I ponder all the blessings that come to mankind by it. Perhaps its strength is the very reason why it becomes a focus for persecution.

I once heard a professor boast that he had broken more priests, rabbis, and Bible readers than anyone else in the business. With that boast he warned any who wished to continue to believe in revelation to depart. I stayed. Then he lowered the boom and went through all the reasons why belief in revelation was irrational. He showed how the people who claimed revelation were inconsistent, both within their own individual writings and among themselves. He pointed out the great abuses that religion had wrought in the world, from inquisitions to caste systems to human sacrifice. He mocked the Bible, pointing out what he took to be obvious internal contradictions. Then he went on to show how everything good in human progress had consisted in rejection of religious belief in favor of scientific, empirical evidence.

Well, frankly I was devastated by that onslaught. There I was, a graduate student, well schooled in Latter-day Saint theology, happily Mormon all my life, a defender of the faith and successful sufferer under physical and social persecution—but devastated. He had made me realize that I did not have a personal testimony of revelation. All I had was an intellectual awareness of what others said about our religion. That realization shook me, for I realized fully that I might have been wrong.

During the next few weeks I went through an experience for which I can think of only one word as a representation: hell. I was assailed by doubt, by fear, by loneliness; I began to wonder if I were sane. Through this time I kept two promises I had made: I continued to go to Church, and I continued to read ten pages in the scriptures each night; but those things became an agony to me. And I prayed. Oh, how I prayed to know for myself if there were such a thing as personal revelation.

Then—thanks to our good Master—it came. I began to feel something special in my breast. I began to recognize certain ideas that appeared in my mind as being different from my own thoughts. These new ideas told me how to interpret passages of scripture, how to understand things formerly incomprehensible to me, even to know the future. But I could tell the difference. Here was the iron rod. I had hold of it. The restored gospel was true!

Since then I have had stumblings. I have been burned, and through those negative experiences I have learned two things: first, without Him I am nothing, and second, I must be ever so careful not to be confused as to who it is that is speaking. Now a full quarter-century has passed. That slender thread of personal revelation has brought me to everything I now hold dear. It has brought a flood of knowledge and understanding—and a glimpse of how far yet to go. I now know that there is power in the priesthood and that the Lord Jesus Christ is indeed the leader of this Church. Now as I see it touching the lives of others, my heart overflows with gratitude to the Lord for this pearl of great price that each of us can have. My greatest sorrow, except for my own sins, is that some whom I know cannot seem to get it. But I have hope for them. Looking back I know that I must have had much personal revelation before that trial. The problem was that I had not become acute in recognizing it.

So personal revelation becomes a great watershed, in the Church and out. Those who have it are drawn into a unity of faith. Many of those who don't have it think those who do are deluded or demented. I suspect some fear that it might really exist—so they persecute those who teach and proclaim its reality. They don't want it for fear they might have to give up some sin. And they don't want anyone else to have it, for that too convicts them of sin.

So we are persecuted for personal revelation in a world that prides itself on “hard” evidence, on objectivity, on the strength of consensus. As a philosopher of knowledge, I can only shake my head. For now I know and can prove that there is no such thing as evidence apart from a matrix of presuppositions, that objectivity is at best consensus, and that consensus is often but a public relations job. Every scientific system begins with unproved postulates. Every person founds his life on articles of faith. But what a blessing to be able to ground faith on a rock—on personal daily revelation from our Savior.

I promise to be more brief on the next idea. We are also persecuted for our belief in uniqueness, for the idea that there is but one true church, one true priesthood, one narrow path to salvation, one chosen people, one fountain for all righteousness. Many people of my acquaintance are willing to see good in the Church, especially as a social system. But to claim that no one except Mormons can become celestial raises hackles. It does not fit with this permissive, egalitarian, ecumenical age. It is taken to be a sign of snobbery, of racism, of hypocrisy, of almost anything bad. One of the reasons my soul so hungers and yearns to see the full establishment of Zion is that we won't have to say anything about uniqueness then. We will just be content to be unique. How unique it would be if we could get at least half of the Church to be of one heart and one mind, to dwell in righteousness and have no poor among us. I think that we would then see the fulfillment of that promise and challenge: “That the kingdoms of this world may be constrained to acknowledge that the kingdom of Zion is in very deed the kingdom of our God and his Christ.” ([D&C 105:32](#).)

Meanwhile, we are subject to persecution for our claim to be the true church and are dismissed with others who make the same claim. Is it possible that we deserve persecution on this point? If we claim to be the *one* and can't show we are significantly better, perhaps we have earned trouble. Oh for Zion!

Two more observations on persecution.

The first concerns the story of Stephen in Acts 6 and 7. I reread it recently and was forcefully impressed with an idea. Stephen has always come across to me as a good and gentle man, well suited to minister to widows' needs, “full of the Holy Ghost,” a powerful servant of Christ. But it has always struck me that he spoke to the Sanhedrin rather forthrightly, surely provocatively. His speech would hardly win any Dale Carnegie awards. I have wondered: Did he have a martyr complex? Was he deliberately trying to die?

My feeling now is that he enjoyed life as much as you or I and was doubtless very happy because of the good he was able to do for others. But he had a mission to perform. For some reason the Sanhedrin needed another witness of the great tragedy in which they were principals. The promised Messiah had come and had fulfilled all things while they, who desired to be his servants but would not recognize him, carefully engineered his death. Tragic flaw, damning fate, indeed. His own rejected him as would have

done no other nation or people. Could Stephen have supposed that he could convert them when the Savior himself had failed?

But Stephen was true to his mission. He bore testimony of Christ and of their sin. The flood of hate and anger that carried him outside the walls to die, stone by stone, was the necessary consequence of his commission. He sealed his testimony (and probably their reward) with blood. The moral I draw from this story is that we should not be needlessly offensive in this world; we should never *seek* to be persecuted; we should seek to fill our personal missions, wending our way among the hate and persecutions that will come, but never trying to offend. But should our commission call us to an unsavory task, where we cannot help but offend, then we should bear the task off manfully, yet with great humility, with a firm grasp on the iron rod. I honor Stephen for his great example.

My second thought relates to Saul and Paul, also of Acts. Saul persecuted the Saints with great zeal and ability. Then the Lord's mercy allowed him to repent to become Paul, and he was persecuted by the Jews and others even as he had persecuted. I think all of us should see ourselves in this story. We should ask ourselves: “Am I yet Saul, or am I now Paul? Am I still persecuting the saints and the Savior, or have I repented of my sins to serve and suffer for the Lord? Do I persecute others in my zeal to do God a favor (as if he needed my hate or scorn to further his cause), or do I humbly and patiently submit to all things that my God seeth fit to inflict upon me, even as a child doth submit to his father?”

My final point concerns again our personal relationship with the Savior. He who knows all things and has created all things has also taken upon himself the suffering required to atone for all sins. When we try to imagine all of the pain resulting from our own sins, our imagination staggers. When we try to imagine the suffering caused by the sins of every human being who has ever lived or will live on earth, it transcends our capacity for comprehension. Yet that is what the Savior took upon himself when he drank of the bitter cup to satisfy the demands of the Father's justice. In his infinite love and concern for us, he bore the burden of our own sins for us, that we need not suffer and atone personally for our sins. The qualification is, of course, that we repent and become sinless as he is. As long as we go on sinning, there is no way we can be forgiven.

You and I, because we know the gospel is true and because we want to stop sinning, have covenanted with our Savior to obey him in all things. Our obedience brings us to righteousness: we are able to bless others. But suppose that knowing what we do, we choose not to obey his commandments. That would be deliberate sin. We who know better, who know how to do better and be better, would be hurting those around us deliberately, because we would be choosing not to do better. Knowing how to bless our loved ones, we would be persecuting them should we sin. Worse yet, because we have been forgiven of our past sins through the blood of Christ, we would also be persecuting him. Matthew 25 haunts my understanding: “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.” ([Matt. 25:40](#).)

Now I admit that this is an unusual approach to the idea of persecution. Usually we think about others persecuting us. We need to think especially about the possibility of our own persecution of others, for it is the latter, not the former, that truly destroys us. This approach makes our choice simple: to sin or not

to sin, which is to persecute or not to persecute. To choose not to persecute is to choose to repent, to live the gospel, to love others with that same pure love with which our Savior loves us. It is to choose to be willing to be persecuted, but to suffer death before we would persecute. Our Master has shown the way by his complete obedience to his Father and in giving up his own life. How grateful am I to know that he is the Way, the Truth, and the Life!

Michael, you have been kind to wade through all of this. I inflict this on you only in the hope that our souls will so hunger after Him whom we love that we will make every sacrifice necessary to become as he is. That is the greatest thing we can do about persecution. Remember the words of the Prophet Joseph Smith:

“Let us here observe, that a religion that does not require the sacrifice of all things never has power sufficient to produce the faith necessary unto life and salvation; for, from the first existence of man, the faith necessary unto the enjoyment of life and salvation never could be obtained without the sacrifice of all earthly things. It was through this sacrifice, and this only, that God has ordained that men should enjoy eternal life; and it is through the medium of the sacrifice of all earthly things that men do actually know that they are doing the things that are well pleasing in the sight of God. When a man has offered in sacrifice all that he has for the truth’s sake, not even withholding his life, and believing before God that he has been called to make this sacrifice because he seeks to do his will, he does know, most assuredly, that God does and will accept his sacrifice and offering, and that he has not, nor will not seek his face in vain. Under these circumstances, then, he can obtain the faith necessary for him to lay hold on eternal life.” (Lectures on Faith, p. 58.)

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