

William W. Phelps: “I Am as the Prodigal Son”

“In late 1838, William W. Phelps, who had been a trusted Church member, was among those who bore false testimony against the Prophet and other Church leaders, leading to their imprisonment in Missouri. In June 1840, Brother Phelps wrote to Joseph Smith, pleading for forgiveness” (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* [2007], 396).

Read the following statement by William W. Phelps from his letter to the Prophet:



“Brother Joseph[,]

“ . . . I am as the prodigal Son . . . : I have been greatly abased and humbled. . . .

“I know my situation, you know it, and God knows it, and I want to be saved if my friends will help me. . . . I have done wrong and I am Sorry. The beam is in my own eye.

“ . . . I ask forgiveness in the name of Jesus Christ of all the saints[,] for . . . I want your fellowship”

(in *The Joseph Smith Papers, Documents, Volume 7: September 1839–January 1841*, ed.

Matthew C. Godfrey and others [2018], 304–5).

- Knowing that William’s false testimony had caused so much suffering for the Saints, how do you think you might have responded to William’s request for forgiveness and fellowship?

The Prophet Joseph Smith replied in a letter to William W. Phelps:



“It is true, that we have suffered much in consequence of your behavior—the cup of gall, already full enough for mortals to drink, was indeed filled to overflowing when you turned against us. . . .

“However, the cup has been drunk, the will of our Father has been done, and we are yet alive. . . .

“Believing your confession to be real, and your repentance genuine, I shall be happy once again to give you the right hand of fellowship, and rejoice over the returning prodigal.

“Your letter was read to the Saints last Sunday, and . . . it was unanimously resolved, that W. W.

Phelps should be received into fellowship.

“ ‘Come on, dear brother, since the war is past,
For friends at first, are friends again at last’ ”

(*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* [2007], 398).

- What does Joseph Smith’s response indicate about his character?
- How do you think William might have felt knowing that the Saints unanimously received him back in full fellowship?

