

**Session 1** was called “The Genesis”. We learned that in 1820, fueled by the Second Great Awakening, Joseph Smith had a vision from ‘God’ and ‘Jesus’ which told him that all the other Christian denominations were wrong and he was to right what was wrong. Between 1823 and 1829, Smith had multiple visions in which he was visited by Moroni, someone he claimed was an ancient prophet who lived in the 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> century and was said to have survived the final destruction of his people (the Nephites), completed and edited sacred records begun by his father, and buried the records (gold plates) in a hill later called Cumorah (in present-day New York). According to Smith, Moroni appeared as a resurrected angel and told him where to find the gold plates along with other items. Smith said Moroni:

- Explained the purpose of the plates
- Quoted and interpreted biblical passages
- Warned Smith about spiritual responsibility and temptation
- Direct him to translate the plates (which later became the Book of Mormon, published in 1830).

It is important to note that there is no independent archaeological or historical evidence for Moroni outside of LDS scripture.

**Session 2** is called “The Exodus”. We will hear about the move (exodus) of Mormons from New York to the Mid-West to Utah, the persecution they experienced, and compare Smith’s answer to opposition and persecution to how Jesus taught His followers to respond.

## Watch the Video: Session 2

### Church of Persecution

Latter-day Saints (LDS) missionaries are well-acquainted with persecution. They have been repeatedly taught that persecution is the proof their Mormon faith is genuine and true. So whenever they are attacked or ridiculed, their confidence and faith only grow stronger.

Wherever Joseph Smith and his followers went—New York, Ohio, Missouri, and later, Illinois—the Mormon Church continued to grow. Similarly, so did the distrust and opposition from its non-Mormon neighbors. It is interesting to note the Mormon response to this opposition:

- While in the city of Far West, Missouri, a number of Latter-day Saints dissented, including Oliver Cowdery (Joseph Smith’s chief scribe while translating the golden plates). Fearing these influential people would turn away other Mormons, the LDS leadership organized an armed group bound by a secret oath called the Danites. Cowdery and other dissenters were warned to “depart or a more fatal calamity shall befall you.”
- On July 4, 1838, Sidney Rigdon preached a sermon calling for battle against both dissenters and non-Mormon opponents. “And that mob that comes on us to disturb us, it shall be between us and them a war of extermination; for we will follow them until the last drop of

their blood is spilled; or else they will have to exterminate us, for we will carry the seat of war to their own houses and their own families, and one party or the other shall be utterly destroyed.” This escalated to the Missouri Mormon War of 1838.

- On October 25, 1838, a group of Mormon militia men clashed with a unit of the Missouri State Guard in the northern part of Ray County, Missouri. On October 27, Missouri Governor Lilburn Boggs issued Missouri Executive Order 44 (known to the Mormons as the “Extermination Order”).
- Boggs claimed the Mormons were guilty of “open and avowed defiance of the laws.” Having “made war upon the people of this State,” Boggs continued, “the Mormons must be treated as enemies, and must be exterminated or driven from the State if necessary for the public peace—their outrages are beyond all description.” This resulted in the expulsion of Mormons from the state.
- Fleeing northeast to Illinois in 1839, Joseph Smith established the town of Nauvoo and organized a large militia group called the Nauvoo Legion. At its peak, the Nauvoo Legion was nearly a third the size of the standing army of the U.S.

Table Talk:

Smith’s answer to opposition and persecution was taking up arms to fight. Now compare the way Jesus taught His followers to deal with opposition and persecution:

### **Read Matthew 5:38-48**

- How did Smith’s actions escalate hostilities with unbelieving neighbors?
- How does a peaceful reaction to opposition often defuse tensions?
- Is Jesus commanding us never to defend ourselves, our families, or our country?
- Explain how our threats and retaliation fail to reflect Jesus’ example and His desire to save all people.

### **Joseph Smith’s Death**

Section 135 of the Mormon scripture *Doctrine and Covenants* describes Joseph Smith’s death in these words:

“When Joseph went to Carthage to deliver himself up to the pretended requirements of the law, two or three days previous to his assassination, he said, ‘I am going like a lamb to the slaughter; but I am calm as a summer’s morning; I have a conscience void of offense towards God, and towards all men. I SHALL DIE INNOCENT, AND IT SHALL YET BE SAID OF ME—HE WAS MURDERED IN COLD BLOOD.’” (Doctrine and Covenants, section 135, verse 4)

This Mormon scripture borrows a line from Isaiah’s prophecy of Jesus’ suffering and death,

“He was oppressed, and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth. By oppression and judgment, He was taken away ....” (Isaiah 53:7-8a).

But Smith’s death and Jesus’ death could hardly have been any different. Smith’s attitude was more like Peter who drew a sword to prevent Jesus’ arrest. Unlike Smith, the Lord Jesus stopped the threatened escalation in violence:

“Then Jesus said to him, ‘Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword’” (Matthew 26:52).

In His arrest, trial and crucifixion, Jesus gave no resistance, perfectly demonstrating how to turn the other cheek and pray for those who seek our lives.

Smith was completely different. He surrendered himself to arrest because he was confident his Nauvoo Legion would come to his rescue. In jail he armed himself with a pistol when offered the opportunity. When the mob stormed the jail before the Legion could arrive, he fired down the staircase at his attackers. Now, as we return to Jesus' words to Peter, notice the stunning parallel with Joseph Smith's Nauvoo Legion:

“Do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once send Me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?” (Matthew 26:53-54).

- While Smith's self-defense is certainly understandable, why do you think Mormon teachers and tour guides leave out the part about Smith's resistance and his gunfight?
- How did Jesus' meekness in His arrest and suffering show God's universal love and salvation, even for those who were killing Him?

Large Group Summary:

### **More about the Mormons: Are Latter-day Saints Still Polygamists?**

**In the beginning, Joseph Smith practiced plural marriage secretly.** Even though he claimed to have received a revelation from God calling for polygamy (more properly called “polygyny,” the marriage of more than one woman to the same man), he only revealed it to a small group of Mormon leaders at first, knowing most Mormons would be shocked.

When he finally began publicly preaching it among the Latter-day Saints, **he implemented Freemason rituals to keep the practice of polygamy secret from non-Mormons, since it was illegal in most states.** Historians debate the number of wives Joseph Smith had, but it was in the neighborhood of 39—including girls as young as fourteen years of age, and more than ten women who were already married to living men at the time.

Joseph Smith died at the age of 38, never having named a successor. Several Mormon leaders sought to take his place after his death, but Brigham Young stepped up to fill that role. **Young himself would end up having 54 wives.**

Because of non-Mormon sentiments against plural marriage, Brigham Young organized the Mormon trek west. **His intention was to take the Latter-day Saints out of the United States and establish a new home in Utah, which at the time was part of Mexico.** There they would be free to practice plural marriage.

**Not all Mormons followed Brigham Young out to Utah.** A small number remained behind in Illinois. In 1860 they formed themselves into the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and appointed Joseph Smith Jr.'s son Joseph Smith III as their prophet and leader. **They rejected plural marriage and took over the original Mormon temple in Kirtland, Ohio.** Today they maintain it is a historical site. In 1994 they dedicated their temple in Independence, Missouri. In April 2001 they changed their name to “Community of Christ.” Currently, they have about 250,000 members.

In 1846 Brigham Young and his Latter-day Saints set out for Utah. In that same year the Mexican-American War began. **By the time the Mormons reached Utah in 1848, Mexico had ceded that region along with vast areas of land to the United States** as a result of the war. In this new, distant part of the United States, **the Mormons were able to continue practicing plural marriage undisturbed.**

In 1860 Abraham Lincoln was elected president of the United States. Brigham Young met that news with great concern. He already considered Lincoln a scoundrel because as state senator in Illinois, Lincoln had done nothing to protect the Mormons in the aftermath of Joseph Smith's murder at the Carthage jail. In addition, **Lincoln had run for president on a platform of eliminating two great evils from America: slavery and polygamy.**

In 1862, Lincoln signed a federal anti-polygamy bill clearly aimed at the Mormons. But under the strain of holding the country together through the Civil War, Lincoln chose not to enforce the law. Lincoln reportedly told an emissary he sent to Utah, **“Tell Brigham Young that if he will let me alone, I will let him alone.”**

The Latter-day Saints' practice of plural marriage continued through the Civil War and Reconstruction until 1887. It was then the U.S. Congress passed the Edmunds-Tucker Act. This prohibited the practice of polygamy and threatened to disincorporate the Latter-day Saints Church if it did not uphold the new anti-polygamy law. **The law also threatened the confiscation of its sacred temples, its treasury, and the loss of basic civil rights for all Mormons.**

Three years later, on May 19, 1890, **the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the provisions for seizing church property under the Edmunds-Tucker Act. On September 25 of that same year, the fourth president of the Latter-day Saints, Wilford Woodruff, announced that God had withdrawn the command to practice plural marriage.** Beginning in 1904, the Latter-day Saints began excommunicating any Mormon man married to more than one woman simultaneously to demonstrate publicly they were upholding federal law.

The only Mormons currently practicing plural marriage are fundamentalist Mormons. They number somewhere around 40,000 and **believe Joseph Smith's teaching is an eternal doctrine of God that man does not have the authority to change or set aside.**

**Closing Prayer:** Lord Jesus, we marvel at the depth of Your love and concern for us, even for those who nailed You to the cross. Forgive us our sins and empower us to love those who oppose and threaten us. Amen.