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Joseph Smith's Happiness Letter on Polygamy (August 17, 2020)

"Happiness is the object and design of our existence" is a line that has been cited by church leaders, educators, and prophets over the last 150 years, and is a truly uplifting idea from Joseph Smith. That quote comes from a letter written by Joseph Smith in April 1842 to then 19 year old Nancy Rigdon.

By April 1842, Joseph Smith was already married to around ten women and would marry about thirteen women in 1842 alone. Joseph made proposals to many women that year, and one of those women was Nancy Rigdon, the daughter of Sidney Rigdon.

While we do not know with exact certainty what happened during this proposal, we do know that Nancy Rigdon rejected Joseph's overtures which led to Joseph Smith writing a letter to Nancy Rigdon to explain why his proposal was from God. The subject of this post is about the letter, but I want to go over some of the history first so that the proper context of the letter is understood.

Before we begin, I want to note that I learned about the Happiness Letter from a [Mormon Discussions podcast](#) that featured Jonathan Streeter and Christopher Smith. Their presentation of not just the Happiness Letter, but the historical sources and story around it is absolutely fascinating, and I can not possibly recommend listening to their podcast enough. You can [listen to their podcast](#) or [view it on YouTube](#), and I hope after you read this post you would check that out to get more context and information behind the letter. Their podcast is about two hours long and gives much more detail not just on the letter, but the history leading up to the letter and the fallout that came afterwards.

For a quick overview of Joseph Smith's proposal to Nancy Rigdon, we have to first note that the accounts of course vary and are from different times which of course can lead to details getting blurred. But as you'll see, it becomes quite clear that Joseph Smith *did* propose to Nancy Rigdon, as even the sources that seek to demonize Nancy Rigdon are forced to admit parts of the story that would prove Nancy Rigdon's account accurate.

Around April 9, 1842 Joseph Smith proposed to Nancy Rigdon. This proposal was set up by Nancy Marinda Hyde (some records go by Marinda Nancy, but we'll go with the revelation name here which is Nancy Marinda), who was living in the printing office and was sealed to Joseph Smith either in April 1842 or May 1843 (Joseph Smith's journal says April 1842). In fact, Joseph Smith produces a revelation for Nancy Marinda Hyde in December 1841, which includes the following:

"Verily thus saith the Lord unto you my servant Joseph, that inasmuch as you have called upon me to know my will concerning my handmaid Nancy Marinda Hyde—behold it is my will that she should have a better place prepared for her, than that in which she now lives, in order that her life may be spared unto her; therefore go and say unto my servant, Ebenezer Robinson, and to my handmaid his wife—Let them open their doors and take her and her children into their house and take care of them faithfully and kindly unto my servant Orson Hyde returns from his mission, or until some other provision can be made for her welfare and safety. Let them to these things and spare not, and I the Lord will bless them and heal them if they do it not grudgingly, saith the Lord God; and she shall be a blessing unto them; and let my handmaid Nancy Marinda Hyde hearken to the counsel of my servant Joseph in all things whatsoever he shall teach unto her, and it shall be a blessing upon her and upon her children after her, unto her justification, saith the Lord." ([December 1841 Revelation](#))

This revelation is interesting, because Nancy's husband Orson Hyde had been sent on a mission to Jerusalem in April 1841, and in December of that year Joseph Smith gives Nancy a revelation to "hearken to the counsel of my servant Joseph **in all things whatsoever he shall teach unto her**, and it shall be a blessing upon her and upon her children after her, unto her justification, saith the Lord." Beyond Nancy Hyde's role in the Nancy Rigdon proposal, she would also become one of Joseph Smith's polyandrous wives, almost certainly without the knowledge of her husband, Orson Hyde. In other words, Nancy Marinda Hyde took this revelation seriously as she would not only agree to a polyandrous marriage with Joseph Smith, but become a willing recruiter to help Joseph Smith obtain more wives.

What is also interesting is that in December 1841, Joseph Smith's revelation says that Nancy Marinda Hyde is to live in the printing office with Ebenezer Robinson, but then just a month later on January 28, 1842, Joseph Smith claims another revelation that the church is to take control of the printing office, which they do for \$6,000 on February 4, 1842. On the day the deed was transferred (in the dead of winter), Willard Richards, who would then live in the printing office with Nancy Hyde (quite scandalous for that time), told Robinson "you must get out to-night or I will put you "in the street."" ([Robison, The Return](#))

At this point Joseph Smith could now conduct meetings and polygamous proposals in secret, away from his legal wife Emma. Just a few months later, Joseph Smith instructs Nancy Hyde to request that Nancy Rigdon stops by the printing office to speak to Joseph Smith following a funeral that her father, Sidney Rigdon, was speaking at. We know this detail is accurate both from sources in Nancy Rigdon's family, but we can also see that this part is true from Orson Hyde's comments in 1845 as he sought to keep the church out of Sidney Rigdon's hands following Joseph's death:

"During my absence to Palestine, the conduct of his daughter, Nancy, became so notorious in this city, according to common rumor, she was regarded generally, little if any better than a

public prostitute. Joseph Smith knowing the conduct she was guilty of, felt anxious to reprove and reclaim her if possible. **He, accordingly, requested my wife to invite her down to her house.** He wished to speak with her and show her the impropriety of being gallanted shoot by so many different men, many of whom were comparatively strangets to her... Nancy, I presume, considered her dignity highly insulted at the plain and sharp reproofs she received front this servant of God. She ran home and told her father that Mr. Smith wanted her for a spiritual wife, and that he employed my wife to assist him in obtaining her." ([Orson Hyde to Nauvoo High Priests Quurom, April 1845](#))

While this paragraph paints Nancy Rigdon in the worst light, it needs to be noted that this story still confirms that Joseph Smith used Orson's wife (who was Joseph's wife for eternity), Nancy Hyde, to setup a private meeting. If this was truly to stop Nancy Rigdon from being a whore, would Joseph have needed to keep it secret from his legal wife Emma to setup a private meeting with another one of his polygamous wives? I think common sense would tell you that would not be the case, but Orson's account is essential to establish from a negative source that the meeting did happen.

Following this meeting there is friction between Joseph Smith and the Rigdon family, and accounts from the Rigdon family state that Joseph Smith finally admitted to making the proposal to Nancy as well as writing the letter we are going to discuss below.

[John Rigdon, 1900](#): "Mr. Rigdon then went on to say that in the early part of the year 1843 Joseph Smith Made a proposition of plural or spiritual marriage to his (Rigdon's) sister Nancy, then a young lady about 21 years of age. The proposition was indignantly refused by the young lady. She at once told her father, Sidney Rigdon, of Smith's porposal. The elder Rigdon was very angry, and called Smith to account. Two or three days afterward Smith called at the Rigdon home and attempted to deny the statement of Miss Nancy, when she promptly told the prophet that he was a liar and a scoundrel if he intimated that he had not made the proposition. Mr. Rigdon said yesterday that he was present at this interview, and remembers the circumstances as distinctly as though it had occurred only last week."

This event was first publicized by John C Bennett, a source that was incredibly close to Joseph Smith before they had a very rough falling out when Bennett's "spiritual wifery" was exposed by women in the church. It should be noted here that what Bennett was doing is not much different than what Joseph Smith was accused of doing here, and it was not just John C Bennett who was accused but also Joseph Smith's own brother William Smith, who also claimed to learn the teachings from Joseph. The only reason William Smith was not excommunicated is because Joseph Smith shut down Brigham Young during the trial, stating "Brother Brig[ham] I will not listen to this abuse of my family a minute longer. [I] will wade in blood up to my knees before I will do it." ([Dialogue, V16 N2](#))

[John Bennett's account](#): "She went down. Joe was there, and took her into a private room, LOCKED THE DOOR, and commenced by telling her that he had long loved her, and had asked the Lord for her, and that it was his holy will that he should have her--he told her that it would not prevent her from marrying any other person--that he had the blessings of Jacob granted to him--and that all was right; he desired to kiss her, and wished her to kiss him, but Joe couldn't come it. She said she would alarm the neighbors if he did not open the door, and let her out--he did so, and requested Mrs. Hyde to explain matters to her. Joe swore her to eternal secrecy. Mrs. Hyde told her that these things looked strange to her at first, but she would become more reconciled on mature reflection. Miss Rigdon replied, "I never shall." Joe agreed to write her and did so in a few days thro' Dr. Richards. That letter is now safe in the hands of her friends. I have seen it, so has her father, and various other persons. On Tuesday last Joe came up to Mr. Rigdon's, accompanied by his High Priest, Geo. Miller, of sable sister notoriety, for a witness, and by boisterous words and violent gestures tried to deny the attempted seduction and alarm the girl: but she _told him he was a cursed liar, and that he could not face her to it. Joe then made a full acknowledgment of the whole affair. All the family, and many other persons were present. The holy George observed, "You must not harm the Lord's anointed--the Lord will not suffer his anointed to fall!!!"

I will freely admit that Bennett very likely embellishes this account, but we have consistency between both the pro-Joseph Smith and anti-Joseph Smith accounts that Joseph Smith had Nancy Rigdon summoned to the printing office through the help of Nancy Marinda Hyde, and we also have multiple accounts that both discuss the proposal of polygamous marriage along with Bennett's mention of the letter which is now in the [History of the Church](#) and cited by church leaders.

Furthermore after months of friction, Joseph Smith allowed many in the church to slander Nancy Rigdon as the rumors grew. This led to a cooling down in August when Sidney Rigdon wrote this letter to the editor of the Wasp:

"Dear Sir: I am fully authorized by my daughter, Nancy, to say to the public through the medium of your paper, that the letter which has appeared in the Sangamo Journal, making part of General Bennett's letters to said paper, purporting to have been written by Mr. Joseph Smith to her, was unauthorized by her, and that she never said to Gen. Bennett or any other person, that said letter was written by said Mr. Smith. nor in his hand writing, but by another person, and in another person's hand writing. She further wishes me to say, that she never at any time authorized Ben. Bennett to use her name in the public papers, as he has done, which has been greatly to the wounding of her feelings, and she considers that the obtruding of her name before the public in the manner in which it has been done, to say the best of it, is a flagrant violation of the rules of gallantry, and cannot avoid to insult her feelings, which she wishes the public to know. I would further state that Mr. Smith denied to me the authorship of that letter."

([Wasp, August 31, 1842](#))

Now this is important because Sidney Rigdon does what the [official church polygamy essay](#) would call "carefully worded denials." Rigdon mentions that Joseph Smith did not write the letter, which is of course true because Joseph Smith always used scribes. That is also why the letter is not in Joseph Smith's handwriting, which Rigdon notes. And at the very end of the letter, Rigdon mentions that Joseph Smith denied authorship of the letter, which is true in all accounts - Joseph Smith denied authorship until Nancy Rigdon called him out and he then admitted to it. Furthermore, the letter is in the [Joseph Smith Papers](#) today and cited by many leaders, which makes clear that the letter is believed to be authored by Joseph Smith.

What is also amazing about this statement by Rigdon is that only after it's published does Joseph Smith call off the attacks against Nancy Rigdon. From the *Wasp* on September 3, 1842 (just 3 days after Sidney's statement is published in the *Wasp*):

"We are authorized to say by Gen. Joseph Smith, that the affidavit of Stephen Markham, relative to Miss Nancy Rigdon, as published in the handbill of affidavits, was unauthorized by him, the certificate of Elder Rigdon relative to the letter being satisfactory."

Just a few days earlier - on the very same day that Rigdon's statement was printed, Markham wrote in the *Wasp* that "he had witnessed Nancy early on in a compromising situation with John Bennett. Markham claimed 'many vulgar, unbecoming and indecent sayings and motions' passed between them and testified that he was convinced that they were 'guilty of unlawful and illicit intercourse with each other.'" ([Wasp, August 31, 1842](#))

There are a number of people who rushed to dispute Markham's account including George W. Robinson, Oliver Olney, Joseph H. Jackson, and John Olney. Joseph Jackson added that "When, as happens in the cases of Miss Martha Brotherton and Miss Nancy Rigdon, [the prophet's] overtures were rejected, with disdain and exposure [he] threatened he would set a hundred hell hounds on them, to destroy their reputations." That is a pattern that occurs beyond just this example; Any time Joseph Smith is attacked he flips those accusations against the accuser. (Richard S. Van Wagoner, "Mormon Polygamy: A History")

Again I don't want to write a novel before we even get to the Happiness Letter, but the way the church turns on those who question the authority of the men in charge is well documented. A great example is Brigham Young's hatred towards Joseph's legal wife Emma, in which he accused her of trying to poison Joseph Smith as well as famously stating "To my certain knowledge **Emma Smith is one of the damnest liars I know** of on this earth." (Prophet Brigham Young, October 1, 1866, as quoted in Newell and Avery, "The Lion and the Lady: Brigham Young and Emma Smith," *Utah Historical Quarterly*, v. 48, Winter 1980, p. 82)

This is just a very basic overview of the events leading to the Happiness Letter, but it is necessary to cover them before reading the letter because the context is so important to understanding what Joseph Smith is attempting to accomplish. In this letter, Joseph Smith is explaining to 19 year old Nancy Rigdon why becoming his polygamous wife or concubine will bring her happiness, and Joseph writes it both in his own voice as well as switching into the voice of God. It includes such beautiful, uplifting message while alternating between promises of blessings and joy and threats of punishments and everlasting regret.

And with that out of the way, let's get to the letter.

The Happiness Letter

"Happiness is the object and design of our existence, and will be the end thereof, if we pursue the path that leads to it; and this path is virtue, uprightness, faithfulness, holiness, and keeping all the commandments of God;

This is the part of the letter that most members of the church have heard if they've heard any of it, and by itself it sure sounds beautiful and uplifting. Joseph Smith avoids the true subject of the letter - his proposal to Nancy Rigdon to enter into a relationship with Joseph Smith - but instead wants to frame that proposal within the context of happiness.

It's also important to see how Joseph Smith is putting virtue, uprightness, faithfulness, and holiness on equal footing with keeping the commandments of God. If you showed this to any Christian they would likely agree with the statement, but again remember that when Joseph Smith says "keeping all the commandments of God," that includes Joseph's claimed commandment that these young women marry him as polygamous wives.

But things are about to take a turn quickly, so buckle up because this letter gets extremely uncomfortable once you read it through the context in which it was written.

"but we cannot keep ALL the commandments without first knowing them, and we cannot expect to know all, or more than we now know, unless we comply with or keep those we have already received! That which is wrong under one circumstance, may be, and often is, right under another. God said, Thou shalt not kill; at another time he said, Thou shalt utterly destroy. This is the principle on which the government of Heaven is conducted, by revelation adapted to the circumstances in which the children of the kingdom are placed. Whatever God requires is right, no matter what it is, although we may not see the reason thereof till long after the events transpire."

Joseph Smith immediately turns the message of the letter to explain to Nancy Rigdon that she can not possibly keep all of her commandments with God unless she listens to God's servant, which just happens to be the person making the marriage proposal, Joseph Smith. This is the same tactic used by other religious leaders who had sex with their young followers. From [Jonathan Streeter's presentation at Sunstone](#):

"Keep in mind that special divine permission is nothing new... Self proclaimed prophet David Koresh and the Branch Davidians claimed special divine permission to take child brides for the purpose of producing the 24 elders foretold in the Book of Revelations. Self proclaimed prophet Wayne Bent of the Lord Our Righteousness Church claimed special divine permission for having sexual relations with children, even his own daughter in law in order, to avoid God's punishment. Self proclaimed prophet Julius Shacknow of the sect known as The Work, claimed special privilege to promise salvation in exchange for sexual intercourse with women and children, including his own stepdaughter. Self proclaimed prophet Tony Alamo of Alamo Christian Ministries claimed special biblical permission to illegally marry multiple women and children. Self proclaimed prophet David Berg of the Children of God claimed special divine permission to normalize sexual relation with children. Prophets, justifying their own predations as special, divine permission through the use of pious language and religious sentiment, is nothing new."

If you are a believing member, the above paragraph will make you feel extremely uncomfortable, but [as I've written about in other posts](#), that discomfort is not Satan trying to lead you away: It's the realization that what Joseph Smith did as prophet to entice young women to marry and have sex with him is no different than what other sexual predators have done throughout our history in the name of God. Not only do other self-proclaimed prophets use these methods, but the women that enter into these relationships report the same spiritual witnesses and visions that some of the women that entered into polygamy with Joseph Smith later claimed.

Joseph then seeks to assure Nancy that what seems horrible and wrong to her (in this case having a sexual relationship or marriage to Joseph Smith) is often right under different circumstances. Again, this letter must be read in the context in which it was written: Joseph Smith explaining to Nancy Rigdon why it is right and proper to consent to being in a relationship with him.

Just take a look at how Joseph Smith uses the Bible to attempt to assure Nancy Rigdon that entering this relationship is actually from God and not just Joseph Smith's desires: "God said, Thou shalt not kill; at another time he said, Thou shalt utterly destroy."

In other words, if God could not only condone, but command, both murder and destruction when the situation calls for it, then entering into a relationship of polygamous marriage of concubinage would

seem small by comparison.

We know from some of Joseph Smith's polygamous wives that he used the concept of revelation to propose to them, so it should be no surprise that Joseph Smith is using the language of revelation here to make sure that Nancy Rigdon knows that he is speaking for God in all that he asks.

Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner: "[At age 12 in 1831], [Smith] told me about his great vision concerning me. **He said I was the first woman God commanded him to take as a plural wife.** ... In 1834 he was commanded to take me for a Wife [In 1842 I] went forward and was sealed to him. Brigham Young performed the sealing ... for time, and all Eternity. I did just as Joseph told me to do." (Compton, Todd (1997), In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith)

Emily Partridge: "**[Joseph] said the Lord had commanded [him] to enter into plural marriage and had given me to him** and although I had got badly frightened he knew I would yet have him." (Compton, Todd (1997), In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith, p. 408)

Lucy Walker: "In the year 1842 President Joseph Smith sought an interview with me, and said, 'I have a message for you, **I have been commanded of God to take another wife, and you are the woman.**'" (Andrew Jenson, "Plural Marriage," Historical Record 6 (July 1887): 229–30)

One other key element that Jonathan Streeter notes in his Sunstone presentation is how Joseph Smith leans heavily into inclusive language by using "we" throughout these commandments. With this framing, Joseph Smith is presenting this proposal to Nancy as if they are both under the same requirements and pressure, but the reality is that they are under very different circumstances in this proposal. Joseph Smith's exaltation is not on the line if Nancy Rigdon rejects his commandment, but Nancy's future and current blessings are very much at stake as we will see in this letter.

Keep in mind that Joseph Smith has known Nancy Rigdon since she was a kid, and in all of these years she has revered him as a prophet. And just as Joseph Smith did with at least some of his other polygamous wives, he uses their reverence for him against them to gain their consent. When Joseph Smith says "whatever God requires is right, no matter what it is, although we may not see the reason thereof till long after the events transpire," he is using his claimed authority as God to tell Nancy what is right, even if she knows deep down how abhorrent the idea of marrying and/or having sexual relations with Joseph is to her.

If you don't think Joseph Smith is talking about polygamy here in this letter, just wait because it's going to be crystal clear in this next section.

"If we seek first the kingdom of God, all good things will be added. **So with Solomon**; first he asked wisdom, and God gave it him, and with it every desire of his heart; **even things which**

might be considered abominable to all who understand the order of Heaven only in part, but which, in reality, were right, because God gave and sanctioned by special revelation."

This part of the letter makes perfectly clear that Joseph Smith is talking about a sexual relationship whether one of polygamy or concubinage, as Joseph Smith directly invokes Solomon who was famous for his 700 wives and 300 concubines. The language in this section is truly remarkable: When he says that Solomon desired "even things which might be considered abominaable to all who understand the order of Heaven only in part," he is undercutting the authority of the Book of Mormon, because *the Book of Mormon says that the Lord himself said* that Solomon "had many wives and concubines, which thing was abominable before me, saith the Lord."

In other words, when Joseph says those that consider Solomon's polygamy and concubinage to be "abominable" "understand the order of Heaven only in part," he is directly contradicting the Lord himself in the Book of Mormon. Again, in the Book of Mormon we are that Solomon's wives and concubines were "abominable before me, saith the Lord," and Joseph Smith is unquestionably stating here that the Lord knows Heaven "only in part" because he considered Solomon's practice "abominable." I know I'm repeating myself here, but I find it fascinating that Joseph Smith uses language in this letter which throws both the Book of Mormon and God under the bus to justify polygamy to Nancy Rigdon.

This contradiction also puts 19 year old Nancy Rigdon in a most uncomfortable spot. If she believes that a relationship with the Prophet Joseph Smith is not from God, then she is being told by Joseph Smith, a man she has trusted since a child, that she knows "the order of heaven only in part." Lucy Walker stated that Joseph Smith first asked her "if I believed him to be a Prophet of God" during his proposal for a polygamous marriage, and this follows that pattern of using these young women's longstanding belief in Joseph Smith over their head to gain their consent for what would otherwise be repulsive to their very core.

Furthermore, this section is implying (just as D&C 132 does) that it is *Joseph Smith himself* who inquired of the Lord for polygamy. Many apologists argue that prophets are only given revelation to questions that ask about (which is the reason we are told the ban on blacks was not lifted for 140 years, harmful LGBT policies, etc), and D&C 132 itself is clear that Joseph Smith is the one who asks about polygamy when it says "Verily, thus saith the Lord unto you my servant Joseph, *that inasmuch as you have inquired* of my hand to know and understand wherein I, the Lord, justified my servants Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as also Moses, David and Solomon, my servants, as touching the principle and doctrine of their having many wives and concubines"

To put plainly, when Joseph Smith says that "God gave it him (Solomon), and with it every desire of his heart" in his letter to Nancy, he is making clear that the desire of Joseph Smith's heart is to enter into a relationship with 19 year old Nancy Rigdon. Otherwise why would Joseph Smith be using this

language to assure Nancy Rigdon that God has chosen for her to be in a relationship with himself?

One last point here: We are going to see a pattern in this letter that we also see with D&C 132, which is where Joseph Smith will alternate between promises of happiness/eternal blessings and threats/punishments. This section above is a promise of happiness if Nancy Rigdon accepts what Joseph Smith is presenting to her as a commandment from God.

Back to the letter:

"A parent may whip a child, and justly too, because he stole an apple; whereas, if the child had asked for the apple, and the parent had given it, the child would have eaten it with a better appetite; there would have been no stripes; all the pleasures of the apple would have been secured, all the misery of stealing lost. This principle will justly apply to all of God's dealings with his children. Every thing that God gives us is lawful and right, and it is proper that we should enjoy his gifts and blessings, whenever and wherever he is disposed to bestow; but if we should seize upon those same blessings and enjoyments without law, without revelation, without commandment, those blessings and enjoyments would prove cursings and vexations in the end, and we should have to lie down in sorrow and wailings of everlasting regret."

Here Joseph Smith is indirectly saying that if Nancy Rigdon would just enter into this relationship without reservation, that "all the pleasures of the apple [sexual relationship with Joseph] would have been secured." He is also making clear that if she accepts Joseph's proposal, not only is it the lawful thing to do, but that it is proper for her to consent. In other words, Joseph is trying to assure Nancy Rigdon that if she accepts his proposal, there will be no punishment for entering into this illegal and immoral relationship, but instead pleasures, gifts, and blessings.

To say that this is an abuse of Joseph Smith's authority and influence over Nancy Rigdon is an understatement, and using the language of God to tell her just to enjoy the commandment that Joseph Smith has presented to her is abhorrent. Remember that Joseph Smith has known Nancy Rigdon since she was 11, and during those eight years she has been raised and conditioned to view Joseph Smith as the prophet of God, and here we can see Joseph Smith using that trust and obedience against her to gain her consent into accepting his proposal.

As we stated above, this section shifts from the promise of happiness in the previous section to a threat that if Nancy does not accept the apple [relationship with Joseph Smith] and were to enter into a relationship with someone not commanded by God (via Joseph Smith), that she would be seizing "upon those same blessings and enjoyments without law, without revelation, without commandment, those blessings and enjoyments would prove cursings and vexations in the end, and we should have to lie down in sorrow and wailings of everlasting regret."

Keep in mind that when this letter was written that there were rumors all around Joseph Smith about both his polygamous affairs as well as those around him including John Bennett and Joseph's own brother, William Smith. At the time Joseph Smith wrote this letter, he was already secretly (and illegally) married to ten other wives besides Emma ([List of wives by marriage date](#)), who did not know of these marriages herself. This section allows Joseph Smith to again assure Nancy that this relationship is not like the ones she's been hearing rumors about, and that it is God's will that she enter into it with Joseph as a women chosen by God for Joseph.

Again we see how Joseph Smith used his claim to be the prophet of God to tell members what God wants for them. Throughout Joseph Smith's time as prophet, he used revelation to get young women to marry him as we noted above, Martin Harris to pay for the Book of Mormon (D&C 19), church members to back off criticisms of Joseph's management of the church (D&C 64), and many other times when he found himself in a spot of trouble.

Back to the letter:

"But in obedience there is joy and peace unspotted, unalloyed; and as God has designed our happiness, the happiness of all his creatures, he never has, he never will, institute an ordinance or give a commandment to his people that is not calculated in its nature to promote that happiness which he has designed, and which will not end in the greatest amount of good and glory to those who become the recipients of his law and ordinances."

Joseph again alternates back to promises of joy and peace as he makes clear that it is God who has calculated this relationship with Joseph Smith to "end in the greatest amount of good and glory to those who become the recipients of his law and ordinances."

In other words, this is Joseph Smith using the language of scripture to convince Nancy Rigdon that it is a commandment to be obedient to God's servant, and Joseph Smith knows that Nancy has believed him to be God's servant since the age of 11. These are the very same tactics used by powerful men who have led many other religious movements with sexual exploitation such as the leaders we quoted above.

I can't overstate how manipulative this letter is given how Joseph Smith is saying that *God himself calculated this proposal* to state that Nancy Rigdon will not only receive happiness, but the "greatest amount of good and glory" if she enters into this relationship with Joseph Smith whether it be as a polygamous wife or a concubine.

As we've mentioned before, Joseph Smith uses the words of God to give his argument the weight and authority that can circumvent the moral and ethical beliefs of his target. Joseph Smith is telling Nancy Rigdon that he speaks for God, and that God only wants what will bring her the most happiness, and

that just happens to line up with Joseph Smith's desire to have her as a polygamous wife or concubine. Whether it was threatening Martin Harris with damnation if he didn't fully fund the Book of Mormon or telling young Lucy Walker that if she rejected his polygamous marriage proposal that the "gate will be closed forever against you," Joseph Smith spent his time as prophet leveraging the words and authority of God to achieve his objectives.

One last point here about this statement from Joseph Smith that God "has designed our happiness, the happiness of all his creatures, he never has, he never will, institute an ordinance or give a commandment to his people that is not calculated in its nature to promote that happiness which he has designed." Even in the [church's own essay on polygamy](#), they concede that "**Plural marriage was difficult for all involved**. For Joseph Smith's wife Emma, it was an **excruciating** ordeal."

If polygamy was both calculated and intended to promote the most happiness and good, then why was it so difficult for so many of the women who were subjected to it? It becomes much easier to see why the *men* who claimed to speak for God found happiness in taking younger wives to have sexual relations with, but this statement from the happiness letter falls flat even when just cross referencing to the concessions made by the church itself in their own essay.

And back to the letter:

"Blessings offered, but rejected, are no longer blessings, but become like the talent hid in the earth by the wicked and slothful servant; the proffered good returns to the giver; the blessing is bestowed on those who will receive, and occupy; for unto him that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundantly, but unto him that hath not, or will not receive, shall be taken away that which he hath, or might have had."

Joseph Smith quickly turns back to threats and punishments if Nancy does not accept his proposal. Not only will Nancy lose the blessings she would receive from accepting this polygamous relationship with Joseph Smith, but she will lose all blessings that she has already received.

When Joseph Smith uses the word "offered" it is not by accident. Given the context of why the letter written, Joseph Smith is making it clear that rejecting his offer, which he terms as a blessing, would end up costing Nancy Rigdon all blessings that she "hath, or might have had."

This is not just a manipulative tactic to gain Nancy's consent, but is spiritual extortion. Joseph Smith is telling Nancy Rigdon that if she does not enter into the proposed relationship with him that she will lose every blessing she has already felt, which chips away at the pretense of free agency for a 19 year old girl who is being pursued by a man she was raised to revere as a prophet of God.

Back to the letter:

"Be wise to-day; 'tis madness to defer! Next day the fatal precedent may plead; Thus on till wisdom is pushed out of time,' into eternity."

This sentence is using poetic language to apply pressure to submit to Joseph Smith's proposal quickly, with the threat that if she does not the offer might be gone. We saw this same tactic as outlined above with Lucy Walker, who was a child living with Joseph Smith who lost her mom and had her father sent on a mission by Joseph Smith.

While her father was on a mission ordered by Joseph Smith, Joseph proposed to her for a secret, polygamous marriage. When Lucy hesitated, Joseph Smith told her "It is a command of God to you. I will give you untill to-morrow to decide this matter. If you reject this message the gate will be closed forever against you." (Andrew Jenson, "Plural Marriage," Historical Record 6 (July 1887): 229–30)

Just as with Lucy Walker, Joseph Smith is using a sense of urgency to get Nancy Rigdon to consent to his proposal. In both situations they were alone and without their parents, which again is a similar tactic that other self-proclaimed prophets who had sexual relations with their followers used to pressure young women to consent to their will.

And back to the letter:

"Our Heavenly Father is more liberal in his views, and boundless in his mercies and blessings, than we are ready to believe or receive, and, at the same time, is more terrible to the workers of iniquity, more awful in the executions of his punishments, and more ready to detect every false way than we are apt to suppose him to be; he will be inquired of by his children;"

Joseph Smith here is attempting to assure Nancy Rigdon that a polygamous/concubine relationship is not as immoral as it might sound because God is "more liberal" than we are ready to believe or receive.

This again is the problem that comes from having one man who claims to speak for God - they can use that authority to claim what God wants for those who believe in the self-proclaimed prophet. When a commandment from the self-proclaimed prophet seems immoral and wrong, the prophet can then claim that God is actually much more liberal than "we are ready to believe" in order to circumvent the sense of morality that the target has been taught since birth.

On the other hand, as we see from different prophets in church history, that "liberal" view tends to change based on the worldview of each prophet. Early prophets all believed that [black members were not allowed to hold the priesthood](#), Russell Nelson today believes the word [Mormon should not be used](#) after past prophets publicly called Nelson out for suggesting so, and, of course, [God's views on](#)

[LGBT members changed in just 3.5 years](#) after public outcry caused a 2015 revelation to be reversed in 2019.

At the same time that Joseph works to convince Nancy that polygamy is approved by God because of his liberalness, he also switches to make sure that Nancy is aware that God is "more awful in the execution of his punishments" to let her know what awaits those who reject his proposals.

I feel like I'm beating a dead horse here, but it is necessary to detail just how manipulative and abusive this letter is for a young, 19 year old woman who knows how immoral and abhorrent Joseph Smith's proposal is.

And on to the final part of the letter:

"he says, Ask and ye shall receive, seek and ye shall find; but, if ye will take that which is not your own, or which I have not given you, you shall be rewarded according to your deeds; but no good thing will I withhold from them who walk uprightly before me, and do my will in all things; who will listen to my voice and to the voice of my servant whom I have sent; for I delight in those who seek diligently to know my precepts, and abide by the laws of my kingdom; for all things shall be made known unto them in mine own due time, and in the end they shall have joy."

The letter finishes off by switching back to promises of joy and happiness for those who listen to the commandments of "my servant whom I have sent."

As I've pointed out repeatedly on this site, Joseph Smith is amazingly quick and effective at switching seamlessly into the voice of God as needed. We detailed how [Joseph Smith was able to dictate D&C 132](#) on polygamy without any pretense of receiving the revelation at the time it was written, even after Hyrum Smith requested that Joseph Smith would use the seer stone to receive the revelation.

Just read the way Joseph Smith transitions from the voice of himself speaking for God to speaking in the voice of God as if receiving a revelation in this final section, just in time to note that Nancy Rigdon needs to "listen to my voice and to the voice of my servant whom I have sent."

When you read this letter in the context as it was given along with how Joseph Smith created a lot of his material, you can see how Joseph Smith realizes and leverages the impact of speaking in the voice of God in order to entice his followers into complete, blind obedience.

We quoted [Jonathan Streeter](#) earlier when he discussed the ways that other self-proclaimed prophets of God used their claimed authority to gain the consent of young women who knew that their proposals were wrong to their very core, but I will quote it again because it is so important to read

given what we know about Joseph Smith's implementation of polygamy:

"Keep in mind that special divine permission is nothing new... Self proclaimed prophet David Koresh and the Branch Davidians claimed special divine permission to take child brides for the purpose of producing the 24 elders foretold in the Book of Revelations. Self proclaimed prophet Wayne Bent of the Lord Our Righteousness Church claimed special divine permission for having sexual relations with children, even his own daughter in law in order, to avoid God's punishment. Self proclaimed prophet Julius Shacknow of the sect known as The Work, claimed special privilege to promise salvation in exchange for sexual intercourse with women and children, including his own stepdaughter. Self proclaimed prophet Tony Alamo of Alamo Christian Ministries claimed special biblical permission to illegally marry multiple women and children. Self proclaimed prophet David Berg of the Children of God claimed special divine permission to normalize sexual relation with children. Prophets, justifying their own predations as special, divine permission through the use of pious language and religious sentiment, is nothing new."

This letter is perhaps the most damning illustration of how Joseph Smith used coercion to win over the consent of women who initially rejected his advances, holding the promises of blessings and exaltation over their head unless they capitulated their morals to accept what Joseph Smith was proposing in the name of God.

And Joseph Smith knew this would shake members to their core, which is why this was all done in secret as he proclaimed in public that he was not participating in any such activity. It's why the church publicly shamed John Bennett and William Smith for "spiritual wifery" when women testified that these men claimed to learn these teachings directly from Joseph Smith himself, which we can see by looking at the accounts of his polygamous wives being proposed to.

To make this point as clear as I can, here is the testimony of Catherine Fuller, who was told by Joseph's brother William that she should not get married so they could continue having sexual relations:

"[William Smith] has also been to my house on the 27th of last month being the day I was married and proposed unlawful connexion but I refused and told him that it was contrary to the teaching of Joseph on the stand. He answered that **Joseph was obliged to teach to the contrary on the stand to keep down prejudice and keep peace at home**. First W. Smith insisted very much that I should not marry and proposed to supply me with food &c if I should remain unmarried and grant his requests." ([Catherine Fuller's testimony](#))

Sarah Miller also testified that she was told that the teachings of "spiritual wifery" originated with Joseph Smith:

"Some two or three weeks since, in consequence of Bro Joseph Smiths teachings to the singers, I began to be alarmed concerning myself, & certain teachings which I had recevd from Chauncy L. Higby, & questioned him about his teaching, for I was pretty well persuaded from Joseph[']s public teachings that Chaney had been telling falsehood.— but Chauncy said that Joseph Now taught as he did th[r]ough necessity, on acount of the prejudices of the people, & his own family particlarly as they had not become full believers in the doctrine." ([Sarah Miller's testimony](#))

Again I'm not trying to beat a dead horse here, but what I want to make clear is that there is testimony that Joseph Smith was teaching these ideas to those around him, including his own brother. Furthermore, the church demonizes John Bennett as he had a falling out with Joseph Smith and very publicly wrote salicious details about the church, but the reality is that Bennett was close to Joseph Smith and the inner workings of the church in the time he was practicing his "spiritual wifery" as it was called by the church to diffentiate it from the polygamy and polyandry that Joseph Smith was teaching privately.

This pattern correlated well with the Nancy Rigdon proposal, and I believe the letter speaks for itself once you understand why Joseph Smith wrote it and the implications he very carefully and explicitly laid out within in by citing Solomon as the model of what those who know Heaven in full would desire.

I don't know what else to say. Polygamy always bothered me as a convert and it was the main reason I could not accept the church as true long before I began researching the other historical problems. When I heard the podcast on the Happiness Letter recently I could not believe what I was hearing. Their podcast is one that every believing member should hear, because the church will never tell them the truth of polygamy and how it was implemented, and every member deserves to know the true, full history of what they are agreeing to when they are baptised and especially when they make covenants in the temple.

I do not believe that God would implement polygamy, and I certainly do not believe that God would claim that he commanded Abraham to enter into polygamy when it was actually his wife Sarah who told Abraham to have a child with Hagar. The fact that Joseph Smith changes both the Bible and Book of Mormon's clear teachings in order to justify polygamy should raise red flags with ever member who is willing to study this issue with an open mind.

Again, a lot of what was discussed above is covered in greater detail in the [Happiness Letter podcast](#) done by Jonathan Streeter, Christopher Smith, and Bill Reel. I hope if this post interested you that will listen to their podcast which has so many more details as well as a lot of back and forth as to where the sources originated from, the background of polygamy at the time, and why this letter is so damning to Joseph Smith's implementation of polygamy.

If you believe that Joseph Smith's polygamy truly was from God given all of the historical and theological problems with his rationalization of it, then why should we not believe David Koresh, Warren Jeffs, David Berg, and others when they claim the very same permission from God in their sexual relations with followers?

This is truly a very uncomfortable letter and I know for believing members it is almost impossible to believe that this letter was written to convince Nancy Rigdon to marry him. The problem however is that the church does not deny this letter was from Joseph Smith as it has been cited by prophets, seers, and revelators such as David O. McKay, J. Golden Kimball, James E. Faust, Thomas S. Monson, Kevin W. Pearson, Kim B. Clark etc. ([List of sources from Mormon Discussions Podcast](#)) Furthermore, the secret meeting with Nancy Rigdon is confirmed by both positive and negative sources as are the follow-up meetings with the Rigdon family about the fallout from Joseph's proposal and letter.

In addition to the Happiness Letter podcast, we have some other write-ups on polygamy that give more details about Joseph Smith's implementation of it:

[Annotated Gospel Topics essay on Polygamy in Kirtland and Nauvoo](#): We took the church's official essay and made annotations to give more detail on the problems with polygamy and why the church's apologeti responses don't match their own history.

[What D&C 132 Reveals About Revelation](#): We looked at the circumstances around the production of D&C 132 on polygamy, which gives a great overview of how Joseph Smith was able to produce revelation on the spot and how he was able to use the voice of God on command.

If you're still interested in more information on polygamy after that, we list some of [our favorite podcasts on polygamy](#) in Mormonism that would again give so many more details about the women Joseph Smith married along with how the practice was both implemented and ended.

We've mentioned on many other posts how difficult it is to take in this new information, and we understand how painful it is to process. Please email us anytime at ldsdiscussion@gmail.com if you would like more resources to learn about these issues or if you are looking for people that you can safely talk to as you continue your faith journey.

Check us out on [Twitter](#) or [Facebook](#) as well for future posts and updates. Thanks for reading!