

# The Happiness Letter

An Iconic Quote's Disturbing Origin

Happiness is the object and  
design of our existence...

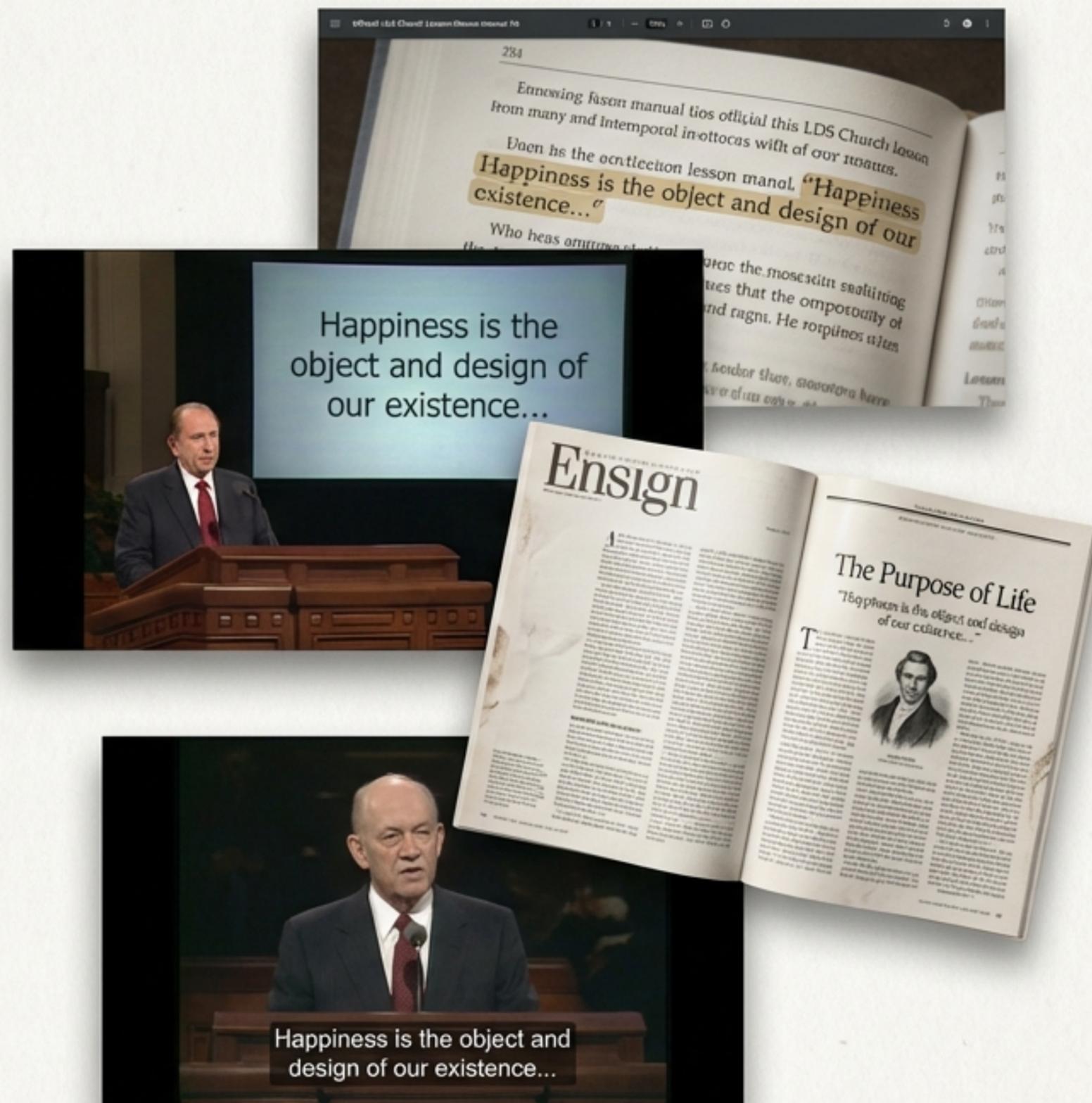
# A Beloved Prophetic Teaching

"Happiness is the object and design of our existence..."

Joseph Smith, 1842

This quote is one of the most cited and cherished of Joseph Smith's teachings.

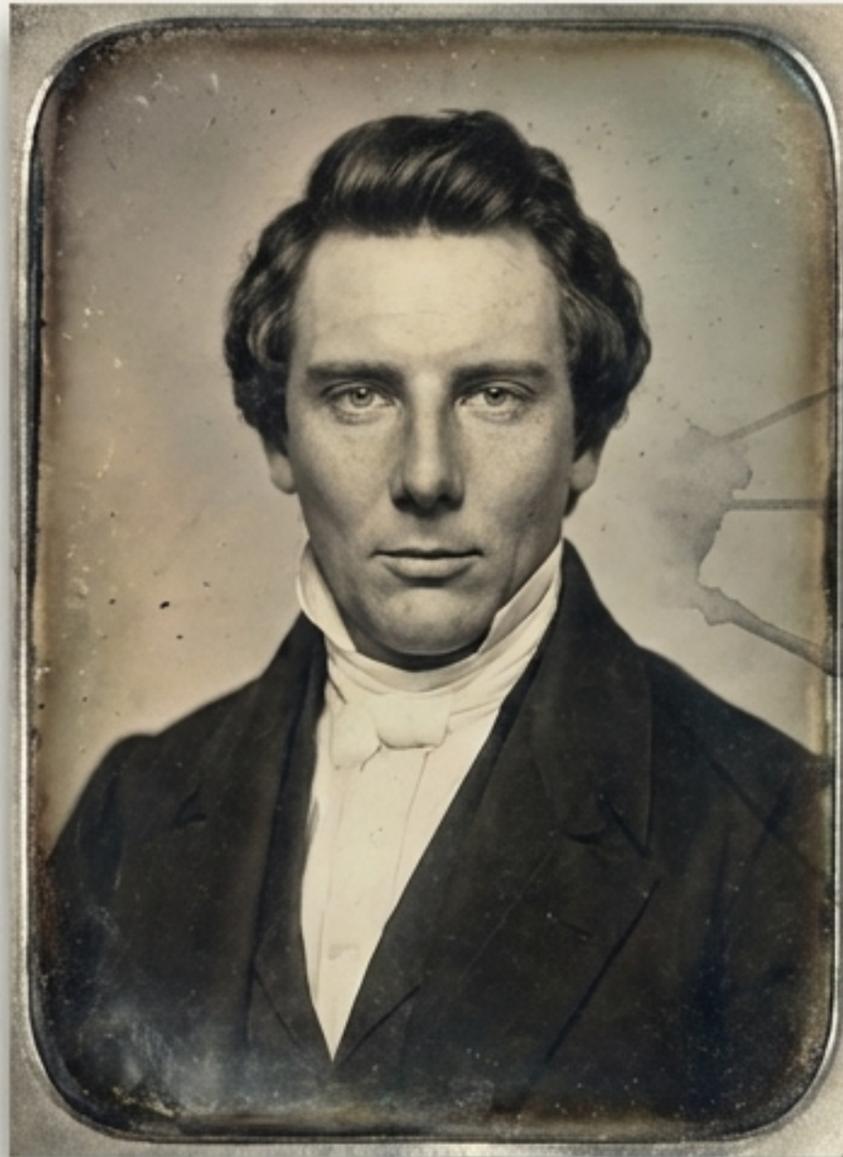
For over 150 years, it has been repeated by Church leaders in General Conference, manuals, and speeches as a source of inspiration and guidance.



# A Letter of Persuasion

The “Happiness” quote is the opening line of a letter written under specific, **unsettling circumstances**:

- **AUTHOR:** Joseph Smith (age 36), Prophet and Mayor of Nauvoo.
- **RECIPIENT:** Nancy Rigdon (age 19), daughter of Smith’s first counselor, Sidney Rigdon.
- **PURPOSE:** To convince Nancy to reconsider his **secret proposal** of **polygamous marriage**, which she had already forcefully rejected.
- **BACKGROUND:** By April 1842, Smith was secretly married to approximately 10 women, including some who were already married to other men (**polyandry**).



**JOSEPH SMITH**  
(c. 1842)



**YOUNG WOMAN**  
(NANCY RIGDON, c. 1842)

# Engineering a Secret Proposal

The proposal was preceded by a series of calculated actions to ensure secrecy and leverage authority:

## 1. Recruit an Intermediary

Joseph tasked Nancy Marinda Hyde (one of his polyandrous wives, married while her husband was on a mission) to facilitate the proposal.

He gave Hyde a revelation (Dec. 1841) commanding her to *"hearken to the counsel of my servant Joseph in all things whatsoever he shall teach unto her."*

## 2. Secure a Private Venue

Smith orchestrated the church's takeover of a printing office to create a secret meeting place away from his wife, Emma.

**"You must get out tonight or I will put you in the street."  
– Willard Richards to the previous owner, Ebenezer Robinson.**

## 3. The Secret Proposal

Using the intermediary and the private venue, Smith makes his polygamous proposal to the 19-year-old Nancy Rigdon.

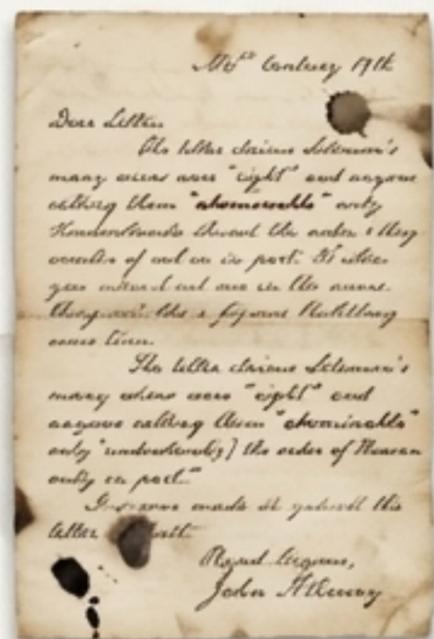
# The Letter's Core Argument: Redefining Morality

## Moral Relativism

*“That which is wrong under one circumstance may be, and often is, right under another... Whatever God requires is right, no matter what it is.”*

Your moral compass is irrelevant; only my commands as God's prophet matter.

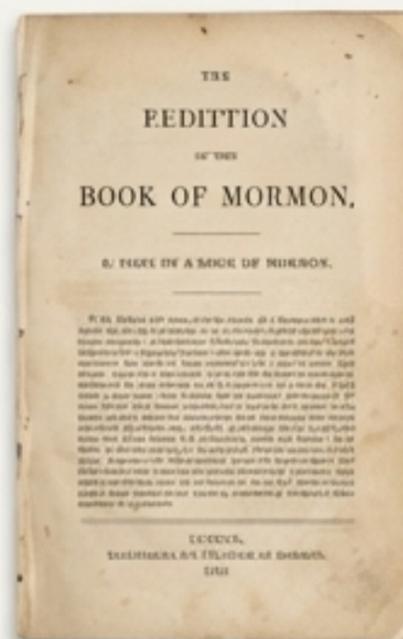
## The Letter's Claim



The letter claims Solomon's many wives were “right” and anyone calling them **“abominable”** only “understand[s] the order of Heaven only in part.”



## The Scripture's Rebuke



**The Problem:** The Book of Mormon explicitly states God found Solomon's polygamy **“abominable before me”** (Jacob 2:24).

# A Cycle of Promises and Threats

The letter alternates between promises of divine pleasure and threats of eternal punishment.

## The “Apple” Analogy

"Joseph compares consenting to sex with him to a child being *given* an apple (pleasurable) versus stealing it (punishment), framing his proposal as a 'gift' she should joyfully accept."

-IM Fell English



- Framing his proposal as a divine gift, minimizing the violation.

## Spiritual Extortion

**“Blessings offered but rejected are no longer blessings... unto him that... will not receive shall be taken away that which he hath.”**

-IM Fell English

- **The Threat:** Accept my proposal, or lose not only this 'blessing' but *all* blessings you currently have.

## Manufactured Urgency

*“Be wise today, 'tis madness to defer.”*

- IM Fell English



- ⚠ **The Tactic:** A high-pressure tactic designed to short-circuit hesitation and force immediate compliance.

# The Prophet's Playbook

The tactics used with Nancy Rigdon were not unique. They reflect Joseph Smith's established pattern for proposing plural marriage.

## To Lucy Walker (age 16)

"I have a message for you. I have been commanded of God to **take another wife**, and you are the woman... If you reject this message the **gate will be closed forever against you.**"

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## To Emily Partridge

"Joseph said... he would write me a letter if I would agree to **burn it** as soon as I read it."

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## The Public Narrative

When caught, Smith and his allies distinguished his 'righteous' plural marriage from the 'sinful' spiritual wifery of others (like John C. Bennett and his own brother, William), even when the actions were nearly identical.

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# The Cost of Saying 'No'

Nancy Rigdon refused. The consequences were swift and severe.

## Rejection

## Denial

## Retaliation

### The Letter is Leaked:

High-profile apostate John C. Bennett publishes the letter.

### Carefully Worded Denials:

Joseph denies authorship. Nancy's father, Sidney, is pressured to issue a statement that the letter was not in Smith's "handwriting" (technically true, as he used a scribe).

**Public Smear Campaign:** When Nancy held firm, Smith's allies used the church-controlled newspaper, *The Wasp*, to defame her, calling her a prostitute and alleging an affair with Bennett.

**"Joseph H. Jackson later stated that Smith threatened to 'set a hundred hellhounds on them to destroy the reputation' of women who rejected him."**

*The Wasp.*

### A WARNING VOICE!

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# From Inspiration to Manipulation

“...considered **abominable**...”

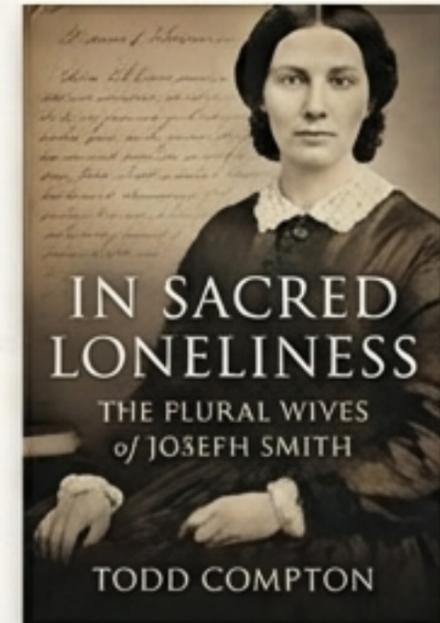
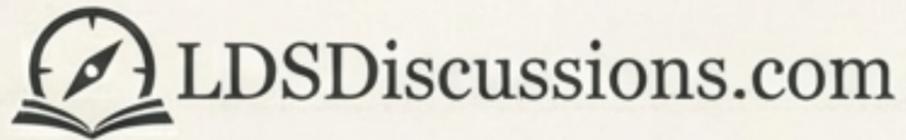
“Happiness is the object and  
...shall be **taken away**  
that which he hath...  
...more **awful** in the  
executions of his  
**punishments**...”

...‘tis **madness to defer**.”

- It is the hook in a calculated attempt to coerce a 19-year-old into a polygamous relationship.
- It weaponizes the universal desire for happiness to justify actions that caused immense pain.
- Understanding its origin transforms a beloved teaching into a case study of spiritual abuse.

# Learn More

This analysis is based on historical documents and research.  
To explore this topic in greater detail:



## Primary Essay

[LDSDiscussions.com/happiness](https://ldsdiscussions.com/happiness)

## Key Research

“The Happiness Letter”  
presentation by Jonathan  
Streeter (YouTube: Thoughts  
on Things and Stuff)

## Comprehensive History

*In Sacred Loneliness: The  
Plural Wives of Joseph Smith*  
by Todd Compton