

# SONS OF PERDITION

Directed by  
Tyler Measom and Jennilyn Merten



*"I don't think religion should ever come between  
family--family should be your religion. "*

--Sam

(2010 / USA / 85 mins)



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## **Logline**

Sons of Perdition follows three teenage boys after they escape from the powerful FLDS polygamist sect and must fend for themselves in mainstream America.

## **Synopsis**

In the remote desert of Utah hides Colorado City, the oldest polygamist compound in the United States. Here men have plural wives and raise their children by the strict code of the Fundamentalist Latter Day Saint religion (FLDS).

Shortly after his rise to power in 2003, the FLDS' prophet Warren Jeffs began a systematic effort to cleanse his flock for the end of the world. He banned public schooling, gentile books, recreations, and excommunicated prominent men, marrying their women and children to other men. Hundreds of teenage boys were exiled to the streets of neighboring communities. Many more followed, giving up their families and salvation in the hope of escape.

*Sons of Perdition* follows three boys after they leave the isolation of Colorado City and join an underground network of exiled FLDS teens. Condemned to hell by their community, many of the boys turn to drugs and alcohol. With limited educations and rarely a stable address, the obstacles are enormous. All the boys have big dreams—starting with the hope of attending high school—but what they want most is contact with their families. For one teen in the film, this means numerous attempts to help his fourteen-year-old sister escape before an arranged marriage.

With unprecedented access, *Sons of Perdition* takes audiences on a three-year-journey into the lives of these remarkable teens, providing the inside analysis to make this intimate portrait a big story—a timely, critical look at faith, family and religious exile in mainstream America.

## **History and Background**

Joseph Smith, the founding prophet of the Mormon Church (LDS—Latter Day Saints) introduced the practice of plural marriage in the 1830s. The Mormon faithful considered polygamy a central tenet of their religion, and endured a difficult trek west into the Utah Territory to escape persecution for the practice. But by the 1880s the United States government had confiscated Mormon property and threatened to deny statehood to the rapidly growing territory. In 1890 Wilford Woodruff, the current prophet of the Mormon Church, signed a manifesto agreeing to discontinue plural marriage; however, polygamy did not come to an end overnight.

Many polygamists believed Wilford Woodruff had not received a revelation from God to end plural marriage as he announced, but had in actuality, capitulated to pressure from the government and other members of the church with a financial stake in Utah's statehood. These

dissenters continued to practice plural marriage in secrecy and eventually broke with the Mormon Church. The largest of these dissenting factions sent a portion of their members southward to a remote desert region located on the Utah/Arizona border. Short Creek (“The Crick”) was later renamed as the twin towns of Hildale, Utah and Colorado City, Arizona. The towns’ members believed they were the “true” Mormons and eventually incorporated their group as the FLDS or fundamental Mormons. Today they remain the largest and most influential breakaway polygamist sects in North America with an alleged population of 30,000 members.

The FLDS ordained their own prophets, and following in the traditions of their Mormon founders, continued to believe their prophets held the power and privilege of speaking directly to God. In 2002 upon the death of the prophet Rulon Jeffs, his son Warren Jeffs proclaimed himself prophet without the election of the church leaders. The FLDS members quickly realized it was futile to fight his leadership. Warren had already put the entire towns’ property, which was held in a communal trust, under his control. Anyone that questioned his power was systematically and publicly removed from the community. Hundreds of men were banished without notice and their wives and children assigned to other men in Warren’s favor.

Warren also began telling parents that some of their children were sent by the devil as a test. Parents were to demonstrate their loyalty to the church by casting out rebellious or disobedient children. Some parents resorted to physical abuse in an effort to control, and ultimately preserve their children. But not long after Warren’s rise to power, hundreds of teenage boys began arriving homeless and bewildered in Southern Utah’s neighboring communities. Many boys were kicked out by Warren, but many were simply ostracized and marginalized for minor infractions and chose to make their escape. Girls that attempted escape were hunted down and brought back.

By 2006 some exiled young men began to fight back. After the suicide of his twin brother, Brent Jeffs, Warren’s nephew filed suit against Jeffs for sodomizing him and his brother as children. Warren refused to acknowledge the subpoena and went into hiding creating safe houses across the West run by his numerous wives. Through the investigative work of Jon Krakauer, Sam Brower, and many others, the FBI had built a case against him with enough material to put him on the FBI’s Most Wanted List. Three months later Jeffs was caught returning from Las Vegas in disguise, and carrying approximately \$50,000 in cash along with wigs, cell phones, laptops, and letters of support from loyal FLDS followers including the town’s sheriff.

Despite Warren’s subsequent trial and conviction as an accessory to rape, he maintains a chokehold on the community from prison. Warren faces similar charges in Arizona and Texas, but most exiles expect little change in the community or their ability to see their families as his legal battles continue to wage. The state has returned homes and property to some exiles but everyone awaits the real resolution—a family reunion only Warren can authorize.

## Characters



### **SAM**

A charming, all-American kid who's had anything but a normal adolescence, Sam fell out of favor with the FLDS leadership for speaking with a girl. After watching Warren exile many of his male relatives and friends, Sam made the daring decision to leave at 17. As Sam struggles to find himself, he becomes the film's philosophical guide and reveals for viewers both the costs and rewards of freedom.



### **BRUCE**

Bruce left Colorado City at 15 shortly after Warren exiled his Father without warning and sent his second and third mothers back to their fathers with all of Bruce's half-siblings. In the outside world Bruce's humor and comedic antics help him make friends easily and assimilate in a profoundly new social environment.



### **JOE**

Joe leaves Colorado City after being fired from his job for watching a movie in the company of an "apostate"--in this case, his exiled brother. Joe refuses to turn his paychecks into his father and moves in with his exiled sister and her husband. Joe dreams of going to high school, but a bigger desire quickly develops: to help his mother and younger siblings escape.



### **HILLARY**

Joe's fourteen-year-old sister, Hillary was pulled from public school after fifth grade. She helps her mother homeschool her twelve younger siblings but has little time for her own education. Hillary's attempts to leave Colorado City and an impending marriage, start a dangerous but hopeful journey as Joe tries to help her escape.

## **Production Personnel**

### **Director/Producer, Tyler Measom**

For the past ten years, Tyler has managed Left Turn Films. He is the producer of the nationally released independent feature film, *Take*, starring Minnie Driver and Jeremy Renner. He has written, produced and directed nearly one hundred commercials, short documentaries and industrials for a wide range of national and international clients. His award-winning short films have played worldwide at dozens of film festivals. Tyler currently lives in a Salt Lake City home under the shade of giant oak tree.

### **Director/Producer, Jennilyn Merten**

Jennilyn Merten is a partner in Left Turn Films and has produced, directed and edited commercials, industrials and mini-documentaries for a variety of corporate clients. She is a producer on the feature-length documentary *First Position* currently in production. She has recently finished a short documentary titled *Tasteless*. A PhD. candidate in American Studies at the University of Utah, Jennilyn writes about 20th Century American culture, the West, and film. Jennilyn currently resides in Brooklyn, NY.

### **Producer, Julie Goldman**

Julie is the founder of newly formed Motto Pictures. Recently nominated for the Producers Guild of America's Producer of the Year Award, Goldman has produced a wide range of award winning documentaries, featured at the most prestigious film festivals around the world. Goldman had several films premiere in 2009, including *Sergio*, winner of the Sundance Film Festival Editing Award and shortlisted for the 2010 Academy Award. Goldman was Executive Producer of Sundance Audience Award winner *In the Shadow of the Moon*, which was released by THINKFilm. During her tenure as a founding partner of Cactus Three, Goldman executive produced a wide slate of acclaimed, award winning feature documentaries, including: *Once in a Lifetime*; Sydney Pollack's *Sketches of Frank Gehry*; *Three of Hearts, Black Sun*; Emmy-nominated *What Remains*; SXSW Audience Award winner *Cat Dancers*, and *Devil's Playground*.

### **Executive Producers**

Sons of Perdition is proud to have the participation of the following Executive Producers:

- **Nick Fraser and Greg Sanderson:** BBC Storyville
- **Dan Cogan:** Impact Partners
- **Diana Barrett:** Fledgling Fund
- **Julia Parker Benello:** Chicken and Egg Pictures
- **Abigail Disney:** Impact Partners
- **Krysanne Katsoolis:** Cactus Three
- **Caroline Stevens:** Cactus Three

## **Director's Statement**

The two of us were raised in the mainstream Mormon Church (LDS). For Mormons, the church is a part of every aspect of your life, and growing up, it felt like an extended family. But for so many reasons—some superficial, some profound—we made the decision to leave the faith in our early twenties. It was a life altering experience for both of us. When you leave your religion you give up your faith, your community, and sometimes your family for the frightening privilege of discovering a new belief system, and you hope, in the process, that you will find yourself. But for a while after leaving, Hell still holds the heat and color of childhood.

More than a decade later, this act of leaving remained an important personal, intellectual, and even political issue for us. We birthed many friends, and even some of our siblings through the process of “losing your religion”. In 2006 when we heard about Utah’s “lost boys”—the hundreds of teens exiled from their polygamist community of Mormon Fundamentalists—we saw something poignantly familiar and incredibly extraordinary in their story. Like many others, we were curious about Warren Jeffs, the group’s dictatorial prophet, and the details of contemporary polygamy, but we wanted to tell that more private and elusive story: searching for a place to belong after you’ve left everything behind.

Although many of these teenage boys were kicked-out by Jeffs, many more were deliberately marginalized by the religion and made their own heartbreaking decision to leave. It was tempting to simply applaud their escape, but the consequences were and continue to be enormous. The teens that leave are denied access to their parents and siblings, and are quite literally condemned to hell. In the eyes of their community, and even their families, they’ve become “Sons of Perdition”.

When we first met some of these teens they were semi-homeless, without identification, basic educations or adult guidance. They were resourceful enough to find drugs, alcohol—and a few nights in jail. But they all wanted something better for themselves—a chance to go to school, to do their own thinking, to talk to a girl or go on a date—or as one of the boys said—“just to find out who you are.” From the beginning it was clear their story was as much about material survival, as it was about spiritual redemption.

It was also clear we would need to earn the kids’ trust. Although the teens’ fundamentalist sect broke with the Mormon Church over a century ago, we still shared enough religious texts and history to speak the same language—and share a few sacrilegious laughs. Likewise, our own stories of leaving, (though certainly less traumatizing,) helped us bond with the kids, and to consider how the film might spur dialogue about faith and family, and the search for selfhood that sometimes leads us away from both.

Religion and faith can be sensitive issues to cover, but the boys’ attitude toward their community informed our approach. While the kids dislike what their community has become under the control of Warren Jeffs, they miss their families intensely and refuse to blame them. In the film

there are similar moments of tension between their longing for home and the joy of their abrupt freedom. It is in these moments that we hope the film asks, how we can protect faith while protecting its youngest practitioners from abuse and abandonment? And perhaps more difficult, how can “losing one’s religion” remain a freedom and a value not purchased at such a cost? We believe family is a value that religion should not dissolve, or as one of the boys so aptly reminded us, “family should be your religion.”

Although we no longer believe in the same heaven our parents cherish, we still remember the words of our childhood faith: “families are forever”. Ultimately, we hope our film title becomes obsolete when each of these boys is no longer a “son of perdition” but again somebody’s son.

-Jennilyn Merten and Tyler Measom

# **SONS OF PERDITION CREDITS**

Impact Partners and BBC Storyville Present

A Left Turn Films Production

in association with  
Motto Pictures  
and  
Cactus Three

**Directed by**

Tyler Measom and Jennilyn Merten

**Produced by**

Julie Goldman  
Tyler Measom  
Jennilyn Merten

**Executive Producers**

Greg Sanderson  
Nick Fraser  
Dan Cogan  
Caroline Stevens  
Krysanne Katsoolis  
Julia Parker Benello  
for Chicken & Egg Pictures  
Diana Barrett  
for The Fledgling Fund  
Abigail Disney  
for Fork Films

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**Digital Intermediate Editor**  
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**Digital Intermediate Producer**  
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**Re-recording Mixer**  
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**Dig It In House Producer**  
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**The Producers wish to thank for their participation**

**(in alphabetical**

Bruce Barlow	Sabrina Broadbent	Tyson Fischer
Deloy Bateman	Suzanne Broadbent	Brenda Jensen
Michelle Benward	Sam Brower	Allie Johnson
Kevin Black	Megan Cooke	Jeremy Johnson
Elizabeth Broadbent	Erin Daniel	Sharla Johnson
Hilary Broadbent	Mike Daniel	Jon Krakauer
Jenifer Broadbent	Priscilla	Russel Saxton
Joe Broadbent	Dockstauder	Jerold Williams
Jorgina Broadbent	Don Fischer	Sam Zitting

**order)**

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Barbara Dobkin  
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Ryan Harrington  
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Gil Holland  
Jeremy Johnson  
Julie and Mike Muskat  
Christian Serge Nelson  
Mike Neuenschwander  
s2m Promotions  
Sam Tang

**The Producers wish to thank the following**

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Aurant Home Theater - SLC	Jonathan Flom	Kent and Connie Measom
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Shem Barlow	Alan Haenhal	Linda and Jeff Merten
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John Battsek	Bryce Harper	Charles Oliver
Sean Logan Bauer	Clark Harris	Daniel Patterson
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Dave Ellis	Caroline Libresco	Tristan Whitman

**for their support and encouragement**

“The Want Heaven”

Written by Mark Geary

Performed by Mark Geary

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Written by Johnny Marks

“Jumpstart”

Written and Directed by Simon Christen

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