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Redemption of the Dead: Continuing Revelation after Joseph Smith

David L. Paulsen, Judson Burton, Kendel J. Christensen, and Martin Pulido


After Joseph Smith’s death, the Saints still had many questions regarding the soteriological problem of evil and the doctrines about redeeming the dead. This paper details what leaders of the church after Joseph Smith have said in response to these previously unanswered questions. They focus on the nature of Christ’s visit to the spirit world, those who were commissioned to preach the gospel to the departed spirits, the consequences of neglecting the gospel in mortality, and the extent and role of temple ordinances for those not eligible for celestial glory. This paper focuses on both the early and the late teachings of President Joseph F. Smith. It explains the doctrinal and historical contexts for his vision in 1918 and the further insights provided by this vision.
Joseph Smith’s revelations and teachings shed new light on long-standing questions concerning the salvation of the dead. Joseph taught that all men would be judged according to their obedience to the measure of light given them, that “eternal punishment” was not necessarily unending, that the dead could receive the gospel, and that living Saints could do vicarious ordinance work on their behalf. Baptisms, among other temple ordinances, were performed—as in ancient times—by living proxies on behalf of the deceased to ensure their opportunity to partake of salvation in God’s kingdom. Joseph’s illuminating and comforting revelations largely resolved the soteriological problem.
of evil and added a distinctly loving element to post-mortem salvation: the dead and living are saved together through temple work.  

After Joseph's death, church leaders further elaborated upon many of these themes. While the Saints recognized that the principal element of the soteriological problem of evil had been resolved (namely, the damnation of those who did not have the opportunity to receive the gospel in this life), nonetheless, the Saints continued to probe and ponder questions still not fully answered, including:

1. What was the nature of Christ's visit to the spirit world, and what precisely did the harrowing of hell accomplish?
2. Who was commissioned to preach the gospel to the departed spirits, and when did they do so?
3. What are the repercussions for neglecting the gospel in this life? Can one who understands and ignores the gospel in mortality repent and progress after death?
4. Why are temple ordinances performed for those who do not warrant celestial glory?

In this concluding article of our four-part series, we will explore responses Latter-day Saint leaders have made to these and related questions. We will also provide context for Joseph F. Smith's vision concerning the spirit world now canonized as section 138 of the Doctrine and Covenants. We will then consider the implications of this vision on our restored doctrine and practice of salvation for the dead.

The Harrowing of Hell: Post Joseph Smith

In the wake of Joseph Smith's death, Latter-day Saint leaders were left to sort out and elaborate on the many statements left by the Prophet. While rich and revealing, these statements nevertheless left open a broad array of questions concerning the exact nature of Christ's personal visit to the spirit world. For example, did Christ personally visit both the righteous and the wicked? And how many of the wicked were actually redeemed at the time of his visit? Did postmortal evangelism continue after Christ's descent to the spirit world? If so, how and by whom? Current Latter-day Saints, familiar and satisfied with Joseph F. Smith's vision, give little thought to these questions, but before his vision these questions were of serious concern, as the salvation of the vast majority of mankind rests upon these issues. The early responses to these questions were diverse and not always in full agreement with each other. However, by examining the initial variety of responses, as well as subsequent agreement among church leaders, we can begin to understand how important and revealing Joseph F. Smith's vision was for the church.

To begin with, nearly all church leaders following Joseph continued to emphasize the salvific nature of the Savior's visit to the spirits in prison. At a funeral in 1855, Apostle Orson Pratt (1811–81) described the message Christ gave to the spirits in prison:

Orson Pratt (1811–1881), in surmising what Christ preached to the spirits in prison, taught that there was no point in proclaiming the gospel message to the dead if the dead had no hope of redemption.
followed the examples of our sectarian preachers, he would go and tell them that their doom was irrevocably fixed, that they were cast down to prison, never to be recovered.” Thus Pratt demonstrated the incomprehensibility of Thomist and Lutheran orthodox theologians’ belief that Christ’s message to the imprisoned had been a rebuke or declaration of their damnation.

Pratt was not alone in stressing the salvific nature of Christ’s postmortal ministry. In November 1884 President George Q. Cannon (1827–1901) expressed his belief that this joyous message of the Savior to the dead “penetrated the depths of hell, the gloom of darkness, and it awakened hope within their hearts.” In a message on the necessity of temples, Elder James E. Talmage (1862–1933) concurred:

His preaching must have been purposeful and positive; moreover, it is not to be assumed that His message was other than one of relief and mercy. Those to whom He went were already in prison, and had been there long. To them came the Redeemer, to preach, not to further condemn, to open the way that led to light, not to intensify the darkness of despair in which they languished.

The Brethren taught that Christ’s message was not only joyous but efficacious in releasing the repentant souls of the dead. On 12 June 1853, Elder John Taylor (1808–87) taught that “[Christ] preached to [the spirits in prison], and they came forth out of their confinement.” On 14 November 1877, as president of the Quorum of the Twelve, John Taylor asked regarding these spirits, “Were they redeemed? Yes, if Jesus preached the Gospel to them, and which he most assuredly did.”

In his Articles of Faith, written in 1899, James E. Talmage reechoed these sentiments: “Upon all who reject the word of God in this life will fall the penalties provided for such act; but after the debt has been paid, the prison doors shall be opened, and the spirits once confined in suffering, now chastened and clean, shall come forth to partake of the glory provided for their class.” Such was the case for the wicked of Noah’s day. Yet Talmage clarified that “deliverance from hell is not admittance to heaven [meaning the celestial kingdom].” Nonetheless, the repentant spirits were clearly redeemed and liberated by Christ in a significant manner. Hence, as Elder Parley P. Pratt’s (1807–57) Autobiography makes clear, after the Savior’s death, Christ “could descend to the dark and gloomy abodes of the spirits in prison and preach to them the gospel—bursting off their shackles and unlocking their prison doors; while these once dark abodes were now brilliant with light, and, instead of prison groans, were heard joyful acclamations of deliverance to the captive, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound.”

Elder Talmage’s Jesus the Christ affirmed that Christ’s redeeming message applied to the imprisoned of all times and dispensations, that “all whose wickedness in the flesh had brought their spirits into the prison house were sharers in the possibilities of expiation, repentance, and release.”
So it was clear that Christ visited and liberated the spirits in prison. This, however, led the Saints to another question: Did Christ also minister to the righteous in paradise? And if so, what was the nature and purpose of his visit to them? Some church leaders affirmed the former and believed that Christ organized the missionary work for the dead while visiting the righteous in paradise. For instance, in November 1884, President George Q. Cannon asserted that while Christ was in the spirit world, he doubtless, chose His ministers, the men who had the authority of the Holy Priesthood, and set them to the same labor that was commenced on the earth, the labor of preaching His everlasting Gospel to all the spirit world, to the millions of spirits who had died either in disobedience to the Gospel of Christ, or in ignorance of that Gospel, never having heard the sound of it.17

While this concept is common and even second nature in the church today, it had not yet been conclusively settled by revelation in Cannon’s day. Yet, Cannon was not alone in his feelings. In October 1887, Elder Erastus Snow of the Twelve (1818–88) concurred:

On 2 February 1884, Elder Snow shared that “[Christ] opened the door and offered the message of life and salvation, and having done this, His fellow laborers—the Seventies, Elders and others whom He ordained to the ministry—as fast as they finished their ministry in the flesh—continued their work among the spirits in prison.”19 At a funeral in 1911, President Joseph F. Smith expressed a similar sentiment: “I have always believed, and still do believe with all my soul, that such men as Peter and James, and the twelve disciples chosen of the Savior in His time, have been engaged all the centuries that have passed since their martyrdom for the testimony of Jesus Christ, in proclaiming liberty to the captives in the spirit world and in opening their prison doors.”20

This topic of missionary work led to another question: “How many were redeemed at the time of the Savior’s visit?” Some believed the number of spirits prepared for the Lord’s ministration was small. For example, on 2 February 1884, Elder Snow taught the Saints that “while [Jesus’s] body lay in the tomb his spirit visited the spirits in prison, turned the key and opened the door of their prison house, and offered unto them the Gospel of salvation. How many of them were prepared to avail themselves of it at that time? Comparatively few.”21

Other authorities expressed a different view. For example, Wilford Woodruff in the April 1894 general conference declared a general principle relating to acceptance of the gospel in the spirit world. He claimed that “there will be very few, if any, [in spirit prison] who will not accept the Gospel. Jesus, while his body lay in the tomb, went and preached to the spirits in prison, who were destroyed in the days of Noah. After so long an imprisonment, in torment, they doubtless gladly embraced the Gospel, and if so they will be saved in the kingdom of God.”22 Church Patriarch Eldred G. Smith agreed with President Woodruff. Speaking in the April 1962 conference, well after President Joseph F. Smith’s
vision, Patriarch Smith proclaimed that a great many continue to receive the gospel in the spirit world and that this success in the spirit world has been taking place since Christ first introduced the gospel upon his postmortal visit.23

The wide array of ideas following Joseph’s death concerning the nature of Christ’s visit to the spirit world is not completely surprising. After all, Joseph’s revelations, while rich and numerous, did not fully clarify all these issues. Importantly, these are the very matters that would receive clarification in Joseph F. Smith’s vision.

**Vicarious Temple Work and Kingdoms of Glory**

In conjunction with the doctrine of postmortem evangelism and the consequent redemption of the dead, Latter-day Saint temple work has been understood, since the Nauvoo era, as a necessary component in availing mankind with the fulness of gospel blessings.24 In Elder Orson Pratt’s September 1856 tract, “Water Baptism,” he taught that by accepting the gospel in the hereafter rather than in mortality when they first were given the opportunity, spirits in prison could be redeemed into the terrestrial but not into the celestial kingdom, for they had not accepted the ordinance of baptism when first offered to them.25 Baptism had been taught as a necessary requirement for entrance into the celestial kingdom (see Mark 16:15-16; John 3:5; D&C 76:51).26 Doctrine and Covenants, section 76, taught that the heirs of the terrestrial kingdom include spirits in prison who did not accept the gospel during mortality but did when it was preached to them in prison (see D&C 76:72-75). On 31 December 1876 John Taylor elaborated on this passage by saying that these spirits would inherit the terrestrial glory: “because they were found not worthy of propagating their species, they were not worthy to become fathers and mothers of lives.”27

If so many were to receive a lesser kingdom of glory, were those who were known to be wicked or to have rejected the gospel while in the flesh to be baptized? In 1901, President Joseph F. Smith was aware that in the process of performing vicarious temple work, the ordinances would be done for many unworthy persons. He explained that “it does not follow, however, that they will receive any benefit therefrom, and the correct thing is to do the work only for those of whom we have the testimony that they will receive it. However, we are disposed to give the benefit of the doubt to the dead, as it is better to do the work for many who are unworthy than to neglect one who is worthy.”28 Furthermore, some Saints were not sure whether baptism was a requirement only for the celestial kingdom or whether it was also a requirement for the terrestrial kingdom. Given this uncertainty, it was not clear whether temple work for wicked spirits in prison would be needed. The issue was undecided.29

Besides the question of the efficacy of priesthood ordinances for salvation in kingdoms lower than the celestial, there was also the question of the possibility of eventual progression between kingdoms of glory in the eternities. If such progression were possible, would not the ordinances of salvation still need to be in place? While no church leaders during this time period claimed revelation regarding such progression, most who considered it were favorable toward it. Ironically, later church leaders would doubt the possibility of progression between kingdoms for the same reasons that many traditional Christians had rejected postmortem evangelism: the potential negative impact it would bring upon gospel living within mortality.30 Additionally, many members maintain that progression from one kingdom to another is not possible due to the fixed nature of our resurrected bodies. Paul taught that some would be resurrected with celestial bodies, other terrestrial, and still others telestial; latter-day revelations seem supportive of that notion. If the resurrected body constitutes an eternal and immutable union of spirit and flesh, then it seemingly would be unchangeable and therefore would prevent an individual from progressing to a higher kingdom. While this seems a strong argument, specific revelation has not been received on this matter. As a matter of policy, the church has announced at two separate times, occasioned by inquiring members (in 1952 and again in 1965), that General Authorities have accepted many positions but that officially the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has no definite doctrine on the matter.

It “may be possible for especially gifted and faithful characters” to pass from one kingdom to another.
Brigham Young, B. H. Roberts, Lorenzo Snow, and James E. Talmage accepted the possibility that over eons of time and with much effort, there could be progression between kingdoms.\(^{31}\) If so, universal exaltation remained an open possibility in the eternities. In November 1910, President Joseph F. Smith explored the possibility of progress between kingdoms.\(^{32}\) He believed there is eternal progress along different tracks in the different kingdoms of glory. Nonetheless, he admitted that it “may be possible for especially gifted and faithful characters” to pass from one kingdom to another. While Joseph Smith’s vision of the three kingdoms taught that partakers of the telestial glory cannot go to where God and Christ dwell, “worlds without end,” President Joseph F. Smith asked, “Who knows but in the provisions of God there may be exceptions, because all his judgments are not made known to us?”\(^{33}\) The ultimate answers to such questions have not yet been provided by authoritative sources.

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Sentiments such as these left the question concerning ordinance work for telestial and terrestrial heirs wide open. However, as President Joseph F. Smith explained, it is better “to give the benefit of the doubt to the dead, as it is better to do the work for many who are unworthy than to neglect one who is worthy.”\(^{34}\) Ultimate resolution will await future direction through continuing revelation. That is why the Lord gives us prophets.

**Social Consequences and Gospel Neglect**

Both Saints and people of other faiths had expressed concern that the possibility of salvation after this life may weaken the incentive to embrace the gospel in mortality.\(^{35}\) They worried that people would indulge in carnal pleasures while on earth and ignore the gospel until they received an opportunity to accept it in the spirit world. Some thinkers, as we explored in our previous article, thought that postmortem evangelism would consequently take “the wind out of the sails of missions.”\(^{36}\) This concern is closely linked to the above eschatological issues (namely, do vicarious ordinances bring everyone into the celestial kingdom or will some individuals, regardless of receiving ordinances posthumously, inherit a lesser glory? And if so, then why perform the ordinances for all individuals?). However, in this context the eschatological question becomes an ethical one—namely, should we teach this doctrine if it encourages indifference toward the gospel?

To address this concern the Saints first carefully distinguished the kingdoms of glory from the temporary abode of the world of spirits. This distinction was drawn to answer those who thought the penitent thief on the cross was received directly into heaven upon death due to the Savior’s promise that they would be together in paradise (see Luke 23:43).\(^{37}\) Many Christians disagreed with the Latter-day Saint Church about the necessity of baptism and other ordinances of the gospel because of this interpretation of the consoling words of the Savior, to which the Saints responded that paradise is not the same as the kingdom of heaven. As Elder Orson Pratt observed in November 1848, “We have no evidence to believe the thief was taken into heaven or into the celestial kingdom of God.”\(^{38}\)

The Saints cited the scriptures to distinguish between paradise and heaven. First, both the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants describe paradise not as God’s heaven, but as a place of rest where spirits await resurrection (see Alma 40:12; Moroni 10:34; compare D&C 77:5). The New Testament, in their eyes, also proved this point. In the New Testament, the Savior told the thief he would be with him in paradise that day (see Luke 23:43). However, three days later, the resurrected Jesus told Mary he had not “yet ascended to [his] Father” (John 20:17).\(^{39}\) Assuming that heaven is the place where God dwells, the Saints considered this proof that the Savior and the thief had not gone there, but to a different realm. As evidenced by an article in the *Gospel Reflector*, the Saints believed as early as 1841 that “it was not improbable . . . that this paradise is synonymous with the prison that Peter mentions.”\(^{40}\) According to Wilford Woodruff, Joseph Smith made similar remarks during a sermon on 11 June 1843:
I will say something about the Spirits in prison. There has been much said about the sayings of Jesus on the Cross to the thief, saying this day thou shalt be with me in paradise. The commentators or translators make it out to say Paradise but what is Paradise? It is a modern word. It does not answer at all to the original that Jesus made use of. There is nothing in the original in any language that signifies Paradise. But it was this day I will be with thee in the world of spirits & will teach thee or answer thy inquiries. The thief on the Cross was to be with Jesus Christ in the World of Spirits.\(^{41}\)

Many church leaders later echoed Joseph’s explanation.\(^{42}\) By clarifying the nature of Christ’s liberation of the wicked and the distinction between the spirit world and the kingdoms of glory, church leaders were equipped to address the question concerning whether postmortem evangelization maintained the needed incentive for gospel living in mortality.

Church leaders’ response to the question of a “second chance” was tripartite. Intentionally delaying acceptance of the gospel until the postmortem spirit world results in:

1. Suffering many of the consequences of sin during mortal life,
2. Ineligibility for a celestial resurrection, and
3. Longer imprisonment and sorrow in the spirit prison.

In respect to the third consequence, resisting the gospel in mortality results in being separated longer from one’s body than is the case for celestial resurrection, or receiving “a fulness of joy” (D&C 93:33). In 1855, Elder Parley P. Pratt noted how the righteous Saints were resurrected shortly after the resurrection of Christ, while the wicked were confined to the spirit world to wait thousands of years. Likewise, he observed that at the second coming of Christ, the righteous will be resurrected at the sound of a trump, while the obstinate, wicked, and ignorant will have to wait in the spirit world another thousand years.\(^{43}\)

On 12 June 1853, Elder John Taylor spoke about those who felt comfortable neglecting or rejecting the gospel in this life because of the Savior’s mercy and mission to the spirits in prison. Taylor denounced this attitude and mentioned the imprisonment and punishment that would come upon those who procrastinate the day of their repentance.\(^{44}\) Some Saints looked at the suffering in the hereafter of the rich man who had slighted Lazarus as a type for the wicked (see Luke 16:19–31).\(^{45}\) Still, the bondage of the antediluvians was the clearest indicator of the consequences of rejecting the gospel taught by God’s prophets.\(^{46}\)

Elder Pratt described another likely outcome of rejecting the gospel in mortality: the opportunity to receive the gospel in the spirit world would not be available as soon as many might expect. In April 1853, Pratt declared, “I have not the least doubt but there are spirits [in the spirit world] who would be found . . . ignorant of the truths, the ordinances, powers, keys, Priesthood, resurrection, and eternal life of the body.”

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ignorant of the gospel even when it was present in their midst. From this, Pratt reasoned analogously that the situation in the spirit world is similar. Pratt declared, “I have not the least doubt but there are spirits there who have dwelt there a thousand years, who, if we could converse with them face to face, would be found . . . ignorant of the truths, the ordinances, powers, keys, Priesthood, resurrection, and eternal life of the body.”

Pratt further thought that the most wicked in the spirit world have not heard the gospel yet, as they are unworthy of gospel instruction.

On 6 October 1875, Elder Joseph F. Smith told the Saints at general conference that “if we do not conform to [God’s] will, obey his laws and yield to his requirements in this world, we will be consigned to the ‘prison house,’ where we will remain until we pay the debt to the uttermost farthing.”

In May 1893, George Q. Cannon taught that the sentence of punishment was strictly enforced for those who reject the gospel in mortality. He believed that only after Christ’s mission to the wicked of Noah’s day did they have “the opportunity of repenting.”

Elder James E. Talmage shared tersely how failure to respond to the gospel’s call and to repent in this life would not be easily repaired in the next. In his book *Articles of Faith*, he explained, “As the time of repentance is procrastinated, the ability to repent grows weaker; neglect of opportunity in holy things develops inability.”

In addition, the terms of repentance in the next life may be less favorable, and repentance becomes harder after a life of sin where we have continually placed ourselves in the power of the adversary. Later Elder Talmage explained that “refusal to hear and heed the word of God is no physical deafness, but a manifestation of spiritual disease resulting from sin. Death is no cure for such. The unrepentant state is a disorder of the spirit, and, following disembodiment, the spirit will still be afflicted therewith. What ages such an afflicted one may have to pass in prison confines before he becomes repentant and therefore fit for cleansing, we may not know.”

Furthermore, rejecting the gospel in the flesh may have the lasting consequence of inheriting, at best, the terrestrial kingdom. In May 1898, Elder Orson F. Whitney (1855–1931) taught that “they who reject the Gospel here, and put off the day of their salvation, and have to be preached to in the spirit world, . . . they who put off the day of their salvation, and think ‘we will have a good time here and will obey the Gospel hereafter,’ they must answer for this neglect, and after they have answered for it and realized what they have lost, they will be saved—not in the celestial kingdom, but in a lesser kingdom called the terrestrial.”

The Brethren also explained that even if the prospect of postmortem evangelism encouraged a few people to procrastinate their repentance until the spirit world, the doctrine was nevertheless unconditionally consistent with the Lord’s tender mercies. In an 1899 article for the *Latter-day Saints Southern Star*, Elder Matthias F. Cowley asserted that even if some people would refuse to take the gospel seriously here, thinking they would accept it later, “the evil results following are incomparably less than would be those which offer salvation to some and deny it to others.” If people thought loved ones, friends, and many innocent persons were truly damned by lacking a mortal opportunity to hear the gospel, they would lose faith in the justice and mercy of God. Cowley likewise thought it repugnant that a murderer could be saved for accepting Christ on his deathbed while the victim lacked the opportunity and so went to hell. How could anyone take that gospel message seriously? Comparing these two options, Cowley considered postmortem evangelism a morally superior position.

Joseph Smith’s revelations and teachings are by far the salient influence in guiding church practice and doctrine regarding the redemption of the dead. After Joseph Smith, one next instinctively thinks of Joseph F. Smith and his grand vision of the redemption of the dead.
redemption of the dead. However, before turning to this revelation, we will explore some important teachings President Joseph F. Smith had presented prior to his well-known vision. For several decades, President Smith had given long, thoughtful consideration to the salvation of the dead. Interestingly, some of his earlier teachings on the subject were confirmed by the revelation, while others were overturned.

One of these early teachings is the distinction Elder Joseph F. Smith, then an apostle, made between Christ’s mission to the antediluvians who died in the flood and Christ’s mission to apostates. In contrast with his later vision, Elder Smith expressly taught that the erring antediluvians were “actually visited in the ’prison house’ by the Savior himself, and heard the Gospel from his own mouth after he was ’put to death in the flesh.’” 56 They would be released from prison when they performed the first works of salvation—faith and repentance, which they had rejected while in the flesh—and through temple work would receive a glory according to their merits. Joseph F. Smith felt that preaching to them likely occurred because they had not been taught the fulness of the gospel. In December 1901, as president of the church, he wrote:

We are not told to what extent the gospel of Christ, in its fulness, was proclaimed to them, but are left to suppose that the message of Noah was not the fulness of the gospel, but a cry of repentance from sin, that they might escape destruction by the flood. They hardened their hearts against Noah’s message, and would not receive it, and were punished for this disobedience in their destruction by the flood; thus in part, paying the penalty for their disobedience; but, not having received the light, they could not be condemned as those . . . who had all the commandments of God given unto them.57

However, President Smith questioned whether apostate Saints would have the same opportunity to receive the gospel as the antediluvians, since they had denied the fulness of truth. In 1901, he taught:

He that believes, is baptized and receives the light and testimony of Jesus Christ, and walks well for a season, receiving the fulness of the blessings of the Gospel in this world, and afterwards turns wholly unto sin, violating his covenants, he will be among those whom the Gospel can never reach in the spirit world; all such go beyond its saving power, they will taste the second death, and be banished from the presence of God eternally.58

Earlier, on 8 April 1876, Elder Smith echoed the Prophet Joseph’s teaching that the spirits of deceased Saints would preach the gospel to the spirits in prison: “To those who have not heard the Gospel in the flesh, if they have not already heard it preached in the spirit, they most assuredly will, and that, too, by men who have previously preached it on the earth, who have died faithful servants, they will continue their labors in the spirit world.”59 Two years later, Elder Smith explained that the Saints’ work was not done until they have saved “all depending upon [them].”60

On 4 July 1892, President Smith, then second counselor in the First Presidency, elaborated:

The millions and millions that have lived upon this earth and have passed away without the knowledge of the Gospel here, will have to be taught them there, by virtue of the authority of this holy priesthood that you and I hold. The Church of God will be organized among them by the authority of this priesthood.61

President Smith also taught more specifically that the group of “faithful servants” sent to teach the

According to James E. Talmage (1862–1933), those who rejected the word of God in this life would pay the penalties for their actions but would eventually be able to partake of glory.
spirits in prison would include prophets, worthy priesthood holders, and righteous women.

Five months later, Elder Smith would declare, as he would in his later vision, how church leaders were aiding in the ministering of the gospel in the hereafter:

Not one dead or living person will pass beyond the Father’s notice, or will be left without hope. They will be brought to where they may receive the fullness of the Gospel, that they may be saved and exalted in the presence of God; or, rejecting that, they become the sons of perdition and heirs of destruction. . . . There are millions on millions that have died without the knowledge of the Gospel who are as worthy of salvation as you or I are worthy. . . . As Jesus went to preach the Gospel to the antediluvians while his body lay in the tomb, so are Joseph the Prophet, President Young, President Taylor, and the Apostles that have died in this age in possession of the testimony of the truth, today preaching to the millions that have passed behind the veil without the knowledge of the Gospel.62

During a conference for the youth of the church, President Smith would proclaim that those who preach the gospel in the next life would include all faithful priesthood holders: “Not only are [prophets and church leaders] engaged in that work but hundreds and thousands of others; the Elders that have died in the mission field have not finished their missions, but they are continuing them in the spirit world.”63 At a funeral President Smith followed Orson Pratt in expanding the preaching of the gospel in the spirit world to the sisters of the church.

Who is going to preach the Gospel to the women? Who is going to carry the testimony of Jesus Christ to the hearts of the women who have passed away without a knowledge of the Gospel? Well, to my mind, it is a simple thing. These good sisters who have been set apart, ordained to the work, called to it, authorized by the authority of the holy priesthood to minister, for their sex, in the House of God for the living and for the dead, will be fully authorized and empowered to preach the Gospel and minister to the women while the elders and prophets are preaching it to the men.64

Joseph F. Smith’s Vision

With these earlier teachings in mind, we can better understand the doctrinal context of President Smith’s vision in 1918. It is also interesting to note the historical context. President Smith received the revelation at a time when the world was suffering pains and death almost unprecedented in its history. The Great War (World War I) and the deadly Spanish flu were raging across the world, combining to claim tens of millions of lives. It was in October 1918, to that point the deadliest month in American history,65 that President Smith received what is now known as section 138 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Perhaps the weight of world fatalities and the recent
loss of family members motivated President Smith to reflect “upon the great atoning sacrifice that was made by the Son of God, for the redemption of the world,” and ponder “over the . . . writings of the apostle Peter.” Consequently, it was during this deep contemplation that the “eyes of [his] understanding were opened,” and he beheld a vision of the Savior’s work among the spirits of the dead during the interval between the crucifixion and resurrection (D&C 138:1, 2, 5, 11).

The vision of the redemption of the dead offers several key insights into Christ’s role in the missionary work among the departed spirits and the way in which postmortem evangelization is performed. Initially, President Smith saw Christ ministering to the “innumerable company of the spirits of the just,” an observation directly affirming the popular Christian tradition. President Smith saw the disembodied Savior preaching to the spirits of the righteous “the everlasting gospel” and such doctrines as “the resurrection and the redemption of mankind from the fall” (D&C 138:19). Thus the vision affirmed the teachings of previous church leaders that Christ himself was the initiator of the redemptive work beyond the veil and that this work was commenced while his body lay in the tomb.

This is similar to the tradition held in the first and second century and preserved today in the Apostle’s Creed, but it has one important distinction: The biblical statement that Christ “went and preached unto the spirits in prison” (1 Peter 3:19), which President Smith had earlier accepted and taught, received clarification in the vision. God revealed that Christ “went not in person among the wicked,” the unrepentant, and those who rejected the prophets’ testimonies. “He could not go personally, because of their rebellion and transgression” (D&C 138:29, 37). Instead, the Savior “organized his forces and appointed messengers . . . and commissioned them to go forth and carry the light of the gospel to them that were in darkness” (D&C 138:30). Thus Christ personally visited the righteous spirits and there organized the missionary work that was to be conducted over these many centuries among the unrighteous spirits, effectively answering the question posed by Elder John W. Taylor and others about whom Christ actually visited.

Additionally, this key insight made all questions concerning the numbers of those saved by Jesus’s visit to the spirit world moot. After all, his visit was one of organization. The harvest would not be quantified in the brief period between his death and resurrection. Instead, his visit would organize the work that would subsequently last for millennia. Perhaps many or perhaps few were ready for the message at that time. Either way, Christ’s mission was one of establishment, not one of direct and personal ministration to the potential recipients of the gospel.

The vision can also still be interpreted to support the view that the Savior preached unto “the spirits in prison.” As Elder Bruce R. McConkie (1915–85)
taught, much like the early conception of Sheol being the abode of both the righteous and the wicked, “it is clearly set forth that the whole spirit world, and not only that portion designated as hell, is considered to be a spirit prison.” Likewise, Joseph F. Smith’s vision noted how the righteous “acknowledged the Son of God as their Redeemer and Deliverer from death and the chains of hell” for “the dead had looked upon the long absence of their spirits from their bodies as a bondage” (D&C 138:23, 50). In this sense, President Smith placed the Mormon position on the harrowing of hell much more in line with those who admitted a *limbus patrum*, a place of waiting for the Old Testament patriarchs and prophets until Christ freed them from death and hell and opened the way to heaven.

In addition to the above insights, President Smith also saw that, upon passing through the veil into the spirit world, the righteous dead actively pursue missionary labors among the spirits in bondage (see D&C 138:57). As he and many other Saints had communicated in earlier sermons, not only were the prophets of old commissioned in the postmortem evangelism, but also his father Hyrum Smith, the Prophet Joseph Smith, other modern-day prophets, and “many of [Mother Eve’s] faithful daughters who had lived through the ages” were involved (D&C 138:53, 39). Thus President Smith confirmed the intimate link between the doctrine of salvation for the unevangelized and the undeniably strong missionary spirit of the church.

However, Christ’s visit to the righteous was not only a time of organization and instruction; Jesus also provided them with the means to their salvation. The Savior “gave them power to come forth, after his resurrection from the dead, to enter into his Father’s kingdom, there to be crowned with immortality and eternal life, . . . and be partakers of all blessings which were held in reserve for them that love him” (D&C 138:51–52).

**Conclusion**

Joseph Smith and subsequent church leaders provided an answer to the soteriological problem of evil that advanced substantially beyond the position of early and contemporary Christians. While the doctrine of the harrowing of hell had not been totally “lost” to the Christian world, Mormon leaders, through revelation,
clarified the nature and extent of the Savior’s redemptive mission to the spirit world and the postmortem evangelism that followed. These clarifications are better appreciated in the context of the long Christian dialogue on soteriology and Peter’s writings.

In addition to this, Joseph’s restoration of baptism for the dead resolved the tension between the Lord’s mercy and the necessity of obeying the Lord’s admonition concerning saving ordinances. The practice provided a means by which the dead could learn correct principles, repent, exercise Christian faith, and also comply with all of God’s gospel requirements, including being “born of water and of the Spirit” (John 3:5), to qualify for salvation in the celestial kingdom. The soteriological teachings of Joseph Smith and subsequent leaders certainly established for Latter-day Saints the possibility of universal, eternal salvation.

In contrast to theologians’ faith-weakening doctrines of an extremely limited salvation of mankind, God, through Joseph Smith, Joseph F. Smith, and other church leaders, provides a plan that truly is big enough for all his children. As Joseph F. Smith’s son, Joseph Fielding Smith (1876–1972), explained, “In the great plan of salvation nothing has been overlooked. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the most beautiful thing in the world. It embraces every soul whose heart is right and who diligently seeks him and desires to obey his laws and covenants.”

These modern-day revelations not only explain how salvation is brought to pass, but also enable the redemptive work for every man, woman, and child, including those who died without receiving the saving ordinances of the gospel.

“Are there few that be saved?” Through the triumphant salvific descent of our Savior below all things, it need not be so. Through the revelations of his prophets a greater picture of love and completeness has emerged as to the salvation of God’s children, whereby no soul will pass the eternities unnoticed or unjustly condemned. Instead, all people will receive the ministry of the gospel, whether in this life or in the next, and receive the opportunity to accept the blessings of salvation. Through proxy ordinances by the living on behalf of the dead, and through the dead’s acceptance of these vicarious ordinances, salvation for the dead is made efficacious in an eternally palpable link between this world and the next. How great are the tender mercies of the Lord, and how blessed are those who receive him! ■
toward that which was thought to be all encompassing: Christ’s initial visitation.
4. For Joseph’s emphasis on the positive nature of the Savior’s visit, see Paulsen, Christensen, and Pulido, “Redeeming the Dead,” 42–43.
5. Orson Pratt, in Journal of Discourses, 2:371–72. Pratt reiterated these remarks on 7 April 1872. See further Orson Pratt, in Journal of Discourses, 15:52–53. In 1895, B. H. Roberts (1857–1933) agreed with Pratt. He argued that “we can scarcely suppose that Messiah would preach the gospel to them if it could do them no good. He did not go there to mock their sufferings or to add something to the torture of their damnation by explaining the beauties of that salvation now forever beyond their reach. Such a supposition would at once be revolting to reason, insulting to the justice of God, and utterly repugnant to the dictates of mercy.” See B. H. Roberts, A New Witness for God (Salt Lake City: Cannon and Sons, 1895), 1:381. Anthon H. Lund (1844–1921) noted how “some have held that [Christ visited the spirits in prison] to tantalize them over what they had lost. Oh, no! That was not the mission of Jesus. He preached glad tidings unto them, and He opened their prison doors. An opportunity was given in the spirit world for them to receive and obey the Gospel.” Lund was second counselor in the First Presidency at the time. See Anthon H. Lund, in Conference Report, October 1903, 81.
7. See Paulsen, Christensen, and Pulido, “Redeeming the Dead,” 28–51.
9. This question was related to and inspired by a far more wide-ranging curiosity—namely, a desire to understand how many will accept the gospel in the spirit world. It may seem strange to us that this question hovers around Christ’s visit to the spirit world. However, in the pre-Joseph F. Smith era, before much had been revealed about the nature of missionary work on the other side of the veil, it was natural for the Saints to turn their thoughts toward that which was thought to be all encompassing: Christ’s initial visitation.
10. Joseph’s 1830 revelation concerning Enoch’s ministry had already shown how Christ’s harrowing of hell had freed the righteous Saints from the prison of death and allowed the repentant spirits in prison to “[c]ome forth, and stand on the right hand of God” (Moses 7:57).
11. John Taylor, in Journal of Discourses, 1:158. John Taylor was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles during this time.
13. James E. Talmage, Articles of Faith (Salt Lake City: The Deseret News, 1899), 151. Talmage held the office of high priest when Articles of Faith was written, but he was later called to the apostleship. St. Augustine struggled with this concept, in particular with the allusion in Matthew 5:26. See Paulsen, Cook, and Christensen, “Harrowing of Hell,” 68–69.
14. Talmage, Vitality of Mormonism, 266. We learn from latter-day revelation that among the inhabitants of the terrestrial kingdom are “they who are the spirits of men kept in prison, whom the Son visited, and preached the gospel unto them, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh; Who received [accepted] not the testimony of Jesus in the flesh, but afterwards received [accepted] it” (D&C 76:73–74).
15. Parley P. Pratt, The Autobiography of Parley Parker Pratt (New York: Russell Brothers, 1875), 60–61. Parley was an apostle from 1835 to 1857. Pratt also expressed the same concept in his Key to the Science of Theology (Liverpool: Richards, 1853), 61–62. Pratt’s writings echo many of the same sentiments of early Christians in the Odes of Solomon, as shown in our first article in this
17. James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1915), 673.


21. Erastus Snow, in *Journal of Discourses*, 25:33. It is not clear whether Elder Snow meant they would never accept the gospel or that they simply were not prepared to accept it in the moment in which it was offered to them.


24. Many ancient Christians held similar beliefs. See Paulsen and Mason, "Baptism for the Dead in Early Christianity," 22–49.

25. Orson Pratt, "Water Baptism" (Lavendar, 1856), 45.

26. In his writings, under a section entitled "Gospel Ordinances for Celestial Kingdom Only," Elder Joseph Fielding Smith wrote: "Will those who enter the terrestrial and celestial kingdoms have to have the ordinance of baptism? No! Baptism is the door into the celestial kingdom. The Lord made this clear to Nicodemus." In a follow-up section entitled "Baptism Serves Men from Lower Kingdoms," Elder Smith claims, "The First Presidency have said in answer to a similar question: ‘We know of no ordinances pertaining to the terrestrial or the celestial kingdom. All of the ordinances of the gospel are given for the salvation of men in the celestial kingdom and pertain unto that kingdom.’" Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1955), 2:329–30. See also Paulsen, Christensen, and Pulido, "Redeeming the Dead," 38–39. Elder Smith clarified: "We are not preaching a salvation for the inhabitants of the terrestrial or the celestial kingdoms. All of the ordinances of the gospel pertain to the celestial kingdom, and what the Lord will require by way of ordinances, if any, in the other kingdoms he has not revealed." Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 2:329, emphasis in original.


30. See Bruce R. McConkie, "The Seven Deadly Heresies," *Improvement Era*, November 1910, who lists as his fifth heresy progression between kingdoms.

31. On 5 August 1855, Wilford Woodruff recorded that President Brigham Young taught in the temple that "none would inherit this Earth when it became celestial & translated into the presence of God but those who would be Crowned as Gods & able to endure the fulness of the Presence of God, except they might be permitted to take with them some servants for whom they would be held responsible. All others would have to inherit another kingdom even that kingdom agreeing with the law which they had kept. Yet He thought they would eventually have the privilege of proving themselves worthy & advancing to a Celestial kingdom but it would be a slow progress." Wilford Woodruff’s *Journal*, ed. Scott G. Kenney (Midvale, UT: Signature Books, 1983), 4:333–34. Young conceived of all life as being in a process towards digression or advancement. "All organized existence is in progress, either to an endless advancement in eternal perfections, or back to dissolution [. . .] where is there an element, an individual living thing, an organized body, of whatever nature, that continues as it is? It cannot be found" (*Journal of Discourses*, 1:349). Young explained that "righteousness tends to an eternal duration of organized intelligence, while sin bringeth to pass their dissolution" (*Journal of Discourses*, 10:251; cf. 7:138–39). In October 1893, Lorenzo Snow (1814–1901) told faithful parents that “if you succeed in passing through these trials and afflictions and receive a resurrection, you will, by the power of the Priesthood, work and labor, as the Son of God has, until you get all your sons and daughters in the path of exaltation and glory. This is just as sure as that the sun rose this morning over yonder mountains.” Lorenzo Snow, “Preaching the Gospel in the Spirit World,” in *Collected Discourses*, 3:364. B. H. Roberts, in *New Witness for God*, 1:391–92, said he could "conceive of no reason for all this administration of the higher [king- doms] to the lower [kingdoms, as described in D&C 76], unless it be for the purpose of advancing our Father’s children along the lines of eternal progression. Whether or not in the great future, full of so many possibilities now hidden from us, they of the lesser glories after education and advancement within those spheres may at last emerge from them and make their way to the higher degrees of glory until at last they attain to the highest, is not revealed in the revelations of God, and any statement made on the subject must partake more or less of the nature of conjecture.” In his first edition of *Articles of Faith*, James Talmage, who was not an apostle at the time, suggested that progress between kingdoms may be possible. Talmage, *Articles of Faith* (1899 ed.), 4:20–21.

Such was not a new concern. It was a primary concern throughout the history of Christianity. Unsurprisingly, the theologians who expressed such concerns did not view biblical scriptures pertaining to Christ’s decent into hell as having salvific force for those who were visited. In some interpretations ancient Christian thinkers rejected the literal nature of the passages altogether. See Paulsen, Cook, and Christensen, “Harrowing of Hell,” 68–70.

For the Saints’ interpretations, see Orson Pratt, “Questions and Answers,” For the Saints’ interpretations, see Orson Pratt, “Questions and Answers,” 211. See also George Q. Cannon, “Editing Thoughts,” Juvenile Instructor 26/2 (1 June 1891): 354; Pratt, Key to the Science of Theology, 127.

Pratt, Key to the Science of Theology, 130–31. In 1888, Elder B. H. Roberts (First Council of the Seventy) likewise observed how the situation of “those who reject the Gospel in the days of the coming of the Son of Man” will mirror the imprisonment of the spirits who rejected the gospel in Noah’s day. They too will be shut up for at least a thousand years. See B. H. Roberts, The Gospel: An Exposition of Its First Principles and Man’s Relationship to Deity, 414 ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1913), 245. Importantly, the spirit prison, in Mormon doctrine, is viewed as a place of purification from sin, a place where the wicked who rejected the gospel in mortality must suffer to prepare themselves to bow the knee and confess the Christ following the end of his millennial reign (see D&C 76:81–83). This is roughly analogous to the Catholic doctrine of purgatory. See Paulsen, Cook, and Christensen, “Harrowing of Hell,” 67.

John Taylor, in Journal of Discourses, 1:158. As an apostle at general conference in October 1900, Anthon H. Lund addressed this complaint and argued that “this doctrine of salvation for the dead does not have the effect, as some say, to make men neglect the present opportunity, thinking that there will always be a chance for them. For there is punishment meted out to those who reject the Gospel. It was a long time for the antediluvians to wait before the door of grace was opened unto them.” See Anthon H. Lund, in Conference Report, October 1900, 25. See also John Taylor, in Journal of Discourses, 15:270.

Jonathan C. Cutler (president of the Curlew Stake of Zion), in Conference Report, October 1918, 97.

Orson Pratt wrote that all who die without the gospel “will be punished according to their works, and will be shut up in prison like those who perished in the flood, and will eventually have the gospel preached to them; . . . those who receive the gospel in prison will be redeemed therefrom; and those who reject it will be sent down to hell with those who reject the same while in the flesh.” Prison is an intermediate state. Those who did not hear the gospel while in the flesh are placed in prison and offered the gospel, but those who heard it and rejected it will be damned, he asserted. Pratt also believed those who came to this earth during the apostasy received the opportunity to hear the gospel in the spirit world before the restoration. Orson Pratt, “Questions and Answers on Doctrine,” Seer 2/1 (January 1854): 207.


Parley P. Pratt, in Journal of Discourses, 1:12. An additional argument to support Pratt’s assertion is that the gospel ministers in the spirit world likely go first to those best prepared to accept the gospel, in order to build up the corps of missionaries.

Joseph F. Smith, Gospel Doctrine, 33.

George Q. Cannon, “Editing Thoughts,” Juvenile Instructor 28/10 (15 May 1893): 318. He was first counselor in the First Presidency at the time.

Talmage, Articles of Faith (1984 ed.), 104 (in section “Repentance Not Always Possible”).

Talmage, Vitality of Mormonism, 259.


57. J. F. Smith, “Editor’s Table: Redemption Beyond the Grave,” Improvement Era, December 1901, 146.
58. Joseph F. Smith, in Journal of Discourses, 18:93. President Smith made similar remarks in the December 1901 Improvement Era while serving as the first counselor in the First Presidency under Lorenzo Snow. He stated, “It is evident that [those who have received and rejected God’s law] have no chance for redemption, no matter what may be done for them in hope or by faith, for they will have sinned against life and knowledge, and are, therefore, worthy of damnation. It is nowhere revealed that such as these will ever be forgiven, although we are informed that all of God’s judgments are not given unto men.” J. F. Smith, “Editor’s Table,” 145.
59. Joseph F. Smith, in Journal of Discourses, 18:274. These remarks were delivered in 1876 at the 46th Annual General Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when Joseph F. Smith was serving as a counselor in the First Presidency under Brigham Young. Later as president of the church, he preached, “When we shall have finished our mission here and go behind the veil, with the Priesthood that has been conferred upon us here and its keys, authority and power, we will continue to administer for the redemption of those that have died without a knowledge of the truth, in the world of spirits, until every son and daughter of God that has lived upon the earth shall have had the privilege of hearing the sound of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and of embracing it, that their prison doors may be opened, and that liberty may be proclaimed unto them, the liberty of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, wherewith we are made free.” See President Joseph F. Smith, in Conference Report, April 1904, 5.
60. See Joseph F. Smith, in Journal of Discourses, 19:264. These remarks were delivered at the funeral of Emmeline B. Wells when Joseph F. Smith was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.
61. Joseph F. Smith, “Rights and Order of the Priesthood,” in Collected Discourses, 3:99. These remarks were made at the conference of the four stakes of Zion in Arizona, held at Pinetop, Apache County, Arizona.
62. Joseph F. Smith, “The Desert Blossoming as a Rose,” in Collected Discourses, 3:219. These remarks were delivered at the Tabernacle in Salt Lake City on 8 January 1893.
66. Despite the controversies discussed throughout our four-part series, to this day the Catholic Church continues to interpret the creed to mean that “the crucified one sojourned in the realm of the dead prior to his resurrection (Acts 3:15; Rom. 8:11; 1 Cor. 15:20; cf. Heb. 13:2),” and that “he descended there as Savior, proclaiming the Good News to the spirits imprisoned there.” See Catechism of the Catholic Church, part 1, section 2, chapter 2, article 5, p. 632.
68. See Paulsen, Cook, and Christensen, “Harrowing of Hell,” 66–68.
69. See Paulsen, Christensen, and Pulido, “Redeeming the Dead,” 45–46.
71. Luke 13:23, cited in Paulsen, Cook, and Christensen, “Harrowing of Hell,” 57. This was the quandary of the sages throughout the ages of time.