



Redemption for the Dead

“The great Jehovah . . . knows the situation of both the living and the dead, and has made ample provision for their redemption.”

From the Life of Joseph Smith

Early in the Prophet Joseph Smith’s ministry, he had an experience that would help to prepare him for the time when the doctrine of salvation for the dead would be revealed. In November 1823, Alvin Smith, the oldest child of Lucy Mack Smith and Joseph Smith Sr., suddenly became seriously ill and lay near death. Alvin was 25 years old, a strong and capable young man whose hard work contributed greatly to the family’s financial stability. His mother described him as “a youth of singular goodness of disposition,” whose “nobleness and generosity” blessed those around him “every hour of his existence.”¹

Knowing he was dying, Alvin called his brothers and sisters to him and spoke to each of them. To Joseph, who was almost 18 years old and had not yet received the gold plates, Alvin said, “I want you to be a good boy and do everything that lies in your power to obtain the records. Be faithful in receiving instruction and keeping every commandment that is given you. Your brother Alvin must now leave you, but remember the example which he has set for you, and set a good example for the children that are younger than you.”²

When Alvin died, the family asked a Presbyterian minister in Palmyra, New York, to officiate at his funeral. As Alvin had not been a member of the minister’s congregation, the clergyman asserted in his sermon that Alvin could not be saved. William Smith, Joseph’s younger brother, recalled: “[The minister] . . . intimated very strongly that [Alvin] had gone to hell, for Alvin



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was not a church member, but he was a good boy and my father did not like it.”³

In January 1836, many years after Alvin’s death, Joseph Smith received a vision of the celestial kingdom, in which he saw that Alvin, as well as his mother and father, would someday inherit that kingdom. Joseph “marveled how it was that [Alvin] had obtained an inheritance in that kingdom, seeing that he had departed this life before the Lord had set his hand to gather Israel the second time, and had not been baptized for the remission of sins” (D&C 137:6). The voice of the Lord then came to Joseph, declaring:

“All who have died without a knowledge of this gospel, who would have received it if they had been permitted to tarry, shall be heirs of the celestial kingdom of God; also all that shall die henceforth without a knowledge of it, who would have received it with all their hearts, shall be heirs of that kingdom; for I, the Lord, will judge all men according to their works, according to the desire of their hearts” (D&C 137:7–9).

On August 15, 1840, the Prophet Joseph Smith preached at a funeral in Nauvoo and, for the first time in public, taught the doctrine of salvation for the dead. According to Simon Baker, who was present, the Prophet began by testifying that the “gospel of Jesus Christ brought glad tidings of great joy.” He read most of 1 Corinthians 15 and explained that “the Apostle was talking to a people who understood baptism for the dead, for it was practiced among them.” He then declared that “people could now act for their friends who had departed this life, and that the plan of salvation was calculated to save all who were willing to obey the requirements of the law of God.”⁴

One month after the funeral address, the Prophet visited his father, who was very ill and near death. The Prophet discussed with his father the doctrine of baptism for the dead, and Father Smith’s thoughts turned to his beloved son Alvin. Father Smith asked that the work be done for Alvin “immediately.” Just minutes before he died, he declared that he saw Alvin.⁵ In the latter part of 1840, the Smith family rejoiced as Hyrum received the ordinance of baptism for his brother Alvin.

Teachings of Joseph Smith

God loves all His children and will judge all people according to the law they have received.

“The great designs of God in relation to the salvation of the human family, are very little understood by the professedly wise and intelligent generation in which we live. Various and conflicting are the opinions of men concerning the plan of salvation, the [requirements] of the Almighty, the necessary preparations for heaven, the state and condition of departed spirits, and the happiness or misery that is consequent upon the practice of righteousness and iniquity according to their several notions of virtue and vice. . . .

“. . . While one portion of the human race is judging and condemning the other without mercy, the Great Parent of the universe looks upon the whole of the human family with a fatherly care and paternal regard; He views them as His offspring, and without any of those contracted feelings that influence the children of men, causes ‘His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.’ [Matthew 5:45.] He holds the reins of judgment in His hands; He is a wise Lawgiver, and will judge all men, not according to the narrow, contracted notions of men, but, ‘according to the deeds done in the body whether they be good or evil,’ or whether these deeds were done in England, America, Spain, Turkey, or India. He will judge them, ‘not according to what they have not, but according to what they have’; those who have lived without law, will be judged without law, and those who have a law, will be judged by that law. We need not doubt the wisdom and intelligence of the Great Jehovah; He will award judgment or mercy to all nations according to their several deserts, their means of obtaining intelligence, the laws by which they are governed, the facilities afforded them of obtaining correct information, and His inscrutable designs in relation to the human family; and when the designs of God shall be made manifest, and the curtain of futurity be withdrawn, we shall all of us eventually have to confess that the Judge of all the earth has done right [see Genesis 18:25].”⁶

“God judges men according to the use they make of the light which He gives them.”⁷

“Men will be held accountable for the things which they have and not for the things they have not. . . . All the light and intelligence communicated to them from their beneficent creator, whether it is much or little, by the same they in justice will be judged, and . . . they are required to yield obedience and improve upon that and that only which is given, for man is not to live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.”⁸

The Savior, Jesus Christ, offers the opportunity for forgiveness and deliverance to both the living and the dead.

“The situation of the Christian nations after death, is a subject that has called forth all the wisdom and talent of the philosopher and the divine, and it is an opinion which is generally received, that the destiny of man is irretrievably fixed at his death, and that he is made either eternally happy, or eternally miserable; that if a man dies without a knowledge of God, he must be eternally damned, without any mitigation of his punishment, alleviation of his pain, or the most latent hope of a deliverance while endless ages shall roll along. However orthodox this principle may be, we shall find that it is at variance with the testimony of Holy Writ, for our Savior says, that all manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven men wherewith they shall blaspheme; but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven, neither in this world, nor in the world to come, evidently showing that there are sins which may be forgiven in the world to come, although the sin of blasphemy [against the Holy Ghost] cannot be forgiven [see Matthew 12:31–32; Mark 3:28–29].

“Peter, also, in speaking concerning our Savior, says, that ‘He went and preached unto the spirits in prison, which sometimes were disobedient, when once the long suffering of God waited in the days of Noah’ (1 Peter 3:19, 20). Here then we have an account of our Savior preaching to the spirits in prison, to spirits that had been imprisoned from the days of Noah; and what did He preach to them? That they were to stay there? Certainly



*In the spirit world, the Savior organized the righteous spirits
“and commissioned them to go forth and carry the light of the gospel
to them that were in darkness” (D&C 138:30).*

not! Let His own declaration testify. ‘He hath sent me to heal the broken hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised.’ (Luke 4:18.) Isaiah has it—‘To bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness from the prison house.’ (Isaiah 42:7.) It is very evident from this that He not only went to preach to them, but to deliver, or bring them out of the prison house. . . .

“The great Jehovah contemplated the whole of the events connected with the earth, pertaining to the plan of salvation, before it rolled into existence, or ever ‘the morning stars sang together’ for joy [Job 38:7]; the past, the present, and the future were and are, with Him, one eternal ‘now;’ He knew of the fall of Adam, the iniquities of the antediluvians [those who lived before the Great Flood], of the depth of iniquity that would be connected with the human family, their weakness and strength, their power and glory, apostasies, their crimes, their righteousness and

iniquity; He comprehended the fall of man, and his redemption; He knew the plan of salvation and pointed it out; He was acquainted with the situation of all nations and with their destiny; He ordered all things according to the counsel of His own will; He knows the situation of both the living and the dead, and has made ample provision for their redemption, according to their several circumstances, and the laws of the kingdom of God, whether in this world, or in the world to come.”⁹

**God is perfectly just and merciful to all people,
living and dead.**

“The idea that some men form of the justice, judgment, and mercy of God, is too foolish for an intelligent man to think of: for instance, it is common for many of our orthodox preachers to suppose that if a man is not what they call converted, if he dies in that state he must remain eternally in hell without any hope. Infinite years in torment must he spend, and never, never, never have an end; and yet this eternal misery is made frequently to rest upon the merest casualty [chance]. The breaking of a shoe-string, the tearing of a coat of those officiating, or the peculiar location in which a person lives, may be the means, indirectly, of his damnation, or the cause of his not being saved.

“I will suppose a case which is not extraordinary: Two men, who have been equally wicked, who have neglected religion, are both of them taken sick at the same time; one of them has the good fortune to be visited by a praying man, and he gets converted a few minutes before he dies; the other sends for three different praying men, a tailor, a shoemaker, and a tinman; the tinman has a handle to solder to a pan, the tailor has a button-hole to work on some coat that he needed in a hurry, and the shoemaker has a patch to put on somebody’s boot; they none of them can go in time, the man dies, and goes to hell: one of these is exalted to Abraham’s bosom, he sits down in the presence of God and enjoys eternal, uninterrupted happiness, while the other, equally as good as he, sinks to eternal damnation, irretrievable misery and hopeless despair, because a man had a boot to mend, the button-hole of a coat to work, or a handle to solder on to a saucepan.

“The plans of Jehovah are not so unjust, the statements of holy writ so [illusory], nor the plan of salvation for the human family so incompatible with common sense; at such proceedings God would frown with indignance, angels would hide their heads in shame, and every virtuous, intelligent man would recoil.

“If human laws award to each man his deserts, and punish all delinquents according to their several crimes, surely the Lord will not be more cruel than man, for He is a wise legislator, and His laws are more equitable, His enactments more just, and His decisions more perfect than those of man; and as man judges his fellow man by law, and punishes him according to the penalty of the law, so does God of heaven judge ‘according to the deeds done in the body.’ [See Alma 5:15.] To say that the heathens would be damned because they did not believe the Gospel would be preposterous, and to say that the Jews would all be damned that do not believe in Jesus would be equally absurd; for ‘how can they believe on him of whom they have not heard, and how can they hear without a preacher, and how can he preach except he be sent’ [see Romans 10:14–15]; consequently neither Jew nor heathen can be culpable for rejecting the conflicting opinions of sectarianism, nor for rejecting any testimony but that which is sent of God, for as the preacher cannot preach except he be sent, so the hearer cannot believe [except] he hear a ‘sent’ preacher, and cannot be condemned for what he has not heard, and being without law, will have to be judged without law.”¹⁰

**It is our duty and privilege to be baptized and confirmed
for those who have died without the gospel.**

“When speaking about the blessings pertaining to the Gospel, and the consequences connected with disobedience to the requirements, we are frequently asked the question, what has become of our fathers? Will they all be damned for not obeying the Gospel, when they never heard it? Certainly not. But they will possess the same privilege that we here enjoy, through the medium of the everlasting priesthood, which not only administers on earth, but also in heaven, and the wise dispensations of the great Jehovah. Hence those characters referred to by Isaiah [see Isaiah 24:21–22] will be visited by the Priesthood, and come

out of their prison upon the same principle as those who were disobedient in the days of Noah were visited by our Savior [who possessed the everlasting Melchizedek Priesthood] and had the Gospel preached to them, by Him in prison. And in order that they might fulfill all the [requirements] of God, living friends were baptized for their dead friends, and thus fulfilled the requirement of God, which says, 'Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.' [John 3:5.] They were baptized of course, not for themselves, but for their dead. . . . Paul, in speaking of the doctrine, says, 'Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? Why are they then baptized for the dead?' (1 Cor. 15:29). . . .

"And now as the great purposes of God are hastening to their accomplishment, and the things spoken of in the Prophets are fulfilling, as the kingdom of God is established on the earth, and the ancient order of things restored, the Lord has manifested to us this duty and privilege, and we are commanded to be baptized for our dead, thus fulfilling the words of Obadiah, when speaking of the glory of the latter-day: 'And saviors shall come upon Mount Zion to judge the remnant of Esau, and the kingdom shall be the Lord's.' [See Obadiah 1:21.] A view of these things reconciles the Scriptures of truth, justifies the ways of God to man, places the human family upon an equal footing, and harmonizes with every principle of righteousness, justice and truth. We will conclude with the words of Peter: 'For the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles.' 'For, for this cause was the Gospel preached also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit.' [1 Peter 4:3, 6.]"¹¹

Suggestions for Study and Teaching

Consider these ideas as you study the chapter or as you prepare to teach. For additional help, see pages vii–xii.

- Review pages 401–3, noting how the doctrine of salvation for the dead affected Joseph Smith and his family. What effect has this doctrine had on you and your family?

- On pages 404–7, review the Prophet Joseph’s teachings about God the Father and Jesus Christ. In what ways do these teachings influence your thoughts and feelings about our Father in Heaven and the Savior? In what ways do these teachings relate to salvation for the dead?
- Review the Prophet’s teachings on pages 404–5 and 407–8. How does God judge His children?
- Joseph Smith said that baptism for the dead is a “duty and privilege” (page 409). In what ways is this work a duty? What experiences have you had in which you have felt that it is a privilege? What can you do to further the work of the Lord for those who have died? How can parents help their children participate in this work?
- How does the doctrine of salvation for the dead show God’s justice? How does it show His mercy? After reading this chapter, how would you explain this doctrine to someone of another faith?

Related Scriptures: Isaiah 49:8–9; 61:1–3; John 5:25; D&C 138:11–37

Notes

1. Lucy Mack Smith, “The History of Lucy Smith, Mother of the Prophet,” 1844–45 manuscript, book 4, pp. 5–6, Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.
2. Alvin Smith, quoted in Lucy Mack Smith, “The History of Lucy Smith, Mother of the Prophet,” 1844–45 manuscript, book 4, p. 4, Church Archives.
3. William Smith, interview by E. C. Briggs and J. W. Peterson, Oct. or Nov. 1893, originally published in *Zion’s Ensign* (periodical published by the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, now called Community of Christ); reprinted in *Deseret Evening News*, Jan. 20, 1894, p. 2.
4. Simon Baker, reporting a discourse given by Joseph Smith on Aug. 15, 1840, in Nauvoo, Illinois; in *Journal History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, Aug. 15, 1840. See also *History of the Church*, 4:231.
5. Joseph Smith Sr., quoted in Lucy Mack Smith, “The History of Lucy Smith, Mother of the Prophet,” 1845 manuscript, pp. 296, 301, Church Archives.
6. *History of the Church*, 4:595–96; punctuation modernized; from “Baptism for the Dead,” an editorial published in *Times and Seasons*, Apr. 15, 1842, p. 759; Joseph Smith was the editor of the periodical.
7. *History of the Church*, 5:401; from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on May 21, 1843, in Nauvoo, Illinois; reported by Willard Richards.
8. Letter from Joseph Smith to his uncle Silas Smith, Sept. 26, 1833, Kirtland, Ohio; in Lucy Mack Smith, “The History of Lucy Smith, Mother of the Prophet,” 1845 manuscript, pp. 228–29, Church Archives.

9. *History of the Church*, 4:596–97; first set of bracketed words in first paragraph in original; spelling and punctuation modernized; paragraph divisions altered; from “Baptism for the Dead,” an editorial published in *Times and Seasons*, Apr. 15, 1842, pp. 759–60; Joseph Smith was the editor of the periodical. A revelation received by President Joseph F. Smith in October 1918 clarified that while the Savior was in the spirit world, He visited the righteous spirits and appointed messengers to go to the wicked spirits with the gospel message (see D&C 138:18–23, 28–32).
10. *History of the Church*, 4:597–98; punctuation modernized; paragraph divisions altered; from “Baptism for the Dead,” an editorial published in *Times and Seasons*, Apr. 15, 1842, p. 760; Joseph Smith was the editor of the periodical.
11. *History of the Church*, 4:598–99; second set of bracketed words in first paragraph in original; spelling and punctuation modernized; paragraph divisions altered; from “Baptism for the Dead,” an editorial published in *Times and Seasons*, Apr. 15, 1842, pp. 760–61; Joseph Smith was the editor of the periodical.