



*The baptistry in the reconstructed Nauvoo Temple. In baptismal fonts such as this, Saints receive the ordinance of baptism for those who have died.*



## Becoming Saviors on Mount Zion

*“How are they to become saviors on Mount Zion?  
By building their temples, erecting their baptismal fonts,  
and going forth and receiving all the ordinances . . .  
in behalf of all their progenitors who are dead.”*

### From the Life of Joseph Smith

**F**or Church members living in Nauvoo in the 1840s, doing proxy work for their kindred dead was a major focus. Ever since the first proxy baptisms in this dispensation had been performed in 1840, the Saints had searched for genealogical information about their ancestors, and many had entered the waters of baptism vicariously for these deceased loved ones.

At first, baptisms for the dead had been performed in the Mississippi River or in local streams. But in January 1841, when the Saints were making plans for the Nauvoo Temple, the Lord declared: “A baptismal font there is not upon the earth, that they, my saints, may be baptized for those who are dead—for this ordinance belongeth to my house, and cannot be acceptable to me, only in the days of your poverty, wherein ye are not able to build a house unto me” (D&C 124:29–30).

Proxy baptisms in the river were discontinued on October 3, 1841, when the Prophet announced: “There shall be no more baptisms for the dead, until the ordinance can be attended to in the Lord’s House. . . . *For thus saith the Lord!*”<sup>1</sup> The Saints quickly began building a temporary wooden font in the newly excavated basement of the Nauvoo Temple. The font, built of Wisconsin pine, rested on the backs of 12 wooden oxen. It was dedicated on November 8, for use “until the Temple shall be finished, when a more durable one will supply its place.”<sup>2</sup> On November 21, 1841,

six members of the Quorum of the Twelve performed baptisms for 40 people who had died, the first baptisms for the dead performed in the font.

The Saints' early experiences with baptism for the dead taught them the importance of record keeping in the Lord's Church. Though proxy baptisms in local rivers had been performed by proper priesthood authority, they had not been officially recorded. Consequently, those baptisms had to be performed again. In an address given on August 31, 1842, the Prophet explained: "All persons baptized for the dead must have a recorder present, that he may be an eyewitness to record and testify of the truth and validity of his record. . . . Therefore let the recording and witnessing of baptisms for the dead be carefully attended to from this time forth."<sup>3</sup> The Prophet discussed this matter at greater length in a letter he wrote to the Saints the next day, and in another letter written on September 6. These two letters are now sections 127 and 128 of the Doctrine and Covenants.

In section 127, the Prophet recorded the following instructions from the Lord: "When any of you are baptized for your dead, let there be a recorder, and let him be eye-witness of your baptisms; let him hear with his ears, that he may testify of a truth, saith the Lord; that in all your recordings it may be recorded in heaven. . . . And again, let all the records be had in order, that they may be put in the archives of my holy temple, to be held in remembrance from generation to generation" (D&C 127:6–7, 9).

As the Saints moved forward with this sacred work, "it soon became apparent that some had long records of their dead, for whom they wished to administer," recalled Elder George A. Smith, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve. "This was seen to be but the beginning of an immense work, and that to administer all the ordinances of the Gospel to the hosts of the dead was no light task. Some of the Twelve asked Joseph if there could not be some shorter method of administering for so many. Joseph in effect replied: 'The laws of the Lord are immutable; we must act in perfect compliance with what is revealed to us. We need not expect to do this vast work for the dead in a short time.'"<sup>4</sup>

## Teachings of Joseph Smith

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### The doctrine of salvation for the dead shows the greatness of God's wisdom and compassion.

“All those who have not had an opportunity of hearing the Gospel, and being administered unto by an inspired man in the flesh, must have it hereafter, before they can be finally judged.”<sup>5</sup>

“It is no more incredible that God should *save* the dead, than that he should *raise* the dead.

“There is never a time when the spirit is too old to approach God. All are within the reach of pardoning mercy, who have not committed the unpardonable sin, which hath no forgiveness, neither in this world, nor in the world to come. There is a way to release the spirits of the dead; that is by the power and authority of the Priesthood—by binding and loosing on earth. This doctrine appears glorious, inasmuch as it exhibits the greatness of divine compassion and benevolence in the extent of the plan of human salvation.

“This glorious truth is well calculated to enlarge the understanding, and to sustain the soul under troubles, difficulties and distresses. For illustration, suppose the case of two men, brothers, equally intelligent, learned, virtuous and lovely, walking in uprightness and in all good conscience, so far as they have been able to discern duty from the muddy stream of tradition, or from the blotted page of the book of nature.

“One dies and is buried, having never heard the Gospel of reconciliation; to the other the message of salvation is sent, he hears and embraces it, and is made the heir of eternal life. Shall the one become the partaker of glory and the other be consigned to hopeless perdition? Is there no chance for his escape? Sectarianism answers ‘none.’ . . .

“This doctrine presents in a clear light the wisdom and mercy of God in preparing an ordinance for the salvation of the dead, being baptized by proxy, their names recorded in heaven and they judged according to the deeds done in the body. This doctrine was the burden of the scriptures. Those Saints who neglect

it in behalf of their deceased relatives, do it at the peril of their own salvation.”<sup>6</sup>

*In December 1840 Joseph Smith wrote to members of the Quorum of the Twelve and other priesthood leaders who were serving missions in Great Britain: “I presume the doctrine of ‘baptism for the dead’ has ere this reached your ears, and may have raised some inquiries in your minds respecting the same. I cannot in this letter give you all the information you may desire on the subject; but . . . I would say that it was certainly practiced by the ancient churches; and St. Paul endeavors to prove the doctrine of the resurrection from the same, and 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 Corinthians 15:29.]*

“I first mentioned the doctrine in public when preaching the funeral sermon of Brother Seymour Brunson; and have since then given general instructions in the Church on the subject. The Saints have the privilege of being baptized for those of their relatives who are dead. . . . Without enlarging on the subject, you will undoubtedly see its consistency and reasonableness; and it presents the Gospel of Christ in probably a more enlarged scale than some have imagined it.”<sup>7</sup>

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**We become saviors on Mount Zion by performing  
sacred ordinances for the dead.**

“If we can, by the authority of the Priesthood of the Son of God, baptize a man in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, for the remission of sins, it is just as much our privilege to act as an agent, and be baptized for the remission of sins for and in behalf of our dead kindred, who have not heard the Gospel, or the fullness of it.”<sup>8</sup>

“The Bible says, ‘I will send you Elijah the Prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord; and he shall turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to the fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.’ [Malachi 4:5–6.]

“Now, the word *turn* here should be translated *bind*, or seal. But what is the object of this important mission? or how is it to



*“The greatest responsibility in this world that God has laid upon us is to seek after our dead.”*

be fulfilled? The keys are to be delivered, the spirit of Elijah is to come, the Gospel to be established, the Saints of God gathered, Zion built up, and the Saints to come up as saviors on Mount Zion [see Obadiah 1:21].

“But how are they to become saviors on Mount Zion? By building their temples, erecting their baptismal fonts, and going forth and receiving all the ordinances, baptisms, confirmations, washings, anointings, ordinations and sealing powers upon their heads, in behalf of all their progenitors who are dead, and redeem them that they may come forth in the first resurrection and be exalted to thrones of glory with them; and herein is the chain that binds the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the children to the fathers, which fulfills the mission of Elijah. . . .

“The Saints have not too much time to save and redeem their dead, and gather together their living relatives, that they may be saved also, before the earth will be smitten, and the consumption decreed falls upon the world.

“I would advise all the Saints to go to with their might and gather together all their living relatives to [the temple], that they may be sealed and saved, that they may be prepared against the day that the destroying angel goes forth; and if the whole Church should go to with all their might to save their dead, seal their posterity, and gather their living friends, and spend none of their time in behalf of the world, they would hardly get through before night would come, when no man can work.”<sup>9</sup>

“There is baptism, etc., for those to exercise who are alive, and baptism for the dead who die without the knowledge of the Gospel. . . . It is not only necessary that you should be baptized for your dead, but you will have to go through all the ordinances for them, the same as you have gone through to save yourselves. . . .

“. . . There should be a place where all nations shall come up from time to time to receive their endowments; and the Lord has said this shall be the place for the baptisms for the dead. Every man that has been baptized and belongs to the kingdom has a right to be baptized for those who have gone before; and as soon as the law of the Gospel is obeyed here by their friends who act as proxy for them, the Lord has administrators there to set them free. A man may act as proxy for his own relatives; the ordinances of the Gospel which were laid out before the foundations of the world have thus been fulfilled by them, and we may be baptized for those whom we have much friendship for.”<sup>10</sup>

“All those who die in the faith go to the prison of spirits to preach to the dead in body, but they are alive in the spirit; and those spirits preach to the spirits [who are in prison] that they may live according to God in the spirit, and men do minister for them in the flesh; . . . and they are made happy by these means [see 1 Peter 4:6]. Therefore, those who are baptized for their dead are the saviors on Mount Zion, and they must receive their washings and their anointings for their dead the same as for themselves.”<sup>11</sup>

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**God has placed upon us a great responsibility  
to seek after our dead.**

“I will open your eyes in relation to the dead. All things whatsoever God in his infinite wisdom has seen fit and proper to reveal to us, while we are dwelling in mortality, in regard to our mortal bodies, are revealed to us in the abstract, and independent of affinity of this mortal tabernacle, but are revealed to our spirits precisely as though we had no bodies at all; and those revelations which will save our spirits will save our bodies. God reveals them to us in view of no eternal dissolution of the body, or tabernacle. Hence the responsibility, the awful responsibility, that rests upon us in relation to our dead; for all the spirits who have not obeyed the Gospel in the flesh must either obey it in the spirit or be damned. Solemn thought!—dreadful thought! Is there nothing to be done?—no preparation—no salvation for our fathers and friends who have died without having had the opportunity to obey the decrees of the Son of Man? . . .

“What promises are made in relation to the subject of the salvation of the dead? and what kind of characters are those who can be saved, although their bodies are moldering and decaying in the grave? When His commandments teach us, it is in view of eternity; for we are looked upon by God as though we were in eternity; God dwells in eternity, and does not view things as we do.

“The greatest responsibility in this world that God has laid upon us is to seek after our dead. The apostle says, ‘They without us cannot be made perfect’ [see Hebrews 11:40]; for it is necessary that the sealing power should be in our hands to seal our children and our dead for the fulness of the dispensation of times—a dispensation to meet the promises made by Jesus Christ before the foundation of the world for the salvation of man.

“. . . It is necessary that those who are going before and those who come after us should have salvation in common with us; and thus hath God made it obligatory upon man. Hence, God said, ‘I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord: he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their

fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.’ [Malachi 4:5–6.]”<sup>12</sup>

*The Prophet Joseph Smith wrote the following in a letter to the Saints, later recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 128:15–18, 22, 24: “And now, my dearly beloved brethren and sisters, let me assure you that these are principles in relation to the dead and the living that cannot be lightly passed over, as pertaining to our salvation. For their salvation is necessary and essential to our salvation, as Paul says concerning the fathers—that they without us cannot be made perfect—neither can we without our dead be made perfect.*

“And now, in relation to the baptism for the dead, I will give you another quotation of Paul, 1 Corinthians 15:29: *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?*

“And again, in connection with this quotation I will give you a quotation from one of the prophets, who had his eye fixed on the restoration of the priesthood, the glories to be revealed in the last days, and in an especial manner this most glorious of all subjects belonging to the everlasting gospel, namely, the baptism for the dead; for Malachi says, last chapter, verses 5th and 6th: *Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.*

“I might have rendered a plainer translation to this, but it is sufficiently plain to suit my purpose as it stands. It is sufficient to know, in this case, that the earth will be smitten with a curse unless there is a welding link of some kind or other between the fathers and the children, upon some subject or other—and behold what is that subject? It is the baptism for the dead. For we without them cannot be made perfect; neither can they without us be made perfect. . . .

“. . . Let your hearts rejoice, and be exceedingly glad. Let the earth break forth into singing. Let the dead speak forth anthems of eternal praise to the King Immanuel, who hath ordained,

before the world was, that which would enable us to redeem them out of their prison; for the prisoners shall go free. . . .

“. . . Let us, therefore, as a church and a people, and as Latter-day Saints, offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness; and let us present in his holy temple, when it is finished, a book containing the records of our dead, which shall be worthy of all acceptance.”<sup>13</sup>

## Suggestions for Study and Teaching

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

- Review pages 469–70, noting how Joseph Smith and the early Saints grew in their understanding of the doctrine of baptism for the dead. Think about how the Saints might have felt when they first learned of salvation for the dead. What were your feelings when you first participated in ordinances for the dead?
- Read the third and fourth paragraphs on page 471. How does the doctrine of salvation for the dead show God’s compassion and mercy? In what ways can this doctrine “enlarge the understanding” and “sustain the soul”?
- What does it mean to be a savior on Mount Zion? (For some examples, see pages 472–74.) Why do you think it is impossible for our deceased ancestors to be made perfect without us? Why do you think it is impossible for us to be made perfect without them?
- Review some of the Prophet Joseph Smith’s teachings about our great responsibility to “seek after our dead” (pages 475–77). What experiences have you had as you have learned about your ancestors? How has your love for your family and your faith in God been strengthened as you learned about your ancestors? How has performing temple ordinances for your ancestors influenced your feelings about them?
- What can we do to help children appreciate their family heritage? What can we do to help children participate in temple and family history work?

*Related Scriptures:* Romans 14:9; D&C 128:8–11**Notes**

1. *History of the Church*, 4:426; from the minutes of a Church conference held on Oct. 3, 1841, in Nauvoo, Illinois, published in *Times and Seasons*, Oct. 15, 1841, p. 578.
2. *History of the Church*, 4:446–47; from “History of the Church” (manuscript), book C-1, addenda, p. 44, Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.
3. *History of the Church*, 5:141; from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on Aug. 31, 1842, in Nauvoo, Illinois; reported by Eliza R. Snow; see also appendix, page 562, item 3.
4. George A. Smith, discourse given on Dec. 25, 1874, in St. George, Utah; in St. George Stake, General Minutes, vol. 4, Church Archives.
5. *History of the Church*, 3:29; from an editorial published in *Elders’ Journal*, July 1838, p. 43; Joseph Smith was the editor of the periodical.
6. *History of the Church*, 4:425–26; from the minutes of a Church conference held on Oct. 3, 1841, in Nauvoo, Illinois, published in *Times and Seasons*, Oct. 15, 1841, pp. 577–78.
7. *History of the Church*, 4:231; paragraph divisions altered; from a letter from Joseph Smith to the Twelve, Dec. 15, 1840, Nauvoo, Illinois; this letter is incorrectly dated Oct. 19, 1840, in *History of the Church*.
8. *History of the Church*, 4:569; from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on Mar. 27, 1842, in Nauvoo, Illinois; reported by Wilford Woodruff; see also appendix, page 562, item 3.
9. *History of the Church*, 6:183–84; from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on Jan. 21, 1844, in Nauvoo, Illinois; reported by Wilford Woodruff.
10. *History of the Church*, 6:365–66; paragraph divisions altered; from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on May 12, 1844, in Nauvoo, Illinois; reported by Thomas Bullock.
11. Quoted by George Laub, in compilation of excerpts from Joseph Smith’s discourses, ca. 1845; George Laub, *Reminiscences and Journal* Jan. 1845–Apr. 1857, p. 21, Church Archives.
12. *History of the Church*, 6:312–13; spelling modernized; from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on Apr. 7, 1844, in Nauvoo, Illinois; reported by Wilford Woodruff, Willard Richards, Thomas Bullock, and William Clayton.
13. Doctrine and Covenants 128:15–18, 22, 24; a letter from Joseph Smith to the Saints, Sept. 6, 1842, Nauvoo, Illinois.