



# Development of the Understanding of the Postmortal Spirit World

The 138th section of the Doctrine and Covenants holds the distinction of being the newest canonized section in the Doctrine and Covenants, and is accepted as a revelation by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Received by President Joseph F. Smith in October 1918, the revelation concerns the state of the spirits of those who have passed from mortality. Several important pieces have been written on the historical setting in which President Smith received the revelation, but little has been said on the doctrinal precedent of the spirit world in which D&C 138 was received by President Smith.<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter, I seek to demonstrate not only how President Smith's revelation differed from the theological, doctrinal, and developmental understanding of the spirit world prior to its reception but also how his vision crystallized existing understandings of the postmortal spirit world. I also suggest how President Smith was uniquely prepared to receive the revelation. To accomplish this, I will weave the story of President Smith's life into the narration of the doctrinal unfolding of this topic by previous Presidents of the Church.

## Teachings of Joseph Smith

The understanding of the doctrine of the spirit world, the location of the soul between death and the judgment of God, developed subtly from the time of the formal organizing of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints until the time of President Joseph F. Smith's revelation found in section 138. The Church's founder, Joseph Smith, had much to say on the subject of the spirit world, but his understanding would have been shaped by his translation of the Book of Mormon. The separation of the just and the unjust described in Alma 40 of the Book of Mormon suggests that there is a separation between the righteous and the unrighteous in the spirit world. In addition to the writings of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith further taught, "Jesus Christ became a ministering spirit (while His body was lying in the sepulchre) to the spirits in prison, to fulfill an important part of His mission."<sup>2</sup> Joseph also taught, "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 not!"<sup>3</sup>

Joseph Smith's understanding of the postmortal spirit world likely came from what he had been taught by his parents, from the religious culture in which he lived, and from his personal and family study of the Bible. He understood 1 Peter 3:19–20 in a literal sense, and it is easy to understand why; the scripture doesn't seem to hint at any sort of dualism or secondary meaning. Joseph's unique theological teachings on salvation for the dead were reinforced by Peter's words, and also Paul's: "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). The Prophet said that "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 spirit; . . . they are made happy by these means."<sup>4</sup> These remarks proved Smith's central doctrinal tenet of organization, that God is a God of order, and not of confusion (see D&C 132:8).



*Illustration of Jesus Christ teaching in the spirit world. © 1985, Robert Barrett.*

## **Joseph F. Smith's Experiences with Death during Joseph Smith's Administration**

Joseph F. Smith was haunted by the shadow of death nearly his entire life. He often shared Church sermons about the Missouri exodus, when the Latter-day Saints, including young Joseph F. and his mother, were forced from the state. At the time of the exodus, his father was imprisoned in Liberty Jail. From 1839 to 1844, his grandfather Joseph Smith Sr. and uncle Don Carlos Smith passed away, but the death that had the greatest effect on young Joseph F. was the murder of his father, Hyrum the Patriarch. What President Smith later called a "ruthless mob" martyred Hyrum alongside Smith's uncle the Prophet Joseph Smith.<sup>5</sup> He first heard the news of his father's death when a messenger rapped on the window and told his mother the news. That was a night of prayer and panic.<sup>6</sup> Later, Joseph F. participated in the family funeral, where someone lifted him up to see his father's mangled face in the funerary box. The sight of his father's face, which had been shot through the nose and under the jaw, remained permanently in his memory.<sup>7</sup>

## **Teachings of Brigham Young**

The doctrinal foundation that the Prophet Joseph had set was expanded upon by his prophetic successor, Brigham Young. The basis for this expansion of understanding was President Young's teachings that faithful Latter-day Saints went on to preach in the spirit world after their mortal lives were over. Brigham's down-to-earth style and practical theology promised hard work even beyond the grave. He and the other men who presided over the Church from 1847 to 1877 focused on the help that mortals could contribute to the Savior's work of salvation after their time in mortality.

Parley P. Pratt taught that Jesus went to spirit prison, saying, "How many other places Jesus might have visited while in the spirit world is not for me to say, but there was a moment in which the poor, uncultivated, ignorant thief was with him in that world."<sup>8</sup> This major understanding, developed during the time Brigham Young led the Church, focused on what work would be done and how it would be organized in the spirit world. Wilford Woodruff expounded at the funeral of President Jedediah M. Grant, saying, "The same Priesthood exists on the other side of the v[e]il. . . . Every Apostle, every Seventy, every Elder, etc., who has died in the faith as soon as he passes to the other side of the v[e]il, enters into the work of the ministry."<sup>9</sup>

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Brigham Young's teachings sum up the understanding of Saints in his administration with these words: "Jesus was the first man that ever went to preach to the spirits in prison, holding the keys of the Gospel of salvation to them. Those keys were delivered to him in the day and hour that he went into the spirit world, and with them he opened the door of salvation to the spirits in prison."<sup>10</sup> He further taught that he couldn't say it "any better than what the ancient Apostle has told it; he says he went to preach to the spirits in prison. Who are they to whom he went to preach? The people who lived in the antediluvian world." In a final summation, President Young taught, "When any of the Latter-day Elders or Apostles die, and leave this world, suffice it to say, that their spirits go to that prison, and preach the Gospel to those who have died without hearing it; . . . the spirits of good men like Joseph and the Elders, who have left this Church on earth for a season to operate in another sphere, are rallying all their powers and going from place to place preaching the Gospel, and Joseph is directing them."<sup>11</sup>

### **Joseph F. Smith's Experiences with Death, 1847–77**

Joseph F. Smith escaped the agony of additional deaths in his immediate family for only eight more years before his mother, Mary, died of apparent pneumonia in 1852. Her death appeared to have had just as much of an impact on Smith as his father's death. When Joseph F. received the news of his mother's death, he is reported to have passed out.<sup>12</sup> A year and a half later, he still felt "like a comet or fiery meteor, without attraction or gravitation to keep me balanced or guide me within reasonable bounds."<sup>13</sup> Clearly, Mary's death unhinged her son emotionally.<sup>14</sup>

Death first struck Smith's own posterity with the death of his first child, Mercy Josephine (whom he called Dodo) in 1870.<sup>15</sup> Smith was thirty years old at the time, still a very young father, and busily engaged in civic and Church responsibilities. Despite his schedule, he was an attentive and loving father and husband to his wives and children. His journal is poignant in his description of his feelings about Mercy's death. Of the tragic events, Smith wrote:

I scarcely dare to trust myself to write, even now my heart aches, and my mind is all chaos; if I should murmur, may God forgive me, my soul has been and is tried with poignant grief, my heart is bruised and wrenched almost asunder. I am desolate, my home seems desolate and almost dreary, yet here are my family and my little babe; yet I cannot help but feel that the tenderest, sweetest and

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yet the strongest cord that bound me to home and earth is severed, my babe, my own sweet Dodo is gone! . . . I am almost wild, and O God only knows how much I loved my girl, and she the light and the joy of my heart. . . . The image of heaven graven in my soul was almost departed. . . . The star of my life and happiness seemed to have shone its last on earth, and my soul bowed into the dust. Oh! my Dodo, my heart is almost broken for the loss of thee!<sup>16</sup>

Joseph's wife Julina Lambson Smith said that her husband "never got over losing his firstborn" and that when a second daughter was born, "he [would take her in] his arms, walk the floor and cry. . . . He never got where he could talk of [Mercy Josephine] without tears in his eyes."<sup>17</sup>

### Teachings of John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, and Lorenzo Snow

Joseph F. Smith was selected as a counselor to John Taylor on October 10, 1880. During President Smith's first sojourn in the First Presidency, Church leaders discussed the spirit world at length in Church conferences, public meetings, and funerals. President John Taylor remarked, "It is also true that the same Savior who is our Savior, when he was put to death in the flesh, was quickened by the spirit, and that he visited those spirits in prison, opening up the door of salvation to them that they might be redeemed and come forth and accomplish certain purposes which God had designed; . . . the priesthood behind the veil is operating and preaching to the spirits that are in prison that have been there from the different ages."<sup>18</sup>

Other leaders chimed in, agreeing with President Taylor, saying that "[Jesus] entered the abode of the doomed"<sup>19</sup> and that "Jesus descended into hell. He certainly did, and visited those spirits that were in prison."<sup>20</sup> President Smith's teachings on the spirit world during the presidencies of John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, and Lorenzo Snow showcase and highlight the teachings of the Church over his lifetime. He preached:

The Priesthood that we hold is perfect, because it is of God. It is the authority which God has revealed and restored to the children of men for their government and guidance in the building up of Zion and in the proclamation of the Gospel to the nations of the earth, until every son and daughter of Adam shall have the privilege of hearing the sound of the Gospel, and of being brought to the knowledge of the truth, not only upon this earth, but in the spirit world. The



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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.<sup>21</sup>

### **Joseph F. Smith's Presidency, 1901–18**

On October 17, 1901, Joseph F. Smith was ordained as the President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The teaching of the doctrine of the spirit world during the presidency of Joseph F. Smith offers excellent insight into the doctrinal climate in which President Smith received his vision of the redemption of the dead. Leaders spoke on varied points of emphasis, but their rhetoric can be grouped into two main themes: Christ visiting the spirit world, and the missionary work that takes place in the spirit world.<sup>22</sup>

*Jesus Christ visited the spirit world.* Church leaders told the world in general conference that Jesus “went into the spirit world and preached to that people the same principles that had been taught by Noah.”<sup>23</sup> The conference congregations were told that “Scripture . . . bear[s] witness that Christ, before He arose from the grave and broke the shackles of death, went into the prison house and preached to the spirits which were in prison.”<sup>24</sup> The scriptures affirm that Jesus opened the prison doors and descended into spirit prison and that he did so for the purpose of allowing faithful Latter-day Saints to do missionary work to those who “some-time were disobedient” in their earthly sojourn (1 Peter 3:20).

*Missionary work.* Missionary work for those in the spirit world was heavily emphasized during the presidency of Joseph F. Smith. Church members were reminded that a postmortal mission field was open on the other side of the veil. Those who had been faithful before Jesus' crucifixion and had followed in his footsteps went and preached to the spirits that were in the spirit world, which needed enlightenment and teaching. Faithful Church members would “mount up to the spirit world, and . . . carry the Gospel to countless millions of the once inhabitants of the earth, and in the footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ we will walk always until the resurrection day shall dawn.”<sup>25</sup> A “mighty work is going on [in the spirit world]” and was operated under the direction of Christ, and through those “brethren [of the priesthood who] depart hence and their places are taken up by their posterity, they will carry on this work in the spirit world.”<sup>26</sup> There was to be

priesthood organization after mortality, just as there was when their bodies tarried on earth. Part of the larger part of the Atonement was that Jesus' death had opened up the spirit world for missionary work<sup>27</sup> and that Latter-day Saints could begin helping now by "labor[ing] for the salvation of our ancestors by attending to ordinances for them which they could not now perform, being in the spirit world."<sup>28</sup> Missionary work, whether in mortality or the life beyond, always requires work by those who are willing.

President Smith himself spoke publicly about death and the spirit world, beginning only two months after his ordination as President of the Church. Smith preached to the Saints that "Jesus went to preach to their spirits in prison, and proclaimed liberty and deliverance to them"<sup>29</sup> and that "such men as Peter and James and the twelve disciples chosen of the Savior . . . [are] proclaiming liberty to the captives in the spirit world and in opening their prison doors. I do not believe that they could be employed in any greater work."<sup>30</sup>

### **Joseph F. Smith's Experiences with Death, 1901–18**

In January of 1918, President Smith's son Hyrum Mack Smith died suddenly at age forty-five, from a burst appendix. His death was shocking and unnerving to President Smith, leaving him physically weak and melancholy. He had "prayed and pleaded with the Lord, but his soul was filled with foreboding anxiety." He expressed his feelings at the death of Hyrum M. Smith thus: "My soul is rent asunder. My heart is broken, and flutters for life! . . . He is my firstborn son; the first to bring me the joy and hope of an endless, honorable, name among men. . . . I needed him more than I can express. . . . He was most useful to the Church. . . . O God, help me!"<sup>31</sup> Smith had lost thirteen children to the persistent hand of death during a span of fifty years, but Hyrum's death must have been particularly painful because of his promising ministry as an Apostle.<sup>32</sup>

President Smith reportedly withdrew from the public following the death of his son. The time away from the public eye, in the midst of the Spanish flu pandemic and World War I, provided time for pondering, praying, and studying the scriptures. His musings on death and the spirit world do not seem to have immediately resulted in a new doctrinal understanding. This is evidenced by the last reference to Smith's understanding of the spirit world before the reception of his vision for the redemption of the dead. In July 1918, when asked by a Church member what happened between death and the Resurrection, President



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Smith replied that “Jesus bridged over the ‘great gulf’ that divided the two divisions of the spirit world, and ‘went and preached to the spirits in prison.’”<sup>33</sup> It is clear to see that President Smith, though he had been grieving over the loss of his son Hyrum, had not yet reached or shared the doctrinal understanding that he would reveal to the Church in less than a month.

On October 4, 1918, President Smith spoke at general conference. Those in attendance noted that his feet and voice trembled while he spoke but that his spirit remained strong.<sup>34</sup> He wanted the congregation to know that he had not been negligent in his duty as prophet, seer, and revelator and President of the Church despite his advanced age, grief, and physical fatigue. He continued, vaguely referencing his vision of the redemption of the dead, saying: “I will not, I dare not, attempt to enter upon many things that are resting upon my mind this morning, and I shall postpone until some future time, the Lord being willing, my attempt to tell you some of the things that are in my mind, and that dwell in my heart. I have not lived alone these five months. I have dwelt in the spirit of prayer, of supplication, of faith and of determination; and I have had my communication with the Spirit of the Lord continuously.”<sup>35</sup>

President Smith had received a revelation, but he did not feel it appropriate to share at that time. He told the congregation, “When the Lord reveals something to me, I will consider the matter with my brethren, and when it becomes proper, I will let it be known to the people, and not otherwise.”<sup>36</sup>

### **The Vision of the Redemption of the Dead**

President Smith was contemplating, studying, and praying about the spirit world under these circumstances. The monster of death was all encompassing: the Spanish flu, World War I, and deaths in his own family caused President Smith to ponder on the “wonderful love” of the Father and the Son, perhaps in gratitude for the Atonement and Resurrection of Jesus Christ (see D&C 138:3–4).

President Smith’s vision of the redemption of the dead is largely an affirmation of the previous ninety years of its doctrinal teaching in the Church. President Smith saw that Jesus went to the righteous in prison, where he “preached . . . the everlasting gospel, the doctrine of the resurrection and the redemption of mankind from the fall, and from individual sins on conditions of repentance” (D&C 138:19). The spirit world was described as a place of learning, a place of joy, and a place of eternal hope through Jesus Christ (see Alma 40:11–12).

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One of the most significant doctrinal developments of President Smith's vision is that Jesus did not go to the wicked, the rebellious, or those that had rejected the gospel while in mortality. Darkness reigned where the Light of the World was not (see D&C 138:20–22). No public discussion of 1 Peter 3 and 4 in the Church from 1829 to September 1918 mentioned that Jesus sent messengers to the wicked, rather than visiting them himself. This is the most significant addition to the Latter-day Saint understanding of the spirit world that was made known through President Smith's vision.

Pondering upon the pragmatic problem of Jesus preaching to the unrepentant spirits in prison, Joseph F. had wondered how Jesus had been able to teach the millions—possibly billions—in spirit prison (see D&C 138:27). In his vision, President Smith saw that, although Jesus didn't descend into hell himself, he “organized . . . forces and appointed messengers, clothed with power and authority, and commissioned them to go forth and carry the light of the gospel to them that were in darkness, even to all the spirits of men” (D&C 138:29–30). President Smith saw that in this manner the gospel was preached to the dead.

These messengers were not just those who had qualified for spirit paradise. They were chosen messengers, sent to proclaim “liberty to the captives” (D&C 138:31). The messengers still operated under the priesthood hierarchy that they had lived in during their sojourn on earth. President Smith saw “the Prophet Joseph Smith, and [Joseph F.'s] father, Hyrum Smith, Brigham Young, John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, and other choice spirits who were reserved to come forth in the fullness of times to take part in laying the foundations of the great latter-day work” busy directing and encouraging the work of preaching to the spirits in prison (D&C 138:57). This part of the vision confirms what Brigham Young and other Church leaders had taught—that priesthood responsibility for preaching the gospel extended beyond the grave.

Joseph F. also affirmed what Joseph Smith had taught about preaching to the dead: those that had passed on without acceptance or opportunity to hear the gospel must have their work done by faithful members of the Church in temples (see D&C 138:54).

President Smith saw death as a melancholy event—one to be looked at with mourning and sorrow. He had the empathy to weep and grieve at death, and identified with others' sorrow because of many life experiences with outliving his parents, parent figures, and many of his children. Nevertheless, despite the loss of his father,

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uncles, grandfather, mother, siblings, wife, and children, he never stepped away from his optimism that he would meet them again on the other side of the veil. That thought carried him through the darkest times in his life. Through his faith in Jesus Christ, and also through the vicissitudes he had faced in losing so many friends and family, he was *uniquely prepared* to receive this vision of the redemption of the dead. Perhaps the knowledge that he and his loved ones would continue to serve in Christ's Church even after mortality would have been of special solace to him, as one among the leaders of the Church who had served the Church for so long and seen so many deaths. Although section 138 largely reaffirms ideas that had been taught for generations in the Church, President Smith's unique life experiences opened his mind to further questions, thus also opening his mind to receive additional enlightenment to those questions he had on the subject of the spirit world.

### Notes

1. George S. Tate, "The Great World of the Spirits of the Dead," *BYU Studies* 46, no. 1 (2007): 5–40. One other article touches on the development of the idea, though not in as much depth or with the background of Joseph F. Smith's life. See Charles R. Harrell, *This Is My Doctrine: The Development of Mormon Theology* (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2011), 348–66. The pages listed cover the chapter on salvation for the dead.
2. *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1932), 4:425.
3. *History of the Church*, 4:596.
4. George Laub, autobiography, in *Writings of Early Latter-day Saints*, 326, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT.
5. In Scott G. Kenney Research Collection, MS 2022, box 5, folder 1, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.
6. Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Life of Joseph F. Smith, Sixth President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1938), 129–30.
7. Scott G. Kenney Research Collection, MSS 2022, box 5, folder 11, L. Tom Perry Special Collections; Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith*, 128.
8. Parley P. Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 1:9. The "ignorant thief" refers to one of the men who was crucified alongside Jesus Christ. Jesus promised him that he would be with the thief "in paradise." See Luke 23:43.
9. Wilford Woodruff, in *Journal of Discourses*, 22:333–34.
10. Brigham Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, ed. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954), 378.
11. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 3:96, 372.
12. See Scott G. Kenney, "Before the Beard: Trials of the Young Joseph F. Smith," *Sunstone* 120 (November 2001): 23n20.
13. Kenney, "Before the Beard," 23n24.

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14. For a full treatment of Joseph F. Smith's mental state, please consult Scott G. Kenney, "Before the Beard."
15. Due to space limitations, this essay will highlight only the first and last deaths in President Smith's family, although he ultimately lost thirteen children before he died.
16. Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith*, 455–56.
17. Julina Lambson Smith, journal, 1912, as cited in Joseph Fielding Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith*, 458–59.
18. John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 21:97.
19. Charles W. Penrose, in *Journal of Discourses*, 22:165.
20. George Q. Cannon, in *Journal of Discourses*, 25:173.
21. Joseph F. Smith, "Rights and Order of the Priesthood," in *Collected Discourses, 1892–1893* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013), 3:99.
22. I repeat that President Smith taught and supported the teachings of his time on the spirit world to highlight the changes in the revelation now known as Doctrine and Covenants 138.
23. George Teasdale, in Conference Report, October 1901, 36.
24. Joseph E. Robinson, in Conference Report, April 1915, 75.
25. Charles W. Penrose, in Conference Report, October 1914, 43.
26. Charles W. Penrose, in Conference Report, April 1904, 72.
27. James E. Talmage, in Conference Report, April 1912, 126–27.
28. Charles W. Penrose, in Conference Report, October 1918, 12.
29. Joseph F. Smith, "Editor's Table," *Improvement Era*, December 1901, 146.
30. Joseph F. Smith, "Address of President Joseph F. Smith: Delivered at the Funeral Services of Sister Mary A. Freeze," *Young Woman's Journal*, March 1912, 130.
31. Smith, *Life of Joseph Smith*, 474.
32. There are several possibilities as to why this particular death took such a physical and emotional toll on President Smith. Perhaps the most obvious reason is that at age seventy-nine, President Smith was considerably older than he had been at the previous loss of a child (at which point he had been sixty). President Smith said this of his son Hyrum: "His mind was quick and bright and correct. His judgment was not excelled, and he saw and comprehended things in their true light and meaning. When he spoke, men listened and felt the weight of his thoughts and words. . . . We all needed him. . . . He has thrilled my soul by his power of speech, as no other man ever did. Perhaps this was because he was my son, and he was filled with the fire of the Holy Ghost. And now, what can I do! O what can I do!" First Presidency Reel 7/29/1918, MS 2022, box 2, folder 15, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.
33. *Gospel Doctrine: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Joseph F. Smith*, 5th ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1939), 472–76.
34. Anthony W. Ivins, journal, October 4, 1918, Anthony W. Ivins Papers, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City.
35. Joseph F. Smith, "Editor's Table," *Improvement Era*, November 1918, 81.
36. Joseph F. Smith, "Spurious Revelations and Visions," *Improvement Era*, December 1918, 106.