

CHRIST'S DESCENT INTO HELL

A LATTER-DAY SAINT PERSPECTIVE

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A CHALLENGING ISSUE

Since the time of Jesus and the Apostles, theological disputes have been somewhat commonplace, both within the Christian fold and between committed Christians and unbelievers. One of the most difficult questions to answer is called the problem of evil and suffering. In essence, it is as follows: If our God is all-loving, all-knowing, and all-powerful, why is there so much evil and suffering in the world? If God knows of the pain on this planet (because he is omniscient), if he has the power to change things (because he is omnipotent), then how can he be all-loving if he does not in fact bring such pain and anguish to an end?

For now, I would like to turn our attention to a variation of this difficult issue, a challenge that has been called the “soteriological problem of evil.” Soteriology is the study of salvation—what it is and how it

comes to the children of God. The soteriological problem of evil has been described by one theologian through a question:

What is the fate of those who die never hearing of the gospel of Christ? Are all the “heathen” lost? Is there an opportunity for those who have never heard of Jesus to be saved?

These questions raise one of the most perplexing, provocative and perennial issues facing Christians. It has been considered by philosophers and farmers, Christians and non-Christians. . . . Far and away, this is the most-asked apologetic question on U.S. College campuses. . . .

Although there is no way of knowing exactly how many people died without ever hearing about Israel or the church, it seems safe to conclude that the vast majority of human beings who have ever lived fall into this category.

In terms of sheer numbers, then, an inquiry into the salvation of the unevangelized is of immense interest. What may be said about the destiny of countless billions who have lived and died apart from any understanding of the divine grace manifested in Jesus?¹

Christian apologist C. S. Lewis found himself puzzled by this dilemma. On one occasion he remarked: “Here is [a matter] that used to puzzle me. Is it not frightfully unfair that this new life [in Christ] should be confined to people who have heard of Christ and been able to believe in Him? But the truth is God has not told us what His arrangements about the other people are. We do know that no man can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved through Him.”²

With the soteriological problem of evil before us, let me address this matter from a Latter-day Saint perspective. My remarks will focus primarily on the continuation of Christ’s ministry following his death on the cross and what has come to be known in Christian history as his “descent into hell” between the time of his death and his resurrection from the dead.

EARLY CHRISTIAN TEACHINGS

Early in Jesus's ministry, a group of Pharisees, no doubt well aware of the miracles he had performed, made a request. "Master," they began, "we would see a sign from thee." Now note his prompt response: "An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign." Most of us are happy to stop there in the narrative and smile at the Master's boldness. But, of course, the account does not end there, for Jesus continued: "And there shall be no sign given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: for as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; *so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth*" (Matthew 12:38–40; emphasis added). The Apostle Paul emphasized that "Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and living" (Romans 14:9). More particularly, Paul wrote to the Ephesians that before Christ "ascended up on high" to "[lead] captivity captive," he "descended first into the lower parts of the earth" (Ephesians 4:8–9). That is the King James Version. The New Jerusalem Bible renders it as follows: "When it says 'he went up', it must mean that he had gone down to the deepest levels of the earth" (Ephesians 4:9).

Several of the early church fathers taught that "no one, on becoming absent from the body, is at once a dweller in the presence of the Lord."³ Early in the second century following Christ, Justin Martyr (ca. AD 160) noted, "The souls of the godly remain in a better place, while those of the unjust and wicked are in a worse place, waiting for the time of judgment."⁴ Clement of Alexandria (ca. AD 195) attested that Jesus "descended to Hades . . . to preach the Gospel" and that "all who believe will be saved on making their profession there." This is because, Clement continued, "God's punishments are saving and disciplinary, leading to conversion. He desires the repentance, rather than the death, of a sinner. This is especially so since *souls, although darkened by passions, when released from their bodies, are able to perceive more clearly*. For they are no longer obstructed by the paltry flesh."⁵ Further, "it is not here alone that the active power of God is present. Rather, it is everywhere and is always at work. . . . For it is not right that those persons [who died

before Christ] should be condemned without trial, and that those alone who lived after His coming should have the advantage of the divine righteousness.”⁶ In summary, as Irenaus (ca. AD 180) noted, “the souls of His [Christ’s] disciples also (upon whose account the Lord underwent these things) will go away into the invisible place allotted to them by God. And they will remain there until the resurrection, awaiting that event.”⁷

We read a description in the entry “Descent into Hell” from a respected Bible dictionary: “a widely held belief in the early Church, and later an article of the Apostles’ Creed, that between his crucifixion and resurrection Jesus descended into the underworld (Hades) either to proclaim victory, to release OT saints, or to proclaim the gospel. Such beliefs and their later creedal development emphasized the universality of salvation offered in Jesus Christ.”⁸ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that “the crucified one sojourned in the realm of the dead prior to his resurrection. This was the first meaning given in the apostolic preaching to Christ’s descent into hell: that Jesus, like all men, experienced death and in his soul joined the others in the realm of the dead. But he descended there as Savior, proclaiming the good news to the spirits imprisoned there.”⁹

THE LATTER-DAY SAINT PERSPECTIVE UNFOLDS

While the Joseph Smith Sr. family read the Bible together and had frequent discussions on religious matters, it is probably the case that young Joseph Smith encountered what we know as the gospel of Jesus Christ largely in his translation of the Book of Mormon. What did he learn from the Book of Mormon about salvation for all people? He learned that baptism is an essential ordinance (sacrament), one that must be properly performed to admit a person into the kingdom of God (2 Nephi 31; Mosiah 18). He learned that “this life is the time for men to prepare to meet God; yea, behold the day of this life is the day for men to perform their labors,” and that “after this day of life, which is given

us to prepare for eternity, behold, if we do not improve our time while in this life, then cometh the night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed” (Alma 34:32–33). Like the book of Deuteronomy, the Book of Mormon essentially sets forth the doctrine of the two ways: things are either black or white, good or evil, and our choices lead either to blessing or to cursing.

A significant moment in Latter-day Saint history and theology unfolded in the fall of 1833 in the life of a woman by the name of Lydia Goldthwait. Lydia grew up in Massachusetts and New York and at the age of sixteen married Calvin Bailey. Calvin had a serious drinking problem and eventually left Lydia and their child. At the time, Lydia was also expecting another baby. The baby died at birth, and within months her first child died also. When she was twenty years old, Lydia moved to Canada to stay with the Freeman Nickerson family. There she was introduced to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and first became acquainted with Joseph Smith. On 24 October 1833 the family sat around the table and listened to Joseph. Those who recorded this event reported that the Spirit of God was poured out upon the group in a remarkable manner, and Lydia even spoke in tongues. The next day, as Joseph’s company prepared to return to Kirtland, Ohio, the Prophet

paced back and forth in the sitting room in deep study. Finally he spoke up and said: “I have been pondering on Sister Lydia’s lonely condition, and wondering why it is that she has passed through so much sorrow and affliction and is thus separated from all her relatives. I now understand it. The Lord has suffered it even as he allowed Joseph of old to be afflicted, who was sold by his brethren as a slave into a far country, and through that became a savior to his father’s house and country. . . . Even so shall it be with her; the hand of the Lord will overrule it for good to her and her father’s family.”

Turning to the young girl he continued: “Sister Lydia, great are your blessings. The Lord, your Savior, loves you, and will overrule all your past sorrows and afflictions for good unto you. Let your heart be comforted. . . . You shall yet be a savior to your father’s house. Therefore be comforted, and let your heart rejoice, for the

Lord has a great work for you to do. Be faithful and endure unto the end and all will be well.”¹⁰

Almost three years later, on 21 January 1836, the following event occurred:

At early candlelight I [Joseph Smith] met with the [First] presidency, at the west school room, in the [Kirtland, Ohio] Temple, to attend to the ordinance of anointing our heads with holy oil: Also the [High] councils of Kirtland and Zion met in the two adjoining rooms, who waited in prayer while we attended to the ordinance. I took the oil in my left hand, Father Smith [Joseph Smith Sr.] being seated before me, and the remainder of the Presidency encircled him round about. We then stretched our right hands towards heaven, and blessed the oil, and consecrated it in the name of Jesus Christ. We then laid our hands on our aged Father Smith, and invoked the blessings of heaven. . . . The [First] presidency then . . . received their anointing and blessing under the hand, of father Smith. . . . All of the [First] Presidency laid th[e]ir hands upon me, and pronounced upon my head many prophecies, and blessings, many of which I shall not notice at this time. But as Paul said, so say I, let us come to visions and revelations.¹¹

Brother Joseph states: “The heavens were opened upon us, and I beheld the celestial kingdom of God [the highest heaven], and the glory thereof, whether in the body or out I cannot tell. I saw the transcendent beauty of the gate through which the heirs of that kingdom will enter, which was like unto circling flames of fire; also the blazing throne of God, whereon was seated the Father and the Son. I saw the beautiful streets of that kingdom, which had the appearance of being paved with gold” (Doctrine and Covenants 137:1–4). Joseph Smith’s description of the celestial kingdom was not unlike John the Revelator’s vision of the holy city, the earth in its sanctified state: “The foundations of the wall of the city,” wrote John, “were garnished with all manner of precious stones.” Further, “the street of the city was pure gold, as it were transparent glass” (Revelation 21:19, 21).

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Joseph's account of the vision continues: "I saw Father Adam and Abraham; and my father and my mother; my brother Alvin, that has long since slept; and marveled how it was that he [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" (Doctrine and Covenants 137:5–6).

Clearly, this was a glimpse into a future heaven, for he saw his parents in the kingdom of the just, when in fact both were still living in 1836. Joseph Sr. would not die until 1840, and Mother Smith would live for another twenty years. Father Smith was, as we mentioned earlier, in the same room with his son at the time the vision was received.

Joseph's brother Alvin was the firstborn of Joseph Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith. He was born on 11 February 1798 in Tunbridge, Vermont. Lucy Mack Smith wrote that on the morning of 15 November 1823, "Alvin was taken very sick with the bilious colic," which was probably appendicitis. A physician hurried to the Smith home and administered calomel, an experimental drug. The dose of calomel "lodged in his stomach," and on the third day of sickness Alvin became aware that he was going to die. He asked that each of the Smith children come to his bedside for his parting counsel and final expression of love. According to Mother Smith's record, "When he came to Joseph, he said, 'I am now going to die, the distress which I suffer, and the feelings that I have, tell me my time is very short. I want you to be . . . faithful in receiving instruction, and in keeping every commandment that is given you.'"¹²

Alvin died on 19 November 1823. Mother Smith wrote of the pall of grief surrounding his passing: "Alvin was a youth of singular goodness of disposition—kind and amiable, so that lamentation and mourning filled the whole neighborhood in which he resided."¹³ Joseph commented later: "I remember well the pangs of sorrow that swelled my youthful bosom and almost burst my tender heart when he died. He was the oldest and noblest of my father's family. . . . He lived without spot

from the time he was a child. . . . He was one of the soberest of men, and when he died the angel of the Lord visited him in his last moments.”¹⁴

Because Alvin had died seven years before the organization of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and had not been baptized, Joseph wondered during his vision how it was possible for his brother to have attained the highest heaven. Alvin’s family had been shocked and saddened at his funeral by the remarks of a local minister. William Smith, Alvin’s younger brother, recalled: “Hyrum, Samuel, Katherine, and mother were members of the Presbyterian Church. My father would not join. He did not like it because Rev. Stockton had preached at my brother’s funeral sermon and intimated very strongly that he had gone to hell, for Alvin was not a church member, but he was a good boy and my father did not like it.”¹⁵ What consolation must have filled the souls of both Joseph Smith Jr. and Sr. when the voice of God declared, “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” (Doctrine and Covenants 137:7–9).

The principle that God does not hold anyone accountable for a gospel law of which he or she was ignorant had actually been taught in the Book of Mormon (2 Nephi 9:25–26; Mosiah 3:11; 15:24). Joseph learned in this vision that every person will have an opportunity—here or hereafter—to accept and apply the principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Only God is capable of perfect judgment, and thus only he can discern completely the hearts and minds of mortal men and women. He alone knows when a person has received sufficient knowledge or impressions of the Spirit to constitute a valid opportunity to receive the message of salvation. This vision reaffirmed that the Lord will judge men not only by their actions but also by their attitudes—the desires of their heart (see also Alma 41:3).

Another of the fascinating doctrines enunciated in what Latter-day Saints call the vision of the celestial kingdom deals with the status of children who die. "And I also beheld," Joseph stated, "that all children who die before they arrive at the years of accountability are saved in the celestial kingdom of heaven" (Doctrine and Covenants 137:10). This part of the vision confirmed what Book of Mormon prophets had taught. One religious leader, King Benjamin, declared that "the infant perisheth not that dieth in his infancy" (Mosiah 3:18). Another prophet, Abinadi, said simply: "Little children also have eternal life" (Mosiah 15:25). A revelation given to Joseph Smith in September 1830 had specified that "little children are redeemed from the foundation of the world through mine Only Begotten" (Doctrine and Covenants 29:46). Joseph later taught that "the Lord takes many away, even in infancy, that they may escape the envy of man, and the sorrows and evils of this present world; they were too pure, too lovely, to live on earth; therefore, if rightly considered, instead of mourning we have reason to rejoice as they are delivered from evil, and we shall soon have them again."¹⁶ A twentieth-century Latter-day Saint leader explained that by virtue of the Lord's infinite understanding of the human family, "we must assume that the Lord knows and arranges beforehand who shall be taken in infancy and who shall remain on earth to undergo whatever tests are needed in their cases."¹⁷

THE REDEMPTION OF THE DEAD

On the afternoon of Tuesday, 8 May 1838, the Prophet Joseph answered a series of questions about the faith and practices of the Latter-day Saints. One of the questions was: "If the Mormon doctrine is true what has become of all those who died since the days of the apostles[?]" Joseph's response: "All those who have not had an opportunity of hearing the gospel, and being administered to by an inspired man in the flesh, must have it hereafter, before they can be finally judged."¹⁸ We cannot help but conclude that Joseph must have spoken of this doctrinal matter since the

time of his vision of Alvin more than two years earlier, but there is no record of such a conversation.

The first public discourse on the subject by the Prophet was delivered on 15 August 1840 at the funeral of a man named Seymour Brunson.¹⁹ Simon Baker described the occasion: “I was present at a discourse that the prophet Joseph delivered on baptism for the dead 15 August 1840. He read the greater part of the 15th chapter of Corinthians and remarked that the Gospel of Jesus Christ brought glad tidings of great joy, and then remarked that he saw a widow in that congregation that had a son who died without being baptized, and this widow [had read] the sayings of Jesus ‘except a man be born of water and of the spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. . . .’ He then said that this widow should have glad tidings in that thing. He also said the apostle [Paul] was talking to a people who understood baptism for the dead, for it was practiced among them [see 1 Corinthians 15:29]. He went on to say 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. He went on and made a very beautiful discourse.”²⁰

After the meeting, a widow, Jane Nyman, was baptized vicariously for her son in the Mississippi River.²¹ Just one month later, on 14 September 1840, on his death bed, Joseph Smith Sr. made a final request of his family—that someone be baptized in behalf of his eldest son, Alvin. His second son, Hyrum, complied with that wish and was baptized vicariously in 1840 in the Mississippi River and again in 1841 in a baptismal font in the Nauvoo Temple.²²

In an epistle dated 19 October 1840, Joseph Smith stated: “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 aside from knowledge independent of the Bible, I would say that it was certainly practised by the Ancient Churches.” The Prophet then quoted from 1 Corinthians 15:29 and continued: “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, who they believe would have embraced the gospel, if they had been privileged with hearing it, and who have received the gospel in the Spirit, through the instrumentality of those who have been commissioned to preach to them while in prison.”²³

On 20 March 1842 the Prophet stated that if we have the authority to perform valid baptisms for the living, it is our responsibility to make those same blessings available to those who have passed through death.²⁴ One month later, in an editorial in the Nauvoo newspaper, *Times and Seasons*, Joseph called upon the Saints to expand their vision concerning the purposes of God. “While one portion of the human race are judging and condemning the other without mercy,” he said, “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.” He observed that “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. . . . Our Saviour 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*.” To this doctrinal statement, Joseph added: “The great Jehovah contemplated the whole of the events connected with the earth, [and] the past, present and the future, were, and are with him one eternal now.” Moreover, Brother Joseph stated, “Chrysostum [AD 349–407] says that the Marcionites practiced baptism for the dead. . . . The church of course at that time was degenerate, and the particular form might be incorrect, but the thing is sufficiently plain in the scriptures.” He again quoted

1 Corinthians 15:29 and concluded by referring to the restoration of this dimension of the “ancient order of things” as the fulfillment of the words of Obadiah concerning persons becoming “saviors . . . on Mount Zion” (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.”²⁵

CHRIST’S POSTMORTAL MINISTRY

On 2 May 1844, Joseph Smith summarized the principle: “*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.*”²⁶ Consequently, Latter-day Saints believe and teach that the disembodied Christ visited the postmortal spirit world and taught his gospel and that after his departure from the spirit world and his resurrection others were commissioned and empowered to continue that work. Latter-day Saints believe this is attested in the following words of Peter’s first epistle: “For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just [the Lord] for the unjust [you and me], that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: by which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water” (1 Peter 3:18–20). In the very next chapter of the epistle, Peter teaches that all people must one day give an accounting of their lives before the Lord, who will “judge the quick and the dead.” Then comes this verse: “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 4:5–6). From our point of view, because God is both merciful and just, every man and woman who live on planet earth will have the

opportunity, either in this world or in the world to come, to hear and accept the message that salvation comes only by and through the Atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ.²⁷

On 3 October 1918, Joseph F. Smith, nephew of Joseph Smith and himself sixth President of the Church, sat reflecting on these very verses from Peter's first epistle. In speaking of what then occurred, Joseph F. explained: "As I pondered over these things which are written, the eyes of my understanding were opened, and the Spirit of the Lord rested upon me, and I saw the hosts of the dead, both small and great." More specifically, he was permitted to witness scenes of what life was like in the postmortal spirit world among the noble and righteous, "an innumerable company of the spirits of the just," at the time Jesus died and entered the spirit world. "I beheld that they were filled with joy and gladness, and were rejoicing together because the day of their deliverance was at hand. They were assembled awaiting the advent of the Son of God into the spirit world, to declare their redemption from the bands of death. Their sleeping dust was to be restored unto its perfect frame, bone to his bone, and the sinews and the flesh upon them, the spirit and the body to be united never again to be divided, that they might receive a fullness of joy. While this vast multitude waited and conversed, rejoicing in the hour of their deliverance from the chains of death, the Son of God appeared, declaring liberty to the captives who had been faithful; and there he preached to them the everlasting gospel, the doctrine of the resurrection and the redemption of mankind from the fall, and from individual sins on conditions of repentance" (Doctrine and Covenants 138:11–12, 15–19).

This was in harmony with, and a confirmation of, what his uncle Joseph Smith had taught some eighty years earlier. Having had that particular insight affirmed, Joseph F. wondered how it was possible, then, for the disembodied Savior to minister to so many in so short a time (between his death and his resurrection). "And as I wondered," he continued, "my eyes were opened, and my understanding quickened, and I perceived that the Lord went not in person among the wicked and the

disobedient who had rejected the truth, to teach them; but behold, *from among the righteous, he organized his 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;* and thus was the gospel preached to the dead” (Doctrine and Covenants 138:29–30; emphasis added). This significant detail is nowhere found in the sermons or writings of his uncle. Joseph F. also states the matter here: *“Unto the wicked he did not go, and among the ungodly and the unrepentant who had defiled themselves while in the flesh, his voice was not raised. . . . Where these were, darkness reigned, but among the righteous there was peace”* (Doctrine and Covenants 138:20, 22; emphasis added). It is interesting to consider the following Roman Catholic teaching: “Jesus did not descend into hell to deliver the damned, nor to destroy the hell of damnation, but to free the just who had gone before him.”²⁸

“THIS DAY . . . IN PARADISE”

On Golgotha, Jesus hung on the cross between two thieves. One of them “railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:39–43).

As we might expect, this passage has given rise to a whole host of interpretations, perhaps the most prevalent being a belief in a type of deathbed confession and repentance. To be sure, it is good to repent no matter *when* we do it. That is, it is better to repent than to remain in our sins. Joseph Smith himself taught, “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.”²⁹ On another occasion, however, he taught, “We should take warning and not wait

for the death-bed to repent. . . . Let this, then, prove as a warning to all not to procrastinate repentance, or wait till a death-bed, for it is the will of God that man should repent and serve Him in health, and in the strength and power of his mind, in order to secure His blessing, and not wait until he is called to die.”³⁰

Respected New Testament scholar N. T. Wright pointed out that “the early Christian future hope centered firmly on resurrection. The first Christians did not simply believe in life after death; they virtually never spoke simply of going to heaven when they died. . . . When they did speak of heaven as a postmortem destination, they seemed to regard this heavenly life as a temporary stage on the way to the resurrection of the body. When Jesus tells the brigand [thief on the cross] that he will join him in paradise that very day, paradise clearly cannot be their ultimate destination, as Luke’s next chapter [where the resurrected Lord appears to many] makes clear.”³¹ In short, for Wright, the mention of resurrection “wasn’t a way of talking about life after death. It was a way of talking about a new bodily life *after* whatever state of existence one might enter immediately upon death.” That is, resurrection and glory are “life *after* life after death.”³²

Joseph Smith stated: “I will say something about the spirits in prison. There has been much said by modern divines about the words of Jesus (when on the cross) to the thief, saying, ‘This day shalt thou be with me in paradise.’ King James’ translators make it out to say paradise. But what is paradise? It is a modern [Persian] word: it does not answer at all to the original word that Jesus made use of [presumably the word *hades*]. Find the original of the word paradise. You might as easily find a needle in a haymow. . . . There is nothing in the original word in Greek from which this was taken that signifies paradise; but it was—This day thou shalt be with me *in the world of spirits*.”³³

Josiah Quincy, a man who later became the mayor of Boston, visited the Prophet Joseph in Nauvoo and wrote later of an occasion wherein Joseph spoke on the necessity of baptism for salvation. A minister in the audience contended as follows with Joseph:

Minister. Stop! What do you say to the case of the penitent thief?
Prophet. What do you mean by that? *Minister.* You know our Saviour said to the thief, “This day shalt thou be with me in Paradise,” which shows he could not have been baptized before his admission. *Prophet.* How do you know he wasn’t baptized before he became a thief? At this retort the sort of laugh that is provoked by an unexpected hit ran through the audience; but this demonstration of sympathy was rebuked by a severe look from Smith, who went on to say: “But that is not the true answer. In the original Greek, as this gentleman [turning to me] will inform you, the word that has been translated paradise means simply a place of departed spirits. To that place the penitent thief was conveyed.”³⁴

Three questions are frequently asked about the Latter-day Saint doctrine of the hereafter. First, are the Latter-day Saints universalists? No, not if that means that all men and women will eventually be saved in the highest heaven, for that would be at variance with our doctrine. No, in that we believe, with our Christian brothers and sisters, that salvation is in Christ and in him alone and that no man or woman will inherit the highest glory hereafter who does not accept Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, the Savior and Redeemer, and with that acceptance receive his gospel, including the covenants and ordinances (sacraments) associated with entering into the Lord’s Church and kingdom. We do, however, believe that all will be saved in a kingdom of glory hereafter, except for those known as the sons of perdition.³⁵

Second, do the Latter-day Saints believe in “hell”? Yes, but for us hell is a condition, a state of mind, as well as a place within the post-mortal spirit world. A revelation given to Joseph Smith describes the kind of people who will enter hell at death: “These are they who received not the gospel of Christ, neither the testimony of Jesus, . . . neither the prophets, neither the everlasting covenant. . . . These are they who are liars, and sorcerers, and adulterers, and whoremongers,” and murderers. “These are they who suffer the wrath of God on earth,” meaning who will be destroyed by the brightness and glory of Christ at his Second Coming.

“These are they who suffer the vengeance of eternal fire. These are they who are cast down to hell and suffer the wrath of Almighty God, until the fulness of times, when Christ shall have subdued all enemies under his feet, and shall have perfected his work” (Doctrine and Covenants 76:82, 101, 103–6; see also Revelation 21:8; 22:15 relative to murderers). They “deny not the Holy Spirit” (Doctrine and Covenants 76:83). That is, their wickedness is not such as to lead to complete perdition; at the time of their mortal death, they enter into that realm of the postmortal sphere we know as hell and are confronted with their sinfulness. These do not come out of hell until they come forth in the “last resurrection,” at the end of the Millennium (Doctrine and Covenants 76:85). Thus, the only ones to experience eternal hell are the sons of perdition.

And what of the lake of fire and brimstone into which the wicked are cast? Joseph Smith taught: “The great misery of departed spirits in the world of spirits, where they go after death, is to know that they come short of the glory that others enjoy and that they might have enjoyed themselves, and they are their own accusers.” Further: “A man is his own tormentor and his own condemner. Hence the saying, They shall go into the lake that burns with fire and brimstone [see Revelation 21:8]. The torment of disappointment in the mind of man is as exquisite as a lake burning with fire and brimstone. I say, so is the torment of man.”³⁶

Third, where do the Latter-day Saints get their notion of more heavens than one? While meeting with his chosen disciples at the Last Supper, the Master said: “Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14:1–2). This is a most intriguing statement. From a Latter-day Saint perspective, the Savior seems to have been saying, in essence, that it should be obvious to anyone that life hereafter consists of more than merely a heaven and a hell; if it were not so, he would have told us otherwise. Reason suggests that not all people are equally good and thus not all good people deserve the same reward hereafter. Likewise, not all bad

people are equally bad and surely some are so bad they deserve to sink to the lowest pit in hell.

Just how unusual is this notion of degrees of glory? St. Augustine wrote: “Who can conceive, not to say describe, what degrees of honor and glory shall be awarded to the various degrees of merit? Yet it cannot be doubted that there shall be degrees. And in that blessed city there shall be this great blessing, that no inferior shall envy any superior, as now the archangels are not envied by the angels, because no one will wish to be what he has not received. . . . And thus, along with this gift, greater or less, each shall receive this further gift of contentment to desire no more than he has.”³⁷

During the First Great Awakening, American theologian Jonathan Edwards, stated: “There are many mansions in God’s house because heaven is intended for various degrees of honor and blessedness. Some are designed to sit in higher places there than others; some are designed to be advanced to higher degrees of honor and glory than others are.”³⁸ Similarly, John Wesley, essentially the father of Methodism, spoke of some persons enjoying “higher degrees of glory” hereafter. “There is an inconceivable variety in the degrees of reward in the other world. . . . In worldly things men are ambitious to get as high as they can. Christians have a far more noble ambition. The difference between the very highest and the lowest state in the world is nothing to the smallest difference between the degrees of glory.”³⁹

CONCLUSION

Frederic W. Farrar observed that “St. Peter has one doctrine that is almost peculiar to himself, and which is inestimably precious.” This doctrine, Farrar added, is a “much-disregarded, and, indeed, till recent times half-forgotten, article of the Christian creed;—I mean the object of Christ’s descent into Hades. In this truth is involved nothing less than the extension of Christ’s redeeming work to the dead who died before His coming.” Farrar then quoted 1 Peter 3:18–20 and 1 Peter 4:6

and stated: "Few words of Scripture have been so tortured and emptied of their significance as these." He noted that "every effort has been made to explain away the plain meaning of this passage. It is one of the most precious passages of Scripture, and it involves no ambiguity, except such as is created by the scholasticism of a prejudiced theology. It stands almost alone in Scripture. . . . For if language have any meaning, *this language means that Christ, when His Spirit descended into the lower world, proclaimed the message of salvation to the once impenitent dead.*" And then, in broadening our perspective beyond those of the days of Noah, Farrar wrote: "But *it is impossible to suppose that the antediluvian sinners, conspicuous as they were for their wickedness, were the only ones of all the dead who were singled out to receive the message of deliverance.*" Continuing, the revered churchman pointed out: "We thus rescue the work of redemption from the appearance of having failed to achieve its end for the vast majority of those for whom Christ died. By accepting the light thus thrown upon 'the descent into Hell,' we extend to those of the dead who have not finally hardened themselves against it the blessedness of Christ's atoning work." Later Farrar wrote that "we do not press the inference of Hermas and St. Clemens of Alexandria by teaching that this passage implies also *other* missions of Apostles and Saints to the world of spirits."⁴⁰ As stated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "The descent into hell brings the Gospel message of salvation to complete fulfillment. This is the last phase of Jesus' messianic message, a phase which is condensed in time but vast in its real significance."⁴¹

"We are frequently asked the question," Joseph Smith once said, "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."⁴²

Latter-day Saints' hope in Christ is in the infinite capacity of an infinite Being to save men and women from ignorance as well as from sin and death. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is indeed the God

of the living (Matthew 22:32), and his influence and redemptive mercies span the veil of death. The Apostle Paul wrote that “if in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable” (1 Corinthians 15:19).

So what of those who never have the opportunity in this life to know of Christ and his gospel, who never have the opportunity to be baptized for a remission of sins and for entrance into the kingdom of God? Joseph Smith’s answer: “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.*”⁴³ In other words, Joseph Smith remarked, “It is no more incredible that God should *save* the dead, than that he should *raise* the dead.”⁴⁴

NOTES

1. John Sanders, ed., *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 7–9; see also Clark Pinnock and Delwin Brown, *Theological Crossfire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 227.
2. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 65.
3. Tertullian, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, 10 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 3:576.
4. Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:197.
5. Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 2:490–91; emphasis added.
6. Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 2:490–91.
7. Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:560.
8. Iain S. Maclain, “Descent into Hell,” in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 338.
9. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), part 1, article 5, paragraph 1, 180.
10. “Lydia Knight’s History,” 21–23, cited in *Journal History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 19 October 1833, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.

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11. Joseph Smith, History, 1838–1856, vol. B-1, created 1 October 1843–24 February 1845; referring to 2 Corinthians 12:1–5.
12. Preston Nibley, ed., *History of Joseph Smith by His Mother* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, n.d.), 87.
13. Nibley, *History of Joseph Smith by His Mother*, 88.
14. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 485; cited hereafter as *Joseph Smith*, followed by the page number.
15. William Smith, interview by E. C. Briggs and J. W. Peterson, in *Deseret News*, 20 January 1894; see also Kyle R. Walker, *William Smith: In the Shadow of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2015), 50.
16. *Joseph Smith*, 176.
17. Bruce R. McConkie, expressing the sentiments of Joseph Fielding Smith, in “The Salvation of Little Children,” *Ensign*, April 1977, 6.
18. *Elders' Journal* 1, no. 2 (July 1838): 43.
19. *Joseph Smith*, 472.
20. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), 49.
21. See Alex Baugh, “The Practice of Baptism for the Dead Outside of Temples,” *Religious Studies Center Newsletter* 13, no. 1 (September 1998): 3–6.
22. “Nauvoo Baptisms for the Dead,” Book A, Family History Library, Salt Lake City, 145, 149.
23. Joseph Smith, History, 1838–1856, vol. C-1, created 24 February 1845–3 July 1845.
24. *Joseph Smith*, 472.
25. Editorial, *Times and Seasons*, 15 April 1842, 760–61.
26. *Joseph Smith*, 474; emphasis added.
27. Obviously, the passages in 1 Peter are not understood in the same way by all Christian groups. A Roman Catholic view is that Christ went to the abode of Saints who had already lived and died and taught them his gospel—that he had conquered sin, death, and hell. Christ then led them out of that place. A Lutheran interpretation is that our Lord descended to Hades to declare his victory over and to pronounce condemnation upon Satan. A fairly traditional Anglican point of view is that following his death on the cross, Jesus went to Hades to that part called paradise and there delivered to

the righteous a more complete understanding of the gospel. Some Evangelical interpretations include: (1) a “pre-incarnate prophetic ministry of Jesus” to those who had died in the days of Noah and the flood, (2) Peter’s reference to the people in the days of Noah is figurative or symbolic, pointing to the fact that many in the days of Jesus were as unbelieving and rebellious as those in the days of Noah, (3) the “spirits in prison” are simply those who were in bondage to sin and ignorance during the Savior’s mortal ministry. See Millard J. Ericson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1986); John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2005), 1915–17.

28. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, part 1, section 2, article 5, 180.
29. *Joseph Smith*, 76, 471.
30. *Joseph Smith*, 73.
31. *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: Harper One, 2008), 41.
32. *Surprised by Hope*, 151; emphasis in original.
33. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 211, 213.
34. *Figures of the Past* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1883), 391–92.
35. These are they who “were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come,” who “crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame,” who have “trodden under foot the Son of God” and “done despite unto the Spirit of grace” (Hebrews 6:4–6; 10:29). They will at the time of death go into the postmortal spirit world and enter into that realm known as hell or outer darkness; they will eventually inherit a kingdom of no glory (see Doctrine and Covenants 88:24).
36. *Joseph Smith*, 224.
37. St. Augustine, *The City of God*, Modern Library Edition, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: Random House, 1978), 865; emphasis added.
38. Edwards, cited in Bruce Wilkinson, *A Life God Rewards* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2002), 119. Edwards’s use of the word *designed* may well reflect his Calvinistic belief in predestination.
39. Wesley, “Notes on the Revelation of Jesus Christ,” cited in Wilkinson, *A Life God Rewards*, 120–21.

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40. Frederic W. Farrar, *The Early Days of Christianity* (New York: Cassell, Petter, Galpin & Co., 1882), 139–42, 169; emphasis added.
41. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, part 1, article 5, paragraph 1, 180.
42. *Joseph Smith*, 408.
43. *Joseph Smith*, 471; emphasis added.
44. *Joseph Smith*, 471.