

CHAPTER EIGHT

REDEMPTION FOR THE DEAD (D&C 2)

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Moroni visited Joseph Smith three times on the night and early morning of September 21, 1823. During these encounters he quoted a number of Old Testament passages of scripture to the seventeen-year-old prophet. One of the more significant passages was taken from the writings of the prophet Malachi. Almost every sentence is filled with great significance for us who live today. Moroni quoted from Malachi: “For behold, the day cometh that shall burn as an oven, and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly shall burn as stubble; for they that come shall burn them, saith the Lord of Hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch. . . . Behold, I will reveal unto you the Priesthood, by the hand of Elijah the prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. . . . And he [Elijah] shall plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to the fathers, and the hearts of the children shall turn to their fathers. If it were not so, the whole earth would be utterly wasted at his [Christ’s] coming” (Joseph Smith—History 1:37–39).

The last two verses of this prophecy are also found in section 2 of the Doctrine and Covenants. We will examine and explicate these scriptural passages as they relate to the doctrine of the redemption of the dead. We shall do this by asking and then trying to answer certain questions raised by this passage of scripture.

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“THE GREAT AND DREADFUL DAY”

First, what is meant by the phrase “the great and dreadful day of the Lord,” a day that will burn like an oven and leave the wicked with neither root nor branch? Latter-day Saints recognize this phrase as an allusion to the Second Coming of our Savior, a day that will be great for the righteous and dreadful for the wicked. Every corruptible thing on earth shall be consumed by the brightness of our Savior’s coming, and to be left with neither root nor branch means to be bereft of both ancestry (roots) and posterity (children) inasmuch as the wicked will be unsealed either to their children or to those from whom they descend. It is difficult to think of a more appropriate figure to describe this condition than a tree with neither roots nor branches. The whole earth would be utterly wasted at Christ’s Second Coming (see D&C 2:1–3).

“THE PROMISES MADE TO THEIR FATHERS”

Second, what is meant by Moroni’s phrase of planting in the hearts of the children the “promises made to their fathers,” thus causing the “hearts of the children” to “turn to their fathers”? The fathers are the ancient patriarchs, such as Adam, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. God made unique promises to these men because of their faithfulness. President Joseph Fielding Smith once said:

“What was the promise made to the fathers that was to be fulfilled in the latter-days by the turning of the hearts of the children to their fathers? It was the promise of the Lord made through Enoch, Isaiah, and the prophets, to the nations of the earth, that the time should come when the dead should be redeemed. And the turning of the hearts of the children is fulfilled in the performing of the vicarious temple work and in the preparation of their genealogies. . . .

“Some of these promises made to the fathers are found in the scriptures. For instance, Isaiah said in reference to our Savior: ‘I the Lord have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles; To open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house.’ [Isaiah 24:21–22.] . . .

“Again, he says: ‘The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because

the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound.' [Isaiah 61:1.] This was spoken of as the mission of the Redeemer, both His work for the living and the dead, who were prisoners that were bound."¹

Thus the promises made to the fathers in ancient times included not only a covenant that their descendants' temple work would be performed in the latter days but also a promise that Christ would come, open the eyes of the spiritually blind, enlighten the Gentiles, preach the gospel to those in the spirit prison, and liberate the righteous dead who were handicapped by lack of opportunity. God also made a special covenant with Father Abraham that He would make of him "a great nation," bless him "above measure," and make him a blessing to his seed by giving them "the blessings of the Gospel, which are the blessings of salvation, even of life eternal" (Abraham 2:9-11).

Our Father in Heaven is at the head of one vast family. This grand system of things He has organized on earth under the direction of Adam, our first earthly father, and given title to as the patriarchal order in which all of the aforementioned blessings are passed from father to son. Patterned after the heavenly arrangement, Adam, often referred to in scripture and elsewhere as the Ancient of Days,² stands at the head of this holy order over which he will yet sit in formal judgment as "ten thousand times ten thousands" pass before to acknowledge him as their grand patriarch, the "father of all." He will preside at the great council at Adam-ondi-Ahman to be held at a future date and eventually "reign over his righteous posterity in the Patriarchal Order to all eternity."³

THE EARTH UTTERLY WASTED

Third, why would the earth be utterly wasted at our Savior's Second Coming if the work of salvation for the dead were not performed? This question has already been answered in part. Interestingly enough, in his original prophecy Malachi used the word "cursed," whereas the angel Moroni used the phrase "utterly wasted." God created this earth as a home for man to work out his eternal life and salvation. Were all men to be left with neither ancestry nor pos-

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terity, there would be no eternal family of God to inherit the earth. Were those in the spirit prison waiting for their temple work to be done never to realize that great blessing (they too once lived on this mortal earth), that would be one of the greatest catastrophes imaginable. To answer the question succinctly, we must view the eternal family organization from Adam and Eve to the present time as one grand unit and realize that God desires the salvation and even the exaltation of all His children. Hear these words of scripture: "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. . . . For we without them cannot be made perfect; neither can they without us be made perfect. Neither can they nor we be made perfect without those who have died in the gospel also" (D&C 128:18). Were this not the case, each person would exist "separately and singly, without exaltation, in their saved condition [that is, with some degree of glory], to all eternity; and from henceforth are not gods, but are angels of God forever and ever" (D&C 132:17). I love the thought of a welding link—the very thing that holds me to my wife and children for time and all eternity, if we live worthy lives.

THE PRIESTHOOD REVEALED BY ELIJAH

Fourth, and finally, what about the promise to reveal the priesthood by the hand of Elijah the prophet? The Prophet Joseph Smith said: "Elijah was the last Prophet that held the keys of the Priesthood, and who will, before the last dispensation, restore the authority and deliver the keys of the Priesthood, in order that all the ordinances may be attended to in righteousness. It is true that the Savior had authority and power to bestow this blessing; but the sons of Levi were too prejudiced. 'And I will send Elijah the Prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord,' etc., etc. Why send Elijah? Because he holds the keys of the authority to administer in all the ordinances of the Priesthood; and without the authority is given, the ordinances could not be administered in righteousness."⁴

Elijah did come as promised. Shortly after the Kirtland Temple was dedicated, Moses, Elias, Elijah, and the Savior Himself visited there. Elijah bestowed on Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery the sealing keys of the Melchizedek Priesthood (see D&C 110:15–16), the very

powers that today in modern temples join couples together and commit to them the powers of eternal increase.

Fortunately for us, Joseph Smith made at least two other interesting observations on the work of Elijah:

“Now comes the point. What is this office and work of Elijah? It is one of the greatest and most important subjects that God has revealed. He should send Elijah to seal the children to the fathers, and the fathers to the children.

“Now was this merely confined to the living, to settle difficulties with families on earth? By no means. It was a far greater work. Elijah! what would you do if you were here? Would you confine your work to the living alone? No: I would refer you to the Scriptures, where the subject is manifest: that is, without us, they could not be made perfect, nor we without them; the fathers without the children, nor the children without the fathers.

“I wish you to understand this subject, for it is important; and if you receive it, this is the spirit of Elijah, that we redeem our dead, and connect ourselves with our fathers which are in heaven, and seal up our dead to come forth in the first resurrection; and here we want the power of Elijah to seal those who dwell on earth to those who dwell in heaven. This is the power of Elijah and the keys of the kingdom of Jehovah.”⁵

How appropriate for the great prophet of the latter days to refer to Elijah’s work as “one of the greatest and most important subjects that God has revealed.” The Prophet also said this: “The spirit, power, and calling of Elijah is, that ye have power to hold the key of the revelations, ordinances, oracles, powers and endowments of the fulness of the Melchizedek Priesthood and of the kingdom of God on the earth; and to receive, obtain, and perform all the ordinances belonging to the kingdom of God, even unto the turning of the hearts of the fathers unto the children, and the hearts of the children unto the fathers, even those who are in heaven.”⁶

We could scarcely overemphasize the role of Elijah where redemption for the dead is concerned. But the inquiring student might ask, “What evidence do you have that Elijah ever truly held the sealing powers of the holy priesthood?” For the answer, we have only to examine the life and activities of Elijah as they are recorded in the pages of the Old Testament. A careful reading of 1 Kings 17–18 shows

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that it was Elijah who, in the days of Ahab, king of Israel, sealed up the heavens so that it did not rain for three years, unsealed those same heavens so that the earth received its needed moisture, sealed up a widow woman's flour barrel and cruse of oil against depletion during the famine, raised her only son from the dead, called down fire upon the priests of Baal to impress them with the true God's power, and finally was taken into heaven in a chariot of fire without tasting death.⁷ He, as a translated being, appeared with Moses to Peter, James, and John on the Mount of Transfiguration and, in the presence of the Savior of the world, delivered his sealing keys that they, too might bind on earth what is bound in heaven.⁸

REDEMPTION FOR THE DEAD REVEALED

As with most principles of the gospel, the doctrine of redemption for the dead came to the Church gradually, literally "line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little" (2 Nephi 28:30). This appears to be the usual process by which our Heavenly Father works. How much of the doctrine the young prophet understood as a result of Moroni's first three visits we are not prepared to say, but it seems safe to assume that it was abundantly clear in Moroni's mind. He knew that temple work would be one of the glorious truths introduced by Joseph Smith in these latter days.

As new revelation was added, Joseph Smith and other prophets grew progressively expansive in their expressions about temple work. The following are some of their comments:

"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" (D&C 128:18).

"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" (D&C 128:17).

"For we without them cannot be made perfect; neither can they without us be made perfect" (D&C 128:18).

"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” (D&C 128:15).

“The saints have not too much time to save and redeem *their* dead. . . . If the whole Church should go to with all their might to save *their* dead . . . and spend none of their time in behalf of the world, they would hardly get through.”⁹

“What kind of characters are those who can be saved although their bodies are decaying in the grave? When his [God’s] commandments teach us, it is in view of eternity. The greatest responsibility in this world that God has laid upon us, is to seek after our dead.—The apostle [Paul] says, they without us cannot be made perfect. Now I will speak of them:—I say to you Paul, you cannot be perfect without us: it is necessary that those who are gone before, and those who come after us should have salvation in common with us, and thus hath God made it obligatory to man.”¹⁰

“President Joseph Smith, by request of some of the Twelve, gave instructions on the doctrine of Baptism for the Dead. . . . The speaker presented ‘Baptism for the Dead’ as the only way that men can appear as saviors on mount Zion. The proclamation of the first principles of the gospel was a means of salvation to men individually, and it was the truth, not men that saved them; but men, by actively engaging in rites of salvation substitutionally, became instrumental in bringing multitudes of their kin into the kingdom of God. . . .

“This doctrine [salvation for the dead] he said, presented in a clear light, the wisdom and mercy of God in preparing an ordinance for the salvation of the dead, being baptised 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.”¹¹

“In 1894, the Lord re-emphasized in a revelation through his prophet, Wilford Woodruff, that it was necessary, in the completion of temple work, to have children sealed to their parents and the parents in turn to their parents in all generations. The saints were told to trace their genealogies and run this chain of generations back into

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the past as far as it was possible to do so. 'This,' said Pres. Woodruff, 'is the will of the Lord to His people.'"¹²

TEMPLE WORK INSTITUTED

The first temple completed in this dispensation was built in Kirtland, Ohio. Although a full complement of temple ordinances was never performed therein, small inklings of future events did emerge. Shortly before Elijah restored his keys, the School of the Prophets met in the attic of the printing office and there attended to "the ordinance of washing our bodies in pure water." That same evening, Joseph Smith and others took oil in their hands, blessed it, and "consecrated it in the name of Jesus Christ," and anointed the head of Joseph's father with the holy oil and pronounced upon him "many blessings," and those present blessed him to be their patriarch. Each in his turn then received a blessing and an anointing from the hands of the new patriarch. Joseph then reports that the heavens were opened and he "beheld the celestial kingdom of God, and the glory thereof," the Father and the Son, Adam and Abraham, and Joseph Smith's own mother, father, and brother Alvin. It was this view of Alvin that caused Joseph to marvel, since the older brother had never been baptized. The revelation recorded in section 137 of our Doctrine and Covenants was then given. From this Joseph learned the great doctrinal truth that "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."¹³

From this point on, the Prophet began to use the term *endowment* with greater and greater frequency, and the word soon became well known throughout the Church.¹⁴ Practically nothing was known about the endowment, however, as we know it today. Not until the fulness of the priesthood was revealed in Nauvoo, Illinois, was the Church to have a clearer understanding of the higher ordinances.

The first real reference to temple work as we know it occurred in a revelation given at Nauvoo on 14 January 1841, while the temple was still under construction. The Lord speaks in section 124 of "your anointings, and your washings, and your baptisms for the dead" and said these were to be attended to in that place. Among much else, the revelation states: "And verily I say unto you, let this house be

built unto my name, that I may reveal mine ordinances therein unto my people; for I deign to reveal unto my church things which have been kept hid from before the foundation of the world, things that pertain to the dispensation of the fulness of times. And I will show unto my servant Joseph all things pertaining to this house, and the priesthood thereof, and the place whereon it shall be built" (D&C 124:39–42).

Baptisms for the dead began shortly after Joseph Smith preached about them on August 16, 1840, at the funeral of Seymour Brunson.¹⁵ From that time, although careful records were not always kept, the Saints commenced to think about the necessity for this ordinance and began to attend to it. Jane Nyman appears to have been among the first. After consultation with her husband, she entered the waters of the Mississippi River on September 13, 1840, and was baptized in behalf of her deceased son.¹⁶ One month later, on October 15, residents on the Iowa side of the Mississippi commenced to do the same.¹⁷ One year later, at the October conference, the Prophet brought the baptisms for the dead outside the temple to a halt: "There shall be no more baptisms for the dead, until the ordinance can be attended to in the Lord's House."¹⁸ The first baptisms for the dead performed in the temple took place on November 21, 1841.¹⁹

Many of the ordinances required for salvation cannot be attended to in person by those in need of the ordinances. Like Joseph's brother Alvin, they died before the fulness of the priesthood was restored, or they never heard the gospel message while in life. Thus, we learn from President Joseph F. Smith's vision of the redemption of the dead that the Savior visited the spirits in prison, organized His missionary forces, and sent them forth to preach the gospel to the dead:

"These were taught faith in God, repentance from sin, vicarious baptism for the remission of sins, the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands,

"And all other principles of the gospel that were necessary for them to know in order to qualify themselves that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit. . . .

"Thus it was made known that our Redeemer spent his time dur-

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ing his sojourn in the world of spirits, instructing and preparing the faithful spirits of the prophets who had testified of him in the flesh;

“That they might carry the message of redemption unto all the dead, unto whom he could not go personally, because of their rebellion and transgression, that they through the ministration of his servants might also hear his words” (D&C 138:33–34, 36–37).

CONCLUSION

Vicarious, or proxy, work is the very heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our Savior’s Atonement in our behalf was a vicarious act, the strong doing for the weak that which they cannot do for themselves if they would only comply with His principles and ordinances. It is the same in the spirit world. Water and the laying on of hands are elements of this physical world and are essential features of redemption. They must be complied with here. It is an act of purest love to make it possible for the living to comply with earthly ordinances in behalf of those who never had that opportunity. May I commend all faithful temple workers who unselfishly devote hours of loving service in behalf of the worthy deceased. May I also compliment those untiring servants of the Lord who spend countless hours researching to locate names, dates, places, and relationships that make temple work the blessed work it is. Small wonder that the Prophet Joseph Smith should issue his fervent appeal to those of us who live today, to us whose hearts have turned to our fathers in the world of spirits, who never had the chance to comply with the ordinances of salvation: “Brethren, shall we not go on in so great a cause? Go forward and not backward. Courage, brethren; and on, on to the victory! 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” (D&C 128:22).

NOTES

1. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954–56), 2:154–55.
2. See Daniel 7:9–14; see also Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938), 157–59, 167–69.

3. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 17–18.
4. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed., rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1932–51), 4:211.
5. Smith, *Teachings*, 337–38.
6. Smith, *Teachings*, 337.
7. See 1 Kings 17:1; 18:32–35; 17:14, 21–24; 18:36–39; 2 Kings 3:9–12.
8. See Matthew 17:1–13; see also Smith, *Teachings*, 158.
9. History of Joseph Smith, January 1844, Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah; hereafter Church Archives.
10. Conference minutes for April 1844, *Times and Seasons*, 5:616.
11. Conference minutes for October 1, 1841, *Times and Seasons*, 2:577–78.
12. *Handbook for Genealogy and Temple Work* (Salt Lake City: Genealogical Society of Utah, 1956), 2.
13. Smith, *History of the Church*, 2:379–80.
14. See D&C 32:32, 38; 95:8; 105:11–12; 110:9; 124:39; 132:59.
15. Joseph Smith's Letter Book, November 6, 1838 to February 9, 1843, 191–96, Church Archives.
16. Letter of George A. Smith, n.p., n.d., Church Archives.
17. John Smith Diary, Thursday, October 15, 1840, Church Archives.
18. Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:426.
19. Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:454.