



Photo by Art Morrill

Brent Top discusses how “the early Brethren emphasized the nearness of the spirit world, the relationship between the two realms, and the fact that spirits continue to be interested and intimately involved in the Lord’s work on both sides of the veil.”

## *What’s on the Other Side? A Conversation with Brent L. Top on the Spirit World*

INTERVIEW BY DEVAN JENSEN

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**Jensen:** *In 2012 you published What’s on the Other Side? What the Gospel Teaches Us about the Spirit World. Why did you write this book, and how does it relate to some of your previous publications on the subject, such as Glimpses Beyond Death’s Door?*

**Top:** I have been researching and writing on the subject of death and the spirit world for over twenty years. In 1993, I published (with my wife, Wendy, as coauthor) *Beyond Death’s Door*. A new edition of that book was recently published by Covenant entitled *Glimpses Beyond Death’s Door*. Because of that research and earlier publications, I was asked to give lectures and teach classes on the subject at BYU Education Week and in other venues. In addition, I was invited in 1997 to team teach with Dr. David Busath, a medical doctor and professor of physiology and biology, a semester-long honors colloquium entitled “Life after Life—A Multi-Disciplinary Examination of the Near-Death Experience Phenomenon.” That was a great experience because we had LDS and non-LDS scholars and experiencers provide our BYU students with unique perspectives on the subject.

A few years ago, Deseret Book asked me to do a series of lectures on Latter-day Saint teachings about the spirit world. It was published in a two-CD set entitled *What's on the Other Side?* Not long after those came out, I was asked by BYU Continuing Education to give a Campus Education Week presentation that would be broadcast on BYUTV entitled “What Is This Thing That Men Call Death?” The broadcast and the CDs became quite popular, and both Deseret Book and BYUTV received many requests for the quotes and sources that I used in these talks. I received so many requests for the talks and for references from people who wanted to share them with someone who had lost a loved one. So that is how the book *What's on the Other Side?* came to be. Deseret Book asked me to put those talks in book format so that people could have the sources. I organized the content into fairly short chapters and included some new material. It is primarily on the teachings of latter-day prophets and apostles, with some fascinating and important non-LDS sources also intertwined. The purpose for the book is twofold: (1) to inform by providing some of the very best LDS and non-LDS sources on the subject together in one reader-friendly volume, and (2) to inspire and comfort those who mourn the loss of loved ones and to strengthen individual testimonies regarding the plan of salvation.

**Jensen:** *You said you have been researching and writing on this subject for over twenty years. How did you become interested in the subject of death and the spirit world?*

**Top:** I think we are all interested in the subject in some way or another. In fact, the older we get, the more interested we become! My interest in the subject was first piqued probably in the late 1970s and early 1980s with the publications of two national bestsellers, *Return from Tomorrow* by George Ritchie and *Life after Life* by Dr. Raymond Moody. From there, I started to examine the LDS literature on the subject and became familiar with some rather famous near-death experiences and spirit-world encounters by Church leaders and members. In the 1990s, the public interest in the near-death phenomenon exploded, even within Latter-day Saint circles. There were television programs, movies, and numerous books on life after death. I remember sitting in a Sunday School class during that time and hearing Church members quoting from a very popular book that recounted the near-death experience of a Church member. This person even had been on the Oprah Winfrey show, which we all know is the “validation of all truth”! As a result, some members unwittingly viewed and used such experiences as doctrine. That is what drew

me to the subject and motivated my research—not so much the experiences themselves, but rather the doctrines of the Church. I love the scriptures and words of the prophets which establish the doctrines of the kingdom. The spirit-world stories or near-death experiences are *interesting*, but the doctrine is *imperative*. That became the guiding principle in my research. My whole approach in writing the books *Glimpses Beyond Death's Door* and now *What's on the Other Side?* is based on these questions: What does our doctrine teach, and how does that help us to better understand and discern these experiences? How can these experiences illustrate, highlight, or help us to better understand our unique doctrines concerning death and the spirit world?

**Jensen:** *What do you mean by “our unique doctrines”? How are Latter-day Saint teachings different from other Christian doctrines regarding the afterlife?*

**Top:** Let me address that question with a couple of experiences. In 1990, Robert Millet (who has also written a great deal on LDS teachings regarding life after death) and I attended the annual conference of the International Association of Near-Death Studies, held that year in Washington, DC. We didn't quite know what to expect. Was the conference going to be comprised of those we might call “kooks”—“UFO chasers,” people with aluminum foil hats, and the like? But it was not like that at all. There were scientists, medical doctors, scholars from many different academic disciplines, theologians and clerics from diverse faith traditions, and many good women and men who had experienced some sort of encounter with the spirit world and sought to make sense of it all. As impressive as this gathering was, what had a greater impact on me was that most of these people were generally familiar with Latter-day Saint beliefs about the afterlife. As Bob and I sat at dinner with a group of the conference attendees, we were peppered with sincere questions and had interesting discussions about our beliefs. It made me realize that we possess unique, profound doctrines concerning the role of the spirit that perhaps we take for granted. The second experience occurred several years later, when Brother Millet and I were visiting with a Disciples of Christ pastor who was also a professor of theology at a college in Nashville, Tennessee. The man was writing a book about what various Christian denominations taught about the afterlife. We had an interesting discussion. What I remember most was his characterization of Latter-day Saint theology as “sophisticated and profound.” He stated that Mormons may not realize how profound and unique their beliefs about the spirit world are. That really struck me. Recently I read a

statement that confirms it. Authors Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, in their book *Heaven: A History*, published by Yale University Press, wrote:

Expressions of the eternal nature of love and the hope for heavenly reunion persist in contemporary Christianity. Such sentiments, however, are not situated within a theological structure. Hoping to meet one's family after death is a wish and not a theological argument. . . . Priests and pastors might tell families that they will meet their loved ones in heaven as a means of consolation, but contemporary thought does not support that belief as it did in the nineteenth century. There is no longer a strong theological commitment to the modern heaven.<sup>1</sup>

Here is the part that grabbed my attention and once again confirmed the power of doctrine:

The major exception to this caveat is the teaching of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, whose members are frequently referred to as the Mormons. The modern perspective on heaven—emphasizing the nearness and similarity of the other world to our own and arguing for the eternal nature of love, family, progress, and work—finds its greatest proponent in the Latter-day Saint (LDS) understanding of the afterlife. While most contemporary Christian groups neglect afterlife beliefs, what happens to people after they die is crucial to LDS teachings and rituals. Heavenly theology is the result not of mere speculation, but of revelation given to past and present church leaders. . . .

There has been . . . no alteration of the LDS understanding of the afterlife since its articulation by Joseph Smith. If anything, the Latter-day Saints in the twentieth century have become even bolder in their assertion of the importance of their heavenly theology. . . . In the light of what they perceive as a Christian world which has given up belief in heaven, many Latter-day Saints feel even more of a responsibility to define the meaning of death and eternal life.<sup>2</sup>

I find that statement very interesting, and it helps to explain why I feel a sense of responsibility to teach this important doctrine. Each of us should likewise feel a sense of responsibility to learn as much as we can about it—not only because of how this doctrine can enrich our own lives, but also because of how it can bless the world and inform those who seek for truth but “know not where to find it” (see D&C 123:12–14). The Prophet Joseph Smith taught:

All men know that they must die. And it is important that we should understand the reasons and causes of our exposure to the vicissitudes of life and of death, and the designs and purposes of God in our coming into the world, our sufferings here, and our departure hence. . . . It is but reasonable to suppose that God would reveal something in reference to the matter, and it is a subject we ought to study more than any other. We ought to study it day and night, for the world is ignorant in reference to their true condition and relation. If we have any claim on our Heavenly Father for anything, it is for knowledge on this important subject.<sup>3</sup>

**Jensen:** *From your years of research and teaching, what doctrinal misconceptions or potential pitfalls in teaching about the spirit world have you encountered among Latter-day Saints? What suggestions would you give for dealing with those concerns?*

**Top:** Let me share three guiding principles, if you will, that I try to follow. These principles apply not only to teaching, researching, and writing about the spirit world, but also more broadly to all we study and teach about the gospel. First, I would say, *teach what the scriptures say, not what they don't say*. Let me illustrate that with one of the most cited scriptural passages concerning the spirit world, Alma 40:11–14. Alma says in verse 11, “Now, concerning the state of the soul between death and the resurrection—Behold, it has been made known unto me by an angel”—that's a pretty good authoritative source—“that the spirits of all men, as soon as they are departed from this mortal body, yea, the spirits of all men, whether they be good or evil, are taken home to that God who gave them life.”

Alma clearly teaches us that there is a waiting period from the time of death until the Resurrection. That's “take it to the bank” doctrine. There is no room for misinterpretation on that one. Alma states it clearly and definitively. But it's the next part of the passage that is often misinterpreted. In verses 12 through 14, Alma says:

Then shall it come to pass, that the spirits of those who are righteous are received into a state of happiness, which is called paradise, a state of rest, a state of peace, where they shall rest from all their troubles and from all care, and sorrow. And then shall it come to pass, that the spirits of the wicked, yea, who are evil . . . these shall be cast out into outer darkness; there shall be weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth. . . . Now this is the state of the souls of the wicked, yea, in darkness, and a state of awful, fearful looking for the fiery indignation of the wrath of God upon them; thus they remain in this state, as well as the righteous in paradise, until the time of their resurrection.

Many times I've heard people interpret this passage this way: “See, it shows in the scriptures there that the righteous are in paradise and the wicked are in spirit prison.” However, you'll notice that Alma never uses the term *spirit prison* anywhere. Nor does he define who the righteous are. Yet we often make our own assumptions and say, “Well, those are members of the Church, and it is only members of the Church that can be in paradise.” But Alma doesn't say that. The point I want to make here is that the words we use a lot when we talk about the spirit world in the context of Latter-day Saint doctrine are *paradise*, *prison*, and *hell*. We create in our own minds clean,

clear, and concrete definitions of and delineations among those terms, but the scriptures don't.

Scripturally, all three of those terms can be applied to any or all of the spirits in the spirit world, depending on the specific context of how the scriptures use them. For example, President Joseph F. Smith teaches in Doctrine and Covenants 138 that all departed spirits view their death as a bondage or "prison" until the glorious reunion of body and spirit at resurrection. Likewise, we learn from the scriptures that all people—righteous, wicked, and everything in between—are released from many of the conditions of our fallen, mortal world. Thus, when they die, they are going to be in a state of rest. In this context, all spirits experience a degree of paradise. In fact, in the King Follett discourse, the Prophet Joseph Smith stated that when Jesus said to the man on the cross, "To day shalt thou be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43), he was referring to the spirit world. So *paradise* can be applied to all spirits, and *prison* applies to all spirits.

As for the word *hell*, people can experience hell right here in mortality. The hell that Alma is talking about, however, is not experienced by those who have not heard the gospel or haven't been as faithful to their degree of knowledge as perhaps they should have been. He is talking about the spirits of the wicked who "have no part nor portion of the Spirit of the Lord; for behold, they chose evil works rather than good; therefore the spirit of the devil did enter into them, and take possession of their house—and these shall be cast out into outer darkness" (Alma 40:13). He's talking about sons of perdition. That verse doesn't tell us anything about the vast majority of the spirits who have ever lived on the earth. Alma is talking about the righteous (remember he doesn't define that term for us) on one end of the continuum and the wicked on the other end of the continuum; he's not telling us anything about those in between. Yet we take this passage in Alma 40 and try to say that it is the definitive declaration concerning conditions of the spirit world. I don't believe that's what Alma is saying or intending to imply. I think Alma is only explaining these two extremes. So when we ask ourselves what we know about the spirit world from the standard works, the answer is "not as much as we often think."

Where we sometimes get into trouble—and I certainly have done this as well—is when we try to make sense of limited scriptural information by putting it into a diagram or on a PowerPoint, thinking that it fully reflects what the scriptures teach about the spirit world. In reality, the scriptures don't

give us a diagram, a chart, a map, photos, or a Google Earth screenshot of the spirit world.

Clearly the ancients had some understanding of the spirit world. In the Old Testament, the author of Ecclesiastes wrote that after we die we "return unto God" (Ecclesiastes 12:7). Jesus, speaking to the thief on the cross, said, "To day shalt thou be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). There are other New Testament allusions to an afterlife. When Jesus walked on water to his disciples, they feared, thinking they had seen a ghost or spirit (see Matthew 14:26). Peter clearly taught that Christ went to preach the gospel in the spirit world (see 1 Peter 3:18–20; 4:6), but he doesn't give us any description of what it is like or where it is. So they believed in some form of life after death, but the Old and New Testaments don't give us much detail.

We shouldn't take these or other passages to say something the author isn't necessarily saying. For example, Doctrine and Covenants 138 gives revelation on the spirit world, but President Joseph F. Smith is focusing on the redemptive work of the spirit world, not giving us a definitive declaration of who is there, where they are, or if all the wicked spirits are in the northern hemisphere and the righteous are in the southern hemisphere or vice versa. The scriptures don't do that. Alma chapter 40 does not give us everything there is to know, and neither does Doctrine and Covenants 138. It takes modern revelation—and modern prophetic commentary—to teach that. That leads to my second point: *know what is doctrine and what is not*.

Official Church doctrine comes to us through the standard works and from prophets, seers, and revelators. "There is an important principle that governs the doctrine of the Church," Elder Neil L. Andersen taught in the October 2012 general conference. "The doctrine is taught by all 15 members of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve. It is not hidden in an obscure paragraph of one talk."<sup>4</sup> Likewise, Elder D. Todd Christofferson taught in the conference just before, "It should be remembered that not every statement made by a Church leader, past or present, necessarily constitutes doctrine. It is commonly understood in the Church that a statement made by one leader on a single occasion often represents a personal, though well-considered opinion, not meant to be official or binding for the whole Church."<sup>5</sup> It is important that we remember that doctrine will be found in official declarations of the Brethren, as well as Church publications and manuals, and will be taught openly and repeatedly in general conference. With regards to the spirit world, the official doctrine is fairly narrow.

There are plenty of other things that have been said and published by Church leaders and faithful members—particularly in the nineteenth century—that are interesting, informed, and in many cases inspired, but that are not necessarily official doctrine. Some of my favorite statements from Brigham Young and Parley P. Pratt and others would probably fall into that category. That doesn't mean that we don't use them in our teaching or that they are not true, but we and our students need to recognize the proper hierarchy of authoritative sources. I think Robert Millet's article "What Is Our Doctrine?"<sup>6</sup> is an excellent resource. That leads me to my third guiding principle. It is what I call the *Apocrypha principle*.

When the Prophet Joseph Smith was working on translating the Bible (the Joseph Smith Translation), the Lord responded to his inquiry about whether or not to translate the Apocrypha (see D&C 91). I love the principle that was taught. Even though it was specifically relating to the Apocrypha, I think it has application to our study and teaching of the gospel in general and the doctrine of the spirit world in particular. The Lord says, "There are many things contained therein that are true." And then he says that there are other things which are not true and "are interpolations by the hands of men" (see D&C 91:1–2). *Interpolations* is an interesting word that we don't use much now. Is it the same as interpretations or opinions? No, it really means unauthorized insertions or additions to the scriptures. Whether we're reading insertions, additions, speculation, interpretation, or opinion, the Lord's words should guide us. "Therefore, whoso readeth it, let him understand, for the Spirit manifesteth truth; and whoso is enlightened by the Spirit shall obtain benefit therefrom; and whoso receiveth not by the Spirit, cannot be benefited" (D&C 91:4–6). I think that same principle applies perfectly to teachings about death and the spirit world. There are some things included in the statements of early Brethren that are speculation, interpretation, or opinion but are not necessarily false. And we have to be guided and directed by the Spirit to know what is true, what is doctrine, and how to apply it to our own lives.

**Jensen:** *You mentioned that we don't have an extensive amount of information regarding the spirit world in the scriptures. How much do we learn from the teachings of latter-day prophets? Can you give us some examples?*

**Top:** I am amazed at how much and how often the early Brethren taught about the spirit world. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught a great deal about death and spirit world, what he called the "principles of consolation."<sup>7</sup> In fact,

some of the Prophet's greatest doctrinal discourses were at funerals. I think this is because it was on his mind after the loss of his father, his brothers, his children, and many of his close friends and also because he was deeply concerned for many of the early Saints who had also lost loved ones. Virtually every family in Nauvoo had been touched by death—particularly deaths of children. So of course the Saints were worried about what was going to become of their deceased ancestors and loved ones. They wondered if their predecessors would be able to gain exaltation as the Prophet Joseph had taught—and he taught about it a great deal. I love this statement from the Prophet. It's recounted by Benjamin F. Johnson, describing a time when the Prophet Joseph Smith came to visit the Johnson family in Ramus, Illinois. Benjamin says that the Prophet, "with a deep-drawn breath, as a sigh of weariness, . . . sank down heavily in his chair, and said, 'Oh! I am so tired—so tired that I often feel to long for my day of rest. For what has there been in this life but tribulation for me?'"<sup>8</sup> When you think about what the Saints had gone through, particularly in Missouri, and how after they came to what they assumed would be a place of peace and rest in Nauvoo, the storm clouds began to gather again. You know they must have wondered, "When will we ever find rest?" It reminds me of the words of the classic Mormon pioneer hymn "Come, Come, Ye Saints" that states, "And should we die before our journey's through, / Happy day! All is well."<sup>9</sup> This promise of eventual peace and rest is at the very heart of the Prophet's teachings on death, the spirit world, and consolation. He repeatedly testified that to the faithful, "all is well" at death—or as an earlier revelation declared, "Those that die in me shall not taste of death, for it shall be sweet unto them" (D&C 42:46). In that visit mentioned earlier, he told Benjamin F. Johnson, "From a boy I have been persecuted by my enemies, and now even my friends are beginning to join with them, to hate and persecute me! Why should I not wish for my time of rest?" And then he said, "I would not be far away from you, and if on the other side of the veil I would still be working with you, and with a power greatly increased, to roll on this kingdom."<sup>10</sup>

I think this story highlights another important doctrine of the restored gospel repeatedly taught by prophets and apostles, and that is that the spirit world is right here on earth and the spirits of our departed loved ones are in reality among us. To me, this is also a vital principle of consolation. This doctrine is as comforting to the Saints as it is unique among Christian beliefs of the afterlife. Our deceased family and friends are not gone, neither are they

far, far away in some distant heaven. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught, “They are not far from us, and know and understand our thoughts, feelings, and motions, and are often pained therewith.”<sup>11</sup> Brigham Young taught that the spirit world is right here on this earth,<sup>12</sup> and Parley P. Pratt gave an extensive explanation for how and why that is the case.<sup>13</sup> Joseph F. Smith said: “I believe we move and have our being in the presence of heavenly messengers and of heavenly beings. We are not separate from them. . . . We are closely related to our kindred, to our ancestors, to our friends and associates and co-laborers who have preceded us into the spirit world.”<sup>14</sup> I think it is the unique doctrine of salvation for the dead that really gives personal meaning to the doctrine of the spirit world. The teachings of the early Brethren emphasized the nearness of our family, the nearness of the spirit world, the relationship between the two realms, and the fact that spirits continue to be interested and intimately involved in the Lord’s work on both sides of the veil.

**Jensen:** *In your opinion, why do you think the early Brethren taught so much about the spirit world? Did they talk about it more than we do today in the Church?*

**Top:** I am not sure that the early Brethren spoke more often or more extensively on the subject than leaders today, but clearly there are some very fascinating teachings by Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, Jedediah Grant, Orson and Parley Pratt, and others. I am convinced, as are some other scholars, that Brigham Young had near-death experiences, one of which happened right before the Saints entered the Salt Lake Valley in July of 1847. That may be one of the reasons he talked so much about the spirit world. I think you see evidence of his personal encounter with the spirit world in this particular statement:

I can say with regard to parting with our friends, and going ourselves, that I have been near enough to understand eternity so that I have had to exercise a great deal more faith to desire to live than I ever exercised in my whole life to live. The brightness and glory of the next apartment is inexpressible. It is not encumbered with this clog of dirt we are carrying around here so that when we advance in years we have to be stubbing along and to be careful lest we fall down. . . . But yonder, how different! . . .

Here, we are continually troubled with ills and ailments of various kinds, . . . but in the spirit world we are free from all this and enjoy life, glory and intelligence.<sup>15</sup>

There is another very well-documented near-death experience of an early LDS Apostle that was also an important contribution to the doctrinal teachings regarding the spirit world. It is the experience of Jedediah M. Grant,

counselor to President Brigham Young. It was recounted by President Heber C. Kimball at President Grant’s funeral. President Grant spoke of the incredible light and love he experienced in the spirit world. “He also spoke of the buildings he saw there, remarking that the Lord gave Solomon wisdom and poured gold and silver into his hands that he might display his skill and ability, and said that the temple erected by Solomon was much inferior to the most ordinary buildings he saw in the spirit world.” President Grant said that it was the greatest dread of his life to come back to earth because mortality paled in comparison to what he had experienced beyond the veil.<sup>16</sup>

There are a couple of passages in the Doctrine and Covenants that I think are profound in helping us to understand what the spirit world is like and how it compares to our mortal existence. The first is found in section 77. The revelation doesn’t specifically use the term *spirit world* or directly address the doctrine of life after death, but it teaches a principle that we can then apply to our understanding of those things. Addressing the symbolism of the book of Revelation, the Lord told the Prophet Joseph, “That which is spiritual [is] in the likeness of that which is temporal; and that which is temporal in the likeness of that which is spiritual.” Then he specifically applies it to the spirit body and said, “The spirit of man in the likeness of his person.” That is an important principle not only because it tells us that we have within our earthly tabernacle an immortal spirit that generally looks like our bodies, but also because it tells us that to a large degree the spirit world looks and is organized like the earthly world. “That which is spiritual is in the likeness of that which is temporal,” Brigham Young said. He emphasized this when he taught, “When you are in the spirit world, everything there will appear as natural as things now do. Spirits will be familiar with spirits in the spirit world—will converse, behold, and exercise every variety of communication one with another as familiarly and naturally as while here in tabernacles. There, as here, all things will be natural, and you will understand them as you now understand natural things.”<sup>17</sup>

This, to me, is not only an important contribution to our understanding of the doctrine but also another “principle of consolation.” It teaches us that not only are our deceased loved ones near us but that they are engaged in familiar activities. Some may think that all spirits do in the spirit world is float around on clouds, playing harps. Others may think that the only thing that goes on there is missionary work. I sometimes joke in my classes that if you find yourself in the spirit world being preached *to*, that’s not a good sign. But

we know that isn't true either. We will be teaching and being taught, serving and being served—just like here. That leads me to the other scriptural passage that is so vital to our understanding of the doctrine of the spirit world and the activities that go on there. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that the “same sociality which exists among us here will exist among us there” (D&C 130:2). While he was speaking specifically of life after the Resurrection, I believe this applies in some measure to life in the spirit world. There we will converse, laugh and cry, and engage ourselves in meaningful and productive activities—just like here.

I must admit, however, that I have wondered how the spirit world will, as Brigham Young taught, appear just as natural as do things here on earth when I read about “inexpressible glory,” buildings that surpass the grandeur of Solomon's temple, gardens that are incomparable in their beauty and colors. I jokingly say that earthly life might be compared to regular television as it was first invented by Philo Farnsworth, and the spirit world is more like high-definition television, enhanced with incredible resolution and beautiful detail. There is a phrase in that same statement from the Prophet Joseph where he spoke of the “same sociality” that may illustrate this principle: “*only it will be coupled with eternal glory, which glory we do not now enjoy*” (D&C 130:2; emphasis added). Again, as I mentioned before, I'm applying the concepts in this text to the spirit world. Righteous spirits, at least, will possess a level of glory that provides capacities and allows experiences that we cannot have in quite the same way in this fallen world with mortal, physical bodies. That explains some of the most remarkable teachings of the early Brethren. For example, Brigham Young taught that when enter into paradise we will be “free to travel with lightning speed.” He compared this spiritual movement, including what we today call “time travel,” to lightning or electricity (or perhaps we could add fiber optics, satellites, and internet). These, Brigham said, “furnish a fine illustration of the ability and power of the Almighty. . . . When we pass into the spirit world we shall possess a measure of this power.”<sup>18</sup> Perhaps this is what the Prophet Joseph meant when he described the righteous spirits as being “enveloped in flaming fire.”<sup>19</sup> Here is another example of enhanced capacities of the spirit bodies.

Elder Orson Pratt spoke extensively of the mode of communication in the spirit world. There, he said, communication isn't dependent upon sound waves and auditory nerves in our ears. Instead, we communicate mind to mind, spirit to spirit. In my research I came across many accounts of non-LDS

near-death experiencers who spoke of this telepathic communication. That may sound like something out of *Star Trek*, but in reality the scriptures and prophets describe it as the “spirit of revelation”—that is, God speaks to our minds and hearts (see D&C 8:2–3). Joseph Smith taught spiritual communication is “independent of affinity of this mortal tabernacle, but [is] revealed to our spirits precisely as though we had no bodies at all.”<sup>20</sup> That is perfect communication.

There is another aspect of this enhanced capacity of righteous spirits in the spirit world that I really look forward to—increased ability to learn and retain knowledge. President Brigham Young stated, “I shall not cease learning while I live, nor when I arrive in the spirit-world; but shall there learn with greater facility.”<sup>21</sup> Elder Orson Pratt also taught that spirits' ability to learn would be “greatly enlarged,” almost as if we had fifty senses instead of five. “Instead of thinking in one channel,” Pratt declared, “knowledge will rush in from all quarters; it will come in like the light which flows from the sun, penetrating every part, informing the spirit, and giving understanding concerning ten thousand things at the same time; and the mind will be capable of receiving and retaining all.”<sup>22</sup> Wow! Doesn't it make you almost want to die? These are but a few of the teachings of prophets and apostles about the spirit world. They are like snowflakes on the tip-top of the iceberg. Can't you now see that what the restored gospel—through scriptures and prophets—teaches about the spirit world and plan of salvation is far more comprehensive and profound than what can be illustrated with a chalkboard diagram or on a PowerPoint slide?

**Jensen:** *In your books you also cite many sources and experiences of people who are not of the LDS faith. One in particular you quote often is Emanuel Swedenborg. Who is he, and what can we learn from him?*

**Top:** Swedenborg was an eighteenth-century Swedish scientist, engineer, and religious philosopher who was also a faithful, Bible-believing Christian. He claimed to have been allowed to visit what we would call the spirit world (he called it “heaven and hell”) on a frequent and prolonged basis. He described what he saw and learned from those experiences in his classic work, *Heaven and Hell*, which was first published in Latin in 1758 and in English in 1812. Ralph Waldo Emerson called him one of “the mastodons of literature” and one of the brightest minds in human history.<sup>23</sup> The reason why I quote him and others like him who were blessed with spiritual insight and experiences goes back to the Apocrypha principle that I talked about earlier. Using



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When Jesus said to the man on the cross, “To day shalt thou be with me in paradise,” he was referring to the spirit world.

the Spirit to discern truth, we can learn from others, and apply the truths we learn from them.

I love this statement from President Howard W. Hunter: “All men share an inheritance of divine light. God operates among his children in all nations, and those who seek God are entitled to further light and knowledge, regardless of their race, nationality, or cultural traditions.”<sup>24</sup> Brigham Young says, “‘Mormonism’ includes all truth.” He goes on to say, “If the infidel has got

truth it belongs to ‘Mormonism.’ . . . There is no truth but what belongs to the gospel.”<sup>25</sup> As Latter-day Saints, we recognize that we have very defined parameters for establishing official doctrine, but we don’t believe that we have a corner on the market of truth or inspiration. We believe that all people on earth are God’s beloved children and that he communicates with them too, wanting all to return to him and enjoy the blessings of the fulness of his glory. He gives experiences and insights and revelation to all kinds of people. Sometimes that is “translated” or interpreted according to their own culture and faith traditions, and that’s where we have to be particularly discerning. In 1978, the First Presidency wrote, “The great religious leaders of the world such as Mohammed, Confucius, and the Reformers, as well as philosophers including Socrates, Plato, and others, received a portion of God’s light. Moral truths were given to them by God to enlighten whole nations and to bring a higher level of understanding to individuals.”<sup>26</sup> Consistent with these truths, we believe that God has given and will give to all people sufficient knowledge to help them on their way to eternal salvation, either in this life or in the life to come. So we shouldn’t be troubled for a second! We should rejoice that the Lord gives them a portion of his truth regarding the world beyond.

Emanuel Swedenborg, in my estimation, was one of many whom the Lord helped to know greater truths about the gospel. He was a Renaissance man in the truest sense of the term. Did he get some things wrong? Absolutely. But he also got a lot of things right, and I am convinced that the Lord inspired him and helped him to understand things within the context of the world in which he was living, which was long before the gospel was restored.

Swedenborg’s teachings about the spirit world are profound in so many ways. In a way reminiscent of C. S. Lewis (who is so often quoted by Latter-day Saints), Swedenborg has a unique way of saying things that illuminate and inform our understanding of doctrine. That’s why it’s important to keep the Apocrypha principle in mind as we read and study other people’s experiences. In the book *Glimpses Beyond Death’s Door*, we use many non-Latter-day Saint experiences. They are valuable because most of them don’t include any “baggage” or particular religious interpretation. They merely describe their near-death experience. That was refreshing and what I was looking for as an author because I didn’t want stories with an angle or an agenda. I just wanted them to describe their experiences. Such narratives allow us to look at the experience and ask, how does this correspond to what we know by revelation and by the standard works? I do not in any way want a person who reads my



books to think that a person's near-death experience or spirit world encounter establishes doctrine—because it doesn't. Other people's experiences may help us to understand, or provide an interesting “gee-whiz” moment, but, as I have emphasized before, the scriptures and the words of the prophets and apostles establish the doctrine of the Church.

**Jensen:** *My grandfather had a near-death experience, and he said that he was given the opportunity to choose to return to his family or stay in the spirit world. Is that a common thing in the accounts you have read?*

**Top:** Yes, it is quite common in the near-death experience literature. Probably every one of us has an ancestor, relative, friend, or acquaintance that has had a near-death experience or some sort of glimpse beyond the veil. There are probably at least a couple of reasons why we don't hear about them more. In our LDS culture, some would view such experiences as too sacred or personal to speak of casually. At the other end of the continuum, others who have these kinds of experiences may think they are crazy or have been told by doctors or others that what they experienced were hallucinations or reactions to medications (although true near-death experiences are dramatically different from those). A Gallup poll conducted many years ago found that one in eighteen people in the United States had had a near-death experience. That tells me that they are far more common than we would think. If these statistics are even somewhat accurate, that would mean that well over a half-million members of the Church have had such an encounter with the afterlife. That is a staggering thought!

My own father-in-law had such an experience before his death. He never spoke about being given a choice to return to earth, but there was no doubt in our minds that he “returned” to complete his mission in mortality. Why some get a choice to return and others do not, I don't have a clue. But I find that concept fascinating because it is often stated that the Prophet Joseph Smith taught that we have an appointed time for our death and that no righteous man dies before his time.<sup>27</sup> I think that indicates that the appointed hour for death is a relative window of time rather than a specific date; the work is of such importance on both sides of the veil that sometimes it may not matter exactly when you die, and so you may be allowed to choose.

**Jensen:** *What would you say are the two or three most important things that you have learned from your years of research on the spirit world and related doctrines?*

**Top:** That is hard—like asking me which of my grandchildren is my favorite. One of the reasons why I have done all of this research and why I've been working on this for over twenty years is that not only is it interesting research in helping me to better understand the doctrine of death, but I also find it extraordinarily motivating. The more I study and learn about the spirit world, the more it enriches my life. Our knowledge of what it will be like *then* and *there* helps us to know what we should be like *here* and *now*. Gospel insights about *dying* teach us a great deal about *living*.

Shakespeare shared this sentiment when he said, “Be absolute [or, we could say, “prepared”] for death; either death or life shall thereby be the sweeter.”<sup>28</sup> There is that direct link between this life and the next. Some people may think that studying death and spirit world is morbid, but in reality, it is so inspiring. Epictetus, the first-century Greek philosopher taught, “Keep death . . . daily before thine eyes. . . . Then wilt thou never think a mean thought, nor covet anything beyond measure.”<sup>29</sup> It may seem distasteful to say “Let death be always before your eyes,” but isn't that what we are doing when we do what the Lord has admonished—“Let the solemnities of eternity rest upon your minds” (D&C 43:34)? Remembering that we will all someday cross over the threshold of death and make an accounting for our lives helps keep us focused on eternity and those things that matter most. Elder Orson Pratt perhaps said it best:

And do not forget to look forward to those joys ahead, if we do, we will become careless, dormant, and sluggish, and we will think we do not see much ahead to be anticipated, but if we keep our minds upon the prize that lays ahead—upon the vast fields of knowledge to be poured out upon the righteous, and the glories that are to be revealed, and the heavenly things in the future state, we shall be continually upon the alert; we are beings that are only to live here for a moment, as it were. Let these things sink down in our minds continually, and they will make us joyful, and careful to do unto our neighbors as we would they should do unto us. Lest we should come short of some of these things is the reason I have touched upon the future state of man the two Sabbaths past, to stir up the pure minds of the Saints that we may prepare for the things that are not far ahead, and let all the actions of our lives have a bearing in relation to the future.<sup>30</sup>

Another one of my favorite discoveries from my research is related to that. It is the concept of a life review. One of the most common observations of people who have had a near-death experience, or an encounter with the spirit world in some way, is that they talk about how their life passed before their eyes—that they undergo some type of a judgment. I find this very fascinating in light of the scriptures and doctrine that we have.

Many non-Latter-day Saint experiencers not only relive their lives and see specific events, but they also actually experience the implications of the choices they have made, which sometimes includes seeing how their choices affected the lives of other people. That's kind of scary to think about. When I die, not only will I see my life but I will experience what impact, whether good or bad, my life and my choices had on other people. That is very interesting to me—especially in light of Alma 41, where Alma teaches his son about the doctrine of restoration. He says in essence, “What we have said and done and thought will be restored unto us.” I've always wondered how that is possible. If you have done evil, how will evil be restored unto you? If you have done good, how will good be restored unto you? The Apostle Paul calls it the law of the harvest—that which you sow, you will eventually reap (see Galatians 6:7, 9).

We see how this works in life to a limited degree. But in the spirit world, this facet of the law of restoration is an absolutely perfect and just return for our actions in life. We get what we gave. We experience all the effects of our own choices. The first question that pops up in response to this is, what about repentance? And will I still have to have that life review if I have repented? The answer is that when we repent, the Atonement of Jesus Christ cleanses and purifies us; we are made new creatures. So, yes we will have a life review, but the life review will be of the new creature, or the new life that Christ has created in us. That is another one of the great doctrines of the spirit world that inspires and motivates me.

I would say that the other major doctrine that I have learned—or at least in this specific case has been powerfully reinforced—is the incredible work of salvation that goes on in the spirit world. Of course I knew of the doctrine, but now I have an even greater appreciation for the merciful work of the Lord done there. It has a direct application to all of us, for we will all be involved in some way in that work. President Wilford Woodruff taught that the priesthood and offices we hold in this life go with us into the spirit world. We engage in the same types of service and ministry there that we use our priesthood for here. “Every man who is faithful is in his quorum there,” he taught, “every apostle, every seventy, [every high priest], every elder, etc., who has died in the faith, as soon as he passes to the other side of the veil, enters into the work of the ministry, and there is a thousand times more to preach there than there is here.”<sup>31</sup>

Also, President Joseph F. Smith taught that women play an important role in the spirit world. Half the world's population is women, and who will be teaching and ministering to them? Faithful women, of course! They will be, President Smith taught, “fully authorized and empowered to preach the gospel and minister to the women while the elders and prophets are preaching it to the men.” I particularly like the next sentence in President Smith's statement: “*The things we experience here are typical of the things of God and the life beyond us.*”<sup>32</sup> I like to think of the temple as a perfect model of how the work of the Lord operates in the spirit world. Think of the order and the organization there—men and women engaged in the work of the Lord, blessing lives and bringing people closer to our Father in Heaven, serving together in the House of the Lord in complementary and vitally important roles. We have an important work to do here, but there is an enormous work to be done on the other side. Prophets have repeatedly taught the urgency of the work of salvation for the dead in this last dispensation. When we understand the critical need for people on this side of the veil to do family history and temple work, we also get a glimpse of the critical needs on the other side. Elder Neal A. Maxwell made this interesting observation: “On the other side of the veil, there are perhaps seventy billion people. They need the same gospel, and releases occur here to aid the Lord's work there. Each release of a righteous individual from this life is also a call to new labors. Those who have true hope understand this.” I find this part especially comforting and consoling:

Therefore, though we miss the departed righteous so much here, hundreds may feel their touch there. One day, those hundreds will thank the bereaved for gracefully forgoing the extended association with choice individuals here, in order that they could help hundreds there. In God's ecology, talent and love are never wasted. The hopeful understand this, too.<sup>33</sup>

Elder Maxwell has also said:

A mortal life may need to be “shortened” by twenty years as we might view it—but if so, it may be done in order for special services to be rendered by that individual in the spirit world, services that will benefit thousands of new neighbors with whom that individual will live in all of eternity.<sup>34</sup>

I recently had a very touching experience related to this. One of my missionaries, a young sister, was stricken with cancer and in a short period of time passed away. She was only twenty-six years old. As I spent some time with her in the days shortly before her death, she wanted to know about the spirit world. What an incredible consolation both to her and to me, to her family,

and to all of our missionaries was the doctrine of the spirit world and the plan of salvation as taught by prophets and apostles. We know that death isn't the end. Even though her mortal life was shortened, she will not be deprived of any joys, privileges, or opportunities. As she prepared to leave mortality for the spirit world, she told me she was excited to continue being a missionary, to continue preaching the gospel and sharing her testimony; and to have as a missionary companion a brother who had preceded her in death. She was a great example of hope in Christ and "hope for a better world" (Ether 12:4). As difficult as it is for us to lose someone in mortality, we must remember they can be such an incredible blessing to those on the other side. And someday, those that are blessed and brought into the gospel through the efforts of our loved ones will thank us, and all of the grief and loneliness we felt will pale in comparison to the joy that will come. That is a powerful "principle of consolation."

If I were to capsulize in conclusion why this doctrine is so critical to me, I would say that it informs me of the great blessings that await us on that side of the veil. It powerfully reminds me to live my life fully and purely, and to be found in service to my fellow men. It teaches me I will receive more spiritual blessings in my life—both here and hereafter—by blessing those around me. When I understand this, I am motivated to give more. I have been reminded again and again: Preparing for dying affects my living, but my living prepares me for dying. That, to me, is one of our greatest doctrines. To me that explains why the Prophet Joseph Smith said that in the context of the plan of salvation, this is a doctrine that we ought to study more than any other. As he said, it is a doctrine that should be on our minds both day and night. That is why I have spent a third of my life studying death and the spirit world. It has been my intent and hope that my writings and teaching will comfort those who mourn and to inspire all to live the gospel more fully. **RE**

## Notes

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6. See Robert L. Millet, "What Is Our Doctrine?," *Religious Educator* 4, no. 3 (2003):

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9. William Clayton, "Come, Come, Ye Saints," in *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 30.
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11. Joseph Smith, in *History of the Church*, 6:52.
12. See Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 3:369.
13. Parley P. Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1874), 126–27.
14. Joseph F. Smith, in Conference Report, April 1916, 2–3.
15. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 14:231.
16. Heber C. Kimball, in *Journal of Discourses*, 4:135–36.
17. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 7:239.
18. See Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 14:231.
19. Joseph Smith, in *History of the Church*, 6:52.
20. *Encyclopedia of Joseph Smith's Teachings*, 453.
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22. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 2:246–47.
23. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Representative Men: Seven Lectures* (London: George Routledge, 1850), 60.
24. Howard W. Hunter, "The Gospel—A Global Faith," *Ensign*, November 1991, 19.
25. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 11:375.
26. First Presidency statement, February 15, 1978.
27. See, for instance, Ezra Taft Benson, "Spencer W. Kimball: A Star of the First Magnitude," *Ensign*, December 1985, 33.
28. William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, 3.1.5–6.
29. Epictetus, *Golden Sayings*, trans. Hastings Crossley (New York: Macmillan, 1912), Saying CLXI, 136.
30. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 3:105.
31. *Discourses of Wilford Woodruff* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1946), 77.
32. Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 461; emphasis added.
33. Neal A. Maxwell, *Notwithstanding My Weakness* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 55.
34. Neal A. Maxwell, *All These Things Shall Give You Experience* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 99.