
Salvation for the Dead

*By Jay M. Todd
Managing Editor*

[Jay M. Todd, "Salvation for the Dead," *Ensign*, Feb. 1995, 47](#)

"God is love," wrote the Apostle John (1 Jn. 4:8). To Latter-day Saints, it may be said that no greater evidence of this truth exists than the remarkable ordinances revealed by the Lord by which he makes the blessings of salvation available to his children who did not have opportunity to receive the gospel in mortality.

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In more popular terms, the subject is known as salvation for the dead. One can quickly comprehend its importance when one focuses on family relationships. What tugs at a man's or woman's heart as strongly as do love and the relationships with wife, husband, children, and extended family?

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The glad message of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ is that ordinances performed in the temples of the Lord conditionally guarantee that these family relationships can continue for eternity. This teaching is one of the most stimulating and ennobling aspects of the plan of salvation our Father in Heaven has prepared for his children, and it is undergirded and outlined in Old Testament and New Testament teachings. 1

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Baptismal font, Alberta Temple. Through baptism for the dead and other vicarious temple ordinances, temple blessings are offered to those who could not receive them in this life. (Copyright by the Corporation of the President, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; no reproduction authorized or permitted.)

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A key principle to understanding salvation for the dead is the principle of vicarious service, in which one person acts in behalf of another. This principle has been used by God throughout history. In the Mosaic dispensation, for example, the scapegoat and the sacrificial offerings served as proxy in mitigating the sins of the people. These representations, of course, were symbolic forerunners of the supreme sacrifice made for mankind—the atonement of Jesus Christ, which is preeminently a vicarious offering. Whoever accepts Jesus as Savior also accepts the principle of vicarious proxy in his life. As the Apostle Paul wrote, Christ “gave himself a ransom for all” (1 Tim. 2:6). Some 750 to 800 years earlier, the prophet Isaiah similarly foresaw the sacrifice of the Redeemer and wrote of him: “He was wounded for our transgressions, . . . and with his stripes we are healed” (Isa. 53:5).

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As Christians believe, the Lord Jesus Christ, in consequence of his sinless sacrifice, offers ransom for all who will obey his commandments and live by the principles of his gospel. These principles were made clear by the Lord.

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One of the Lord’s most emphatic teachings was given to Nicodemus: “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). Baptism, or being born of water, was also at the center of the Lord’s last instructions to his Apostles after his resurrection:

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“Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:

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“Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19–20).

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Having earlier paid the price of sin for each of us, the Lord descended into death and the spirit world and then rose triumphantly again. For us to be cleansed of sin, we must each descend into water and rise again into a new, covenant life with Jesus, our Redeemer.

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Another teaching fundamental to the Lord’s plan of salvation is the concept that after death, one’s spirit goes to a place where spirits reside, where faculties of sight and sound and mind are as vivid as they are here. God “is not a God of the dead,” Jesus said, “but of the living: for all live unto him” (Luke 20:38). Jesus himself visited that spirit world prior to his resurrection, just as he foretold: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live” (John 5:25).

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The events surrounding the Lord’s death and resurrection clearly demonstrate that there is a place to which we go after we die where we await our resurrection and subsequent entry into “heaven.”

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To the penitent thief crucified at his side, Christ said, “Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). This place here translated as “paradise” is not heaven, however, as was made clear on the third day after the Lord’s death. (See Alma 40:11–13 for further clarification.)

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Early in the morning following the angelic [page 48] announcement to the women that Jesus had been resurrected, the Lord appeared to Mary. Apparently she desired to touch him, but the Master instructed her, “Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God” (John 20:17).

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If the Savior had not ascended to heaven yet, where had he been during the three days his body lay in the tomb? It is in the writings of Peter, the chief Apostle, that we receive the answer. Christ went to be with other disembodied spirits and there minister to them. What did the Lord do there? Said Peter: “He went and preached unto the spirits in prison” (1 Pet. 3:19).

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Who were these people? According to Peter, they were those who “sometime were disobedient” (1 Pet. 3:20). “For this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh” (1 Pet. 4:6).

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This essential ministry of the Lord to those who have died was prophesied by Isaiah, who, writing in behalf of the Messiah, wrote: “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” (Isa. 61:1).

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What would be good tidings to those in prison? Surely it would be a message of how they could be set free to progress and enjoy the blessings of the gospel. This was the message confirmed by the Lord in the spirit world during the three days he himself was a disembodied spirit. *The message continues to be taught in the spirit world today by teachers the Lord has appointed to that ministry* (see D&C 138:18–22, 30–34, 57–59).

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Thus, those who die without a knowledge of Christ have the opportunity to hear the glad message of redemption, exercise faith, and repent of their sins. But what of baptism? As Nicodemus learned, a person must be baptized—born of water—before he can enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus himself was baptized “to fulfil all righteousness” (Matt. 3:15), and he instructed his Apostles to baptize those who accepted the gospel message, telling them, “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved” (Mark 16:16).

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How, then, can those who died without the chance to be baptized receive this ordinance? The

answer is, they can receive it vicariously. Just as Jesus performed a labor for us that we could not perform for ourselves, so can we perform the ordinance of baptism for those who have died, allowing them the opportunity to become heirs of salvation.

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Paul the Apostle alluded to this ordinance when he needed to reprove backsliding Corinthians regarding the reality of the resurrection. Those who received his epistle were well acquainted with this ordinance, known as baptism for the dead. Paul wrote: "Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? why are they then baptized for the dead?" (1 Cor. 15:29.)

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Today, the resurrection is accepted as perhaps the most glorious concept of Christianity, but where in Christianity do we find the ordinance of baptism for the dead, which Paul used to argue for the reality of the resurrection? This was one of many teachings and ordinances that were lost or changed as early Christians endured tragic persecution and saw the doctrines of Christ changed by those wishing to make them more palatable to a world steeped in Greek philosophy.

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From both the Bible and scholastic studies of the last half century, it is clear that baptism for the dead was practiced by the early Christians. 2 Is it any wonder, then, that when it came time for the Lord Jesus Christ to restore to earth in the latter days his gospel in its purity and power, he would restore the truths concerning salvation for the dead? 3 With such truths restored, the Lord also restored the power and authority of his priesthood. Why? So that the ordinances performed, both for the living and the dead, would be valid and binding before God.

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Prior to his departure from mortality, the Lord gave priesthood power to Peter, the chief Apostle, so that he and others to whom he delegated that power could perform baptisms and the other ordinances vital to man's salvation. To Peter the Lord promised, "I will [page 49] give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 16:19).

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These same priesthood keys were restored in the latter days to the Prophet Joseph Smith at the opening of this dispensation. Speaking to the Prophet Joseph Smith of this binding power, the Lord clarified the conditions that exist after we leave mortality: "And verily I say unto you, that the conditions . . . are these: All covenants, contracts, bonds, obligations, oaths, vows, performances, connections, associations, or expectations, that are not made and entered into and sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise, of him who is anointed . . . (and I have appointed unto my servant Joseph to hold this power in the last days . . .), are of no efficacy, virtue, or force in and after the resurrection from the dead; for all contracts that are not made unto this end have an end when men are dead.

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"Behold, mine house is a house of order" (D&C 132:7–8).

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Thus, with his priesthood power to seal ordinances on earth and have them binding in heaven, the Lord has extended gospel blessings to the deceased of all mankind. The same ordinances performed for the living can be offered in proxy by someone standing in for the deceased! Not only baptism, but also the covenants and blessings of the endowment and of eternal marriage are made available to all those who could not receive them in this life.

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Each day, thousands of Latter-day Saints enter temples of the Lord and perform these ordinances in behalf of their fathers and mothers, grandfathers and grandmothers—as far back as known records can disclose names and identities of real individuals. These persons—dead to us, but very much alive in the spirit world—are, as the Master said, awaiting the “good tidings” that their work has been performed so that they may receive liberty from the “prison” wherein they “are bound.” When these ordinances are performed on their behalf, they are able to keep to a greater degree the commandments of the Lord and continue their growth and progression.

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Clearly, however, no earthly activity interferes in any way with the right of choice exercised by persons in the spirit world. They are free to accept or reject the ministrations in their behalf. If they choose to accept the ordinances performed for them, exercise faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and repent, they are released from their spiritual bondage. If they choose not to accept those conditions, they remain in their spiritual bondage. Their right to choose remains inviolate. Agency is an eternal inheritance we each have from God our Father, and it is fundamental to our personal development. The Lord’s work goes on in the spirit world as it goes on here in mortality, in that all mankind are graciously *invited*, not forced, to receive the fulness of the gospel and to use it to ennoble their lives.

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The oxen, symbolizing the twelve tribes of Israel, support the Idaho Falls Temple baptismal font. In fonts like this one, members are baptized for the dead. (Copyright by the Corporation of the President, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; no

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These truths concerning salvation for the dead are so important that they were among the first principles taught to the Prophet Joseph Smith at the opening of this dispensation. On 21 September 1823, only three years after he was first visited by the Father and the Son and four years before he would receive the plates of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith was visited by the angel Moroni. The angelic instructor said that the time would soon come when Malachi's Old Testament prophecy would be fulfilled wherein the "hearts of the children"—we, the posterity of our forebears—shall turn "to their fathers"—our ancestors (see Mal. 4:6). Four times Moroni repeated Malachi's prophecy that Elijah the prophet would be sent by the Lord to reveal the authority and knowledge necessary for this work to begin.

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It is the solemn witness of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that Elijah the prophet did come as was both anciently and modernly foretold. While the world went about its normal activities on 3 April 1836, Elijah the prophet appeared to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery in the newly dedicated temple in Kirtland, Ohio, and gave them the authority to reinstate baptism for the dead as well as all other ordinances necessary for the salvation of the dead. "Therefore," said Elijah, "the keys of this dispensation are committed into your hands" (D&C 110:16).

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Since that day in 1836, the Latter-day Saints have built temples throughout the world in which the [page 50] ordinances of the gospel can be performed for our forebears. To facilitate their search for the identities of their progenitors, Latter-day Saints have also established genealogical libraries and other aids to family history research that are used worldwide.

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Stirring witness of salvation for the dead was also given to a subsequent latter-day prophet in 1918. President Joseph F. Smith recorded a vision he received on October 3 as he read and pondered 1 Peter 3:8–20 and 1 Peter 4:6 [1 Pet. 3:8–20; 1 Pet. 4:6] wherein the Apostle Peter discusses the Lord Jesus Christ's visit to the spirit world after his crucifixion:

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"As I pondered over these things which were 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 great and small.

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"And there were gathered together in one place an innumerable company of the spirits of the just.

...

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"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;

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“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. ...

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“I perceived that the Lord went not in person among the wicked and the disobedient who had rejected the truth, to teach them;

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“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. ...

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“Thus was the gospel preached to those who had died in their sins, without a knowledge of the truth, or in transgression, having rejected the prophets.

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“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,

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“And all other principles of the gospel that were necessary for them to know in order to qualify themselves. ...

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“I beheld that the faithful elders of this dispensation, when they depart from mortal life, continue their labors in the preaching of the gospel of repentance and redemption, through the sacrifice of the Only Begotten Son of God, among those who are in darkness and under the bondage of sin in the great world of the spirits of the dead.

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“The dead who repent will be redeemed, through obedience to the ordinances of the house of God” (D&C 138:11–12, 18–19, 29–30, 32–34, 57–58).

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The vital importance of this vicarious work for the dead was underscored by the Prophet Joseph Smith himself—he through whom the power and authority for this work were given and who received much angelic instruction. Said the Prophet:

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“The great designs of God in relation to the salvation of the human family are very little understood by the professedly wise, and intelligent generation in which we live; various and conflicting are the opinions of men concerning the plan of salvation; the requisitions of the Almighty; the necessary preparations for heaven; the state and condition of departed spirits; and the happiness, or misery that is consequent upon the practice of righteousness and iniquity. ... But while one portion of the human race are judging and condemning the other without mercy, 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, causes *'his sun* to rise on the evil and the good; and sends *his rain* on the just and unjust.' He holds the reins of judgment in his hands; he is a wise lawgiver, and will judge all men, [not according to the narrow contracted notions of men, but] 'according to the deeds done in the body whether they be good or evil;' or whether these deeds were done in England, America, Spain, Turkey, India: he will judge them 'not according to what they have not, but according to what they have'; those who have lived without law, will be judged without law, and those who have a law, will be judged by that law; we need not doubt the wisdom and intelligence of the great Jehovah, he will award judgment or mercy to all nations according to their several deserts, [page 51] their means of obtaining intelligence, the laws by which they are governed; the facilities afforded them of obtaining correct information; and his inscrutable designs in relation to the human family: and when the designs of God shall be made manifest, and the curtain of futurity be withdrawn, we shall all of us eventually have to confess, that the Judge of all the earth has done right.

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"The situation of the Christian nations after death is a subject that has called forth all the wisdom, and talent of the philosopher, and the divine; and 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; without any mitigation of his punishment, alleviation of his pain or the most latent hope of a deliverance while endless ages shall roll along. However orthodox this principle may be, we shall find that it is at variance with the testimony of holy writ. ...

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"The great Jehovah contemplated the whole of the events connected with the earth, pertaining to the plan of salvation, before it rolled into existence, or ever the 'morning stars sung together for joy,' the past, the present and the future, were, and are with him one eternal now; he knew of the fall of Adam, the iniquities of the antediluvians, of the depth of iniquity that would be connected with the human family; their weakness and strength, their power and glory, apostasies, their crimes, their righteousness, and iniquity; he comprehended the fall of man, and their redemption; he knew the plan of salvation, and pointed it out; he was acquainted with the situation of all nations; and with their destiny; he ordered all things according to the council of his *own* will, he knows the situation of both the living, and the dead, and has made ample provision for their redemption, according to their several circumstances, and the laws of the kingdom of God, whether in this world, or in the world to come. ...

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"When speaking about the blessings pertaining to the gospel, and the consequences connected with disobedience to its requirements, we are frequently asked the question, 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 in heaven. ...

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“And now as the great purposes of God are hastening to their accomplishment and the things spoken of in the prophets are fulfilling, as the kingdom of God is established on the earth, and the ancient order of things restored, the Lord has manifested to us this duty and privilege, and we are commanded to be baptized for our dead” (*Times and Seasons*, 15 Apr. 1842).

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The doctrinal foundation has been laid. The priesthood authority has been restored. And now baptism for the dead is being performed in the temples of the Latter-day Saints. So also are all the other necessary ordinances required for the happiness of family life hereafter. Couples long since dead are being sealed in marriage to each other, children are being bound to their parents, and parents are being bound to their children.

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All the tender feelings of any parent or spouse—indeed of every spouse, every parent, and every child in the world of spirits—can find fulfillment in the temples of God. To perform this labor of love in their behalf is the obligation and blessing of all who come to know the way of the Lord in these latter days. It is no wonder that the subject of temples is so cherished and sacred to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

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Gospel topics: Jesus Christ, death, family history, plan of salvation, temple work

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[illustration] *Christ Preaching in the Spirit World*, by Robert T. Barrett. After his crucifixion, Christ visited the spirit world and there preached “the everlasting gospel” (D&C 138:19; see also 1 Pet. 3:19).

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[illustration] Right: *Elijah Restoring the Keys of the Sealing Power of the Priesthood*, by Robert T. Barrett. In 1836, Elijah appeared to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery in the Kirtland Temple to restore the keys of the sealing power, as was prophesied (see Mal. 4:5–6).

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[photo] Members of the Church turn their hearts to their fathers as they research the names of their ancestors.

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[photo] The Provo Temple. Members submit the names of their ancestors for temple work, then attend temples in order to perform ordinances for those who have died.