The Savior’s Visit to the Spirit World

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What Jesus did during the hours between His death and Resurrection provides the doctrinal foundation for building temples.

Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46). After Jesus spoke these words from the cross, His immortal spirit took leave of His physical body. His lifeless flesh was laid in a sepulchre, and a stone sealed its entrance.

A brief time later, angels declared to a group of women gathered at His tomb, “He is not here, but is risen” (Luke 24:6). Jesus’ spirit had reentered His body, forming a glorious union of spirit and flesh never again to be separated.

The facts of Jesus’ death and Resurrection are hailed by those of Christian denominations as fundamental tenets. However, what Jesus’ immortal spirit did after His death and before His Resurrection is a mystery to all but the Latter-day Saints. And the significance of what He did during those hours provides the doctrinal foundation for building temples across the earth. Furthermore, a testimony of what He did can greatly console those who mourn the death of a loved one.

The Requirement of Baptism

To understand why Jesus visited the spirit world after His death, we must return to a night following His first cleansing of the temple at Jerusalem. Nicodemus, because of his prominence as “a ruler of the Jews,” came to the Savior to discuss matters of great concern. Nicodemus acknowledged the Master as “a teacher come from God.” Jesus taught him, “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:1–2, 5).

We are, therefore, required to be baptized if we desire admittance into God’s kingdom. Even Jesus Christ, the one and only sinless man to walk this earth, submitted to this universal requirement (see 2 Nephi 31:5–7).1

Mercy and Justice for the Unbaptized

The Lord’s plan of salvation is known by many names. One name is “the plan of mercy” (Alma 42:15). Mercy implies compassion and forgiveness, whereas justice can refer to punishment and retribution. But there are also some softer qualities of divine justice, including equity and fairness.

How can His plan be merciful or just if it...
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requires every accountable individual to be baptized when billions of people have died without the opportunity to hear the gospel and choose baptism? The Apostle Peter described the provisions God has made: "For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just [meaning Jesus Christ] for the unjust [meaning you and me], that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit" (1 Peter 3:18). This Christ did in order to bring the gift of eternal life to all.

The Apostle Peter continued, "By which also he [Jesus Christ] went and preached unto the spirits in prison" (1 Peter 3:19).

Who were these people in the spirit world? They were both righteous and unrighteous people who had died. Some had been disobedient and rejected the gospel in the days of Noah (see Joseph Smith Translation, 1 Peter 3:20). Some had been in the spirit world for thousands of years!

Why was the gospel preached in the spirit world? So that the dead might repent and live according to the will of God (see Joseph Smith Translation, 1 Peter 4:6). Mercy and justice require that those who have died without an opportunity to hear the gospel in mortality receive that opportunity in the spirit world. Mercy and justice also require that those who have rejected the gospel in this life receive some opportunity to hear it again.

What about the obedient? People who have accepted and lived according to the gospel of Jesus Christ also inhabit the spirit world. The prophet Enoch foresaw the Crucifixion of the Savior of the world and when "the earth groaned; and the rocks were rent." He saw that at the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, "the saints arose, and were crowned at the right hand of the Son of Man." He further saw the obedient in the spirit world come forth in their glorified resurrected bodies, while "the remainder [the wicked] were reserved in chains of darkness until the judgment of the great day" (Moses 7:56–57). Thus, the obedient enter the spirit world to wait the day of their resurrection.
The prophet Alma taught that while the obedient wait, they dwell in “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” (Alma 40:12).

His Visit Brought Dramatic Changes

The wondrous benefits to the obedient because of the Savior’s visit to the spirit world were seen in vision by President Joseph F. Smith (1838–1918). He saw the spirit world just before the Savior’s arrival there. The obedient spirits “were gathered together in one place” and “filled with joy and gladness, . . . rejoicing together because the day of their deliverance was at hand” (D&C 138:12, 15).

The Savior appeared to them and declared that the day of their glorious resurrection had come. He spoke to them of “the everlasting gospel, the doctrine of the resurrection and the redemption of mankind from the fall, and from individual sins on conditions of repentance” (D&C 138:19).

Among those gathered were Adam and Eve, Noah, and Abraham. Book of Mormon prophets also mingled in the assembly. “These the Lord taught, and gave them power to come forth, after his resurrection from the dead, to enter into his Father’s kingdom” (D&C 138:51).

President Joseph F. Smith wondered how the Savior could have preached to all the people in the spirit world in the short time between His death and Resurrection. But President Smith perceived that “unto the wicked he did not go, and among the ungodly and the unrepentant . . . , his voice was not raised . . .

“But behold, from among the righteous, he organized his forces and appointed messengers . . . [to] proclaim liberty to the captives who were bound, even unto all who would repent of their sins and receive the gospel.

“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” (D&C 138:20, 30–32).

The work of preaching the gospel to these unbaptized dead goes on even to this day. The messengers now being dispatched by the Savior to the unbaptized who have died include the faithful members of the Church of this dispensation who have died. For when the faithful “depart from mortal life, [they] 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” (D&C 138:57).

Work for the Dead

One crucial question, however, remains to be answered in order to fulfill the merciful and just plan of God. How can a dead person be baptized? This dilemma is solved through the ordinance of baptism for the dead, which is performed only in sacred temples. If we are worthy, you and I may go to a temple and there receive the ordinance of baptism on behalf of individuals who are dead.

Baptism for the dead was practiced among the Saints in the days of Peter and Paul. In teaching the Corinthians about Jesus Christ and the Resurrection of the dead, the Apostle Paul asked, “Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? why are they then baptized for the dead?” (1 Corinthians 15:29).

Baptism for the dead and other sacred ordinances performed for the dead were restored to earth through the Prophet Joseph Smith. These sacred ordinances are now performed in more than 100 temples.
throughout the earth. These temples are an outward manifestation of our testimony of the reality of the work that goes on for the dead both here and in the spirit world, a work initiated by the Savior’s visit to the righteous dead.

Common Questions

This doctrine of ordinance work for the dead raises questions among those not of our faith and sometimes among Latter-day Saints. Following are answers to some of these common questions.

What happens if the deceased person doesn’t want to repent or doesn’t want the blessings of baptism? We believe that everyone is free to choose, both in this life and in the spirit world. This freedom is essential to the plan of our Heavenly Father. No one will be coerced into accepting ordinances performed on his or her behalf by another. Baptism for the dead offers an opportunity, but it does not override a person’s agency. But if this ordinance is not performed for them, deceased persons are robbed of the choice to accept or reject baptism.

Why do you perform baptisms for deceased people whose lives on earth indicated little inclination to keep the commandments of God? We believe that many people are like Amulek, who once said of himself, “I did harden my heart, for I was called many times and I would not hear; therefore I knew concerning [the gospel of Jesus Christ], yet I would not know” (Alma 10:6). Amulek later became a great missionary and teacher of his people.

There was also a time in the Book of Mormon when the more righteous Lamanites hunted down the extremely hardened Gadianton robbers, and “they did preach the word of God among the more wicked part of them, insomuch that this band of robbers was utterly destroyed from among the Lamanites” (Helaman 6:37).

We simply do not know who among the dead will turn their hearts to the Lord and repent. We are not in a position to judge. We must do the work and leave the matter in the hands of the deceased person and the Lord.

For Those Who Mourn

The Savior Himself greatly anticipated His visit to the obedient in the spirit world: “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).

His visit organized the preaching of the gospel to those in the spirit world. While in a state of happiness and peace called paradise, the dead who have been obedient await the receiving of a “fulness of joy” (D&C 138:17; see also Alma 40:12). They are busily engaged in the call to preach the gospel.

The dead who have not heard or who rejected the gospel in mortality are in darkness, or in a state of misery (see Alma 40:14; D&C 138:2). Yet because of His visit, we have a hope for their salvation. We may go to the temple and turn the key, opening the gates of heaven for them and, by our service, for ourselves. For we know “that they without us cannot be made perfect—neither can we without our dead be made perfect” (D&C 128:15). Mercy and justice combine to give all of our Father’s children the opportunity to return to Him.

NOTE

1. Individuals exempt from the universal requirement of baptism are little children, and adults who are unaccountable for their actions because of a mental disability. They are in an “infant state, innocent before God” (D&C 55:58). The prophet Mormon taught: “This thing shall ye teach—repentance and baptism unto those who are accountable and capable of committing sin. . . . Little children need no repentance, neither baptism” (Moroni 8:10–11).