

Section 104

The Savior told a story in Luke 16:19–31 about a rich man who “fared sumptuously” in life while a “beggar named Lazarus” waited in vain for some of the rich man’s table scraps. When the two men died, angels carried Lazarus into Abraham’s bosom while the rich man went to hell. “And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments,” begging for Lazarus to relieve his suffering. Section 104 evokes that story and applies it to Latter-day Saints, but it is hard to recognize that now.¹

Early manuscripts of the revelation refer to “Dives,” a proper name: “He shall with Dives lift up his eyes <in hell> being in torment.”² The intertextual relationship of this passage and the story in Luke is obvious, but who is Dives? *Dives* is Latin for “rich, opulent, wealthy” and is the word in the Latin Vulgate Bible translated into English as *rich* in Luke 16:19: “there was a certain rich man.” In the Middle Ages, the word *dives* was adopted as the name of the rich man, and that’s how it’s used in D&C 104:18.

The revelation came when the problems of the United Firm had become acute. The Firm was composed of Church leaders, including the two bishops, and was responsible to manage the Church’s two mercantile firms and its printing office. The printing office had been destroyed in Independence, Missouri, and the mercantile there had also been shut down by the mob’s ultimatum. The United Firm still owed debts on

¹ Steven C. Harper, “The Rich Man, Lazarus, and Doctrine & Covenants 104:18,” *BYU Studies* 47:4 (2008): 51–54.

² “[Revelation Book 1](#),” 193, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, accessed November 13, 2020; “[Revelation Book 2](#),” 102, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, accessed November 13, 2020.

these unprofitable losses, and its members were growing more indebted to Bishop Whitney's remaining mercantile in Ohio, which in turn owed its creditors. Section 103's expensive command to lead a large group of men to Missouri to aid the Saints there added to the pressure.

Joseph counseled with the other members of the United Firm. He sought and received the revelation in section 104 to address the complex financial reality. It is no overstatement to say that Joseph was pretty frustrated with Saints who could and should have relieved the Church's financial obstacles but chose not to.³

The Lord was pretty frustrated, too, including with some members of the United Firm whose covetousness was complicating the problem. Joseph and the members of the United Firm who were in Kirtland met on April 10, 1834, and reluctantly decided to dissolve the Firm and make its members individual stewards over its various properties. Section 104 affirmed those decisions.

All of that helps explain why the revelation emphatically sets forth the law of consecration. The Lord declares the first principle of consecration—"the earth is the Lord's" (Exodus 9:29)—repeatedly and clearly: "I, the Lord, stretched out the heavens, and built the earth, my very handiwork; and all things therein are mine" (D&C 104:14).

The Lord's logic is potent: He made the earth; it is therefore His. He endowed mankind with agency to act on the ample, abundant earth as stewards. He decreed that the rich must share with the poor (D&C 104:16). "Therefore," the next premise follows, "if any man take of the abundance which I have made, and impart not his portion, according to the law of my gospel, unto the poor and the needy, he shall, with the wicked, lift up his eyes in hell, being in torment" (v. 18).

Section 104 begins with a curse upon the members of the United Firm who had broken the covenant of Section 82. "I the Lord am not to be mocked in these things," He says, referring to making covenants with "feigned words" (D&C 104:4–6). Covenants are serious and section 104 announces that those who break the covenant to consecrate cannot escape the Lord's wrath and the buffetings of Satan, as prophesied in section 82:21. So the Lord offers the members of the United Firm an opportunity to repent and consecrate in verse 10, after which he reviews the law of consecration in verses

³ "Letter to Orson Hyde, 7 April 1834," 82, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed November 13, 2020.

11–18 before getting very specific in verses 19–46 about the stewardships for which He will hold each members of the Firm accountable.

Beginning in verse 47, the Lord dissolves the United Firm into two firms, one in Kirtland, Ohio, and the other in Missouri. Again, He emphasizes that this Firm, which was supposed to last, and would have, according to the terms of the covenant in section 82:20–21, has been undermined by the broken covenants of free agents, “the covenants being broken through transgression, by covetousness and feigned words” (D&C 104:52).

Beginning in verse 54, the Lord reviews the principle of stewardship with emphasis on how it relates to the specific stewardships he gave to the Literary Firm in section 70 (and the United Firm’s responsibility to support the Literary Firm as revealed in sections 78 and 82). Verses 55–56 reaffirm the first premise of consecration—“the earth is the Lord’s, and the fulness thereof” (Psalm 24:1)—with an inescapable logic that brings covenant-breaking Saints face-to-face with hypocrisy: If the Lord is not Creator and Owner of the earth, why worship Him? If He is, why pretend to be “owners” of anything or to resent or resist his prerogative to distribute his resources in what he calls “mine own way” (D&C 104:16)? In other words, to acknowledge the Lord at all is to accept one’s role as an accountable steward, not an unaccountable owner determined to “play-act just a little longer—risking righteousness and true happiness merely in order to be reassured about our independence.”⁴

The revelation ends by reminding the brethren that the Lord is the sovereign master who has given them agency to act and stewardships to be acted upon and that he will continue to hold them accountable. He concludes with what must have been a reassuring guarantee that His house will not be broken up (D&C 104:86).

After the Lord revealed section 104, Joseph and his brethren in the United Firm at Kirtland acted on properties the Lord had assigned each of them as stewardships. They also forgave each other all debts they owed to the Firm. This relieved Joseph of paying \$1,151.31, and the six men combined forgave debts to each other totaling \$3,635.35.⁵ That did not satisfy the debts they owed other creditors, however.

⁴ Neal A. Maxwell, *All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1979), 2.

⁵ Frederick G. Williams Papers, CHL. Amt. of Balances due as of April 23, 1834, Newel K. Whitney Collection, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah. Max Parkin

Mindful of those obligations, Joseph and his brethren acted on this revelation. They did the specific things the Lord set forth as terms on which He promised to “soften the hearts of those to whom you are in debt, until I shall send forth means unto you for your deliverance” (D&C 104:80–82). Joseph’s journal records humility, diligent effort, and faithful prayers for this deliverance and documents that it came as prophesied. On the day the revelation came, Joseph and other members of the Firm “united in asking the Lord” to bless Zebedee Coltrin and Jacob Myers in their efforts “to borrow for us.”

Meanwhile, donations began to pour in from consecrating Saints. Joseph and Oliver Cowdery “united in prayer” for such blessings to continue and covenanted, as the Lord was enabling them to pay their debts, they would return one-tenth of what they received “to be bestowed upon the poor of his Church, or as he shall command, and that we will be faithful over that which he has entrusted to our care.”⁶ They prayed and prayed, asking the Lord “to lift the mortgage on the farm upon which the temple was being built.”⁷

One evening they received an impression “that in a short time the Lord would arrange his providences in a merciful manner and send us assistance to deliver us from debt and bondage.”⁸ Two months later, as creditors were about to foreclose on the temple site, a converted hotel owner from New York, John Tanner, arrived in Kirtland with \$2000, “with which amount the farm was redeemed.”⁹ Good for His word, the Lord had delivered the “means” as promised (D&C 104:80). In the meantime, Joseph and his brethren learned to trust in the Lord, pray in faith, and be humble and diligent. The Saints in general also rose to the occasion and, though belatedly, consecrated to the building of Kirtland and its crowning temple. As a result of their offerings, the Lord poured out blessings in that temple that no amount of money could buy (see sections 109–110).

painstakingly documented each of these in “Joseph Smith and the United Firm,” *BYU Studies* 46:3 (2007): 5–66.

⁶ “[Covenant, 29 November 1834](#),” 88, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed November 13, 2020.

⁷ John Tanner, “Sketch of an Elder’s Life,” *Scraps of Biography* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor’s Office), 12.

⁸ “[Journal, 1832–1834](#),” p. 92, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed November 13, 2020.

⁹ Tanner, “Sketch of an Elder’s Life,” 12.