
The Spirits of the Dead

D&C 138: Introduction

At the October 1918 general conference, President Joseph F. Smith said,

As most of you, I suppose, are aware, I have been undergoing a siege of very serious illness for the last five months. ... I have not lived alone these five months. I have dwelt in the spirit of prayer, of supplication, of faith and of determination; and I have had my communication with the Spirit of the Lord continuously.¹

President Smith then told of pondering the question of how the Savior could have taught the gospel to so many in the spirit world in so short a time and of seeing a vision of the redemption of the dead.

After the October 1918 general conference, President Smith dictated his vision to his son, Joseph Fielding Smith.² The text of the vision first appeared in the November 30, 1918, edition of the *Deseret Evening News*.

Fifty-eight years later, at the April 1976 general conference, President N. Eldon Tanner, First Counselor in the First Presidency, said,

At a meeting of the Council of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve held in the Salt Lake Temple on March 25, 1976, approval was given to add to the Pearl of Great Price the following two revelations: First, a vision of the celestial kingdom given to Joseph Smith, the Prophet, in the Kirtland Temple, on January 21, 1836, which deals with the salvation of those who die without a knowledge of the gospel. And

¹ Joseph F. Smith, "Continuous Communication with the Spirit of the Lord," in Conference Report, October 1918, 2.

² Joseph Fielding Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1938), 466.

second, a vision given to President Joseph F. Smith in Salt Lake City, Utah, on October 3, 1918, showing the visit of the Lord Jesus Christ in the spirit world and setting forth the doctrine of the redemption of the dead. It is proposed that we sustain and approve this action and adopt these revelations as part of the standard works of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.³

By an act of common consent, those assembled voted in affirmation to accept the proposal. The two visions—one given to the Prophet Joseph Smith and the other to President Joseph F. Smith—were added to the Pearl of Great Price. In June 1979 the First Presidency announced that the two visions would be printed in the Doctrine and Covenants.

Of his Vision of the Redemption of the Dead, President Joseph F. Smith said, “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 small and great” (D&C 138:11). President Smith was given to know that the Savior visited the spirits who had been “faithful in the testimony of Jesus while they lived in mortality” (v. 12). The Savior visited those who had “offered sacrifice in the similitude of the great sacrifice of the Son of God” and had “suffered tribulation in their Redeemer’s name” (v. 13). These spirits had “departed the mortal life, firm in the hope of a glorious resurrection, through the grace of God the Father and his Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ” and were “filled with joy and gladness, and were rejoicing together because the day of their deliverance was at hand” (vv. 14–15). President Smith was also told that the “Lord went not in person among the wicked and disobedient.” The Lord “organized his forces and appointed messengers, clothed with power and authority” to carry his gospel message to the hosts of the dead.⁴

As to who are the appointed messengers to carry the gospel message to the dead, Wilford Woodruff said, “Every Apostle, every Seventy, 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 to there than there is here. ... They have work on the other side of the veil; and they want men, and they call them.”⁵ President Joseph F. Smith said that they

are preaching that same gospel that they lived and preached here, to those who are in darkness in the spirit world and who had not had the

³ James R. Clark, “Our Pearl of Great Price: From Mission Pamphlet to Standard Work,” *Ensign*, August 1976, 17.

⁴ Royden G. Derrick, “Moral Values and Rewards,” *Ensign*, May 1981, 66–67.

⁵ Wilford Woodruff, “The Channels of Communication from God to Man,—Dreams, Visions, etc.,” *Journal of Discourses*, 22:334.

privilege before they went. The gospel must be preached to them. We are not perfect without them— they cannot be perfect without us.

Now, among all these millions of spirits that have lived on the earth and have passed away, from generation to generation, since the beginning of the world, without knowledge of the gospel— among them you may count that at least one-half are women.

Who is going to preach the gospel to the women? Who is going to carry the testimony of Jesus Christ to the hearts of the women who have passed away without a knowledge of the gospel? Well, to my mind it is a simple thing. These good sisters who have been set apart, ordained to the work, called to it, authorized by the authority of the Holy Priesthood to minister for their sex, in the House of God for the living and for the dead, will be fully authorized and empowered to preach the gospel and minister to the women while the Elders and Prophets are preaching it to the men. ... Those who are authorized to preach the gospel here and are appointed here to do that work will not be idle after they have passed away, but will continue to exercise the rights that they obtain here under the Priesthood of the Son of God to minister for the salvation of those who have died without a knowledge of the truth.⁶

⁶ Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Joseph F. Smith, Sixth President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1939), 460–461.