

Redeeming the Dead

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Before the resurrection and final judgment, is there an opportunity for individuals who have died to be redeemed or to improve their eternal opportunities? Another Sword Series™ essay discusses the spirit world where such individuals reside. What can be done for these individuals once they are in a post-mortal condition and who can help these individuals on earth?

A Desire to Help Those Who Have Died

There are many Christians who pray for the dead as part of their worship services—mainly Catholics during the liturgical celebration. True Christian doctrine takes these prayers to an entirely new level through temple ordinances. The concept of helping to redeem the dead demonstrates the faith rendered by Christians on behalf of those who are caught up in the spirit world.

Preaching to the Spirits in Prison

The scriptures make clear that Christ himself visited the spirit world and commenced the preaching of the gospel to the dead. John 5:25 states, “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.” 1 Peter 3:18-19 states, “For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison.”

Doctrine and Covenants 138 records a vision given to the prophet Joseph F. Smith on the preaching of the gospel to those in the spirit world. In that vision the prophet saw Jesus Christ “went not in person among the wicked and the disobedient who had rejected the truth to teach them” (D&C 138:29), but rather he chose spirits “from among the righteous” and thus “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” (D&C 138:30).

The vision goes on to describe the work being done in the spirit world: These spirits “were taught faith in God, repentance from sin, vicarious baptism for the remission of sins, [and] the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands” (D&C 138:33).

Vicariously Helping the Spirits in Prison

This great work of preaching the gospel in the spirit world, more specifically to those in spirit prison, is on-going and will continue until the second resurrection. These efforts are essential and demonstrate the great mercy of our Heavenly Father in not wanting to lose one soul in the eternities. Just as many of the righteous spirits are given the opportunity to preach the gospel in the spirit world, we are given the opportunity to take part in the work of redeeming the dead through vicarious ordinances performed on earth in the holy temple. This principle of vicarious work for the dead was given to the prophet Joseph Smith by the Lord through revelation.

Although the concept of vicarious work may seem foreign to some Christians, the prophet Gordon B. Hinckley offers the following: “I think that vicarious work for the dead more nearly approaches the vicarious sacrifice of the Savior Himself than any other work of which I know. It is given with love, without hope of compensation, or repayment or anything of the kind. What a glorious principle” (Gordon B. Hinckley, “Excerpts from Recent Addresses of President Gordon B. Hinckley,” *Ensign*, Jan 1998, 72)

When work is performed for the dead there isn’t an automatic change, nor does such work usurp one’s moral agency. These ordinances are performed and available for acceptance by the spirits in prison for their benefit in

same way that the Atonement of Christ is available to everyone who chooses to have faith in him and repent. Nothing is compelled. At every stage of this life and after it, one is free to choose.

The Motivation to Helping Deceased Ancestors

The motivation behind this vicarious work in the temple is a combination of love of the individuals for whom the work is being performed and a firm and relentless testimony of the Savior. Todd Christofferson of the seventy explains the nature of this testimony of Christ in relation to temple work: “Our anxiety to redeem the dead, and the time and resources we put behind that commitment, are, above all, an expression of our witness concerning Jesus Christ. It constitutes as powerful a statement as we can make concerning His divine character and mission. It testifies, first, of Christ’s Resurrection; second, of the infinite reach of His Atonement; third, that He is the sole source of salvation; fourth, that He has established the conditions for salvation; and, fifth, that He will come again” (D. Todd Christofferson of the Presidency of the Seventy, “The Redemption of the Dead and the Testimony of Jesus,” *Liahona*, Jan 2001, 10-13).

The Importance of Family History

Christians are encouraged to be diligent about completing family history to identify ancestors who are in need of temple ordinances for their eternal progression. In performing these labors of love, the latter generations are turning their hearts towards the earlier generations, fulfilling the prophecy from the Lord, “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse” (Mal. 4:5-6).

Those with a temple recommend are encouraged to frequently attend the temple to perform the needed ordinances for their ancestors and others—an act of on-going service that brings love and inspiration into both the living and the dead. Each ordinance is done in the spirit and name of Jesus Christ who said, “I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live” (John 11:25). There is a deep belief that Christ “died for all” (2 Cor. 5:15) and that

“He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2).

For Those Who Think Work for the Dead is Strange

At first glance this concept of actively doing service in the temple for the dead will be unfamiliar to most—perhaps even strange. Praying for the dead is one thing, but being vicariously baptized and confirmed for the dead is an entirely different matter! However, when one takes the time to ponder and reflect on it, if you are willing to pray for the dead during a worship service, why wouldn’t you be willing to do more if more could be done to help these loved ones? If God allows us to pray for those who are dead, wouldn’t he allow us to intercede more fully by doing work on their behalf as proxies, much like what Christ has done for us? Consider such scriptures as Obadiah 21 in the Old Testament which states, “saviours shall come up on mount Zion,” and Hebrews 11:40 which states, “God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect.”

One might consider this in a much broader context when considering that many have and will leave this life without having been baptized at all—many through no choice of their own. In some Christian sects those who have passed through mortality without baptism are left in an unpredictable state before the resurrection. Such doctrine is not consistent with the justice and mercy of God. If someone dies without knowledge of the gospel, and/or the opportunity to be baptized, would God leave their salvation up in the air?

Since the answer to the aforementioned question is a resounding no, one must reconcile the following scripture, “...Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). If someone dies and no longer has a body, how can they be baptized? If they can’t be baptized, they cannot enter into the kingdom of God. Applying the doctrine of some Christian sects to this scripture would mean that those not baptized will not enter into the kingdom of God, because some sects do not provide a way for baptism after death.

Paul puts all doubts to rest when he wrote in his letter to the Corinthians: “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). Were there baptisms for the dead performed during the time of Paul? There is no sure way of knowing, but the scripture leaves open the possibility. Perhaps baptism for the dead was yet another restored truth in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

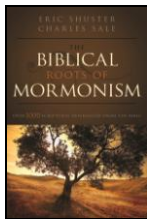
One must also consider scripture from 1 Timothy 2:5 which reads, “There is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.” Jesus Christ is the great mediator between God and men; therefore, the gospel of Jesus Christ can provide a way for those who have left the earth without an opportunity to participate in the required ordinances to have them done by proxy—just as Jesus did for us.

Conclusion

The work of redeeming the dead, a work commenced by the Savior himself, is a devoted demonstration of the Christian passion and belief that Christ will come again in his glory and majesty upon the earth. This work is in preparation of the second coming for both ourselves, and those who have passed on before us. The Christian world knows with a surety that “His grace and promises reach even those who in life do not find Him. Because of Him, the prisoners shall indeed go free” (D. Todd Christofferson of the Presidency of the Seventy, “The Redemption of the Dead and the Testimony of Jesus,” Liahona, Jan 2001, 10-13).

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