

## Comments on Doctrine & Covenants 138

This section by Joseph F. Smith is composed of explanatory text surrounding two visions on the subject of post-mortality, with specific focus on post-mortal proselyting. The first vision is of the faithful dead before Christ's death (v. 11-24), and the second is of the ministry of the faithful dead after Christ's death to the unfaithful (v. 29-37). The two visions apparently happened in relatively close succession, but how closely they were received is unclear. Both were apparently received before the October 3, 1918 General Conference where President Smith spoke of them briefly.

The subject matter of this section is very influential in the theology of the Church with respect to understanding the importance of redeeming the dead through genealogy and proxy ordinance work. At the time of this revelation the [ecclesia's interest in this matter was waning](#), and this revelation changed that course.

1 On the third of October, in the year nineteen hundred and eighteen, I sat in my room pondering over the scriptures; 2 And reflecting upon the great atoning sacrifice that was made by the Son of God, for the redemption of the world; 3 And the great and wonderful love made manifest by the Father and the Son in the coming of the Redeemer into the world; 4 That through his atonement, and by obedience to the principles of the gospel, mankind might be saved.

v1-4 President [Joseph F. Smith](#), son of Hyrum Smith, nephew of Joseph Smith, was President of the Church at the time of this revelation. Nearing the end of his life, during a time of personal and worldwide turmoil, he was thinking about the atonement.

5 while I was thus engaged, my mind reverted to the writings of the apostle Peter, to the primitive saints scattered abroad throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, and other parts of Asia, where the gospel had been preached after the crucifixion of the Lord. 6 I opened the Bible and read the third and fourth chapters of the first epistle of Peter, and as I read I was greatly impressed, more than I had ever been before, with the following passages: 7 "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: 8 "By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; 9 "which sometime were disobedient, when once the long-suffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water." (1 Peter 3:18-20.) 10 "For for this cause was the gospel

preached also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit.” (1 Peter 4:6.)

v5-10 While thinking on this subject, Smith reviews the Scriptural passages that comment on the matter. The previously revealed Scriptures on the subject become the springboard for the new revelation.

This pattern is repeated in v. 25-28 leading to the second vision (v. 29-37). This clearly suggests that when searching over a subject in the gospel, one is expected to be fully familiar with what has already been revealed on the subject before the Lord will reveal anything additional. We should be thoroughly acquainted with what the Lord has already said on the subject at hand before we ask Him for any additional details on the matter.

Note the list of prominent persons in v. 38-49 puts particular emphasis on those prophets who testified in writing on the subject of the resurrection and redemption of the dead, showing Smith’s clear understanding of those texts in addition to those explicitly cited.

11 As I pondered over these things which are 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 small and great. 12 And there were gathered together in one place an innumerable company of the spirits of the just, who had been faithful in the testimony of Jesus while they lived in mortality; 13 And 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. 14 All these 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. 15 I beheld that they were filled with joy and gladness, and were rejoicing together because the day of their deliverance was at hand. 16 They were assembled awaiting the advent of the Son of God into the spirit world, to declare their redemption from the bands of death. 17 Their sleeping dust was to be restored unto its perfect frame, bone to his bone, and the sinews and the flesh upon them, the spirit and the body to be united never again to be divided, that they might receive a fulness of joy.

18 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; 19 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.

20 But unto the wicked he did not go, and among the ungodly and the unrepentant who had defiled themselves while in the

flesh, his voice was not raised; 21 Neither did the rebellious who rejected the testimonies and the warnings of the ancient prophets behold his presence, nor look upon his face. 22 Where these were, darkness reigned,  
but among the righteous there was peace; 23 And the saints rejoiced in their redemption, and bowed the knee and acknowledged the Son of God as their Redeemer and Deliverer from death and the chains of hell. 24 Their countenances shone, and the radiance from the presence of the Lord rested upon them, and they sang praises unto his holy name.

v11-24 The faithful believers in Christ wait for His appearance among them in the post-mortal spirit world (v. 11-17). After his death, Christ appears to them, but not to those who did not accept and worship Him (v. 18-24).

v11-17 The faithful believers perceive the important nature of Christ's death, having understood in mortality the doctrines taught in the Scriptures. These people worshipped the Lord through literal sacrifices, understanding it represented the sacrifice of the Only Begotten Son, who would redeem them from death and sin. These post-mortal people know the end of Christ's mortality is imminent, and are gathered together anticipating his arrival, rejoicing because they know they will shortly be resurrected.

v18-24 These verses highlight the appearance of the post-mortal Christ with a rhetorical emphasis on light versus darkness. Those who accept Christ enjoy His presence and His work (v. 18-19) and are filled with joy and light (v. 23-24). But, those who do not accept Christ do not meet him and are left in darkness (v. 20-22).

v18-19 The post-mortal Christ is visiting with the post-mortal faithful people who accepted and worshipped Him while they were in the flesh (v. 11-17), including dispensation heads and prominent persons from the Bible and Book of Mormon (v. 38-54). And yet, He lectures them in v. 19 on the seeming basics of the gospel. We would think they already knew these fundamental principles of the gospel, but, clearly, the post-mortal Lord has more to explain on these subjects to even the most faithful and knowledgeable people. As much as we think we know on these subjects, it pales in comparison to what we could learn post-mortally in the presence of the Lord.

v18 "vast multitude", sometimes we think the straight and narrow path results in few obtaining it, but, here, it is plain there are many who have obtained it.

25 I marveled, for I understood that the Savior spent about three years in his ministry among the Jews and those of the house of Israel, endeavoring to teach them the everlasting gospel and call them unto repentance; 26 And yet, notwithstanding his mighty works, and miracles, and proclamation of the truth, in great power and authority, there were but few who hearkened to his voice, and rejoiced in his presence, and received salvation at his hands. 27 But his ministry among those who were dead was limited to the brief time intervening between the crucifixion and his resurrection; 28 And I wondered at the words of Peter--wherein he said that the Son of God preached unto the spirits in prison, who sometime were disobedient, when once the long-suffering of God waited in the days of Noah--and how it was possible for him to preach to those spirits and perform the necessary labor among them in so short a time.

v25-28 After seeing the first vision of the post-mortals Christ appearing to the faithful dead, but not appearing to the unfaithful dead (v. 11-24), Smith is wondering over how it is Jesus could preach to the wicked spirits in prison when his mortal ministry was relatively short, so few accepted Him. He wonders over the connection to what Peter said about Him preaching to the wicked who are deceased, when the vision he just personally received indicates Christ did not preach to the wicked, a seeming contradiction.

29 And as I wondered, my eyes were opened, and my understanding quickened, and I perceived that the Lord went not in person among the wicked and the disobedient who had rejected the truth, to teach them; 30 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; and thus was the gospel preached to the dead. 31 And the chosen messengers went forth to declare the acceptable day of the Lord and proclaim liberty to the captives who were bound, even unto all who would repent of their sins and receive the gospel.

32 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. 33 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. 34 And all other principles of the gospel that were necessary for them to know in order to qualify themselves that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit. 35 And so it was made known among the dead, both small and great, the unrighteous as well as the faithful, that redemption had been wrought through the sacrifice of the Son of God upon the cross.

36 Thus was it made known that our Redeemer spent his time during his sojourn in the world of spirits, instructing and preparing the faithful spirits of the prophets who had testified of him in the flesh; 37 That they might carry the message of redemption unto all the dead, unto whom he could not go personally, because of their rebellion and transgression, that they through the ministration of his servants might also hear his words.

v29-37 Smith has a second vision, wherein the faithful persons from the first vision (v. 11-19, 23-24) are organized, authorized and sent to preach the gospel to the unfaithful persons who had not previously accepted Christ (v. 20-22).

38 Among the great and mighty ones who were assembled in this vast congregation of the righteous were Father Adam, the Ancient of Days and father of all, 39 And our glorious Mother Eve, with many of her faithful daughters who had lived through the ages and worshiped the true and living God. 40 Abel, the first martyr, was there, and his brother Seth, one of the mighty ones, who was in the express image of his father, Adam. 41 Noah, who gave warning of the flood; Shem, the great high priest; Abraham, the father of the faithful; Isaac, Jacob, and Moses, the great law-giver of Israel; 42 And Isaiah, who declared by prophecy that the Redeemer was anointed to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that were bound, were also there. 43 Moreover, Ezekiel, who was shown in vision the great valley of dry bones, which were to be clothed upon with flesh, to come forth again in the resurrection of the dead, living souls; 44 Daniel, who foresaw and foretold the establishment of the kingdom of God in the latter days, never again to be destroyed nor given to other people; 45 Elias, who was with Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration; 46 And Malachi, the prophet who testified of the coming of Elijah--of whom also Moroni spake to the Prophet Joseph Smith, declaring that he should come before the ushering in of the great and dreadful day of the Lord--were also there. 47 The Prophet Elijah was to plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to their fathers, 48 Foreshadowing the great work to be done in the temples of the Lord in the dispensation of the fulness of times, for the redemption of the dead, and the sealing of the children to their parents, lest the whole earth be smitten with a curse and utterly wasted at his coming. 49 All these and many more, even the prophets who dwelt among the Nephites and testified of the coming of the Son of God, mingled in the vast assembly and waited for their deliverance, 50 For the dead had looked upon the long absence of their spirits from their bodies as a bondage. 51 These the Lord taught, and gave them power to come forth, after his resurrection from the dead, to enter into his Father's kingdom, there to be crowned with immortality and eternal life, 52 And continue thenceforth their labor as had been promised by the

Lord, and be partakers of all blessings which were held in reserve for them that love him.

v38-52 Among the faithful dead are prominent ancient persons from the Bible (v. 38-48) and Book of Mormon(v. 49). All had been waiting for the promises made concerning the resurrection and continuing work of the Lord (v. 50-52).

These verses clearly present a literal reading to the ancient Bible stories, including Adam and Eve, as they are present in the vision as real people who existed in history. This also includes Book of Mormon persons as well. This is clearly hostile to those who see the Scriptures as inspired fictions.

v38-49 The list of prominent characters is chronological, and while it omits many notable persons, Smith places particular emphasis on persons who discussed the current subject at hand of redemption of the dead, specifically Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and, most prominently, Malachi. Smith's intent is to present the doctrine as one that is pervasive and persistent through the Scriptures, and not limited to one dispensation. This is a fundamental matter in the Lord's plans.

v50-52 A parenthesis showing that despite there being a great difference of time and persons in the preceding list (v. 38-49), they are all united in their understanding of the gospel, its promises, and the requirements associated with accepting the gospel. These who accept the blessings of redemption, look forward to continuing the same work they had performed in mortality (v. 52), but were being prohibited from performing in a post-mortal setting (v. 50).

I see verses 50-52 as a parenthetical comment that bridges the ancient persons in v. 38-49 with the contemporary persons of v. 53-59. Verses 50-52 comment on the ancient persons seeing their "bondage" of having their spirits and bodies separated (v. 50) who upon meeting Christ post-mortally can be resurrected and receive eternal life (v. 51) and then can therefore continue their labors (v. 52). This suggests the "bondage" of v. 50 is of not being able to "continue...their labors" of v. 52, which is that of preaching the gospel to the nonbelievers, which is made available by the events of v. 18-24. When I look at v. 50-52, I see 50 and 52 as antithetically parallel and then v. 51 is a crescendo.

This same commitment to the gospel is what binds the ancient persons of v. 38-49 to the contemporary persons of v.

53-59. All who pass through mortality participate in the same process, regardless of whether it was before or after Christ's death. The only thing that changed was those before Christ's death had to wait, while those who died afterwards can immediately get to work.

53 The Prophet Joseph Smith, and my father, Hyrum Smith, Brigham Young, John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, and other choice spirits who were reserved to come forth in the fulness of times to take part in laying the foundations of the great latter-day work, 54 Including the building of the temples and the performance of ordinances therein for the redemption of the dead, were also in the spirit world.

55 I observed that they were also among the noble and great ones who were chosen in the beginning to be rulers in the Church of God. 56 Even before they were born, they, with many others, received their first lessons in the world of spirits and were prepared to come forth in the due time of the Lord to labor in his vineyard for the salvation of the souls of men.

57 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. 58 The dead who repent will be redeemed, through obedience to the ordinances of the house of God, 59 And after they have paid the penalty of their transgressions, and are washed clean, shall receive a reward according to their works, for they are heirs of salvation.

v53-59 Smith also sees more recently deceased persons as well, people who were involved in establishing the work of redeeming the dead in the current dispensation (v. 53-54). All of these people, both ancient and modern, were among the premortally foreordained persons tasked with saving their brothers and sisters (v. 55-56). All of the faithful who are deceased continue their labors in the spirit world (v. 57), preaching repentance to the other deceased who can accept proxy ordinance work and be redeemed (v. 58-59).

v53-54 Note the division made in the vision of ancient historical persons and contemporary persons whom Smith personally knew (v. 53-59). The list preceding the parenthesis (v. 50-52) are all ancient persons he had only read about (v. 38-49), but the later set of people are those whom he knew well and had a personal relationship with (v. 53-59). What unites

them in purpose is their commitment to the gospel, but in Smith's vision, there is a close and different bond to them owing to the firsthand familiarity.

This second set of persons was also clearly not present at the event detailed in v. 18-24, as were the first set. But, regardless, the persons in the second set are there among the first set, engaged in the same labor, because of the same commitment to the principles discussed in v. 50-52.

These verses make it clear the work continues, and was not limited to a brief period of time after the death of Christ. This is an ongoing labor that started with Christ's death, was going on at the time of Smith's vision, and will presumably continue until the Second Resurrection.

v55-56 While v. 38-49 are ancient persons and v. 53-54 are modern persons, all are united in being foreordained to the work, regardless of when they enter into mortality.

**60 Thus was the vision of the redemption of the dead revealed to me, and I bear record, and I know that this record is true, through the blessing of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, even so. Amen.**

v60 Smith closes the revelation with his testimony concerning its veracity.



## Historical Material Pertaining to Doctrine & Covenants 138

The text of this section first published in [Deseret Evening News on Saturday, November 30, 1918, section four, page VII](#) under the title "Vision of the Redemption of the Dead." It was printed in the December, 1918 *Improvement Era*, and in January, 1919 editions of the *Relief Society Magazine*, the *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine*, the *Young Women's Journal*, and the *Millennial Star*. It was first published in the Doctrine and Covenants in the 1981 edition.

For a lengthy discussion on the historical context, see George S. Tate's [The Great World of the Spirits of the Dead](#).

### Excerpt from The Vision of the Redemption of the Dead

During the last six months of his life, President Joseph F. Smith suffered from the effects of advancing years (he was in his eightieth year) and spent much of his time in his own room in the Beehive House. However, President Smith did manage to garner enough strength to attend the 89th Semi-Annual General Conference of the Church (October 1918). At the opening session of the General Conference (Friday, October 4), he arose to welcome and address the Saints, and with a voice filled with emotion he spoke the following:

"As most of you, I suppose, are aware, I have undergone a siege of very serious illness for the last five months. It would be impossible for me, on this occasion, to occupy sufficient time to express the desires of my heart and my feelings, as I would desire to express them to you....

"I will not, I dare not, attempt to enter upon many things that are resting upon my mind this morning, and I shall postpone until some future time, the Lord being willing, my attempt to tell you some of the things that are in my mind, and that dwell in my heart. *I have not lived alone these last 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.*"

According to the President's son, Joseph Fielding Smith, the prophet was here expressing (albeit in broadest terms) the fact that during the past half-year he had been the recipient of numerous manifestations, some of which he had shared with his son both before and after the conference. One of these manifestations, the vision of the redemption of the dead, had

been received just the day before, on October 3, and was recorded immediately following the close of the conference.

The state of the world in early 1918 was cause for serious reflection upon such matters as the purpose of life and death. World War I, the "war to end all wars," cast its ominous shadow upon the globe, and Latter-day Saints were not immune from its broadening effects. By early January 1919, approximately fifteen thousand members of the Church were involved in the military services. Revolutions in Russia and Finland further intensified the anxieties and confirmed the fears that truly war had begun to be poured out upon all nations (see D&C 87:2). By October an influenza epidemic began to spread throughout the land, leaving death and sorrow in its wake. ([Robert L. Millett, The Vision of the Redemption of the Dead, Sperry Symposium Classics: The Doctrine and Covenants](#))

**Excerpt from A Commentary on the Doctrine and Covenants**

The first eleven verses of Doctrine and Covenants 138 record its historical setting. Joseph F. Smith, the sixth President of the Church, was eighty years old and quite ill. He had been spending considerable time meditating and considering the things of God. He explained the events surrounding this vision:

As most of you, I suppose, are aware, I have been undergoing a siege of very serious illness for the last five months. It would be impossible for me on this occasion, to occupy sufficient time to express the desires of my heart and my feelings, as I would desire to express them to you... I will not, I dare not, attempt to enter upon many things that are resting upon my mind this morning, and I shall postpone until some future time, the Lord being willing, my attempt to tell you some of the things that are in my mind, and that dwell in my heart. 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.

Current events weighed heavily on the mind of President Smith. World War I, the supposed war to end all wars, was ending with many fatalities. An influenza epidemic was spreading throughout the world, resulting in the death of millions (over 650,000 in the U.S. alone). Perhaps the most challenging event personally for the aging prophet was the unexpected death of his son Hyrum Mack Smith, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve and a close

advisor. Elder Hyrum Mack Smith died unexpectedly 23 January 1918 as a result of a ruptured appendix. His death greatly affected President Smith, and he questioned why this son needed to leave this mortal life when he was so needed here. He mourned greatly the loss of his son.

The months following his son's death were filled with spiritual reflection and deep meditation. During these months, he had been close to the spirit world and had spoken on the postmortal experience several times. At a temple fast meeting in February 1918, he spoke of the status of children in the resurrection, declaring that children are immortal beings, spirits who continue to live beyond the grave. Reflecting the teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, he taught that those who died as children will come forth out of the grave to be raised and cared for by worthy parents. Having lost eleven children in childhood, he exclaimed: 'O how I have been blessed with these children and how happy I shall be to meet them on the other side.'

On 3 October 1918, while pondering the scriptures [President Smith received the revelation]... He dictated the vision to his son Joseph Fielding Smith. It was presented to the First Presidency, the quorum of the Twelve, and the Patriarch to the Church in a council meeting on Thursday, 31 October 1918. They accepted and endorsed it as the word of God. It was published in the 30 November 1918 edition of the *Deseret News* and the December *Improvement Era* as well as other Church publications. Included in the Pearl of Great Price in 1976, it was then placed as section 138 of the Doctrine and Covenants, first printed in the 1981 edition.

About one and a half months after receiving Doctrine and Covenants 138, President Smith contracted pleurisy, which developed into a severe case of pleuropneumonia that led to his death on 19 November 1918. Because of the influenza epidemic, no public funeral was held to honor him. Thus ended the mortal life of the last President of the Church who personally knew the Prophet Joseph Smith." (Stephen E. Robinson, H. Dean Garrett, A Commentary on the Doctrine and Covenants, 2001, pages 300-302)

### **Excerpt from Revelations in Context**

On the evening of Friday, November 5, 1918, Susa Young Gates and her husband, Jacob, stopped by the home of some close friends to pick up a box of apples. That home was the Beehive House, on the corner of State Street and South Temple in Salt Lake City, and

those friends were Joseph F. Smith, President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and his wife Julina Smith. Susa and Joseph had known each other since Susa's childhood, in the 1860s, when he was a frequent visitor in the home of her father, Brigham Young. The Gateses and the Smiths had served together as missionaries in Hawaii in the 1880s and had remained close friends ever since. Susa and Joseph forged a particularly close friendship. She called him "My Beloved and Honored Friend and Brother"; he called her his "beloved Sister" and expressed "the truest brotherly love" for her. What happened during her visit that evening would become a crowning expression of that friendship and a deeply personal affirmation of Susa's tireless efforts in what she called the "work of redeeming the dead."

### "A Greater Work"

Susa Young Gates was one of the most prominent Latter-day Saint women of her time. A woman of indomitable energy and determination, she had worked for decades as a writer, editor, educator, and leader in the Young Ladies' Mutual Improvement Association (YLMIA), the Relief Society, and various national women's organizations. But in 1918 her driving interest was genealogy and temple work, an area in which she had been a leading Latter-day Saint advocate for over a decade.

Susa felt a sacred sense of personal mission in this work. In 1902, returning from a meeting of the International Council of Women in Europe, Susa had become seriously ill. In London she sought a priesthood blessing from Elder Francis M. Lyman, then serving as president of the European Mission, and in that blessing he told her, "You shall live to perform temple work, and you shall do a greater work than you have ever done before." This commission became a driving force in her life. "I had been interested in Temple work before," she said, "but now I felt that I must do something more, something to help all the members of the Church."

Susa could hardly have done any more than she went on to do for the cause of family history and temple work. She wrote countless newspaper and magazine articles, taught class after class, and took the message on the road to many stakes and wards. She visited genealogical libraries in the eastern United States and England and corresponded with genealogists from many other countries, seeking greater knowledge and expertise. She served on the general board of the Relief Society, where she succeeded in having lessons on genealogy (most of which she also wrote) incorporated into the curriculum. She published a 600-page

reference book on surnames and contributed frequently to a new magazine devoted to genealogical research. With all this effort, she also found time to serve for decades as a temple ordinance worker. Susa's work was integral to the establishment of family history as a focus for Latter-day Saints.

In these efforts she worked closely with Elder Joseph Fielding Smith—assistant Church historian, son of the Church President, and, after 1910, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Elder Smith also served as secretary of the Utah Genealogical Society, the Church's official genealogical organization. Susa referred to Elder Smith as "the Apostle to the spirits in prison" and as "the eloquent spokesman" of genealogy and temple work. Susa and Elder Smith spoke together at genealogical meetings—she provided practical instruction in methodology, and he laid out the theological foundations of the work. Thanks to their efforts and those of several like-minded associates, thousands of Latter-day Saints received training and encouragement in performing family history and temple work.

Despite these accomplishments, Susa often felt that she was waging an uphill battle. She believed that too many Latter-day Saints exhibited "a very general indifference" toward genealogy and temple work. "Not even an angel from heaven could induce some of these club women and these successful business men to set aside a portion of their time for temple work," Susa wrote to a friend.

When she visited President Smith that night in November 1918, Susa had recently been reminded of the widespread lack of enthusiasm for family history work. Members of the Relief Society general board had nearly voted to discontinue genealogy lessons. "I have had to take the part of the genealogical work against all others," she wrote in one letter. She had barely succeeded in preserving it as part of the curriculum. At the October 1918 Relief Society conference, stake leaders reported that the genealogy lessons were too difficult. They suggested that the lessons be "simplified" and "emphasis placed on the spiritual rather than on the educational side of this study." Susa assured them that the recently published *Surname Book and Racial History* would help make the lessons more accessible. But she had long insisted that the spiritual and the practical dimensions of genealogy were complementary. "All the desired inspiration in the world will not save our dead," she declared. "We must also have information in order to consummate that noble work." She labored on, making every effort to provide both information and inspiration to her fellow Saints.

## "The Hosts of the Dead"

In November 1918 President Smith was ill—elderly, frail, and declining rapidly. He had spent much of the year at home, unable to maintain the demanding pace that characterized most of his life. His age-related ailments were compounded by heavy grief. In January his beloved eldest son, Elder Hyrum M. Smith, had died suddenly of a ruptured appendix. "My soul is rent, my heart is broken! O God, help me!" President Smith exclaimed at the time. But the blows kept coming. In February a young son-in-law died after an accidental fall. And in September, Hyrum's wife, Ida, died just a few days after giving birth, leaving five orphaned children. Meanwhile, the Great War (World War I) was dragging to a close, leaving unimaginable carnage and devastation in its wake, and a worldwide influenza pandemic was claiming millions of victims. For President Smith, it was a time of deeply personal pain amid much global suffering.

These catastrophes formed a visible backdrop at the October general conference. Attendance was noticeably diminished, "owing to so many of the Priesthood being absent in the war." The growing flu epidemic likely kept people home as well. Mustering his failing strength, President Smith made a surprise appearance and presided at four sessions of the conference. "I have been undergoing a siege of very serious illness for the last five months," he said in his opening remarks. "Although somewhat weakened in body," he affirmed, "my mind is clear with reference to my duty." Then President Smith hinted at a message he was still struggling to find words to express. "I will not, I dare not, attempt to enter upon many things that are resting upon my mind this morning," he said, "and I shall postpone until some future time, the Lord being willing, my attempt to tell you some of the things that are in my mind, and that dwell in my heart." He continued: "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."

President Smith's remarks undoubtedly referred in part to the events of the previous day, October 3, 1918, when he had experienced a remarkable vision of the Savior's visit to the spirit world (now recorded in [Doctrine and Covenants 138](#)). In this vision, President Smith saw "the hosts of the dead" awaiting the Savior's arrival. Wondering how Christ could have accomplished His ministry among the dead in "the brief time intervening between the crucifixion and his resurrection," President Smith saw that He "organized his forces and appointed

messengers" from among the righteous spirits and "spent his time during his sojourn in the world of spirits, instructing and preparing the faithful spirits of the prophets who had testified of him in the flesh" to carry the message of redemption to the spirits of those who had not heard or had not received the gospel in their mortal lives.

President Smith's desire to speak of these things to the Saints in person was not fulfilled. Ten days after general conference, he dictated the vision to his son Joseph Fielding Smith. Two weeks later, on October 31, Joseph Fielding Smith read the text to the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles at their regular council meeting in the temple. It was "fully endorsed by all the brethren," he recorded, and they made plans to publish it in the December issue of the *Improvement Era*. A week after that notable meeting, Susa and Jacob Gates made their visit to the Smith home.

#### "An Exquisite Joy and Comfort"

As the Gateses visited with members of the Smith family, President Smith summoned Susa to come into his room. "I comforted him all I could in his severe illness," Susa wrote. He told her, "You are doing a great work, greater than you know anything about." After a few minutes President Smith and Susa were joined by Jacob and Julina and others (presumably Smith family members), and President Smith gave Susa a paper to read. It was a transcript of the account of his vision. "How blest, O how blest I am to have the privilege!" Susa wrote in her journal that night. "To be permitted to read a revelation before it was made public, to know the heavens are still opened."

Susa's description of the vision highlighted the aspects she found most compelling: "In it he tells of his view of Eternity; the Savior when He visited the spirits in prison—how His servants minister to them; he saw the Prophet and all his associate Brethren laboring in the Prison Houses; Mother Eve & her noble daughters engaged in the same holy cause!" Long an advocate for women's causes, Susa rejoiced at the specific mention of women in the revelation, grateful "to have Eve and her daughters remembered." And she rejoiced in the revelation's affirmation of the work on behalf of the dead. "Above all," she wrote, "to have this given at a time when our Temple work and workers & our genealogy need such encouragement. No words of mine can express my joy and gratitude." "Think of the impetus this revelation will give to temple work throughout the Church!" she later wrote to a friend.

Two weeks later, on November 19, 1918, President Joseph F. Smith died. The announcement and publication of his vision appeared alongside the many tributes published at the time of his passing. In the *Relief Society Magazine*, editor Susa Young Gates published a lengthy tribute to President Smith and his wives, along with eulogies from various leading women in the Church. She then included the full text of the "Vision of the Redemption of the Dead," as it was called, but without disclosing her personal experience with it. Here she expanded on her private comments about the reference to Eve and her daughters in the text: "This is unusual—the mention of women's labors on the Other Side." Susa felt that "the direct view of [women] associated with the ancient and modern prophets and elders confirms the noble standard of equality between the sexes which has always been a feature of this Church."

She continued: "The Vision's principal message to this people is a clarion call for them to awake to the immediate necessity of looking after their dead." In spite of the setbacks and challenges in this effort, President Smith's vision was "an exquisite joy and comfort" to her. Seven decades earlier, Joseph Smith had written to the Saints on the same subject, "Shall we not go on in so great a cause?" Now Susa Young Gates, with renewed vision and commitment, continued the call: "May the people, and especially our sisters, rise to the measure of fulness in response to this heavenly manifestation!" ([Lisa Olson Tait, Susa Young Gates and the Vision of the Redemption of the Dead, Revelations in Context](#))

Copyright © 2021 by S. Kurt Neumiller <kurt.neumiller@gmail.com>. All rights reserved. No part of this text may be reproduced in any form or by any means for commercial gain without the express written consent of the author. Digital or printed copies may be freely made and distributed for personal and public non-commercial use.