

## LESSON #30

# “THE PRISONERS SHALL GO FREE”

by Ted L. Gibbons

**INTRODUCTION:** Joseph Smith, speaking of the work of redemption for the dead called that work the “. . . most glorious of all subjects belonging to the everlasting gospel . . .” (D&C 128:17) Why? What is there about this work that would cause the prophet to place its importance above any other subject belonging to the restoration of the gospel? As you study the scriptures and content associated with this lesson, watch for answers to this question.

## **1. THROUGH THE PROPHET JOSEPH SMITH, THE LORD REVEALED THE DOCTRINE OF PRIESTHOOD ORDINANCES FOR THE DEAD.**

Any religion that can only deal with mankind in mortality automatically subjects most of the human family to whatever punishments await those who do not partake. Even the most aggressive religions have been unable to reach everybody on the earth with their proselyting. And what about the uncounted billions that have lived while no one was proselyting for a particular faith?

This is a reality with which every religion must deal. If the doctrines and or ordinances are necessary for salvation, then what of those who never so much as hear of them? Are they to be eternally consigned to Limbo or Hell or worse?

There are only three choices here:

1. You did not hear or believe. Therefore you eternally forfeit the blessings.
2. God will save you whether you had the ordinances and believed the doctrine or not. Therefore, no one is required to believe and submit.
3. Some way must be found to teach the doctrine and perform the ordinances for those who leave mortality without an opportunity to hear and believe.

Think of the implications of the following.

“In his Divine Comedy, Dante depicts the doctrine of damnation for unfortunate souls who die without a knowledge of Christ, as that doctrine was taught in the thirteenth century. According to the story, Dante is lost in the woods, where he is met by the Roman poet Virgil, who promises to show him the punishment of hell and purgatory, and later he is to have a view of paradise. He follows Virgil through hell and later into Limbo, which is the first circle of hell. Here are confined the souls of those who lived virtuous and honorable lives but who, because they were not baptized, merit punishment and are denied forever the blessings of salvation. As Dante looks upon these miserable souls in the upper stratum of hell and sees, as the story says, ‘many and great, both of children, and of women and men,’ he marvels.

“His guide asks: ‘Thou askest not what spirits are these thou seest?’

“Dante shows a desire to know, so the guide continues: ‘I wish thee to know, before thou goest farther, that they sinned not; and though they have merit, it suffices not: for they had not Baptism, which is the portal of the faith that thou believest; and seeing they were before Christianity, they worshipped not God aright; and of these am I myself. For such defects, and for no other fault, are we lost; and only in so far afflicted, that without hope we live in desire.’ (Philo M. Buck, Jr., ed., *An Anthology of World Literature* [New York: Macmillan Co., 1940], p. 446.)

“In answer to the earnest inquiry of his mortal guest, who desires to know if any thus punished ever had the privilege of coming forth from this sad condition of torment, the spirit-poet declares that the righteous who had known God from our first parents down to the time of Christ have been exalted. But of these unfortunates who never heard of Christ, he says, ‘Be thou assured, no spirit of human kind was ever saved.’” (Joseph Fielding Smith, “Justice for the Dead,” *Ensign*, Mar. 1972, 2–3)

In this matter, Joseph places the restoration light years ahead of any other dogma on the planet, for he showed us a God and a religion willing and able

to offer the blessings of exaltation to every soul that ever lived or will live on this earth.

The truth is that the work in the Spirit World is much greater than it is here. We go from door to door seeking audience with the living, but there the dead from all ages await the message. What a responsibility the Lord has placed on us to make the ordinances available to those on that side of the veil. Speaking of this matter, Elder Maxwell said,

“What we do here is so vital, but it is actually a preparation for our labors in paradise in the spirit world. *The scope in that spirit world is ten times as large as the demographics of this world.* It is, though, a place of peace, a place of intense devotion. One sees in section 138 of the Doctrine and Covenants words that tell us about the character of God. Not only will the gospel go to those who have never heard of it, but also included are those who have been in transgression, in rebellion, and who have rejected the prophets.” [Elder Neal A. Maxwell, Satellite Broadcast, 2 Feb. 2001–Evening With a General Authority; *emphasis added*]

Ten times (give or take a few billion) as many there need to hear the message as need to here it here.

Allusions to this work and its central importance in the restoration came to Joseph very early. Moroni spoke of the mission of Elijah on that first night in Joseph’s bedroom (see JSH 1:36-39). Section 2 of the D&C alludes to the work for the dead. The actual announcement that ordinances could be performed for the dead came in August of 1840 in a funeral sermon by the prophet Joseph.

In the beginning there were some procedural mistakes.

“When Joseph received the revelation that we have in our possession concerning the dead, the subject was opened to him, not in full, but in part, and he kept on receiving. When he had first received the knowledge by the spirit of revelation how the dead could be officiated for, there are brethren and sisters here, I can see quite a number here who were in Nauvoo, and

you recollect that when this doctrine was first revealed and in hurrying in the administration of baptism for the dead, that sisters were baptized for their male friends, were baptized for their fathers, their grandfathers, their mothers and their grandmothers, etc. I just mention this so that you will come to understanding, that as we knew nothing about this matter at first, the old Saints recollect, there was little by little given, and the subject was made plain, but little was given at once. Consequently, in the first place people were baptized for their friends and no record was kept. Joseph afterwards kept a record. Then women were baptized for men and men for women, etc. It would be very strange, you know, to the eyes of the wise and those that understood the things pertaining to eternity, if we were called upon to commence a work that we could not finish. This, therefore, was regulated and all set in order: for it was revealed that if a woman was baptized for a man, she could not be ordained for him, neither could she be made an Apostle or a Patriarch for the man, consequently the sisters are to be baptized for their own sex only.

“This doctrine of baptism for the dead is a great doctrine, one of the most glorious doctrines that was revealed to the human family; and there are light, power, glory, honor and immortality in it.” (JD, Vol. 16:165)

## **2. THE LORD COMMANDED THE SAINTS TO BUILD A TEMPLE IN NAUVOO.**

The Lord commanded the saints to build another temple in Nauvoo in January of 1841. The temple in Kirtland was a preparatory temple, a place for the restoration of keys that could be used in building the Kingdom of God and furthering the work of the Lord in the last days. John Taylor observed that keys from Kirtland were instrumental in inspiring the work in Nauvoo.

“At the time [Moses appeared in the Kirtland temple] there appeared another, even Elijah, whose mission was to turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest (says the Lord) I come and smite the earth with a curse. He committed these keys. But before they were

committed, what was done in the Temple? Did we baptize for the dead there? No, we did not. Why? Because the keys were not given. When they were given and afterwards when the Temple was built in Nauvoo, then that spirit accompanied it, and we began to feel after our fathers behind the veil, and they likewise began to feel after their children.” (Journal of Discourses, Vol.19, p.126 - p.127, John Taylor, October 7, 1877)

Even though both structures were called temples, they served different functions. The Spirit of modern temple work derives from what happened at Nauvoo much more than Kirtland, and it is interesting to note that even at that early age, prophets perceived that something monumental was coming in the building of temples.

“When we first heard the fullness of the Gospel preached by the first Elders, and read the revelations given through the Prophet Joseph Smith, our ideas of Zion were very limited. But as our minds began to grow and expand, why we began to look upon Zion as a great people, and the Stakes of Zion as numerous, and the area of the country to be inhabited by the people of Zion as this great American continent, or at least such portions of it as the Lord should consecrate for the gathering of His people. We ceased to set bounds to Zion and her Stakes. We began also to cease to think about a single temple in one certain place. Seeing the different Stakes of Zion that were being organized we perceived the idea, possibly, of as many temples. Having had one spot pointed out in the revelations for the temple in Jackson County, our minds expanded so that in a short time we were building another temple in a Stake of Zion in Kirtland, Ohio. A little while afterwards we were laying the foundation of a temple in Far West, Missouri, and driven before our enemies; from that place we next laid the foundation and built up a temple unto the Lord in Nauvoo. When we located in the mountains and laid the foundation of a temple in Salt Lake City, who of us had an idea that before it should be completed we would be administering in a temple in St. George, and another in Logan, and another in Manti, and who conceives the idea to-day, that by the time these are completed and the Saints have officiated in them, we will be scattered over the American continent, building

temples in a hundred other places? All this comes within the range of possibility, nay, probability, almost amounting to certainty. One of my brethren behind me here, who understands these things, and who can speak knowingly in regard to them, says, that we may put it down as a certainty, that by and by, there will be hundreds of these temples throughout the land.” (Journal of Discourses, Vol.25, p.30 - 32, Erastus Snow, February 2nd, 1884)

When the Lord commanded the building of a temple in Nauvoo, he gave a list of reasons for beginning and hastening the construction. Some of them were:

- ‘ “. . . there is not a place found on earth that he may come to and restore again that which was lost unto you, or which he hath taken away, even the fulness of the priesthood.” (D&C 124:28)
- ‘ “For a baptismal font there is not upon the earth, that they, my saints, may be baptized for those who are dead—“ (D&C 124:29)
- ‘ “. . . if you do not these things at the end of the appointment ye shall be rejected as a church, with your dead, saith the Lord your God.” (D&C 124:32)
- ‘ “For therein are the keys of the holy priesthood ordained, that you may receive honor and glory.” (D&C 124:34)
- ‘ “. . . that those ordinances might be revealed which had been hid from before the world was.” (D&C 124:38)
- ‘ “. . . your anointings, and your washings, and your baptisms for the dead, and your solemn assemblies, and your memorials for your sacrifices by the sons of Levi, and for your oracles in your most holy places wherein you receive conversations, and your statutes and judgments, for the beginning of the revelations and foundation of Zion, and for the glory, honor, and endowment of all her municipalities, are ordained by the ordinance of my holy house . . .” (D&C 124:39)

- ' "I deign to reveal unto my church things which have been kept hid from before the foundation of the world, things that pertain to the dispensation of the fulness of times." (D&C 124:41)

There are other promises relating to the temple in D&C 97.

- ' ". . . that there may be a house built unto me for the salvation of Zion—" (D&C 97:12)
- ' "For a place of thanksgiving for all saints . . ." (D&C 97:13)
- ' "For a place of instruction . . ." (D&C 97:13)
- ' "That they may be perfected in the understanding of their ministry, in theory, in principle, and in doctrine, in all things pertaining to the kingdom of God on the earth . . ." (D&C 97:14)

### **3. WE SHOULD BE ENTHUSIASTIC AND JOYFUL IN OUR EFFORTS TO PERFORM BAPTISMS FOR THE DEAD.**

I have been delighted to have my high school aged son go again and again to the temple to perform baptisms for the dead. He had his friends have made this a frequent and a social activity. Sometimes youth have participated as couples in what could be called a date—a date to the temple to do work for the dead.

This kind of commitment ought to be encouraged in all the youth of the church who are 12 or older. Perhaps when parents come to priesthood leaders to renew recommends, children 12 and older could come too, to obtain their own recommends to perform this most wonderful work. Then, if they can research names of their own ancestors to take with them, they will know what Elijah meant when he spoke of a turning of hearts.

"There was something different about the group from Las Vegas in the St. George (Utah) Temple. All of them were there to do the ordinance work for their own deceased family members and ancestors. They had participated in a program in which ward members submitted ten times as many names for temple work as they had the year before.

“The same difference was true, too, for the group of approximately 110 teenagers from the Augusta Maine Stake, who were at the Washington (D.C.) Temple. They were there to receive baptism for their kindred dead. The youth themselves had prepared the information for the ordinance work.” (Richard Tice, “Temple Ancestor Day: Three Success Stories,” *Tambuli*, Sept. 1990, 29)

Some have suggested that 105 billion people have lived on the earth since the fall of Adam. As a church we have performed over 100 million temple ordinances since the restoration, but think of the amount left to do!

**CONCLUSION:** In D&C 128, the prophet called this work “the most glorious of all subjects belonging to the everlasting gospel . . .” When we consider the scope of this work, which Elder Maxwell reported to be ten times as great as our redemptive work, we begin to understand the urgency with which prophets have encouraged our participation in it.

Said the Prophet Joseph Smith: “Brethren, shall we not go on in so great a cause? Go forward and not backward. Courage, brethren; and on, on to the victory! Let your hearts rejoice, and be exceedingly glad. . . .

“Behold, the great day of the Lord is at hand. . . . Let us . . . as a church and a people, and as Latter-day Saints, offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness; and let us present in his holy temple . . . a book containing the records of our dead, which shall be worthy of all acceptation.” (D&C 128:22,24; cited by M. Russell Ballard, “Are We Keeping Pace?” *Ensign*, Nov. 1998, 8)

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