

Section 138

Early Christians believed that people were not saved or damned based on when they lived or died but based on what they decided to do with Christ's offer of salvation when they learned about it. Over the subsequent centuries, however, death became "a firm boundary of salvation" in western Christianity.¹

Based on teachings of Peter and Paul, medieval Christians continued to believe in what they called the "harrowing of hell," Christ's disembodied descent into the spirit world between his crucifixion and resurrection to redeem the captives. A rich tradition of drama and art depict the Savior's mission of "deliverance" in which he declared "liberty to the captives who had been faithful" (D&C 138:18).²

A thousand years later, in 1918, the problem of death had not diminished and the aged Prophet Joseph F. Smith contemplated the same teachings of Peter and Paul. The Great War, known to us as World War I, raged, eventually claiming more than nine million lives. A global influenza pandemic dwarfed that total, reaping a grim harvest of perhaps 50 million souls or more worldwide. It killed over 195,000

¹ Jeffrey A. Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead: The Posthumous Salvation of Non-Christians in Early Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3–9, 126–40.

² K. M. Warren, "Harrowing of Hell," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Volume VII. (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910).

Americans in October 1918, the deadliest month in American history, the month the Lord revealed section 138.³

In the midst of the dead and dying was Joseph F. His father Hyrum had been brutally shot to death when Joseph was five. “I lost my mother, the sweetest soul that ever lived,” Joseph wrote, “when I was only a boy.”⁴ His first child, Mercy Josephine, died at age two, leaving Joseph “vacant, lonely, desolate, deserted.” His eldest son died unexpectedly in January 1918, leaving President Smith his “overwhelming burden of grief.” In between those deaths, President Smith buried a wife and eleven other children.⁵

President Smith was ill as general conference approached in October 1918. He surprised the Saints by attending on October 4 and speaking briefly. “I have dwelt in the spirit of prayer, of supplication, of faith and of determination; and I have had my communications with the Spirit of the Lord continuously.”⁶ The day before, the Lord had given him the visions described in section 138.⁷

Section 138 is a Christ-centered testimony from beginning to end. It starts with President Smith pondering the Savior’s atonement, continues with a witness of Christ’s “harrowing of hell,” proceeds with the gospel of Jesus Christ being preached to departed spirits, and concludes in the name of Jesus. “I saw” (D&C 138:11), “I beheld” (vv. 15, 57), “I understood” (v. 25), “I perceived” (v. 29), “I observed” v. 55), “I bear record, and I know that this record is true,” Joseph F. declared (v. 60).

He used powerful verbs to describe how he sought revelation. “I sat in my room *pondering* over the scriptures; And *reflecting* upon the great atoning sacrifice that was made by the Son of God, for the redemption of the world” (D&C 138:1–2, emphasis added). He intellectually “*engaged*” the soteriological [relating to salvation] problem of Christian theology and the most terrible questions of his time in which “the sheer,

³ George S. Tate, “The Great World of the Spirits of the Dead: Death, the Great War, and the 1918 Influenza Pandemic as Context for Doctrine and Covenants 138,” *BYU Studies* 46 no. 1 (2007): 27, 33.

⁴ Joseph F. Smith, “Status of Children in the Resurrection,” in *Messages of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, compiled by James R. Clark, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965–75), 5:92.

⁵ Joseph Fielding Smith, compiler, *Life of Joseph F. Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1938), 476.

⁶ Joseph F. Smith, 89th Semi-Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1918), 2.

⁷ Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith*, 466.

overwhelming quantity of death awakened individual and communal grief on an unprecedented scale. With the loss came questions: What is the fate of the dead? Do they continue to exist? Is there life after death?”⁸ He returned to relevant Bible passages he already knew well and “pondered over these things which are written” (v. 11).

That resulted in a series of visions. Joseph F. saw an innumerable gathering of the righteous dead, those who had been faithful Christians in life, “rejoicing together because the day of their deliverance was at hand” (D&C 138:15). They had been eagerly waiting for Christ to deliver them from the bondage of being disembodied, what verse 23 calls the “chains of hell” (cross-reference D&C 45:17 and 93:33). The Savior arrived and preached the gospel to them but not to those who had rejected the warnings of prophets in life.

This vision led President Smith to wonder and inquire further. Christ’s miraculous three-year mortal ministry resulted in few converts. How could his short ministry among the dead be effective? What did Peter mean by writing that the Savior preached to the spirits in prison who had been disobedient? These questions brought another revelation, a recognition “that the Lord went not in person among the wicked and disobedient” but sent messengers. He mustered an army to wage war with death and hell. He “organized his forces” and armed them “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” (D&C 138:30).⁹

Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and Wilford Woodruff all taught that the Savior unlocked the spirit prison and provided for redemption of the dead.¹⁰ Not until Joseph F.’s vision, however, did mankind know how Christ “organized his forces,” “appointed messengers,” and “commissioned them to go forth” (D&C 138:30). That made it possible for the dead to act for themselves, to be fully developed free agents who were accountable for their new knowledge. The teaching fulfilled God’s just plan of

⁸ Tate, “The Great World of the Spirits of the Dead,” 21.

⁹ The insight belongs to George S. Tate. See Tate, “The Great World of the Spirits of the Dead,” 34.

¹⁰ See Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds. and comps., *Words of Joseph Smith* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center Brigham Young University, 1980), 370; Brigham Young in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F.D. Richards, 1855–86), 4:285, March 15, 1857; and Wilford Woodruff, *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal*, 1833–1898, Typescript., ed. Scott G. Kenney, 9 vols., (Midvale, Utah: Signature, 1983–84), 6:390.

salvation, making each individual responsible to receive or reject “the sacrifice of the Son of God” (v. 35).

President Smith saw “our glorious Mother Eve, with many of her faithful daughters who had lived through the ages and worshiped the true and living God” (D&C 138:39). He must have been moved to see his father, Hyrum Smith, together with his brother Joseph, “among the noble and great ones” (v. 55). Most comforting to me is his vision of

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. (v. 57)

As both orphaned son and grieving father, President Smith appreciated the vision’s confirmation of “the redemption of the dead, and the sealing of the children to their parents” (v. 48).

A survivor of the influenza pandemic repeatedly asked, “Where are the dead?” Section 138 “answers this question and speaks to the great, worldwide need that underlies it.”¹¹ On October 31, 1918, ailing President Smith sent his son Joseph Fielding Smith to read the revelation to a meeting of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. They “accepted and endorsed the revelation as the word of the Lord.”¹² The *Deseret Evening News* published the revelation about a month later. In the meantime, Joseph F. passed from life to death knowing better than anyone else what he could expect on arrival.

¹¹ Tate, “The Great World of the Spirits of the Dead,” 39–40.

¹² James E. Talmage, *Journal*, October 31, 1918, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University; Anthon H. Lund, *Journal*, October 31, 1918, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.