

# *What Is This Thing That Men Call Death?*

## *Latter-day Saint Teachings About the Spirit World*

BRENT L. TOP

**M**y brothers and sisters, I am honored to have been invited to speak to you today. The topic that I have been assigned to speak on may seem a little strange to some of you for a setting like Campus Education Week, but I hope and pray that it will be both interesting and inspiring. The subject is death.

Someone once said that life is a terminal illness; no one gets out of it alive. Death is both fascinating and somewhat frightening—frightening in that there is normal apprehension about it. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that “the Lord in his wisdom had implanted the fear of death in every person that [we] might cling to life and thus accomplish the designs of [our] creator” (quoted by Wilford Woodruff in *Diary of Charles Lowell Walker*, ed. A. Karl Larson and Katherine Miles Larson [Logan: Utah State University Press, 1980], 1:465–66).

Death is uncharted territory. No matter what our age or circumstance, death will be a new experience for all of us. Some look forward to passing to the other side, where they can be free from pains and sicknesses and toils and troubles or be reunited with a loved one from whom they have been separated—sometimes for decades. On the other hand, some spend their lives in search

of a fountain of youth with the hope that they will never die. Still others just ignore death, finding it too unpleasant to think or talk much about. But ignoring it doesn’t eliminate it. In fact, death is a vital gateway to immortality—an important milestone along the road of eternal progress. For this reason we should learn all we can about it.

The Prophet Joseph Smith taught:

*All men know that they must die. And it is important that we should understand the reasons and causes of our exposure to the vicissitudes of life and of death, and the designs and purposes of God in our coming into the world, our sufferings here, and our departure hence. . . . It is but reasonable to suppose that God would reveal something in reference to the matter, and it is a subject we ought to study more than any other. We ought to study it day and night, for the world is ignorant in reference to their true condition and relation. If we have any claim on our Heavenly Father for anything, it is for knowledge on this important subject.* [HC 6:50]

---

*Brent L. Top, professor of Church history and doctrine, delivered this Campus Education Week address on August 18, 2010.*

Our Heavenly Father has indeed revealed many things to us about “the great plan of happiness” (Alma 42:8) and the next estate. From the scriptures—both ancient and modern—and the inspired teachings and experiences of prophets, seers, and revelators, we can glimpse beyond the veil of death and gain greater understanding of the role of death and the conditions of the spirit world. The knowledge gained from the restored gospel is both interesting and inspiring, fascinating and comforting.

While attending the funeral of a friend, President Gordon B. Hinckley penned a poem about death that speaks of this comfort and knowledge. I have loved this poem from the first time I read it, but I was deeply touched by the musical rendition of it composed by Janice Kapp Perry that was sung by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir at President Hinckley’s funeral. The first stanza goes like this:

*What is this thing that men call death,  
This quiet passing in the night?  
'Tis not the end, but genesis  
Of better worlds and greater light.  
[“The Empty Tomb Bore Testimony,” Ensign, May 1988; also “What Is This Thing Man Calls Death?” Ensign, February 2010]*

It is of these “better worlds and greater light” that I wish to speak today. I would like to share with you a few of the many important truths we learn about the spirit world through the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. There are three specific questions that I would like to address by letting the words of Restoration scriptures and latter-day prophets and apostles answer them:

1. What do we as Latter-day Saints uniquely understand regarding the attributes and abilities of the Spirit?
2. What does the Restoration teach us about the spirit world: where is it, what is it like, and what goes on there?
3. How does this important latter-day revealed knowledge about death and the spirit world affect our lives right here and now?

### **The Attributes and Abilities of the Spirit**

The gospel teaches us that our physical body is indeed the outer shell or tabernacle that houses our immortal spirit. Modern revelation teaches us that “the spirit of man [is] in the likeness of his person” (D&C 77:2).

In 1909 the First Presidency stated that the body “is only the clothing of the spirit” and that “the spirit of man is in the form of man” (“Editor’s Table: The Origin of Man,” *Improvement Era* 8, no. 1 [November 1909]: 78).

President Boyd K. Packer compared the body and the spirit to a glove and a hand. The glove covers the hand, but the hand is the real living part. Death is like taking off the glove (see *CR*, April 1973, 79).

President Brigham Young stated, “Take the spirit from the body, and the body is lifeless” (*JD* 9:287).

This doctrine helps us understand our feelings when we stand before the open casket bearing the remains of a dear loved one. There is the distinct feeling of “that is not him (or her).” The body of our loved one is not the “real” person we have loved. The “real” person is gone. You can feel it; you can see it!

The gospel teaches us another important truth about the spirit body: it is perfect, not hampered or hindered by physical defects or disabilities. At death the spirit body is liberated from the adverse effects of aging, disease, or handicaps.

Elder Orson Pratt taught:

*We, as Latter-day Saints, believe that the spirits that occupy these tabernacles have form and likeness similar to the human tabernacle. Of course there may be deformities existing in connection with the outward tabernacle which do not exist in connection with the spirit that inhabits it. These tabernacles become deformed by accident in various ways, sometimes at birth, but this may not altogether or in any degree deform the spirits that dwell within them. [JD 15:242–43]*

President Young said:

*I can say with regard to parting with our friends, and going ourselves, that I have been near enough to*

*understand eternity so that I have had to exercise a great deal more faith to desire to live than I ever exercised in my whole life to live. The brightness and glory of the next apartment is inexpressible. It is not encumbered [as we are] here so that when we advance in years we have to be stubbing along and to be careful lest we fall down. . . . But yonder, how different! . . .*

*. . . Here, we are continually troubled with ills and ailments of various kinds . . . ; but in the spirit world we are free from all this and enjoy life, glory, and intelligence. [JD 14:231]*

What a comforting doctrine that is—to know that physical limitations will fall away, that disease and sickness will be nonexistent, and that aging and handicaps will be nowhere to be found.

From the restored gospel we also learn that the powers and capacities of the spirit body even surpass those of bodies in the physical world when it comes to communication and feelings, movement and travel, and learning and comprehension. From the Doctrine and Covenants we learn that “spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes” (D&C 131:7). Because of this refined nature, as Elder Parley P. Pratt taught, spirit matter with “its refined particles penetrate amid the other elements with greater ease, and meet with less resistance . . . than would the more gross elements” (JD 1:8).

I am not a physicist, and I don’t profess to understand how it all works, but I find the scriptural statements about matter and the statements of early prophets and apostles about spirit capacities fascinating. Take, for example, these amazing statements by President Young:

*As quickly as the spirit is unlocked from this house of clay, it is free to travel with lightning speed to any planet, or fixed star, or to the uttermost part of the earth, or to the depths of the sea, according to the will of Him who dictates. [JD 13:77; emphasis added]*

*[Spirits] move with ease and like lightning. If we want to visit Jerusalem, or this, that, or the other place—and I presume we will be permitted if we desire—there we*

*are, looking at its streets. If we want to behold Jerusalem as it was in the days of the Savior; or if we want to see the Garden of Eden as it was when created, there we are, and we see it as it existed spiritually, for it was created first spiritually and then temporally, and spiritually it still remains. . . . God has revealed some little things with regard to His movements and power, and the operation and motion of the lightning furnish a fine illustration of the ability and power of the Almighty. . . .*

*When we pass into the spirit world we shall possess a measure of this power. [JD 14:231]*

In Doctrine and Covenants 8:2 the Lord revealed through the Prophet Joseph Smith that the means whereby God communicates with man is in the mind and in the heart. The spirit of revelation is the divine means of communication not only here in mortality but also in the next life. Such divine communication transcends words and language.

Elder Orson Pratt taught:

*How do you suppose that spirits after they leave these bodies, communicate one with another? Do they communicate their ideas by the actual vibrations of the atmosphere the same as we do? I think not. I think if we could be made acquainted with the kind of language by which spirits converse with spirits, we would find that . . . they have undoubtedly a more refined system among them of communicating their ideas. . . .*

*Well inquires one, “Can you imagine up any such system, or language in this world?” [JD 3:100–101]*

Elder Pratt then went on to answer his own question:

*I can imagine up one, but it cannot be made practicable here, from the fact that the mind of man is unable to use it. For instance, the Book of Mormon tells us, that the angels speak by the power of the Holy Ghost, and man when under the influence of it, speaks the language of angels. Why does he speak in this language? Because the Holy Ghost suggests the ideas which he speaks; and it gives him utterance to convey them to the people. . . . Suppose, instead of having arbitrary sounds, such as we have here, to communicate these ideas, that the*

*Holy Ghost itself, through a certain process and power, should enable him to unfold that knowledge to another spirit, all in an instant. [JD 3:101]*

With such perfect communication in that realm, no wonder those who come back from a spirit-world encounter have difficulty putting into human words what they learned, what they heard, what they felt, and what they experienced.

Another important capacity of the spirit body is the ability to learn and comprehend. We know that the spirit world is a place of learning. The gospel teaches us that the most important learning is acquired through spiritual means. President Young stated, “I shall not cease learning while I live, nor when I arrive in the spirit-world; but shall there learn with greater facility” (JD 8:10).

Likewise, Elder Orson Pratt taught that our ability to absorb, comprehend, and remember information will be “greatly enlarged” (JD 2:243). He said:

*I believe we shall be freed, in the next world, in a great measure, from these narrow, contracted methods of thinking. Instead of thinking in one channel, and following up one certain course of reasoning to find a certain truth, knowledge will rush in from all quarters; it will come in like the light which flows from the sun, penetrating every part, informing the spirit, and giving understanding concerning ten thousand things at the same time; and the mind will be capable of receiving and retaining all. [JD 2:246]*

I look forward to that enhanced capacity to learn. In addition, there is one capacity of spirit learning that really appeals to me: not only will I learn faster and better, but I will also actually remember it! Elder Orson Pratt taught:

*We read or learn a thing by observation yesterday, and today or tomorrow it is gone. [Can you relate to that?] . . . Some of the knowledge we receive here at one time becomes so completely obliterated, through the weakness [of our physical bodies], that we cannot call it to mind, no association of ideas will again suggest it to our minds; it is gone, erased, eradicated from the*

*tablet of our memories. [Why?] . . . There is imperfection in the organization of the flesh and bones, and in things pertaining to the tabernacle; it is this that erases from our memory many things that would be useful. . . . It is not so with the spirit when it is released from this tabernacle.*

*. . . Wait until these mortal bodies are laid in the tomb . . . ; then is the time we shall have the most vivid knowledge [and memory]. [JD 2:239]*

These descriptions of the learning that takes place in the spirit world illustrate perfectly what the Prophet Joseph Smith was referring to when he declared, “Could you gaze into heaven five minutes, you would know more than you would by reading all that ever was written on the subject” (*Teachings*, 324).

#### **Where the Spirit World Is and What It Is Like**

We have talked about the nature of our spirits—what they are like and what they can do. Now let us address the issue of the spirit world, the habitation of our immortal spirits when they leave our bodies at death.

People often think of the spirit world, or heaven, as being up in the sky or out in outer space somewhere. From the Restoration of the gospel, we know that is not the case.

President Young said:

*Where is the spirit world? It is right here. Do the good and evil spirits go together? Yes, they do. . . . Do they go to the sun [or some other planet]? No. Do they go beyond the boundaries of this organized earth? No, they do not. They are brought forth upon this earth for the express purpose of inhabiting it to all eternity. [JD 3:369]*

How is it that the spirit world can be right here on this earth? Is it like a different dimension? Elder Parley P. Pratt perhaps explained it best, saying that the spirit world is here on the very planet where we were born; or, in other words,

*the earth and other planets of a like sphere, have their inward or spiritual spheres, as well as their outward,*

*or temporal. The one is peopled by temporal tabernacles, and the other by spirits. A veil is drawn between the one sphere and the other, whereby all the objects in the spiritual sphere are rendered invisible to those in the temporal.* [Key to the Science of Theology, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Steam Printing Establishment, 1874), 129–30]

These statements illustrate so well why we speak of death as “passing through the veil.” I like the imagery of a veil rather than a wall or a faraway planet. The spirit world is right here around us.

President Joseph F. Smith declared:

*I believe we move and have our being in the presence of heavenly messengers and of heavenly beings. We are not separate from them. . . . Therefore, I claim that we live in their presence, they see us, they are solicitous for our welfare, they love us now more than ever.* [CR, April 1916, 2–3]

The Lord revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith in Doctrine and Covenants 77:2 that “that which is temporal [is] in the likeness of that which is spiritual.” From this we can assume that the spirit world is much like this world.

President Young, who had himself seen the spirit world on more than one occasion, declared:

*When you are in the spirit world, everything there will appear as natural as things now do. Spirits will be familiar with spirits in the spirit world—will converse, behold, and exercise every variety of communication one with another as familiarly and naturally as while here in tabernacles. There, as here, all things will be natural, and you will understand them as you now understand natural things.* [JD 7:239]

While the scriptures and prophets teach us that the spirit world will appear natural to us and be much like this world, I think we can assume that it will be what I like to call “natural plus,” or, as Joseph Smith taught, “It will be coupled with eternal glory, which glory we do not now enjoy” (D&C 130:2). I guess we could compare it to the quality of

regular television broadcasts in years past with the best high-definition broadcasts of today.

Jedediah M. Grant, counselor to President Young and father to President Heber J. Grant, saw the spirit world shortly before his death and recounted what he saw to President Heber C. Kimball:

*Brother Heber, I have been into the spirit world two nights in succession, and, of all the dreads that ever came across me, the worst was to have to again return to my body, though I had to do it.* [JD 4:135]

President Kimball shared more of President Jedediah M. Grant’s experience:

*He also spoke of the buildings he saw there, remarking that the Lord gave Solomon wisdom and poured gold and silver into his hands that he might display his skill and ability, and said that the temple erected by Solomon was much inferior to the most ordinary buildings he saw in the spirit world.*

*In regard to gardens, says brother Grant, “I have seen good gardens on this earth, but I never saw any to compare with those that were there. I saw flowers of numerous kinds, and some with from fifty to a hundred different colored flowers growing upon one stalk.” We have many kinds of flowers on the earth, and I suppose those very articles came from heaven, or they would not be here. . . .*

*After speaking of the gardens and the beauty of every thing there, brother Grant said that he felt extremely sorrowful at having to leave so beautiful a place and come back to earth, for he looked upon his body with loathing, but was obliged to enter it again.* [JD 4:136]

President Grant’s experience is strikingly similar to many of the experiences and descriptions given by others, including President Young. No wonder President Young said that it took far greater faith than he had ever before exercised for him to desire to continue to live in mortality (see JD 14:231).

In Doctrine and Covenants 132:8, the Lord declared, “Behold, mine house is a house of order . . . and not a house of confusion.” Order and organization are certainly important characteristics in the spirit world paradise.

President Ezra Taft Benson taught:

*Righteous spirits are close by us. They are organized according to priesthood order in family organizations as we are here; only there they exist in a more perfect order. This was revealed to the Prophet Joseph. [TETB, 35–36]*

President Heber C. Kimball related how President Jedediah Grant also marveled at the extensive order and organization in the spirit world:

*But O, . . . the order and government that were there! When in the spirit world, I saw the order of righteous men and women; beheld them organized in their several grades, and there appeared to be no obstruction to my vision; I could see every man and woman in their grade and order. I looked to see whether there was any disorder there, but there was none. . . . The people . . . were organized in family capacities; and when [I] looked at them [I] saw grade after grade, and all were organized and in perfect harmony. [JD 4:135–36]*

Alma taught that, for the righteous, the spirit world will be a paradise—“a state of rest, a state of peace, where they shall rest from all their troubles and from all care, and sorrow” (Alma 40:12). I have often wondered how we can be in a place of rest and yet be busy and deeply involved in intense activity. It reminds me of an account that one of my colleagues shared with me. His aged mother-in-law, who had been widowed for decades, saw into the spirit world shortly before her passing. She told the family that she had seen departed family members, including her beloved husband.

“Well, doesn’t that make you want to go join them?” a daughter asked her.

She responded, “Oh, no. They were so busy. It made me tired watching them.”

President Wilford Woodruff learned why people on the other side are so busy through a vision he received of the spirit world in which he spoke with the Prophet Joseph Smith.

*I saw him at the door of the temple in heaven. He came and spoke to me. He said he could not stop to talk with*

*me because he was in a hurry. The next man I met was Father Smith [Joseph Sr.]; he could not talk with me because he was in a hurry. I met half a dozen brethren who had held high positions on earth, and none of them could stop to talk with me because they were in a hurry. I was much astonished. By and by I saw the Prophet again, and I got the privilege to ask him a question. “Now,” said I, “I want to know why you are in a hurry. I have been in a hurry all through my life; but I expected my hurry would be over when I got into the kingdom of heaven, if I ever did.” Joseph said: “I will tell you, Brother Woodruff. Every dispensation that has had the Priesthood on the earth and has gone into the celestial kingdom, has had a certain amount of work to do to prepare to go to the earth with the Savior when He goes to reign on the earth. Each dispensation has had ample time to do this work. We have not. We are the last dispensation, and so much work has to be done, and we need to be in a hurry in order to accomplish it.” [“Discourse Delivered at the Weber Stake Conference, Ogden, Monday, October 19th, 1896,” *Deseret Weekly*, 7 November 1896, 642–43; also *The Discourses of Wilford Woodruff*, sel. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1946), 288–89]*

*Hurry* is the operative word. *Urgency* would describe the work on the other side of the veil. We know what that work is in which the righteous spirits are so busily engaged. It is the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ—proclaiming, as Isaiah described it, “liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound” (Isaiah 61:1).

In one of the great revelations of the Restoration, President Joseph F. Smith saw in vision the opening of this vital work in the world of the spirits. On October 3, 1918, President Smith sat in his room pondering the scriptures when, as he 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). Of the righteous spirits, President Smith said:

*I beheld that they were filled with joy and gladness, and were rejoicing together because the day of their deliverance was at hand.*

*They were assembled awaiting the advent of the Son of God into the spirit world, to declare their redemption from the bands of death. . . .*

*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;*

*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.*

*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;*

*Neither did the rebellious who rejected the testimonies and the warnings of the ancient prophets behold his presence, nor look upon his face.*

*Where these were, darkness reigned, but among the righteous there was peace. [D&C 138:15–16, 18–22]*

After seeing in vision the Savior’s ministry among the righteous in the spirit world, President Smith wondered how the gospel would go forth to all the other spirits in that realm. He then saw how the Lord

*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. [D&C 138:30]*

That is the urgent work in which all faithful spirits will find themselves engaged when they depart this life and enter into the world of the spirits. There is no doubt in my mind that the work of the Lord in the spirit world follows much the same pattern as the work of the Lord in this life—leading, teaching, fellowshiping, strengthening—all under the direction of the priesthood.

President Woodruff declared:

*The same Priesthood exists on the other side of the veil. Every man who is faithful in his quorum here will join his quorum there. When a man dies and his body is laid in the tomb, he does not lose his position. The Prophet*

*Joseph Smith held the keys of this dispensation on this side of the veil, and he will hold them throughout the countless ages of eternity. He went into the spirit world to unlock the prison doors and to preach the Gospel to the millions of spirits who are in darkness, and every Apostle, every Seventy [every high priest], 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 there than there is here. [JD 22:333–34; also Discourses of Wilford Woodruff, 77]*

President Woodruff highlighted the work in the spirit world done by priesthood holders. But we know that much of the Lord’s work on this side of the veil is also done by faithful sisters, and it is the same on the other side.

President Joseph F. Smith observed:

*Among all these millions and thousands of millions of spirits that have lived in the earth and have passed away, from generation to generation, since the beginning of the world, without the 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 simple thing. [Faithful sisters] 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. **The things we experience here are typical of the things of God and the life beyond us.** [“Address of President Joseph F. Smith Delivered at the Funeral Services of Sister Mary A. Freeze,” *Young Woman’s Journal* 23, no. 3 (March 1912): 130; emphasis added]*

Because of the importance and urgency of the work of the Lord in the spirit world, there are times when faithful men and women are called to that work before we might think that they are ready to die. No righteous person dies “before their time.” But just like calls here in mortality, calls to the other side sometimes are unexpected and come at what we may think are inopportune times.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell gave an insightful observation of this fact:

*A mortal life may need to be “shortened” by twenty years as we might view it—but if so, it may be done in order for special services to be rendered by that individual in the spirit world, services that will benefit thousands of new neighbors. [All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 99]*

Elder Maxwell also said:

*On the other side of the veil, there are perhaps seventy billion people. They need the same gospel, and releases occur here to aid the Lord’s work there. Each release of a righteous individual from this life is also a call to new labors. Those who have true hope understand this.*

*Therefore, though we miss the departed righteous so much here, hundreds may feel their touch there. One day, those hundreds will thank the bereaved for gracefully forgoing the extended association with choice individuals here, in order that they could help hundreds there. In God’s ecology, talent and love are never wasted. [Notwithstanding My Weakness (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 55]*

Certainly Elder Maxwell was one of those who died before we were ready to let him go. He now continues to serve and bless others on the other side of the veil. We know of many others whose labors continue, though they are transferred to a different mission field. Though the work of the Lord will be much the same on that side of the veil, the success attending it will be much greater there than it is here.

President Lorenzo Snow said:

*I believe, strongly too, that when the Gospel is preached to the spirits in prison, the success attending that preaching will be far greater than that attending the preaching of our Elders in this life. I believe there will be very few indeed of those spirits who will not gladly receive the Gospel when it is carried to them. The circumstances there will be a thousand times more*

*favorable. [“Discourse by President Lorenzo Snow,” Millennial Star 56, no. 4 (22 January 1894): 50]*

One of the great heartaches that my mother and father experienced in this life was the death of a child. Next to the graves of my mom and dad is a small grave that holds the earthly remains of my brother whom I never knew in mortality. He died as a four-day-old baby.

What is the spirit world like for him? What is he doing now? I am sure that every parent who has lost a child has wondered those same things. The restored gospel gives us some valuable insight and profound comfort regarding this subject.

President Joseph F. Smith declared:

*The spirits of our children are immortal before they come to us, and their spirits, after bodily death, are like they were before they came. They are as they would have appeared if they had lived in the flesh, to grow to maturity, or to develop their physical bodies to the full stature of their spirits. If you see one of your children that has passed away it may appear to you in the form in which you would recognize it, the form of childhood; but if it came to you as a messenger bearing some important truth, it would perhaps come . . . in the stature of full-grown manhood [or womanhood]. . . .*

*Father [remember that President Smith’s father was Hyrum Smith, the Patriarch of the Church and the brother of the Prophet Joseph] [taught] that the Spirit of Jesus Christ was full-grown before he was born into the world; and so our children were full-grown and possessed their full stature in the spirit, before they entered mortality. [GD, 455]*

I find that so interesting. My brother who died as a baby is now a full-grown, spiritually mature man in the spirit world. If I were to see him today, that is how he would appear. I believe that my brother who died as a baby was indeed, as the Prophet Joseph Smith taught concerning little children who die before accountability, “too pure, too lovely, to live on earth” (HC 4:553). That doctrine comforts grieving mothers and fathers. I know it comforted my mother.



In light of what the prophets have declared, I believe that my parents, at their deaths, were reunited with their son and are laboring side by side with him in the great work of the Lord in the spirit world—sharing the gospel, teaching, and blessing and strengthening others—and that my brother will continue that great service until the morning of the First Resurrection. Then my mother and father will realize another one of the most comforting promises of the gospel: they will be able to raise my brother in the Resurrection. When they come forth on the morning of the First Resurrection, my mother will once again have a babe in arms to love and nurture and rear.

President Joseph F. Smith stated:

*Joseph Smith declared that the mother who laid down her little child, being deprived of the privilege, the joy, and the satisfaction of bringing it up to manhood or womanhood in this world, would, after the resurrection, have all the joy, satisfaction and pleasure, **and even more than it would have been possible to have had in mortality**, in seeing her child grow to the full measure of the stature of its spirit. [GD, 453; emphasis added]*

I can only imagine the glorious reunion of my parents with their long-departed son. They had been separated for nearly sixty years. Reunion with loved ones is one of the most significant and most joyful conditions of the spirit world. The Prophet Joseph Smith himself looked forward to the joyful reunion with his loved ones on the other side of the veil of death. He said:

*I have a father, brothers, children, and friends who have gone to a world of spirits. They are only absent for a moment. They are in the spirit, and we shall soon meet again. . . . When we depart [from this life], we shall hail our mothers, fathers, friends, and all whom we love, who have fallen asleep in Jesus. . . . It will be an eternity of felicity. [HC 6:316]*

President Young said:

*We have more friends behind the veil than on this side, and they will hail us more joyfully than you were*

*ever welcomed by your parents and friends in this world; and you will rejoice more when you meet them than you ever rejoiced to see a friend in this life. [JD 6:349]*

The doctrine of the spirit world being a place of joyous and loving reunion with family and friends is a glorious and comforting doctrine. President Joseph F. Smith said of this doctrine, “What is there for any religion superior to that? I know of nothing.” He also said:

*What is more desirable than that we should meet with our fathers and our mothers, with our brethren and our sisters, with our wives and our children, with our beloved associates and kindred in the spirit world, knowing each other, identifying each other . . . by the associations that familiarize each to the other in mortal life? What do you want better than that? [“The Resurrection,” *Liahona: The Elders’ Journal* 6, no. 8 (8 August 1908): 178]*

In Doctrine and Covenants 130:2 we read that the “same sociality which exists among us here will exist among us there, only it will be coupled with eternal glory, which glory we do not now enjoy.”

What does that mean? What is sociality? It seems to indicate that the same kinds of social interactions and feelings that we enjoy here in this life will be in that realm—only to a greater and more glorious degree. I hope that means fun and laughter as well as rejoicing and praising. My sociality involves joking and teasing and a lot of laughing and enthusiastic cheering for my favorite sports teams. I hope that continues on the other side.

I once heard someone say, “I am not afraid of death. It is what I have to do to get there that scares me.”

President Young said that when we pass through the veil, we will view death as one of life’s great blessings, not something to be dreaded. He said:

*If we could see things as they are, and as we shall see and understand them, this dark shadow and valley [of*

death] is so trifling that we shall turn round and look upon it and think, when we have crossed it, why this is the greatest advantage of my whole existence, for I have passed from a state of sorrow, grief, mourning, woe, misery, pain, anguish and disappointment into a state of existence where I can enjoy life to the fullest extent as far as that can be done without a body. My spirit is set free, I thirst no more, I want to sleep no more, I hunger no more, I tire no more, I run, I walk, I labor, I go, I come, I do this, I do that, whatever is required of me, nothing like pain or weariness, I am full of life, full of vigor, and I enjoy the presence of my heavenly Father, by the power of his Spirit. [JD 17:142]

Wow! Isn't that appealing? Doesn't that just make you want to die? It reminds me of what a colleague once said to me: "When we get over to the other side and see how good things are there, we will wonder why we ate so much whole wheat!"

### How This Knowledge Affects Our Lives

Now, to my last point: how a uniquely Latter-day Saint view of death and the spirit world should affect our lives today. President Harold B. Lee once quoted a man he met at a stake conference: "What we are hereafter depends on what we are after here" ("Place of Mothers in the Plan of Teaching the Gospel in the Home," *Relief Society Magazine* 51, no. 12 [December 1964]: 9; also *The Teachings of Harold B. Lee*, ed. Clyde J. Williams [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996], 75). I like that play on words. Let me say it in a little different way: what we know about the hereafter can influence what we do and become hereafter. Or there is another way of saying it: our knowledge of what it will be like *then* and *there* helps us to know what we should be like *here* and *now*.

The restored gospel of Jesus Christ doesn't just teach us about and prepare us for eternity; it also blesses and enriches our lives right now. That is certainly true with regard to the doctrine of death and the spirit world. The gospel insights about *dying* teach us a great deal about *living*. The scriptures teach that "if ye are prepared ye shall not fear" (D&C 38:30).

Not only biologically but spiritually we begin preparation for death the moment we are born. How we live is how we prepare.

The early Christian father and Bible translator Jerome taught in the fourth century, "Begin to be now what you will be hereafter" (Letter XXII, to Eustochium, "The Virgin's Profession," AD 384).

Epictetus, the first-century Greek philosopher, likewise taught, "Let death . . . be daily before your eyes . . . ; and you will never entertain any abject thought, nor too eagerly covet anything" (*Enchiridion* [AD c. 125], XXI).

I like that phrase—"let death be daily before your eyes." It may sound morbid to say, "Think about death all the time," but we can "let death be daily before our eyes" by keeping our eyes focused on eternity and on those things that matter most.

In our day the Lord declared, "Let the solemnities of eternity rest upon your minds" (D&C 43:34). That is the way whereby we are not only better prepared to die but also better equipped to really live.

There are two places in particular where we feel the closeness of the spirit world and where we are reminded most profoundly of the need to prepare for death: at funerals and in the temple.

First, funerals. My wife, Wendy, loves funerals. I tease her that she ought to read the obituaries in the newspaper and then just randomly select a funeral to attend. Like "an apple a day," she could do a funeral a day. She probably would do that—and really enjoy it.

At funerals our hearts are more tender and our minds are more focused on death. I have felt the Spirit powerfully testifying of the truths of the gospel at funerals. For me, there is probably more spiritual introspection at a funeral service than at any other time—except maybe during the administration of the sacrament.

Speaking at a funeral, President Howard W. Hunter said:

*In the quiet of this chapel today, our souls have been on their knees.* [Let me interject at this point. I love the phrase "our souls have been on their knees."

I really like that imagery.] *We have contemplated the uncertainties of life and the certainty of death. Each of us in his turn will follow the same course—only the point of time is the difference. Will we be ready? Will the things we intend to accomplish be completed? Will we make right the little wrongs and replace the harsh words with kindness before our call comes? Will we accept the fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ by following his teachings, keeping his commandments, being of service to our fellowman, ready to enter the tomb, partake of the glorious resurrection, and stand at the judgment as worthy servants?* [The Teachings of Howard W. Hunter, ed. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 15–16]

Those are important questions that we all need to frequently consider. Not long ago I attended the funeral service of a dear friend and colleague. It was deeply moving, and the Spirit was there in rich abundance. Most touching were the tributes paid by the children. There was no mention of his positions of prominence or his scholarly publications. Little was said of his career contributions. Instead the focus was on his love for others; his thoughtfulness and kindness; his role as husband, father, and grandfather; and, most of all, his faith and devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ. (I was so impressed that I wondered if I could “rent” his children to give the same tributes at my funeral!)

As I left that funeral, I wondered what my family and friends would say about me. What mark in this world am I leaving in the hearts and lives of those around me? Are my priorities right? Am I putting first things first, or am I distracted and diverted, pursuing things that, when the moment of death comes, will not seem very important at all?

As I took a spiritual inventory of my life, I realized that every day, every moment, I am writing my own eulogy. My words, my actions, my thoughts, and my love are being “written” in my heart and soul and are likewise being recorded in the hearts of my family and fellowmen. If I don’t like how that eulogy is being written, then I need to change it, and I can do that through repentance and through striving to do better and be better.

That is one of the great blessings of the gospel. Daily preparing for *dying*, as strange as that may sound, powerfully affects our daily *living*. As Shakespeare wrote, “Be [still prepared] for death; either death or life / Shall thereby be the sweeter” (*Measure for Measure*, act 3, scene 1, lines 5–6; emphasis added).

Now the second place: temples. I have heard it said that temples are where heaven and earth meet—the crossroad between mortality and eternity. Everything we do in the temple is focused on preparing for the next life *and* enriching our lives here and now. Our minds are continually centered on the relationship between the two. Think about it: from picking up the name of a deceased person for whom we are doing the work to passing through the veil, we are continually reminded in the temple about death and how it is a gateway to immortality and eternal life. Even as we are focused on that next life and on those in the spirit world, we are also reminded by instruction and covenant of the importance of this life and how living in harmony with those eternal principles will bless our own lives and families right here and now.

What a blessing it is to have temples and temple ordinances to keep our minds centered on the things of eternity. President Hinckley taught that if we worthily attend the temple on a regular basis, “we will be a better people, we will be better fathers and husbands, we will be better wives and mothers.” He then added this: “I know your lives are busy. I know that you have much to do. But I make you a promise that if you will go to the house of the Lord, you will be blessed, *life will be better for you*” (“Excerpts from Recent Addresses of President Gordon B. Hinckley,” *Ensign*, July 1997; emphasis added).

President Hinckley’s promise about temples reminds me of a principle that I often teach my students. I like to call it “the principle of indirection.” You find it in the scriptures a great deal—it’s just not called that. The principle works this way: You focus on one thing, and another thing results, kind of like a boomerang. You throw it one direction, and it comes back in another.

The most famous example in the scriptures of this is Matthew 10:39: “He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.” This is an interesting irony. Those who spend their lives focused solely on this life—living for now, giving little thought about what lies beyond—will come to realize that they have lost the substance while seeking after the shadow (see Charles Churchill, “Dedication to Churchill’s Sermons” [1765], line 157).

In a spiritual way, focusing only on *today* diminishes our *tomorrow*. In contrast, if we prepare for death each day of our lives, we will not only obtain eternal life—“better worlds and greater light”—but also our here and now will be abundantly enhanced (in Hinckley, “Empty Tomb”; also Hinckley, “What Is This Thing?”).

Several years ago, as my parents were getting older and slowing down considerably, I invited them to come and visit us in Utah. Mother’s health wasn’t that great, and she responded, “I don’t know if we can come next week because I don’t know what next week will bring. We are just living day by day.”

I thought a great deal about that phrase: “We are just living day by day.” Each of us—whether we are nine or ninety—is, in reality, living day by day. I may have plans and goals for weeks and months and years to come, but, nonetheless, my life is in the Lord’s hands. For me, the phrase “living day by day” doesn’t mean that I don’t have a long-range view. In fact, it is just the opposite. Living day by day means doing everything each day with an eternal perspective—recognizing that *today* might be *the* day when I am called home.

Alma posed a series of questions that should guide our daily introspection:

*Have ye walked, keeping yourselves blameless before God? Could ye say, if ye were called to die at this time, within yourselves, that ye have been sufficiently humble? That your garments have been cleansed and made white through the blood of Christ . . . ?*

*Behold, are ye stripped of pride? I say unto you, if ye are not ye are not prepared to meet God. Behold ye must prepare quickly. . . .*

*. . . Is there one among you who is not stripped of envy? I say unto you that such an one is not prepared; and I would that he should prepare quickly, for the hour is close at hand, and he knoweth not when the time shall come. . . .*

*. . . Is there one among you that doth make a mock of his brother, or that heapeth upon him persecutions?*

*Wo unto such an one, for he is not prepared, and the time is at hand that he must repent or he cannot be saved! [Alma 5:27–31]*

As I consider these questions, think about my own mortality, and consider how I need to daily prepare for death, I am reminded of the words of the Prophet Joseph Smith, who counseled the Saints: “Search your hearts, and see if you are like God. I have searched mine, and feel to repent of all my sins” (*Teachings*, 216). With repentance should come a reexamination of our priorities in life.

An understanding of the doctrine of death and the spirit world, as revealed in these last days through the Restoration, inspires me to repent, reexamine my priorities, and reorder them as necessary. But there is something else it does for me—and that word also starts with the letter *R*—*rejoice*. Because of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ, I rejoice in my understanding of the purpose of this estate and the meaning of death. I rejoice to know that death is not the end of life and love. I rejoice to know that my loved ones whom I am separated from for a season are not far from me. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that our departed loved ones “are not far from us” and that they continue to feel deeply about us (*Teachings*, 326).

I am reminded of a story about Elder Bruce R. McConkie’s father, Oscar McConkie Sr. As he was close to death, Brother McConkie called his family together to express his love and to give some departing counsel. He told them, “I am going to die. When I die, I shall not cease to love you. I shall not cease to pray for you. I shall not cease to labor in your behalf” (quoted in Robert L. Millet, *When a Child Wanders* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996], 133).

It makes perfect sense to me that just as we continue to think about and love those who are separated from us by death, they continue to think about and love us.

President Joseph F. Smith taught:

*Sometimes the Lord expands our vision from this point of view and this side of the veil, that we feel and seem to realize that we can look beyond the thin veil which separates us from that other sphere. . . . We begin to realize more and more fully, as we become acquainted with the principles of the gospel, as they have been revealed anew in this dispensation, that we are closely related to our kindred, to our ancestors, to our friends and associates and co-laborers who have preceded us into the spirit world. We cannot forget them; we do not cease to love them; we always hold them in our hearts, in memory, and thus we are associated and united to them by ties that we cannot break, that we cannot dissolve or free ourselves from. . . . For now they see the dangers that beset us; they can comprehend better than ever before, the weaknesses that are liable to mislead us into dark and forbidden paths. They see the temptations and the evils that beset us in life, and the proneness of mortal beings to yield to temptation and to wrong doing; hence their solicitude for us and their love for us and their desire for our well being must be greater than that which we feel for ourselves. [GD, 430–31]*

What a comforting thought to know that we are not alone in facing our challenges or in dealing with our difficulties.

President Benson testified:

*There are people over there who are pulling for us—people who have faith in us and who have great hopes for us, who are hoping and praying that we will measure up—our loved ones (parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, and friends) who have passed on. [TETB, 31]*

In Doctrine and Covenants 84:88 the Lord promised: “I will go before your face. I will be on your right hand and on your left, and my Spirit

shall be in your hearts, *and mine angels round about you, to bear you up*” (emphasis added). You have probably read that passage many times, as I have. Perhaps you have wondered too, who are those angels? Because of the restored gospel’s teachings about the spirit world and eternal families, we know the answer.

President Joseph F. Smith taught it clearly. He said:

*When messengers are sent to minister to the inhabitants of this earth, they are not strangers, but from the ranks of our kindred [and] friends. . . . In like manner our fathers and mothers, brothers, sisters and friends who have passed away from this earth, having been faithful, and worthy to enjoy these rights and privileges, may have a mission given them to visit their relatives and friends upon the earth again, bringing from the divine Presence messages of love, of warning, or reproof and instruction, to those whom they had learned to love in the flesh. [GD, 435–36]*

That makes perfect sense. If there is to be help from beyond the veil, it will come from those who know and love us best and who desire to help us most. Do you realize what a blessing that can be to us as parents and grandparents, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters? Sometimes we know when the veil is being parted on our behalf, but most times we don’t. Whether that help is seen or unseen, it is real.

Speaking specifically to parents who have children who have strayed from the path, President James E. Faust, not long before his own death, gave this comforting assurance:

*Perhaps in this life we are not given to fully understand how enduring the sealing cords of righteous parents are to their children. It may very well be that there are more helpful sources at work than we know. I believe there is a strong familial pull as the influence of beloved ancestors continues with us from the other side of the veil. [“Dear Are the Sheep That Have Wandered,” *Ensign*, May 2003]*

At the beginning of this talk I shared with you the first stanza of President Hinckley's poem. Let me share it again and this time give you the rest of President Hinckley's inspired words:

*What is this thing that men call death,  
This quiet passing in the night?  
'Tis not the end, but genesis  
Of better worlds and greater light.*

*O God, touch Thou my aching heart,  
And calm my troubled, haunting fears.  
Let hope and faith, transcendent, pure,  
Give strength and peace beyond my tears.*

*There is no death, but only change  
With recompense for victory won;  
The gift of Him who loved all men,  
The Son of God, the Holy One.*  
[Hinckley, "Empty Tomb"; also Hinckley, "What Is This Thing?"]

I rejoice with you in knowing that there is indeed strength and peace beyond our tears. I rejoice in and bear testimony of the divinity of Jesus Christ. I know He lives. I know that because He lives there is no death but only change and "better worlds and greater light." How grateful I am for the peace the gospel brings. I add my testimony to the words of the apostle Paul:

*O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? . . .*

*. . . Thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. [1 Corinthians 15:55, 57]*

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.