

Trust in the Lord

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Our only sure reliance is to trust in the Lord and His love for His children.

My dear brothers and sisters, a letter I received some time ago introduces the subject of my talk. The writer was contemplating a temple marriage to a man whose eternal companion had died. She would be a second wife. She asked this question: would she be able to have her own house in the next life, or would she have to live with her husband and his first wife? I just told her to trust the Lord.

I continue with an experience I heard from a valued associate, which I share with his permission. After the death of his beloved wife and the mother of his children, a father remarried. Some grown children strongly objected to the remarriage and sought the counsel of a close relative who was a respected Church leader. After hearing the reasons for their objections, which focused on conditions and relationships in the spirit world or in the kingdoms of glory that follow the Final Judgment, this leader said: “You are worried about the wrong things. You should be worried about whether *you* will get to those places. Concentrate on that. If you get there, all of it will be more wonderful than you can imagine.”

What a comforting teaching! Trust in the Lord!

From letters I have received, I know that others are troubled by questions about the spirit world we will inhabit after we die and before we are resurrected. Some assume that the spirit world will continue many of the temporal circumstances and issues we experience in this mortal life. What do we really know about conditions in the spirit world? I believe a BYU religion professor’s article on this subject had it right: “When we ask ourselves what we know about the spirit world from the standard works, the answer is ‘not as much as we often think.’”¹

Of course, we know from the scriptures that after our bodies die we continue to live as spirits in the spirit world. The scriptures also teach that this spirit world is divided between those who have been “righteous” or “just” during life and those who have been wicked. They also describe how some faithful spirits teach the gospel to those who have been wicked or rebellious (see 1 Peter 3:19; Doctrine and Covenants 138:19–20, 29, 32, 37). Most important, modern revelation reveals that the work of salvation goes forward in the spirit world (see Doctrine and Covenants 138:30–34, 58), and although we are urged not to procrastinate our repentance during mortality (see Alma 13:27), we are taught that some repentance is possible there (see Doctrine and Covenants 138:58).

The work of salvation in the spirit world consists of freeing spirits from what the scriptures frequently describe as “bondage.” All in the spirit world are under some

form of bondage. President Joseph F. Smith's great revelation, canonized in section 138 of the Doctrine and Covenants, states that the righteous dead, who were in a state of "peace" (Doctrine and Covenants 138:22) as they anticipated the Resurrection (see Doctrine and Covenants 138:16), "had looked upon the long absence of their spirits from their bodies as a bondage" (Doctrine and Covenants 138:50).

The wicked also suffer an additional bondage. Because of unrepented sins, they are in what the Apostle Peter referred to as spirit "prison" (1 Peter 3:19; see also Doctrine and Covenants 138:42). These spirits are described as "bound" or as "captives" (Doctrine and Covenants 138:31, 42) or as "cast out into outer darkness" with "weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth" as they await resurrection and judgment (Alma 40:13–14).

Resurrection for all in the spirit world is assured by the Resurrection of Jesus Christ (see 1 Corinthians 15:22), though it occurs at different times for different groups. Until that appointed time, what the scriptures tell us about activity in the spirit world principally concerns the work of salvation. Little else is revealed. The gospel is preached to the ignorant, the unrepentant, and the rebellious so they can be freed from their bondage and go forward to the blessings a loving Heavenly Father has in store for them.

The spirit-world bondage that applies to righteous converted souls is their need to await—and perhaps even be allowed to prompt—the performance of their proxy ordinances on earth so they can be baptized and enjoy the blessings of the Holy Ghost (see Doctrine and Covenants 138:30–37, 57–58).² These mortal proxy ordinances also empower them to go forward under priesthood authority to enlarge the hosts of the righteous who can preach the gospel to the spirits in prison.

Beyond these basics, our canon of scripture contains very little about the spirit world that follows death and precedes the Final Judgment.³ So what else do we know about the spirit world? Many members of the Church have had visions or other inspirations to inform them about how things operate or are organized in the spirit world, but these personal spiritual experiences are not to be understood or taught as the official doctrine of the Church. And, of course, there is abundant speculation by members and others in published sources like books on near-death experiences.⁴

As to all of these, the wise cautions of Elders D. Todd Christofferson and Neil L. Andersen in earlier general conference messages are important to remember. Elder Christofferson taught: "It should be remembered that not every statement made by a Church leader, past or present, necessarily constitutes doctrine. It is commonly understood in the Church that a statement made by one leader on a single occasion often represents a personal, though well-considered, opinion, not meant to be official or binding for the whole Church."⁵

In the following conference, Elder Andersen taught this principle: "The doctrine is taught by all 15 members of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve. It is

not hidden in an obscure paragraph of one talk.”⁶ The family proclamation, signed by all 15 prophets, seers, and revelators, is a wonderful illustration of that principle.

Beyond something as formal as the family proclamation, the prophetic teachings of the Presidents of the Church, affirmed by other prophets and apostles, are also an example of this. As to circumstances in the spirit world, the Prophet Joseph Smith gave two teachings near the close of his ministry that have been frequently taught by his successors. One of these is his teaching in the King Follett sermon that family members who were righteous will be together in the world of spirits.⁷ Another is this statement at a funeral in the last year of his life: “The spirits of the just are exalted to a greater and more glorious work ... [in] the world of spirits. ... They are not far from us, and know and understand our thoughts, feelings, and motions, and are often pained therewith.”⁸

So, what about a question like I mentioned earlier about where spirits live? If that question seems strange or trivial to you, consider many of your own questions, or even those you have been tempted to answer on the basis of something you heard from another person sometime in the past. For all questions about the spirit world, I suggest two answers. *First*, remember that God loves His children and will surely do what is best for each of us. *Second*, remember this familiar Bible teaching, which has been most helpful to me on a multitude of unanswered questions:

“Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.

“In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths” (Proverbs 3:5–6).

Similarly, Nephi concluded his great psalm with these words: “O Lord, I have trusted in thee, and I will trust in thee forever. I will not put my trust in the arm of flesh” (2 Nephi 4:34).

We can all wonder privately about circumstances in the spirit world or even discuss these or other unanswered questions in family or other intimate settings. But let us not teach or use as official doctrine what does not meet the standards of official doctrine. To do so does not further the work of the Lord and may even discourage individuals from seeking their own comfort or edification through the personal revelation the Lord’s plan provides for each of us. Excessive reliance on personal teachings or speculations may even draw us aside from concentrating on learning and efforts that *will* further our understanding and help us go forward on the covenant path.

Trust in the Lord is a familiar and true teaching in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. That was Joseph Smith’s teaching when the early Saints experienced severe persecutions and seemingly insurmountable obstacles.⁹ That is still the best principle we can use when our efforts to learn or our attempts to find comfort encounter obstacles in matters not yet revealed or not adopted as the official doctrine of the Church.

That same principle applies to unanswered questions about sealings in the next life or desired readjustments because of events or transgressions in mortality. There is

so much we do not know that our only sure reliance is to trust in the Lord and His love for His children.

In conclusion, what we do know about the spirit world is that the Father's and the Son's work of salvation continues there. Our Savior initiated the work of declaring liberty to the captives (see 1 Peter 3:18–19; 4:6; Doctrine and Covenants 138:6–11, 18–21, 28–37), and that work continues as worthy and qualified messengers continue to preach the gospel, including repentance, to those who still need its cleansing effect (see Doctrine and Covenants 138:57). The object of all of that is described in the official doctrine of the Church, given in modern revelation.

“The dead who repent will be redeemed, through obedience to the ordinances of the house of God,

“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” (Doctrine and Covenants 138:58–59).

The duty of each of us is to teach the doctrine of the restored gospel, keep the commandments, love and help one another, and do the work of salvation in the holy temples.

I testify of the truth of what I have said here and of the truths taught and to be taught in this conference. This is all made possible because of the Atonement of Jesus Christ. As we know from modern revelation, He “glorifies the Father, and *saves all the works of his hands*” (Doctrine and Covenants 76:43; emphasis added). In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.