

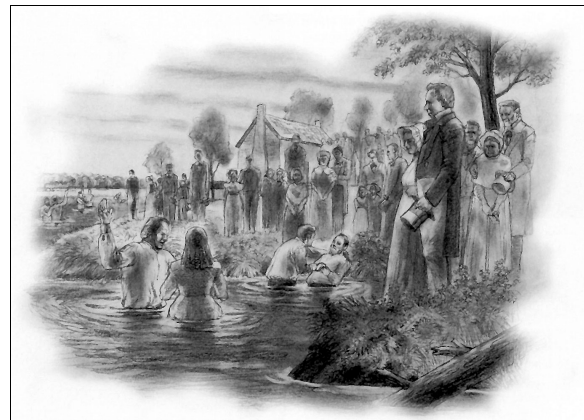
Historical Development in the Latter-Days of the Doctrine of Baptism for the Dead

D&C 124:28–42; D&C 127:6; D&C 128:11–18 ¹

- **1823** Moroni prophesied of the coming of Elijah in 1823 to Joseph Smith (*Joseph Smith-History 1:36–39*).
- **1836, April 3** Elijah restored the keys on 3 April 1836 in the Kirtland Temple (*D&C 110:13–16*).
- **1840, August 10** Joseph Smith first mentioned baptism for the dead on 10 August 1840 at the funeral of Seymour Brunson (*History of the Church, 4:231*). Brunson, one of the first settlers of Nauvoo, had been one of the earliest missionaries in the Church and had served on the high council in Far West and Nauvoo. Joseph Smith's history states that Brunson "died in the triumph of faith, and in his dying moments bore testimony to the Gospel that he had embraced." (*History of the Church, 4:179*)

"In this powerful funeral sermon, the Prophet read much of 1 Corinthians 15, including verse 29 which refers to the practice of baptism for the dead. He then announced to the congregation that the Lord would permit the Saints to be baptized in behalf of their friends and relatives who had departed this life. He told the Saints that "the plan of salvation was calculated to save all who were willing to obey the requirements of the law of God." (*Journal History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 15 Aug. 1840, Historical Department, Salt Lake City*)

- **1840, August 10** The first baptisms for the dead were performed in the Mississippi River following the sermon, when Jane Neyman asked Harvey Ohnstead to baptize her in behalf of her deceased son, Cyrus. (*B. H. Roberts, A Comprehensive History of the Church, 2:76*). Joseph Smith asked what words were used in performing the ordinance, and then he approved what had taken place. In the ensuing weeks, several more baptisms for the dead were performed in the river or in nearby streams.



- **1841, January 19** The Lord commanded the Saints to build a temple with a baptismal font for these vicarious ordinances (D&C 124). The Lord stated that baptism for the dead "belongeth to my house, and cannot be acceptable to me, only in the days of your poverty, wherein ye are not able to build a house unto me" (D&C 124:30).
- **1841, July 12** Permission was given for the Saints at Zarahemla (Iowa) to perform baptisms for the dead prior to 12 July 1841 (*History of the Church, 4:382–383*).

¹ Adapted from "Baptism for the Dead," in *Church History in the Fulness of Times, CES Student Manual, Religion 341–343, 251–252*

- **1841, October 3** **Baptisms for the dead ceased temporarily.** As the basement of the temple neared completion, Joseph Smith declared, “There shall be no more baptisms for the dead, until the ordinance can be attended to in the Lord’s House.” (*History of the Church, 4:426*) This revelation generated considerable enthusiasm, and work on the temple progressed quickly.

- **1841, November 8** **A temporary font was dedicated by Brigham Young in the basement of the Nauvoo Temple** so baptisms for the dead could continue (Roberts, *Comprehensive History, 2:92*). The baptismal font, built by Elijah Fordham, was made from Wisconsin pine and mounted on twelve carefully crafted oxen.



The Prophet Joseph Smith described the font:

“The baptismal font is situated in the center of the basement room. . . . It is constructed of pine timber; and, put together of staves tongued and grooved, oval shaped, sixteen feet long and twelve feet wide. . . . [T]he moulding of the cap and base are formed of beautiful carved work in antique style.

“The font stands upon twelve oxen, four on each side, and two at each end, their heads, shoulders, and fore legs projecting out from under the font; they are carved out of pine plank, glued together, and copied after the most beautiful five-year-old steer that could be found in the country, and they are an excellent striking likeness of the original; the horns were formed after the most perfect horn that could be procured. The oxen and ornamental mouldings . . . were carved by Elder Elisha Fordham . . . which occupied eight months of time.”

—*History of the Church, 4:446*

- **1841, November 21** **The baptismal font in the Nauvoo Temple was first used** two weeks later, on Sunday, 21 November 1841, when Elders Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, and John Taylor performed forty baptisms for the dead; Elders Willard Richards, Wilford Woodruff, and George A. Smith performed the confirmations. (*Joseph Fielding Smith, Essentials in Church History, 256–257*)
- **1842, August 31** **The Prophet emphasized the need to keep accurate records of baptisms for the dead.** While addressing members of the Female Relief Society in Nauvoo, Joseph Smith said that “a few things had been manifested to him . . . respecting the baptism for the dead.” Although he desired to wait “until the had opportunity to discuss the subject to greater length,” the Prophet emphasized that “all persons baptized for the dead must have a Recorder present, that he may be an eyewitness to testify of it.” (*History of the Church, 5:141; D&C 128:2*).

The Prophet's Specific Instructions on Baptisms for the Dead

D&C 124:28–42; D&C 127:6; D&C 128:11–18 ²

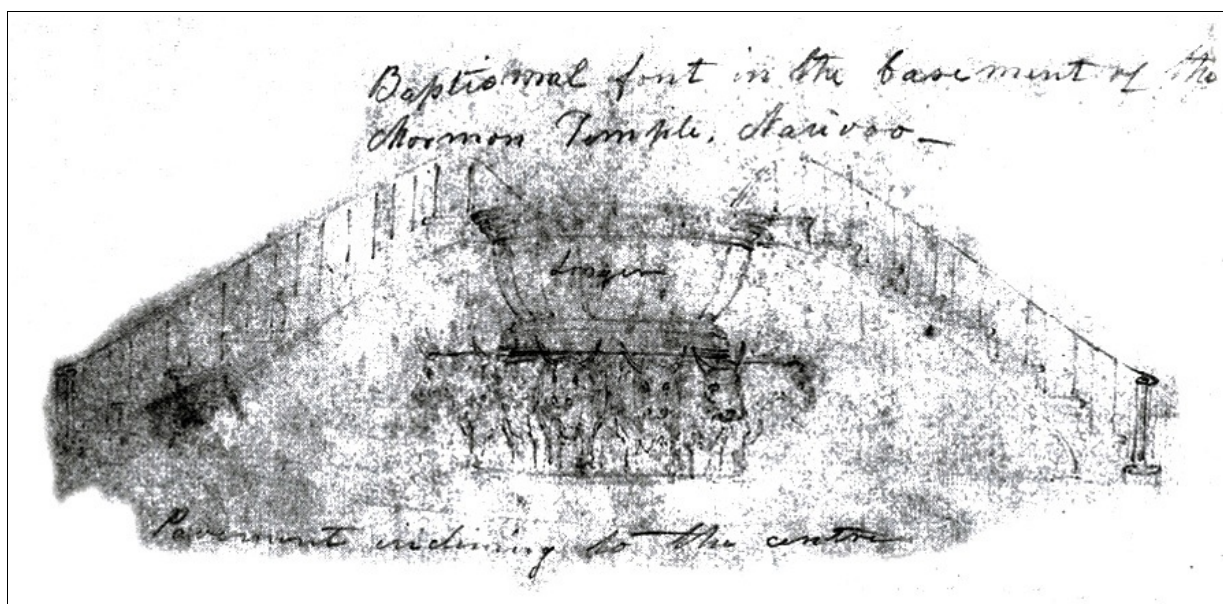
In 1842, while forced into temporary exile by old Missouri enemies, the Prophet wrote two general epistles to the Saints on the doctrine of baptism for the dead. Both emphasized the importance of having a recorder present for the baptisms to be valid. The recorder was to see that each ordinance was performed correctly and to make an accurate record. The first letter stated, "Let all the records be had in order, that they may be put in the archives of my holy temple, to be held in remembrance from generation to generation, saith the Lord of Hosts" (D&C 127:9).

In the second and longer of the two letters the Prophet explained that the living and the dead are dependent upon each other for salvation. "They [the dead] without us cannot be made perfect—neither can we without our dead be made perfect" (D&C 128:15). The ordinances to help accomplish this mutual perfection, he later explained, include not only baptism for the dead, but also the endowment of the holy priesthood and marriage for time and eternity.

"These two letters, written in the hand of William Clayton, were addressed to "all the Saints in Nauvoo" at a time when the Prophet was making few public appearances because of threats of unlawful arrest. Governor Carlin of Illinois, responding to a demand from the governor of Missouri, issued a warrant for Joseph Smith's arrest as an accessory before the fact in an assault with intent to kill Lilburn W. Boggs, ex-governor of Missouri. Having been arrested but temporarily released on 8 August 1842, the Prophet remained "in retirement" to avoid re-apprehension. It was not until 5 January 1843 that Joseph Smith was formally discharged from this arrest.

"The letters concern themselves with salvation for the dead, a subject of much interest and discussion in 1842. Baptism for the dead was first publicly announced on 15 August 1840 at the funeral of Seymour Brunson. Immediately after the announcement of the new doctrine, Church members began performing proxy baptisms in the Mississippi River and in local streams. While those administering these vicarious ordinances in 1840 were not without authority, the actions were not recorded; consequently the baptisms were later repeated. On 3 October 1841 Joseph Smith declared, 'There shall be no more baptisms for the dead, until the ordinances can be attended to in the Lord's House. . . . For thus saith the Lord.' " (Lyndon W. Cook)

The Old Testament describes a large basin resting on twelve oxen used in conjunction with the temple in the days of Solomon (1 Kings 7:23–25). When the Nauvoo Temple was built the Prophet Joseph Smith directed that the baptismal font be built in the basement on the backs of twelve oxen, which represented the twelve tribes of Israel.



² Adapted from "Baptism for the Dead," in Church History in the Fulness of Times, CES Student Manual, Religion 341–343, 251–252

The Principle of Baptism for the Dead

D&C 124:28–42; D&C 127:6; D&C 128:11–18; 1 Corinthians 15:29

The Encyclopedia of Mormonism, Vol.1, says:

Baptism for the dead is the proxy performance of the ordinance of baptism for one deceased. Joseph Smith taught, “If we can baptize a man in the name of the Father [and] of the Son and of the Holy Ghost for the remission of sins it is just as much our privilege to act as an agent and be baptized for the remission of sins for and in behalf of our dead kindred who have not heard the gospel or fulness of it.”

The first public affirmation of the ordinance of baptism for the dead in the Church was Joseph Smith’s funeral sermon for Seymour Brunson in Nauvoo in August 1840. Addressing a widow who had lost a son who had not been baptized, he called the principle “glad tidings of great joy,” in contrast to the prevailing tradition that all unbaptized are damned. The first baptisms for the dead in modern times were done in the Mississippi River near Nauvoo.

Revelations clarifying the doctrine and practice have been given from time to time:

1. This was a New Testament practice (1 Cor.15:29; D&C 128).
2. The ministry of Christ in the spirit world was for the benefit of those who had died without hearing the gospel or the fulness of it (1 Pet.4:6).
3. Such baptisms are to be performed in temple fonts dedicated to the purpose (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, 308; D&C 124:29–35). In November 1841 the font in the unfinished Nauvoo Temple was so dedicated.
4. The language of the baptismal prayer is the same as for the living, with the addition of “for and in behalf of” the deceased.
5. Witnesses are to be present for proxy baptisms and a record is to be kept in Church archives (D&C 128:3, 8).
6. Women are to be baptized for women and men for men.
7. Not only baptism but confirmation and the higher temple ordinances may also be performed by proxy (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, 362–63).
8. The law of agency is inviolate in this world and the world to come. Thus, those served by proxy have the right to accept or reject the ordinances.

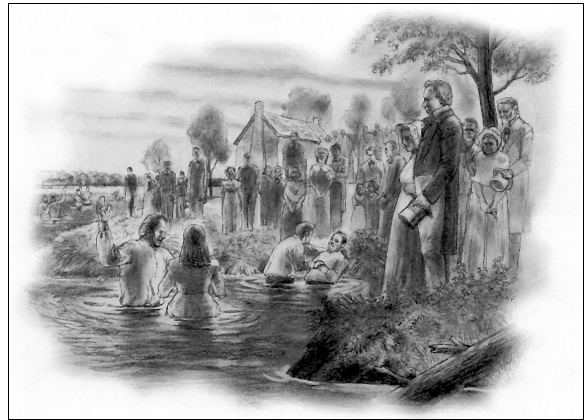
Vicarious Baptisms for the Dead

D&C 124:28–42; D&C 127:6; D&C 128:11–18; 1 Corinthians 15:29

Among the thousands of verses of scripture in the standard works of the Church, few are more important to Latter-day Saints than these four, which deal with the topic of baptism for the dead, and, by extension, all vicarious ordinance work for our deceased ancestors.

Inasmuch as baptism is a requirement for salvation in the celestial kingdom (D&C 112:28–29; 3 Nephi 11:33; John 3:5), and because there are billions who have passed from this earth without that saving ordinance, God has set in place the means whereby the living may perform this ordinance in behalf of the dead. It is a labor of love performed within the house of Him who authorizes such saving service.

These verses are the first mention in modern scripture of baptism for the dead.



The Prophet Joseph Smith

said in a letter to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles on 19 October 1840:

"I presume the doctrine of 'baptism for the dead' has ere this reached your ears, and may have raised some inquiries in your minds respecting the same. I cannot in this letter give you all the information you may desire on the subject; but aside from knowledge independent of the Bible, I would say that it was certainly practiced by the ancient churches; and St. Paul endeavors to prove the doctrine of the resurrection from the same, and says, 'Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? Why are they then baptized for the dead?' [1 Cor. 15:29.]

"I first mentioned the doctrine in public when preaching the funeral sermon of Brother Seymour Brunson; and have since then given general instructions in the Church on the subject. The Saints have the privilege of being baptized for those of their relatives who are dead, whom they believe would have embraced the Gospel, if they had been privileged with hearing it, and who have received the Gospel in the spirit, through the instrumentality of those who have been commissioned to preach to them while in prison.

"Without enlarging on the subject, you will undoubtedly see its consistency and reasonableness; and it presents the Gospel of Christ in probably a more enlarged scale than some have imagined it. But as the performance of this rite is more particularly confined to this place, it will not be necessary to enter into particulars; at the same time I always feel glad to give all the information in my power, but my space will not allow me to do it."

—*History of the Church*, 4:231

The revelation explains that the ordinance of baptism for the dead is to be done only in a place designated by the Lord. Performing the ordinance was acceptable outside the temple only under special circumstances, and before the completion of the Nauvoo Temple the Lord permitted the ordinance to be performed in the Mississippi River. In October 1841 the Prophet announced that no more baptisms for the dead would be administered until the temple's font was completed. It was finished in November, and baptisms recommenced on the twenty-first (D&C 124:27–30). To the question as to whether we intend to perform this labor of love for all who have ever lived, the simple answer is "Yes!" "Why, that is impossible," say some.

Boyd K. Packer said:

"Perhaps, but we shall do it anyway." Further: 'And once again we certify that we are not discouraged. We ask no relief of the assignment, no excuse from fulfilling it.

"I say that no point of doctrine sets this church apart from the other claimants as this one does. Save for it, we would, with all of the others, have to accept the clarity with which the New Testament declares baptism to be essential and then admit that most of the human family could never have it.

"But we have the revelations. We have those sacred ordinances"

—*Ensign*, November 1975, 99



Salvation for All the Dead?

1 Peter 4:6

For Whom is Salvation for the Dead Intended?



Bruce R. McConkie said:

“Salvation for the dead is limited expressly to those who do not have opportunity in this life to accept the gospel but who would have taken the opportunity had it come to them.

“ ‘All who have died without a knowledge of this gospel,’ the Lord said to the Prophet, ‘who would have received it if they had been permitted to tarry, shall be heirs of the celestial kingdom of God; also all that shall die henceforth without a knowledge of it, who would have received it with all their hearts, shall be heirs of that kingdom, for I, the Lord, will judge all men according to their works, according to the desire of their hearts.’ (*Teachings*, 107)”

—*Mormon Doctrine*, 686

The Fate of Those Who Ignored Noah (1 Peter 3:18–20)

What, then, of those in the days of Noah who wilfully sinned against God and rejected the prophet’s warnings? Can they now be saved and exalted?

Spencer W. Kimball said:

“They were drowned in their sins. Their marriages were for time. They reveled in worldliness. They were possibly like many in the world today who place no curb upon their eating, drinking and licentiousness. Their ignoring the laws of God and the warning of the prophets continued until the very day when Noah and his family entered the ark. Then it was too late. Too late! What finality in that phrase! Following their eternal history, we find Peter telling of them more than two millennia later (1 Peter 3:18–20)

“And last, they had a chance in the spirit world to hear the voice of missionaries and prophets again. But so late! What sad words! Nearly a further two millennia passed into history and we hear of them again in modern revelation. Of the vision given to Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon in 1832, the Prophet writes:

“ ‘And again, we saw the terrestrial world, and behold and lo, these are they who are of the terrestrial. . . They who are the spirits of men kept in prison, whom the Son visited, and preached the gospel unto them, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh;

“‘Who received not the testimony of Jesus in the flesh, but afterwards received it.’ (*D&C* 76:71, 73–74)

“Too late! The terrestrial for them! It could have been the celestial, and it could have been exaltation! But they procrastinated the day of their preparation. The same lamentable cry of ‘Too late!’ will apply to many of today’s Church members who did not heed the warning but who proceeded—sometimes carelessly, sometimes defiantly—to bind themselves through mortality to those who could not or would not prepare for the blessings which were in reserve for them.”

—*Miracle of Forgiveness*, 248–249



Our Own Salvation Requires Us To Do Work for the Dead

D&C 124:31, 39

Gordon B. Hinckley said:

“No person has all of the gospel until he is able to receive [the ordinances of the temple]. And the responsibility rests with us to see that the facilities are available. I do not know how much longer I am good for, but I hope to end out my days building temples of the Lord, taking the temples to the people so that they can have the marvelous blessings that are to be obtained here.”

—*Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley*, 641



Howard W Hunter said:

“The building of temples has deep significance for ourselves and mankind, and our responsibilities become clear. We must accomplish the priesthood temple ordinance work necessary for our own exaltation; then we must do the necessary work for those who did not have the opportunity to accept the gospel in life.”

—*Teachings of Howard W. Hunter*, 230

Joseph Fielding Smith said:

“It matters not what else we have been called to do, or what position we may occupy, or how faithfully in other ways we have labored in the Church, none is exempt from this great obligation. It is required of the apostle as well as the humble elder. . . .

“Some may feel that if they pay their tithing, attend their regular meetings and other duties, give of their substance to the poor, perchance spend one, two, or more years preaching in the world, that they are absolved from further duty. But the greatest and grandest duty of all is to labor for the dead.”

—*Doctrines of Salvation 2:148–149*



Fragments of Experience

If a record had been kept of all the facts connected with the building of the Kirtland and Nauvoo Temples, it would tell a curious story of poverty, self-denial, dependence upon God and wants providentially supplied.

No doubt such a record has been kept, but not here on earth. We have not access to it. But many, very many of those who had the privilege of aiding in the work of building those temples have gone to meet that record. Some doubtless will meet it with satisfaction, with joy untold; others with remorse and self-reproach.

Could the Saints of the present day peruse that record, it would put many of them to the blush to think they had done so little in aid of such works. They would see that, though they have enjoyed peace and plenty, they have done almost nothing towards the temples in our day; compared with what the poor Saints did in building those earlier houses of God. . . .

The case of one of those workmen will serve to illustrate the self-sacrificing disposition manifested by many of those who labored upon that building, as well as the way their simple wants were sometimes supplied by the Almighty

Brother L— arrived in Nauvoo from England, his native country, in March, 1844. He was an excellent mechanic, had held good situations and been in good circumstances in the “old country,” and his skill as a workman was such as to command ready employment and high wages in any of the large cities of America, had such been his object.

But he had embraced the gospel and received a testimony of its truth, and afterwards the spirit of gathering with the Saints, which enabled him to brook the taunts and ridicule heaped upon him by friends and relatives for his unpopular faith, and resist the pleading of aged parents, who were loath to part with him.

His faith and zeal were such that he had left friends and property and all that he had formerly held dear, and come to America that he might be with the chosen people of God and assist in building up Zion.

He was ambitious to labor upon the temple, and applied for work immediately upon his arrival in Nauvoo. When informed that there was plenty of work but nothing to pay with, he replied that pay was no consideration.

He took hold with a determination, and worked with all the energy with which the young, strong and enthusiastic nature was capable from that time until the work upon the temple ceased, upwards of two years, and during that time only received in cash for his services the small amount of fifty cents.

Many a time he felt the pangs of hunger, and went to his work fasting rather than join with his family in eating the last ration of food in their possession, but the Lord sustained him by His Spirit, gave him joy in his labors and provided a way for more food to be obtained to sustain the lives of himself and family.

—*Fragments of Experience, Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1882, 84*

It is significant that two revelations were canonized at the April 1976 general conference of the Church. Both dealt with the principle of redemption for the dead (Ensign, May 1976, 19, 127—29; D&C 137, 138).

The further hastening of this work was emphasized in a revelation received in June 1978, wherein “every faithful, worthy man in the Church” was authorized to receive the priesthood (D&C Official Declaration 2). Not only did this affect the living, but it also had great impact on the millions in the spirit world who had been awaiting the full blessings of the priesthood, including those of the temple. This revelation opened the way to doing the redemptive work for every man, woman, and child who had arrived at the age of accountability but died before receiving the saving ordinances of the gospel.