
Doctrine and Covenants 138 — The Vision of the Redemption of the Dead

A vision given to President Joseph F. Smith at Salt Lake City, Utah, October 3, 1918, of the Savior's visit to the spirits of the dead — the last revelation canonized in the Doctrine and Covenants.

This is the crowning revelation of the Doctrine and Covenants — President Joseph F. Smith's vision of what the Savior did between His crucifixion and resurrection, when His body lay in the tomb and His spirit went to the world of the dead. It reveals that Christ did not personally preach to the wicked but *organized his forces and appointed messengers* from among the righteous dead to carry the gospel to all the spirits in prison — establishing the doctrine of missionary work among the dead and completing the Restoration's vision of a salvation that reaches every soul who ever lived.

Hebrew Word Studies

en phylak (the spirits in prison) (ἐν φυλακῇ) — "in prison, in ward, held in keeping" v. 28. "The spirits in prison" is Peter's phrase (1 Pet. 3:19, en phylak). Phylak means a place of guarded keeping — a holding place, not necessarily a place of torment. Section 138 illuminates it: the spirit world holds the dead awaiting deliverance, and even the righteous "looked upon the long absence of their spirits from their bodies as a bondage" (v. 50). The "prison" is the condition of the dead before the gospel reaches them and before the resurrection frees them. Christ came "to proclaim liberty to the captives" (Isa. 61:1), and through His appointed messengers the prison doors are opened to all who will receive the gospel. The word reframes death entirely: not a sealed dungeon but a guarded waiting-place, from which the Redeemer and His servants are setting the captives free.

From the Chapter's Architecture

Sixty verses. It opens with **the pondering** (vv. 1–11): President Smith reflecting on the Atonement and Peter's words, until the eyes of my understanding were opened. It shows **the waiting righteous and the Lord's coming** (vv. 12–24): the joyful multitude, the Son of God declaring liberty. It gives **the great revelation** (vv. 25–37): not in person to the wicked, but he organized his forces and appointed messengers — the gospel preached to all the dead through commissioned servants. It names **the noble and great** (vv. 38–56): Adam, Eve, the prophets of every dispensation, Joseph Smith and the latter-day leaders. And it reveals **the ongoing work** (vv. 57–60): the faithful elders continue preaching beyond the veil; the repentant dead are redeemed through the ordinances of God's house. The architecture moves from one man's grief-touched pondering to the grandest vista in the Restoration — a salvation organized to reach every soul who ever lived, on both sides of the veil.