

Section 124

Joseph emerged from the depressing jail in Liberty, Missouri, with an undaunted spirit. He had known since January 1838 that he could only count on living for five more years and that his work was far from finished. So Joseph was laser-focused on preparing the Saints for the covenants and ordinances of the holy temple.

He led the Saints in purchasing land along the Mississippi River in the state of Illinois, including a townsite called Commerce. Joseph renamed it Nauvoo, the Hebrew word translated as “beautiful” in Isaiah 52:7. In October 1839 Joseph called for all Saints to gather there and build a holy city. Then Joseph prayed for and received a momentous revelation, the longest in the Doctrine and Covenants—section 124.

Coming shortly after a presidential election and just days before Nauvoo’s first city election, section 124 begins by expressing the Lord’s approval of Joseph’s efforts. Then, “that I might show forth my wisdom through the weak things of the earth,” the Lord commands Joseph to immediately write a proclamation “to all the kings of the world ... to the honorable president-elect,” William Harrison, “and the high-minded governors of the nation in which you live.” Joseph was to write “in the spirit of meekness and by the power of the Holy Ghost” and declare the will of Christ to the world’s political authorities. The Lord says nothing of the will of *the people* but declares his will to “my people” (D&C 124:10, 11, 21, 29, 40, 45, 84, 92, and 104). In the United States, the voice of the people was the voice of God. In Nauvoo, the Lord spoke directly through Joseph Smith.

The command for all the Saints to consecrate to the building of the temple begins with verse 25. The rationale for doing so follows, beginning in verse 28: “For there is not a place found on earth that he may come to and restore again that which was lost unto you, or which he hath taken away, even the fulness of the priesthood.” The Lord grants the Saints sufficient time to consecrate and build the temple as a sacred location for baptisms and the other sacred ordinances, after which he will not accept their ordinances, “for therein,” meaning the temple, “are the keys of holy priesthood ordained, that you may receive honor and glory” (D&C 124:34, cross-reference section 128).

The Lord continues his rationale for building the temple through verse 41, which is a restatement of the promise to reveal fullness in the temple. Some have misread verses 31–34 in self-serving ways. President Joseph Fielding Smith explained that verse 32’s condition (“and if ye do not these things at the end of the appointment,” that is, the period for building the temple) “does not mean ‘if ye do not build a temple at the *end* of the appointment,’ as our critics infer it does, but it refers to the ordinances that were to be performed in the temple.” President Smith clarified that if the Saints failed to perform the temple ordinances for the dead, then they would be rejected by the Lord per section 124:32.¹

President Boyd K. Packer explained the revelation’s references to washing and anointing ordinances in verses 37–39.

The ordinances of washing and anointing are referred to often in the temple as initiatory ordinances. It will be sufficient for our purposes to say only the following: Associated with the endowment are washings and anointing—mostly symbolic in nature, but promising definite, immediate blessings as well as future blessings. ... In connection with these ordinances, in the temple you will be officially clothed in the garment and promised marvelous blessings in connection with it.²

¹ Joseph Fielding Smith, quoted in Roy W. Doxey, *Latter-day Prophets and the Doctrine and Covenants*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1978): 4:265–66.

² Boyd K. Packer, *The Holy Temple* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 154–55.

Covenants and specific instructions follow the verses on temple ordinances, including the spot on which to build and the terms and conditions on which the Lord will make it holy and on which the Saints will be able to remain in Nauvoo to see it finished. These covenants hinge on the inseparable doctrines of individual agency and accountability and culminate in verses 47–48:

If you build a house to my name, and do not the things that I say, I will not perform the oath which I make unto you, neither fulfill the promises which ye expect at my hand, saith the Lord. For instead of blessings, ye, by your own works, bring cursings, wrath, indignation, and judgments upon your own heads.

In verses 49–54 the Lord explains accountability in terms of agency. That is, he holds accountable those who have power to determine the outcomes he commands. Following that principle, verse 55 is another statement of rationale for building the temple in Nauvoo.

Nauvoo rose like a fortress on a hill, up from a swampy lowland along the Mississippi. Believers streamed into Illinois from Canada, the British Isles, and the Atlantic Seaboard. The population of Nauvoo rose quickly to twelve thousand because of this revelation and Joseph's counsel to gather and build Zion. Joseph began keeping the Book of the Law of the Lord with section 124, where he recorded it. The revelation oriented his life and the Church's. It gave Joseph the rest of his life's work, and he entered the names of those who consecrated to the temple in the Book as well. At April conference in 1841 the revelation was read, and then Joseph rose and urged the Saints to obey it by building the temple and the Nauvoo House.³

Section 124 reorganized the Church, setting in order its presiding priesthood quorums, replacing apostates and filling the vacancies left by brethren who had passed away. The Saints acted on the Lord's commands to sustain those called to the priesthood quorums, which they did at April conference in 1841, as well as building offices for them in the temple.

³ Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds. and comps., *Words of Joseph Smith* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center Brigham Young University, 1980), 69.

Section 124 reoriented the Church by giving it specific work to do, most importantly in building the Nauvoo Temple as a means to the end of receiving the ultimate blessings—the fulness of priesthood ordinances. Knowing that his days were numbered, Joseph began giving the ordinances in May 1842 to a select few, fifty-seven brothers and sisters in all, even before the temple was finished. He sealed couples and confirmed the fulness of priesthood ordinances on a few, according to section 132. Joseph was killed in June 1844, before the temple was ready for ordinances, but in March of that year he had commissioned the apostles to carry on the work and given them all the necessary priesthood keys to do so. Beginning in December 1845, the apostles and others who had been endowed by Joseph officiated in the temple ordinances for 5,600 Saints.

The temple blessings thus resulting from section 124 are inestimable. Speaking of temples, President Gordon B. Hinckley declared, “These unique and wonderful buildings, and the ordinances administered therein, represent the ultimate in our worship. These ordinances become the most profound expressions of our theology.”⁴

⁴ *Ensign* (November 1995), 53.