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The Power of Moroni's Message

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Abstract: This article concentrates on the work of salvation for the dead as introduced when Moroni quoted Malachi to Joseph Smith.

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“In these days of atheistic teachings, of chaotic social propaganda, and of economic uncertainty, it may be well for us to seek more earnestly than ever to remember God, that His blessings and protecting care may come to us more abundantly in our times of special need.”—REED SMOOT.

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THE POWER OF MORONI'S MESSAGE

ELDER JOHN A. WIDTSOE

OF THE COUNCIL OF TWELVE

ON THE evening of September 21st, 1823, Joseph Smith, then a lad about eighteen years of age, lay in his bed praying to the Lord for guidance, wisdom, and revelation. In answer to his request, a heavenly being appeared to him and gave him a number of instructions relative to the work that the boy had been told, in previous vision, he was to perform. Of these, the particular instruction with which we shall be concerned here is known to us as section two of the Doctrine and Covenants, which is a slight variation of the famous words of Malachi:

Behold, I will reveal unto you the Priesthood, by the hand of Elijah the prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.

And he shall plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to the fathers, and the hearts of the children shall turn to their fathers.

If it were not so, the whole earth would be utterly wasted at his coming.

In the import of its meaning, this is a message second to none given to the Prophet Joseph Smith. Out of it have grown the endeavours of this Church in behalf of the salvation of those who have passed beyond the veil, without hearing the Gospel of Christ while in this mortal probation.

The Church has built nine temples since its organization. Seven of them are now in full operation. In these temples, thousands of the dead are being served each week. An index kept of the work that is done—the largest genealogical index in the world—contains seven million cards. This shows not only the eagerness and willingness of the people to do work for their dead, but also the tremendous labour involved in the work. The

genealogical library of the Church, if not the largest in the world, is one of the largest dealing especially with genealogy, and in the selectness of the books it contains, it has perhaps no superior in the world.



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we do for the dead. Indeed, it answers directly and positively, without hesitation or doubt, the deepest and most fundamental questions with which man has wrestled throughout the ages of his existence. And in the answers to these questions, the message to the Prophet by Moroni is shown to be one of the notable evidences of the divine inspiration of the Prophet Joseph Smith, and of the fact that his latter-day work is founded in God's truth, under God's revelation and direction.

May all men be saved? This question has agitated the minds of men almost from the beginning of Christianity, and perhaps before. The idea has often been current that only a few of the human family will be saved. The iniquitous doctrine was preached, a hundred years or more ago, that some of the human family, in some unknown way, were destined to fail of salvation; that they were not able, through any act of their own, to win salvation; that they were foreordained to what was commonly called in those days "damnation."

The fact that we do work in our temples for the whole human family, and have so been directed, insofar as we may obtain the names of the dead, is of itself a sufficient answer to this age-old question. The Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is intended for all men. There are no exceptions. Only as we ourselves, through our failure to obey the law, fail to win salvation, may we be placed with those who cannot enter the presence of God.

Ever since this message was given by the Angel Moroni to the Prophet Joseph Smith, there has been a growing interest in genealogical work throughout the world. In every civilized country, men and women have occupied themselves with the gathering of genealogy, and thousands upon thousands of books on genealogy have been published.

In the message the promise was made that Elijah would appear. On April 3, 1836, Elijah did appear, at the dedication of the Kirtland Temple, and he gave to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, and through them to the Church, the keys which authorized the beginning of this work. Joseph and Oliver already had received the Priesthood, and now with the keys in their possession, the operation of the Priesthood in behalf of the dead was authorized.

But there is more in the message of Moroni than the work that

Salvation is intended for us all, and all must have a chance to win it.

The Mormon doctrine is very simple. Every man is judged according to his works. Every man must be weighed in the balance of divine justice, and must accept that which he has earned throughout life, whether upon this earth, or perhaps in the life before this.

Eternal justice demands that he be judged according to his works. Nevertheless that gives humanity eternal hope. When we recall the agony of spirit and of mind that has overtaken men and women in the past who realised they had been sinful here, and had failed to do here what they should do, and felt that they faced death without full repentance, unprepared, and without having had a chance to meet the ordinances of the Church that would save them from eternal damnation, we may understand what a flood of hope and light and joy was brought to the world by the message of Moroni, which includes the opening of the doors for all the dead. All who are worthy, all who care to accept that which we do for them, may enter into some glory, may win some degree of salvation.

"In my Father's house are many mansions," and we do not believe that all men shall attain exactly the same state or degree of salvation; but we do believe that even those who merit only the lowest glory will receive an abundant joy far beyond the understanding of men; and those who win for themselves celestial glory enter in where God and Christ dwell, and there can be no greater glory. But all will find places prepared for them, each man's place proportioned to his works. Those who here or in the hereafter accept the truth of the Gospel and otherwise are worthy of the blessings that the Lord has in store for His children, may rise, through the work we do for them here, into the highest glory. That is eternal hope, brought to the world through the Prophet Moroni.

It may be said, in passing, that there is in reality no hell in Mormon doctrine. As I think it through, it seems that the regret that we may feel for not having done better and accomplished more leaves a poignant sorrow which is perhaps worse than the traditional hell. Only by constant striving and overcoming and progressing, under the law under which we live, can that sorrow be assuaged.

ANOTHER question which has been so commonly asked during the last few centuries is: Why is earth life so important?

Since we do work for all the dead, are baptized for them, take their endowments for them, we imply by that very labour that the work of this earth has infinite and eternal value. We teach, under the message of Moroni, that man is an eternal being; he was in the beginning with God, and will continue to the end of time—and time has no end; that this earth life is but a chapter in an endless journey, and that it has a definite meaning in the eternal progress for which we are striving. Without elaborating upon the plan of salvation, we may recall that unless a man repents and is baptized, unless he is born of the water as well as of the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. In the spirit world there can be no water. Water belongs to this earth. It

is not a spiritual element. Yet the law is definite, and cannot be abrogated for any living soul, therefore those who have passed through the earth experience must, either themselves or after death by proxy, have the earth ordinances done for them. Our problem in the spirit world, if we be there, is to accept or to reject that which is done for us. Earth life is so tied-in with this eternal journey, so definitely a part of the eternal plan of salvation, that the ordinances that involve earthly elements must be performed by every soul who is to rise into a fullness of joy. That is why we practise vicarious service in behalf of the dead, in our temples.

If I were to moralize I might call your attention to the meaning of earth life with respect to our daily duties and actions. If earth life is so important, it behooves us, every one of us, to use our utmost endeavours, all of our energies, to live the law here upon earth so that we may not forfeit the great spiritual blessings that lie ahead of us, for life upon this earth and life hereafter, that done upon this earth and done hereafter, are like the warp and woof in the patterns that we weave of our eternal lives.

THERE is yet a larger and older question, answered by Moroni's message. The first man who witnessed death asked it. It runs something like this: Is there personal life after death? With that question men have struggled from the beginning of time. In our temples, work is done for each individual. We do not baptize for a thousand at once, but each individual man in succession, in turn, receives baptism by proxy; each individual person in turn receives temple endowments. That, of itself, answers the question, from the Mormon point of view. There is a personal life after death.

There is in existence a philosophy which declares that life is eternal, but that it returns at death into the great ocean of existence. This philosophy says that I live on, yes, but I live on only as may a drop of water in the ocean from which it was momentarily taken. Even to-day, we have many men and women, many thoughtful people, who are inclined to believe that while man may persist after death, he does not persist as an individual being.

Moroni's message gives a definite, positive answer to this question. It says, "Yes, man lives personally after death. He is not swallowed up with the mass of the dead, but he himself moves forward individually, as a personality, in that land which he enters after death."

In the doctrine of personal existence lies the "why" of genealogy. If there is personal immortality then it becomes necessary that the person be discovered for whom we shall do work in the temples. Our people are spending thousands and thousands of pounds annually, all over the earth, in tracing out their lineages and discovering the names and the vital data of each of their ancestors, so that each may receive a personal blessing, because he is a personal being, entitled to personal immortality and the personal blessings that adhere to it.

In connection with this question has come another which today is being discussed far and wide by learned men: Do our personal faculties persist after death? In the hereafter, do I but stand by the throne of God, performing routine duties through all

eternity, or do I cross the great gulf, retaining my personal powers, my eternal will? May I think and learn and aspire and put two and two together, in the hereafter, as I do here? Can I accept there? Can I reject there? Do these fundamental faculties of the individual man persist after death?

Many men who accept personal immortality are yet inclined to doubt that personal faculties remain with us after death. But Moroni's message, as exemplified in our temple work, leaves no doubt about the answer. We Latter-day Saints declare to all the world that not only does man live as a personal being beyond the grave, but in that life thereafter he possesses practically the same powers of individuality that he possesses here. All we can do in the temples of the Lord is to open the doors for the dead. We cannot save them. That is beyond our power. They on the other side may will to pass through the opened door, or to remain where they are. They accept or they reject. So by that very token, by that very doctrine, we answer this question by saying, "Yes, every personal faculty possessed by man upon this earth will be possessed by him after death, and no doubt in an increased volume, in a finer manner, with greater ability on the part of those who live in the spirit world to make use of those faculties."

The question discussed by the learned theological world seventy-five years ago was: Can a man repent after death? The Mormon answer does away with the whole question of death-bed repentance. If a man retains the power of repentance after death, then it does little good to repent just before death, in fear of the coming darkness. The doctrine that the power of repentance continues after the grave has changed the theological thinking of the world within the last hundred years. The Prophet Joseph Smith no doubt was the one who sent out that message for the first time in our modern day, to a waiting world.

FOLLOWING this question is still another which has been asked by intelligent men. I live after the grave; I retain my personal faculties after the grave. Yet there is a doubt in some minds whether on the other side we know one another, and so the question comes somewhat in this form: Do we know one another, and maintain family relationships after death? The answer means much to every person who has mother or father, son or daughter, who has loved ones in the grave. On the other side do I live as it were in a beautiful, star-lit night, cold but beautiful; or do I live there, in the presence of warmth and sunshine and light? Are the songs of the heart forbidden in the spirit world, or do they continue?

Here we reach almost the apex, the pinnacle of Moroni's message, for through Elijah's commission and blessing, we have the power to seal on earth in such a way that the sealing is recognized in the heavens; through that authority we may bind on earth and it is bound in heaven. Today, in our temples, men and women, parents and children, are sealed for time and for all eternity. Such sealing penetrates the veil. It is everlasting. It does not belong merely to this earth.

So we answer those who ask this question today—and it is asked by millions of people: "Yes, we shall know one another in the life after this. We shall maintain family relationships in

the life after this. The wife shall know her husband, and the husband his wife; the mother shall know her child; the father shall know his child; and the child shall know its parents; and the happiness, comfort and joy and the strength and power that flow from the wholesome family circle will be present in the spirit world." Such is the doctrine brought to us in these latter days through the Prophet Joseph Smith.

Finally, still another question often asked may, through Moroni's message, also be answered affirmatively: What is the nature of life after death? We exist, have our personal faculties; we know one another; family relationships are maintained in the heavens. Now, what is the nature of life, over and beyond that, in the great hereafter? The Lord said not long after Moroni had appeared, speaking to the Prophet Joseph Smith, that His concern, His chief concern, was "to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man." Immortality would be provided through the redeeming power and sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ. But the Lord grants eternal life in addition to immortality. Life is active; never static. Life cannot stand still. It moves upward or downward. Life, in its higher, nobler definition, the Lord's chief concern, is activity, upward, onward, progressively, eternally. "This is my work and my glory," He said, "to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man," to enable man, throughout the eternities, throughout all time, to move onward to a destiny so great as to be beyond the understanding of mortal man.

In other words, the Gospel teaches us that just as to-day, in this life, if we live right, we are engaged in a progressive development, moving higher and higher, becoming more and more like our Father in heaven, so in the life hereafter, we shall be engaged in a similar progressive development. The Lord will ever be our great ideal. Towards that ideal we shall progress, in many ways not clearly known to us, but actively, using all our faculties and gifts, never standing still, forever moving, upward and onward. Thus we shall approximate more and more the likeness of the Father of our spirits, God our Father.

THE question is asked by many Latter-day Saints, in connection with this doctrine: Since we believe in graded salvation, one person being placed here, another there, another higher still, is it not possible then for those of a lower glory, in course of time, to rise into a higher glory? The answer is simple. Those who by their righteous actions have been placed in the highest glory, where God and Christ are, will have the power of more rapid progression than those in the lower glories. Those who find themselves in the lowest glory will have least power to progress. However, the law and possibility of progress are not withheld from any soul. No matter where man is, under the divine law, he may rise and go forward. Repentance is always in order. The Prophet Joseph Smith declared that the repentant spirit of man is never too old to approach its Maker. But, there can be no passing from one glory to another, for those who are moving forward at the tremendous rate belonging to the celestial glory, cannot be overtaken by those who are behind, with a lower rate of progress. Nevertheless, all may progress to a destiny known only to the mercy and love of the Lord.

This may be just a poor, mechanical way of expressing eternal truths; but the law of life and progress forms a wonderful climax to Moroni's message. Consider it! You and I are mortal beings, limited, handicapped, so weak, subject to disease, so frail, yet possess within ourselves the germs of eternal growth and progress, the power to rise ultimately above our frailties and weaknesses, to become much more like our Father in heaven than we have ever thought possible. It is a doctrine which thrills the human soul. Thank God for it!

MAY I say, in conclusion, that while I have attempted to introduce into the simple message of Moroni the answers to some of the very vital questions that man has asked himself so many years, there remains still unconsidered, the effect upon the individual of work for the dead. It is well to know about the hereafter, but it is more important to be concerned about this life, as a training place for the greatest gifts the Lord may have in store for His children in the hereafter. From that point of view there are few things more effective in shaping and fitting us for life hereafter, or for life upon this earth, than the work we do vicariously for our dead. We go into the temples to help those who are helpless, to help those who, as far as we know, will give us no temporal reward. If we do such with unselfish motive, then the work will develop and strengthen the spirit of love within us. Thus we shall indeed grow toward the likeness of our Father in heaven.

Because of His love for us, the Father planned the earth and all that pertains to it. The plan of salvation was conceived under God's love. Unless we develop love, self-forgetting love for our fellowmen, living or dead, we cannot become like our Father in Heaven. Work in the temple halls develops within us unselfishness, love, forgetfulness of the reward, joy in the doing the Father's work, and we grow toward His stature.

When the Lord said that unless this work be done the earth will be utterly destroyed at His coming, He meant, no doubt, that since the spirit of love lies at the foundation of this work, unless we can temper our wills into a condition of love for our fellow men, He shall have failed in the ultimate purpose that He had in creating the earth, and placing us upon it. To become partners with the Lord in carrying forward His great work is one of the purposes of our labours in the temple. It is indeed our greatest responsibility.

I am grateful that Moroni came on that fateful night in 1823, and that on that occasion he did not confine himself to the special work given to the Prophet Joseph with respect to the Book of Mormon, but that he outlined to him the great plan of salvation, and emphasized as he did the work which later led to the building of our temples, and the labours therein for the salvation of the dead.

The world is already borrowing the doctrines of Moroni's message. May the day soon come when the world will recognize the authority of the Priesthood which lies back of all this work.

May this work grow and prosper. And may we use it to build ourselves into a likeness of our Father.—(Adapted from an address delivered in the Tabernacle in Salt Lake City, Utah, September 30, 1934.)