

The Face and Voice of God

What the Tabernacle Teaches about Overcoming Spiritual Death

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o. Introduction

Church leaders often teach that “the Atonement is the most important single thing that has ever occurred in the entire history of created things.”¹ Because of that, “an accurate understanding of this doctrine is one of the most important things a person can acquire.”² Central to the atonement is the fact that it “prepareth a way for our escape from ... the death of the body, and also the death of the spirit” (2 Ne. 9:10). It follows that in order to understand the atonement, it is vital to understand physical and spiritual death. That is, in order to understand how and why we are saved, we must understand what it is we are saved *from*.³

Most Latter-day Saints are very familiar with physical death and would be very comfortable explaining it. We are often less familiar, however, with some of the technicalities required to give a full and accurate description of spiritual death. Through the ancient tabernacle (and later, through Solomon’s temple), the Lord has clarified this important doctrine. The ancient tabernacle uses spatial and sensory symbolism to teach several truths about spiritual death. It teaches that there are two types of spiritual death, that they have two distinct causes, and that they are overcome at different times, in different ways, and on different conditions.

The key to understanding the tabernacle’s message regarding spiritual death lies in understanding the symbolic use of the Lord’s face and the Lord’s voice. In section one of this

¹ Bruce R. McConkie, [*Mormon Doctrine*](#) (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), p. 60.

² J. Devn Cornish, “[Learning How the Atonement Can Change You](#),” *Ensign*, Apr. 2002, p. 20.

³ Ezra Taft Benson made this point by saying, “Just as a man does not really desire food until he is hungry, so he does not desire the salvation of Christ until he knows why he needs Christ. No one adequately and properly knows why he needs Christ until he understands and accepts the doctrine of the Fall and its effect upon all mankind,” and spiritual death was part of that effect (“[The Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants](#),” *Ensign*, May 1987, p. 85).

paper, I will explain the two types of spiritual death, and in section two, how they are typified by face and voice symbolism. In section three, I will illustrate how this symbolism is used in the tabernacle, in combination with spatial symbolism via separate rooms, to teach certain truths about spiritual death, such as what causes it and how and when we overcome it. Finally, in section four, I will point out common misunderstandings regarding spiritual death and how the tabernacle symbolism aids in clearing up those misunderstandings.

1. The Two Types of Spiritual Death

The Church manual *True to the Faith* says, “Spiritual death is separation from God.”⁴ Prophets in the Book of Mormon give this same definition using different words, often describing spiritual death as being “cut off from the presence of the Lord” (2 Ne. 9:6; Alma 42:9; Hel. 14:16). This naturally raises the question, What does it mean to be cut off or separated from God?

Understanding the answer requires first understanding what it means to be *in* God’s presence. “Each member of this trinity is called God,”⁵ so the word *God* can be used in different ways—to refer to members of the Godhead in unison or individually. Thus, the idea of being in God’s presence can also be used in different ways. The scriptures sometimes refer to being in the literal, physical presence of the Lord himself (standing in the same location as and talking with him); they also refer to being in his intangible, spiritual presence (having the influence of the Spirit with us). Thus, being in “the presence of the Lord” can mean being in Heavenly Father’s presence or being in the Holy Ghost’s presence—being in either one’s presence can be called being “in the presence of God.”

Likewise, separation from either of these divine beings can be considered separation from God, or spiritual death. One key teaching of the Book of Mormon is that *there are two types of spiritual death*—separation from the Lord himself, and separation from his Holy Spirit.⁶ This is

⁴ *True to the Faith*, “[Death, Spiritual](#),” p. 48.

⁵ N. Eldon Tanner, “[A Basis for Faith in the Living God](#),” *Ensign*, Nov. 1978, p. 46

⁶ The latter sense, of being cut off from the Holy Spirit, is sometimes called dying “as to things pertaining to righteousness” (1 Ne. 15:33; Alma 12:16, 32; 40:26; Hel. 14:18), as straying from righteous principles causes the Holy Spirit to withdraw his influence.

a vital concept to grasp. Once this is understood, many of the ambiguities or misunderstandings regarding spiritual death can be cleared up.

While we might use words like *literal*, *direct*, *actual*, or *physical* to describe Heavenly Father's presence and *figurative*, *indirect*, *immaterial*, or *spiritual* to describe the Holy Ghost's presence,⁷ Book of Mormon prophets use the terms *temporal* and *spiritual* to convey that same distinction. In their teachings, both Alma and Samuel the Lamanite use those two terms when explaining that there are two ways we are cut off from the Lord's presence:

Our first parents were cut off both temporally and spiritually from the presence of the Lord. (Alma 42:7)

The resurrection ... redeemeth all mankind from ... that spiritual death; for all mankind, by the fall of Adam being cut off from the presence of the Lord, are considered as dead, both as to things temporal and to things spiritual.
(Hel. 14:16)⁸

In order to use clear terminology while adhering as closely as possible to scriptural language, from this point on I will use "temporal separation" to refer to the type of spiritual death that involves physical separation⁹ from *Heavenly Father* himself,¹⁰ and "spiritual

⁷ As a teaching exercise, asking a class the question "Are you in God's presence right now" often elicits a variety of adjectives and descriptors like these which can be grouped into the two categories.

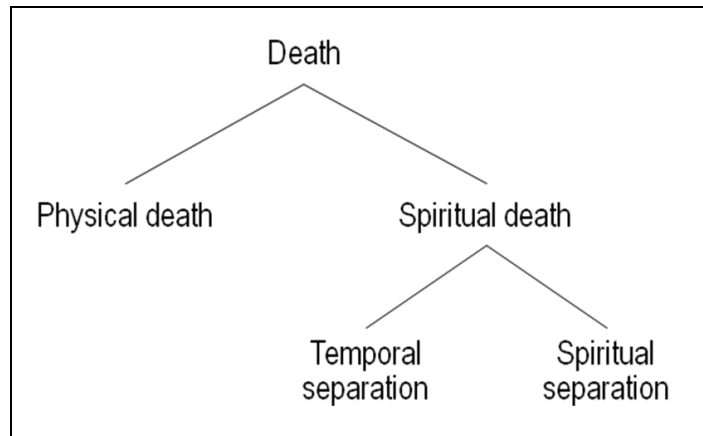
⁸ These verses are sometimes interpreted to refer to physical death and spiritual death (because of their connection to the fall of Adam). While they certainly have been used to explain truths about those two deaths and can be useful passages for pedagogical purposes, I believe key insights are also drawn from seeing them as references, not to physical and spiritual death, but to the two types of spiritual death, as I hope to show.

⁹ I hesitate to use "physical" or "physical separation" for a few reasons. For one thing, it's unscriptural; the word "physical" only appears once in the standard works, in D&C 134:10, where it refers to the role of earthly governments, not to anything regarding the Atonement, bodies, resurrection, or our fundamental nature. For another reason, the word may carry some neo-Platonic assumptions that conflict with the intent of scriptural teachings. For example, *physical* has its roots in a **Greek concept connoting permanence and the unchanging aspects of a thing**, which form its core identity. In contrast, *temporal* implies almost the exact opposite—something transitory and unenduring. Using either word to describe our bodies or our separation from God can carry with it a load of implications about what we really, fundamentally *are* and whether there is an order of things that we can expect beyond the veil which differs from how this mortal world operates.

¹⁰ Throughout this paper, each time I refer to Heavenly Father's presence, a case could be made that the Son's presence would also fulfill the same meaning. Since the Father and the Son are "one" and are often treated

separation” to refer to the type of spiritual death that involves separation from the influence of the *Holy Ghost*. I believe this is the same distinction being made when the *Guide to the Scriptures* defines spiritual death as “separation from God and his influences.”¹² Either type of separation can rightfully and accurately be called “spiritual death.”¹³

Figure 1: Types of Death¹¹



Having explained the two ways of being in God’s presence, and thus the two ways we can be separated from his presence, I will now outline further details regarding both types of spiritual death. In particular, I will describe the definition each type, their respective causes and the scope of who is affected by them, which type is necessary for our growth and exaltation, how each separation is resolved, and the conditions that must be met for the resolution to occur. I do not mean to delay the main point of this article, but before a person can understand the face-voice symbolism in the tabernacle, he or she must fully understand these two types of spiritual death.

indistinguishably, it did not seem fruitful to needlessly complicate things by differentiating the Son’s presence in this discussion, and I have tried to simplify things by limiting myself to distinguishing only between Heavenly Father and the Holy Ghost (see [note 42](#)). In a way, it makes sense that in a distinction between temporal and spiritual presences, the Father and the Son would both fall identically in the former category since they both have physical bodies, while the Holy Ghost would fall in the latter category since he has only a spirit body.

¹¹ This chart can be used to explain an odd phrase used by Nephi in 2 Ne. 28:23, in which he says, “Yea, they are grasped with death, and hell; and death, and hell, and the devil.” Nephi uses this queer redundancy because he is quoting his younger brother Jacob’s sermon recorded in 2 Nephi 9. There, Jacob distinguishes between three types of death: physical death, the temporal separation, and the spiritual separation (the three shown on this chart). Jacob, however, labels them “death,” “hell,” and “the devil,” respectively. He also clarifies that the Lord delivers everyone from “that monster, death and hell” (v. 10), while he only delivers “his saints from that awful monster the devil, and death, and hell” (v. 19).

¹² *Guide to the Scriptures*, “[Death, Spiritual](#),” lds.org.

¹³ The temporal separation and spiritual separation are also sometimes referred to in the scriptures as the “first death” and “second death” respectively (see [section 4.2.4](#)).

1.1 Temporal Separation

1.1.1 Definition

The temporal separation refers to being separated from Heavenly Father's physical location, in the literal sense that he is up in heaven while we are down on earth. For example, before the Fall, Adam and Eve walked and talked with God the Father face to face; they were able to be in his physical presence.¹⁴ President Joseph F. Smith explains,

Now what was his condition when he was placed in the Garden of Eden? He had access to the Father. He was in His presence. He walked and talked with Him face to face, as one man walks and talks with another. This was the condition of Adam and Eve when they were in the garden.

But when they partook of the forbidden fruit they were cast out. ... He was "spiritually dead"—banished from the presence of God.¹⁵

After the Fall, Adam and Eve experienced a temporal separation in that the earth fell and they were no longer in the Father's literal presence; they could converse with him in prayer, but "they saw him not" (Moses 5:4). Elder Earl C. Tingey explains,

Spiritual [death] is separation from God's presence. Adam and Eve freely conversed with God in the Garden of Eden. After their transgression, they lost that privilege. Thereafter, communication from God came only through faith and sacrifice, combined with heartfelt petitioning.

¹⁴ Adam was "lord ... of all things on earth, and at the same time enjoying communion and intercourse with his Maker, without a veil to separate between" (Joseph Smith, [Lectures on Faith](#) 2:12). "Adam was as conversant with his Father who placed him upon this earth as we are conversant with our earthly parents. The Father frequently came to visit his son Adam, and talked and walked with him" (Brigham Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, p. 104; cited in [Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young](#), p. 93). "How did Adam get his information of the things of God? ... God came to him in the garden and talked with him" (John Taylor, *The Gospel Kingdom*, sel. G. Homer Durham [SLC: Bookcraft, 1987] p. 91; cited in Robert L. Millet, "[The Man Adam](#)," *Ensign*, Jan. 1994, p. 8).

¹⁵ Joseph F. Smith, *Deseret Evening News*, 9 Feb. 1895, p. 9; cited in "Chapter 11: [Jesus Christ Redeems the Repentant from Spiritual Death](#)," *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph F. Smith* (SLC, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1998), p. 95

Currently, we are all in the state of spiritual death. We are separated from God. He dwells in heaven; we live on earth.¹⁶

1.1.2 Cause and Scope

The temporal separation is caused by the fall of Adam¹⁷ and affects every descendant of Adam, including little children who have not reached the age of accountability. That is, every descendant of Adam is born into a world that is apart from God the Father's heavenly dwelling place. Being a descendant of Adam, even Jesus Christ himself experienced this temporal separation when he left heaven and came to earth.

1.1.3 Necessity

The temporal separation is absolutely *necessary* for our eternal growth and progress to become like God. We must leave the Father's presence in order to be thoroughly tested. Elder D. Todd Christofferson explains,

It was necessary in God's plan for our future happiness and glory that we become morally free and responsible. For that to happen, we needed an experience apart from Him where our choices would determine our destiny. The Fall of Adam provided the spiritual death needed to separate us from God and place us in this mortal condition.¹⁸

Elder L. Tom Perry similarly teaches,

Mortality was introduced by Adam and Eve. ... It was a necessary step forward in the progress of man. Because of the Fall, all men and women are

¹⁶ Earl C. Tingey, "[The Great Plan of Happiness](#)," *Ensign*, May 2006, p. 72–74.

¹⁷ Hence *True to the Faith* explains, "The scriptures teach of two sources of spiritual death. The first source is the Fall, and the second is our own disobedience" ([True to the Faith](#), "Death, Spiritual," p. 48).

¹⁸ D. Todd Christofferson, "[Moral Agency](#)," *Ensign*, Jun. 2009, p. 46–53.

separated from God. This is known as spiritual death. ... It is in a fallen world that we are fully given the opportunities to be tested and to prove ourselves.¹⁹

Members of the Church are very familiar with statements like, “We will make an earth whereon these may dwell; And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them” (Abr. 3:24–25), and with the idea that we had to leave God’s presence in order for that testing to happen. Perhaps less familiar is that we can accurately call this necessary condition “spiritual death,” and like Elders Christofferson and Perry explain, we can accurately say, “Spiritual death is necessary in order to become like God.” However, anyone saying this should make very clear that they are talking about only one type of spiritual death—the temporal separation. Neglecting to do so could be misinterpreted as saying, “*Sin* is necessary in order to become like God,” which is most definitely *not* accurate (see [section 4.2.2](#)).

The fact that the temporal separation is necessary may be why Alma tells his son Corianton that “it *was not* expedient that man should be reclaimed from this temporal death, for that would destroy the great plan of happiness” (Alma 42:8). This passage can be taken to mean that the temporal separation, along with physical death, is necessary to be tested and proven, and if the Lord had rescued mankind from the temporal separation immediately after Adam and Eve ate the fruit, they would have been deprived of the conditions necessary for testing and proving.

1.1.4 Resolution

The temporal separation is overcome when all people return to God’s presence for the Judgment.²⁰ Several passages emphasize that in the Judgment, we are restored to God’s presence. “All men come unto God; wherefore, they stand in the presence of him, to be judged”; “the atonement ... bringeth back men into the presence of God; and thus they are restored into

¹⁹ L. Tom Perry, “[“Give Heed unto the Word of the Lord”](#),” *Ensign*, Jun. 2000, p. 22.

²⁰ Since we overcome a spiritual death at the Judgment, that event could be called a spiritual rebirth. However, people usually use “spiritual rebirth” to mean overcoming the spiritual separation; it is rarely used to mean overcoming the temporal separation.

his presence, to be judged” (2 Nephi 2:10; Alma 42:23). Gerald N. Lund clarifies, “Christ’s redemption ... brings all men back into his presence at the judgment bar. Spiritual death, or our separation from God, is at that point overcome.”²¹

Notably, the Savior was the first person to overcome the temporal separation. This occurred when he ascended into heaven after his resurrection. The magnitude of this event—a member of the human race rising to the dwelling place of God upon dying, rather than remaining in the spirit world apart from God—is emphasized by ancient prophets because it was so singular and unprecedented.²² Abinadi prophesied not only of Christ’s Resurrection, but also of his Ascension (Mosiah 15:9), and the latter is treated as a noteworthy doctrine by other prophets such as Alma the elder (Mosiah 18:2), Alma the younger (Alma 40:20),²³ Nephi son of Nephi (3 Ne. 10:18; 11:12), Mormon (Moro. 7:27), and the Savior himself (3 Ne. 15:1). Christ was not only “the firstfruits of the Resurrection,”²⁴ being the first to overcome physical death, with more people to resurrect after him; you could also say he was “the firstfruits of the Ascension,” being the first to overcome the temporal separation, with more people to ascend after him.

1.1.5 Conditions

Because the temporal separation is imposed by an action we did not perform (Adam’s fall), its effects are likewise overcome without requiring any action on our part. It was imposed upon us involuntarily, and thus it is removed unconditionally.

²¹ Gerald N. Lund, “[The Fall of Man and His Redemption](#),” *Ensign*, Jan. 1990, p. 22.

²² To appreciate how unique this event would be in the mind of pre-Resurrection peoples, imagine Peter or Paul explaining the plan of salvation to a Greek by saying, “When people die, their bodies rot to pieces, and then they go up to Mount Olympus to dwell with the gods.” It’s easy to imagine that the Greek would think this crazy Christian didn’t know basic cosmology, and would argue, “No, that’s not it at all. When people die, their bodies rot to pieces, and then they go down to Hades to dwell with other dead people. Olympus is for the gods, not for mortals.” The Ascension truly was a paradigm-shattering doctrine.

²³ Note that in these first three references, each prophet pairs the Lord’s Resurrection with his Ascension. That the two events were closely associated makes sense when we realize they were the first time either physical death or the temporal separation was completely overcome.

²⁴ Howard W. Hunter, paraphrasing 1 Cor. 15:23 in “[An Apostle’s Witness of the Resurrection](#),” *Ensign*, May 1986, p. 15.

Book of Mormon prophets clearly teach that overcoming this type of spiritual death (the temporal separation) is a free gift of the Atonement that requires no action or choice on our part. Samuel the Lamanite teaches that everyone overcomes this first spiritual death, no matter what choices they make in life, when he says “[Christ] redeemeth all mankind from the first death—that spiritual death; ... Christ redeemeth mankind, yea, even all mankind, and bringeth them back into the presence of the Lord” (Hel. 14:16–17). Likewise, Moroni mentions no requirements but rather emphasizes that we will all be restored to God’s presence: “Because of the redemption of man, which came by Jesus Christ, they are brought back into the presence of the Lord [thus overcoming the temporal separation]; yea, this is wherein all men are redeemed ... ; and they shall come forth, ... and all shall stand before his bar, being redeemed and loosed from this eternal band of death, which death is a temporal death” (Morm. 9:13).²⁵

Gerald N. Lund has written several excellent articles emphasizing this point. In cogent language, he explains that overcoming this type of spiritual death is unconditional:

Not only does Christ’s redemption bring about resurrection for all without condition, but it also brings all men to the judgment bar where they are brought into the presence of God to stand before him to be judged. If we are brought back into the presence of God, then spiritual death, or our separation from God, is overcome at that point. What does a man have to do to have this happen? Absolutely nothing. It, too, is unconditional. Thus both effects of the fall of Adam [physical death and temporal separation] are automatically redeemed by the Savior.²⁶

²⁵ In this case, as in others, a Book of Mormon prophet may be using the term “temporal death” to refer to both physical death and temporal separation (see [note 27](#) and the passages cited in [note 111](#)). This makes sense, since the two are so closely tied. They are both results of the fall of Adam and Eve, and perhaps it is our mortality (physical death) that necessitates our being relocated out of God’s direct presence (temporal separation), lest our weak, transitory bodies be consumed by his glory. For example, the Lord told Moses (perhaps at a time when the prophet was not transfigured), “Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live. ... Thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen” (Ex. 33:20, 23).

²⁶ Gerald N. Lund, “The Fall of Man and His Redemption,” *The Book of Mormon: Second Nephi, the Doctrinal Structure*, p. 95–96; I am indebted to Craig Ostler for bringing this article to my attention.

For this reason, it could be considered inaccurate, or at least incomplete, to say, “Overcoming physical death is unconditional, but overcoming spiritual death is conditional,” or, “Everyone will overcome physical death no matter what you do, even sons of perdition, but only those who meet the Lord’s requirements such as repentance will overcome spiritual death.” In reality, one aspect of spiritual death *is* overcome by everyone, without conditions, even for sons of perdition. This fact is more than just quibbling over a technicality; it is a major emphasis of several Book of Mormon prophets.²⁷ One reason they emphasize it is to vindicate God and show that he is just and fair, ultimately holding each person accountable only for his or her own choices, not for something an ancestor did (see [section 4.2.1](#)).

²⁷ Several passages refer to the resurrection and the Judgment almost as though they were the same event. In each of the following passages, the main verb is *bring* or *raise*, as in bringing or raising people back to the temporal presence of the Father at the Judgment. Note that the subject of the main verb is not Christ. Jacob says, “The resurrection, which is in Christ, will bring you to stand with shame and awful guilt before the bar of God” (Jacob 6:9). Samuel says that Christ brings “to pass the resurrection of the dead, that thereby men may be brought into the presence of the Lord. ... The resurrection of Christ redeemeth mankind, yea, even all mankind, and bringeth them back into the presence of the Lord” (Hel. 14:15, 17). Mormon says, “He bringeth to pass the resurrection of the dead, whereby man must be raised to stand before his judgment-seat” (Morm. 7:6). And Moroni says, “The death of Christ bringeth to pass the resurrection, which bringeth to pass a redemption from an endless sleep, [and that redemption is two-fold:] from which sleep all men shall be awakened by the power of God when the trump shall sound; and they shall come forth, both small and great, and all shall stand before his bar” (Morm. 9:13). In each case, the subject or agent of the main verb is *resurrection*. In other words, these prophets are being more specific than saying, “Christ raises you to the Father’s presence” (though this is of course true); they are telling us, “The resurrection raises you to the Father’s presence.” These passages all imply that the active cause of being restored to God’s presence is the Resurrection, as though it were a necessary prerequisite, or indeed, the same event. One implication is that physical death and the temporal separation are intricately related (since they are overcome almost simultaneously). Indeed, it may be that the former caused the latter. That is, once mankind became mortal, they could not endure the Father’s presence because their flesh was corruptible and had to withdraw from his presence. In this condition, as Joseph Smith explains, we now have a two-fold purpose: “We came to this earth that we might have a body and present it pure before God in the celestial kingdom” (“Chapter 17: [The Great Plan of Salvation](#),” *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith*, (SLC: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), p. 206–16). Through the Savior’s gifts of Resurrection and Ascension, we will conquer physical death when we “have our bodies” again, we will conquer the temporal separation when we “present it before God” (see also [notes 25 and 111](#))

1.2 Spiritual Separation

The spiritual separation differs in many ways from the temporal separation. Both concepts can be accurately called “spiritual death” (and frequently are), but there are vital differences between the two.

1.2.1 Definition

The spiritual separation refers to being separated from the influence of the Holy Ghost. It means being separated from God in a spiritual way, in the sense that, since the Holy Ghost is a member of the Godhead, separation from the Holy Ghost’s influence is separation from God. For example, before we sin, we can freely have the Holy Ghost’s companionship. After we sin, the Holy Ghost withdraws and we are cut off from the Spirit, or “cut off ... spiritually from the presence of the Lord” (Hel. 14:16).

1.2.2 Cause and Scope

This type of spiritual death, the spiritual separation, is caused by individual sins. While the source of the temporal separation is the fall of Adam, the source of the spiritual separation “is our own disobedience.”²⁸ To borrow another person’s phrase, the temporal separation is caused by “the Fall of Adam,” but the spiritual separation is caused by “the fall of me.”²⁹ Hence Paul says, “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23), meaning “the result of sin is spiritual separation from God.”

Because the spiritual separation only affects those who sin, there are two notable exceptions to the fact that nearly everyone experiences this second type of spiritual death. Firstly, the Savior Jesus Christ was sinless and thus exempt from the spiritual separation.³⁰

²⁸ [True to the Faith](#), “Death, Spiritual,” p. 48.

²⁹ Gerald N. Lund, “[Salvation: By Grace or by Works?](#),” *Ensign*, Apr. 1981, p. 17; Robert L. Millet, “[The Fall as Taught in the Book of Mormon](#),” LightPlanet.com, accessed 23 Apr. 2010.

³⁰ He is unique example, however, because he voluntarily experienced the spiritual separation as part of the Atonement, even though, being sinless, He did not deserve it. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland explains, “For His Atonement to be infinite and eternal, He had to feel what it was like to die not only physically but spiritually, to

Secondly, “little children ... cannot sin, for power is not given unto Satan to tempt little children, until they begin to become accountable” (D&C 29:46–47). Therefore, little children do not experience this spiritual separation (see [section 4.2.3](#) for further discussion). For this reason, Mormon emphasizes that “little children need no repentance, neither baptism.” Just as your body is alive because your spirit is dwelling within it, “little children are alive in Christ” because the Spirit of God is with them (Moro. 8:11–12). This is so because they have not sinned and therefore have not alienated themselves from the Spirit.

1.2.3 Necessity

The spiritual separation is absolutely *unnecessary* for our eternal growth and progress. It is virtually synonymous with sin, and sin is never necessary for us to become closer to or more like our Heavenly Father in any way. Multiple prophets have attested to this truth (see [section 4.2.2](#) for examples).

Not only is the spiritual separation unnecessary for our progress, it is harmful and detrimental to it. Indeed, one of the reasons we undergo the temporal separation and “are absent from the Lord” while living on earth is so that we can learn to “walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:6–7). In other words, one reason we left Heavenly Father’s presence was to better know his spiritual presence—the still, small voice that whispers truth and requires faith in order to follow. Thus Alma tells his son, “It *was not* expedient that man should be reclaimed from this temporal death, ... [but] it *was* expedient that mankind should be reclaimed from this spiritual death” (Alma 42:8–9). This statement can be taken to mean that God did not immediately rescue mankind from the temporal separation because his plan requires it in order for us to learn how to follow the Spirit, but he is eager to rescue us from our sins as soon as we will let him, because they push his Spirit away and cause the spiritual separation,.

sense what it was like to have the divine Spirit withdraw, leaving one feeling totally, abjectly, hopelessly alone” (Jeffrey R. Holland, “[None Were with Him](#),” *Ensign*, May 2009, p. 86).

1.2.4 Resolution

The spiritual separation is overcome to the extent that a person returns to and dwells in God's spiritual presence. As the scriptures call separation from the Holy Ghost "spiritual death," they naturally call overcoming it "spiritual rebirth."³¹ We regain the Holy Spirit's presence in degrees as we repent and keep the commandments, which is why some have said, rather than being a one-time event, "the spiritual rebirth is a process that goes on gradually."³² However, the greatest single step in this return happens through baptism and receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost, for that is when we enter a qualitatively different relationship with the third member of the Godhead.

When one is given the gift ... of the Holy Ghost, he has overcome spiritual death to a degree, for he has come into the presence of one member of the Godhead. The Holy Ghost's role, of course, is to help us continue in the pre-conditions of this part of the Atonement and fully overcome spiritual death by coming back into the presence of the Father and the Son.³³

Adam and Eve, the great pioneers of the plan of salvation, demonstrated with their lives the pattern their descendants should follow. They were the first to learn about and overcome the spiritual separation by receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost. Adam left a record of his life that illustrates how to take each step back to God, including how to overcome spiritual death by being spiritually reborn:

Adam cried unto the Lord, and he was caught away by the Spirit of the Lord, and was carried down into the water, and was laid under the water, and was brought forth out of the water. And thus he was baptized, and the Spirit of God descended upon him, and thus he was born of the Spirit, and became quickened in the inner man (Moses 6:64–65).

³¹ The phrase "spiritual rebirth" could refer to overcoming either separation (i.e., regaining God's temporal presence at the Judgment), but in common parlance, it usually refers to overcoming the spiritual separation.

³² Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah* (SLC: Deseret Book, 1978), p. 351.

³³ Gerald N. Lund, "[Salvation: By Grace or by Works?](#)," *Ensign*, Apr. 1981, p. 17.

When we are baptized and confirmed, we enter a covenant that can potentially bind us to the Holy Ghost and allow us to enjoy his presence constantly. This ordinance and covenant are the means of overcoming the spiritual separation.

When is the process of spiritual rebirth complete? That is, at what point are we fully saved from this spiritual separation? Dallin H. Oaks's description of what it means to be "saved" is applicable to this question. In one sense,

we tend to speak of "saved" or "salvation" [from the spiritual separation] as a future event rather than something that has already been realized. ... It [can be] premature for any of us to say that we have been "saved" in mortality.

That glorious status can only follow the final judgment. ...

[However] some modern prophets have also used "salvation" or "saved" in [the] present sense. President Brigham Young declared: "It is present salvation and the present influence of the Holy Ghost that we need every day to keep us on saving ground. ... It is for us to receive it today, and not wait for the Millennium."³⁴

The distinction between present salvation and future salvation from the spiritual separation is sometimes described as the difference between justification and sanctification. For example, "Justification is a judicial act, whereby God declares that the sinner who repents and ... is baptized ... is acquitted and received into His Kingdom [the Church]."³⁵ This is an event that happens during mortal life. In contrast, sanctification is not immediate, but rather "the faithful are sanctified degree by degree as they add to their faith and good works."³⁶ In both cases, however, "it is not that we earn these gifts, but rather that we choose to seek and accept

³⁴ Dallin H. Oaks, "[Have You Been Saved?](#)," *Ensign*, May 1998, p. 55.

³⁵ Hyrum M. Smith and Janne M. Sjodahl, *The Doctrine and Covenants Commentary*, p. 104; cited in [Doctrines of the Gospel Student Manual](#) (SLC: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1986), p. 50.

³⁶ Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah* (SLC: Deseret Book, 1978), p. 351. Sue Bergin eloquently explains, "Once baptismal covenants are made and the gift of the Holy Ghost is conferred and received, the symbolic rebirth must be made actual through the day-to-day struggle to repent and choose life—Christ and righteousness. The choice is not made once and for all, but many times during a lifetime" (Sue Bergin, "[Life and Death, Spiritual](#)," in Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* [New York: MacMillan, 1992], p. 833).

justification and sanctification. ... Justification and sanctification are [both] accomplished by the grace of Christ."³⁷

Thus, we are justified in the present, which happens when we enter a covenant and are *declared* "perfect in Christ" (Col. 1:28; Moro. 10: 32–33). We are sanctified over time as we maintain a repentant way of life, until it culminates in *actually becoming* whole and perfect on the other side of the veil.³⁸ So while, from our mortal perspective, we do not fully overcome the spiritual separation in this life, the doctrine of hope gives us an eternal perspective, teaching us that the promise of that complete rebirth is so sure that in some ways we can consider it a present reality, an accomplished fact.³⁹

1.2.5 Conditions

Because the spiritual separation is caused by individual choices, voluntarily, its effects are only overcome conditionally, on the terms of repentance. The resolution of both spiritual deaths are made *possible* by the atonement. However, whereas the temporal separation is overcome unconditionally, the spiritual separation is only overcome as we make and keep sacred covenants.

For those who do not exercise faith, repent, get baptized, receive the Holy Ghost, and endure to the end (whether in this life or in the spirit world), the spiritual separation is not overcome. While they return to God's temporal presence for the Judgment, they reject the Holy Ghost, God's spiritual presence. Thus, they overcome the first spiritual death, but the second

³⁷ D. Todd Christofferson, "[Justification and Sanctification](#)," *Ensign*, Jun. 2001, p. 18. Elder Christofferson describes the two ideas as "justification (being pardoned) and sanctification (being purified). ... This action of acceptance on our part opens the door for the process of justification (remission, or pardoning, of sins) and sanctification (cleansing from sin) to work in us—something we may refer to as being born again. ... The Savior offers to all who will have faith and accept it, the gifts of being justified or pardoned before the law and also being sanctified—that is, being made spotless and holy.

³⁸ If we identify this culmination with receiving the Second Comforter, then it could even happen on this side of the veil, though even that is an exceptional situation.

³⁹ To expand on the birth metaphor, justification is when we are first conceived, filled with the potential for a new life but not yet truly born. Sanctification is the gestation process, filled with the struggling and wrestling of a newborn in the womb of mortal trials, until the sanctification process is complete and it culminates in the delivery of a fully alive child at the Judgment who enters eternal life (see also John 16:21).

spiritual death still has power over them, and they remain cast out of God's presence. This state is often referred to as the second death.⁴⁰

1.3 Summary

In summary, "spiritual death" can refer to either of two separations—being "cut off temporally from the presence of the Lord" or being "cut off spiritually from the presence of the Lord," to use Alma's terminology.⁴¹

The temporal separation, being cut off from Heavenly Father, is caused by Adam's transgression and affects all his posterity unconditionally, even innocent children and the Savior. Therefore, it is overcome unconditionally by the Atonement when everyone, even sons of perdition, returns to the Father's presence to be judged. The temporal separation is a necessary phase to pass through in order to become more like God.

The spiritual separation, being cut off from the Holy Ghost, is caused by individual sins and affects only those who are accountable and break the commandments. Therefore, it is overcome conditionally by the Atonement only for those who repent, when they receive the gift of the Holy Ghost and abide in his presence through continual submission to God's will. The spiritual separation is always detrimental to our progress and only hinders us from becoming more like God.

⁴⁰ See Rev. 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8; Jacob 3:11; Alma 12:16, 32; 13:30; Hel. 14:18–19; D&C 63:17; 76:37.

⁴¹ "Spiritual death ... comes as a result both of Adam's fall and of our own unrepented, accountable sins. Adam's fall causes us to be removed from the physical presence of God (see Helaman 14:15–17). Our own sins alienate us spiritually from God (see Alma 12:9–11)" (Mack C. Sterling, "[The Way of Life and the Way of Death in the Book of Mormon](#)," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6:2 (Provo, Utah: Maxwell Institute, 1997), p. 152–204).

Figure 2: The Two Types of Spiritual Death

	Temporal Separation	Spiritual Separation
Definition	Separation from Heavenly Father	Separation from the Holy Ghost
Caused by	Adam's transgression	Our individual sins
Necessity of	Completely necessary	Completely unnecessary; harmful
Resolved during	The final Judgment	The covenant of baptism
Conditions for overcoming	[none]	Repentance

2. Symbols of God's Presence

Now that the nature of spiritual death has been described, and the two distinct types of separation of which it consists have been introduced, it is easier to understand the scripture symbolism that is used to evoke these two concepts.

In many passages throughout all the standard works, *God's face* is used to symbolize his *temporal presence*, and *God's voice* is used to symbolize his *spiritual presence*. All scriptural symbolism is finely nuanced and context-dependant, but generally speaking, when God's voice is mentioned, we can think of it as referring to the Holy Ghost, and when God's face is mentioned, as referring to Heavenly Father. When people hear God's voice, we can suppose that the Holy Ghost is present. When people see God's face, we can suppose that more than the Holy Ghost is present; the Father himself⁴² is interacting with them.

Speaking more broadly, Heavenly Father's presence is sometimes evoked using visual allusions, while the Holy Ghost's presence is evoked using auditory allusions.⁴³ When the scriptures use terms such as *see*, *eyes*, *show*, *similitude*, *appear*, or *countenance*, they are often

⁴² "There are few recorded instances of God the Father appearing to or speaking to man" (*Guide to the Scriptures*, "[God, Godhead](#)"). It is usually Jesus Christ who communicates with this fallen sphere. I intentionally use the term "the Father" here because it can include either Heavenly Father or Jesus Christ. Both Elohim and Jehovah wield the title "Father" —Heavenly Father because he is the Father of our spirits, and Jesus Christ because he is the Father of the redeemed, the Father of heaven and earth, and the divinely authorized representative of Heavenly Father ("[The Father and the Son](#)," *Ensign*, Apr. 2002, p. 13; reprinted from *Improvement Era*, Aug. 1916, p. 934–42). As mentioned in [note 10](#), I have simplified the matter for the purposes of this paper by generally referring to Heavenly Father, even though Jesus Christ could also fill the same role in these concepts in most cases.

⁴³ A case could be made that the Son's presence, or the Second Comforter, is evoked using tactile allusions, through such terms as *hand*, *flesh*, *touch*, *feel*, or *finger*. See, for example, [section 2.1.2](#), and [note 49](#). However, the connections are not as strong and are not dealt with extensively in this paper.

alluding to the Father's presence. When they use terms such as *hear, ears, talk, or words*, they are often alluding to the Holy Ghost's presence.

If God's face and voice represent his temporal and spiritual presence, then being separated or cut off from his face or voice represents spiritual death. The temporal separation is depicted as being unable to see his face, and the spiritual separation as unable to hear his voice.

This symbolism is apt, for whereas a voice is an abstract, immaterial part of a person, a face is an actual tangible body part, representing God's more concrete presence. In an auditorium, a voice can spread out and "fill the immensity of space" (like the Spirit; D&C 88:12),⁴⁴ whereas a face is in one place. A person is most frequently known for his face, and when others see it, they immediately recognize him. Likewise, if we stood in God temporal presence right now, there'd be no doubt whom he was. On the other hand, recognizing a person just by his voice is often a harder task for us to do; it usually requires coming to know him very well, talking with him, and becoming very familiar with his voice. Likewise, recognizing the Holy Ghost takes experience and practice, and may even be one of the principal reasons we came to earth.⁴⁵

2.1 Scriptural Examples

I will now give several examples of scripture passages that utilize this symbolism. Each of the following passages mentions God's face and God's voice, often contrasting them or using them to imply truths about the two types of spiritual death that have been discussed.

⁴⁴ Granted, this description is of the light of Christ, not the Holy Ghost per se. But it fits the Holy Ghost because he operates through the medium of the light of Christ. "The Holy Ghost ... can be manifest in every place at the same moment of time ... by acting through ... the Light of Christ" (Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation* 1:38, 40).

⁴⁵ Interestingly, when people try to recognize the identity of a speaker on an audio recording, in the midst of their concentration, they often close their eyes. Shutting out the visual sense seems to enable greater focus on the auditory sense. We know being shut out of God's temporal presence for a season was a necessary step; perhaps that is because his personal presence is so overpowering that we wouldn't have come to know the gentle touch of his spiritual presence unless we withdrew apace, learning to "walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7). By shutting our eyes for a time, our ears become better attuned.

2.1.1 Adam and Eve

The first example comes from our first parents, whose lives are meant to be a model for the rest of us—explaining our current state, how we got in it, and what we should do about it. When Adam and Eve were in the garden, they were in God’s temporal presence; they walked and talked with him, freely conversing face-to-face (see [note 14](#)). After they transgressed by eating the fruit, their relationship with God fundamentally changed. Moses’s record uses face-voice symbolism to express that new relationship:

¹After I, the Lord God, had driven them out, ... ⁴Adam and Eve, his wife, called upon the name of the Lord, and they heard the voice of the Lord from the way toward the Garden of Eden, speaking unto them, and they saw him not; for they were shut out from his presence. (Moses 5:1, 4)

One point of this figurative passage is to explain Adam and Eve’s new relationship with God. They were no longer in God’s temporal presence (“they *saw* him not”), but they could be in his spiritual presence (“they *heard* the voice”) when they met the right conditions (calling upon the name of the Lord).

Interestingly, immediately after the story of Adam and Eve’s fall comes the story of Cain’s fall. I believe these two stories appear right next to each other because they are meant to explain and typify the origin of spiritual death.⁴⁶ Adam and Eve represent all of us when we leave God’s temporal presence and enter this mortal sphere full of pain and sorrow. And as “Cain was shut out from the presence of the Lord” after killing Abel (Moses 5:41), he represents all of us when we leave God’s spiritual presence by rejecting his commandments and bringing the misery of sin on ourselves.⁴⁷ Adam and Eve typify the temporal separation, and Cain

⁴⁶ I believe there is strong textual evidence, especially in the book of Moses, that the temporal and spiritual separations were meant to be typified by the story of Adam and Eve, and of Cain and Abel, respectively. I hope to elaborate on this theme in a forthcoming paper; see also [note 56](#).

⁴⁷ This does not mean that Adam and Eve never sinned during their lives on earth, just that the highly allegorical retellings of their lives are focused on explaining the temporal separation.

typifies the spiritual separation. This symbolism will be further explored later in this paper (see [section 3.2.2](#)).

2.1.2 *The Brother of Jared*

More examples can be found in the book of Ether, in the first six chapters, which narrate the founding of the Jaredite nation by its righteous leaders. Early in the narrative, the Jaredites leave Babel when the Lord scatters the people.

When they had come down into the valley of Nimrod the Lord came down
and talked with the brother of Jared; and he was in a cloud, and the brother of
Jared saw him not. (Ether 2:4)

As with the passage about Adam and Eve, talking to the Lord is explicitly contrasted with seeing him. In other words, the brother of Jared could enjoy the presence of the Holy Ghost,⁴⁸ but he had not yet entered the Lord's temporal presence. This happened when he brought the sixteen stones to the top of Mount Shelem:

⁶The Lord stretched forth his hand and touched the stones one by one with his
finger. And the veil was taken from off the eyes of the brother of Jared, and he
saw the finger of the Lord. ...

¹⁰And he answered: ... Lord, show thyself unto me.

¹³And when he had said these words, behold, the Lord showed himself
unto him, and said: ... ye are redeemed from the fall; therefore ye are brought
back into my presence; therefore I show myself unto you. (Ether 3:6, 10, 13)

Whereas regaining the Lord's spiritual presence is typified by *talking* with or *hearing* the voice of God, regaining his temporal presence is typified by *seeing* him—first his finger and then

⁴⁸ Of course, keeping the Holy Ghost's presence (continuing to hear the voice) required obeying its instructions (heeding the voice). Apparently at some point, the brother of Jared neglected the example of our first parents and "remembered not to call upon the name of the Lord" (Ether 2:14). The Lord forgave him but warned him that the Holy Ghost's presence was not without conditions: "Ye shall remember that my Spirit will not always strive with man; wherefore, if ye will sin until ye are fully ripe ye shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord" (v. 15).

his whole self.⁴⁹ Like a face, a finger is a material body part (as opposed to the more abstract voice), representing the more concrete manifestation of the Lord—his direct, temporal presence. Interestingly, immediately after appearing to the brother of Jared, the Lord emphasizes that being brought into his temporal presence constitutes being redeemed from the fall, reinforcing the connection between the temporal separation and its cause—the fall of Adam and Eve.⁵⁰

2.1.3 Moses

When recounting to the Israelites the story of how they received the Mosaic law, Moses explained the limitations the Israelites were under at that time:

¹¹Ye came near and stood under the mountain; ... ¹²And the Lord spake unto you out of the midst of the fire: ye heard the voice of the words, but saw no similitude; only ye heard a voice. (Deut. 4:12)

Thus, while the people could bridge their separation from the Holy Ghost (“hear the voice”), they could not endure the Lord’s temporal presence (“see the similitude”⁵¹) and had to be shielded from it by a cloud. In contrast, Moses was able to endure it, not only hearing God’s voice, but he also seeing his finger and face:

Moses went into the midst of the cloud, and gat him up into the mount. ...
And [the Lord] gave unto Moses, when he had made an end of communing with him upon mount Sinai, two tables of testimony, tables of stone, written

⁴⁹ Note that the brother of Jared first *hears* God’s voice, then God’s *hand touches* the dust of the earth, then the man *sees* God’s face. This could be an example of typifying the presence of the Holy Ghost, the Son, and the Father, respectively. Tactile symbolism is suited to the Son, since he is the “Word made flesh” (John 1:14) and “God manifest in the flesh” (1 Tim. 3:16; see also Rom. 8:3). This imagery can remind us that “the Holy Ghost ... , which is the first Comforter” brings a person to the second Comforter, “the Lord Jesus Christ himself,” who eventually “will manifest the Father unto him ... [and] will teach him face to face” ([Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith](#), p. 150–51). This imagery can also describe the process of sanctification: as we hear and obey the voice of God, we begin to feel his hand in our lives, shaping and moving us, until we someday see his face in our own countenance (see the hymn “[Heard Yet Unseen](#)” at the end of this paper).

⁵⁰ Another possible use of this typology occurs in verse 21, when the Lord says, “Thou shalt not suffer these things which ye have seen and heard to go forth unto the world. ... Treasure up the things which ye have seen and heard, and show it to no man.”

⁵¹ *Similitude* is sometimes translated *form*, as in visible appearance (see the RSV or NIV translations).

with the finger of God. ... And the Lord spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend. (Ex. 24:18; 31:18; 33:11)

This passage also typifies the role of temples (evoked by the mountain) and of the Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthoods in overcoming the two separations from God. As the Lord explains,

¹⁸The power and authority of the higher, or Melchizedek Priesthood, is to hold the keys ... ¹⁹to enjoy the communion and presence of God the Father, and Jesus. ... ²⁰The power and authority of the lesser, or Aaronic Priesthood, is to hold the keys of the ministering of angels. (D&C 107:18–19)

Under the Aaronic order of the Mosaic law, the Israelites could only reach the base of the temple-mountain (“under the mountain”), thus only hearing God’s messengers, such as angels or the Holy Ghost. Having the Melchizedek Priesthood, Moses could ascend “to the top of the mount” (Ex. 24:17) and see God’s face. This connection of face-voice symbolism to the temple will be further developed in [section 3](#).

2.1.4 Enos

When Enos prayed in the wilderness seeking “a remission of my sins, ... there came a voice unto me, saying: Enos, thy sins are forgiven thee” (Enos 1:2, 5). This passage associates hearing God’s voice with being forgiven, reminding us that the spiritual separation is caused by our sins, and that overcoming it requires that the Atonement cover our sins.

While Enos overcomes the spiritual separation in this life, he implies that the temporal separation is not to be resolved until the resurrection and Judgment, at which point we regain the Father’s presence:

I rejoice in the day when my mortal shall put on immortality, and shall stand before him; then shall I see his face with pleasure, and he will say ... there is a place prepared for you in the mansions of my Father. Amen. (Enos 1:27)

2.1.5 Joseph Smith

In one of his weightiest revelations to Joseph Smith, the Lord attempts to convey several profound truths about the Atonement and the plan of salvation. He begins the revelation with a penetratingly simple summary of his plan:

Verily, thus saith the Lord: It shall come to pass that every soul who forsaketh his sins and cometh unto me, and calleth on my name, and obeyeth my voice, and keepeth my commandments, shall see my face and know that I am.
(D&C 93:1)

In a few images, he describes the source of the problem—sin separates us from the Spirit, so we must forsake our sins in order to “hear his voice” again. He also explains the sequence of overcoming spiritual death by giving an if-then promise. “If you first overcome the spiritual separation (obeying his voice), it will eventually lead to overcoming the temporal separation (seeing his face). If you want to abide in my presence in the next life, you must first abide the Holy Ghost’s presence in this life.” That we all will see his face at the Judgment is true, but whether we stay in his temporal presence is another question. If we cannot endure his gentle influence on earth, we will never be able to withstand his all-consuming personal presence in heaven. This sequence—bridging first the spiritual separation, then the temporal—is reflected in the tabernacle symbolism that is explained in [section 3](#).

Note that in the examples from the writings of Enos and Joseph Smith, hearing God’s voice occurs in the present life (“cameth a voice”; “obeyeth my voice”), but seeing his face is considered a future event (“then shall I see his face”; “shall see my face”). This reflects the fact that overcoming the temporal separation at the Judgment is a future event, while overcoming the spiritual separation can and should happen during this second estate.⁵²

⁵² Of course, the spiritual separation can also be overcome during the time spent in the spirit world for those “who would have received [a knowledge of this gospel] if they had been permitted to tarry” (D&C 137:7). Since the spirit world is part of this earthly probation, we can properly include it in references to the second estate. Marion G. Romney likewise defined “our ‘second estate,’ which is the mortality we are now experiencing and our sojourn in the spirit world following death” (Marion G. Romney (“[We Are Children of God](#),” *Ensign*, Sep. 1984, p. 3)

2.2 Summary

Hopefully this explanation will breathe new understanding into passages that readers encounter such as “The day cometh that you shall hear my voice and see me, and know that I am” (D&C 50:45); and “seek the face of the Lord always ... and ye shall have eternal life” (D&C 101:38). Such statements can be seen as admonitions to overcome the effects of Adam’s fall and our own sins by reuniting with the Godhead, beginning with the Holy Ghost and ending with the Father himself.

Figure 3: Symbols of God’s Presence

Temporal Presence	Spiritual Presence
God’s face <i>see, eyes, show, similitude</i>	God’s voice <i>hear, ears, talk, words</i>

3. The Tabernacle

The ancient tabernacle combines the sensory imagery of face-voice with spatial imagery of distance-presence in order to teach, reinforce, and remind us of key doctrines regarding spiritual death and overcoming it. It does so by setting off certain spaces in increasing distance from God and distinguishing them by whether a person could see or hear him.

3.1 Representing Spiritual Death with Distance

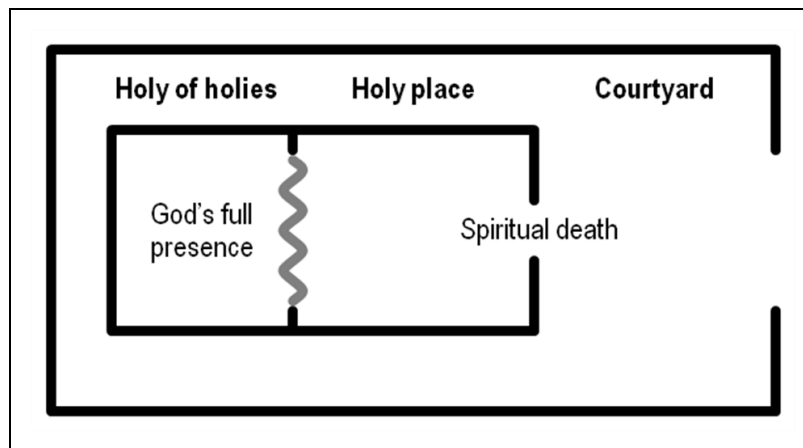
The Atonement is a profound event, process, and concept that we will never fully understand in mortality. So the Lord uses a variety of symbols to describe it, each symbol conveying some aspect of it. One way to organize this symbolism is in problem-solution pairs. For example, in the scriptures, the problem of sin and the solution of the Atonement are respectively compared to bondage and freedom (Alma 5:7), debt and being paid off (Matt.18:23–27), and being lost and found (Luke 15:4–7).

In addition to using the scriptures, the Lord also uses physical ordinances to illustrate the problem that sin is and the way the atonement solves it. Because baptism represents the atonement as a washing, sin is implicitly compared to being dirty.⁵³ The sacrament represents the atonement through eating food, so sin is implicitly compared to hunger. In the initiatory, the atonement is represented through clothing, thus implying that sin is like nakedness.

⁵³ I am aware that these ordinances all have other meanings. For example, baptism also represents dying, being buried, and returning to life. This list is only a brief survey of potential meanings in the physical actions of the ordinances.

Laden with symbols as it is, the main problem-solution comparison being made in the tabernacle and in the modern endowment seems to be distance and proximity — spiritual death is like being far from God and the Atonement is like being brought nearer to God. This can be seen in the basic layout of a temple: there is a linear series of rooms.⁵⁴ A person starts at one end, and at the far end is a room that represents the dwelling place of God (the holy of holies in the ancient tabernacle, and the celestial room in modern temples). The ceremonies performed in the sacred building consist of starting at the first room and making one's way to the room where God resides.⁵⁵ Just as the other ordinances assume a representation of sin (dirty, hungry, naked) and resolve it through a representation of the atonement (clean, filled, clothed), the endowment represents spiritual death as being physically distant from God and resolves the problem by representing the Atonement as drawing closer to God. In other words, the fact that there is a room where God dwells and another room apart from it represents spiritual death, or the fact that we are separated from God's presence.

Figure 4: Cut off from God



If the holy of holies represents God's presence, then being outside the holy of holies represents spiritual death.

⁵⁴ As even unendowed members and non-members can tour temples before they are dedicated, this distance-proximity explanation can serve as a useful explanation of the basic symbolism of the endowment.

⁵⁵ Of course, along the way other symbols are used, such as clothing, light, names, actions, and words. I like to think of these symbols as ribs on the larger backbone symbol of distance-proximity. The meaning of the other symbols can often be interpreted in light of how close one is to the final room where God dwells.

Herein lies the significance of having three rooms in the ancient tabernacle. If the tabernacle had one room where God dwells and only one other room apart from it, that would convey the basic idea of spiritual death—that we are separated from God’s presence. But by having *two* rooms apart from the room where God dwells, the structure conveys that there are *two* ways of being separated from God’s presence, or two degrees of separation. In other words, the two rooms represent the fact that there are two types of spiritual death. This is the first of several lessons about spiritual death that are taught in the tabernacle.

If we were to make a specific association between each of the two rooms outside of the holy of holies and each of the two types of spiritual death, we could do so based on the sequence that the deaths occur. Mankind was first separated from God temporally, when Adam and Eve left the garden and became mortal and fallen; subsequently mankind was separated from God spiritually, when they sinned and became “carnal, sensual, and devilish.”⁵⁶ Individuals likewise are separated from God first temporally, when they are born into this fallen world outside of heaven, and second spiritually, when they sin and alienate themselves from the Holy Spirit. Thus, we could tentatively conclude that the first space outside the holy of holies, the holy place, represents the temporal separation, while the next space, the courtyard,⁵⁷ represents the spiritual separation. Thus, the layout of the rooms can remind us of the sequence in which the two spiritual deaths occur.⁵⁸ This association becomes even stronger as we consider the use of God’s face and voice in the tabernacle layout.

⁵⁶ Mosiah 16:3; Alma 42:10; Moses 5:13; 6:49 (see also James 3:15; Alma 41:13; D&C 20:20; 29:35). The book of Moses seems to emphasize that becoming “carnal, sensual, and devilish” was a distinct event or process from becoming mortal and fallen (see sections [2.1.1](#) and [3.2.2](#)). Moses 5:13 reads like an etiological statement on the origin of sin, which notably comes well after the story of eating the fruit. This fits squarely with the restored doctrine that Adam and Eve did not sin in eating the fruit.

⁵⁷ The KJV translates the word as “court”; I have used courtyard because it is more common.

⁵⁸ The sequence that the temporal and spiritual separations occur in may be why they are sometimes known in the scriptures as “the first death” (2 Ne. 9:15; Alma 11:45; 12:36; Hel. 14:16; D&C 29:41) and “the second death” (Rev. 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8; Jacob 3:11; Alma 12:16, 32; 13:30; Hel. 14:18–19; D&C 63:17; 76:37). See [section 4.2.4](#).

3.2 Drawing Further from God's Face and Voice

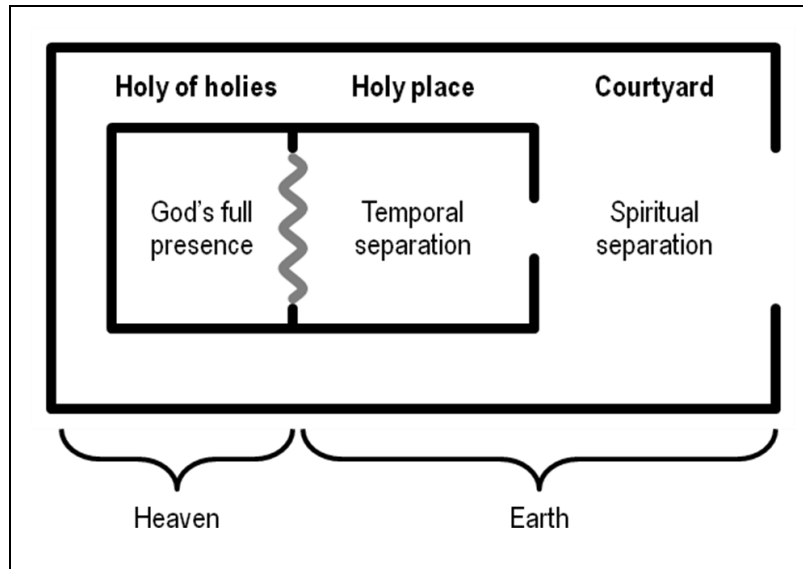
We have identified two sets of symbols—sensory and spatial—to represent God's presence and our separation from it. The sensory set depicts God's presence through his face or voice, and being separated from his presence through not seeing his face or hearing his voice. The spatial set depicts God's presence through proximity to him, and being separated from his presence through distance from him. These two symbol sets are combined and dramatically portrayed in the tabernacle.

3.2.1 *Leaving the Holy of Holies*

Consider the use of God's face in the series of rooms. In the holy of holies lay the ark of the covenant, whose lid was called the mercy seat and symbolized the throne of God (Ex. 25:21–22; 26:34). Typologically speaking, it was the room where God himself sat. If a person were to stand in the holy of holies, he would be able to see God's face, since he would be in the Lord's immediate presence, standing right in front of him. However, if a person were to take a few steps back, he would find himself in the holy place, now separated from God by a thick curtain. The curtain would block his view of God's face, making it impossible to see him. And by backing up even further, he would be out in the courtyard, still completely unable to see God's face.

If we apply the meaning of God's face that has been established to this point, we can derive certain doctrinal teachings regarding the first spiritual death, the temporal separation. The holy of holies is the room where we can see God's face, therefore it represents the place where we can have God's temporal presence—heaven, the dwelling place of God. The other two rooms share in common the fact that we cannot see God's face when standing in them. Therefore they represent the place where we are cast out of God's temporal presence—this earth, ever since Adam and Eve's actions converted it to a fallen, mortal sphere that lies outside the temporal presence of God (see [figure 5](#)). Once mankind came to earth and fell, he was no longer able to walk in God's personal presence, or “see his face.”

Figure 5: The Three Tabernacle Spaces⁵⁹



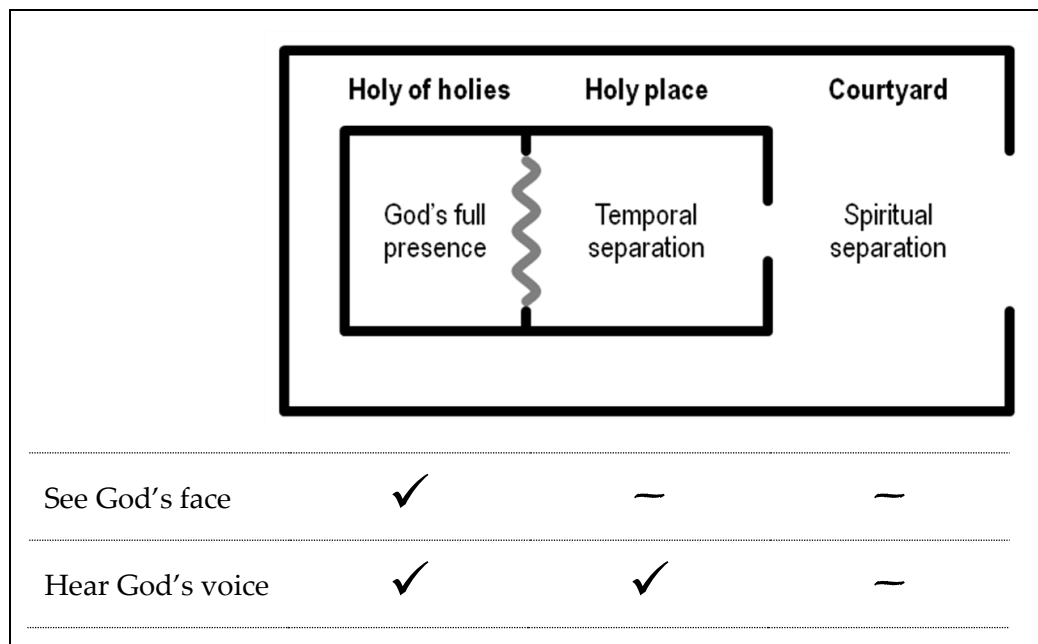
The spaces in the tabernacle symbolize the presence of God (the holy of holies) and how we are separated from his presence both temporally (the holy place) and spiritually (the courtyard).

Consider now the use of God's voice in the series of rooms. In the holy of holies, since a person would find himself standing in front of the throne where the Lord resides, he would be able to talk with him and hear his voice. If he were to step backward into the holy place, the veil would come between himself and the throne of God. Whereas a veil will block his vision of the Lord's face, it will not prevent his hearing the Lord's voice. With only a few feet of space and a cloth curtain between them, the person would still be able to hear and converse with the Lord. In contrast, should he retreat even further backward and go out into the courtyard, he would no longer be able to hear the Lord's voice. Surrounded by the open air, braying livestock, chattering people, and quotidian distractions, he would not hear or understand the words being said by a person sitting so far away as the holy of holies.

⁵⁹ This diagram of the tabernacle is not to scale. For one thing, the tent proper filled a much smaller portion of the courtyard. The scale has been changed in this diagram to emphasize the three main divisions within the tabernacle complex.

Applying the identified meaning of God’s voice to this scenario, more doctrinal teachings become apparent, this time regarding the second spiritual death, the spiritual separation. In heaven (the holy of holies) we dwelt with the entire Godhead, including the Holy Ghost. The fall separated mankind from God’s temporal presence, but he was still able to have the Holy Ghost’s companionship (speaking with the Lord through the veil, but not seeing him). However, once he distances himself from the Lord through sinning, he separates himself from the influence of the Holy Ghost. Surrounded by the effects of sin, he cannot fully hear or understand the Holy Ghost and has suffered the spiritual separation.

Figure 6: God’s Face and Voice in the Tabernacle



In the holy of holies, we can both see God’s face and hear his voice. In the holy place, we cannot see his face but we can still hear his voice. In the courtyard, we can do neither.

Thus the association is now even stronger between the holy place and the temporal separation, and between the courtyard and the spiritual separation. As you can see from [figure 6](#), the three rooms of the temple illustrate three conditions in which mankind can be: in God’s full presence (in the holy of holies, seeing his face and hearing his voice), being cut off

temporally (in the holy place, no longer seeing his face but still hearing his voice), and being cut off spiritually (in the courtyard, neither seeing his face nor hearing his voice).⁶⁰

As discussed in [section 1](#), the fall of Adam and Eve was a necessary step for us to have a probationary experience outside Heavenly Father's presence, but personal sin is not necessary, as it alienates us from the member of the Godhead whose presence we are meant to enjoy in this life. Another way of saying this using the tabernacle typology is to say, we needed to leave the holy of holies and step into the holy place, but we did not need to go out into the courtyard. While both the holy place and the courtyard are "in the world," only the courtyard is "of the world" (John 17:11, 16). We needed to come into this world, but we should continue "standing in holy places"⁶¹ to have God's influence with us. When we are standing in the courtyard, we are "without God in the world."⁶²

3.2.2 Leaving Eden

The tabernacle was oriented eastward. That is, the entrance was on the eastern end, and the holy of holies was at the far west end of the structure. As one left the holy of holies, he moved progressively eastward the further he drew from God's presence. There is a strong tie between this orientation and the story of Adam and Eve.

As mentioned earlier (see [section 2.1.1](#)), Adam and Eve's lives explain why we are all cut off temporally from God's presence, and Cain's life typifies how we all cut ourselves off spiritually when we sin. The Genesis narrative represents these separations by mentioning that the people involved moved to a new land further eastward each time a separation from God occurred.

When Adam and Eve were cast out of the garden, it is apparent that they went to the east of Eden, for the Lord, "drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden

⁶⁰ Technically, the courtyard would represent being cut off spiritually *and* temporally, since neither his face nor voice is accessible. The deaths are cumulative, not mutually exclusive. This describes well the state of sinners in this life—no one finds himself alienated from the Holy Ghost without also being alienated from the Father as well.

⁶¹ 2 Chr. 35:5; Ps. 24:3; Matt. 24:15; D&C 45:32; 87:8; 101:22; JS—M 1:12.

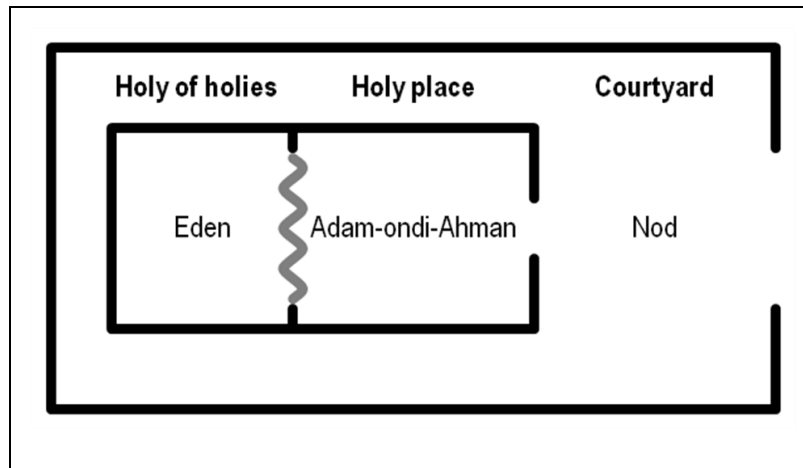
⁶² Eph. 2:12; Mosiah 27:31; Alma 41:11; Morm. 5:16.

Cherubims ... to keep the way of the tree of life" (Gen. 3:24). The Lord identifies "Adam-ondi-Ahman" as "the land where Adam dwelt" (D&C 117:8). Thus, Adam-ondi-Ahman can represent the state of being temporally cut off from God, which is the state all of Adam and Eve's children inherited from them. But whereas Cain was born outside of Eden because of his parents, his own actions required him to move even further away from the divine presence. After committing grave sins, "Cain went out from the presence of the Lord, and dwelt in the land of Nod, on the east of Eden" (Gen. 4:16).

Note that in both cases, when a spiritual death is introduced, the person involved always moves further east. This notion is reflected in the layout of the tabernacle. The holy of holies can be thought of as Eden, where mankind walked and talked with God personally. The holy place is Adam-ondi-Ahman, where mankind had to go to experience trials, but where he is still able to commune with God's spiritual presence. The courtyard is Nod, where sinners wander in total separation from God's presence.

The book of Moses refers to Cain's people as "the sons of men" (Moses 5:52, 54–56), typifying that fact that all mankind become sinners once they are accountable. But sinners can overcome the spiritual separation and re-enter Adam-ondi-Ahman, so to speak, by joining the covenant and being spiritually reborn, whom the book of Moses refers to as "the sons of God" (Moses 7:1; 8:13). Likewise today, those who join the covenant and leave the courtyard are called saints, which means "holy ones." Thus the holy ones stand in the holy place until they are called home into the Eden-like conditions of the next life.

Figure 7: The Holy of Holies as Eden



Adam and Eve were cast out east of Eden and dwelt in Adam-ondi-Ahman, representing the temporal separation. Cain was cast out even further east and dwelt in Nod, representing the spiritual separation.

This representation of temporal and spiritual separation through geographical migrations can be found in many scriptures stories, most frequently during the founding of a new nation and covenant people.⁶³ While the Adam and Eve narrative and the Cain narrative are ones of drawing further from God, many migration narrative are ones of leaving the sinful world and drawing closer to God. In many cases, the Lord is urgent to quickly get the group *out* of the land that represents sin, but then he often makes them wait a long time—often several years—before they are prepared enough to *enter* the land that represents heaven (often called the promised land). Thus, the wilderness is a vital part of each narrative. One message we can take away from this pattern is that while some experiences are unnecessary ones that the Lord is eager to help us escape (like sin), other experiences (being outside of heaven) are required to

⁶³ See Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, *The Exodus Story: Ancient and Modern Parallels* (SLC: Bookcraft, 1997) for an extensive treatment of this motif. The chart is adapted from the information in his book.

refine us and help us develop Godly traits. Even though it is unpleasant, we are sometimes meant to trek through the wilderness before we are ready to enter the promised land.⁶⁴

Figure 8: Separation as Migration

Symbol source	Spiritual separation	Temporal separation	God's full presence
Tabernacle	Courtyard	Holy place	Holy of holies
Adam and Eve and mankind	Nod	Adam-ondi-Ahman	Eden
Jaredites	Babel	Nimrod, Moriancumer	Promised land
Moses and the Israelites	Egypt	Sinai, wilderness	Canaan
Lehites	Jerusalem	Wilderness, Bountiful	Promised land
Alma and the Zeniffites	Nephi	Helam	Zarahemla
Joseph Smith and the saints	New York	Ohio	Missouri

3.3 Drawing Nearer to God's Face and Voice

The main purpose of the “endowment is ... to enable you to walk back to the presence of the Father,” or to teach us how to overcome spiritual death.⁶⁵ Tabernacle ordinances made use of various furnishings, ceremonies, and actions performed by worshippers to convey truths symbolically. It is possible to interpret these elements as commentaries on overcoming the two spiritual deaths. While this is not the only meaning that can be drawn out of the tabernacle and temple ceremonies, it is a fruitful source of doctrinal representations regarding this important topic.

⁶⁴ Notice that in the case of Moses and the Israelites, and of Joseph Smith and the modern saints, when they first entered the promised land, they proved unready to receive it (Num. 14:22–23, 31–33; D&C 105:9–10). In those two cases, even after entering the promised land, they were required to re-enter the “wilderness” as a form of preparation.

⁶⁵ Brigham Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, comp. John A. Widtsoe (SLC: Deseret Book, 1941), p. 416; cited in [“Endowed with Covenants and Blessings,”](#) *Ensign*, Feb. 1995, p. 38.

3.3.1 Two Aspects of the Atonement

Overcoming the two spiritual death begins with distinguishing their effects in our lives. Elder Richard G. Scott explains the difference between the effects of the fall of Adam and our personal falls:

Trials, disappointments, sadness, and heartache come to us from two basically different sources. Those who transgress the laws of God will always have those challenges. The other reason for adversity is to accomplish the Lord's own purposes in our life that we may receive the refinement that comes from testing. It is vitally important for each of us to identify from which of these two sources come our trials and challenges, for the corrective action is very different.⁶⁶

In other words, our personal transgressions cut us off from the Holy Ghost, while testing and refinement require that we be cut off from Heavenly Father. Both conditions involve pain, but of qualitatively different kinds.

Elder David A. Bednar explains how the corrective actions for these two types of pain both involve the Atonement. He distinguishes between two aspects of the Atonement, which are tailored to address both the necessary sorrow that comes from refining tests and the unnecessary misery that comes from sin:⁶⁷

I suspect that you and I are much more familiar with the nature of the redeeming power of the Atonement than we are with the enabling power of the Atonement. ... I think most of us know that when we do things wrong,

⁶⁶ Richard G. Scott, "[Trust in the Lord](#)," *Ensign*, Nov. 1995, p. 16.

⁶⁷ It is often useful to distinguish between *sorrow*, which is necessary to experience joy, and *misery*, which is the unhelpful consequence of sin. Lehi explains that the option to sin makes good choices meaningful, but that does not mean we have to actually sin before we can be agents. He says that "doing good" requires, not *doing* sin, but "knowing" sin. Likewise, he contrasts joy and misery. While the sorrow of mortality makes joy meaningful, that does not mean we have to experience the misery of sin. He says that "having joy" requires not *having* misery, but "knowing" misery. However, prophets do not always use these words distinctively, much like *sin* v. *transgression*, or *salvation* v. *exaltation*.

when we need help to overcome the effects of sin in our lives, the Savior has paid the price and made it possible for us to be made clean through His redeeming power. Most of us clearly understand that the Atonement is for sinners. I am not so sure, however, that we know and understand that the Atonement is also for saints—for good men and women who are obedient and worthy and conscientious and who are striving to become better and serve more faithfully. I frankly do not think many of us “get it” concerning this enabling and strengthening aspect of the Atonement. ...

... The Atonement provides help for us to overcome and avoid bad and to do and become good. There is help from the Savior for the entire journey of life—from bad to good to better and to change our very nature.

... It is eternally important for all of us to recognize that both of these essential elements of the journey of life—both putting off the natural man and becoming a saint, both overcoming bad and becoming good—are accomplished through the power of the Atonement.⁶⁸

In other words, the temporal and spiritual separations are both active sources of sorrow and misery in our lives, and the Atonement helps us overcome them by *redeeming* us from sin and *enabling* us to surmount the refining trials that we came here to experience. The “corrective action” that Elder Scott mentions is two-fold—for the spiritual separation, it is to repent, thus making use of the redeeming power; for the temporal separation and the trials entailed therein, it is to practice Godly qualities such as patience, humility, and selflessness, thus making use of the enabling power.

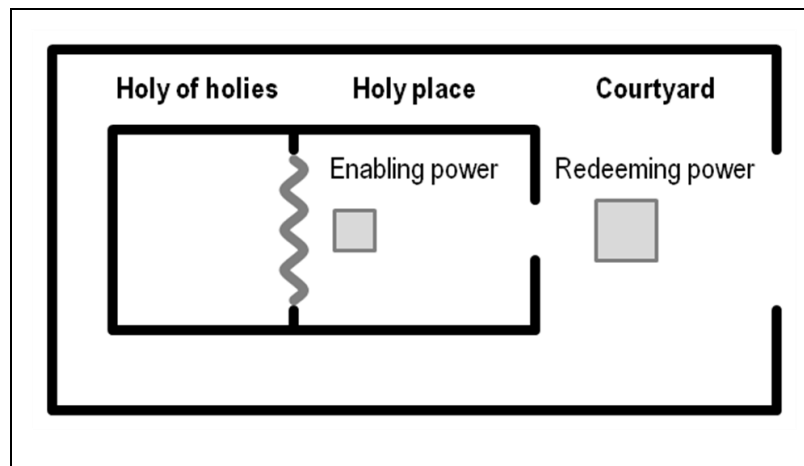
3.3.2 Two Altars

The tabernacle once again portrays this two-fold power of the Atonement by showing how we regain access to God’s voice and face. In order to advance from the courtyard to the

⁶⁸ David A. Bednar, “[In the Strength of the Lord](#),” BYU devotional, 23 Oct. 2001, [speeches.byu.edu](#), accessed 16 Apr. 2010.

holy place, a person would have to walk past the altar of sacrifice; doing so would allow him to be in a position to once again hear God’s voice. To advance from the holy place into the holy of holies, he would have to walk past the altar of incense (also called the altar of prayer); doing so would enable him to see God’s face again. These two altars can represent the two aspects of the Atonement that Elder Bednar explains—the first redeeming us from the spiritual separation caused by sin, and the second enabling us to weather the pain and trials inherent to the temporal separation. In the courtyard we practice sacrifice to free us from sin and regain the Holy Ghost’s presence. In the holy place we practice obedience to all our covenants to keep ourselves free from sin in anticipation of regaining Heavenly Father’s presence.⁶⁹

Figure 9: Altars for Redeeming and Enabling



David A. Bednar explained that the Atonement serves a dual purpose. The altar of sacrifice reminds us that grace redeems the natural man from sin, helping bad men become good. The altar of prayer reminds us that grace enables the saint to overcome weakness, helping good men become better.

These two altars represent a common pattern in the prophets’ teachings on the Atonement.

⁶⁹ Samuel’s declaration that “to obey is better than sacrifice” might be applied to these two aspects of the Atonement (1 Sam. 15:22). Had mankind remained in perfect obedience, sacrifice would not have been necessary to overcome sin. We came to earth to learn obedience, “the first law of heaven,” which is typified by the holy place. Sinning necessitates sacrifice and other related covenants, which is thus typified by the courtyard.

Figure 10: Redeeming and Enabling Patterns

	Temporal Restoration	Spiritual Restoration
King Benjamin	Become a saint	Put off the natural man
Jesus Christ	Have it more abundantly	Have life
	Cleave unto all good	Forsake all evil
Brigham Young	Learn to do good	Cease to do evil
David O. McKay	Make good men better	Make bad men good
Gordon B. Hinckley	Be good for something	Be good
Temple initiatory	Anointing	Washing
Rebirth ordinances	Receiving the Holy Ghost	Baptism by immersion

Of course, we should be cautious in holding too tenaciously to any one interpretation of the tabernacle furnishings. “While the Bible describes the function of each item, it does not specifically designate the symbolism. ... A body of lore has grown up explaining the symbolism of these objects,”⁷⁰ but they likely have a variety of potential meanings. Likewise, we should not artificially parse the Atonement. Elder Bednar gives the caveat, “I am not trying to suggest that the redeeming and enabling powers of the Atonement are separate and discrete. Rather, these two dimensions of the Atonement are connected and complementary; they both need to be operational during all phases of the journey of life.”⁷¹

But at the very least, the fact that a person must walk past an altar in order to pass from one room to the next—even in modern temples—can be considered a clear message from the Lord. He is saying, “To overcome spiritual death, you’ve got to make covenants with me. If you

⁷⁰ Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, Dana M. Pike, and David Rolph Seely, *Jehovah and the World of the Old Testament* (SLC: Deseret Book, 2009), p. 105.

⁷¹ David A. Bednar, “[In the Strength of the Lord](#),” BYU devotional, 23 Oct. 2001, speeches.byu.edu, accessed 16 Apr. 2010.

want to draw closer to me, you've got to make sacrifices. You have to give things up. What are you willing to leave on the altar so that you can walk past it and come closer to me?" One of the best answers to that question was given by the Lamanite king to Aaron, the son of Mosiah: "I will give away all my sins to know thee" (Alma 22:18). Likewise, if we leave our sins on the sacrificial altar, we will come to know God better as we converse with him at the altar of prayer. If we choose to continue this life of worship and familiarity in the holy place, some day the veil will be parted, and "when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is" (1 Jn. 3:2).

3.4 Summary

I do not claim that these meanings are the only correct interpretation of the tabernacle and temple rituals, nor that they are the most correct or most important message of the sacred ordinances, nor that the early Israelites understood these symbols to have these meanings. For all I know, there may *have* been ancient temple-using members of the covenant who took this face-voice symbolism to be a commentary on two types of spiritual death. That's an intriguing possibility, but beyond the scope of both this paper and my professional training. Thus, while this interpretation cannot claim to be rigorously historical, it is at least homiletical. Even if ancient people didn't interpret temple symbolism this way, I believe it's safe to say that there are many possible interpretations of the temple ceremonies that are good to the extent that they reinforce true doctrine and motivate us to continue on the Lord's path. I believe the preceding interpretation is one of them.

I also think it's safe to say that spiritual death is an important doctrine in the scriptures, especially in the Book of Mormon, and so it shouldn't surprise us to find it dealt with in the temple. Further, it is clear that the face-voice motif and the distance-presence motif in the scriptures are vividly enacted in the temple ceremony. Therefore, it is not too much of a stretch to say that face-voice symbolism as applied to the two types of separation is not only a valid interpretation of the temple ceremony, but a rather consistent and compelling one.

Figure 10: Lessons Illustrated in the Tabernacle Typology

	Tabernacle Detail	Symbolic Teaching
Spiritual Death	The room where God dwells (the holy of holies) is separated from the rest of the tabernacle.	We experience spiritual death, or separation from God.
	There are two rooms apart from God's dwelling place.	There are two types of spiritual death.
Leaving God's Presence	In the holy of holies, we can both see God's face and hear his voice.	In heaven, we can enjoy the presence of both Heavenly Father and the Holy Ghost.
	In the holy place and the courtyard, we cannot see God's face.	On this mortal, fallen earth, we are separated from God's temporal presence, meaning we cannot commune with Heavenly Father in person.
	In the holy place, we <i>can</i> hear God's voice.	When we are free from sin—either because we are innocent and unaccountable, or our sins have been covered by the Atonement—we enjoy God's spiritual presence, meaning we can have the Holy Ghost's companionship.
	In the courtyard, we <i>cannot</i> hear God's voice.	As long as we remain in a sinful condition, we are separate from God's spiritual presence, meaning we cannot have the Holy Ghost's companionship.
	When excluded from the holy of holies, just because we can't see God's face doesn't mean we can't hear his voice; we just have to stand in the holy place rather than the courtyard.	When leaving heaven to experience earth life, just because we can't be with Heavenly Father for the moment doesn't mean we can't have another member of the Godhead with us; we just have to "stand in holy places" rather than dabble in sin.
Returning to God's Presence	Walking from the courtyard into the holy place to hear God's voice requires passing the altar of sacrifice.	Leaving sin and receiving the Holy Ghost requires repenting of our sins and entering the baptismal covenant.
	Walking from the holy place into the holy of holies to see God's face requires passing through the veil.	Leaving earth to live with Heavenly Father requires dying and resurrecting.
	The closer we walk to the holy of holies, the better we hear God's voice.	The more Godly choices we make, the more strongly and clearly we feel the Holy Ghost's influence.
	In order to pass from one room to the next (thus hearing God's voice better), in each case we must walk past an altar.	In order to draw closer to God (thus having the Holy Ghost's influence more strongly), we must make sacrifices, such as giving up our sins.

4. Common Misunderstandings

Is spiritual death really that important of a doctrine that it would be taught so frequently in the tabernacle and temple ceremonies? Why would this doctrine be so vital as to merit frequent explanations and representations in both sacred texts and sacred rituals?

4.1 Incomplete Descriptions

One reason may be that incomplete descriptions of spiritual death abound. When a description is not both accurate and thorough, it can potentially lead to several common misunderstandings. There are two types of incomplete descriptions of spiritual death: accurate but simplified, and inaccurate or unclear.

The simplified descriptions usually define spiritual death only as the spiritual separation, not recognizing the temporal separation. They are technically accurate, and a person may get by with such a simplified understanding of spiritual death, but by expanding his understanding of it to include the temporal separation, many scripture passages will become much clearer and more consistent. The inaccurate descriptions usually conflate the two separations, often mixing different elements from each type. Sometimes they are unclear, meaning the author may have understood spiritual death and the difference between the two types of separation, but his description is not worded clearly enough to be helpful for someone new to the doctrine.

Either type of incomplete description can ultimately be very confusing, especially when trying to harmonize it with Book of Mormon passages concerning spiritual death. Following are examples of descriptions of spiritual death, with evaluations of accuracy and thoroughness. If a

description groups the right elements together (e.g., separation from the Father is grouped with the Judgment), it is considered accurate; if not, it is considered inaccurate or unclear. If a description recognizes the distinction between temporal and spiritual separation, it is considered thorough; if it discusses only one type of separation, it is considered simplified.

4.1.1 Accurate and Thorough

The most thorough explanations of the distinctions between the two types of spiritual death that I am aware of come from Gerald N. Lund, an emeritus Seventy. Interested readers are directed to his articles on the subject.⁷² Another example can be found in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* article on spiritual death. The first half of the description says,

The first type of spiritual death is the actual separation from God that automatically comes upon all born into mortality as a consequence of the Fall of Adam. All mortals will be redeemed from this death, as well as from physical death, through Christ's Atonement and resurrection, to be brought back into God's presence to stand before him.⁷³

Figure 11: Description 1a—Accurate and Thorough

	Temporal Separation		Spiritual Separation	
Separation from	Heavenly Father	✓		Holy Ghost
Cause	Adam's fall	✓		Our sins
Necessity	Necessary			Unnecessary
Resolution	Judgment	✓		Baptism
Conditions	[none]	✓		Repentance

This portion of Romney's description mentions several key elements of the temporal separation, including who we are separated from ("actual separation," as opposed to spiritual or figurative), the cause ("the Fall of Adam"), the conditions for overcoming it ("all mortals," meaning it is unconditional), and when it is overcome ("stand before him," scriptural phraseology that describes the Judgment).

⁷² "[Salvation: By Grace or by Works?](#)" *Ensign*, Apr. 1981, p. 17; "[The Fall of Man and His Redemption](#)," *Ensign*, Jan. 1990, p. 22; "The Fall of Man and His Redemption," chapter in *The Book of Mormon: Second Nephi, the Doctrinal Structure* (Provo, Utah, 1989).

⁷³ Richard M. Romney, "[Spiritual Death](#)" in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, p. 1407; scriptural citations removed.

Romney's description continues:

The second spiritual death ... is the result of a lifetime of choices. ... All people on earth over the age of accountability are to a certain extent spiritually dead, depending on their present state of repentance and their degree of sensitivity ... to the Holy Ghost. ... The only permanent spiritual death is that which individuals bring upon themselves by refusing to repent of their sins, having denied the Holy Spirit after having received it.⁷⁴

This second portion exhibits elements of the spiritual separation, including the conditions for overcoming it ("depending on repentance"), who we are separated from ("sensitivity to the Holy Ghost"), the cause ("their sins"), and how it is resolved ("received the Holy Ghost," connecting it to the baptismal covenant).

Figure 12: Description 1b—Accurate and Thorough

	Temporal Separation		Spiritual Separation	
Separation from	Heavenly Father		✓	Holy Ghost
Cause	Adam's fall		✓	Our sins
Necessity	Necessary			Unnecessary
Resolution	Judgment		✓	Baptism
Conditions	[none]		✓	Repentance

Because Romney's description groups the right elements together (i.e., what is caused by Adam is resolved unconditionally, and what is caused by an individual is resolved on conditions), his description can be considered accurate. Because it recognizes the two types of spiritual death, it can be considered thorough.⁷⁵

Another third example is given by Mack Sterling

"Spiritual death ... comes as a result both of Adam's fall and of our own unrepented, accountable sins. Adam's fall causes us to be removed from the physical presence of God (see Helaman 14:15–17). Our own sins alienate us spiritually from God (see Alma 12:9–11)" (Mack C. Sterling, "The Way of Life

⁷⁴ Richard M. Romney, "[Spiritual Death](#)" in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, p. 1407; scriptural citations removed.

⁷⁵ By thorough, I don't mean absolutely plenary. Obviously there are further details than can be elaborated upon in a short encyclopedia entry.

and the Way of Death in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6:2 (Provo, Utah: Maxwell Institute, 1997), p. 152–204).

For a discussion that bears on this question, see Mack C. Sterling, “The Way of Life and the Way of Death in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6:2 (Provo, Utah: Maxwell Institute, 1997), p. 152–204. He and Bergin use the third view in their writings. For example, he says, “The first spiritual death—the spiritual death of probation—consists of two components: physical separation from the presence of God caused by the fall of Adam and spiritual alienation from God caused by our individual sins. ... Our *spiritual alienation* is overcome by becoming spiritually begotten of God and thereafter growing up in the spirit. ... *Physical separation* from the presence of God, although transiently overcome at the judgment for all men, is overcome in a more meaningful and lasting way by those who persist in the way of life” (emphasis in the original; scripture reference removed).

As I understand the whole passage, Bergin uses “first spiritual death” to refer to both the temporal and spiritual separations, and “second spiritual death” to refer to being cast out of God’s presence again after the Judgment. There is nothing inherently wrong with grouping spiritual death this way, and other authors have done so. For example, Mack Sterling writes, “We suffer the first spiritual death during probation as a combined result of Adam’s fall and our own sins. ... Those who refuse to repent ... suffer the second spiritual death or hell, ... [which] consists of being completely withdrawn (cast out) from the presence of God into outer darkness” (Mack C. Sterling, “Doctrines of the Book of Mormon: The 1991 Sperry Symposium,” *FARMS Review* 5:1, p. 290–304, review of Bruce A. Van Orden and Brent L. Top, *Doctrines of the Book of Mormon: The 1991 Sperry Symposium*, (Provo, Utah: Maxwell Institute, 1993). However, grouping the temporal and spiritual

separations into one entity or event can lead to conflating the two, as can be seen by the analysis of Bergin's wording.

4.1.2 *Accurate but Simplified*

Many descriptions are accurate, but they simplify spiritual death by only referring to the spiritual separation. This includes many descriptions given by general authorities. For example, Ezra Taft Benson said, "Thus He became our Redeemer—redeeming all of us from physical death, and redeeming those of us from spiritual death who will obey the laws and ordinances of the gospel."⁷⁶ Here, President Benson makes no mention of the fact that the Savior redeems all of us not only from physical death, but also from one form of spiritual death (the temporal separation). Rather, he focuses on the spiritual separation and the fact that overcoming it is conditional. This is a true and accurate description, but it has the potential to be confusing when compared to passages such as Hel. 14:15–19, which says that Christ "redeemeth all mankind from the first death—that spiritual death, ... yea, even all mankind, and bringeth them back into the presence of the Lord." In contrast with President Benson, Samuel the Lamanite focuses on the *temporal* separation and the fact that overcoming it is entirely unconditional.

These two prophets are not conflicting with each other. Rather than seeing contradiction, we should see differing audiences and purposes. President Benson's description is not less accurate than Samuel's; it is accurate but simplified. This is probably because they had different priorities in what they wanted to convey to their respective listeners. Samuel may be emphasizing the justness of God, in that he does not hold us accountable for Adam's choice; thus he distinguishes between the two types of spiritual death. In contrast, President Benson cuts to the chase and discusses only the spiritual separation because that is the spiritual death that we still have to *do* something about.

President Marion G. Romney gives us another example of a simplified definition:

We suffer this spiritual death as a result of our own transgressions. ...

Redemption from the grave is granted to every soul unconditionally. This is

⁷⁶ Ezra Taft Benson, "[Keeping Christ in Christmas](#)," Ensign, Dec. 1993, p. 2.

not so, however, with respect to forgiveness and redemption from the effects of our own transgressions. The only persons who are thus forgiven and redeemed are those who accept and abide the terms prescribed by the Redeemer. ... This is repentance.⁷⁷

President Romney’s description of spiritual death is clearly talking about the spiritual separation. He mentions the cause (“result of our own transgressions”) and the conditions to overcome it (“the terms prescribed ... repentance”). Because President Romney’s description groups the right elements together (i.e., what we bring upon ourselves by our choices can only be resolved if we choose to repent), his description can be considered accurate. Because it examines only one type of spiritual death, omitting any discussion of the other type, it can be considered simplified.

Simplified explanations are good for introductory purpose—to explain the basics of the gospel to large groups or to people who are learning it for the first time. Such simplified explanations of spiritual death as these two by Presidents Benson and Romney exclude the temporal separation probably because of priority and expediency. That is, since the temporal separation has already been overcome unconditionally by the Savior (when all mankind returns to the Father’s presence for the Judgment), it might seem redundant to explain a problem that has already been fully resolved. In contrast, many doctrinal expositions serve the purpose of persuading the listener to make wise choices while their mortal probation still lasts. Thus, the spiritual separation is a more important doctrine to explain, since each mortal still needs to overcome it through his or her choices. When a speaker’s time and article space are limited, he will often describe

Figure 13: Description 2—Accurate but Simplified

	Temporal Separation		Spiritual Separation	
Separation from	Heavenly Father			Holy Ghost
Cause	Adam’s fall		✓	Our sins
Necessity	Necessary			Unnecessary
Resolution	Judgment			Baptism
Conditions	[none]		✓	Repentance

⁷⁷ Marion G. Romney, “[The Resurrection of Jesus](#),” *Ensign*, May 1982, p. 6.

spiritual death as only the spiritual separation, omitting the more technically thorough description of it as both the spiritual and temporal separations.

4.1.3 Inaccurate or Unclear

Sometimes in our efforts to make the gospel understandable, we as Latter-day Saints are unsuccessful at accurately simplifying our descriptions of spiritual death. Instead of omitting the temporal separation and just focusing on the spiritual separation, we end up conflating the two. This results in descriptions that are not only inaccurate, but misleading. Such descriptions, if followed through to their logical conclusions, can be very confusing (see [section 4.2.1](#)).

I will share a few examples of inaccurate descriptions. My purpose is not to criticize—anyone could be thrown off by this potentially perplexing doctrine until it has been explained clearly. My purpose is to help readers discern accurate descriptions from confusing ones, and to hopefully give clearer descriptions in the future. The first example is a suggested answer to the question, “How does the Atonement redeem us?”

We can all return to Heavenly Father’s presence, overcoming spiritual death. As all were cut off from the presence of God by Adam’s fall, all who repent of their sins will be restored to the presence of God through Christ’s atonement.⁷⁸

This description does not recognize a distinction between the two types of spiritual death. It mentions that spiritual death is a separation from Heavenly Father himself, and that it is caused “by Adam’s fall,” leading one to think it is talking about the temporal separation. But it then asserts that we only overcome this separation on the condition that we

Figure 14: Description 3—Inaccurate or Unclear

	Temporal Separation		Spiritual Separation	
Separation from	Heavenly Father	✓		Holy Ghost
Cause	Adam’s fall	✓		Our sins
Necessity	Necessary			Unnecessary
Resolution	Judgment			Baptism
Conditions	[none]		✓	Repentance

⁷⁸ “Lesson 7: [The Atonement Brings Victory over Death and Hell](#),” *Aaronic Priesthood Manual 3* (SLC: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1995), p. 23.

repent (“all who repent”), which is an element of the spiritual separation. This definition appears to conflate elements of both types of spiritual death, and is thus inaccurate, or at least unclear. The author may have understood the two types of spiritual death and intended to convey the distinct characteristics of each, but the wording does not lead to a clear understanding of spiritual death.

A second example appears to mix elements in a different way:

The scriptures speak of two spiritual deaths. ... The first spiritual death does not begin for an individual on the earth until the age of accountability. ... Insofar as they do not harmonize behavior with an understanding of truth ... , they create a gulf between themselves and God—that is, spiritual death. ... Christ’s Atonement ... overcomes the first spiritual death by making it possible for all men and women to come into God’s presence to be judged.⁷⁹

Unlike the previous description, this one recognizes that there are two kinds of spiritual death. However, when describing what it calls “the first spiritual death,” it again conflates elements of the two different types of separation. It mentions that spiritual death is caused by sin (“do not

harmonize behavior”), which is an element of the spiritual separation. But it then says that overcoming it is unconditional (“all men and women”) because it happens at the Judgment (“to be judged”), which are characteristics of the temporal separation. Thus, this description seems

Figure 15: Description 4—Inaccurate or Unclear

	Temporal Separation		Spiritual Separation	
Separation from	Heavenly Father			Holy Ghost
Cause	Adam’s fall		✓	Our sins
Necessity	Necessary			Unnecessary
Resolution	Judgment	✓		Baptism
Conditions	[none]	✓		Repentance

⁷⁹ Sue Bergin, “[Life and Death, Spiritual](#),” in Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: MacMillan, 1992), p. 833.

to merge the two types in a way that may cloud the doctrine more than clarify it.⁸⁰ This description could also be considered inaccurate or unclear.

Several more examples like these two, which combine the two types of separation into one concept, can be found just by googling “spiritual death” with “Mormon” or “LDS.” The results of misunderstandings like these are discussed in [section 4.2.1](#). Again, this analysis is not intended to be disparaging of the authors whose descriptions were examined. The purpose is to point out where confusions often arise, in the hopes that clearer descriptions can be used in the future.

4.2 Mistaken Conclusions

The problem with combining the temporal and spiritual separations into one concept is that doing so often conflicts with several important doctrines. Because the distinction between the two types of spiritual death is frequently not acknowledged, individuals often come to mistaken conclusions regarding spiritual death or related doctrines. This is frequently because in one sentence people will use “spiritual death” to refer to the temporal separation and then in the next breath use it to mean the spiritual separation (or vice versa), as will be shown.

Following are several examples of true statements that nevertheless lead to misunderstandings. Many such statements, while technically accurate, must nevertheless be qualified by explaining that they refer to one type of separation and not the other. Otherwise the listener may conflate the two. I will begin with an example related to the *conditions* of

⁸⁰ As I understand the whole passage, Bergin uses “first spiritual death” to refer to both the temporal and spiritual separations, and “second spiritual death” to refer to being cast out of God’s presence again after the Judgment. There is nothing inherently wrong with grouping spiritual death this way, and other authors have done so. For example, Mack Sterling writes, “We suffer the first spiritual death during probation as a combined result of Adam’s fall and our own sins. ... Those who refuse to repent ... suffer the second spiritual death or hell, ... [which] consists of being completely withdrawn (cast out) from the presence of God into outer darkness” (Mack C. Sterling, “[Doctrines of the Book of Mormon: The 1991 Sperry Symposium](#),” *FARMS Review* 5:1, p. 290–304, review of Bruce A. Van Orden and Brent L. Top, *Doctrines of the Book of Mormon: The 1991 Sperry Symposium*, (Provo, Utah: Maxwell Institute, 1993). However, grouping the temporal and spiritual separations into one entity or event can lead to conflating the two, as can be seen by the analysis of Bergin’s wording.

overcoming spiritual death. This first example is the common result of using “spiritual death” in the undifferentiated sense, as with the descriptions just examined.

4.2.1 Conditions: “Overcoming spiritual death is conditional on your choices”

This statement makes sense in light of several statements from presidents of the Church. For example, the manual *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph F. Smith* has two paired chapters that are named on the basis of conditionality. Chapter 10 is titled “Jesus Christ Redeems All Mankind from Temporal Death” and chapter 11 is titled “Jesus Christ Redeems the Repentant from Spiritual Death.”⁸¹ In the latter chapter, Joseph F. Smith lists the conditions for overcoming spiritual death:

The Gospel was, therefore, preached to him [Adam], and a way of escape from that spiritual death given unto him. That way of escape was through faith in God, repentance of sin, baptism for the remission of sins, the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands. Thereby he received a knowledge of the truth and a testimony of Jesus Christ, and was redeemed from the spiritual death that came upon him.⁸²

However, as with the examples in [section 4.1.2](#), this can be considered a simplified description that is bracketing the temporal separation.

To say that overcoming spiritual death is conditional on one’s choices is only true when discussing the spiritual separation. Elder Lund points out that the temporal separation is overcome for everyone:

⁸¹ *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph F. Smith* (SLC: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1998).

⁸² *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph F. Smith* (SLC: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1998), p. 95. Many statements by President Smith in this chapter can be reconciled with the fact that Adam did not sin in eating the fruit by acknowledging that Adam’s spiritual separation occurred at the same time as, or shortly following, his temporal separation. That is, while partaking the fruit itself was not a sin, Adam and Eve’s first sin may have been closely tied to it, such as partaking too soon or without authorization by a true messenger, partaking separately instead of doing so together as “one flesh,” or hiding “themselves from the presence of the Lord” when he next visited them.

Our second Article of Faith states, “We believe that men are punished for their own sins and not for Adam’s transgression.” There are no conditions placed on our coming back into the presence of God (overcoming spiritual death) at the Judgment. Our initial mortal separation from him was originally caused by the fall of Adam, not any act of our own; we therefore suffer no spiritual punishment for Adam’s transgression.⁸³

However, statements such as the [first example](#) in section 4.1.3 conflate the elements of cause and conditionality, saying, “As all were cut off from the presence of God by Adam’s fall [true of the temporal separation], all who repent of their sins will be restored to the presence of God through Christ’s atonement [true of the spiritual separation].” Thus, the term “presence of God” is used in two different senses in the same sentence. Elder Lund explains the doctrinal problems of such a paradigm that does not differentiate spiritual death:

To make coming back into the presence of God (overcoming spiritual death) conditional, when our separation from him was originally caused by the fall of Adam, would mean we do suffer punishment for Adam’s transgression, and such is not the case. ... Thus both effects of the fall of Adam [physical death and temporal separation] are automatically redeemed by the Savior.⁸⁴

This misunderstanding is important to clear up, lest we think God is unjustly requiring something of us before he will rescue us from the effects of someone else’s choices.

Statements such as the [second example](#) in section 4.1.3 result in a different, less common problem. The description says, “The first spiritual death does not begin for an individual on the earth until the age of accountability [when we sin]. ... Christ’s Atonement ... overcomes the first spiritual death by making it possible for all men and women to come into God’s presence to be judged.” To say that spiritual death is caused by individual sin, but everyone overcomes spiritual death and returns to God’s presence unconditionally, could unintentionally sound like

⁸³ Gerald N. Lund, “[The Fall of Man and His Redemption](#),” *Ensign*, Jan. 1990, p. 22.

⁸⁴ Gerald N. Lund, “The Fall of Man and His Redemption,” *The Book of Mormon: Second Nephi, the Doctrinal Structure*, p. 95–96.

a kind of universalism that is inconsistent with the restored gospel. I'm sure the author didn't intend to convey that idea, but misunderstandings about overcoming spiritual death have happened in the past. To wit, this undifferentiated concept of spiritual death may be at the root of the problematic doctrine of universalism taught by some groups today.

In summary, if we were to use the tabernacle imagery as a mnemonic device regarding conditionality, we could say that everyone will see God's face at the Judgment, but if we have not come to know and follow his voice before that time, we will not want to continue seeing his face. In fact, if we have not previously resolved the spiritual separation by heeding the Lord's voice, we will desperately ask him, "Hide thy face from my sins" (Ps. 51:9). When he does not, we will say "to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne" (Rev. 6:16). As Moroni puts it, if we have not clothed ourselves in the covenants of the Atonement, we "shall be brought to see [our] nakedness before God" (Morm. 9:5). Being so unprepared and unlike the Lord, we "would be more miserable to dwell with a holy and just God, under a consciousness of [our] filthiness before him, than [we] would to dwell with the damned souls in hell" (Morm. 9:4). In this condition, realizing that there is nothing that will prevent us from seeing his face (or, dwelling in his direct presence), we will feel so "racked with a consciousness of guilt" that we will "shrink from the presence of the Lord" of our own volition (Morm. 9:3; Mosiah 2:38).

4.2.2 Necessity: "Spiritual death is necessary to become like God"

This statement makes sense in light of the doctrine that the fall of Adam was necessary to become like God. For example, President Joseph Fielding Smith said, "The fall of man came as a blessing in disguise, and was the means of furthering the purposes of the Lord in the progress of man, rather than a means of hindering them."⁸⁵ L. Tom Perry likewise said, "The Fall was as much a part of the foreordained plan of salvation as the Atonement. It was a

⁸⁵ Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 1:113–14; cited in *Doctrines of the Gospel Student Manual*, "[Chapter 8—The Fall](#)" (SLC: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1986), p. 21.

necessary step forward in the progress of man.”⁸⁶ One Protestant writer, Chris Welborn, accurately identifies this as a distinctive doctrine unique to Latter-day Saints:

2 Nephi 2 in the Book of Mormon, presents a unique philosophy pertaining to the role of the Adamic fall, sin in the cosmos, and the role of sin in relation to God. It teaches that the Adamic fall was a good event necessary for the progress of humanity.⁸⁷

However, this doctrine of the necessary Fall can be misunderstood (or deliberately misconstrued). Some lump the Fall of our first parents together with our own individual falls through sin, concluding that because Latter-day prophets teach that Adam had to fall to progress, they also mean that individuals have to sin to progress. Such is not the case, but Welborn spends an entire article either missing or ignoring this distinction:

According to Mormon scriptures, the *personal* performance of sin is necessary for human moral advancement. [Quotes Moses 5:11 and 6:11.] ... It is not enough that each person know sin simply in the sense of knowing *about* sin, or specific sins. Rather, each person from the first parents onward must personally *experience* sin. ...

The Mormon concept that the experience of sin is necessary for human progress can logically lead to the idea that in order to experience any particular good, one needs to perform the corresponding opposite sin. In order to experience more good, therefore, one would need to experience more sin.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ L. Tom Perry, “[Give Heed unto the Word of the Lord](#),” *Ensign*, Jun. 2000, p. 22.

⁸⁷ Chris Welborn, “[2 Nephi 2 in the Book of Mormon: Was the Fall Necessary?](#)” *Christian Research Journal* 27:3 (2004), online at equip.org, accessed 23 Apr. 2010.

⁸⁸ Welborn, “[Was the Fall Necessary?](#)”; emphasis in the original. I have silently corrected what appears to be a punctuation error: the original says, “or specific sins rather.”

Such umbrage would be perfectly understandable if Latter-day Saints truly believed that individuals must commit sin in order to progress, learn, grow, and become like God.⁸⁹ However, Latter-day Saints do not believe that, and there is nothing in our standard works that compels such an interpretation. One reason we do not believe this is because of an implication that Welborn himself correctly points out:

If, however, *personal* sin is necessary for *personal* advancement, then this is problematic. Someone may say Jesus Himself did not need to sin; rather, He experienced sin vicariously as described above. He was tempted by sin, evil, and difficulty, but He Himself did not sin. The obvious response to this is that if Jesus ... did not need to sin personally in order to progress to His complete potential as Mormon theology indicates, then the need to sin *personally* is not universal. ... If this is true, then is it really necessary for anyone to personally experience sin?⁹⁰

In other words, to say that committing sin is necessary in order to learn and grow is to say that we sinners are privy to certain wisdom that Jesus Christ does not and cannot have, because he never sins. It changes his doctrine to being “I am the way ... unless you find a better one.”

In contrast, many prophets have specifically taught against the idea that we grow more by sinning and repenting than we otherwise could have by obeying. For example, Elder Dallin H. Oaks said, “Some Latter-day Saints ... maintain that a person is better off after he has sinned and repented. ... The idea ... that one is better off after sinning and repenting are

⁸⁹ I have my doubts about whether Welborn is sincerely mistaken about Latter-day Saint teachings and beliefs. In his article, he interprets various LDS scripture passages to say sinning is necessary while fully conscious (even acknowledging) that most, if not all, Latter-day Saints would interpret them differently. There are plenty of other valid interpretations for the verses he uses, but he seems to consciously ignore them, insisting that his eisegesis is the obvious meaning. And yet he goes on to cite several modern apostles who disagree with his interpretation. To put the worst light possible on a passage and portray it as the widely-held and only possible meaning, while simultaneously listing several Church leaders and lay members who disagree with it, is difficult to regard as anything but disingenuous.

⁹⁰ Welborn, “[Was the Fall Necessary?](#)”; emphasis in the original.

devilish lies of the adversary.”⁹¹ This incorrect idea has three common variations. Proponents maintain that we are better off for having sinned because it makes us stronger, wiser, or more loving than we otherwise could have been without committing the sin. Each variation, however, has been addressed by modern Church leaders.

President Spencer W. Kimball responds to the first variation:

Another error into which some transgressors fall, because of the availability of God’s forgiveness, is the illusion that they are somehow stronger for having committed sin and then lived through the period of repentance. This simply is not true. ... His sin and repentance have certainly not made him stronger than the consistently righteous person.⁹²

It is true that repenting makes us spiritually stronger than we were in our *sinful* state, but President Kimball emphasizes that it does not make us stronger than we would have been had we remained obedient.⁹³

Just as sinning and repenting do not make us stronger than obedience would have, neither do they make us wiser:

If we are selective in the things we choose to do in life, we only have time for high-priority experiences. For example, an enlightened mother chooses parenthood over her career. A youth overcomes any desires to follow the seamy side of life in favor of building on positive, uplifting experiences.

Many people feel that vicarious experiences never lead to meaningful understanding. Only the poor can, they say, really understand poverty. Only

⁹¹ Dallin H. Oaks, “[Sin and Suffering](#),” *Ensign*, Jul. 1992, p. 70.

⁹² Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969), p. 357. President Kimball’s rhetorical “consistently righteous person” ultimately has only one instantiation in reality—the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁹³ This faulty comparison of our past state with our penitent present ignores the more important comparison—that of our past state to our potential present which was never realized. This is in some ways similar to Frédéric Bastiat’s examination of the same mistake in economic matters, in his pamphlet *The Seen and the Unseen*. See Nathan Richardson, “[Bastiat and Repentance: How Not to Get Out of a Recession](#),” *LDSphilosopher.com*, 2 Feb. 2009, accessed 29 Apr. 2010 at <http://www.ldsphilosopher.com/?p=1462>.

the sinner can know the nature or the consequences of sin. They claim there is no substitute for direct experience.

Such an argument has at least two inherent weaknesses. First, it's risky to live in the atmosphere of sin in order to understand it or to help others who are sinning, since individuals may become trapped in the very things they want others to avoid. Taking drugs to know what it's like, for example, may lead to personal slavery rather than the redemption of others. Second, the argument overlooks the fact that the Holy Ghost can provide such understanding and that man can, by empathy, come to understand, as Jesus did, what sin means to others.

Jesus understood sin better than the sinner, without ever having sinned. Prophets have been and are acute "vicarious" observers of the consequences of sin and thus can provide adequate leadership in helping others overcome sin.

Spiritually guided empathy leads to a greater understanding of the nature of sin than partaking of sin, because the empathizer seeks only to understand and is not subject to the perceptual distortions present in trying to justify behavior.⁹⁴

C. S. Lewis elaborates on why the sinless Savior's understanding is greater than the sinner's:

A silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means. This is an obvious lie. Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is. You find out the strength of a wind by trying to walk against it, not by lying down. A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later. That is why bad people, in one sense, know very little about badness. They have lived a sheltered life by always giving in. We never find out the strength of the evil

⁹⁴ Phillip C. Smith, "[The Virtue of Vicarious Experience](#)," *Ensign*, Apr. 1974, p. 21.

impulse inside us until we try to fight it: and Christ, because He was the only man who never yielded to temptation, is also the only man who knows to the full what temptation means—the only complete realist.⁹⁵

It is true that the Lord often makes use of our sinful experiences to teach us lessons, but it is unwise to assert that sinning was the only way we could have learned those lessons. Such would make disobeying God's will key to becoming like him. Wisdom does not come from sin; it comes in spite of sin.

Another variation of this misunderstanding is based on a misinterpretation of the parable of the two debtors:

⁴¹There was a certain creditor which had two debtors: the one owed five hundred pence, and the other fifty. ⁴²And when they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both. Tell me therefore, which of them will love him most?

⁴³Simon answered and said, I suppose that he, to whom he forgave most.

And he said unto him, Thou hast rightly judged. (Luke 7:41–43)

Some conclude from this tale that we need to sin in order to appreciate and love the Savior more. However, Elder Marion D. Hanks clarified that such was not the message of the parable, saying, “There is here, of course, no encouragement or condoning of sin.”⁹⁶ This incorrect idea has also been put thusly: “Forgiveness is a good thing, and more sinning means more forgiving. So sinning is helpful, because you can never get too much of a good thing like forgiveness.”⁹⁷ Paul seems to have been trying to clear up this very notion when he says, “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid” (Rom. 6:1–2).

Thus, it should be clear that the process of sinning and repenting does not make us stronger, wiser, more loving, or better off in any way that we would have been through perfect

⁹⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), p. 142.

⁹⁶ Marion D. Hanks, “[He Means Me](#),” *Ensign*, May 1979, p. 74. What the parable *does* mean is a separate matter that would stray from the purpose of this paper. We can, however, eliminate this one incorrect meaning.

⁹⁷ Personal conversation with a friend, 4 Jun. 2006.

obedience. This is not a controversial doctrine. It is the basis of God's justice in applying consequences for sin. This is not to say that any other mortal is ever going to achieve perfect obedience; it is to say that we can be saved and exalted in spite of that fact, not because of it. At best, sinning only needlessly delays developing those Godly traits, and at worst prevents us from ever developing them. There is nothing to be gained by sinning and repenting that could not have been gained by perfect obedience.⁹⁸ Indeed, one purpose of the Savior's life was to show that perfect obedience leads to every good and desirable blessing and characteristic. If such were not true, then the Lord himself would be the most impoverished soul that ever lived.

Part of Welborn's mistake comes from the ambiguity of the verb "experience." Is it necessary that we experience sin during this mortal life?⁹⁹ The answer depends entirely on how the asker is using the word. If by "experience" the asker means *knowing* sin—that we have the option of sinning presented to us, that we be tempted, that we have the potential to sin and the ability to act on it unimpeded, then the answer is yes. Obedience is meaningless if no other possibility exists. If, however, by "experience" the asker means *doing* sin—acting on temptation, playing out sin in our choices, actually committing sin—then the answer is no.

I believe this is why Lehi's parallelism in 2 Nephi 2 takes an unexpected turn. He says that if Adam and Eve had not eaten the fruit, "they would have remained in a state of innocence, having no joy, for they knew no misery; doing no good, for they knew no sin" (2 Ne. 2:23). One might expect him to contrast paired opposites with the same verb, saying,

Having no joy, for they

Had no misery;

Doing no good, for they

Did no sin.

Instead, Father Lehi throws in a subtle, unanticipated twist:

⁹⁸ I believe this can be one the hardest realizations to make during the repentance process.

⁹⁹ Even if Welborn were to poll a Mormon audience with this question and receive many Yes answers, it would not prove his point because he and his audience could quite likely be using the phrase "experience sin" to mean two different things.

Having no joy, for they
Knew no misery;
Doing no good, for they
Knew no sin.

Lehi's message seems to be that there is no vicarious substitute for joy and obedience, which is why we had to leave God's temporal presence to be tested. On the other hand, there *is* a vicarious substitute for misery and sin. "The Spirit knoweth all things" (Alma 7:13), and he can convey whatever useful knowledge we might need regarding sin without us actually needing to commit the sin; alienating the Spirit only prevents him from accomplishing that. Thus, while we need to *have* joy and *do* good, we only need to *know* misery and sin.

This misunderstanding—that Adam's need to fall implies individuals' need to sin—is far less likely to happen when a proper distinction is made between the two types of spiritual death. As shown by the quotes from Elders Christofferson and Perry in [section 1.1.3](#), it is perfectly accurate to say, "Spiritual death is necessary to become like God"—*if* the speaker is talking about the temporal separation. But the spiritual separation caused by sin is not necessary, as shown by the quotes in this section. In other words, the "Fall of Adam" is necessary, but the "fall of me" is not. In the language of the tabernacle imagery, we could say that it is necessary to cease seeing God's face for a time, but it is never necessary to cease hearing his voice.

As a side note, if you look at the charts in section 4.1, you will notice that none of the four descriptions that were analyzed mentions whether spiritual death is necessary or not. Even the most thorough descriptions lacked an explanation of whether each spiritual death is necessary. I believe that the doctrine of spiritual death is significantly clearer when writers address the question of necessity in their descriptions of it. Welborn need not have wrangled with the apparent problem if this distinction had been clearer for him.

4.2.3 Cause and Scope: “Infants experience spiritual death”

This statement is true only if one is talking about the temporal separation. As descendants of Adam, including the Savior himself, we are all born into this world separated from Heavenly Father. This gives us a chance to be tested.

However, if the distinction between spiritual deaths is not recognized, this statement can sound like, “Infants experience the *spiritual* separation,” which would imply they are sinful. Because much of the rest of Christianity does not recognize a difference between the two types of spiritual death, that is exactly the conclusion they often come to. Many biblical passages are misunderstood to teach that children are actually born sinful and thus subject to the spiritual separation. For example, one Protestant author says,

Children, no matter how young, are not “innocent” in the sense of being sinless. The Bible tells us that even if an infant or child has not committed personal sin, all people, including infants and children, are guilty before God because of inherited and imputed sin. Inherited sin is that which is passed on from our parents. ... The very sad fact that infants sometimes die demonstrates that even infants are impacted by Adam’s sin, since physical and spiritual death were the results of Adam’s original sin. Each person, infant or adult, stands guilty before God; each person has offended the holiness of God.¹⁰⁰

If a person really believes that physical death is caused by sin, then the only way to explain why children die is to conclude that they are sinful.

This belief that infants are “guilty before God” and spiritually dead through sin logically implies that they need to be spiritually reborn through baptism.¹⁰¹ This is a reason that many Christian religions teach the need for infant baptism. The Catholic catechism holds that,

¹⁰⁰ No author given, “[Where do I find the age of accountability in the Bible? What happens to babies and young children when they die?](#)” GotQuestions.org, accessed 25 Apr. 2010.

¹⁰¹ It’s likely that only Christians who believe baptism is necessary would conclude this, such as Catholics. Many Protestants don’t believe baptism is required for anyone, so they would not see baptism as necessary for infants.

Born with a fallen human nature and tainted by original sin, children also have need of the new birth in Baptism to be freed from the power of darkness. ... Parents would deny a child the priceless grace of becoming a child of God were they not to confer Baptism shortly after birth.¹⁰²

Thus, when people misunderstand which spiritual death it is that children experience, believing they are spiritually separated from God, it is understandable that they conclude it is caused by sin and needs to be resolved through baptism.

As Mormon makes clear in Moroni 8, these are incorrect conclusions. He strongly denounces infant baptism and the idea that it would even be necessary. This misunderstanding can be greatly alleviated simply by distinguishing between the two spiritual deaths.¹⁰³ Any passages referring to Adam passing on spiritual death to his descendants can be understood as referring to the temporal separation. To borrow tabernacle imagery, little children are separated from God's face, but not from his voice; they are in the holy place until they become accountable. This knowledge eliminates the conclusion that children are sinful or that they need baptism.

Interestingly, many non-LDS Christians intuit the truth that babies are innocent and undeserving of damnation.¹⁰⁴ Many believe the scriptures "allow us to hope that there is a way

They do, however, still wrestle with the problem of how babies can be saved when they are so young that they "never reach the ability to make this individual choice" to personally accept the Savior ("[Where do I find the age of accountability in the Bible? What happens to babies and young children when they die?](#)" GotQuestions.org).

¹⁰² [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#) 1250, Vatican.va, accessed 25 Apr. 2010.

¹⁰³ Perhaps the reason Book of Mormon prophets emphasized that there are two spiritual deaths was to respond to this very question of little children inheriting a spiritual death, for it appears that the Nephites, in at least one point in their history, misunderstood the doctrine of the Fall as requiring that children need baptism (Moro. 8:5–6).

¹⁰⁴ Just because a Christian believes babies will be saved, however, does not mean he believes they are sinless. Many believe that infants deserve hell just as much as any other sinner, but that "infants go to heaven because of the mercy of God given to us in Christ Jesus. ... Babies do not inherit eternal life because of their own merits and neither do we" (The Seeking Disciple, "[When Babies Die: Four Approaches](#)," ArminianToday.blogspot.com, 15 Sep. 2008, accessed 25 Apr. 2010). In contrast, I interpret modern revelation to say that adults are saved in spite of deserving hell, whereas infants are saved because they don't deserve hell.

of salvation for children who have died without Baptism.”¹⁰⁵ In order to reconcile this hope with many New Testament passages, they propose a distinction similar in some ways to the one the Book of Mormon makes between the two types of spiritual death:

To reconcile the truths that all humans are sinful but that children do possess a kind of “relative innocence”, some theologians have suggested that the distinct variations in sin could carry different kinds of “death penalties.”

For instance, could it be proposed that the penalty for inherited sin (sin passed genetically from generation to generation) is spiritual death (separation from God) which state, if left unchanged and confirmed in personal sin (sins personally committed as an act of free will) results in eternal death and eternal separation from God? Could the penalty of imputed sin (judicially passed from Adam directly to each individual—Rom. 5:12) be physical death?

If so, it could help us to understand how a child (born in sin, yet having not committed sin as an act of the will) could be subject to physical death without being subject to the penalty of eternal spiritual death. Infants, born “guilty” of both imputed sin (ultimately resulting in physical death) and inherited sin, would not be subject to the eternal penalties of sin until confirmed by personal acts of unrighteousness committed with an understanding of right and wrong. It must be confessed that the Scriptures do not explicitly teach the existence of these distinctions.¹⁰⁶

The theologians mentioned propose two terms that (very roughly) correspond to the two types of spiritual death: *imputed sin* for the temporal separation, and *inherited sin* for the spiritual separation. There are still significant differences between the restored doctrine of spiritual death and this formulation, but the doctrinal outcome is the same—babies inherit

¹⁰⁵ [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#) 1261, Vatican.va, accessed 25 Apr. 2010.

¹⁰⁶ No author given, [“The Destiny of an Infant Who Dies \(Prematurely\)!”](#) TheWordOut.net, accessed 25 Apr. 2010.

spiritual death from Adam, but they do not necessarily go to hell if they die before accepting the Savior's Atonement.

These theologians apparently consider the mental work of interpreting Bible passages regarding the effects of Adam's fall to be worth the effort if it means finding the possibility that infants are not damned. Fortunately, such a possibility is boldly proclaimed as a reality in the restored gospel. While this good author forthrightly confesses that the Bible verses he examines "do not explicitly teach the existence of these distinctions," the Book of Mormon *does* explicitly teach such a distinction. God be praised for the gift of modern revelation.

4.2.4 Terminology: "Spiritual death is the second death"

One final matter could use some clarification. "The second death" is a term used at least twelve times in the scriptures.¹⁰⁷ From the context, it clearly relates to spiritual death, but there are at least three views of how it does so. All three views contrast the term with its implicit twin, "the first death."

The first view identifies the second death with spiritual death, and assumes that the scriptures are contrasting it with physical death, which would then be "the first death." The second view identifies the second death with the spiritual separation, in contrast with the temporal separation, which would be the first death. The third view identifies the second death with being separated from God again after the Judgment (both temporally and spiritually), in contrast with being separated from him (both temporally and spiritually) during this mortal probation. Thus, in the first view, the distinction is between physical and spiritual events; in the second view, the distinction is between types of spiritual events; and in the third view, the distinction is sequential, referring to the same type of event happening on two different occasions. The first two views are categorical, while the third is chronological.

¹⁰⁷ Rev. 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8; Jacob 3:11; Alma 12:16, 32; 13:30; Hel. 14:18–19; D&C 63:17; 76:37. I say at least because this list was compiled by searching for the terms "second" and "death" in the same verse. Other references to it might use words like "again," "last," or "die."

Figure 16: Definitions of the Second Death

View	“First death”	“Second death”
1	Physical death	Spiritual death
2	Temporal separation	Spiritual separation
3	Temporal and spiritual separation in mortality	Temporal and spiritual separation after the Judgment

I believe the second and third views both have merit. In studying the various Book of Mormon passages concerning spiritual death, it seems that both views lend insight to certain passages. However, I currently have not determined which of the two is the most consistent with Book of Mormon prophets’ usage. This may be due in part to the possibility that different prophets use the term “second death” differently.¹⁰⁸

Either way, though, we can rule out the first view because it identifies the first death with physical death. “The first death” is a term used at least four times in the scriptures.¹⁰⁹ The term cannot mean “physical death,” however, because some of these passages explicitly identify it as a spiritual death. For example, Samuel the Lamanite says that Christ “redeemeth all mankind from the first death—that spiritual death” (Hel. 14:16). The Lord tells the elders of the Church that Adam “became spiritually dead, which is the first death, even that same death

¹⁰⁸ For a discussion that bears on this question, see Mack C. Sterling, “[The Way of Life and the Way of Death in the Book of Mormon](#),” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6:2 (Provo, Utah: Maxwell Institute, 1997), p. 152–204. He and Bergin use the third view in their writings. For example, he says, “The first spiritual death—the spiritual death of probation—consists of two components: physical separation from the presence of God caused by the fall of Adam and spiritual alienation from God caused by our individual sins. ... Our *spiritual alienation* is overcome by becoming spiritually begotten of God and thereafter growing up in the spirit. ... *Physical separation* from the presence of God, although transiently overcome at the judgment for all men, is overcome in a more meaningful and lasting way by those who persist in the way of life” (emphasis in the original; scripture reference removed).

¹⁰⁹ 2 Ne. 9:15; Alma 11:45; Hel. 14:16; D&C 29:41. This list comes from a search for “first” and “death” in the same verse, but other references to it may use related words like “die.”

which is the last death, which is spiritual” (D&C 29:41). Thus the “first death”—as frequently used in the scriptures—must be some kind of spiritual death.

If the “first death” is a spiritual death, then the “second death” cannot simply be synonymous with spiritual death.¹¹⁰ It may refer either to one *type* of spiritual death, or to one *time* that spiritual death happens (or to another yet-unconsidered concept). So rather than say, “The second death is spiritual death,” it would be more accurate to say, “The second death is *a* spiritual death.” Otherwise people might assume that (1) the second death and spiritual death are identical, and (2) the phrase “first death” must refer to physical death. Neither assumption is correct.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ The first view sometimes appears in writings by Church members and leaders, wherein the author does use “second death” as a synonym for spiritual death. For example, Elder Packer says, “The Atonement was absolutely essential for men to ... overcome the second death, spiritual death, which is separation from our Father in Heaven (Boyd K. Packer, “[Who Is Jesus Christ?](#),” *Ensign*, Mar. 2008, p. 12–19). There is nothing intrinsically wrong with doing this. People doing a close reading of the scriptures just need to keep in mind that it is not how Book of Mormon prophets use the term. This should not surprise us. Different prophets often use terminology with slightly different meanings, especially when they are separated by time, culture, language translation, and audience needs. For example, Alma clearly uses *soul* to mean *spirit* in several passages (Alma 29:16; 36:15; 40:18, 21, 23), while the Savior uses *soul* to mean “the spirit and the body” in D&C 88:15.

¹¹¹ On a related note, I believe it is a mistake to identify the scriptural phrase “temporal death” with physical death; I do not believe they are synonymous (see also [notes 25 and 27](#)). My current hypothesis is that “temporal death” means physical death *and* the temporal separation (all the unpleasant consequences of Adam and Eve’s fall). This is because when Alma, Amulek, and Moroni talk about overcoming spiritual death, they frequently define it as a two-part event: being restored to our bodies and being restored to the Father’s presence for Judgment (Alma 11:42–44; 42:8; Morm. 9:13). For example, Amulek says, “⁴²All shall be raised from this temporal death. ⁴³The spirit and the body shall be reunited again, ... and we shall be brought to stand before God. ... ⁴⁴This restoration shall come to all, ... every thing shall be restored to its perfect frame ... in the body, and shall be brought and be arraigned before the bar of Christ the Son, and God the Father” (Alma 11:42–44). If overcoming “temporal death” means regaining our bodies and the Father’s temporal presence, it follows that temporal death must mean losing our bodies (physical death) and the Father’s presence (temporal separation). Thus, temporal death is not identical to physical death; what we call physical death is one ingredient of temporal death.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to explain the doctrine that there are two types of spiritual death, how it is portrayed in tabernacle and temple symbolism, and why it matters. My hope is that this discussion helps readers understand the importance of this doctrine as well as the problems that arise from not fully understanding it. I also hope readers gain a greater appreciation for the temple ceremony. The sacred ordinance can take on an even sweeter, more vibrant dimension when we understand what Heavenly Father is trying to teach us about the Atonement through the symbols discussed in this paper. If anyone finds their scripture study enhanced, their temple experiences enriched, or their personal prayers intensified, then the effort has been more than worthwhile.

6. A Hymn

Heard Yet Unseen

by Nathan Richardson

His presence nigh my hope secures.
My unclean lips the Word intone,
Amazed to find that He whose name
I whisper also knows my own.

Can ears of dust and clay endure
Both rushing wind and shatt'ring rod?
Though deafened, yet my soul has heard
The still, small voice of God.

I raise my arms at heaven's call
And call on Him, heard yet unseen,
To find that wounded hands on high
Have made these lowered hands now clean.

Can mountain height touch vaulted skies
For heav'n to walk on earth unshod?
Yet oft this fashioned clay has felt
The shaping hand of God.

When washed the clay falls from my eyes
And gauzy veil is rent in twain,
The glass, once dark and now made clear,
Shows in whose image mine was made.

Can graving hands on breathless stone
His living countenance record?
Yet in my flesh these eyes will see
The smiling face of God.