

The Face and Voice of God

What the Tabernacle Teaches about Overcoming Spiritual Death

Abstract / Executive Summary / Condensed Version

Nathan Richardson

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o. Introduction

In order to understand the atonement, it is vital to understand physical and spiritual death. 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. 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 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

Spiritual death is separation from God (2 Ne. 9:6; Alma 42:9; Hel. 14:16).

There are two types of spiritual death (Alma 42:7; Hel. 14:16).

Temporal separation is literal, physical separation from Heavenly Father's location. It is caused by Adam's fall and affects all of his descendants, even innocent children or Jesus Christ himself. It is necessary for us to grow, experience joy, and be tested. It is overcome unconditionally for everyone when they return to the Father's physical presence for the Judgment.

Spiritual separation is alienation from the influence of the Holy Spirit. It is caused by our individual sins and thus affects only those who are accountable. It is not necessary for our growth. It is overcome on conditions of repentance through the covenant of baptism and the gift of the Holy Ghost.

Figure 1: Types of Death

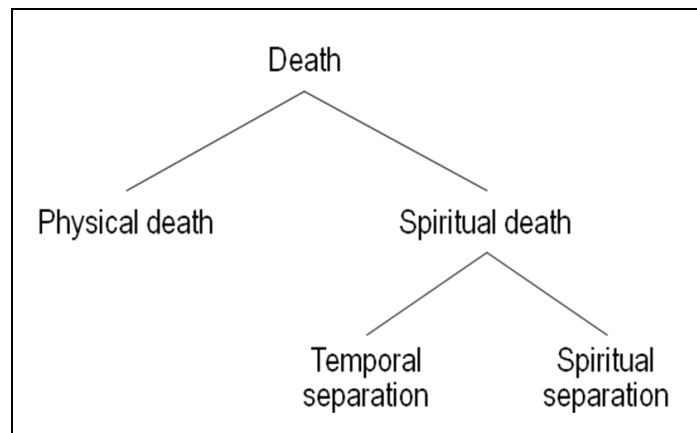


Figure 2: The Two Types of Spiritual Death

	Temporal Separation	Spiritual Separation
Definition	Separation from Heavenly Father	Separation from the Holy Ghost
Cause	Adam’s transgression	Our individual sins
Scope	All Adam’s descendants	Those past the age of accountability
Necessity	Completely necessary	Completely unnecessary; harmful
Resolution	The final Judgment	The covenant of baptism
Conditions for overcoming	[none]	Repentance

2. Symbols of God’s Presence

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* (Moses 5:1, 4; Ether 2:4; 3:6, 10, 13; Deut. 4:12; Enos 1:5, 27; D&C 93:1)

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 reinforce key doctrines regarding spiritual death.

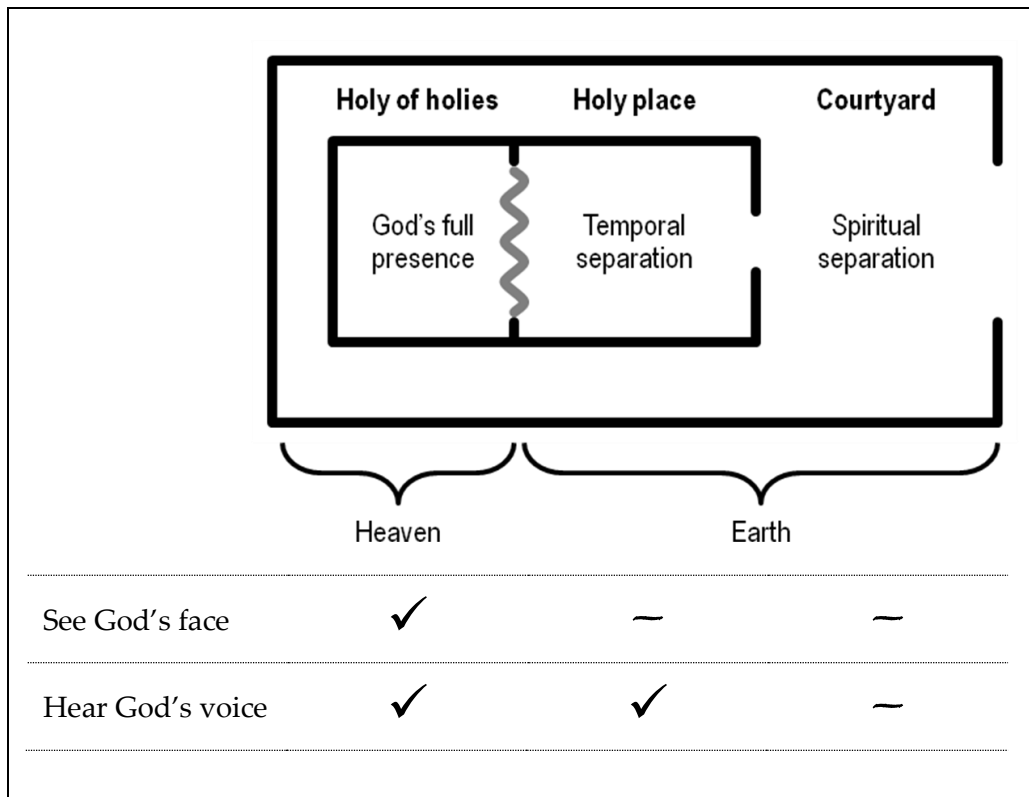
The holy of holies houses the ark, which was symbolically God’s throne. If a person were to stand in the holy of holies, he would be able to see God’s face and converse vocally with him. Thus, that room represents God’s presence. The other two spaces (the holy place and the courtyard) are literally separate from God’s presence in the holy of holies, so they represent spiritual death. Since there are two spaces, they imply that there are two kinds of spiritual death.

If the person standing in the holy of holies 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, but that person would still be able to hear God’ voice,

being only a few feet from the throne. Thus the holy place represents being separated from God temporally (*can't* see his face) but not spiritually (*can* hear his voice).

If the person were to back up even further, he would be out in the courtyard, still unable to see God's face and now no longer able to hear his voice either. Surrounded by the open air, braying livestock, and other distractions, he would not hear or understand the words being said by a person sitting so far away as the holy of holies. Thus the courtyard represents being separated from God both temporally and spiritually.

Figure 5: The Three Tabernacle Spaces



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 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).

Walking back toward the holy of holies represents the process of overcoming spiritual death. Passing from the courtyard into the holy place, we can now hear God's voice again. This represents entering covenants with God such as baptism, at which point we receive the gift of the Holy Ghost and overcome the spiritual separation. Walking past the veil into the holy of holies, we can now see God's face again. This represents dying and being judged, and which point we enter the Father's presence and overcome the temporal separation.

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

A fuller understanding of spiritual death (i.e., that there are two types and that they are different in several ways) can help us avoid several doctrinal pitfalls, which is why it is such an important doctrine restored through modern revelation. However, as Latter-day Saints, we are not always thorough in our descriptions of spiritual death. In a survey of about a dozen explanations of spiritual death found on the internet, I found three kinds of explanations:

- **Accurate and thorough.** Ones that explained the two distinct kinds of separation.
- **Accurate but simplified.** Ones that only explained one of the two kinds of separation.
- **Inaccurate or confusing.** Ones that conflated aspects of either kind to form a confusing or inconsistent explanation.

[Several examples of each kind of explanation are available.]

An undifferentiated view of spiritual death—one which conflates aspects of the two types of separation into one concept—is at the root of several doctrinal errors.

- **Original sin.** If we say that spiritual death is separation from Heavenly Father's physical presence (an aspect of the temporal separation) but that it is caused by sin (an aspect of the spiritual separation), we could conclude that babies are sinful.
- **Infant baptism.** If we say that spiritual death is overcome by baptism (true, regarding the spiritual separation), we would then baptize those infants.
- **Unjust God.** If we say that spiritual death is caused by Adam (true of the temporal separation) but we will only overcome it depending on our personal choices (true of the spiritual separation), then we say God is punishing us for Adam's transgression.
- **Universalism.** On the other hand, if we say that spiritual death is caused by personal sins (true of the spiritual separation) but is overcome unconditionally for everyone (true of the temporal separation), we would conclude that God saves everyone in heaven.
- **Theistic amorality.** If we say that spiritual death is caused by sin (true of the spiritual separation) but that it is necessary for our growth (true of the temporal separation), we would conclude that God actually wants us to sin, or that what we call sins aren't really intrinsically evil.
- **Incomplete theodicy.** If we say that the pains and sorrows of mortality that were brought about by Adam's fall (the temporal separation) are not necessary for our growth and joy (just as the spiritual separation is not necessary), then we are left wondering why the Lord lets good people suffer. This applies especially to innocents, like babies, where we cannot point to personal sin as the root of their mortal pains and sorrows. We cannot fully answer the problem of evil if we do not distinguish between the necessary sorrow of mortality (the

temporal separation) and the unnecessary misery we bring on ourselves through sin (the spiritual separation).

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.