

SECTION 38 (MODERN D&C 12)

FAITH: Mormonism | TEXT: Doctrine and Covenants | VOLUME: 1835 Edition | AUTHOR: Joseph Smith

OVERVIEW

This text, identified as Section 38 in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants (Section 12 in modern editions), is a revelation dictated by Joseph Smith for Joseph Knight Sr. in May 1829. Knight was an early patron who provided material support (food and paper) to Smith during the translation of the Book of Mormon. The text utilizes heavy biblical imagery, specifically drawing from Johannine and Pauline language, to frame the emerging Mormon movement as a cosmic 'harvest.' The central argument is a call to action: the 'field is white already to harvest,' and Knight is commanded to 'thrust in his sickle.' Theologically, the text bridges the gap between service and soteriology, explicitly linking the act of laboring in this new cause ('reaping') with the accumulation of 'everlasting salvation.' It establishes the prerequisites for this ministry—humility, love, faith, and temperance—while asserting the divine authority of the speaker (Jesus Christ) through Joseph Smith. It serves as a foundational call to missionary service and institutional loyalty in early Mormonism.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus Christ (The Speaker), Joseph Smith (The Revelator), Joseph Knight Sr. (The Recipient)

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. SALVATION THROUGH LABOR

Assertion: One treasures up everlasting salvation for their soul by thrusting in their sickle (working for the cause).

"thrust in his sickle with his might... that he may treasure up for his soul everlasting salvation"

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, good works are the fruit of salvation, not the root. Ephesians 2:8-9 explicitly states salvation is 'not of works.' This text, however, establishes a causal link where the 'reaping' (missionary effort and establishing Zion) is the mechanism by which one 'treasures up' salvation. This shifts the locus of confidence from Christ's finished work to the believer's ongoing performance in the 'harvest.'

2. THE CAUSE OF ZION

Assertion: Believers are commanded to bring forth and establish a specific socio-religious cause called 'Zion'.

"seek to bring forth and establish the cause of Zion"

Evangelical Comparison: While Evangelicals view Zion typically as a spiritual reality or future heavenly city (Hebrews 12:22), early Mormonism defined Zion as a literal, physical gathering and a specific ecclesiastical organization. The command to 'establish the cause' implies that God's work is dependent on human effort to build this structure, contrasting with the Evangelical view that Christ builds His church (Matthew 16:18).

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental gap lies in the relationship between works and salvation. The text uses the phrase 'treasure up for his soul everlasting salvation' as the direct object of the verb 'reap.' In Evangelical theology, salvation is a gift received by faith (Ephesians 2:8), and rewards are treasured up in heaven as a result of service (Matthew 6:20). By making salvation the reward for the work of the sickle, the text introduces a merit-based soteriology that undermines the sufficiency of Christ's atonement. Furthermore, 'God's word' is redefined from the Bible to Joseph Smith's current dictation.

Shared Values:

Necessity of humility, faith, hope, and charity; Urgency of evangelism/missionary work; God as Light and Life; Importance of prayer

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Fide – Salvation is presented as something 'treasured up' through the work of reaping.
2. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – New revelation is presented with the same authority and descriptors (Hebrews 4:12) as the Bible.
3. [Major] Christology (Sufficiency) – Christ's work is not presented as finished; the believer must 'assist in this work' to establish Zion.

Semantic Warnings:

"Word"

In Text: The immediate revelation given through Joseph Smith.

Evangelical: The Canon of Scripture (Bible) and Jesus Christ (Logos).

Example: *When the text says 'give heed to my word,' it means 'obey this specific instruction Joseph is dictating,' not necessarily 'obey the Bible.'*

"Called of God"

In Text: Anyone who has the desire to work ('whosoever will thrust in his sickle... is called').

Evangelical: Specific election by God or ordination to office (Romans 8:30, Hebrews 5:4).

Example: *The text democratizes the 'call' based on the volunteer's willingness to work, whereas biblical calling is initiated by God's sovereign choice.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Everlasting salvation in the kingdom of God, treasured up by the individual.

How Attained: By thrusting in the sickle (works), keeping commandments, and assisting in the work.

Basis of Assurance: Performance in the 'harvest' and adherence to the 'word'.

Comparison to Sola Fide: Directly opposes Sola Fide. Romans 4:4-5 states that to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. This text frames salvation as the wage for the work of reaping.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Give heed to my word
2. Thrust in his sickle with his might
3. Ask of God
4. Keep my commandments
5. Seek to bring forth and establish the cause of Zion

Implicit Obligations:

1. Accept Joseph Smith's dictation as the voice of God
2. Commit resources and time to the new religious movement
3. Maintain specific character traits (humble, temperate) to remain qualified

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 2, it says we 'treasure up salvation' by reaping. How do you reconcile that with the Bible saying salvation is a free gift, not of works?
2. When this text says 'give heed to my word,' does it mean the Bible, or the specific words Joseph Smith was speaking at that moment?
3. If 'whosoever will' is called of God just by having the desire to work (verse 4), how does that fit with the idea of priesthood authority being essential?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The White Field – This acknowledges the urgent spiritual need of humanity. People are ready to be saved. [John 4:35 (The source of the quote) - Jesus points to the harvest to show the urgency of the Gospel, but He is the Lord of the Harvest who saves, while we are merely witnesses.]
2. The Desire to Serve God – The desire to serve God is good, but it must be channeled into the Gospel of Grace, not a gospel of works. [Romans 10:2 - 'For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge.]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Performance Anxiety / Works-Righteousness [Severe] – The believer is told that their 'everlasting salvation' depends on how mightily they 'thrust in the sickle.' This creates a perpetual burden to work harder for the church to ensure one's soul is saved.
2. Dependency on Modern Revelation [Moderate] – By shifting authority from the fixed Bible to the 'quick and powerful' word of the modern prophet, the believer loses the stability of Scripture and becomes dependent on the shifting dictates of leadership.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Subjective Revelation and Obedience

Verification Method: Pragmatic results ('if you will ask... you shall receive') and internal spiritual confirmation.

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology relies on the objective standard of written Scripture (Acts 17:11). This text relies on immediate, extra-biblical revelation where the validity is tested by the recipient's willingness to 'ask' and 'knock' within the framework of the new revelation.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: May 1829

Authorship: Joseph Smith (dictated)

Textual Issues: This text is nearly identical to several other sections (4, 11, 14) dictated around the same time. In the 1835 edition, it was Section 38; in modern editions, it is Section 12.