

SECTION 53 (MODERN D&C 31)

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

OVERVIEW

This revelation, given through Joseph Smith in September 1830, addresses Thomas B. Marsh, a significant figure who would later become the first President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. The text functions as a personal call to ministry, blending assurance with conditional warnings. It acknowledges Marsh's anxiety regarding his family's spiritual state, promising that they will eventually 'believe and know the truth.' However, the text introduces a distinctively restorationist soteriology by connecting the forgiveness of Marsh's sins directly to his missionary labor ('thrust in your sickle... and your sins are forgiven you'). It commands him to preach the specific revelations given to Joseph Smith, rather than the Bible alone, and instructs him to prepare converts for the 'gathering,' a physical consolidation of believers central to early Mormon eschatology. The revelation concludes with a warning about the possibility of losing one's reward, emphasizing a probation-based view of salvation contingent on enduring faithfulness.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus Christ (The Speaker), Thomas B. Marsh (Recipient), Joseph Smith, Jr. (The Revelator)

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. TRANSACTIONAL FORGIVENESS

Assertion: Forgiveness of sins is granted as a result of, or concomitant with, diligent missionary labor.

"thrust in your sickle with all your soul; and your sins are forgiven you (Section 53:2)"

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, forgiveness is based solely on the atoning work of Christ and is received through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9, Romans 4:5). Good works are the *result* of salvation, not the *cause* of forgiveness. This text, however, establishes a causal link between 'thrusting in the sickle' (missionary work) and the forgiveness of sins. This suggests that in early Mormon theology, remission of sins was an ongoing process contingent upon obedience and service to the institutional church, rather than a settled status based on the cross.

2. THE GATHERING

Assertion: Converts are to be prepared for a specific time of 'gathering' to a central location.

"prepare them against the time when they shall be gathered (Section 53:3)"

Evangelical Comparison: The concept of 'gathering' in this text refers to the early Mormon doctrine of physically assembling the saints in a designated 'Zion' (initially Missouri, later Utah). This contrasts with the New Testament teaching of the church as a spiritual body spread throughout the nations (Acts 1:8), where believers are 'citizens of heaven' (Philippians 3:20) regardless of their geographic location. The text implies that spiritual safety and preparation are linked to this physical consolidation.

3. CONDITIONAL SECURITY

Assertion: A believer can lose their divine reward through lack of prayer or entering temptation.

"Pray always, lest you enter into temptation, and lose your reward. (Section 53:4)"

Evangelical Comparison: The text explicitly warns Marsh that he could 'lose his reward.' In the context of Mormon theology, this 'reward' often refers to Exaltation or Eternal Life. This introduces a high degree of spiritual anxiety, making final salvation contingent on the believer's performance ('Be faithful unto the end'). Evangelicalism teaches that while believers should persevere, their security rests in Christ's power to keep them (Jude 24, John 10:28), not their own ability to avoid all temptation.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental incompatibility lies in the mechanism of forgiveness and the locus of authority. Evangelicalism posits that the Bible is the sole sufficient rule of faith and that forgiveness is a free gift of grace. This text asserts that Joseph Smith is the channel for necessary new truth ('declare the things which have been revealed to my servant') and that forgiveness is a conditional result of missionary exertion. This shifts the focus from Christ's finished work to the believer's ongoing performance, creating a system of merit that is foreign to the New Testament gospel of grace.

Shared Values:

Importance of evangelism; Reliance on the Holy Spirit (Comforter); Meekness in leadership; Faithfulness in marriage/family governance; Non-retaliation ('revile not')

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Fide (Faith Alone) – Forgiveness is explicitly linked to the work of missionary labor ('thrust in your sickle... and your sins are forgiven').
2. [Major] Sola Gratia (Grace Alone) – The text implies a 'wage' system for spiritual standing ('the laborer is worthy of his hire' applied to spiritual forgiveness).
3. [Critical] Sola Scriptura (Scripture Alone) – Commands the preaching of Joseph Smith's revelations as the word of God.

Semantic Warnings:

"Glad tidings"

In Text: The specific revelations and restorationist message given through Joseph Smith.

Evangelical: The Gospel of Jesus Christ's death, burial, and resurrection for sinners (1 Corinthians 15:1-4).

Example: *When the text says 'declare glad tidings,' it means preaching Mormonism/Smith's revelations, not just the biblical gospel.*

"Physician"

In Text: Likely a spiritual metaphor for healing the church's divisions or problems (though Marsh had some medical knowledge).

Evangelical: Usually refers to physical doctors (Colossians 4:14) or Christ as the healer of souls.

Example: *Marsh is told to be a physician to the church but not the world, implying an internal pastoral role.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Implicitly defined here as forgiveness of sins, being 'one' with the church, and receiving a reward.

How Attained: Through faith in the work, missionary labor ('thrusting in the sickle'), and enduring to the end.

Basis of Assurance: Assurance is based on performance and obedience to the call.

Comparison to Sola Fide: The text says 'thrust in your sickle... and your sins are forgiven.' The Bible says 'to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness' (Romans 4:5).

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Lift up your heart and rejoice
2. Declare the things revealed to Joseph Smith, Jr.
3. Thrust in your sickle with all your soul
4. Go from your family for a little time
5. Revile not against those that revile
6. Govern your house in meekness
7. Pray always

Implicit Obligations:

1. Accept Joseph Smith's revelations as equal to or superseding biblical authority
2. Prioritize church service over immediate family presence
3. Prepare converts for physical relocation (gathering)

Ritual Requirements:

1. Missionary service (viewed here as a quasi-sacramental act for forgiveness)

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 2, the text says, 'thrust in your sickle... and your sins are forgiven you.' How do you interpret the relationship between your missionary work and God's forgiveness?
2. If forgiveness is linked to our labor, how can we ever be sure we have labored enough to be fully forgiven?
3. The text warns about losing your reward. How does this impact your sense of peace regarding your standing with God compared to Romans 8:1 ('There is therefore now no condemnation...')?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The longing for family unity – The text taps into the deep human desire for our families to be united in truth. The Gospel offers a spiritual family that transcends biology. [Acts 16:31 - 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.' (Note: Promise of influence, not guarantee of others' choice).]
2. The Physician – We all need healing, but human leaders can only do so much. Christ is the true Great Physician who heals the root cause of our separation from God. [Mark 2:17 - 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.']

Spiritual Weight:

1. Performance Anxiety / Works-Righteousness [Severe] – The believer is placed under the burden of earning forgiveness through missionary activity. If they are not 'thrusting in the sickle' with all their soul, the implication is that their sins remain or their standing is insecure.
2. Uncertainty / Fear of Loss [Moderate] – The warning 'lest you... lose your reward' creates a spiritual environment where salvation/exaltation is always at risk, dependent on the believer's ability to avoid temptation and remain faithful without stumbling.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Direct revelation through the Prophet (Joseph Smith) and personal guidance via the Comforter.

Verification Method: Internal spiritual confirmation ('Comforter') and obedience to the prophetic command.

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology tests all spirits and prophecies against the closed canon of Scripture (1 John 4:1, Acts 17:11). This text demands acceptance of Smith's revelations as the 'glad tidings' themselves, bypassing biblical sufficiency.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: September 1830

Authorship: Joseph Smith (dictated)

Textual Issues: Published in the 1833 Book of Commandments as Chapter 34, then 1835 D&C as Section 53. Minor editing occurred between versions to clarify language.