

SECTION 91 (MODERN SECTION 76)

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

OVERVIEW

This text, known in modern Latter-day Saint canon as Section 76, represents a pivotal moment in Mormon theology, often called 'The Vision.' Occurring on February 16, 1832, while Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon were translating the Gospel of John, it fundamentally restructures the Christian understanding of the afterlife. Rejecting the traditional binary of Heaven and Hell, the text introduces a graded cosmology consisting of three kingdoms of glory: the Celestial (for the valiant and baptized), the Terrestrial (for the honorable but blinded or less valiant), and the Telestial (for the wicked who are eventually redeemed). It also defines a fourth category, the 'Sons of Perdition,' who commit the unpardonable sin and suffer eternal damnation. The text asserts universal resurrection and near-universal salvation (in terms of inheriting a kingdom), but reserves the presence of God the Father solely for those in the Celestial Kingdom. It introduces the doctrine of deification ('they are gods') and establishes that entrance into the highest glory requires specific ordinances and strict obedience, moving soteriology from a focus on Christ's finished work to the believer's progression and valiancy.

KEY FIGURES

Jesus Christ (The Son), God the Father, Joseph Smith, Sidney Rigdon, Lucifer (Perdition), Angels/Sanctified Beings

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. THE THREE DEGREES OF GLORY

Assertion: The afterlife is divided into three kingdoms (Celestial, Terrestrial, Telestial) corresponding to the sun, moon, and stars, determined by one's works and acceptance of Mormon ordinances.

"And the glory of the celestial is one, even as the glory of the sun is one. And the glory of the terrestrial is one, even as the glory of the moon is one. And the glory of the telestial is one, even as the glory of the stars is one"

Evangelical Comparison: Evangelical Christianity teaches a binary eternal destiny based on acceptance or rejection of Christ (Matthew 25:46). This text introduces a universalist hierarchy where even the wicked (liars, sorcerers, adulterers) eventually inherit a kingdom of glory (Telestial) after suffering for their own sins. This negates the finality of judgment for the unregenerate and suggests that Christ's atonement eventually rescues those who rejected the gospel, granting them a measure of glory, though separating them from the Father.

2. DEIFICATION (THEOSIS)

Assertion: Those who achieve Celestial glory become gods and joint-heirs with Christ in a literal, ontological sense.

"wherefore, as it is written, they are gods, even the sons of God: wherefore all things are theirs"

Evangelical Comparison: The Bible teaches that God is ontologically distinct from humanity (Isaiah 43:10). While believers are glorified and share in Christ's inheritance, they never become 'gods' or ontological equals with the Creator. This text asserts that the ultimate goal of salvation is to become gods, possessing 'all things' and dominion, which fundamentally alters the definition of monotheism.

3. CONDITIONAL EXALTATION VIA ORDINANCES

Assertion: Entrance into the highest glory requires baptism, keeping commandments, and being sealed by the Holy Spirit.

"baptized after the manner of his burial... that, by keeping the commandments, they might be washed and cleansed... and who overcome by faith"

Evangelical Comparison: Evangelicalism holds that justification is a declared status based on Christ's righteousness received by faith (Romans 3:28). This text posits that the highest salvation (Exaltation) is conditional upon specific rituals (baptism) and personal performance ('keeping the commandments,' being 'valiant'). It creates a two-tiered salvation: general salvation (resurrection) is free, but eternal life (God's presence) is earned.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental gap lies in the sufficiency of Christ. In Evangelicalism, Christ's work is sufficient to bring the believer into the immediate presence of the Father (Hebrews 10:19-22). In this text, Christ's work provides universal resurrection and a baseline salvation from hell, but access to the Father (Celestial glory) is contingent upon the believer's 'valiancy' and obedience to law. Furthermore, the text introduces a cosmology where the 'wicked' eventually receive a degree of glory, contradicting the biblical teaching on the finality of judgment (Hebrews 9:27).

Shared Values:

Jesus is the Son of God; Jesus died for sins; Resurrection of the dead; God is the Creator; Reality of Satan/Lucifer

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Fide (Faith Alone) – Celestial glory is conditioned on baptism, keeping commandments, and personal valiancy, not faith alone.
2. [Major] Christology (Sufficiency of Work) – Christ's atonement is applied to the wicked (Telestial) to grant them glory, contradicting the biblical penalty for sin.
3. [Critical] Theology Proper (Monotheism) – Teaches that humans can become 'gods,' blurring the Creator/creature distinction.

Semantic Warnings:

"Salvation"

In Text: Often refers to general resurrection or escaping Outer Darkness (universal). Distinct from 'Exaltation.'

Evangelical: Deliverance from sin and wrath, resulting in eternal life with God (exclusive to believers).

Example: *In this text, the wicked in the Telestial kingdom are 'heirs of salvation' but are excluded from God's presence.*

"Valiant"

In Text: A specific level of zeal and obedience required for the highest kingdom.

Evangelical: Not a soteriological category; believers are saved by grace, not by the intensity of their zeal.

Example: *Terrestrial inhabitants are 'honorable' but not 'valiant' in the testimony of Jesus.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Bifurcated into 'Salvation' (Resurrection/Immortal glory) and 'Exaltation' (Life in God's presence as gods).

How Attained: General salvation by grace/resurrection; Exaltation by faith + ordinances + obedience + valiancy.

Basis of Assurance: Based on personal worthiness, reception of the Holy Spirit of Promise, and adherence to law.

Comparison to Sola Fide: Directly opposes Sola Fide by stating that those who inherit the highest glory are those who 'keep the commandments' and are 'washed' by ritual, whereas Romans 4:5 states God justifies the ungodly by faith.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Write the vision (commanded to Joseph and Sidney)
2. Purify yourselves before God
3. Love God

Implicit Obligations:

1. Receive baptism by proper authority
2. Keep the commandments to be washed/cleansed
3. Be 'valiant' in the testimony of Jesus (not just a believer)

4. Seek the 'mysteries' of the kingdom

Ritual Requirements:

1. Baptism by immersion
2. Laying on of hands for the Holy Spirit
3. Sealing by the Holy Spirit of Promise

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. The text mentions that 'honorable men' who aren't 'valiant' enough end up in the Terrestrial Kingdom, separated from the Father. How do you define 'valiant' enough?
2. If Jesus paid for all sins, why do the people in the Telestial kingdom still have to suffer for their own sins before being redeemed?
3. The text says believers can become 'gods.' How does that fit with Isaiah's statement that before God there was no God formed, nor shall be after Him?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Justice of God regarding the unevangelized – The text attempts to solve the problem of how God judges those who never heard the gospel. This shows a desire for God to be fair. [Genesis 18:25 ('Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?') - We can trust God's character without inventing extra-biblical hierarchies.]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Performance Anxiety / Perfectionism [Severe] – The believer is burdened with the knowledge that being a 'good Christian' or 'honorable' person is insufficient for the highest heaven. They must be 'valiant,' creating a constant pressure to do more to secure their status as 'gods.'
2. Uncertainty of Standing [Moderate] – Since final salvation (Exaltation) depends on endurance to the end and valiancy, the adherent cannot possess the 'blessed assurance' of salvation in the present moment.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Mystical experience and direct revelation mediated through the prophet.

Verification Method: Personal purification leads to personal revelation ('privilege of seeing and knowing for themselves').

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology relies on the objective, completed Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16) illuminated by the Spirit. This text relies on subjective visionary experience and suggests that 'mysteries' are hidden from the general reader of Scripture.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: February 16, 1832

Authorship: Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon

Textual Issues: This text was later canonized as D&C 76. It represents a significant departure from the theology of the Book of Mormon (1830), which held to a more traditional heaven/hell binary.