

Section 131

Section 131 also includes esoteric temple knowledge but maybe less new knowledge about the celestial kingdom than it has been interpreted to include. The first four verses came in the evening of May 16, 1843. Joseph was in the home of Melissa and Ben Johnson with his scribe/recorder, William Clayton. Melissa and Ben were in their mid-twenties, married two years prior on Christmas day, and parents of one child so far, Benjamin Jr. Joseph invited them to sit down and told them he was there to marry them according to the law of the Lord.

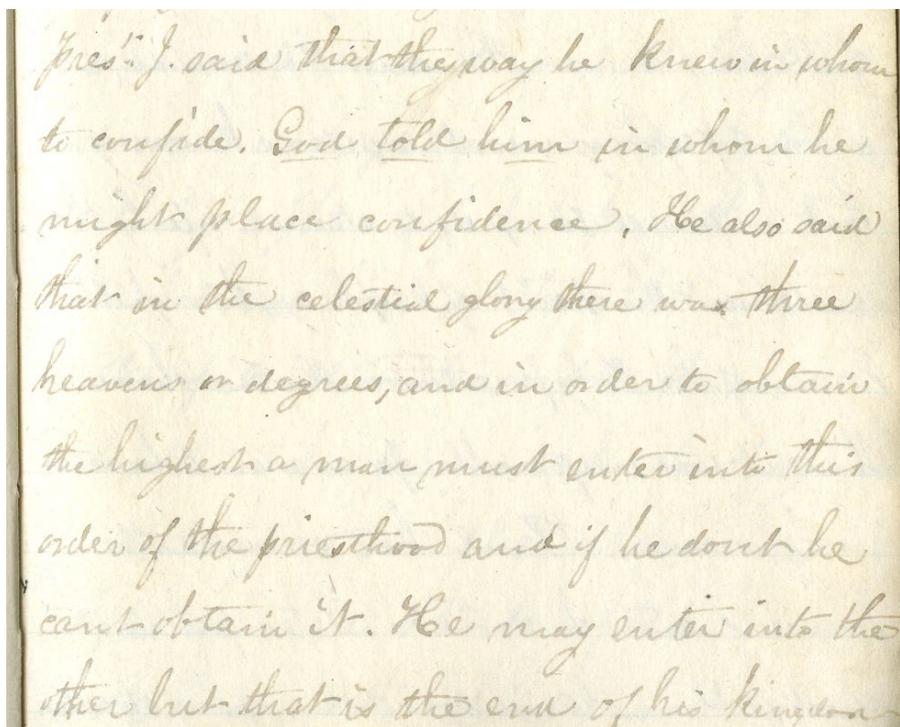
Ben had joked with Joseph before and thought he was joking now. Ben tried to join in the fun, saying he wouldn't marry Melissa again until she paid for their dates, since he paid the first time they courted. Joseph might have thought that was funny on a different day, but he was in a hurry, he was solemn, and this occasion was sacred. He scolded Ben for being light-minded in that moment. Then he invited Melissa and Ben to stand and sealed them together by the power of the holy priesthood vested in him by ministering angels of Almighty God. He promised that if they kept the terms and conditions of this covenant, no power on earth or in hell could prevent them from being resurrected together and crowned with exaltation and eternal lives (D&C 132:19–24).¹

That got their attention. Joseph sat them down again and taught them about the new and everlasting covenant of marriage they had just “made and entered into” (D&C 132:7). He said there were three parts to it (see section 132), and its blessings wouldn't

¹ Benjamin Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 96.

be sure unless and until Melissa and Ben made them sure by being faithful to the covenant. Using his secretary, William Clayton, as an example of one who had taken the step the Johnsons were taking, Joseph taught them the doctrine of exaltation through faithfulness to covenants sealed by sacred ordinances.

The context for the first four verses, then, is exaltation. All of the sources suggest that what Joseph taught the Johnsons that night is not the same as what D&C 131:1–2 has been understood to mean—that there are three degrees inside the highest of the three degrees of glory. That idea hangs on nothing more than D&C 131: “In the celestial glory there are three heavens or degrees” and the assumption that “celestial” there means the highest of the three heavens revealed in D&C 76. That is not the only possible interpretation, and in context it’s not the best one. In the vocabulary of both Joseph and the Johnsons, “celestial” could still just mean heavenly. If we read D&C 131:1 that way, it makes sense in context. In other words, Joseph probably taught the Johnsons what we are taught—there are three glories in heaven, and exaltation in the highest one comes from making and keeping the new and everlasting covenant of marriage. Joseph meant what sections 76 and 132 teach.



Pres. J. said that the way he knew in whom to confide. God told him in whom he might place confidence. He also said that in the celestial glory there was three heavens or degrees, and in order to obtain the highest a man must enter into this order of the priesthood and if he do not he can't obtain it. He may enter into the other but that is the end of his kingdom.

Instruction on exaltation in the highest celestial glory, 16 May 1843, as Reported by William Clayton. Image via Joseph Smith Papers.

According to William Clayton’s journal, Joseph taught that “in order to obtain the highest [degree of glory] a man [and woman] must enter into this order of the priesthood,” meaning the new and everlasting covenant of marriage. Joseph explained that a man and a woman sealed together “by the power and authority of the holy priesthood” would continue to be married and have their family after resurrection, while those who weren’t sealed would not.² There are many, many descendants of the Johnsons today, and they will be their descendants forever, as a result of this revelation.

The day after he sealed the Johnsons, Joseph preached a sermon on 2 Peter 1 about making one’s eternal destination sure. It included section 131:5–6. William Clayton noted Joseph teaching

that knowledge is power and the man who has the most knowledge has the greatest power. Also that salvation means a man’s being placed beyond the powers of all his enemies. He said the more sure word of prophecy meant, a man’s knowing that he was sealed up unto eternal life by revelation and the spirit of prophecy through the power of the Holy priesthood. He also showed that it was impossible for a man to be saved in ignorance.³

In speaking of *knowledge* and *ignorance*, Joseph did not mean that book learning or secular subjects were sources of salvation. He meant that unless people know for themselves the fulness of temple ordinances and their promised blessings, they are not yet endowed with power over all enemies, including death, both spiritual and physical.

Joseph had taught the same principle in other words the preceding Sunday. He tried to help the Saints understand the difference between having a testimony that one *could be* saved if they obeyed the gospel and gaining the testimony that one *had been* saved because they obeyed the gospel. Step one is to gain a testimony of Christ and the possibility of salvation, Joseph taught. That was just the beginning of the quest for knowledge of God, which to Joseph was the equivalent of power over sin and death. “They would then want that more sure word of Prophecy that they were sealed in the heavens & had the promise of eternal live in the Kingdom of God,” Joseph taught.

² “[Instruction, 16 May 1843, as Reported by William Clayton](#),” p. [15], The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 8, 2020.

³ “[Discourse, 17 May 1843–A, as Reported by William Clayton](#),” p. [16], The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 8, 2020.

This is what he called “knowledge,” which is what he meant in section 131—and what the Lord meant all the way back in section 84:19–24.⁴

Section 131 leads willing Saints to the knowledge of God, the certainty of a future exaltation by virtue of the sacred covenants sealed by priesthood. Ignorance of the knowledge of God leads to a less certain, or at least less celestial, future. One wants to be *more sure* in what the young Joseph called “matters that involve eternal consequences” (D&C 131:5).

Samuel Prior, a Methodist, had listened to Joseph’s sermon on 1 Peter 1 and come away unexpectedly impressed. Joseph returned the gesture in the evening by listening to Prior’s sermon. Afterward Joseph “arose and begged leave to differ from me in some few points of doctrine,” wrote Prior, “and this he did mildly, politely, and affectingly; like one who was more desirous to disseminate truth and expose error, than to love the malicious triumph of debate over me.” Drawing on section 93:33, Joseph noted that matter endures eternally and added verses 7–8. “I was truly edified with his remarks,” Prior noted, “and felt less prejudiced against the Mormons than ever.” Joseph invited Prior to visit him in Nauvoo, which he did.⁵

⁴ “[Discourse, 14 May 1843, as Reported by Wilford Woodruff](#),” p. [32], The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 8, 2020.

⁵ Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds. and comps., *Words of Joseph Smith* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center Brigham Young University, 1980), 202–204.