

Section 29

Could you identify the voice of Jesus Christ the way you can quickly identify the voice of one of his living apostles? What does the Savior sound like? Section 29 begins with a command to listen to Christ, followed by a reason why.

It was given to Joseph at a small gathering of Church members at the Whitmer home in Fayette, New York, where they gathered for their quarterly conference in September 1830. They all wanted to better understand the prophecy of Isaiah, emphasized in the Book of Mormon, about when the Lord would bring again Zion (Isaiah 52:8; 3 Nephi 16:18; 20:32; 21:22–24). They also had different views about the nature of Adam’s fall. Joseph had been reading the Bible closely on that point, and they all hoped the Lord would clarify some things about it.¹

Section 29 is the first of Joseph’s revelations to use the word *agency*, the power with which God endows people to act of their own free will. The revelation shows that agency comes when a set of ingredients combine in a person—a mixture of power to act, commandments that determine good and evil, knowledge of the commandments to act upon, and Satan’s opposition to our acting in obedience.

Joseph’s Calvinist ancestors thought the elect were the relative few God arbitrarily chose to passively receive his grace. In section 29 the Lord defines the elect as those

¹ “[Revelation, July 1830–A \[D&C 29\]](#),” p. 36, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 24, 2020.

who actively choose to hear his voice (the commandments that comprise part of agency) and harden not their hearts. The chicks he promises to gather like a hen are those who decide to humble *themselves*. That language is theologically significant and frames the entire revelation. Agency: who has it, how did they get it, and what are the results of using it to obey or disobey?

Several of the revelations are eschatological, meaning they deal with the last days, the end of time as we know it at the Lord's second coming. None is more vividly eschatological than Section 29. It paints a horrific picture of those who exercise their agency not to repent.

The Lord never specifies the timing of his second coming in the scriptures. He says only that it will be "soon," but as Elder Neal A. Maxwell suggested, wristwatch-wearing mortals are not well positioned to determine what *soon* means to "Him who oversees cosmic clocks and calendars."² Even if the revelations are purposefully vague about precise dates, eschatological revelations like section 29 are chronological. They tell the order of events that will lead up to and comprise the Savior's return and reign. They are characterized by words such as "*before* that great day shall come" (D&C 29:14), "*when* the thousand years are ended" (v. 22), and "*before* the earth shall pass away" (v. 26). Section 29 sets forth the logic of gathering the elect because the unrepentant will soon suffer the Lord's just vengeance at his second coming. "The righteous shall be gathered on my right hand unto eternal life; and the wicked on my left hand will I be ashamed to own before the Father" (v. 27).

The Lord explains that the wicked will be powerless to come where he is and then transitions into a passage on the importance, therefore, of being endowed with power. Section 29 thus prefigures the endowment of power restored later. How does this endowment of power work? Using Adam and Eve as archetypes in section 29, the Lord talks us through the process of their creation, fall, and redemption. (Though, if I understand verses 30–31, this is all one process of creation in God's image.)

² Neal A. Maxwell, "Hope through the Atonement of Jesus Christ," *Ensign*, Nov 1998, 61.

As the earliest-known revelation to Joseph to describe premortal life, section 29 explains Satan's lust for power and how he led away a third of heaven's inhabitants "because of their agency" (D&C 29:36). We too easily assume that Satan conspired to undermine agency by coercing his followers. The scriptures don't say that. They only say that he sought to destroy agency. Couldn't he have done that by telling them their choices had no consequences, that anything they chose was as good as any other choice?

Section 29 emphasizes Heavenly Father's more excellent way. When Adam and Eve chose of their own free will to become subject to Satan by obeying him, they were cast out of God's presence *because* they transgressed the law. They thus died spiritually. In other words, they were first spiritual, then temporal. Their fall made them carnal, mortal, natural. But that was only "the beginning of my work," the Lord said (D&C 29:32).

God began the "last" phase of creating Adam and Eve in his image by lengthening their mortal lives to enable them to exercise agency. He sent angels to teach them the law of the gospel, namely "repentance and redemption, through faith on the name of mine Only Begotten Son" (D&C 29:42). This plan safeguarded agency, justice, and mercy. It guaranteed redemption to all who chose to believe and "eternal damnation" to all who choose not to believe or repent (v. 44). Both get just what they want, what they choose.

Section 29 ends as it began, with emphasis on agency. Until His children are capable of acting for themselves, Heavenly Father restricts Satan's power to tempt them. In other words, we grow into free agents gradually, and we "begin to become accountable" (D&C 29:47) in direct proportion to our ability to act on our knowledge of the Lord's commands of our own free will.