

Section 74

The context of section 74 is mysterious, but the content is a commentary on 1 Corinthians 7:14, where Paul counseled Christian women who were married to Jewish men regarding the tension between their religions when it came to raising children.¹

This remarkable revelation makes one think of Joseph's teenage struggles to understand the Bible: "The teachers of religion of the different sects understood the same passages of scripture so differently as to destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible" (Joseph Smith—History 1:12). Joseph had learned then to take his questions to the Lord himself.

In Section 74, as in several others, the Lord himself interprets the Bible for Joseph. In doing so he subtly solves an important theological problem that often occurs to parents of three-year-olds. It concerns original sin. Are mortals sinful by nature or not? Ask a group of Latter-day Saints if they believe that people are inherently evil and, all evidence from themselves and their own children aside, they will overwhelmingly answer no.

Ask the Book of Mormon writers and you get a different answer. They knew and taught that mortals are inherently evil, at least in part (2 Nephi 2:29; 2 Nephi 4:17–20). As the brother of Jared put it, "Because of the fall our natures have become evil

¹ "[Historical Introduction](#)" and "Explanation of Scripture, 1830 [D&C 74]," p. 60, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 5, 2020.

continually” (Ether 3:2). Though the scriptures are plain on this point, sometimes modern Latter-day Saints underestimate the effects of the Fall. Perhaps we fear that it makes us sound too much like other Christians. But by merely being born as mortals, we inherit a sinful nature. We are naturally vicious, selfish, carnal, mean, and often flat-out evil.

Doesn't section 74 say that little children are holy? Yes. They are, but not because they are inherently so. The revelation says they are “sanctified through the atonement of Jesus Christ.” Section 74 teaches us one more of the profundities of Christ's infinite atonement: Since children inherit fallenness helplessly, without having exercised any agency in the matter, Jesus Christ atones for them. He sanctifies them and sets them on a course to become free agents at about age eight if properly taught the law of the gospel (see sections 29 and 68). As long as children are not yet free agents, too helpless to understand or do much about the fallen part of their nature, Jesus sanctifies them according to his will. That is what section 74 teaches. It is beautiful doctrine, restored through Joseph Smith, and it resolves an important theological problem.