

Moral Agency

D. Todd Christofferson — BYU Devotional, 31 Jan 2006

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I offer you a warm greeting on this cold January day. Two years ago, in January, President Gordon B. Hinckley spoke to the leaders of the Church around the world, both men and women. Commenting on current conditions, he said:

No one need tell you that we are living in a very difficult season in the history of the world...

... I do not know that things were worse in the times of Sodom and Gomorrah. At that season, Abraham bargained with the Lord to save these cities for the sake of the righteous. Notwithstanding his pleas, things were so bad that Jehovah decreed their destruction. They and their wicked inhabitants were annihilated. We see similar conditions today. They prevail all across the world. I think our Father must weep as He looks down upon His wayward sons and daughters.

In the Church we are working very hard to stem the tide of this evil. But it is an uphill battle, and we sometimes wonder whether we are making any headway. But we are succeeding in a substantial way. We see so many of our youth who are faithful and true and who look to us for encouragement and direction.¹

It was you President Hinckley thought of when he looked for signs that we might be succeeding as a Church in stemming the tide of evil. If, as he said, you look to us for encouragement and direction, I want to offer you some of each. I would like to talk to you about moral agency and offer some counsel about how you use your agency.

In years past, we generally used the term *free agency*. That is not incorrect, but more recently we have taken note that *free agency* does not appear as an expression in the scriptures. They talk of our being “free to choose” and “free to act” for ourselves² and of our obligation to do many things of our own “free will.”³ But the word agency appears either by itself or, in Doctrine and Covenants, section 101, verse 78, with the modifier *moral*: “That every man may act in doctrine and principle . . . according to the *moral agency* which I have given unto him, that every man may be accountable for his own sins in the day of judgment” (emphasis added). When we use the term *moral agency*, then, we are appropriately emphasizing the

accountability that is an essential part of the divine gift of agency. We are moral beings and agents unto ourselves, free to choose but also responsible for our choices.

The Elements of Moral Agency

What, then, are the elements of moral agency? To me there are three.

First, there must be alternatives to choose among. Lehi described it as opposites, or “opposition.”⁴ He spoke of righteousness and its opposite, wickedness; holiness versus misery; good versus bad.⁵ Without opposites, Lehi said, “All things must needs be a compound in one; . . . no life neither death, nor corruption nor incorruption, happiness nor misery, neither sense nor insensibility.”⁶

He further explained that for these opposites or alternatives to exist, there must be law. Law provides us the options. It is by the operation of laws that things happen. By using or obeying a law, one can bring about a particular result—and by disobedience, the opposite result. Without law there could be no God, for He would be powerless to cause anything to happen.⁷ Neither He nor we would be able to predict or choose a particular outcome by a given action. Our existence and the creation around us are convincing evidence that God, the Creator, exists and that our mortal world consists of “both things to act and things to be acted upon,”⁸—or, in other words, choices.

Second, for us to have agency, we must not only have alternatives but we must also know that they exist and what they are. If we are unaware of the choices available, the existence of those choices is meaningless to us. Lehi called this being “enticed by the one or the other.”⁹ He recalled the situation of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden presented with a choice, “even the forbidden fruit in opposition to the tree of life; the one being sweet and the other bitter.”¹⁰ Adam and Eve’s choice, of course, brought about the Fall, which brought with it a knowledge of good and evil, opening to their understanding a multitude of new choices. Had they remained in Eden, “they would have remained in a state of innocence, having no joy, for they knew no misery; doing no good, for they knew no sin.”¹¹ But with the Fall, both they and we gain sufficient knowledge and understanding to be enticed by good and evil—we attain a state of accountability and can recognize the alternatives before us.

The beauty of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that it pours knowledge into our souls and shows things in their true light. With that enhanced perspective, we can discern

more clearly the choices before us and their consequences. We can, therefore, make more intelligent use of our agency. Too many fall into unanticipated traps and unhappiness because they either lack or ignore the gospel light. They are unaware of their options or are confused about the outcomes of their choices. Ignorance effectively limits their agency.

Third, after the existence of choices and a knowledge of choices, is the next element of agency: the freedom to make choices.¹² This freedom to act for ourselves in choosing among the alternatives that the law establishes is often referred to in the scriptures as agency itself. For this freedom we are indebted to God. It is His gift to us.¹³

The Lord said unto Enoch: Behold these thy brethren; they are the workmanship of mine own hands, and I gave unto them their knowledge, in the day I created them; and in the Garden of Eden, gave I unto man his agency.¹⁴

King Benjamin reminded us that in addition to giving us the freedom to choose, God makes it possible for us to use the gift because He “is preserving you from day to day, by lending you breath, that ye may live and move and do according to your own will, and even supporting you from one moment to another.”¹⁵

Let us pause and note that freedom of choice is the freedom to obey or disobey existing laws—not the freedom to alter their consequences. Law, as mentioned earlier, exists as a foundational element of moral agency with fixed outcomes that do not vary according to our opinions or preferences. Elder Dallin H. Oaks observed in a devotional talk here that “we are responsible to use our agency in a world of choices. It will not do to pretend that our agency has been taken away when we are not free to exercise it without unwelcome consequences.”¹⁶

Satan’s Attack on Agency

We recognize the gift of agency as a central aspect of the plan of salvation proposed by the Father in the great premortal council, and that “there was war in heaven”¹⁷ to defend and preserve it. The Lord revealed this to Moses:

Wherefore, because that Satan rebelled against me, and sought to destroy the agency of man, which I, the Lord God, had given him, and also, that I should give unto him mine own power; by the power of mine Only Begotten, I caused that he should be cast down;

And he became Satan, yea, even the devil, the father of all lies, to deceive and to blind men, and to lead them captive at his will, even as many as would not hearken unto my voice.¹⁸

Satan has not ceased his effort “to destroy the agency of man.” He promotes conduct and choices that limit a

person’s freedom to choose by replacing the influence of the Holy Spirit with his own domination.¹⁹ Yielding to his temptations leads to a narrower and narrower range of choices until none remain and to addictions that leave one powerless to resist. While Satan cannot actually destroy law and truth, he accomplishes the same result in the lives of those who heed him by convincing them that whatever they think is right is right and that there is no ultimate truth—every man is his own god, and there is no sin.

Of course Satan’s ongoing opposition is a useful and even necessary part of moral agency. The scripture states:

It must needs be that the devil should tempt the children of men, or they could not be agents unto themselves; for if they never should have bitter they could not know the sweet.²⁰

Remember, though, that we retain the right and power of independent action.²¹ God does not intend that we yield to temptation. Like Jesus, we can gain all we need in the way of a mortal experience without yielding.

The Central Role of Jesus Christ

We have reviewed the elements of moral agency and its divine origins, but we must always remember that agency would have no meaning without the vital contribution of Jesus Christ. His central role began with His support of the Father’s plan and His willingness to become the essential Savior under that plan. The plan required a setting for its implementation, and Jesus was instrumental in the creation of this planet for that purpose. Most important, while the Fall of Adam was a critical element of the plan, the Fall would also have frustrated the plan if certain of its consequences were not mitigated by the Atonement and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It was necessary in God’s plan for our future happiness and glory that we become morally free and responsible. For that to happen, we needed an experience apart from Him where our own choices would determine our destiny. The Fall of Adam provided the spiritual death needed to separate us from God and place us in this mortal condition as well as the physical death needed to provide an end to the mortal experience. As Alma put it:

And now, ye see by this that our first parents were cut off both temporally and spiritually from the presence of the Lord; and thus we see they became subjects to follow after their own will.²²

Without more, however, these deaths would have defeated the plan after having made it possible. Death had to be permitted, but it also had to be overcome or we could not return to the presence of God. Jacob, the brother of Nephi, explained it this way:

For as death hath passed upon all men, to fulfill the merciful plan of the great Creator, there must needs be a power of resurrection....

... For behold, if the flesh should rise no more our spirits must become subject to that angel who fell from before the presence of the Eternal God, and became the devil, to rise no more.

And our spirits must have become like unto him, and we become devils, angels to a devil, to be shut out from the presence of our God, and to remain with the father of lies, in misery, like unto himself...

O how great the goodness of our God, who prepareth a way for our escape from the grasp of this awful monster; yea, that monster, death and hell, which I call the death of the body, and also the death of the spirit.²³

Thus, if our separation from God and our physical death were permanent, moral agency would mean nothing. Yes, we would be free to make choices, but what would be the point? The end result would always be the same no matter what our actions: death with no hope of resurrection and no hope of heaven. Good or bad as we might choose to be, we would all end up, in Jacob's words, "devils, angels to a devil."

With resurrection through Jesus Christ, the Fall can achieve its essential purpose without becoming a permanent death sentence. "The grave must deliver up its captive bodies," "hell must deliver up its captive spirits," and "the paradise of God must deliver up the spirits of the righteous" so that "the spirit and the body is restored to itself again, and all men become incorruptible, and immortal, and they are living souls, having a perfect knowledge like unto us in the flesh, save it be that our knowledge shall be perfect."²⁴

But there was one more thing that Christ needed to accomplish so that moral agency could have a positive potential. Just as death would doom us and render our agency meaningless but for the redemption of Christ, even so, without His grace, our bad choices or sins would leave us forever lost. There would be no way of fully recovering from our mistakes, and, being unclean, we could never live again in the presence of the "Man of Holiness."²⁵

We cannot look to the law to save us when we have broken the law.²⁶ We need a Savior, a Mediator who can overcome the effects of our sins and errors so that they are not necessarily fatal. It is because of the Atonement of Christ that we can recover from bad choices and be justified under the law as if we had not sinned.

Wherefore, redemption cometh in and through the Holy Messiah; for he is full of grace and truth.

Behold he offereth himself a sacrifice for sin, to answer the ends of the law, unto all those who have a broken heart and a contrite spirit.²⁷

Professor C. Terry Warner stated:

Human agency was purchased with the price of Christ's suffering. This means that to those who blame God for allowing human suffering, Latter-day Saints can respond that suffering is less important than the gift of agency, upon which everything else depends, and that none of us has paid a greater price for this gift than Christ.²⁸

The Savior's Exemplary Use of Moral Agency

The Savior's use of moral agency during His lifetime is an instructive example for us. At one point in His teaching He revealed the principle that guided His choices: "He that sent me is with me: the Father hath not left me alone; for I do always those things that please him."²⁹ I believe that much of the Lord's power is attributable to the fact that He never wavered in that determination. He had a clear, consistent direction. Whatever the Father desired, Jesus chose to do.

John reported the following response to Jesus' statement that He did always those things that please the Father:

As he spake these words, many believed on him.

Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed;

And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.³⁰

So, being Jesus' obedient disciple—just as He is the Father's obedient disciple—leads to truth and freedom. Then He added, "If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed."³¹

To the secular world it seems a paradox that greater submission to God yields greater freedom. They look at things through Korihor's lens, which is that obedience to God's laws and ordinances is "bondage."³² So how do obedience and truth make us free? You can easily think of some practical ways in which truth gives us the ability to do things we otherwise could not do or to avoid disasters we might otherwise suffer.

I was interested to read recently of a young British girl who learned in school about the characteristics of water along a shoreline that signal the approach of a tsunami. Two weeks later, on vacation with her family in Thailand, she observed those phenomena and insistently warned her parents and the people around her. They escaped to higher ground just in time when the December 26, 2004, tsunami hit south Asia. More than a hundred people owe their lives to that girl's knowledge of certain truths of the

natural world.³³

But the Lord's statement that the truth will make us free has broader significance. "Truth," He tells us, "is knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come."³⁴ Possession of this knowledge of things past, present, and future is a critical element of God's glory: "The glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth."³⁵ Does anyone doubt that, as a consequence of possessing all light and truth, God possesses ultimate freedom to be and to do?

Likewise, as our understanding of gospel doctrine and principles grows, our agency expands. First, we have more choices and can achieve more and receive greater blessings because we have more laws that we can obey. Think of a ladder—each new law or commandment we learn is like one more step on the ladder that enables us to climb higher. Second, with added understanding we can make more intelligent choices because we see more clearly not only the alternatives but their potential outcomes. As Professor Daniel H. Ludlow once expressed it, the extent of our agency "is in direct proportion to the number and kind of laws we know and keep."³⁶

The Lord promises that if, in the exercise of our agency, we follow His example and do always those things that please Him and the Father, then we will come to know and understand all things:

And if your eye be single to my glory, your whole bodies shall be filled with light, and there shall be no darkness in you; and that body which is filled with light comprehendeth all things.³⁷

That which is of God is light; and he that receiveth light, and continueth in God, receiveth more light; and that light groweth brighter and brighter until the perfect day.³⁸

He that keepeth [God's] commandments receiveth truth and light, until he is glorified in truth and knoweth all things.³⁹

And the Spirit giveth light to every man that cometh into the world; and the Spirit enlighteneth every man through the world, that hearkeneth to the voice of the Spirit.

And every one that hearkeneth to the voice of the Spirit cometh unto God, even the Father.⁴⁰

These are magnificent promises: to be filled with light and truth, to comprehend all things, to be glorified in truth and know all things, and to come even unto the Father. I have no doubt regarding the literal fulfillment of these promises in those who exercise their agency to choose obedience, but, along with you, I recognize that they are not realized in a day. There is much of keeping commandments—much of practice, if you will—much of

experience required before we will enjoy a fulness. We should, however, be encouraged by what John said of the Savior:

And I, John, saw that he received not of the fulness at the first, but received grace for grace;

And he received not of the fulness at first, but continued from grace to grace, until he received a fulness.⁴¹

So we might presume to follow in His footsteps and receive grace for grace and truth for truth until we also receive a fulness.

Testing as Part of the Essential Experience

A consistent effort will educate and refine our desires so that in time, just as with Jesus, our desires will become aligned with the Father's. But we should expect to be tested. The gift of agency is intended to give us experience. We "taste the bitter, that [we] may know to prize the good."⁴² And Jesus, "though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered."⁴³

We learn how to hold on the right way through adversity. Joseph Smith was told to expect some severe opposition despite making good choices. Said the Lord, "Know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good."⁴⁴ We are in a mortal experience because we cannot become as God without that experience. We must prove to Him and to ourselves that we can consistently make the right choices and then stick to those choices, come what may.

Some think that they should be spared from any adversity if they keep God's commandments, but it is "in the furnace of affliction"⁴⁵ that we are chosen. This is the battle we expected when we "shouted for joy"⁴⁶ at the prospect of this time on earth. I believe the challenge of learning to make and hold onto correct choices in the face of opposition appealed to us when God presented His plan, and we should approach that challenge now without fear, knowing that we can do it and that He will sustain us. Certainly the alternative would not appeal to us. As Elder James E. Talmage observed:

But for the opportunity thus given, the spirits of God's offspring would have remained forever in a state of innocent childhood, sinless through no effort of their own; negatively saved, not from sin, but from the opportunity of meeting sin; incapable of winning the honors of victory because prevented from taking part in the conflict.⁴⁷

The Lord's promise is not to spare us the conflict but to preserve and console us in our afflictions and to consecrate them for our gain.⁴⁸

Elder Donald L. Hallstrom of the Seventy offered a

present-day example in an article in the January 2006 Ensign, where he recounted the experiences of Brother Toshio Kawada and his wife Miyuki:

Like all of us, Toshio Kawada of the Obihiro Ward, Sapporo Japan Stake, has had to make crucial choices when faced with life's difficulties. He joined the Church in 1972, and he and his wife, Miyuki, were sealed in the Laie Hawaii Temple in 1978. They have two sons....

More than 20 years ago, when his family was still very young, Brother Kawada was working for his father as a dairy farmer. Tragically, one day the large barn where they kept their milk cows and all their equipment burned down. Financially devastated, his father went to the farmers' union for a loan but was turned down. Subsequently, his father and older brother filed for bankruptcy. Although not legally responsible, Brother Kawada felt obligated to help pay back all the debts.

As Brother Kawada was pondering a solution to his problem, he decided to plant carrots. He had grown potatoes, but he did not know how to grow carrots. He planted the seeds and prayed earnestly for his carrots to grow.

All this time, Brother Kawada faithfully served in the Church, kept the Sabbath day holy, and paid his tithing. When he and his family dressed in their best clothes and went to their Sunday meetings, many neighbors scoffed at them. It was difficult to lose one day a week in their fields, especially at harvest time. It was not always easy for them to pay their tithing, but they offered it to the Lord obediently and cheerfully.

Fall came and Brother Kawada's carrots turned out to be unusually sweet and large, with an exceptionally rich color. He had an abundant harvest and went to the farmers' union for help, but they refused to sell his carrots through their distribution system. He fasted and prayed and felt inspired to try to find a produce distributor in Tokyo—something that is very difficult to do without introductions or connections.

Brother Kawada was blessed to find a large distributor in Tokyo. Since then he has been very successful and has repaid all his father's debts. He currently has a large agricultural operation with many employees, and he is teaching young farmers how to effectively organize their businesses.

Even in exceptionally trying circumstances, Brother Kawada chose to be true to the promises he made in his baptismal, priesthood, and temple covenants.⁴⁹

Let me read you some of Brother Kawada's own words from his testimony:

Sometimes we worked until midnight on Saturday to keep from breaking the Sabbath. We went to church the next day, often without much sleep. Once we came home from church, and a cow had gotten caught in the pasture fence and died. There were times when we had millions of yen worth of damage to our cut hay because it had lain in the rain on the Sabbath. We knew accidents didn't happen because it was Sunday. If you worry about that kind of thing, you would never be able to keep the Sabbath. Accidents can happen anytime....

We planted carrots with great success. Finally we were getting some kind of order in our lives. With carrots, it didn't matter if it rained or we took every Sunday off. We could make our own decisions. We could serve more easily in any calling we were called to.

In our business, we use a lot of part-time help. When we are really busy, our employees suggest that we work Sundays. I tell them that we just don't work on Sundays. When our workers know that, they work hard and rarely take days off. On Sundays the younger workers spend the day with their children, and the older workers visit with their grandchildren.⁵⁰

I like that.

Exercising agency in a setting that sometimes includes opposition and hardship is what makes life more than a simple multiple-choice test. God is interested in what you are becoming as a result of your choices. He is not satisfied if your exercise of moral agency is simply a robotic effort at keeping some rules. Your Savior wants you to become something, not just do some things.⁵¹ He is endeavoring to make you independently strong—more able to act for yourself than perhaps those of any prior generation. You must be able to be righteous, even when He withdraws His Spirit, or, as Brigham Young said, even "in the dark."⁵²

Using your agency to choose His will, and not slackening even when the going gets hard, will not make you God's puppet; it will make you like Him. God gave you agency and Jesus showed you how to use it so that eventually you could learn what They know, do what They do, and be what They are.

Remember that with His gift to you of moral agency, your Heavenly Father has graciously provided help in exercising that agency in a way that will yield precious, positive fruit in your life here and hereafter. Among other resources, you have the scriptures that contain the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ, mentors and parents

who love you, the voice of prophets and apostles living among you, the covenants and ordinances of the priesthood and the temple, the gift of the Holy Ghost, prayer, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Draw upon these resources constantly to guide your choices, to do always those things that please God.

With President Hinckley, I express my confidence in you. I thank God for you. I thank God for the gift of moral agency. I thank Him for the gift of His Son, whose life and sacrifice animate that moral agency. I testify that Jesus Christ has redeemed us from the Fall, that He lives, and that through Him we “are free to choose liberty and eternal life.”⁵³ In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Standing Strong and Immovable,” Worldwide Leadership Training Meeting: The Priesthood and the Auxiliaries of the Relief Society, Young Women, and Primary, 10 January 2004 (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 20.
2. See, for example, 2 Nephi 2:27, 10:23; Helaman 14:30.
3. See D&C 58:27.
4. 2 Nephi 2:11.
5. See 2 Nephi 2:11–13.
6. 2 Nephi 2:11.
7. See 2 Nephi 2:13.
8. 2 Nephi 2:14.
9. 2 Nephi 2:16.
10. 2 Nephi 2:15.
11. 2 Nephi 2:23.
12. See 2 Nephi 10:23.
13. See Moses 4:3.
14. Moses 7:32.
15. Mosiah 2:21.
16. Dallin H. Oaks, “Weightier Matters” (9 February 1999), BYU 1998–99 Speeches (Provo: BYU, 1999), 148.
17. Revelation 12:7.
18. Moses 4:3–4.
19. See D&C 29:40, 93:38–39.
20. D&C 29:39.
21. “If man is to be rewarded for righteousness and punished for evil, then common justice demands that he be given the power of independent action. . . . If he were coerced to do right at all times, or were helplessly enticed to commit sin, he would merit neither a blessing for the first nor punishment for the second” (David O. McKay, “Free Agency—A Divine Gift,” *Improvement Era*, May 1950, 366).
22. Alma 42:7.
23. 2 Nephi 9:6, 8–10.
24. 2 Nephi 9:12, 13.
25. Moses 6:57; see also 3 Nephi 27:19.
26. See 2 Nephi 2:5.
27. 2 Nephi 2:6–7; see also Alma 42:22–24.
28. C. Terry Warner, in Daniel H. Ludlow, ed.,

Encyclopedia of Mormonism, 5 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), s.v. “agency,” 1:27.

29. John 8:29; see also 3 Nephi 11:11.
30. John 8:30–32.
31. John 8:36.
32. Alma 30:24, 27.
33. See “Girl Honored for Saving Lives with Pre-Tsunami Warning,” *Deseret Morning News*, 27 December 2005, A2.
34. D&C 93:24.
35. D&C 93:36.
36. Daniel H. Ludlow, “Moral Free Agency” (2 July 1974), *Speeches of the Year, 1974* (Provo: BYU Press, 1975), 182.
37. D&C 88:67.
38. D&C 50:24.
39. D&C 93:28.
40. D&C 84:46–47; emphasis added.
41. D&C 93:12–13.
42. Moses 6:55.
43. Hebrews 5:8.
44. D&C 122:7.
45. Isaiah 48:10; 1 Nephi 20:10.
46. Job 38:7.
47. James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith*, 12th ed. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1924), 70.
48. See 2 Nephi 2:2, 4:19–26; Jacob 3:1.
49. Donald L. Hallstrom, “Using Agency Wisely,” *Ensign*, January 2006, 9–10.
50. Toshio Kawada, in Hallstrom, “Using Agency,” 11.
51. “The Final Judgment is not just an evaluation of a sum total of good and evil acts—what we have *done*. It is an acknowledgment of the final effect of our acts and thoughts—what we have *become*. It is not enough for anyone just to go through the motions. The commandments, ordinances, and covenants of the gospel are not a list of deposits required to be made in some heavenly account. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a plan that shows us how to become what our Heavenly Father desires us to become” (Dallin H. Oaks, “The Challenge to Become,” *Ensign*, November 2000, 32; emphasis in original).
52. Brigham Young’s Office Journal, 28 January 1857, Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; cited in James E. Faust, “The Light in Their Eyes,” *Ensign*, November 2005, 22.
53. 2 Nephi 2:27.