God’s Foreknowledge, Premortal Existence, Purpose of Mortality, Agency

President Joseph F. Smith, Gospel Doctrine, 13.

SPIRIT MEMORIES. (Letter written to Elder Orson F. Whitney, who was a missionary in England.) I heartily endorse your sentiments respecting congeniality of spirits. Our knowledge of persons and things before we came here, combined with the divinity awakened within our souls through obedience to the gospel, powerfully affects, in my opinion, all our likes and dislikes, and guides our preferences in the course of this life, provided we give careful heed to the admonitions of the Spirit.

All those salient truths which come home so forcibly to the head and heart seem but the awakening of the memories of the spirit. Can we know anything here that we did not know before we came? Are not the means of knowledge in the first estate [preexistence] equal to those of this? I think that the spirit before and after this probation, possess greater facilities, aye, manifold greater, for the acquisition of knowledge, than while manacled and shut up in the prison-house of mortality.

Had we not known before we came the necessity of our coming, the importance of obtaining tabernacles, the glory to be achieved in posterity, the grand object to be attained by being tried and tested — weighed in the balance, in the exercise of the divine attributes, god-like powers and free agency with which we are endowed; whereby, after descending below all things, Christ-like, we might ascend above all things, and become like our Father, Mother, and Elder Brother, Almighty and Eternal — we never would have come: that is, if we could have stayed away.

I believe that our Savior is the ever-living example to all flesh in all these things [including having posternity]. He no doubt possessed a foreknowledge of all the vicissitudes through which he would have to pass in the mortal tabernacle, when the foundations of this earth were laid, “when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy.” When he conversed with the Brother of Jared, on the Mount, in his spiritual [spirit] body, he understood his mission, and knew the work he had to do, as thoroughly as when he ascended from the Mount of Olives before the wondering gaze of the Jewish disciples, with his resurrected, glorious and immortal body.

And yet, to accomplish the ultimatum of his previous existence, and consummate the grand and glorious object of his being, and the salvation of his infinite brotherhood, he had to come and take upon him flesh. He is our example. The works he did, we are commanded to do. We are enjoined to follow him, as he followed his Head; that where he is, we may be also; and being with him, may be like him. If Christ knew beforehand, so did we. But in coming here, we forgot all, that our agency might be free indeed, to choose good or evil, that we might merit the reward of our own choice and conduct. But by the power of the Spirit, in the redemption of Christ, through obedience, we often catch a spark from the awakened memories of the immortal soul, which lights us up our whole being as with the glory of our former home. [Contributor, 1883, Vol 4, pp. 114- 115.]

Neal A. Maxwell, Deposition of a Disciple, A1

Second Questioner: The belief of Latter-day Saints about the devil is clearly not the only hard doctrine. You have already made very specific assertions about the doctrine of the preexistence, the reality that we mortals lived as individuals before we came to earth. May we focus on this now?

The Disciple: Individuals have a genetic and an environmental inheritance, each of which is powerfully important. But there is an even earlier bestowal that follows us from our premortal existence wherein our personalities and traits were developed in various ways and in various degrees and strengths. The third bestowal is at least as important as those involving genes and environment. All three combined would, if fully comprehended, give us a true picture of the human personality and how it has been shaped and molded. This would help to explain human differences that are not explainable solely on the basis of genes and environment, varied as these are.

Second Questioner: It’s all so outside our usual frame of reference, isn’t it?

The Disciple: Yes, the gospel helps us to overcome that provincialism. Much of the so-called Christian world does not accept this teaching, or if they do, their acceptance is confined to a pre-existent Jesus only. Just as Christianity didn’t begin with Christ in the meridian of time, so other things extend backward even into our first estate as well, and still others forward into our next estate — far more than others have imagined.

No wonder the world has become rather mixed up about it all. When many are missing the first act of a three-act play and are uncertain about whether there will even be a third act, the second act seems such a small and anxious sample.

First Questioner: Understanding and accepting the plan of salvation seem to be the key to so many things.

The Disciple: Yes! The gospel is not shy about strategic truths. We understand, for instance, that the preexistence was an expanse of time in which we developed talents, capacities, and abilities and then brought them in our “luggage” when we came here. We assume, as Elder Bruce R. McConkie has said, that Mozart developed certain of his talents before he came to mortality, and that Melchizedek came into this world with such faith and spiritual capacity that when he was a child, “he feared God, and stopped the mouths of lions, and quenched the violence of fire.” (Genesis 14:26, Inspired Version.)

If we could see man in continuum, then we could both understand and rejoice more in the plan of life.

Second Questioner: But how can those who do not believe in the preexistence do this?

The Disciple: They can’t, of course, and that is one of their real problems. We try to help them by teaching the gospel and hopefully by living the gospel in such a way that we can direct their attention to this great truth on which so many other things depend for clarity and consistency.

First Questioner: But do not the views about foreordination come dangerously close to being predestination?

The Disciple: No, it is a distinction with a real difference. Any serious student of the scriptures can see the interplay of agency and of knowledge. The doctrine of predestination would rob man of his agency. I rather assume, for instance, that Satan’s sponsorship of the doctrine of predestination occurred because it came very close to what he preferred in the preexistence; it also gave people an unfortunate excuse for both failure and arrogance here in this second estate. That’s quite a different thing from foreordination, such as Elder McConkie described in the instance of President Spencer W. Kimball, “a spirit son of God who was called and chosen and foreordained before the foundations of the earth were laid,” and who is now fulfilling the destiny designed for him from the preexistence, and promised him, in our presence, as we sat with him in the Grand Council when God Himself was there.” Obviously, agency operates. By contrast, mighty David fell from his appointed place because of grave errors. David’s fall did not surprise the Lord, but the Lord gave David every chance, just as he did Judas. Jesus knew from the beginning who would betray him in every dispensation, and he stood ready to roll back, wherever repentance was real (as in the case of the city of Nineveh), any prophetically projected dire consequences. Not only real but gladly!

Second Questioner: This suggests that our blessings in this life may grow out of our obedience in that first estate, just as our blessings in the world to come will reflect our performance in the second estate. Do you subscribe to that seriously?

The Disciple: One must be especially careful about judging the limitations some have in this second estate, since these may reflect understanding and how one has not understand. But as to callings, foreordination operates. More important than my words are the words of President Harold B. Lee. In his last general conference
address in October 1973, he made this observation: “All these rewards were seemingly promised, or foreordained, before the world was. Surely these matters must have been determined by the kind of lives we had lived in that premortal spirit world. Some may question these assumptions, but at the same time they will accept without any question the belief that each one of us will be judged when we leave this earth according to his or her deeds during our lives here in mortality. Isn’t it just as reasonable to believe that what we have received here in this earthly life was given to each of us according to merits of our conduct before we came here?”

First Questioner: Like the lines from William Wordsworth?

The Disciple: It is much more than the poetry of Wordsworth, beautiful as that is. You are referring, of course, to Wordsworth’s “Ode on Intimations of Immortality.” President David O. McKay drew to our attention the fact that Wordsworth was somewhat criticized for that poem because it suggested a belief in a preexistence. Under criticism, Wordsworth hedged but finally added, “But let us bear in mind that, though the idea is not advanced in revelation, there is nothing here to contradict it, and the fall of man presents an analogy in its favor.” It doesn’t surprise me that men like Wordsworth and others come close to the truth.

I am constantly impressed by how the Lord lifts all people who will be lifted to receive insights of various kinds. Our doctrine, however, comes from prophets, not poets, and the doctrine is, therefore, bound up in revealed truth. Otherwise, we would be left like Wordsworth, only with intimations rather than bold declarations. The quotation by President Lee, by the way, is one of those questions that is really not a question but an assertion.

First Questioner: Is the idea of graded salvation linked to the idea of graded performance not only in mortality, but also in the preexistence?

The Disciple: Undoubtedly, it is. President Joseph Fielding Smith observed rather directly, which was ever his style, that “when tests were made,” individuals in the premortal state were chosen on the basis of how they performed in the first estate and because of their “superior intelligence manifest in the spirit world.”

Second Questioner: You mean intellectual ability?

The Disciple: No, I mean intelligence — the ability to perceive truth and act upon it, not simply to accumulate it in the abstract for the thrills of intellectual possession. Jesus could never have fully conceptualized the Sermon on the Mount had he not also exemplified its teachings. The Christian’s expanded conceptual capacity is tied to his expanded behavioral capacity. Beliefs may exceed behavior (or performance) temporarily, of course, but as the former precedes the latter, so the latter can constrain the former over time; if there is no improvement in behavior, conceptual power wanes.

First Questioner: All of this about the premortal past suggests a rationing or allocation of roles and high talent to various stages of human history, does it not?

The Disciple: Yes, it does. Paul was alluding to the fact that in the days of old “the most High divided to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel” (Deuteronomy 32:7-8), when in Athens he made much the same declaration about how the Lord had “determined the times before (Deuteronomy 32:7-8), when in Athens he made much the same declaration about how the Lord had “determined the times before (Deuteronomy 32:7-8), when in Athens he made much the same declaration about how the Lord had “determined the times before (Deuteronomy 32:7-8), when in Athens he made much the same declaration about how the Lord had “determined the times before their conduct. Such was given to each of us according to merits of our conduct before we came here?”

First Questioner: Aren’t some of the versions of the preexistence somewhat romanticized, however?

The Disciple: Perhaps they have been, yet I am one of those who feels, who hears from one like President Joseph F. Smith, as well as in his letter to Elder Orson F. Whitney, that these are truths to be taken into account. In his letter, published in 1882, President Smith said: “Had we not known before we came the necessity of our coming, the importance of obtaining tabernacles, the glory to be achieved in posterity, the grand object to be obtained by being tried and tested — weighed in the balance, in the exercise of the divine attributes, God-like powers and free agency with which we are endowed; whereby, after descending below all things, Christ like, we might ascend above all things, and become like our Father, Mother, and Elder Brother, almighty and eternal — we would never have come; that is, if we could have stayed away.”

This suggests an excellence of environment in our first estate, filled with much that would attract us and retain us had we not seen the necessity of coming here. Each of us in our more sober and spiritual moments can know those situations which President Smith describes as lighting up “our whole being as with glory of our former home.”

President George Q. Cannon observed, much as did other early brethren, “If we could understand the glory we once had with our Father in Heaven, we would be discontented in dwelling in this condition of existence. We would pine for the home we left behind us with its glory and its beauty.”

First Questioner: I can understand an over-all plan, but is the plan really a plan down to rather minute details?

The Disciple: Yes, or else it would not be a plan. There cannot be a plan for the whole without a plan for each part, and when we understand the plan of God, as President Brigham Young observed, we will “comprehend that it is the most reasonable way [of] dealing with the human family.” We will also, he said, “discern that purity, holiness, justice, perfection, and all that adorns the character of the Deity are contributing to the salvation of men.” The great view of God is marvelous to contemplate compared with the distant deity some suggest, a passive “life force” out there somewhere in space.

George McDonald said, “Of all teachings that which presents a far distant God is the nearest to absurdity. Either there is none, or He is nearer to everyone of us than our nearest consciousness of self.” (C. S. Lewis, George McDonald Anthology, London: Geoffrey Bles, 1970.)

First Questioner: Does this mean it is important to have a knowledge of God?

The Disciple: It is crucial, crucial! The Prophet Joseph Smith said, “Having a knowledge of God, we begin to know how to approach Him, and how to ask so as to receive an answer. When we understand the character of God, and know how to come to Him, He begins to unfold the heavens to us, and to tell us all about it. When we are ready to come to Him, He is ready to come to us.”

Bruce R. McConkie, Mormon Doctrine, 290 FOREORDINATION
Alma taught the great truth that everyone who holds the Melchizedek Priesthood was foreordained to receive that high and holy order in the pre-existent councils of eternity. “This is the manner after which they were ordained,” he says. They were “called and prepared from the foundation of the world according to the foreknowledge of God, on account of their exceeding faith and good works [while yet living in pre-existence]; in the first place [that is, in pre-existence] being left to choose good or evil; therefore they having chosen good, and exercising exceeding great faith, are called with a holy calling, yea, with that holy calling which was prepared with, and according to, a preparatory redemption for such.” Thus, he explains, Melchizedek Priesthood holders have been “prepared from the foundation of the world” for their high callings. The Lord has prepared them “from eternity to all eternity, according to his foreknowledge of all things.” (Alma 13:3-9.)

James E. Talmage, Jesus the Christ, Ch.3, 18.

Let not ignorance and thoughtlessness lead us into the error of assuming that the Father’s foreknowledge as to what would be, under given conditions, determined that such must be. It was not His
design that the souls of mankind be lost; on the contrary it was and is His work and glory, “to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man.” Nevertheless He saw the evil into which His children would assuredly fall, and with infinite love and mercy He ordained means of averting the dire effect, provided the transgressor would elect to avail himself thereof. The offer of the firstborn Son to establish through His own ministry among men the gospel of salvation, and to sacrifice Himself, through labor, humiliation and suffering even unto death, was accepted and made the foreordained plan of man’s redemption from death, of His eventual salvation from the effects of sin, and of his possible exaltation through righteous achievement.


The concept of a chosen and favored people, a concept scarcely known in the world and but little understood even by the saints of God, is one of the most marvelous systems ever devised for administering salvation to all men in all nations in all ages. Israel, the Lord’s chosen people, were a congregation set apart in preexistence. In large measure, the spirit children of the Father who acquired a talent for spirituality, who chose to heed the divine word then given, and who sought, above their fellowso, to do good and work righteousness — all these were foreordained to be born in the house of Israel. They were chosen before they were born. This is the doctrine of election. They were true and faithful in the premortal life, and they earned the right to be born as the Lord’s people and to have the privilege, on a preferential basis of believing and obeying the word of truth. Believing blood, the blood of Abraham, flows in their veins. They are the ones of whom Jesus said: “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.” (John 10:27–28.)

Neal A. Maxwell, All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience, 6 ff.

Few doctrines, save those pertaining to the reality of the existence of God, are more basic than the truth that God is omniscient. “O how great the holiness of our God! For he knoweth all things, and there is not anything save he knows it.” (2 Ne 9:20.) Unfortunately, this truth is sometimes only passively assimilated to by individuals who avoid exploring it and coming to understand its implications. Later on, such believers sometimes have difficulty with the implications of this core doctrine — which connects with other powerful doctrines such as the foreknowledge of God, foreordination, and foreassignment. The all-loving God who shapes our individual growing and sanctifying experiences — and then sees us through them — could not do so if He were not omniscient.

The word omniscienthas, at times, been used carelessly, unnecessarily blurring our understanding of this very fundamental attribute of God. We read in the Prophet Joseph Smith’s Lectures on Faith that God is perfect in the attributes of divinity, and one of these is knowledge: “... seeing that without the knowledge of all things, God would not be able to save any portion of his creatures; for it is by reason of the knowledge which he has of all things, from the beginning to the end, that enables him to give that understanding to his creatures by which they are made partakers of eternal life; and if it were not for the idea existing in the minds of men that God had all knowledge it would be impossible for him to exercise faith in him.” (Lecture 4, paragraph 11.)

Joseph Smith also declared, “God is the only supreme governor and independent being in whom all fullness and perfection dwell; who is omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient.” (Lecture 2, paragraph 2.)

God, who knows the beginning from the end, knows, therefore, all that is in between. He could not safely see us through our individual allotments of “all these things” that shall give us experience if He did not first know “all things.”

Below the scripture that declares that God knows “all things” there is no footnote reading “except that God is a little weak in geophysics!” We do not worship a God who simply forecasts a generally greater frequency of earthquakes in the last days before the second coming of His Son; He knows precisely when and where all these will occur. God has even prophesied that the Mount of Olives will cleave in twain at a precise latter-day time as Israel is besieged. (Zechariah 14:4.)

There are no qualifiers, only flat and absolute assertions of the omniscience of God such as these: “The Lord searcheth all hearts, and understandeth all.” (1 Chronicles 28:9.) The psalmist said that the Lord’s “understanding is infinite.” (Psalm 147:5.) “Now we are sure that thou knowest all things.” (John 16:30.) “The Lord knoweth all things which are to come.” (Words of Mormon 1:7.)

Mortals should not aspire to teach God that He is not omniscient by adding qualifiers that He has never used in the scriptures. Job rightly asked, “Shall any teach God knowledge?” (Job 21:22.) The Lord could not know all things that are to come if He did not know all things that are past as well as all things that are present. Alma described God’s “foreknowledge” of all things and said also that God “comprehendeth all things.” (Alma 13:3; 26:35.) Indicating that omniscience is a hallmark of divinity, Helaman wrote, “Except he was a God he could not know of all things.” (Helaman 9:41.)

The Lord Himself said that He “kneweth all things, for all things are present” before Him. (D&C 38:2.) We read, too, that “all things are present with me, for I know them all.” (Moses 1:6.)

Therefore, God’s omniscience is not solely a function of prolonged and discerning familiarity with us — but of the stunning reality that the past and present and future are part of an “eternal now” with God! (Joseph Smith, History of the Church 4:597.) ...

We define the veil as the border between mortality and eternity; it is also a film of forgetting that covers the memories of earlier experiences. This forgetfulness will be lifted one day, and on that day we will see forever, rather than “through a glass, darkly.” (1 Corinthians 13:12.)

However, there are poignant reminders of the veil even now, adding to our sense of being close but still outside. In our deepest prayers, when the agency of man encounters the omniscience of God, we sometimes sense how provincial our petitions really are. We perceive that there are more good answers than we have good questions, and that we have been taught more than we can tell, for the language used is not that which tongue can transmit.... But mercifully the veil is there! It is fixed by the wisdom of God for our good. It is no use our being irritated with the Lord over that reality, for it is clearly a condition to which we agreed so long ago. Even when the veil is parted briefly, it will be on His terms, not ours. Such partings of the veil happen, of course, but in private settings and often with instructions or needed reassurances to expedite God’s work and always to reward faith — not to moot [argue] faith.

Without the veil, for instance, we would lose that precious insulation which keeps us from a profound and disabling homesickness that would interfere with our mortal probation and maturation. Without the veil, our brief, mortal walk in a darkening world would lose its meaning, for one would scarcely carry the flashilight of faith at noontday and in the presence of the Light of the world!

Without the veil, we could not experience the gospel of work and the sweat of our brow. If we had the security of having already entered into God’s rest, certain things would be unneeded; Adam and Eve did not carry social security cards in the Garden of Eden! And how could we learn about obedience if we were shielded from the consequences of our disobedience?

Nor could we choose for ourselves in His holy presence among alternatives that do not there exist, for God’s court is filled with those who have both chosen and overcome — whose company we do not yet deserve.

Fortunately, the veil keeps the first, second, and third estates separate, hence our sense of separateness. The veil insures the avoidance of having things “compound in one” — to our everlasting
before they form a mob, just as He saw where civil rebellion in
perfectness. God can see into the hearts of the malcontent even
a suffering Joseph Smith, God said, “Thy days are known, and thy
are assumed by us to be “built in” features of our lives. Think of the
expansion of the lungs — to these we scarcely give a thought. These
predictability of other things in this second estate. Each spring
unexplained reality!

There is simply no way to reconcile the doctrine of
the omniscience of God with the notion of a god who is something less
than that.

Unfortunately, the omniscience of God in the minds of some
well-meaning Latter-day Saints has been qualified by the concept of
“eternal progression.” Some have wrongly assumed God’s progress
is related to His acquisition of additional knowledge. In
fact, God’s “eternal progression” (if one is nevertheless
determined to apply these two words to God) is related to the
successful execution, again and again, of His plan of salvation to
redeem billions of His children throughout His many creations.
President Brigham Young said there are “millions of earths” like this one.
(JD 1:1-41.) Of this marvelous recurring and redemptive
process that rolls forth on such a vast scale, God has said that “his
course is one eternal round.” (D&C 3:2.)

President Joseph Fielding Smith observed that God’s progression
“is in building worlds and bringing to pass the immortality and
eternal life of man, . . . not his intelligence or knowledge, or virtue,
or wisdom, or love, for these things are, as the scriptures teach, in a
state of perfection.” (Church History and Modern Revelation, 1947,
1:169.)

Since we cannot fully comprehend any one of God’s perfected
attributes, we surely cannot comprehend them in the aggregate. But
we can have faith in Him and in His attributes as He has described
these to us. This is what He asks of us. We may say that this is a lot
to ask, but anything less will not do.

Those who try to qualify God’s omniscience fail to understand
that He has no need to avoid ennum [boredom] by learning new
things. Because God’s love is also perfect, there is, in fact, divine
delight in that “one eternal round” which, to us, seems to be all
routine and repetition. God derives His great and continuing joy
and glory by increasing and advancing His creations, and not from new
intellectual experiences.

There is a vast difference, therefore, between an omniscient
God and the false notion that God is on some sort of post-doctoral
fellowship, still searching for additional key truths and vital data.
Were the latter so, God might, at any moment, discover some new
truth not previously known to Him that would restructure, diminish,
or undercut certain truths previously known by Him. Prophecy
would be mere prediction. Planning assumptions pertaining to our
redemption would need to be revised. Fortunately for us, however,
His plan of salvation is constantly underway — not constantly under
revision.

An omniscient God foresaw the modern establishment of Israel
as a separate nation-state. Historians have since acclaimed the
remarkableness of how the United Nations voted to establish the
state of Israel with the support of both the United States and the
Soviet Union. It was a narrow political space window through which
necessary events quickly passed, leading to the official
establishment of Judah once again in the Holy Land. But it was a
space window that was soon closed.

The Lord foresaw the establishment two centuries ago of
precious but imperative constitutional freedoms in the land of
America, the host nation for His kingdom in the last days —
the place where many of the events connected with the restoration
could occur, and where He could establish His church without its
light being snuffed out by a state religion or paganism. But a god
who was not omniscient might have attempted to establish his
restored church in beleaguered Lithuania.
The Lord's determination of timing is also tied to His omniscience. Even mortals can see through the glass of history “darkly.” The readers, for instance, of Barbara Tuchman's highly researched book about the fourteenth century (A Distant Mirror) will note how that century included several plagues of the black death (in just one of these visitations death took one in three of all mortals living between Iceland and India); the interminable "hundred years" war; and peasant revolts that racked much of Europe. Hardly the century or the setting that the Restoration would require! It would also have been a century without printing presses — no time to bring forth the Book of Mormon!

A god who did not perfectly know his prophets — and indeed all his spirit children — might have selected a prominent nineteenth-century clergymen to receive the first vision, only to find later that the clergymen was bent on taming the truths he thus learned. In order to make these truths more acceptable to his fellow clergymen, such an individual might have excised such words as "none" and "all" from the message of that theophany in the grove in which the Lord described churches at the time of the restoration. (Joseph Smith — History 1:19.) The carefully and divinely selected receiver of that marvelous manifestation, Joseph Smith, had to suffer and die for repeating those divinely declared words. God's martyrs are not permitted great concern over public relations, for truth is a relentless taskmaster.

A god who is not omniscient would have had difficulty predicting two millennia beforehand the troubled conditions (including the ominous, multinational military convergence) that will occur in the Middle East in connection with the second coming of the Savior. (Zechariah 14:2; Revelation 11.) If He did not know all the factors and variables beforehand, those prophesies and all prophecies would come to naught. These final Scenes of some of the difficulties in the last days, for all someone less than omniscient might know, could well end up being centered not in the Middle East, but on the island of Luzon.

If God did not know our predilections and our choices even before we made them, and had not planned accordingly, we might well have ended up having Joseph Smith born in Manchuria and the Book of Mormon plates buried in Belgium! A less than omniscient god would be more like the earnest but fumbling Caesars who dot the landscape of history than a living, all-knowing God.

Though His plans are known to Him, there is no premature exposure of the Lord's plans. This could bring unnecessary persecution upon an unready Lord's people. Further, a premature showing of His power and strength in support of His Saints could cut short the trial of our faith.

When God has imerssed His people for His purposes in larger events, we do not, therefore, always see secular history that confirms spiritual happenings. (See D&C 121:12.) For instance, there appears to be no conclusive secular record of Moses and the Exodus in Egyptian history. There is even some disagreement among scholars about which pharaoh was the pharaoh of the Exodus.

Human history has its limitations, but obscurity its usefulness. Traditional discussions of omniscience ignore the fact that this attribute is much more than God's simply noticing and observing everything as it happens. It is a remarkable thing for God to notice every sparrow that falls. But God could be fully noticing and aware — and yet still be surprised, along with the rest of us. Yet the living God is aware of all things before they unfold. This supernal dimension of knowledge is a part of omniscience!

Because of His omniscience and foreknowledge, God is, therefore, able to see His plan unfold safely. If He were less than omniscient and did not, in fact, operate out of perfect foreknowledge, His plan of salvation would by now be in shambles.

The Father needed to know, for instance (and know long before assignments were given in the premortal world), that Jesus Christ would not break in Gethsemane or upon Calvary, refusing to yield up His special life. He needed to know that Joseph Smith could sustain all of the pressures that would be brought to bear upon him without coming apart. He needed to know that certain of the translations of the Book of Mormon would be lost and that substitute plates needed to be restored. (Words of Mormon 1:6-7; D&C 3:10.) God even knew centuries before that the great restoring latter-day prophet would, like his father, bear the name of Joseph and not Walter. (2 Nephi 3:15.)

One might multiply examples of this foreknowledge which grows out of God's omniscience, end upon end. Suffice it to say, we are safe in knowing that one of the perfected attributes of our Father in heaven is knowledge. No wonder the Prophet Joseph taught that if men do not comprehend the character of God, they do not comprehend themselves.

God is never surprised (fantasy stories to the contrary) by unexpected arrivals in the spirit world because of unforeseen deaths. But we must always distinguish between God's being able to foresee and His causing or desiring something to happen, a very important distinction! God foresaw the fall of His beloved David but did not cause it. (See D&C 132:39.) Sending for Bathsheba was David's decision, and even her battle-weary husband Uriah's sleeping loyally by David's door was not enough to bring a by then devious and determined David to his senses. (2 Samuel 11:9.)

By foreseeing, God can plan and His purposes can be fulfilled, but He does this in a way that does not in the least compromise our individual free agency, any more than an able meteorologist causes the weather rather than forecasts it. Part of the reason for this is our forgetfulness of our earlier experiences and the present inaccessibility of the knowledge and understanding we achieved there. The basic reason, of course, is that, as we decide and act, we do not know what God knows. Our decisions are made in our context, not His.

This mortal probation (of which the Gods said before we came here, "Let us prove them herewith") is, therefore, a perfectly arranged test. We will all end up kneeling and saying to God that He has been perfect in His justice and His mercy. In fact, we will acknowledge that we deserve the reward, or lack of it, which we one day will receive!

Perhaps it helps to emphasize — more than we sometimes do — that our first estate featured learning of a cognitive type, and it was surely a much longer span than that of our second estate, and the tutoring so much better and more direct.

The second estate, however, is one that emphasizes experiential learning through applying, proving, and testing. We learn cognitively here too, just as a good university examination also teaches even as it tests us. In any event, the books of the first estate are now closed to us, and the present test is, therefore, very real. We have moved, as it were, from first-estate theory to second-estate laboratory. It is here that our Christlike characteristics are further shaped and our spiritual skills are thus strengthened.

Such a transition in emphasis understandably produces genuine anxiety, for to be “proved herewith” suggests a stern test, a test that must roll forward to completion or else all that has been invested up to that point would be at risk.

Some find the doctrines of the omniscience and foreknowledge of God troubling because these seem, in some way, to constrict their individual agency. This concern springs out of a failure to distinguish between how it is that God knows with perfection what is to come but that we do not know, thus letting a very clear and simple doctrine get obscured by our own finite view of things.

Personality patterns, habits, strengths, and weaknesses observed by God over a long period in the premortal world would give God a perfect understanding of what we would do under a given set of circumstances — especially when He knows the circumstances to come. Just because we cannot compute all the variables, just because we cannot extrapolate does not mean that He cannot do so. Omniscience is, of course, one of the essences of Godhood; it sets Him apart in such an awesome way from all of us even though, on a smaller scale, we manage to do a little foreseeing ourselves at times.
with our own children even with our rather finite and imperfect minds.

Ever to be emphasized, however, is the reality that God’s “seeing” is not the same thing as His “causing” something to happen.

We must not approach God as if He were somehow constrained by finite knowledge and by time. A useful and illustrative episode is the one involving the prophet Elisha and his young male servant. The prophet could see that a mountain was hostilely compassed about with horses and chariots of fire. Thus, even though the prophet said to the young man, “Fear not: for they that be with us are more than they that be with them,” he was still puzzled and doubting. Only when his eyes were opened could he see the reassuring reality. Often, so it is with us. We see dimly, or, as Paul said, “through a glass, darkly.” (1 Corinthians 13:12.) Such is the relevance of seers. Such is the role of faith.

In a very real sense, all we need to know is that God knows all!

If one searches for still other reasons as to why the doctrine of the omniscience of God is a stumbling block for some, some of these are attributable to the democratic age in which we live with its inordinate efforts at equalizing everything, rather than achieving justice. The delification of man and the subsequent deep disappointment with man have both happened within decades of each other. It has been a time of terrible wrenching for the humanitarian and the optimist.

The dashed plans of mankind have led many people to a despair and disappointment with life and with themselves. Mortals then impute their deficiencies, somehow, to Divinity.

Yet was it not God who, from the beginning, reminded earthlings that the wisdom of men is foolishness? We are only discovering, afresh, what He has long told us about all man’s puny efforts that do not rely upon Him. Mortals are fretting over the weakened arm of flesh, but God has told us for centuries to beware of those biceps!

This mortal shortfall not only results from the tiny data-bank men have accumulated — compared to God’s — but it also occurs because of the quality and nature of such information as men have collected in that tiny databank. Mortals are, in fact, “ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (2 Timothy 3:7.) So much of the secular data men have accumulated is accurate, but ultimately unimportant. Even learning useful things has often diverted mankind from learning crucial things.

Furthermore, let us not forget that great insight given us about the premortal world. The ascendant of Jesus Christ (among all of our spirit brothers and sisters) is clearly set forth. Of Him it was said that He is “more intelligent than they all.” (Abraham 3:19.) This means that Jesus knows more about astrophysics than all the humans that He is “more intelligent than they all.” (Abraham 3:19.) This means that Jesus knows more about astrophysics than all the humans that He is “more intelligent than they all.” (Abraham 3:19.) This means that Jesus knows more about astrophysics than all the humans. Yet was it not God who, from the beginning, reminded earthlings that the wisdom of men is foolishness? We are only discovering, afresh, what He has long told us about all man’s puny efforts that do not rely upon Him. Mortals are fretting over the weakened arm of flesh, but God has told us for centuries to beware of those biceps!

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It is significant that in

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glory is to lift us up, and His is the work that will finally prevail. Therefore, in order for us to develop trust in God to see us through all these things, we must have a measure of understanding about His nature, including His omniscience. The Prophet Joseph Smith said it was the first principle of real religion to know the true nature of God. (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, 345.) Jesus Christ said in His great high priestly prayer, “And this life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.” (John 17:3.)

The myopic and despairing soul-cry and question, “If there is a God, why does He permit suffering?” reflects a basic failure to understand the very nature of life with its components of chastening and suffering. And as for that question, it is not difficult to imagine who originated it, however understandably sincere some are who now raise it. The question strikes at the heart of Father’s plan, because it comes from him who rejected that plan!

The future duties to be given to some of us in the worlds to come by an omniscient God will require of us an earned sense of esteem as well as proof of our competency. Thus the tests given to us here are given not because God is in doubt as to the outcome, but because we need to grow in order to be able to serve with full effectiveness in the eternity to come.

Further, to be untested and unproven is also to be unaware of all that we are. If we are unknowing of our possibilities, with what could we safely be entrusted? Could we in ignorance of our capacities trust ourselves? Could others then be entrusted to us?

Thus the relentless love of our Father in heaven is such that in His omniscience, He will not allow the cutting short some of the brief experiences we are having here. To do so would be to deprive us of everlasting experiences and great joy there. What else would an omniscient and loving Father do, even if we plead otherwise? He must at times say no.

Furthermore, since there was no exemption from suffering for Christ, how can there be one for us? Do we really want immunity from adversity? Especially when certain kinds of suffering can aid our growth in this life? To deprive ourselves of those experiences, much as we might momentarily like to, would be to deprive ourselves of the outcomes over which we shouted with anticipated joy when this life’s experiences were explained to us so long ago, in the world before we came here.

Life is a school in which we enrolled not only voluntarily but rejoicingly; and if the school’s Headmaster employs a curriculum — proven, again and again on other planets, to bring happiness to participants — and if we agreed that once we were enrolled there would be no withdrawals, and also to undergo examinations that would truly test our ability and perception, what would an experienced Headmaster do if, later on, there were complaints? Especially if, in His seeming absence, many of the school children tore up their guiding notebooks and demanded that He stop the examinations since these produced some pain? There is, to use jargon from American higher education, no way to “CLEP” [test out of a course without taking it] the examinations of the second estate; one learns by taking the full course!

Even in the context of acknowledging His omniscience, the chastening experiences of life are difficult enough for us to bear. We could not trust in the perfectness of God’s judgment if we did not first know that He foresaw and carefully calibrated our chastening and learning experiences accordingly.

In order for “all these things” to make sense, we must come to understand that God has “all sense.” Only then can we reposit with confidence in His perfect love!

Neal A. Maxwell, But for a Small Moment, 95 ff.

All of this brings us now to the need to examine a doctrine within a doctrine within a doctrine. Within the plan of salvation is the doctrine of premortal existence; we then encounter the delicate but important doctrine of foreordination.

The doctrine of foreordination is one of the doctrinal roads “least traveled by.” Yet it clearly underlines how very long and how perfectly God has loved each of us and known each of us, with our individual needs and capacities. It is so powerful a doctrine, however, that isolated from other doctrines, or mishandled, it can induce false pride, stoke the fires offatalism, impact adversely upon agency, cause us to focus on status rather than service, and carry us over into the false doctrine of predestination. President Joseph Fielding Smith warned:

“It is very evident from a thorough study of the gospel and the plan of salvation that a conclusion that those who accepted the Savior were predestined to be saved no matter what the nature of their lives must be an error. . . . Surely Paul never intended to convey such a thought. . . . This might have been one of the passages in Paul’s teachings which caused Peter to declare that there are in Paul’s writings “some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable, wrest as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction.” (Improvement Era, May 1963, pp. 350-351; see 2 Peter 3:16.)

Paul stressed running life’s race the full distance; he did not intend a casual Christianity in which some had won even before the race started.

Yet, though foreordination is a difficult doctrine, it has been given to us by the living God, through living prophets, for a purpose. It can actually increase our understanding of how crucial this mortal second estate is and can further encourage us in humble good works. This precious doctrine can also help us go the second mile, because it indicates that we are doubly called.

In some ways our second estate, in relationship to our first estate, is like agreeing in advance to surgery. Then the anesthetic of forgetfulness settles in upon us. Just as doctors do not pre-anesthetize a patient in the midst of authorized surgery to ask him, again, if the surgery should be continued, or varied to meet a now-discovered need, so in mortality we are not periodically asked to reaffirm our previous agreement to come here and to submit ourselves to certain experiences. Of our situation, Truman Madsen has said, “Our amnesia is God’s anesthesia.” And the surgeon stays with us!

Of course, when we mortals try to fully comprehend rather than graciously accept foreordination, the result is finite minds futilely trying to comprehend omniscience. A full understanding is for now impossible. We simply have to trust in what the Lord has told us, realizing that we are not dealing with guarantees from God but with extra opportunities — and certainly heavier responsibilities.

Foreordained Joseph Smith found himself, for instance, in Liberty Jail and finally in Carthage. He was buffeted by the world from the moment he left the Sacred Grove.

If one’s responsibilities are in some ways linked to past performance or to past capabilities, it should not surprise us. If the tutoring one receives bears down especially upon what remains to be refined, why should it be otherwise?

The Lord said, “There is a law, irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundations of this world, upon which all blessings are predicated. And when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated.” (D&C 130: 20-21.) This eternal law prevailed in the first as well as in the second estate. It should not disconcert us, therefore, that the Lord has indicated that before they came here he chose some individuals to carry out certain assignments in mortality, and that these individuals were foreordained or set apart to those assignments.

Foreordination is like any other blessing — it is a conditional bestowal subject to the recipient’s faithfulness. Prophecies foreshadow events without determining the outcome, this being made possible by a divine foreseeing of outcomes. So foreordination is a conditional bestowment of a role, a responsibility, or a blessing which likewise foresees but does not fix the outcome. Remember John’s sequence — “called, and chosen, and faithful.” (Revelation 17:14.)

There have been those who have failed or who have been, in one degree or another, treaunous to their trust or callings — people such as David, Solomon, and Judas. God foresaw the fall of David but was not the cause of it. It was David who saw Batsheba from
the balcony and sent for her and who ordered what happened to her husband, Uriah. But neither was God surprised by such a sad development.

Thus foreordination is clearly no excuse for fatalism, or arrogance, or the abuse of agency. It is not, however, a doctrine that can be ignored simply because it is difficult. Indeed, deep inside the hardest doctrines are some of the pearls of greatest price.

The doctrine pertains not only to the foreordination of prophets but also to God’s precise assessment of each mortal, or to each of those who will respond to the words of the Savior and the prophets. From the Savior's own lips came these words: “I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and I am known of mine” (John 10:14). Similarly he said, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27). Further, he declared, “And ye are called to bring to pass the gathering of mine elect; for mine elect hear my voice and harden not their hearts” (D&C 29:7).

This responsiveness could not be gauged without divine foreknowledge concerning all mortals and their response to the gospel — a foreknowledge so perfect that it leaves the realm of prediction and enters the realm of prophecy.

It does no violence even to our frail human logic to observe that there cannot be a grand plan of salvation for all mankind unless there is also a plan for each individual. The salvational sum will reflect all its parts.

As part of his infinite foreknowledge, for example, the Lord would need to have perfect comprehension of all the military and political developments in the Middle East for all time. Some of these are unfolding only now, bringing to pass a latter-day condition in which Jerusalem, as Zechariah foretold, will be a “cup of trembling,” a “burdensome stone for all people.” “All nations” will be gathered “against Jerusalem to battle.” (Zechariah 12:2, 3; 14:2.)

It should not surprise us that the Lord, who set bounds and habitations before the world was (see Acts 17:26; Deuteronomy 32:9), would know centuries before the event how much money Judas would receive — thirty pieces of silver — at the time he betrayed the Savior (Matthew 26:15, Matthew 27:3; Zechariah 11:12). Or that the Lord would watch over and encourage his prophet in a Missouri jail.

We are permitted at times, through a process we call inspiration and revelation, to access that divine databank — the knowledge of God — for the narrow purposes at hand. No wonder that experience is so unforgettable!

There are clearly cases of individuals with special limitations in life, conditions we mortals cannot now fully fathom. For all we now know, the seeming limitations may have been an agreed upon spur to achievement — a developmental equivalent of a “thorn in the flesh.” Like him who was “blind from birth,” some come to bring glory to God (John 9:1-3). Some are spiritual pioneers in developing nations who are called by revelation in the midst of environmental deprivation.

We must be exceedingly careful therefore about imputing either wrong causes or wrong rewards to all in such varied circumstances. They too are in the Lord’s hands, and he loves them perfectly. Indeed, some of those who have required much waiting upon in this life may well be waited upon again by the rest of us in the next world — but for the highest of reasons! Furthermore, the rickshaw wallah of Calcutta who refuses to beg, who instead runs for ten miles to bring home his little bundle of goods, is so unforgettable!

We should always understand that while God is not surprised, we often are.

Life’s episodes may thus take on new meaning. For instance, Simon, a Cyrenian, came into Jerusalem that very day and was pressed into service by Roman soldiers to help carry the cross of Christ (Mark 15:21). Simon’s son, Rufus, joined the Church and was so well thought of by the Apostle Paul that the latter mentioned Rufus in his epistle to the Romans, describing him as “chosen in the Lord” (Romans 16:13). Was it, therefore, a mere accident that Simon “who passed by, coming out of the country” was asked to bear the cross of Jesus?

The pattern of proving the chosen pertains to whole peoples, too: “And thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments, or no” (Deuteronomy 8:2). Properly humbled and instructed concerning the great privileges that are ours, we can cope with what seem to be very dark days. With true perspective about “things as they really are,” we can see in them a great chance to contribute.

 medicines, trying to rally his countrymen in an address at Harrow School on October 29, 1941, appealed to them:

Do not let us speak of darker days; let us speak rather of sterner days. These are not dark days: these are great days — the greatest days our country has ever lived; and we must all thank God that we have been allowed, each of us according to our stations, to play a part in making these days memorable in the history of our race. (Bartlett's Familiar Quotations, 14th ed. [Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1968], p. 923.)

The truth about foreordination also helps us to taste of the other deep wisdom of Alma: he said we ought to be “content with the things which the Lord hath allotted unto each of us (Alma 29:3). If, indeed, the things allotted to each of us have been divinely customized, then “why should I desire more than to perform the work to which I have been called?” (Alma 29:6.)

So should we regard the dispensation of the fulness of time —
even when we face stern challenges and circumstances. “These are great days!” Our hearts need not fail us. We can be equal to our challenges.

For us to seek to wrench ourselves free of our schooling circumstances (as obviously distinguished from that betterment we are to seek) could be to tear ourselves away from carefully matched opportunities. To rant and to rail could be to go against divine wisdom, wisdom in which we may once have concurred before we came here. God knew beforehand each of our coefficients for coping and contributing.

President Henry D. Moyle said: “I believe that we, as fellow workers in the priesthood, might well take to heart the admonition of Alma and be content with that which God has allotted us. We might well be assured that we had something to do with our allotment in our pre-existent state. This would be an additional reason for us to accept our present condition and make the best of it. It is what we agreed to do.” (Conference Report, October 1952, 71.)

With regard to our individual traits and personalities, obviously, genes and environment play a large part. But more important than we now know is the luggage we bring with us from the premortal world. In any case, having been rescued from the false doctrine of ex nihilo creation of man, we should be very careful about imputing to God any spiritual deficiencies we may have—especially since it is under his tutelage that we are to overcome these things “really are” and “as they really will be” (Jacob 4:13).

The disciple too will be puzzled at times. But he persists. Later he rejoices and exclaims over how wonderfully things fit together, realizing only then that—with God—things never were apart.

In some of those precious and personal moments of discovery there will be a sudden surge of recognition of an immortal insight, a doctrinal deja vu. We will sometimes experience a flash from the mirror of memory that urges us forward to a far horizon.

When in situations of stress we wonder if there is anything more in us to give, we can be comforted to know that God, who knows our capacity perfectly, placed us here to succeed. No one was foreordained to fail or to be wicked.

When we feel overwhelmed, let us recall the assurance given through Joseph that God, who knows we “cannot bear all things now,” will not overprogram us; he will not press upon us more than we can bear (see D&C 50:40).

The doctrine of foreordination is not a doctrine of repose; instead, it is a doctrine for second- and third-milers, and it will draw out of them the last full measure of devotion. It is a doctrine for the deep believer but it will bring only scorn from the skeptic.

When, as President Joseph F. Smith said, we “catch a spark from the awakened memories of the immortal soul,” let us be quietly grateful. When of great truths we can say “I know,” that powerful spiritual witness may also carry with it the sense of our having known before. With rediscovery, we are really saying “I know—again!”

Until we know more about what Joseph was told in Liberty Jail about “the Council of the Eternal God of all other gods before this world was” (D&C 121:32), we must be elatedly content with the fact that the council was concerned with us as Heavenly Father’s children. It is that, for now, which we need to know—there is a redemptive design and a loving Designer! It is through Joseph Smith that we are given such reassuring answers to those everlasting important questions.

Precious indeed is the doctrine of our premortal existence, with its discernments as to the testing and developing of the Lord’s disciples:

“To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne” (Revelation 3:21).

For us to overcome requires us to reach that point at which, in words translated by Joseph, there is a “yielding [of our] hearts unto God” (Helaman 3:35).

“Being called,” therefore, is not always precisely the same as “being chosen,” and even those “chosen” must still finally qualify as those who are “faithful” (see D&C 121:34-35).

Called, chosen, and faithful Joseph Smith, who slept on a “dirty straw couch” in a “lonesome, dark, and dirty” jail in Liberty, was in that sense triply crowned, for he “endured it well.”

Neal A. Maxwell, Things As They Really Are, 23 ff.

The doctrine of foreordination is one of the doctrinal roads “least traveled by”: nowadays it is dealt with gently and occasionally, yet it underlines how long God has loved us and known our individual needs and capacities. It is so powerful a doctrine, however, that, isolated from other doctrines or mishandled, it can stoke the fires of fatalism, distort agency, and spill over into the perils of predestination. President Joseph Fielding Smith once warned:

It is very evident from a thorough study of the gospel and the plan of salvation that a conclusion to those who accepted the Savior were predestined to be saved no matter what the nature of their lives must be an error. The gospel of salvation based on faithfulness and obedience to the covenants and laws of the gospel is definitely clear in the doctrines of our Lord and his inspired servants. Surely Paul never intended to convey such a thought that in the preexistence many were destined by divine decree to be saved no matter what the nature of their mortal lives might be. This might have been one of the passages in Paul’s teachings which caused Peter to declare that there are in Paul’s writings, “some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable, wrest as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction.” (Improvement Era, May 1963, 350-51.)

Surely Paul, who stressed so rigorously the importance of pressing forward and running the race the full distance in our discipleship, did not intend a casual Christianity, in which some had won even before the race started!

Yes, though foreordination is a difficult doctrine, it has been given to us by the living God, through living prophets, for a purpose. It can increase our understanding of how crucial this mortal second estate is and encourage us in good works. This precious doctrine can help us go the second mile because we are doubly called.

When we mortals try to comprehend rather than to accept foreordination, finite minds are trying to comprehend omniscience. A full understanding is impossible; we simply have to trust in what the Lord has told us, knowing that we are not dealing with guarantees from God, but extra opportunities and heavy responsibilities. If those responsibilities are linked to past performance or past capabilities, it should not surprise us. The Lord said, “There is a law, irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundations of this world, upon which all blessings are predicated—And when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated.” (D&C 130:20-21.)

That law of blessings based upon obedience prevailed in the first estate as well as in the second estate. It should not disconcert us, therefore, that the Lord has indicated that before they came here he chose some individuals to play certain roles and, therefore, these individuals have been foreordained to those assignments.

Foreordination is like any other blessing — it is a conditional bestowal subject to our faithfulness. Prophecies foreshadow events without determining those outcomes, because of a divine foreseeing of that outcome. So foreordination is a conditional bestowal of a role, responsibility, or a blessing that, likewise, foreshores but does not fix the outcome.

There have been those who have failed or who have been treasonous to their trust, such as David, Solomon, and Judas. God foresaw the fall of David, but God was not the cause of it. It was David who from the balcony both saw and sent for Bathsheba. But God was not surprised by such sad developments. God foresaw but
did not cause Martin Harris’s loss of certain pages of the translated Book of Mormon, he made plans to cope with that failure over fifteen hundred years before it was to occur. (See Preface to D&C 10, and Words of Mormon 1:6-7.)

Thus foreordination is no excuse for fanaticism or arrogance or the abuse of agency. It is not, however, a doctrine that can be ignored simply because it is difficult. It is best approached, as Peter may have implied, by those who are sufficiently learned and spiritually stable. (2 Peter 3:16.)

The doctrine pertains not only to the foreordination of prophets, but also to God’s precise assessment beforehand as to those who will respond to the words of the prophets and the Savior. We read these words, which came from the Savior’s own lips: “I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine.” (John 10:14.) Similarly the Savior said, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.” (John 10:27.) This could not be so without divine foreknowledge concerning all mortals and their response to the gospel — which foreknowledge is so perfect that it leaves the realm of prediction and enters the realm of prophecy.

Surely the Lord, who was able to say to his disciples, “Cast the net on the right side of the ship,” knew beforehand that there were a multitude of fishes there. (John 21:6.) And if he so knew the movements and whereabouts of fishes in the little Sea of Tiberias, does it offend us that he is constantly and perfectly aware of us and our needs and that he knows beforehand which mortals will come into the gospel net?

Given these utterances in the meridian of time, it should not surprise us to have the Lord say in 1830 to the Prophet Joseph Smith, “And ye are called to bring to pass the gathering of mine elect; for mine elect hear my voice and harden not their hearts.” (D&C 29:7.)

The readiness of certain mortals to hear the gospel, gladly and with alacrity, is based upon their parallel responsiveness in the premortal world. No wonder the Lord could say as he did to Jeremiah, “Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee . . . and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations.” (Jeremiah 1:5.)

Paul, in writing to the saints in Rome, said, “God hath not cast away his people which he foreknew.” (Romans 11:2.) He also said of God that “he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world.” (Ephesians 1:4.)

There are clearly special cases of individuals with special limitations in life, which we cannot now fathom. Like him who was “blind from birth,” some come to bring glory to God. (John 9:1-2.) We must be exceedingly careful about imputing either wrong causes or wrong rewards to all such. They are in the Lord’s hands and he loves them perfectly. Some of those who have required much waiting upon in this life may be waited upon in the next world — but for the highest of reasons.

Thus when we are elected to certain mortal chores, we are elected “according to the foreknowledge of God the Father.” (1 Peter 1:2.) When Abraham was advised, “thou shalt choose before thou wast born,” he was among the “noble and great ones.” (Abraham 3:22-23.) In the revelation given to us by President Joseph F. Smith we read that the Prophet Joseph Smith, Hyrum Smith, Brigham Young, John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, “and other choice spirits” were also reserved by God to come forth in the fullness of times to take part in the laying of the foundations of the great latter-day work. (Joseph F. Smith-Visions 1:53.) These individuals are among the rulers that were described to Abraham centuries earlier by God. They were to be “rulers in the Church of God,” not necessarily rulers in the secular kingdoms. Thus those seen by Abraham were the Spencer W. Kimball, not the Churchills, the Pauls, not the Caesars, though obviously wise secular leaders do much lasting and commendable good.

President Joseph Fielding Smith said, “In regard to the holding of the priesthood in pre-existence, I will say that there was an organization there just as well as an organization here, and men there held authority. Men chosen to positions of trust in the spirit world held priesthood.” (Doctrines of Salvation 3:81.)

In the terms of the acceptance of the gospel and the joining of the Church, Paul said in his epistles to the saints in Corinth that (as the world measured greatness and wisdom) “not many wise, after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called.” (1 Corinthians 1:26.)

Thus neither the power structure nor the status structure of the world would be reproduced in the Church, though, of course, there are some happy exceptions.

Alma speaks about foreordination with great effectiveness and links it to the foreknowledge of God and perhaps even to our previous performance. (Alma 13:3-5.) The omniscience of God made it possible, therefore, for him to determine the boundaries and times of nations. (Acts 17:26; Deuteronomy 32:8.)

Elder Orson Hyde said of our life in the premortal world, “We understood things better there than we do in this lower world.” He also surmised as to the agreements we made there that “it is not impossible that we signed the articles thereof with our own hands — which articles may be retained in the archives above, to be presented to us when we rise from the dead, and be judged out of our own mouths, according to that which is written in the books.”

Just because we have forgotten, said Elder Hyde, “our forgetfulness cannot alter the facts.” Hence, the degree of detail involved in the covenants and promises we participated in at that time may be a more highly customized thing than many of us surmise. (Journal of Discourses 7:314-315.)

Yet, on occasion, there are inklings. President Joseph F. Smith said, “But in coming here, we forgot all, that our agency might be free indeed, to choose good or evil, that we might merit the reward of our own choice and conduct. But by the power of the Spirit, in the redemption of Christ, through obedience, we often catch a spark from the awakened memories of the immortal soul, which lights up our whole being as with the glory of our former home.” (Gospel Doctrine, 13:14.)

As indicated earlier, this powerful teaching is bound to be puzzling in some respects, if we do not have faith and trust in the Lord. Yet if we think about it, even within our finite framework of experience, it shouldn’t startle us. Mortal parents are reasonably good at predicting the behavior of their children in certain circumstances. Of this Elder James E. Talmage wrote:

Our Heavenly Father has a full knowledge of the nature and disposition of each of His children, a knowledge gained by long observation and experience in the past eternity of our primal childhood; a knowledge compared with which that gained by earthly parents through mortal experience with their children is infinitesimally small. By reason of that surpassing knowledge, God reads the future of child and children, of men individually and of men collectively as communities and nations; He knows what each will do under given conditions, and sees the end from the beginning. His foreknowledge is based on intelligence and reason. He foresees the future as a state which naturally and surely will be; not as one which must be because He has arbitrarily willed that it shall be. (The Great Apostasy, p. 20.)

Another helpful analogy is the reality that universities can and do predict with a high degree of accuracy the grades entering students will receive in their college careers based upon certain tests, past performances, etc. If mortals can do this with reasonable accuracy (even with our short span of familiarity and with finite data), surely God, the Father, who knows us perfectly, can foresee how we will respond to various challenges. Omniscience, of course, would be able to foresee with perfection what we mortals only reasonably guess at.

In all of this it is crucial, however, to remember that while we often fail our opportunities, God is neither pleased nor surprised that we do not rise to those opportunities. But we cannot say to him later on that we could have achieved had we only been given the chance. This is all part of the justice of God. One of the most helpful — indeed necessary — insights in pondering this powerful doctrine is given in the revelation of the Lord to Moses in which the Lord says, “And all things are present with me, for I know them all.” (Moses 1:6.)

God does not live in the dimension of time as we do. We are not only hampered by our finiteness (experimental and intellectual),
but also by being in the dimension of time. Moreover, God, since “all things are present” with him, is not simply predicting based solely on the past. In ways that are not clear to us, he sees rather than foresees the future, because all things are at once present before him.

In a revelation given through the Prophet Joseph Smith, the Lord describes himself as “the same which knoweth all things, for all things are present before mine eyes.” (D&C 38:2.) From the prophet Nephi we receive the same basic insight in which we, likewise, must trust: “But the Lord knoweth all things from the beginning; wherefore, he prepareth a way to accomplish all his works among the children of men…” (1 Nephi 9:6.)

We need to develop both the understanding and the trust that Mormon had when he was dealing with something that he sensed had a relationship to events yet future. He did as bidden and then made this observation: “And I do this for a wise purpose: for thus it whispereth to me, according to the workings of the Spirit of the Lord which is in me. And now, I do not know all things; but the Lord knoweth all things which are to come; wherefore, he worketh in me to do according to his will.” (Words of Mormon 1:7.)

One of the dimensions of worshipping a living God is to know that he is alive and living in the sense of foreseeing. He is not a retired God whose best years are past — to whom we should pay a retroactive obeisance and whom we worship for what he has already done. He is the living God who is, at once, in the dimensions of the past and the present and the future, while we labor constrained by the limitations of time itself. Time can tug at us and play so many tricks upon us if we lack eternal perspective.

It is imperative that we always keep in mind the caveats noted earlier so that we do not indulge ourselves, or our whims, simply because of the presence of this powerful doctrine of foreordination, for with special opportunities come special responsibilities and much greater risks. The caveats include not isolating this doctrine from all the other true doctrines (such as the need to work out our salvation), not confusing it with predestination, and not attempting to explain all human circumstances thereby. We can accept God’s omniscience, but we cannot comprehend it fully. But the doctrine of foreordination properly understood and humbly pursued can help us immensely in coping with the vicissitudes of life. With enlarged understanding can come an enlargement of soul. We should always understand that while God is not surprised, we may be, and that while a particular outcome is not what God would have chosen, he has clearly foreseen it.

Life’s episodes may take on new meaning. For instance, was it mere happenstance that Simon, the Cyrenian, wandered into Jerusalem that very day and was pressed into service by Roman soldiers to help carry the cross of Christ? (Mark 15:21.) Simon’s son, Rufus, joined the church, and was so well thought of by the apostle Paul that the latter mentioned him in his epistle to the Romans. (Romans 16:13.) Rufus was described by Paul as “chosen in the Lord.” Was it, therefore, a mere accident that Simon “who passed by, coming out of the country,” was asked to bear the cross of Jesus?...


Now if his knowledge was forgotten, and his judgment taken away, why not ours? We find this to be the case. What person among all the human family can comprehend what took place in his first existence? No one, it is blotted from the memory, and I think there is great wisdom manifested in withholding the knowledge of our previous existence. Why? Because we could not, if we had all our pre-existent knowledge accompanying us into this world, show to our Father in the heavens and to the heavenly host that we would be in all things obedient; in other words, we could not be tried as the Lord designs to try us here in this state of existence, to qualify us for a higher state hereafter. In order to try the children of men, there must be a degree of knowledge withheld from them, for it would be no temptation to them if they could understand from the beginning the consequences of their acts, and the nature and results of this and that temptation. But in order that we may prove ourselves before the heavens obedient and faithful in all things, we have to begin at the very first principles of knowledge, and be tried from knowledge to knowledge, and from grace to grace, until, like our elder brother, we finally overcome and triumph over all our imperfections, and receive with him the same glory that he inherits, which glory he had before the world was.

This is the way that we as a people look upon our previous existence. There is something truly cheering in contemplating the previous existence of man, much more so than in the old idea of the sectarian world — that God is constantly creating, that he did not finish his work some five or six thousand years ago, but that he is creating all the time. They will tell you that they have spirits in their bodies capable of existing after the bodies have crumbled back to mother earth. Ask them the origin of these spirits, and they will tell you they originated about the time the infant tabernacles of flesh and bone originated. Hence, according to their ideas, God has all the time been creating about one person every twenty seconds, which I believe is about the average rate that persons are born into the world; in other words, about three a minute, and according to their ideas the Lord is engaged in making spirits with this rapidity, and sending them here to this world.

I cannot, for my part, see that there is any more absurdity in believing that he made them thousands of years before they came here, than to suppose that he made them just before they came here, and entered into the tabernacle. One can certainly not be more unreasonable than the other.

Because we can not recollect our former existence is no proof whatever that we did not have one. I can prove this. In regard to this present existence, what person is there in this congregation who can remember the first six months of his or her infancy? There is not a man nor a woman on the face of the earth, I presume, who can remember this; but no person will argue, on that account, that he did not exist at that time. Oh no, says the objector, that would be an improper method of arguing. Our memories have nothing to do with a previous existence. If we remember it, all good; if we do not, it does not alter that existence.

If we were born in heaven before this world was made, the question might arise as to the nature of that birth. Was it by command that the spiritual substance, scattered through space, was miraculously brought together, and organized into a spiritual form, and called a spirit? Is that the way that Jesus, the firstborn of every creation, was brought into existence? Oh no; we were all born there after the same manner that we are here, that is to say, every person that had an existence before he came here had a literal father and literal mother, a personal father as a personal mother; hence the Apostle Paul, in speaking to the heathen at Ephesus, says, “We are his offspring.” Now I look upon every man and woman that have ever come here on this globe, or that ever will come, as having a father and mother in the heavens by whom their spirits were brought into existence. But how long they resided in the heavens before they came here is not revealed.

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