One of the marvelous blessings of the Book of Mormon is that it contains, in clarity, revelations reserved to come forth in this dispensation of time. Much of the knowledge that we have relating to the principle of moral agency is found in these modern revelations.

The Lord gave a brief but detailed definition of this divine doctrine when He said, “Every man may act in doctrine and principle pertaining to futurity, 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” (D&C 101:78; emphasis added). We are accountable for our actions as we exercise our moral agency. If we understand this principle and make righteous choices, our lives will be blessed. Wise choices can put us in control of situations where we might otherwise be tempted to compromise our principles. We cannot control all that happens to us; however, we can choose to be in control of our responses.

While I was serving as a mission president, my two assistants were acting one day and introduced themselves to a man who responded in a rage. He repeatedly took the Lord’s name in vain and called them profane names. Then he ordered them to leave his property. When they shared this incident, I asked how they had responded. They indicated that they told him they had an important message that would bless his life. I asked what they felt as they were being cursed and rejected. One told me that he had an overwhelming feeling of compassion for the man. The impression came to him to ask Heavenly Father to forgive the man, for they realized that he did not know what he was doing. These elders were not in control of the situation, but they exercised their moral agency to control how they responded.

We may be born into less-than-desirable circumstances. We can choose to let those circumstances keep us from becoming successful, or we can respond with a divine determination to achieve in spite of adverse conditions. At times our circumstances call for us to make critical choices to keep our covenants or to compromise them. Covenants should never be compromised, even when at the moment some circumstances might seem to justify it.

The Book of Mormon teaches us of a group of converted Lamanites, known as Ammonites, who had repented and felt the Lord had forgiven them. They entered into a covenant that “they never would use weapons again for the shedding of man’s blood; … covenanting with God, that rather than shed the blood of their brethren they would give up their own lives” (Alma 24:18). Later, in a time of war when others were bearing the brunt of their defense, these Ammonites “were about to break the covenant which they had made and take up their weapons of war” (Alma 56:7). Helaman, who realized the importance of keeping covenants, later wrote: “I would not suffer them that they should break this covenant which they had made, supposing that God would strengthen us” (Alma 56:8). The two thousand sons of the Ammonites went to war in their place and, under Helaman’s direction, were successful in the defense of the city of Judea. The Lord always stands ready to strengthen us when we use our moral agency to hold true to our covenants, even under extremely adverse circumstances.

I once coached a high school basketball player named Jim who chose not to compromise his principles for the sake of success. During a state quarterfinal game, we played a team with an all-state center whom Jim was assigned to guard. We knew that if Jim was successful, we could win the game and advance to the semifinal. The lead changed thirteen times. With two minutes left in the game, I called our last time-out. As Jim came to the bench, he said, “Coach, I know how we can win this game. The center bruised his big toe on his right foot during practice this week. The next time down court, I can accidentally step on his toe and this game will be ours.” Then, without hesitation, he said: “It wouldn’t be right, would it? It would take all the fun from the victory.” This young man could have taken action without seeking consent. His desire to obey a principle of correct conduct was greater than his desire to win by compromising his principles. Those principles sustained him later when a work-related accident left him using a wheelchair for the remainder of his life. We lost that basketball game during an overtime, but I still consider this the greatest victory I had as a coach—to see a young man make a righteous choice under pressured conditions.

It is important that we understand this powerful principle of moral agency and its application in our [page
lives, since we are making decisions each day that determine our divine destinies. To more fully understand moral agency, it is needful to review its role in premortality and in mortality.

Premortality

Moral agency is an inherent part of our existence. The Lord revealed to Joseph Smith: “Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be. “All truth is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it, to act for itself, as all intelligence also; otherwise there is no existence” (D&C 93:29–30; emphasis added).

Heavenly Father is indeed the Father of our spirits (see Rom. 8:16; Heb. 12:9), and we are created in His image (see Mosiah 7:27; Ether 3:15–16; Moses 6:8–9). We continued to have our moral agency following our spiritual birth. Our spirits were born innocent (see D&C 93:38; Moro. 8:8, 12), but some became more intelligent, noble, and great than others (see Abr. 3:18–19, 22–23; D&C 138:55–56) because they exercised more faith and performed greater works in premortal life (see Alma 13:3–4). During this period, Satan exercised his agency in attempting to destroy ours, (see Moses 4:3), and many chose to follow him (see Abr. 3:28; D&C 29:36). In the Grand Council during premortal life, we each exercised our agency; there were not then, nor will there ever be, any neutrals (see 2 Ne. 10:16).

A number of significant events took place during our premortal life that give light to the role of moral agency. Among these were the Council in Heaven, the Creation, the War in Heaven, and the Fall. The Council in Heaven. References in the revelations give evidence that a Grand Council was convened during our premortal life. All of Heavenly Father’s spiritual children were there. The purpose of the council was to prepare us for our earthly experiences. We were taught all that we would need to know to return to Heavenly Father’s presence one day. We did indeed receive “[our] first lessons in the world of spirits and were prepared to come forth in the due time of the Lord” (D&C 138:56).

After the plan of salvation was presented for a sustaining vote, Heavenly Father inquired as to whom He should send to put the plan into effect in mortality. Satan responded with an alteration of the plan, a version conceived with an evil intent. He said: “I will redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost … ; wherefore give me thine honor” (Moses 4:1). Satan’s plan would indeed “destroy the agency of man” (Moses 4:3). Selfish and senseless, his plan defied eternal law. It was an impossible plan, for without moral agency no one could become exalted. Today he continues to activate parts of his evil plan, appealing to the carnal tendencies of man through temptations. If we are not aware, we may find ourselves being lured by Satan’s temptations, and if we follow his plan we will become like him (see Mosiah 16:3).

After Satan presented his evil version of the Father’s plan, the Savior responded to Heavenly Father: “Here am I, send me” (Abr. 3:27). He added: “Father, thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever” (Moses 4:2). In those few humble words, the Savior, exercising His moral agency, accepted the sacred assignment as the atoning sacrifice; in this role He would suffer sorely for our sins. We, too, exercised our moral agency in the premortal council. We sustained Heavenly Father’s plan with its laws, ordinances, and covenants. We also sustained Jesus Christ as our Savior, who was, indeed, foreordained (see Ether 3:14; 1 Pet. 1:19-20).

Creation. Abraham records that the premortal Jesus Christ directed, “We will go down, for there is space there, and we will take of these materials, and we will make an earth whereon these may dwell (Abr. 3:21). It was determined that this earth would be a place of probation (see Alma 12:24; D&C 29:43).

One of the purposes of the probation was stated by the Savior: “We will prove them … to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them” (Abr. 3:25). This means that in mortality our “natural man” tendencies must be brought into subjection by the “spiritual man” through our moral agency. With our mortal bodies, we have the power of procreation in this life. We have the choice and capacity to control our physical desire, or to have it control us. This is one of the most important challenges we face in using our moral agency. Unrighteous use of the procreative power carries with it the most condemning consequences, but if we use it righteously, we have potential to “receive a fulness of joy” (D&C 93:33–34; D&C 138:17).

The War in Heaven. Angrily, Lucifer used his divine gift of agency to make a decision that would lead to his eternal damnation. In bold opposition, he rebelled against God (see Rev. 12:7-8) and “kept not his first estate” (Abr. 3:28). “A third part of the hosts of heaven turned he away from me [the Lord God] because of their agency” (D&C 29:36; emphasis added). Even with the possibility of their eternal damnation, Heavenly Father would not take their agency from them. To do so would be counter to eternal law. As a result of their rebelliousness, Lucifer and his followers were cast out of heaven (see Rev. 12:9; D&C 29:36–37) and forfeited the blessings of eternal life.
Adam and Eve were placed in the Garden of Eden and were unable to have children, for their bodies had not yet become mortal. However, the Creator also provided the means by which they could choose to obey His commandment. He planted two special trees in the Garden of Eden, the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. These two trees in the garden offered completely different choices, with different consequences.

Adam and Eve were commanded, “But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it, nevertheless, thou mayest choose for thyself, for it is given unto thee; but, remember that I forbid it, for in the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die” (Moses 3:17; emphasis added). By partaking, Adam and Eve experienced a spiritual death, being separated from Deity as they were cast out of the garden. Their bodies became mortal, subject to temptations of the flesh and, eventually, to death (see D&C 29:40–43).

Had they not partaken of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, they “would have remained in the garden of Eden. … “And they would have had no children; … 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” (.2 Ne. 2:22-23). We, too, would have remained in our premortal condition without the possibility of mortal bodies or earthly experiences. We would have had no possibility of godhood.

We are blessed as a result of our first parents’ partaking of the fruit of this tree. Our eternity depended on their act of agency. We now have the power of procreation, providing bodies for the spirit children of Heavenly Father. Indeed, “Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy” (2 Ne. 2:25). Adam and Eve made a conscious decision based upon the two choices that were placed before them. They chose mortality, which gave them the opportunity for eternal life, and, as a result, they were cast out of the Garden of Eden, “cut off both temporally and spiritually from the presence of the Lord; and thus … they became subjects to follow after their own will” (Alma 42:7). Moral agency was now in full force in mortality.

Mortality

Although Adam and Eve did not forget there was a God, they had no memory of their premortal instructions (see Joseph Smith, comp., Lectures on Faith [1985], 14.).
said, “Men are instructed sufficiently that they know good from evil,” (2 Ne. 2:5) so that they may “act for themselves and not … be acted upon” (2 Ne. 2:26).

Alma taught: “He that knoweth not good from evil is blameless; but he that knoweth good and evil, to him it is given according to his desires, whether he desireth good or evil, life or death, joy or remorse of conscience” (Alma 29:5). With knowledge comes accountability. Mormon explained the unhappy consequences in unwise exercise of moral agency. Once people have been enlightened by the Spirit, gaining knowledge of the laws that govern righteousness, and then disobey the commandments, “their state becomes worse than though they had never known these things” (Alma 24:30).

**Freedom to choose.** Laws, opposition, and knowledge were given to the children of God. We are free to choose between contrasting paths with their clear consequences (see 2 Ne. 2:27; 10:23). In thus exercising our moral agency, we are given the power to be our own judges (see Alma 41:3-7).

**Principles**

Satan will attempt to gain control of our agency through temptations, but there are principles that will assist us in resisting his enticements.

While our physical bodies might be basically “carnal, sensual and devilish, by nature,” (see Alma 42:10) our eternal spirit has the power to rule over the body (1 Cor. 9:27). We can be in control of our thoughts, feelings, and actions if we properly exercise our moral agency.

In early September 1994, Marc Bennett faced a difficult decision. The eighteen-year-old football star from Salisbury High School in Sherwood Park, Alberta, Canada, had just won a starting position on the University of Alberta Golden Bear football team.

He was the youngest player on the team and the first Latter-day Saint to play for Alberta in over a decade. Coming up was “Rookie Night,” a time for the team veterans to initiate the first-year players. Alcohol consumption would be expected.

As practice broke that Friday afternoon, John Price, a veteran fullback, took Marc aside and asked if he were planning to attend the initiation. Before Marc could reply, John explained the importance of being together as a team. Then he added that he knew what Marc’s standards were. If anyone asked Marc to do something contrary to his beliefs, John said, they would have to go through him first. As Marc entered the hall that night, John greeted him with a soft drink and made sure that he was able to maintain his standards throughout the event.

At the year-end banquet, Marc received the Hector Creighton Award as the most outstanding rookie player. It was then announced that he would not be returning for the 1995 season because he would be serving a two-year mission for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. As the evening progressed, many team members stopped at Marc’s table to wish him well on his mission. Marc is now serving in the France Marseilles Mission.

When we are obedient and set the proper example, the Lord, even by inspiring the actions of others, can strengthen our power to resist. John Price was an answer to Marc’s prayers. When we let our lights shine before men, we need not fear.

Satan has no power over us except that which we allow him to take. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught the principle that those with bodies have power over those without bodies (see *Scriptural Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith, annotated by Richard C. Galbraith, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1993, p. 206). It is only through the misuse of our agency that we give Satan influence in our lives.

We will not be tempted beyond our capacity to resist (see 1 Cor. 10:13). This principle comes as a promise to those who are striving to resist and are not reckless in their response to temptations (see Alma 13:28).

Moral agency is an eternal principle of power and potential. A loving Heavenly Father has given us this great gift, and through it the opportunity to determine our divine destiny.

May we always be grateful for the trust that He has given us, and may we be true to Him day by day as we exercise our priceless agency.