

Agency: Essential to the Plan of Life

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Recently I received a letter from a friend of over 50 years who is not a member of our church. I had sent him some gospel-related reading, to which he responded: “Initially it was hard for me to follow the meaning of typical Mormon jargon, such as *agency*. Possibly a short vocabulary page would be helpful.”

I was surprised he did not understand what we mean by the word *agency*. I went to an online dictionary. Of the 10 definitions and usages of the word *agency*, none expressed the idea of making choices to act. We teach that agency is the ability and privilege God gives us to choose and “to act for [ourselves] and not to be acted upon.” Agency is to act with accountability and responsibility for our actions. Our agency is essential to the plan of salvation. With it we are “free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil.”

The words of a familiar hymn teach us this principle very clearly:

Know this, that ev'ry soul is free

To choose his life and what he'll be;

For this eternal truth is giv'n:

That God will force no man to heav'n.

To answer my friend's question and the questions of good men and women everywhere, let me share with you more of what we know about this meaning of agency.

Before we came to this earth, Heavenly Father presented His plan of salvation—a plan to come to earth and receive a body, choose to act between good and evil, and progress to become like Him and live with Him forever.

Our agency—our ability to choose and act for ourselves—was an essential element of this plan. Without agency we would be unable to make right choices and progress. Yet with agency we could make wrong choices, commit sin, and lose the opportunity to be with Heavenly Father again. For this reason a Savior would be provided to suffer for our sins and redeem us if we would repent. By His infinite Atonement, He brought about “the plan of mercy, to appease the demands of justice.”

After Heavenly Father presented His plan, Lucifer stepped forward, saying, “Send me, ... and I will redeem all mankind, that [not even] one soul shall ... be lost ... ; wherefore give me thine honor.” This plan was rejected by our Father, for it would have denied us our agency. Indeed, it was a plan of rebellion.

Then Jesus Christ, Heavenly Father's “Beloved and Chosen [Son] from the beginning,” exercised His agency to say, “Father, thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever.” He would be our Savior—the Savior of the world.

Because of Lucifer's rebellion, a great spiritual conflict ensued. Each of Heavenly Father's children had the

opportunity to exercise the agency Heavenly Father had given him or her. We chose to have faith in the Savior Jesus Christ—to come unto Him, follow Him, and accept the plan Heavenly Father presented for our sakes. But a third of Heavenly Father's children did not have faith to follow the Savior and chose to follow Lucifer, or Satan, instead.

And God said, “Wherefore, because that Satan rebelled against me, and sought to destroy the agency of man, which I, the Lord God, had given him, ... I caused that he should be cast down.” Those who followed Satan lost the opportunity to receive a mortal body, live on earth, and progress. Because of the way they used their agency, they lost their agency.

Today the only power Satan and his followers have is the power to tempt and try us. Their only joy is to make us “miserable like unto [themselves].” Their only happiness comes when we are disobedient to the Lord's commandments.

But think of it: in our premortal state we chose to follow the Savior Jesus Christ! And because we did, we were allowed to come to earth. I testify that by making the same choice to follow the Savior now, while we are here on earth, we will obtain an even greater blessing in the eternities. But let it be known: we must continue to choose to follow the Savior. Eternity is at stake, and our wise use of agency and our actions are essential that we might have eternal life.

Throughout His life our Savior showed us how to use our agency. As a boy in Jerusalem, He deliberately chose to “be about [His] Father's business.” In His ministry, He obediently chose “to do the will of [His] Father.” In Gethsemane, He chose to suffer all things, saying, “Not my will, but thine, be done. And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him.” On the cross, He chose to love His enemies, praying, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” And then, so that He could finally demonstrate that He was choosing for Himself, He was left alone. “[Father,] why hast thou forsaken me?” He asked. At last, He exercised His agency to act, enduring to the end, until He could say, “It is finished.”

Though He “was in all points tempted like as we are,” with every choice and every action He exercised the agency to be our Savior—to break the chains of sin and death for us. And by His perfect life, He taught us that when we choose to do the will of our Heavenly Father, our agency is preserved, our opportunities increase, and we progress.

Evidence of this truth is found throughout the scriptures. Job lost everything he had yet chose to remain faithful, and he gained the eternal blessings of God. Mary and Joseph chose to follow the warning of an angel to flee into Egypt, and the life of the Savior was preserved. Joseph Smith chose to follow the instructions of Moroni, and the Restoration unfolded as prophesied. Whenever we choose to come unto Christ, take His name upon us, and follow His servants, we progress along the path to eternal life.

In our mortal journey, it is helpful to remember that the opposite is also true: when we don't keep the commandments or follow the promptings of the Holy Ghost,

our opportunities are reduced; our abilities to act and progress are diminished. When Cain took his brother's life because he loved Satan more than God, his spiritual progress was stopped.

In my youth I learned an important lesson about how our actions may limit our freedom. One day my father assigned me to varnish a wooden floor. I made the choice to begin at the door and work my way *into* the room. When I was almost finished, I realized I had left myself no way to get out. There was no window or door on the other side. I had literally painted myself into a corner. I had no place to go. I was stuck.

Whenever we disobey, we spiritually paint ourselves into a corner and are captive to our choices. Though we are spiritually stuck, there is always a way back. Like repentance, turning around and walking across a newly varnished floor means more work—a lot of resanding and refinishing! Returning to the Lord isn't easy, but it is worth it.

As we understand the challenge of repenting, we appreciate the blessings of the Holy Ghost to guide our agency and Heavenly Father, who gives us commandments and strengthens and sustains us in keeping them. We also understand how obedience to the commandments ultimately protects our agency.

For example, when we hearken to the Word of Wisdom, we escape the captivity of poor health and addiction to substances that literally rob us of our ability to act for ourselves.

As we obey the counsel to avoid and get out of debt now, we use our agency and obtain the liberty to use our disposable income for helping and blessing others.

When we follow the prophets' counsel to hold family home evening, family prayer, and family scripture study, our homes become an incubator for our children's spiritual growth. There we teach them the gospel, bear our testimonies, express our love, and listen as they share their feelings and experiences. By our righteous choices and actions, we liberate them from darkness by increasing their ability to walk in the light.

The world teaches many falsehoods about agency. Many think we should "eat, drink, and be merry; ... and if it so be that we are guilty, God will beat us with a few stripes, and at last we shall be saved." Others embrace secularism and deny God. They convince themselves that there is no "opposition in all things" and, therefore, "whatsoever a man [does is] no crime." This "destroy[s] the wisdom of God and his eternal purposes."

Contrary to the world's secular teaching, the scriptures teach us that we do have agency, and our righteous exercise of agency always makes a difference in the opportunities we have and our ability to act upon them and progress eternally.

For example, through the prophet Samuel, the Lord gave a clear commandment to King Saul:

"The Lord sent me to anoint thee to be king ... : now therefore hearken thou unto the voice ... of the Lord. ...

"... Go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have."

But Saul did not follow the Lord's commandment. He practiced what I call "selective obedience." Relying on his own wisdom, he spared the life of King Agag and brought back the best of the sheep, oxen, and other animals.

The Lord revealed this to the prophet Samuel and sent him to remove Saul from being king. When the prophet arrived, Saul said, "I have performed the commandment of the Lord." But the prophet knew otherwise, saying, "What meaneth then this bleating of the sheep in mine ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?"

Saul excused himself by blaming others, saying the people had kept the animals in order to make sacrifices to the Lord. The prophet's answer was clear: "Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken [to the commandments of the Lord] than the fat of rams."

Finally, Saul confessed, saying, "I have sinned: for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord, and thy words: because I feared the people, and obeyed their voice." Because Saul did not hearken with exactness—because he chose to be selectively obedient—he lost the opportunity and the agency to be king.

My brothers and sisters, are we hearkening with exactness to the voice of the Lord and His prophets? Or, like Saul, are we practicing selective obedience and fearing the judgments of men?

I acknowledge that all of us make mistakes. The scriptures teach us, "All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." For those who find themselves captive to past unrighteous choices, stuck in a dark corner, without all the blessings available by the righteous exercise of agency, we love you. Come back! Come out of the dark corner and into the light. Even if you have to walk across a newly varnished floor, it is worth it. Trust that "through the Atonement of Christ, all mankind [including you and me] may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel."

As the hour of the Atonement was upon Him, the Savior offered His great Intercessory Prayer and spoke of each of us, saying: "Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me." "And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent."

I bear my special witness that They live. When we exercise our agency in righteousness, we come to know Them, become more like Them, and prepare ourselves for that day when "every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess" that Jesus is our Savior. May we continue to follow Him and our Eternal Father, as we did in the beginning, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.