

The Sacred Gift of Agency

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One of the key issues in the Council in Heaven—and one of the key differences between our Heavenly Father’s plan for us and the plan advocated by Lucifer—was whether or not we would be given agency, or the ability to make our own choices. Lucifer argued that he could return us all to our Father without any need for agency on our part. Lucifer said:

Behold, here am I, send me, I will be thy son, and I will redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost, and surely I will do it; wherefore give me thine honor.

But our Elder Brother said:

Father, thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever.

Wherefore, because that Satan rebelled against me, and sought to destroy the agency of man, which I, the Lord God, had given him, and also, that I should give unto him mine own power; by the power of mine Only Begotten, I caused that he should be cast down. [Moses 4:1–3]

In the Father’s plan, championed by Jesus Christ, agency was integral. In fact, Lucifer’s plan could not have worked. Learning to exercise agency is the very essence of learning to be like our Father in Heaven.

I am a scientist, and for me (and I hope for you) it is fun to think about what science can teach us about the gospel in general and about agency in particular. For me, science is highly faith affirming, but I recognize that for some people it is not. I’ll come back to that later.

I like to look at a picture taken with the Hubble Space Telescope. The image is called the Hubble Deep Field. The telescope was pointed at a certain patch of sky that looked empty and was allowed to collect light for a long time. Looking at the image, one can see that space is not empty. Almost all the objects in the picture are galaxies, each consisting of billions of stars. Some are among the most distant objects ever imaged. I’m reminded of Psalm 8, where we read:

When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained;

What is man, that thou art mindful of him?
[Psalm 8:3–4]

Many in science have noted what is sometimes referred to as the Goldilocks principle:

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all the fundamental forces that govern matter in the universe seem to be—like the little bear’s porridge in the Goldilocks story—“just right” to allow stars, planets, life, and people to exist. If, for example, the force of gravity were only slightly weaker than it is, modern physics suggests that stars could not form because gravity would not be strong enough to hold them together; if there were no stars, there could be no planets and no people. On the other hand, if gravity were slightly stronger than it is, all matter would quickly end up in black holes; again, these are conditions that do not allow the existence of stars, planets, or you or me.

Some have argued that this “just rightness” of the universe proves the existence of a Creator. Others argue that the fact we exist just means that we must live in a universe that allows it. Fundamentally, we can’t tell which position is right simply through reason. Furthermore, it is important to our sacred gift of agency that this be the case.

However, I’d like to take this idea of “just rightness” one step further. Not only do we live in a universe with conditions just right for us to exist, but we also live in a universe that is just right in terms of allowing us agency, the ability to make choices that have consequences.

From the time of Isaac Newton until the early 20th century, it was believed that the universe was completely deterministic, that if you knew the starting conditions and all the rules, everything in the universe—from galaxies and stars down to atoms and electrons—would have to play by those rules, and you could mathematically determine everything that would happen in the future. In such a universe, two plus two would always equal four, and every decision would likewise be predictable by an equation. There would be no agency because all actions and all results would depend ultimately on how things were set up in the beginning. Every action would be a consequence of the way things were created, and there could be no free will.

However, by the early 20th century, this view began to change. A fundamental concept of modern physics and chemistry is known as the uncertainty principle. This is a scientific statement that claims there are limits to how accurately we can measure such things as the position and speed of an electron. We don’t have time to talk about the reasoning behind the uncertainty principle, but it is well established and accepted, and it is one of the key ideas that helps us understand scientifically the way the universe functions. Quantum uncertainty explains why atoms behave the way they do. It’s important in chemical bonding. Uncertainty is a key part of how practical devices like transistors and lasers work. According to the uncertainty principle, there is a built-in uncertainty in the way small things like electrons and atoms behave. We can say what we think they will probably do, but we can’t predict individual events with certainty.

I find it fascinating that the biochemistry of thought and decision making, of signal transmission in neurons, occurs at the level of electrons and atoms, where quantum uncertainty operates and behavior is not deterministic. At this level we can’t always predict exactly what will happen. Therefore this basic idea of quantum mechanics suggests that our thoughts and decisions are not deterministic.

At the same time, uncertainty only becomes important for very small particles like electrons and atoms. For larger things, we can make accurate predictions. This is important too—otherwise, all would be chaos. Instead, after we make choices, consequences inevitably follow. Therefore, we live in a universe that is predictable enough that our actions have consequences but not so predictable that it is deterministic.

It is as if the Lord designed the very fabric of the universe in such a way as to guarantee us the opportunity of agency while still demanding consequences to the way we use our agency. Thus not only do we live in a universe

that is “just right” to allow human existence, it is also “just right” to give us the sacred gift of agency.

None of this is surprising when viewed in the light of the gospel. In fact, we know a lot more about agency from the scriptures than we know from science. Agency is a key part of the plan of salvation, and learning to use it is one of the main purposes of mortality. Consider how precious the gift of agency is in the eyes of God:

- He gave us a universe whose very fabric allows it.
- We pass through the veil and come into this life without memory of the premortal existence so that we can have it.
- We live now by faith so that we can have it.
- We face adversity and opposition so that we can have it.
- God’s Son, our Elder Brother, Jesus Christ, suffered and died so that we can have it.

Agency is a sacred gift.

As much as I love science as a means for discovering truth, my life’s experience suggests that it will never be possible to arrive at full spiritual knowledge by purely scientific methods. I know this because if such a course were possible, it would destroy our agency, and the Lord does not work that way. Agency is sacred. If we could prove the gospel true and always know how to act purely through reason or logic or science, only choices in accord with the gospel would be reasonable or acceptable. Correct choices would become obvious with minimal effort on our part. That was essentially the plan all of us rejected in the premortal existence. Although sometimes our choices have consequences that limit our future choices, our Father in Heaven never compromises our agency.

The practical question for us, then, is “How do we learn to use the precious gift of agency

given to us by our Heavenly Father?” This question is critically important for all of us every day; it is what life is about. Let me suggest four things to keep in mind as you use your agency:

1. Choose in the light of the gospel.
2. Remember that help is always available if you will stay in tune.
3. Little choices matter because they add up to make big ones.
4. Know that ultimately the choice is yours.

Let’s talk about choosing in the light of the gospel. I love the words of Mormon, recorded by his son, Moroni, in Moroni 7:

For behold, my brethren, it is given unto you to judge, that ye may know good from evil; and the way to judge is as plain, that ye may know with a perfect knowledge, as the daylight is from the dark night.

For behold, the Spirit of Christ is given to every man, that he may know good from evil; wherefore, I show unto you the way to judge; for every thing which inviteth to do good, and to persuade to believe in Christ, is sent forth by the power and gift of Christ; wherefore ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of God.

But whatsoever thing persuadeth men to do evil, and believe not in Christ, and deny him, and serve not God, then ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of the devil. . . .

Wherefore, I beseech of you, brethren, that ye should search diligently in the light of Christ that ye may know good from evil; and if ye will lay hold upon every good thing, and condemn it not, ye certainly will be a child of Christ. [Moroni 7:15–17, 19]

According to Mormon, our choices are clear. However, our agency is not compromised. We still have to learn and understand the ways of Christ, and we have to choose whether or not to follow Him. If we will consider the

consequences of our choices and whether they lead us toward the Savior or away from Him, we will use our agency well.

Second, because He loves us, the Lord does not leave us without help in using our agency, but He does it in such a way that our agency is always preserved. As a consequence of our choice to make sacred baptismal covenants, we've been given another sacred gift to assist us—the gift of the Holy Ghost. At the time we make covenants to live the gospel, the Lord gives us exactly the help we need to keep those covenants as we exercise our agency.

It is crucial that we live so that this gift can operate and bless our lives and help us choose correctly. The Holy Ghost has been compared to a “still small voice” (1 Nephi 17:45). Thus we must be careful not to let the frenzied, loud voices of the world drown out the promptings of the Spirit. The Spirit is like a faraway radio station that can be heard clearly when the radio is in tune; the still small voice can easily be drowned out by noise if our lives are not in tune. Sins of commission are a sure way to let this happen. They can cause so much noise that it may damage the receiver and require repairs only the Savior can make. Sins of omission are perhaps just as bad. They seem smaller and more innocent, so it is easier for them to sneak up on us. They are just little things, aren't they? Those little things we can be prone to neglect—like reading the scriptures and offering up daily, sincere prayers—are what keep our hearts in tune so that the signal of the Spirit remains strong. That's why the little things are so important.

Do you remember the story of the rich young ruler? His sad story shows that it is possible to make mostly right choices while still letting little things get in the way. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all recorded what happened. I'll quote from Mark.

We read that a certain rich young ruler came to the Savior and asked what he could do to inherit eternal life.

The Savior told him to keep the commandments.

When the young man affirmed that he had done so from his youth up, the Lord told him there was one little thing he lacked:

Then Jesus beholding him loved him, and said unto him, One thing thou lackest: go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow me

And he was sad at that saying, and went away grieved: for he had great possessions. [Mark 10:21–22]

His love of wealth held him back. He was not able to give up the things of the world, and so he did not choose well. Perhaps he could have been a Peter or a James or a John; we don't know.

Do we have cares of the world that prevent us from exercising our sacred gift of agency righteously? They might even be simple things like being too busy to stop and care for those we home teach or visit teach. The Lord wants to bless us, and He will, if we allow Him to do so. Sometimes it is little things that matter.

Finally, remember that no one can exercise your agency for you. The Lord certainly will not. Doing that would not allow us to accomplish what we are here to do. Doing that wouldn't teach us the things we must learn. As Oliver Cowdery learned when attempting to translate, we need to make the best decision we can before we ask the Lord if it is right:

But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right.

But if it be not right you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought that shall cause you to forget the thing which is wrong. [D&C 9:8–9]

When we do ask, I believe the most common answer for one who is living the gospel and is already tuned to the Spirit will likely be “You decide.” The Lord does not tell us this because He does not care or does not want to help. He does not tell us precisely because He does care and He does love us. It blesses us to learn to use our agency on our own. That is why we are here.

A number of important opportunities to use our agency usually occur for many people around the college years. For instance, many have the following questions:

- What major should I choose?
- What career should I pursue?
- Should I serve a mission?
- Whom should I date?
- Whom should I marry?
- When should we begin a family?
- What do I believe?
- How will I act on my beliefs?

I’ll touch on just a few of these.

How do you choose a major and a career? Some of you are having trouble with this and have changed your minds a few times. That’s okay. Please indulge me as I tell you how I made that choice. I grew up with a love for science. I guess I was a nerd (but I didn’t know it until later when my wife told me). However, I didn’t have much exposure to chemistry until one summer during high school when I participated in a chemistry program at that excellent university to the north. I found that chemistry was fun and that I had some aptitude for it; so I decided to major in it. I got to BYU and promptly bombed my first chemistry exam. I feared I had made a bad choice, but, fortunately, my professor had mercy on the class and made it possible to overcome that stumble. After that I made the adjustment to college and did okay.

On my mission I discovered that I also loved teaching. I found great joy in seeing the lights

come on in someone else’s eyes. I returned home and wondered if I might be able to combine these things and become a chemistry professor. My resolve became stronger as I observed the examples of my professors and saw a little of their family lives through some good friends whose parents worked at the university. What I saw was compatible with my goals of having a family and of being able to serve others, and my choice was confirmed as I went forward.

One of the great experiences of my life came as I was beginning my independent career as a faculty member at the University of Texas at Arlington. Paul had a great experience on the road to Damascus, and I had my own on the road to Dallas. No, I did not see the Savior as Paul did, but I did experience His love, and I got to see how many little, seemingly less-important choices added up to bless me.

I was trying hard to raise a family and to serve faithfully in the Church. It is challenging to do this as a young assistant professor. I had taken the job planning to pursue a certain course of research that appeared to have good opportunities for funding. I set up my lab and needed a test problem to check whether or not my instruments were working. I wasn’t quite ready to do what I had originally planned, and I remembered some work I had done years before as an undergraduate at BYU. This gave me an idea for a new experiment. It wasn’t a big deal, but I tried it, and it worked.

I wanted to attend a scientific meeting I thought would further my career. I needed something to present at the conference because the university required me to present in order to fund the trip, so I took the results of my test experiment and drove 700 miles from Dallas to Nashville to attend the meeting. It was just a poster presentation, one among hundreds, but I was shocked at the strong positive response I received.

I had to drive the 700 miles home by myself, and that was when the revelation began. All

the way home it was as if I heard a voice saying over and over, “Drop your original plans and pursue this other course of research.” I did, and that choice laid the foundation for my entire subsequent career. In part, that is why I am here at BYU today. It may not have won a Nobel Prize, but the choice was a good one. It came after much thought and hard work and led to much more thought and hard work. I still don’t know if the Lord cares about the science I did. I doubt it matters at all to Him, but I do know for sure that He loves me and my family, and that matters a lot. It has blessed my life.

Some of you face the choice of whom to marry. Quoting Elder Bruce R. McConkie, President Thomas S. Monson recently said, “The most important single thing that any Latter-day Saint ever does in this world is to marry the right person, in the right place, by the right authority” (Bruce R. McConkie, “Agency or Inspiration?” *New Era*, January 1975, 38; quoted in Thomas S. Monson, “Whom Shall I Marry?” *New Era*, October 2004, 6).

I think that if this is not the most important decision we will make in our entire eternal existence, it certainly must be in the top 10.

I came home from my mission with a desire to make that choice. I dated, and I learned a lot from some wonderful people, but things never quite seemed to click. Horror of horrors, I graduated from BYU single. I wondered if there was something wrong with me, but the only thing that was really wrong was that the time was not right. I needed to be in the same place as the other who would choose me. I needed to develop talents that would be attractive to her. I had to learn to distinguish between my own feelings and the confirming voice of the Spirit. But when the time was right, the choices were made, and calm, peaceful confirmation then followed. I made the best choice ever, and that has been a foundation for the greatest blessings in my life ever since.

Let me give one final example. One of the most important choices we make is actually

the same choice we already made following the Council in Heaven—a choice to believe the Father and to follow Christ. Because we have passed through the veil, which was essential in obtaining our agency in mortality, we don’t remember our earlier choice, and now in faith we must continue to choose.

Well-meaning people may honestly disagree with my interpretation of how the universe is put together. Agency allows and requires this possibility. But for me, as I noted above, science is faith affirming because I choose to believe, and everything else follows.

At some point in our lives, in one way or another we all face the choice to believe. It may come in little things we choose to do every day, it may come in big life decisions, like the decision to be baptized, but often it comes in combinations of these.

I was raised in the gospel, and in my early years I owed most of my testimony to the example of my parents. For me, the critical point in the choice to believe came the year after I returned to BYU from my mission. I had a wonderful experience as a missionary and had the opportunity to teach the plan of salvation and about the Resurrection. I taught of priesthood power and blessings and did so in sincerity and faith.

However, all of this took on new meaning in the year after I came home, when the person I was closest to in all the world, my father, was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Suddenly the doctrine of the gospel became more than theory, and I had to decide what I really believed. Was there really power in priesthood blessings, even if after receiving one my Dad did not get better? Would I ever really see him again? Do the covenants we make and the blessings we are promised in the temple with regard to eternal families have meaning? I had to make that choice to believe and to go forward in faith.

I testify that my own life has been richly blessed because I chose then to believe and to try to live in accord with that belief and

because I have continued to make that choice. “And,” in the simple words of the poet Robert Frost, “that has made all the difference” (“The Road Not Taken” [1916]). Quantum uncertainty may turn out to be as incomplete a view of the universe as the Newtonian determinism that came before it, but it does not matter to me—I have chosen to believe, and that choice has been confirmed by the Spirit many times over. It has made all the difference.

If you struggle with the choice to believe, take comfort in the fact that all you need to begin is a desire, as Alma taught the Zoramite poor:

But behold, if ye will awake and arouse your faculties, even to an experiment [and I love that word experiment] upon my words, and exercise a particle of faith, yea, even if ye can no more than desire to believe, let this desire work in you, even until ye believe in a manner that ye can give place for a portion of my words. [Alma 32:27]

Let that desire work in you. Experience the joy that will come as you choose good and your agency takes you upward. May the Lord bless us all as we use the sacred gift of agency wisely. I say these things in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.