

Agency

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Agency in Mortality

Last week a young man came into my office with a serious problem. He had been given a gift that was most precious and had misused it, as did the Prodigal Son. You and I have been given that same gift. Whether we succeed or fail in life will depend upon how we use it.

That precious gift which the Lord has given us is agency—the right to choose for oneself. Since the beginning of time, wars have raged over this issue. Agency is the most vital political issue in the world today. The Lord said to Enoch, “In the Garden of Eden, gave I man his agency” (Moses 7:32). It was also in the Garden of Eden that the Lord said to Adam and Eve, “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.” (Moses 3:17).

What was given to them? It was that most precious gift, the right to choose for themselves—their agency.

We often refer to agency as *free agency*. Adding the word *free* is descriptive. It is also repetitive, for agency implies the capacity or freedom to act.

Agency in Premortal Life

In the Garden of Eden, the Lord gave man his agency. We also had our agency before we came to earth. If not so, Lucifer could not have rebelled against God, for rebellion requires the exercise of agency. Nor could one-third of the hosts of heaven have followed Lucifer. They chose to rebel against God. They supported Lucifer’s attempt to destroy the agency of man. As a penalty, they were cast down (see Moses 1:3).

In section 93 of the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord explained,

Every spirit of man was innocent in the beginning; and God having redeemed man from the fall, men became again in their infant state, innocent before God. [D&C 93:38; emphasis added]

So when we entered our premortal life, we were innocent, and when we were born into

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mortality, *again* we became innocent before God.

If I said to you today, “I’m going to Denver.” Then if I said to you next week, “I’m going to Denver again,” I would have had to go to Denver and return, or I could not properly use the word *again*. By that same reasoning, if we entered the spirit world innocent before God, and then we became *again*, in our infant state, innocent before God, we obviously left our state of innocence in the premortal world, else we could not have returned to a state of innocence as we entered mortality. We cannot return from a place where we have not been.

The Plan of Salvation

Adam and Eve were commanded by the Lord:

Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat, 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 3:16–17]

Adam and Eve exercised their agency. They partook of the fruit of the tree of which they were commanded not to partake. As a penalty, they were cast out of the garden and were cut off both spiritually and temporally from the presence of God. They suffered a spiritual death as the Lord had said they would. That is, they no longer had the Spirit of the Lord with them, nor could they walk in his presence. They were alone—alone in the lone and dreary world! Had they continued in that condition, they would have been lost forever and would never have had the opportunity to return to the presence of God, either spiritually or temporally. The prophet Alma explained:

Therefore, as the soul could never die, and the fall had brought upon all mankind a spiritual death

as well as a temporal, that is, they were cut off from the presence of the Lord, it was expedient that mankind should be reclaimed from this spiritual death. [Alma 42:9]

Alma also said, “And thus . . . a time [was] granted unto man to repent, yea, a probationary time, a time to repent and serve God” (Alma 42:4). We refer to this probationary time as mortality. For each of us, it is our own life span.

In their new world—that is, this earth—Adam and Eve were taught by messengers of God. They were taught the principles of faith in the Lord, repentance, baptism for the remission of sins, and the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost. After learning these principles, they accepted the gospel of Jesus Christ. They developed faith in the Lord, they repented, they were baptized, and they received the Holy Ghost. Thereafter, so long as they remained faithful, they had the companionship of the Holy Ghost and were spiritually reunited with the Lord.

When Adam and Eve sinned, or when any of us sin, eternal justice requires a punishment. The debt created by the transgression must be paid. Either we pay the penalty individually for our own sins, or someone else who qualifies by virtue of his perfection must pay the penalty. This is what eternal justice demands. Only the Son of God was qualified, for he was the only One free from sin.

He came to earth, served his ministry, suffered, bled, died, atoned for the sins of men, and thus satisfied the demands of eternal justice for our sake. Only on condition of repentance of men in this probationary state could this merciful act of Christ take effect in each of our lives, except it would destroy the work of justice. When a person repents, accepts the gospel of Jesus Christ, and lives in accordance with the principles and ordinances of the gospel, then Christ’s atonement becomes effective for him,

for Jesus Christ has already paid the penalty—that is, for those who will repent.

God has provided a way for us to accept and obey the gospel, but whether or not we obey is up to each of us.

The prophet Alma explained the plan of salvation to his son Corianton and then said,

Therefore, O my son, whosoever will come may come and partake of the waters of life freely; and whosoever will not come the same is not compelled to come; but in the last day it shall be restored unto him according to his deeds. [Alma 42:27]

Agency and Destiny

And so it is. There is nothing you and I can do to change the rule. Regardless of whether we agree or disagree, the plan remains firm and steady. But we have our agency, and what we do with it determines our future. We can use it wisely and reap the rewards, or we can use it unwisely and pay the penalty.

Someone has said that, if you put a frog in a pot of boiling water, he will immediately leap out unscathed, but if you put a frog in a pot of tepid water and turn up the heat, the water will warm up gradually, and you will soon have a dead frog.

That's just the way sin is. No one intends to sin before he first commits a sin. If I were to ask you what kind of a person you want to be, it is likely every one of you would say, "I want to be obedient to the laws of God. I want to be clean and sweet and pure and free from sin."

Sometimes we fall into sin without realizing that we are sinning. As Earl J. Glade, the founder of KSL, often said, "We sometimes don't realize that we err until after we have erred." But now the water is getting warmer. The more we sin, the easier it becomes to sin. Our conscience grows dimmer. As the water gets warmer, we increasingly lose our sense of values and our sense of judgment.

When a husband and father of beautiful children permits himself to be attracted to

another woman, he soon loses that precious understanding of the value of his wife and his children. His judgment becomes impaired. He permits himself to be gradually destroyed by the adversary. Likewise, when a young lady and a young man permit themselves to get involved in petting, they lose their sense of values and their sense of judgment. A young man responds to the enticing of his would-be friends and takes his first drink. It becomes easier as he takes the second and third ones. He soon loses his freedom and becomes a captive of the adversary.

Lucifer Makes Sin Attractive

One day Sister Derrick and I attended the London Temple. For the first time we saw the plan of salvation on film. We recognized that the man who played the role of Lucifer was a friend of ours. I don't mean Lucifer. I mean the one who played the part. He was handsome beyond description with his jet black hair, goatee, long black sideburns, and tanned complexion. But inside, according to the role he was playing, he was wicked and evil. As we left the temple that day, I said to Sister Derrick, "Isn't that just the way Lucifer is! So attractive on the outside, but filthy on the inside." The lights of Las Vegas reflecting from the gold and silver windows are so attractive outside, but inside the casinos, the water bubbles to the boiling point.

How does Lucifer affect our behavior? The Lord says, "And that wicked one cometh and taketh away light and truth, through disobedience, from the children of men" (D&C 93:39).

But if we keep the Lord's commandments, he places wonderful promises within our reach. "For if you keep my commandments," he said, "you shall receive of his fullness, and be glorified in me as I am in the Father; therefore, I say unto you, you shall receive grace for grace" (D&C 93:20).

He further said, "And no man receiveth a fulness unless he keepeth his commandments.

He that keepeth his commandments receiveth truth and light, until he is glorified in truth and knoweth all things.” (D&C 93:27–28).

Responsibility

Yes, sin is attractive. The adversary makes it so. But men and women have their agency. They may do what is right, or they may do what is wrong. They may be obedient or disobedient, but they cannot escape the consequences.

President Spencer W. Kimball said:

You probably think you have found a new freedom: to think wholly for yourself, to make wholly your own determinations, to criticize and decide for yourself what is right and wrong. That was decided eternities ago. Right and wrong are not to be determined by you or me. Those elements were decided for us before our birth.

We have our free agency to do the right or to do the wrong, but who are we to alter those changeless things? . . . But, my beloved young brother, believe this absolute and unchangeable truth; you cannot avoid the responsibility of your acts! Think that through clearly! Do not fool yourself. Your own life is too precious! The lives of your posterity are too priceless! You will receive the rewards of right thinking, righteous doing, conforming attitudes; and wholly beyond your own controls, you will pay penalties—not that God will punish you, but that you, yourself, will bring down upon yourself the judgments. [TSWK, p. 160]

While we speak of agency, we must also understand that repentance is available to every person. We have our agency to repent. The adversary would have us believe that repentance is not possible. If that were so, we would all be in serious difficulty, for there was only One who was without sin. Repentance enables us to grow spiritually. The steps of repentance are (1) recognition, (2) remorse, (3) resolve, (4) restitution, and (5) abandonment.

I believe the Lord was speaking of this same process in the Beatitudes. He said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3). In the Book of Mormon, he clarified this with an addition, “Blessed are the poor in spirit who come unto me, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (3 Nephi 12:3). It is not progress to be poor in spirit unless one comes to the Lord for help through prayer. This is the first step, which involves recognition of sin and a desire to improve.

The second step: “Blessed are all they that mourn, for they shall be comforted” (3 Nephi 12:4). The apostle Paul speaks of a godly sorrow for sin. Unless we have remorse for our sins, we cannot progress toward perfection.

The third step: “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (3 Nephi 12:5). The meek are the teachable. No longer do we have a defensive and critical attitude. Our unrighteous pride has been broken, through suffering for sin. We are willing to listen to the teachings of the Lord, whose sole right it is to determine the rules and regulations.

The fourth step: “Blessed are all they who do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled with the Holy Ghost” (3 Nephi 12:6). When we hunger and thirst after righteousness, we are filled with resolve, and we are anxious to learn more about the Lord and how we can improve our lives through knowledge and understanding.

The fifth step: “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy” (3 Nephi 12:7). When we are merciful, we have a desire to serve others and a sincere concern for their welfare. We want to make restitution where possible for any wrong we may have done them. When we are merciful to others through service and a forgiving attitude, then the Lord will be merciful to us.

The sixth step: “Blessed are all the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (3 Nephi 12:8). When we abandon our sins and do not permit

ourselves to get involved again, we develop a pure heart which entitles us to be in God's presence.

Now we are ready for the next step which completes the process of repentance, and you will note that all the steps are in the proper sequence: "Blessed are all the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God" (3 Nephi 12:3–9). Following the process of repentance, we have that sweet peace of God in our heart and in our mind. We want peace in the home, peace in the family, peace in the nation, and peace in the world. Indeed, we then qualify to be the children of God.

We then have no fear of criticism from those who would persecute us falsely, for the sake of the Lord. We stand firm in support of those principles given to us by the Lord through his holy prophets in modern days, as well as in ancient days. We do not permit the scoffing of our would-be friends to cause us to feel embarrassed, nor do we give in to their enticing that would lead us into sin and sorrow.

And thus the Lord has given us a formula to attain perfection. The closing verse in the chapter containing the Beatitudes is, "Therefore I would that ye should be perfect as I, or your Father who is in heaven is perfect" (3 Nephi 12:48).

Punishment

The prophet Alma explained that the punishment of sin is remorse of conscience (see Alma 42:18). It doesn't seem that simple, for sin has many entanglements and is much more complicated. It weighs down the soul and brings misery and unhappiness to the heart and the mind. It takes away light and truth and overshadows one with feelings of guilt. When light is taken away, darkness envelops the room. And so it is with the soul.

I have recollection of my first experience with remorse of conscience. I was four years old. As I walked up the street, I passed a small

grocery store. The proprietor had built a ledge about four to five inches wide in front of the windows of the store, where at this particular time of the year he would place beautiful, red, polished apples to attract the passers-by, but not little four-year-old boys.

As I passed the store, I saw one of those delicious, juicy, rosy apples. My cheeks ached as my saliva began to run. Without realizing I was doing wrong, I reached over, picked up an apple, and continued up the street. When I got two houses beyond the store, I looked in my hand and realized I had stolen an apple. I began to run where any four-year-old boy who was in trouble would run—home! Our secret hiding place was under the front porch where we stored our gardening tools. I ran all the way home, crawled under the porch, sat there all afternoon shivering with fear, and eating the apple.

Remorse of conscience is not always that simple, but I have often reflected upon the fact that at four years of age, my conscience told me I had done wrong. I knew it was wrong, and I knew that my Heavenly Father knew that I had done wrong. I was both frightened and ashamed. Whether we are four years old or forty years old, it is all the same. Our conscience teaches us right from wrong—unless we have destroyed it through careless abandonment.

Independence

We become more aware of our agency as we come into our adolescent years of life. Whereas we heretofore have been obedient without questioning, now we rebel at compulsion and dislike gentle suggestions. We want our independence. We want to exercise our agency that was given to us by the Lord. This can be a very sensitive period, for oftentimes we exercise our agency without the wisdom of experience. Let me give you an example. When one of our sons was seventeen years of age, he became typically independent. We did

not understand the problem and were deeply concerned. He was a good boy but seemed to have become a bit rebellious. Nevertheless, he was always willing to go home teaching with me as he was assigned by the bishop to be my companion. We had arranged an appointment to go home teaching on a particular Thursday evening. I wanted our families to implement in the home the principles of the gospel introduced in church, so I asked Sister Derrick, “What did you study in Relief Society last month?”

She responded, “We studied the principle of independence.”

David and I went into the bedroom, kneeled in prayer, and then sat on the bed; we talked and read from the scriptures about independence.

The second home we visited was that of President Kimball. He answered the door. We sat down in the front room with him and Sister Kimball. Following brief words of greeting, I said to Sister Kimball, “I understand you studied the principle of independence in Relief Society last month.”

“Yes,” she responded.

I turned to David and said, “Would you like to tell us your thoughts on independence?” The response he gave caused my heart to leap for joy.

He said, “Every young man and every young woman wants to be independent. I want to be independent.” I thought that was a great statement, for I believe it is true. He continued, “I always thought that to be independent you had to *not* do what our parents wanted you to do, but I’ve discovered tonight that, if you want to be independent, you have to keep the commandments of the Lord. The Lord has given us his commandments so that we can remain free. The Lord wants us to be free. But if we do not keep his commandments, we will come under the control of Lucifer. Lucifer wants to take our independence from us. Therefore, we are in jeopardy of losing the

very thing we are trying to gain.” You can appreciate how delighted I was to hear those words. He has been a model son since that day.

Promptings of the Spirit

We want to be receptive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit which come from within. What do we mean when we say, “Comes from within”? The apostle Paul, speaking to the Corinthian Saints, said: “Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?” (1 Corinthians 3:16).

Later in his epistle he revealed that the Spirit of God which he spoke of is the Holy Ghost. In the Doctrine and Covenants, we receive the following confirmation of that principle: “The elements [that is, the flesh and the bones] are the tabernacle of God; yea, man is the tabernacle of God” (D&C 93:35).

In section 130 of the Doctrine and Covenants the Lord says, “The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones, but is a personage of Spirit. Were it not so, the Holy Ghost could not dwell in us” (D&C 130:22).

When we are confirmed members of the Church, hands are laid upon our heads, and one having authority to do so says, “Receive the Holy Ghost.” From that moment on, the Holy Ghost dwells within us so long as we keep the commandments of God. If we break his commandments, the Holy Ghost leaves our bodies, for nothing unclean can enter the presence of God, and when something unclean appears, the Holy Ghost departs. When we have properly repented, the Holy Spirit returns and continues to prompt us as we ask the Lord for forgiveness and for divine guidance. We receive such messages by feelings in our hearts and thoughts in our minds.

I would like to share with you my thoughts on this matter. They are my own. I do not teach them as doctrine. Some years ago, Dr. Asael Woodruff, who at the time was the dean of the

School of Education here at BYU, made a presentation to our General Sunday School Board on concepts. He said that, when we are born into the world, we have no concepts. Johnny, who recently entered mortality, is walking along the street. It begins to rain and someone says, "Johnny, this is rain." And so Johnny is introduced to his first primary concept. The rain turns to snow, and someone says, "Johnny, this is snow." Johnny receives his second primary concept. It goes from there to hail, sleet, wind, blizzard, heat, cold, and so forth. Then someone says, "Johnny, you put all these together, and you have weather." And so Johnny receives his first secondary concept. We combine secondary concepts to attain higher concepts and then combine higher concepts to attain ever higher concepts in our various fields of endeavor.

Sometimes, in response to our prayers, the Holy Spirit puts new thoughts in our minds. In my experience, this happens very seldom. Most of the time, he takes thoughts from the storehouse of one's own brain and brings them forward for review. Thus, it is important that we study and fill our minds with knowledge and learning about things as they were, as they are, and as they are to come. The Spirit cannot bring thoughts to recall from an empty mind.

Ofttimes the Holy Ghost will bring more than one thought to the forefront of our minds where we can ponder them and, in the light of our experiences, put them together to form higher concepts. And thus he enlightens our minds, and our understandings are expanded using the resources we have attained by experience and study.

We obtain confirmation of those things which are right by peaceful feelings and good feelings. The Lord said to Oliver Cowdery through the Prophet Joseph Smith, "Did I not speak peace to your mind concerning the matter? What greater witness can you have than from God?" (D&C 6:23).

So when we keep the commandments of God, he stands by to give us promptings, assistance, and direction. But we must ask. He says, "Ask, and ye shall receive; knock, and it shall be opened unto you" (D&C 4:7). We are nearly always required to initiate the communication. But when we have committed sin and have not repented, the Spirit is silent. What a great companion we have! Let us not turn our back on him and reject his promptings by disqualifying ourselves through disobedience.

President Kimball said, "Conscience tells the individual when he is entering forbidden worlds, and it continues to prick until silenced by the will or by sin's repetition" ("President Kimball Speaks Out on Morality," *Ensign*, November 1980, p. 95).

The adversary has no control so long as we remain worthy of the companionship of the Holy Ghost. When the Holy Ghost leaves our bodies because we have sinned, the adversary can get his toe in the door, pry it open, and take control. Thus we get the promptings of the adversary instead of the promptings of the Holy Ghost.

Whether the adversary prompts us or the Holy Spirit prompts us depends upon the thoughts we think. The apostle Paul said, "If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy" (1 Corinthians 3:17). In section 93 of the Doctrine and Covenants, we read, "Whatsoever temple is defiled, God shall destroy that temple" (D&C 93:35), meaning that the Holy Ghost will depart when our bodies are not fit places for the Spirit to reside. When the Spirit leaves, our bodies are no longer temples, for a temple is where God resides.

How do we defile our bodies? It is all controlled by our minds. We defile our bodies when we think thoughts we shouldn't think. We defile our bodies when we say things we shouldn't say. We defile our bodies when we take into them things we should not take in. We defile our bodies when we do things with

them we should not do. Did it ever occur to you that there is no other way to sin? All we need do is to control those few actions—all of which stem from the mind.

How to Control Our Destiny

From the foregoing, it is obvious that our future can be one of joy and happiness if we but keep the commandments of the Lord. Keeping the commandments does not relate to our economic welfare. Some of the most faithful Saints have meager incomes, and some of the most faithful Saints are well-to-do. Valiance is more closely related to self-discipline. Self-discipline implies that we as individuals know where we are going and the price we are willing to pay to get there. We anticipate what might happen and decide in advance what our position will be and how we will react. The man who returns money to the bank cashier who has given him more than she should in change did not make up his mind at the moment. His decision had been made beforehand. The man who testifies at the trial and who tells the truth to his embarrassment does not make up his mind what to say on the moment. His decision to be truthful is made beforehand. The man who takes the responsibility for his own mistakes instead of blaming a subordinate has made the decision long before.

We must decide what kind of people we want to be and then do those things that will result in our being that kind of people. When the Savior was accosted by Lucifer on the mountain and sorely tempted by the master tempter, he did not hesitate. He knew in

advance what he would say. There was no discussion. There was no question. He said promptly and forcefully, “Get thee hence, Satan” (Matthew 4:10).

When we make our decisions well in advance, our judgment is best. When we make our decisions under emotional stress or under the tempter’s snare, our judgment is impaired.

What kind of a person are you going to be? What will be your destiny? Are you going to be obedient to God’s laws, or are you going to lose your freedom to the adversary? Are you going to be a person of integrity, or are you going to be a person of weak character? The decision is yours, today.

The time to decide you are going on a mission is when you are a very young man, or if you have not yet decided, the time is now. The time to decide on a temple marriage is in your early youth. If that decision is not made, make it now.

President Kimball counseled,

Your own life, our own lives, are precious ones. We can satisfy ourselves with mediocrity. We can be common, ordinary, dull, colorless, or we can so channel our lives to be clean, vibrant, progressive, colorful, and rich.

We can soil our records, defile our souls, trample underfoot virtue, honor, and goodness, or we can command the respect and admiration of our associates and the love of the Lord . . .

Your destiny is in your hands and your all-important decisions are before you. [TWSK, p. 161]

To this fact I bear witness in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.