

Our Essential Spiritual Agency

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My beloved young friends and associates, it is a joy for me to be with you, and I want you to know what a blessing it is to be on this beautiful campus! There really is nothing like it in the whole world. I want to thank President Samuelson and all who make BYU possible. You are a light to the world, and you will become a brighter light as we go through this dispensation.

Most of all, I am grateful for each of you, the students of this great university. Thank you for preparing yourselves to serve Heavenly Father's children. And thank you for standing as a witness of the Savior "at all times and in all things, and in all places."¹ We love you.

I believe you will look back on your decision to come to BYU as one of the most important choices of your life—a choice that will bless you and your families eternally. The choice to come to BYU is a choice that if you are obedient will make you independent of the things of the world. That is not easy.

I begin with a few questions that are so simple I hope you will not dismiss them too quickly: Do you know who you are? Do you know what you have been given and what a glorious future you have?

We are told we are children of God. We sing about it in Primary. We say it to others, hoping

they will understand and believe it. But do we really know what it means?

How recently have we thanked Heavenly Father that we were born in the covenant, that we are members of the Church, that we are at this university? Or, if we weren't born in the covenant, have we thanked Him for the opportunities that we can make choices to be sealed in the temple so that we can receive the blessings of the covenant and pass them down to our posterity? For those born in the covenant or not, we have the same opportunities, if we make the right choices.

This morning I would like to visit with you about our choices and blessings. Before coming to this earth we lived with Heavenly Father. He gave us the incomparable gift of agency. We had an opportunity to use that gift in a Grand Council with all His children. On that momentous occasion Heavenly Father presented a plan to become like Him and inherit all that He has.

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But Lucifer, our brother, rebelliously opposed this plan with one of his own—a plan that would give him the honor. He in fact said to the Father, “Give me thine honor.”² But that would have destroyed the agency of man. Tragically, a third of our spiritual siblings used their agency to follow him. Like Cain, they “loved Satan more than God.”³

But we chose to follow our Savior, Jesus Christ. He chose, as we did, to accept our Heavenly Father’s eternal plan. He offered to make that plan possible by being our Savior, saying, “Father, thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever.”⁴ Just the simple words: “Father, send me.” By that singular choice, Jesus Christ made it possible for all of us to come to earth, exercise our agency, choose freely, repent of our sins, and become like our Heavenly Father.

Brothers and sisters, we are here now because we chose to follow Jesus Christ then. Today each of us has the opportunity to continue making the same choice: to come, to follow Him, and to be able to return to His presence. The scriptures say:

*Wherefore, [we] are free according to the flesh; and all things are given [us] which are expedient unto [us]. And [we] are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men [Jesus Christ], or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil.*⁵

It is our choice to choose light or darkness. This has been the plan for us and for all God’s children from the beginning. From the scriptures we know that Adam was tempted by Lucifer, just as we are. For “it must needs be that the devil should tempt the children of men, or they could not be agents unto themselves; for if they never should have bitter they could not know the sweet.”⁶ That is why there is and must be opposition in all things. It is for our growth and for our development here in mortality.

Because of that opposition, we have the essential spiritual agency to choose spiritual life here and eternal life in the world to come.

As we use our God-given agency to keep the commandments, we qualify for the life Heavenly Father wants us to have. In mortality, that life unfolds through a natural process of making choices and experiencing tests and trials. And the blessings come after the tests and trials and from how we handle them.

The Prophet Joseph Smith provides an ideal example. Think of the process of his life: He exercised his agency to seek which Church was right. He chose to talk to ministers and visit congregations. He chose to study the Bible. He chose to pray in the Sacred Grove. Through these choices he was developed to accomplish his foreordained mission.

This development always takes time and testing and faith. After the First Vision, Joseph was treated with suspicion, unkindness, and ridicule by members of the community. Three years later Moroni appeared to him and told him of the Book of Mormon. During the next four years, misunderstanding and hostility increased toward Joseph Smith and his family. He returned to the site to visit Moroni each year until finally he was deemed ready to receive the plates on which the Book of Mormon was written.

Through it all, the young Prophet was growing and maturing. He was learning to rely upon Heavenly Father and to seek guidance from His Holy Spirit.

So it is with all of us. We will be tested, often to our limit. Yet all of us know and are assured that we will never be tested more than that which we can endure. And the greatest blessings will be based on how *well* we endure our tests.

I testify that whatever challenges or hardships we have, they are provided for a reason—so that we can become and accomplish what we were sent to the earth to be and to do.

This truth is taught in the scriptures: that we receive no witness until after the trial of our faith. Sometimes that trial consists of seeking understanding or waiting for an answer from the Lord. President David O. McKay prayed for a testimony in his boyhood, but it didn't come until several years later, while he was serving a mission in Scotland.

I had my own experience seeking and waiting on the Lord. As a boy I loved baseball and dreamed of becoming a professional ball player. I'm sure I didn't have major league talent, but I had the desire and the love for it. Baseball had surely captured my heart and soul. Then, when I was about 11 or 12, my father took me to the Sacred Grove. Through a simple but meaningful experience there, I began to sense that Heavenly Father had other things for me to do. We both had prayers. As time went on, divinely arranged opportunities helped me recognize that I was not meant to be a professional athlete. His plan for me was to put me on a course that led me to my calling to be an Apostle—and, I might add, led me to my sweetheart. I would not be here without her and have the opportunity to be with you this morning. I love my companion so much. She means so much to me, and I ask that you seek from your Heavenly Father that you might find that right companion who will have you be able to accomplish in this life what you are capable of becoming.

I testify that the life Heavenly Father has in store for each of us is more glorious than anything we can imagine or arrange for ourselves, but it won't come without challenges, and it won't come about all at once. His way is always to prepare us line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little. And that always happens on His timetable.

In our fast-paced world, we are sometimes impatient for His plan to unfold. Popular culture tells us, "Get a life." My advice to all of us is, "Get an eternal life." By making right

choices today, tomorrow, and for the rest of our time on earth, that eternal goal means the most to us.

As members of the Church, we are striving to make the right choices for the right reasons. Early in our marriage I suggested that we pay our tithing from out of our year-end bonus, which came after the first of the year. I was thinking about tithing like life insurance or fire insurance—something you pay to stay out of trouble. But my sweet wife and companion taught me: "No," she said, "we will pay tithing as we go, because we love the Lord and want to build His kingdom."

Where the kingdom is concerned, the willingness of our hearts is everything. We keep the commandments because we love Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. As we express that love, it is very simple. He said, "If ye love me, keep my commandments."⁷ As we do, we lay the foundation of a great work, and out of these small things proceeds that which is great.

How do we lay that foundation? I'm going to tell you a story I have never told before. As a boy, I had the job of shellacking a wooden floor. As I neared the end of the task, my father found me in a terrible predicament. He literally stood at the door and laughed. I had worked from the only door to the far end of the room. I had painted myself into a corner, without a window. There was no escape! At that point I had two choices: sit down and accept being stuck for many hours until the varnish dried or walk back across the floor, undoing all I had done. I knew what it would take to refinish it properly. The sanding and refinishing—I knew what was ahead of me, and so did my father. Because of the way I used my agency in painting the floor, my agency was diminished. In fact, my choices were not only drastically reduced but my agency was gone.

Whenever we use our agency, we are either choosing to move toward a new door with many possibilities or into a closed corner

with very few options. If we do what is right, our opportunities increase. If we don't, our opportunities decrease.

You, my friends, are in the critical period I call the decade of decisions. You must make many choices regarding education, employment, temple, missions, friends, dating, marriage, serving in the Church, and your family. As you choose, are your options and possibilities growing? Are you making the right choices? Is your future becoming brighter each day or are the lights dimming?

After the Prophet Joseph translated the first 116 pages of the Book of Mormon, Martin Harris insisted that he be loaned the manuscript. He wanted to show people what he was doing—his family and others. The Prophet responded by seeking the counsel of the Lord, who told him very clearly not to share the manuscript. But Brother Harris was undeterred, and the Prophet continued to ask the Lord. Finally, the Lord said, in effect, "All right, Joseph, have it your way." The Lord does not control or interfere with the exercise of our agency. The song in the hymnbook says He "will force no man to heav'n."⁸

So the Prophet loaned the manuscript to Brother Harris. He listened to the people's voice, as Saul learned.⁹ And then the manuscript disappeared. As a result, Joseph lost his ability to translate, and he had to come back and repent to the Lord. In this way the Prophet painted himself into a corner, and his options were reduced. Blessings were taken away from him. It was an agonizing experience until he was able to repent, to turn around, and to receive his power to translate once again so that he could fulfill the mission the Father had for him here on earth.

The Prophet's experience is just one way we paint ourselves into a corner. Whenever we heed the opinions of men, we put ourselves in a corner. Whenever we become addicted to anything—drugs, money, shopping, adulation—we put ourselves in a corner. When we

do not heed spiritual promptings and marry the wrong person, we put ourselves in a corner. When we don't do our homework or don't get the proper grades or don't prepare for a test or miss work or take offense or get angry or tell a lie—we put ourselves in a corner. There we are stuck, our options are limited, and our opportunities and power to choose are reduced.

Painting ourselves in a corner also happens when we do not pay heed to our own God-given gifts and talents, when we don't seek counsel from others, and when we don't obtain direction from the Lord.

When I was in college, I was blessed to audit a class in law school. As part of that class I was invited to go to a national debate conference and be a partner on a very fine debate team. While many thought I could be successful as an attorney and advised me to study the law, I found I didn't enjoy arguing oftentimes for a position that I could not agree with myself. The law is an important and valuable profession, and many have been prepared to serve the Lord through its practice. But it wasn't a work I enjoyed or that made the best use of my gifts. And it wasn't a work I had been prepared to do.

All of us should carefully consider what Heavenly Father wants us to do and how He may be preparing us. We should avoid trying to obtain the praise of the world and the honors of men.

When I was a little boy, my mother used to call me by saying as she went through the house, "Ding-ding, ding-ding. Calling Dr. Hales to surgery!" Being a doctor is a noble profession, but it wasn't right for me. I can't stand the sight of blood. Similarly, Harvard Law School is a highly valuable educational opportunity, but it wasn't what I was meant to do. I walked across a bridge and went to another school that I felt was better for me.

I caution all of us to avoid looking to the great and spacious building for answers to questions about our future pursuits, our

companions, and our lifestyles. Instead, let us kneel and talk with our Heavenly Father, learn about our gifts and talents, find ways to develop them, make choices based on who we are and what we have been given, come to an understanding of what we are to accomplish here in mortality, and make the choices to bring it about.

Often the answers come when we seek the counsel of wise and trusted advisors—parents, priesthood leaders, teachers, and mature and dear friends. After I completed my master’s degree, I went to a great leader at the university I was at and asked him for counsel. He agreed to give me counsel on two conditions: First, I had to come to him with a plan of my own; and, second, I had to follow his instructions and his counsel. “Otherwise,” he told me, “the meeting would be a waste of both my time and yours.”

Perhaps we should not agree in advance to take the counsel of anyone unless they have a spiritual stewardship for us. But aren’t these the conditions for seeking counsel from the Lord in prayer?

In the Doctrine and Covenants we are taught that when we have a concern or question, we should study the matter out in our own mind and bring our plan to the Lord. Then, as we present that plan, we may either receive a burning in our heart or a stupor of thought. But these answers will not come unless we ask in faith—in other words, we have agreed in advance to accept the guidance of our Heavenly Father as delivered through His Spirit and through our obedience and to follow what we are told to do.

The principle of seeking this divine guidance is true for all decisions. The most naïve and destructive approach to life is to say, “I will do it my way. I can do it myself.” Whoa. To succeed in mortality and to obtain eternal blessings, we should never act alone.

That is why we seek the advice of those who love us: our teachers, our parents, our priest-

hood leaders, and our eternal companions. That is why we seek the Lord—praying to know His will regarding the prayerful, diligent efforts we have made.

I am saddened when I think of the great potential of those who could have accomplished magnificent things in this life but who have lost the opportunity to do so by making wrong, foolish, or misguided choices.

I can hardly bear to think of those who squander their birthright because they misuse their agency. The servants of the Lord have reminded all of us: Pray daily. Study the scriptures. Get an education. Save your money and resist consumer debt—provident living. Avoid pornography. Exercise care in the media you consume. Keep the Word of Wisdom. Dress modestly and appropriately. Be morally clean. Obey the commandments and keep your covenants. Do they sound familiar? They are the most important choices we make to allow us to be able to get the answers to our prayers and to be guided by the Spirit.

Exercising our essential spiritual agency isn’t easy. Throughout His life the Savior sought to know and to do the will of His Father. In his 12th year he began to be about His Father’s business. Throughout His ministry He lived the truths expressed in His great Intercessory Prayer: He was one with the Father. He did the will of His Father. He was totally obedient. He taught others what the Father had taught Him. He was always humble. He never took credit. He always glorified His Father.

But it wasn’t easy! He was misunderstood, challenged, ridiculed, scorned, beaten, and ultimately crucified. He was the light shining in the darkness, and the darkness comprehended Him not.¹⁰ For Him there were always pointing fingers and mocking voices. That is true for all who take upon them His name. We have to understand what comes from the great and spacious building and the world—it is pointing fingers and mocking voices. And, as

Lehi learned, the same can be said for all who would sincerely, wholeheartedly follow Him.

Think of all the things that Job went through, yet he used his agency to remain faithful. Think of all that Joseph Smith had to go through. Think of Abraham, Abigail, Esther, Mary and Joseph, Peter, Nephi, Alma, Abinadi, Mormon, Moroni, Emma, and so many others. Think of our own ancestors and our pioneer forebears—the very heritage many of us have. Think of ourselves . . .

“And blessed are all they who are persecuted for my name’s sake, . . . for great shall be your reward in heaven; for so persecuted they the prophets who were before you.”¹¹

A word of warning: When things get hard, the natural man looks for an easier way. The challenges of the latter days create the perfect environment for the doctrines of the anti-Christ to take root. The anti-Christ message is always the same: Don’t do what is hard, don’t follow the Savior, and don’t use your agency to submit to the will of your Heavenly Father.

These perverted ideas were perfectly preached by Korihor and others like him, who told the people:

*Eat, drink, and be merry; nevertheless, fear God—he will justify [us] in committing a little sin; yea, lie a little, take the advantage of one because of his words, dig a pit for thy neighbor; there is no harm in this; and do all these things, for tomorrow we die; and if it so be that we are guilty, God will beat us with a few stripes, and at last we shall be saved in the kingdom of God.*¹²

Don’t you ever believe that. That is not the way it is. The way is through obedience and love. It is that sweet comment again of the Savior: “If ye love me, keep my commandments.” In other words, be obedient.

This message the anti-Christ gives is the message of the secular movement in our world today. It robs us of our accountability and responsibility, diminishing our judgment and

essential spiritual agency. Do not believe this destructive doctrine of men and of Lucifer. The closer we are to the Second Coming, the further we will be from being where the world is going. As the New Testament teaches, “Abstain from all appearance of evil.”¹³

Beloved young people, the world is getting darker, it is true. But we are called to walk in the light. We do not have to find a path for ourselves. As we did in our premortal life, we choose to follow Jesus Christ. He is the Light of the World.

He understands the challenge of walking His path. Remember, He “was in all points tempted like as we are.”¹⁴ Even in the Garden of Gethsemane He had a choice. “All things are possible unto thee,” He pled with His Father. “Take away this cup from me: nevertheless not what I will, but what thou wilt.”¹⁵

When we end our prayers with “Thy will be done,” we are doing what the Savior did in the Garden of Gethsemane, for what we are saying is, “Whatever the test, whatever I’m to learn, I will always love Thee.”

The scenes leading to His crucifixion were filled with choices to suffer the cruel and ignorant behavior of His brothers and sisters. At times He used His agency to be silent. On the cross He chose mercy, praying, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.”¹⁶

In those awful hours He chose to endure not just the agony of physical death but the terrible separation from His Father, with whom He had always been. This was our Heavenly Father’s plan—to allow His Son to fully exercise His agency to complete His work on His own. He called to His Father, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”¹⁷

There may be moments in your life, as there have been in mine, when you’ll have a moment like that—when you are in pain. He who could have called on legions of angels to carry Him home hung alone on the cross until that final moment when He chose to give up His life, His spirit—He being the only One who could

do so—and He said: “It is finished.”¹⁸ For you and me, may we be able to finish this life and endure to the end and be able to say in our closing hours, “It is finished.”

But the example of our Savior does not end there. He chose to preach unto the spirits in prison, who were filled with gladness and joy because “the Son of God appeared, declaring liberty to the captives who had been faithful.”¹⁹

After three days in the Garden Tomb, He chose to take up His body again and break the bands of death. He appeared to Mary Magdalene and to many other believers, choosing to teach them, feed them, and encourage them in the work of the kingdom that was now theirs.

He chose to appear to the people on this continent—including the faithful who had been persecuted for believing in Him. In the thick darkness of destruction, the supernal confirmation that He had honorably kept His premortal promise was heard and felt by all: “Behold my Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased, in whom I have glorified my name—hear ye him.”²⁰

Then, high above the ruins of Bountiful, wearing a white robe and bearing the tokens of the Atonement in His hands and feet and side, He chose to descend—to call the people forth, to minister to them one by one, and to bless their children.

I express my eternal gratitude for the Savior’s willingness to mark this path and His way for us by exercising His agency in righteousness. I bear my testimony and my special

witness that our Savior freely and willingly chose to give His life for us. I pray we may freely and willingly choose to live our lives for Him and to lift and strengthen others.

I testify that His gospel is true. This is His Church. President Thomas S. Monson is His prophet. We are truly God’s children with the essential spiritual agency to become like Him and to live with Him eternally. May this be our choice now and forever, I pray. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Mosiah 18:9.
2. D&C 29:36; Moses 4:1.
3. Moses 5:18.
4. Moses 4:2.
5. 2 Nephi 2:27.
6. D&C 29:39.
7. John 14:15; D&C 124:87.
8. “Know This, That Every Soul Is Free,” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 240.
9. See 1 Samuel 15:24.
10. See John 1:5; D&C 88:49.
11. 3 Nephi 12:10–12.
12. 2 Nephi 28:8.
13. 1 Thessalonians 5:22.
14. Hebrews 4:15.
15. Mark 14:36.
16. Luke 23:34.
17. Matthew 27:46.
18. John 19:30.
19. D&C 138:18.
20. 3 Nephi 11:7.