

Free to Choose Liberty or Captivity

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We deal with one key aspect of the remarkable plan of salvation many times each day (in reality, many times each hour): agency, or the ability to choose for ourselves. As I was preparing these remarks, I tried to think of a comparison to convey the importance of agency in the plan of salvation. First I thought of a piece in a jigsaw puzzle. Have you ever put together a jigsaw puzzle and found out there was one missing piece? It can be frustrating, and the picture isn't totally complete without every piece of the puzzle. But I realized that this is not analogous to agency in the plan because the exercise of putting the puzzle together is basically the same whether or not you have all the pieces, and the finished project looks very similar to what was intended.

A more accurate comparison would be the crankshaft in an automobile engine. The crankshaft isn't just some emissions control gadget or even a power-steering pump or air-conditioning compressor. Without a crankshaft the engine will not start. It won't function at all. The purpose of the engine—to move a car—cannot be accomplished. There is no way around it. This is more like agency in the plan of salvation. Without it, the plan would not work.

Agency is essential to our progress and ability to become like our Father in Heaven

and His Son, Jesus Christ. The Savior chose good over evil in every choice He made. Part of our earthly experience consists of being enticed by both good and evil and then learning how to choose good over evil. How could we become like the Savior if we did not have agency to make those choices? By using our agency to choose the right, we begin to put on the divine nature—to pattern our lives after His. We find peace, happiness, and freedom as we make right choices.

In the pre-earth life, Lucifer tried to destroy agency. The scriptures teach us that “Satan rebelled . . . and sought to destroy the agency of man, which I, the Lord God, had given him.”¹ Our Heavenly Father did not allow him to destroy this precious gift of agency. In fact, his attempt to destroy it is one of the reasons he was cast out of heaven.² We also learn from the scriptures that “he became Satan, yea, even the devil, the father of all lies, to deceive and to blind men, and to lead them captive at his will, even as many as would not hearken unto my voice.”³

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This sounds a little like a contradiction. Satan tried to destroy agency. Our Heavenly Father wouldn't allow it and cast him out. Satan will now deceive and blind men, and he will lead them captive at his will. If he is leading people captive, doesn't that sound like he is destroying agency? The fact is, he couldn't destroy agency in the pre-earth life, and he can't do it now either. If he can't destroy agency, then how can he lead us captive? He does it by enticing us to sin. When we sin, we subject ourselves to him. We, in effect, give part of our agency to him. He can't take it from us, but we can relinquish it.

This concept is explained in the context of the early history here on earth: "Wherefore, it came to pass that the devil tempted Adam, and he partook of the forbidden fruit and transgressed the commandment, wherein he became subject to the will of the devil, because he yielded unto temptation."⁴ When we yield to temptation, we become subject to the will of the devil. Again, even though he can't destroy or take away our agency by force, we can give it up.

Listen to some of the phrases from the scriptures illustrating this important idea:

- "Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin."⁵
- "To whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey."⁶
- "They chose evil works rather than good; therefore the spirit of the devil did enter into them, and take possession of their house . . . , and this because of their own iniquity, being led captive by the will of the devil."⁷

Lehi taught his sons very plainly:

Wherefore, men are free according to the flesh; and all things are given them which are expedient unto man. And they 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; for he seeketh that all men might be miserable like unto himself.*⁸

Lehi pleaded with his sons not to "choose eternal death, according to the will of the flesh and the evil which is therein, which giveth the spirit of the devil power to captivate."⁹

Joseph Smith observed:

*Satan was generally blamed for the evils which we did, but if he was the cause of all our wickedness, men could not be condemned. The devil could not compel mankind to do evil; all was voluntary. Those who resisted the Spirit of God, would be liable to be led into temptation. . . . God would not exert any compulsory means, and the devil could not; and such ideas as were entertained [on these subjects] by many were absurd.*¹⁰

Elder James E. Talmage wrote:

*Satan exerts a mastery over the spirits that have been corrupted by his practises . . . ; he seeks to molest and hinder mankind in good efforts. . . . Yet in all these malignant doings, he can go no farther than the transgressions of the victim may enable him, or the wisdom of God may permit; and at any time he may be checked by the superior power.*¹¹

Satan's ultimate goal is to make each of us miserable like he is.¹² Since he can't impose this misery, he has to find a way to convince us to choose it. Does this even sound like a feasible business plan? "Convince people to choose to be miserable." It sounds more like *Mission Impossible*: "Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to convince people to choose misery over joy, bondage over freedom." It just sounds ridiculous. And yet, by all observations, he has been fairly successful in the world at large. And to the degree we have chosen to commit sins, he has even been successful with each of us.

With such an implausible goal, how has he been able to convince so many to choose a

path through life that leads to misery? How is he able to convince even good people who are generally choosing righteously in life to commit sins? We have to remember that for us to exercise our agency in a way to help us become more like the Savior, we must be enticed by good and evil. The evil has to be enticing or it would be no test—no challenge, no real choice—and thus we would not experience real growth. But by us choosing good in the face of an alternative that is truly enticing, our characters are shaped and we start to reap the rewards of freedom and peace. We learn more deeply that we trust in a God who cannot lie,¹³ and our faith increases.

So what makes it possible for the adversary to make evil and sin seem enticing? How do you sell misery, bondage, and disappointment? Well, you have to lie. He is a liar. In fact, he is “the father of all lies.”¹⁴ The only way he can sell sin is to portray it as something it isn’t. He has to convince people that evil is good, or, in other words, that sin is right, that momentary pleasure equates with long-term joy, and that sin leads to freedom and happiness instead of to bondage and misery. He also throws in the idea that good is evil and that righteousness is bondage. Satan is a master at marketing. He has been at it for a long time, but the foundation of his marketing scheme is always lies.

Let’s look at a few examples from the scriptures.

Cain loved “Satan more than God.”¹⁵ He bought into Satan’s lies and chose to sin. There is a very telling description of Cain’s reaction after he killed Abel: “And Cain gloried in that which he had done, saying: I am free; surely the flocks of my brother falleth into my hands.”¹⁶ It is clear he had fallen for the adversary’s portrayal that committing sin (although Satan doesn’t call it that) will bring happiness and freedom. Cain’s exclamation “I am free” has to be in the top-ten list of the most deluded statements in all of scripture. He found out very soon that he was anything but free and

anything but happy because of his action. Yet how many people have felt the same thing—a burst of exhilaration or a sense of freedom when they have committed a sin—and think they’ve gotten away with it?

There was a time in the Book of Mormon when the Nephites had become very wicked. Samuel, a Lamanite, was sent to preach repentance to them. He explained to the people:

*Ye have procrastinated the day of your salvation until it is everlastingly too late, and your destruction is made sure; yea, for ye have sought all the days of your lives for that which ye could not obtain; and ye have sought for happiness in doing iniquity, which thing is contrary to the nature of that righteousness which is in our great and Eternal Head.*¹⁷

They had bought into the idea that they could find happiness in doing iniquity—the fundamental lie upon which Satan bases all of his enticements. Of course he doesn’t label iniquity “iniquity.” He portrays it as something good and natural. These Nephites had not learned the lesson Alma taught his son Corianton: that “wickedness never was happiness.”¹⁸ Corianton, for a time, had fallen for the lie that he could break the commandments and that doing so would lead to happiness.

The adversary doesn’t stop after we have decided to commit one sin. He wants us in his power. He wants us to be subject to him. Some of the related terms in the scriptures include “cords,”¹⁹ “bonds,”²⁰ “chains,”²¹ “captive,”²² “subjection,”²³ and even “seal.”²⁴ The Book of Mormon teaches us about his tactics to bring people into bondage by degrees: “He leadeth them by the neck with a flaxen cord, until he bindeth them with his strong cords forever.”²⁵ The imagery is instructive. It starts with a single cord and progresses until they are bound with strong cords. We also read, “Others he flattereth away, and telleth them there is no hell; and he saith unto them: I am no devil, for there is none—and thus he whispereth in

their ears, until he grasps them with his awful chains.”²⁶ He carefully leads people into bondage. It is not done in one big Faustian bargain. Just as we progress line upon line in righteousness, we move to bondage sin upon sin.

This is one reason parents and leaders are so concerned when a young person starts to make wrong choices. Once we get entangled in the adversary’s cords, getting out is much more difficult than getting in.

This bondage can be powerful. In the Book of Mormon we read about a time when

Satan had great power, unto the stirring up of the people to do all manner of iniquity, and to the puffing them up with pride, tempting them to seek for power, and authority, and riches, and the vain things of the world. . . .

And thus . . . the people [were] delivered up . . . to be carried about by the temptations of the devil whithersoever he desired to carry them, and to do whatsoever iniquity he desired they should. . . .

*. . . And all this iniquity had come upon the people because they did yield themselves unto the power of Satan.*²⁷

Later, as the civilization declined in Mormon’s time, he lamented that his people were “led about by Satan, even as chaff is driven before the wind, or as a vessel is tossed about upon the waves, without sail or anchor, or without anything wherewith to steer her.”²⁸ That imagery doesn’t convey much freedom, does it? When we yield ourselves to the adversary, we become “things to be acted upon”²⁹ instead of being free to act for ourselves.

I don’t know what the actual mechanism is for bringing about this bondage. I don’t know exactly what happens in the soul, but I do know something happens, and it is very real.

There is a tendency to use bondage to sin as an excuse for sinful behavior. For example, someone who is abusive may say that they have always had a temper and can’t help it if they yell at their family members. While it may

be true that a person has a weakness, giving in to that weakness strengthens its hold on us. On the other hand, if we resist the temptation, the hold on us is weakened.³⁰

One of Satan’s most effective tools is to clothe bondage in the costume of liberty. Peter warned the early Saints about individuals among them who would try to pull them away from the path of righteousness. He described these wicked individuals as “having eyes full of adultery, and that cannot cease from sin. . . . They speak great swelling words of vanity, they allure through the lusts of the flesh. . . . Those that were clean . . . while they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption: for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage.”³¹

These people tried to lure others to sin by promising them liberty even though they themselves were in the bondage of sin.

In the Book of Mormon we see that Korihor tried the same stunt, with a twist. He taught doctrines that brought people to the conclusion that sinning would bring them freedom and happiness, but he also focused on convincing people that the commandments and ordinances bound them down—that belief in God, Christ, and the prophets kept them in bondage.

Now that is a lie. The truth is that living the commandments makes us free. In fact, the irony in this situation is that Korihor was the one in bondage. He was not free. We don’t know all of his sins, but one that bound him down was his lying. He always knew there was a God, but he repeatedly denied this fact and lied to others about it. When Korihor denied the existence of God to Alma, Alma told him, “I know that thou believest, but thou art possessed with a lying spirit, and ye have put off the Spirit of God that it may have no place in you; but the devil has power over you, and he doth carry you about, working devices that he may destroy the children of God.”³² Korihor had chosen to lie initially and

then continued to lie repeatedly until Alma described him as possessed with a lying spirit.

Today there are many individuals promoting or condoning sin, and parts of our culture also carry these dangerous messages. For example, we see in the media a lot of modeling of sins with seemingly no negative consequences. We see meanness, law-breaking, disrespect, breaking of the law of chastity, immodesty, and profanity in an almost constant stream. Many times goodness and righteousness are portrayed as naïve and silly at best and evil at worst.

Each of us has sins that easily beset us and bind us down.³³ No one is exempt. You might struggle with something different than I face. Even Nephi grieved that he struggled with temptations: “And why should I yield to sin, because of my flesh? Yea, why should I give way to temptations, that the evil one have place in my heart to destroy my peace and afflict my soul?”³⁴

Since each of us has sinned and thus has subjected ourselves to the will of the devil to some degree, we need to somehow be freed from the bondage of sin. The Atonement has power to break these bonds, these chains, this captivity. When the Savior began His public ministry, He referenced a prophecy about Himself and His mission: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised.”³⁵ Deliverance and liberty come through Him and His Atonement.

No matter what the nature of the sins in our lives—dishonesty, pride, hypocrisy, laziness, greed, challenges with the law of chastity, addictions, anger, Word of Wisdom problems—whatever sins we struggle with, we can be freed from any degree of bondage we may be in. Each of us has experienced this as we have repented in the past. We have felt true

freedom as we have been forgiven and have jettisoned the behavior that has tormented us.

Sometimes these bonds are broken in a dramatic way. They seem to burst, and we are immediately freed. At other times the cords are loosed rather than burst.³⁶ It is almost as if a little at a time the cords that are wrapped around us are unraveled. But whether this happens all at once or gradually, the long-term effect is the same: we are free! And, either way, it is miraculous.

When we obey Satan, we give him power. When we obey God, He gives us power. This is not the message we get from the world, but it is the truth. Real power, the power to become like the Savior, is only found in obedience. Real freedom is found in obedience—in subjecting ourselves to God’s will rather than to the will of the flesh or the will of the devil. Freedom through obedience: this sounds like a paradox, but those who have lived this way can testify it is true. Obedience brings power, freedom, joy, peace, and hope.

While obedience does protect us from spiritual bondage and the misery associated with sin, it doesn’t bring us a life without challenges. There are things in this fallen world that can bring misery and suffering, such as sickness, death of loved ones, physical pain, and the actions of others. But misery from these sources will eventually be taken care of by the Atonement, and if we endure these challenges faithfully, they will not have eternal negative consequences for us. However, the misery resulting from sin can only be completely removed if we repent.

When we are righteous, Satan has no power over us. A prophecy about the Millennium teaches us that “because of the righteousness of his people, Satan has no power; wherefore, he cannot be loosed for the space of many years; for he hath no power over the hearts of the people, for they dwell in righteousness.”³⁷ This scripture is speaking about the condition that will exist in the world when the people as

a whole live in righteousness, but the principle can be true today for us individually. In a description of Captain Moroni, Mormon said, “If all men had been, and were, and ever would be, like unto Moroni, behold, the very powers of hell would have been shaken forever; yea, the devil would never have power over the hearts of the children of men.”³⁸ Individually we can be free from any power the adversary would like to have over us by living righteously. He only gains power as we allow it by our choices.

If we have something in our life that has bothered us and bound us down to some degree, let’s repent. Let’s get rid of it and increase the freedom in our lives. If you’ll pick something and work on it, I will too.

Agency—the ability to make choices—is a crucial and wonderful gift, and we rejoice that we are here on earth able to choose good over evil and to progress toward exaltation. As we use our agency to choose the right, reject evil, and love God, His grace is sufficient for us, and by that grace we will become perfected in Christ.³⁹ To this I testify in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Moses 4:3.
2. See Moses 4:3.
3. Moses 4:4.
4. D&C 29:40.
5. John 8:34.
6. Romans 6:16.
7. Alma 40:13.
8. 2 Nephi 2:27.
9. 2 Nephi 2:29.
10. HC 4:358 (bracketed words in original); quoted in *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 214.
11. James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1924), 63.
12. See 2 Nephi 2:18, 27.
13. See Enos 1:6.
14. Moses 4:4.
15. Moses 5:28.
16. Moses 5:33.
17. Helaman 13:38.
18. Alma 41:10.
19. 2 Nephi 26:22.
20. Mosiah 27:29.
21. Alma 12:6.
22. 3 Nephi 18:15.
23. Mosiah 7:22.
24. Alma 34:35.
25. 2 Nephi 26:22.
26. 2 Nephi 28:22.
27. 3 Nephi 6:15, 17; 7:5.
28. Mormon 5:18.
29. 2 Nephi 2:14.
30. See James 4:7.
31. 2 Peter 2:14, 18–19.
32. Alma 30:42.
33. See Alma 7:15.
34. 2 Nephi 4:27.
35. Luke 4:18.
36. See Alma 5:9–10.
37. 1 Nephi 22:26.
38. Alma 48:17.
39. See Moroni 10:32.