

Agency and Freedom in the Divine Plan

Byron R. Merrill

Agency is fundamental to the Lord's plan of salvation. Acquiring a knowledge and understanding of choices and their consequences is one of the primary purposes of existence. The children of God have the potential to become like Him, but the process of development and progression toward ultimate perfection comes only as a result of experiencing the consequences of making choices in an atmosphere of freedom and learning therefrom.

The doctrinal principle termed *agency* is often referred to in the Church as *moral agency* or *free agency*. This last term possibly results from a combining of the scriptural word *agency* with the idea of *free will*, the two meaning essentially the same thing; namely, that an individual has the inherent right and ability to choose between differing choices. While the concepts of agency and freedom are closely related, they are intrinsically different. For the purpose of this article, *agency*

will be used to refer to the exercise of the will. *Freedom* will refer to the external circumstance enabling an individual to carry out the choices made through his or her agency. This paper will define and discuss the doctrine of agency. It will also explore agency's relationship to freedom, what freedom means, how it can be lost, and why it is so important.

AGENCY

The terms *agency*, *moral agency*, and *free will* are typically used in contrast to the philosophical concepts of predestination or determinism. These latter concepts express the idea that everything we do or become lies outside our realm of control, or in other words is determined by an outside source, be it a supreme being or environmental factors. Such philosophies place responsibility for our accomplishments or lack thereof outside ourselves. Belief in a God who holds us

accountable for our obedience to His commandments is inconsistent with the concepts of predestination and the idea that heredity or social circumstances dictate whether or not a person follows those commands. The alternative belief is that we have within ourselves the capacity to choose what we will do or what we will become. This approach places responsibility for our actions directly on ourselves. The difference between the two ideas is immense, and the resultant approach to life and decision making is monumental. Latter-day Saint doctrine refutes the concepts of determinism and predestination as part of the eternal plan.¹

What actually is agency? The word has reference to an internal power or ability to choose between different options. It refers to a conscious exercise of the will, freely selecting between competing alternatives. Elder B. H. Roberts described the method of exercising agency as follows: "The mind is conscious of a power of deliberation; before the intellect passes the different motives of action, interests, passions, opinions, etc. The intellect considers, compares, estimates, and finally judges them. This is a preparatory work which precedes the act of will. . . . When deliberation has taken place—when man has taken full cognizance of the motives which present themselves to him, he takes a resolution, of which he looks upon himself as the author, which arises because he wishes it. . . . It is the resolution which is the proper act of man."²

The Prophet Joseph Smith described *agency* as "that free independence of mind which heaven has so graciously bestowed upon the human family as one of its choicest gifts."³ This "free independence of mind," or agency, is the power that allows individuals to be "agents unto themselves" (D&C 58:28). It encompasses both the exercise of the will to choose between good and evil or differing levels of good or evil and also the opportunity to experience the consequences of that choice. Heavenly Father loves His children so much that He wants us to reach

our full potential—to become as He is. To progress, a person must possess the innate capacity to make his or her desired choice. Agency is so fundamental to His plan for His children that "even God could not make men like himself without making them free."⁴

In its most basic aspects, agency is both the God-given right to choose and the power—the intrinsic ability—to do so. To have the gift of agency fully operative there must be competing choices and a person must have some knowledge of what the choices are and understand something about the nature of the consequences that flow from the respective choices. The idea of choices presumes that there are differences, whether those differences be viewed as up or down, back or forward, better or worse, black or white, good or evil. Thus, Lehi declares: "For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. If not so, . . . righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness, neither holiness nor misery, neither good nor bad. Wherefore, all things must needs be a compound in one" (2 Nephi 2:11). If all alternatives were compounded into one, there would be no choice to be made. If there were no opposition, no competing choices, of what value would the gift of agency be? Lehi concluded that without opposition "there would have been no purpose" in the creation (2 Nephi 2:12).

Agency in the premortal world. Agency is an eternal principle (see D&C 93:29–31). The scriptures indicate that the children of God possessed it in the premortal realm. Alma refers to that original spiritual realm when he says that "in the first place they were on the same standing with their brethren"; that is, all had the same opportunities. Furthermore, "being left to choose good or evil," some chose good—the plan of our Heavenly Father that was supported by His Beloved Son Jesus Christ (Alma 13:3, 5). The scriptures indicate that these exercised their agency to gain great knowledge and understanding while others chose a different path "because

of the hardness of their hearts.” Alma sadly acknowledged that if it had not been for their bad choices, “they might have had as great privilege as their brethren” (Alma 13:3–5). This underscores the Lord Jehovah’s declaration to the prophet Abraham that he had been chosen before he was born because he stood among “the noble and great ones” (Abraham 3:22–23). For the Lord to have made the judgment that some were noble and great presupposes that there were others who had not attained that status. Undoubtedly the others had not used their agency to make wise choices. It was the very gift of agency that allowed Satan and his followers in the premortal world to rebel. Referring to Satan, the Lord said, “A third part of the hosts of heaven turned he away from me because of their agency” (D&C 29:36). The statement “Satan rebelled against me, and sought to destroy the agency of man, which I, the Lord God, had given him” (Moses 4:3) can be read to refer to Satan’s actions in both the premortal and subsequent mortal spheres.

Why would a spirit sufficiently distinguished to be called a “son of the morning” rebel? (D&C 76:26). Isaiah records that Lucifer said in his heart, “I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the Most High” (2 Nephi 24:13–14). Satan is quoted as saying, “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” (Moses 4:1). A careful reading of those verses exposes an inordinate use of first-person pronouns. Satan’s motivation was personal aggrandizement—his selfish, overbearing pride and seeking for power and preeminence.

Satan’s primary concern was only for himself and not for the other children of Heavenly Father. Agency and accountability were the antithesis of Satan’s selfish plan and thus an impediment to his ambition. He therefore proposed to

alter the Father’s plan to eliminate this crucial element that was at the very foundation. “The only way Lucifer could save all was by getting rid of their free will. He was willing to destroy agency as the price for redemption, and he was willing to hold redemption hostage as the price for power.”⁵ In the poetic words of Elder Orson F. Whitney, Satan proposed:

“Send me!” coiled ’neath his courtly smile
A scarce concealed disdain—
“And none shall hence, from heaven to earth,
That shall not rise again.
My saving plan exception scorns.
Man’s will?—Nay, mine alone.
As recompense, I claim the right
To sit on yonder Throne!”⁶

Because of the risk involved with agency and the foreknowledge that mankind would fall, God the Father devised a plan that contained a means of redemption, of bringing fallen souls back into His presence. Jehovah, or Jesus Christ, the Firstborn of all Heavenly Father’s spirit children,⁷ volunteered to assume the responsibility to implement the plan through His Atonement. Because of the sinless life of Christ, His power over life and death, and His willing sacrifice in vicarious payment for the sins of mankind, our selfish or shortsighted choices, if repented of, need not permanently separate us from God. Thus the Atonement safeguards and preserves agency by permitting us to learn and progress through experiencing the results of our choices while still holding open to us the door toward exaltation. But passage through that portal is predicated on our abandoning and repenting of evil choices and upon subsequent compliance with God’s laws through faithful obedience.

A great council of all the children of God was held in heaven where the plan of salvation was presented and discussed.⁸ Satan desired power and glory rather than the suffering that would inevitably be a part of the Atonement. As President John Taylor wrote, “Satan (it is possible)

being opposed to the will of his Father, wished to avoid the responsibilities of this position, and rather than assume the consequences of the acceptance of the plan of the Father, he would deprive man of his free agency, and render it impossible for him to obtain that exaltation which God designed." His plan was, in fact, fraudulent, because no person could become exalted without choice and accountability. "It would further seem probable," wrote President Taylor, "that he refused to take the position of redeemer, and assume all the consequences associated therewith."⁹ Thus Satan was not only a liar from the beginning (John 8:44) but probably a coward also. President Ezra Taft Benson taught: "The central issue in that council, then, was: Shall the children of God have untrammelled agency to choose the course they should follow, whether good or evil, or shall they be coerced and forced to be obedient? Christ and all who followed Him stood for the former proposition—freedom of choice; Satan stood for the latter—coercion and force. Because Satan and those who stood with him would not accept the vote of the council, but rose up in rebellion, they were cast down to the earth, where they have continued to foster the same plan."¹⁰

Agency in mortality. With Satan and his followers—those who had placed themselves beyond redemption—cast out to earth where they would seek to deceive mankind, the arrangements for the implementation of the plan of salvation proceeded. Adam and Eve were placed on the earth to begin the human family. In order for them to be accountable in mortality, God needed to preserve their agency after having drawn a veil across their minds. This veil blocked out their memory of the premortal world, giving them the opportunity to begin anew. Being thus removed from the immediate presence and influence of Heavenly Father, they were given the freedom to choose in a manner that would reveal their deepest desires.

God issued the commandment to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden not to partake of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and He warned them of the awful consequence that would result from violation of His law. But as a reminder that they still had the power of choice, He added, "Nevertheless thou mayest choose for thyself, for it is given unto thee" (Moses 3:17). This is a unique situation, for there is no other scriptural reference to God giving a command followed by an invitation to choose whether or not to keep it.

Agency is dependent upon the degree of knowledge we have. The Lord told Enoch that He had given Adam and Eve their knowledge, thereby making it possible for them to have agency (Moses 7:32). What was true for Adam and Eve is also true for all their posterity, for the Lord said He has "given unto the children of men to be agents unto themselves" (D&C 104:17). According to Samuel the Lamanite, the result of being an agent unto oneself is "that whosoever perisheth, perisheth unto himself; and whosoever doeth iniquity, doeth it unto himself; for behold, ye are free; ye are permitted to act for yourselves; for behold, God hath given unto you knowledge and he hath made you free" (Helaman 14:30).

How much understanding did Adam and Eve possess of the nature and consequences of their choice? While Adam and Eve had knowledge of God's commandments, they had little or no experience in the garden with actually overcoming opposition. The Fall was a needed step in their progression and since they had the ability to fall, God opened the way for them to do so, thereby ushering in mortality. Elder Boyd K. Packer said: "There was too much at issue to introduce man into mortality by force. That would contravene the very law essential to the plan."¹¹ Thus, as Elder Orson F. Whitney commented, "The fall had a twofold direction—downward, yet forward."¹²

Because Adam and Eve partook of the forbidden fruit, they became subject to death and, as Jacob observed, would have remained subject to Satan had there been no atonement (see Jacob 2:8–9). Reflecting on how the Atonement of Christ vouchsafes the principle of agency in mortality, the patriarch Lehi said:

And the Messiah cometh in the fulness of time, that he may redeem the children of men from the fall. And because that they are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon, save it be by the punishment of the law at the great and last day, according to the commandments which God hath given.

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. (2 Nephi 2:26–27)

Jesus Christ is thus the source of freedom upon the earth and its greatest advocate.

Heavenly Father's commitment to agency as an integral part of the plan meant that choice and accountability must remain intact in mortality. That commitment opens the path toward eternal progress while simultaneously foreshadowing Satan's doom. Because the Father's plan exalted agency to such a pivotal position, the prospect of eternal glory was accompanied by the attendant risk of eternal damnation. If we cannot choose wrongly, we do not have complete agency. In other words, if we are not free to fail, we are not truly free. To appreciate these possible consequences, it is necessary to recognize and understand that God works only by "persuasion, by longsuffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned" (D&C 121:41). Even when He must get our attention by dramatic displays of power, He never forces a particular

choice upon us. His commitment and deference to the eternal principle of agency is so great that He will not abridge it. Even when He has to plead with us to be obedient, He will not violate the very principle that will allow us to return to Him and become like Him. He loves us enough to hold our agency inviolate, even when we choose to reject Him! By the same token, so sacred does God hold the principle of agency that He normally will not intervene to prevent His children who misuse their agency from inflicting evil and abuse on one another.

In order to reenthroned the principle of agency in mortality, the Lord Jesus Christ needed additionally to (1) establish and teach laws which would present choices and opposites; (2) illuminate within each person that spark called the Light of Christ that indicates right from wrong, thus activating agency; and (3) place all in an environment of freedom where we could use our agency to choose, freely act upon our choices, and then experience the attendant consequences.

Satan, having lost the War in Heaven on the principle of agency, seeks to thwart mankind's understanding of this principle in mortality. Satan cannot ultimately abridge our innate agency, so he sometimes seeks to thwart the plan by hiding the truth. If he can prevent us from learning or comprehending the greater plan, he feels he can limit our ability to choose obedience and salvation. We are then left in the sad posture of exercising agency to make the less significant choices that make up mortal life. The daily decisions about what to have for dinner or what clothes to wear or what color to paint the house are only incidental to the critical choices leading toward eternal life, for which the Savior suffered and died. One may thereby postpone facing those eternal decisions. But, thankfully, the plan of salvation has taken into account Satan's power to cloud the issues or to keep individuals in mortality from receiving critical knowledge. From an eternal perspective, all will have the opportunity to fully understand the plan and its ramifications

either here or hereafter so that they can knowingly choose whether or not to abide by it and thus be fairly judged by their choices and their actions.

Satan, in fact, has a unique role to play in the plan. "And 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" (D&C 29:39). Therefore, even though he cannot remove agency, he does have power given him to tempt mankind to choose evil. He uses numerous and devious means of temptation. He may try to deceive us into accepting the belief that we do not have agency or its attendant accountability at all. Elder Dallin H. Oaks has warned: "Satan would like us to believe that we are not responsible in this life. That is the result he tried to achieve by his contest in the pre-existence. A person who insists that he is not responsible for the exercise of his free agency because he was 'born that way' is trying to ignore the outcome of the War in Heaven. We *are* responsible, and if we argue otherwise, our efforts become part of the propaganda effort of the Adversary."¹³

In order that all might be accountable, there needs to be some way of distinguishing good from evil. Mormon taught that "the Spirit of Christ is given to every man, that he may know good from evil" (Moroni 7:16). We therefore remain accountable in mortality for the exercise of our agency and for the decisions made here. As the Prophet Joseph Smith stated, "God judges men according to the use they make of the light which He gives them."¹⁴ He further commented, "He is a wise Lawgiver, and will judge all men, not according to the narrow, contracted notions of men, but, 'according to the deeds done in the body whether they be good or evil,' . . . He will judge them, 'not according to what they have not, but according to what they have,' those who have lived without law will be judged without law, and those who have a law, will be judged by that law."¹⁵ The Lord stated, "For I, the Lord, will

judge all men according to their works, according to the desire of their hearts" (D&C 137:9). He further declared, "Behold, here is the agency of man, and here is the condemnation of man; because that which was from the beginning is plainly manifest unto them, and they receive not the light" (D&C 93:31).

Lehi taught, "And men are instructed sufficiently that they know good from evil. And the law is given unto men. And by the law no flesh is justified; or, by the law men are cut off" (2 Nephi 2:5). In exercising our agency in mortality, we, who have reached a state of accountability, have at some point chosen evil and therefore "come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Thus, Lehi prophesied, "Redemption cometh in and through the Holy Messiah; for he is full of grace and truth. Behold, he offereth himself a sacrifice for sin, to answer the ends of the law, unto all those who have a broken heart and a contrite spirit" (2 Nephi 2:6–7). Alma proclaimed the same "good news" as Lehi: "And thus we see that all mankind were fallen, and they were in the grasp of justice; yea, the justice of God, which consigned them forever to be cut off from his presence. And now, the plan of mercy could not be brought about except an atonement should be made; therefore God himself atoneth for the sins of the world, to bring about the plan of mercy, to appease the demands of justice, that God might be a perfect, just God, and a merciful God also" (Alma 42:14–15). God's judgment is therefore not only totally just but also perfectly merciful.

Lehi's prophetic utterance that "it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things" (2 Nephi 2:11) is in full effect in mortality because of the conflicting pull exercised on the one hand by the influence of the Spirit of Christ and, on the other, by the temptations of Satan. Sometimes we may wish for a cushion to soften the results of poor choices or simply to buffer the adverse effects of mortality. But without a broad range of experience, progression would be limited. In the innocence of the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve

had “no joy, for they knew no misery” (2 Nephi 2:23). Just as they needed the experiences arising from mortality, so do we learn more from mistakes and adversity than we could learn from a sheltered existence. The British philosopher Edmund Burke wrote, “Adversity is a severe instructor, set over us by one who knows us better than we do ourselves, as he loves us better too.”¹⁶ Elder Howard W. Hunter taught: “We came to mortal life to encounter resistance. It was part of the plan for our eternal progress. Without temptation, sickness, pain, and sorrow, there could be no goodness, virtue, appreciation for well-being, or joy.”¹⁷

In the quest for perfection, “every reversal can be turned to our benefit and blessing and can make us stronger, more courageous, more god-like.”¹⁸ President Brigham Young explained: “It is recorded that Jesus was made perfect through suffering. If he was made perfect through suffering, why should we imagine for one moment that we can be prepared to enter into the Kingdom of rest with Him and the Father, without passing through similar ordeals?”¹⁹ As the Lord stated to Joseph Smith when the Prophet lay incarcerated in Liberty Jail, “Know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good” (D&C 122:7). From those experiences of the Prophet Joseph, he could bear witness that God will fashion the trials needed by each individual in such a way as to test their commitment and faithfulness. As quoted by President John Taylor, Joseph said, “You will have all kinds of trials to pass through. And it is quite as necessary for you to be tried as it was for Abraham and other men of God, and . . . God will feel after you, and He will take hold of you and wrench your very heart strings, and if you cannot stand it you will not be fit for an inheritance in the Celestial Kingdom of God.”²⁰ Agency makes these experiences possible.

FREEDOM IN MORTALITY

As children of God, we apparently had complete freedom in the premortal spirit world to exercise our agency and then carry out those choices and experience the consequences thereof. Satan can no more limit our agency in mortality than he could in that premortal world. But what he can limit is our freedom, the ability we have to act upon our choices. In this mortal world, there is no such thing as *absolute* freedom. Although our ability to make internal choices, to exercise our free will, is unabated, there are often external restrictions placed on freedom. Elder Oaks explained, “Freedom may be qualified or taken away (1) by physical laws, including the physical limitations with which we are born, (2) by our own actions, and (3) by the actions of others, including governments.”²¹

Loss of freedom from seeking to avoid accountability. Obviously, physical restrictions, such as gravity and inertia, and impairments with which we are born or which we acquire later may limit the range of our choices. But how do we further restrict our own freedom? Quite often, individual freedom is lost because we fall prey to Satan’s pernicious lie that choice can be separated from accountability, thereby abandoning the key element upon which agency and the attendant potential for growth are based. As it was in the premortal world, so it is in the mortal world that agency is accompanied by accountability. We cannot be free to choose and assume there will not be consequences. The Prophet Joseph Smith explained, “There is a law, irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundations of this world, upon which all blessings are predicated—and when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated” (D&C 130:20–21). If blessings are predicated upon obedience to law, it follows that the result of disobedience will be forfeiture of the attached blessing, and perhaps even cursing (see Alma 42:22). President Wilford Woodruff said,

“By virtue of this agency you and I and all mankind are made responsible beings, responsible for the course we pursue, the lives we live, and the deeds we do.”²²

Accountability in mortality requires knowledge and a certain level of understanding. Hence children are not to be baptized until they reach “the years of accountability” (D&C 20:71). Being accountable for our decisions means in part that we cannot blame others for the consequences of those decisions—nor can we blame God. Being accountable in a positive way means choosing the right and doing our best in current circumstances while retaining faith in and reliance on God, patiently trusting Him to let “all things . . . work together for your good, if ye walk uprightly and remember the covenant” (D&C 90:24). A willingness to assume personal accountability also requires waiting upon the Lord to fulfill His promises “in his own time, and in his own way, and according to his own will” (D&C 88:68).

In seeking to avoid personal accountability, we sometimes voluntarily release our grasp on freedom, exchanging the priceless pearl of liberty for the tawdry bauble of license. Selfishness, characterized by wanting to be free to choose without being subject to the consequences of choice, thus often leads to bondage. The related philosophy of victimization, of blaming others for our actions or attitudes, is another convenient ploy Satan has used to separate accountability from agency. It is a false philosophy based on the same false premise that he espoused in the pre-mortal world. Elder Spencer W. Kimball stated, “Escape from the consequences of acts of free agency is an impossibility. No one, however clever, bypasses the ‘due reward of our deeds.’”²³

Elder Oaks has written: “Few concepts have more potential to mislead us than the idea that choice, or agency, is an ultimate goal. For Latter-day Saints, this potential confusion is partly a product of the fact that moral agency—the right to choose—is a fundamental condition of mortal life. . . . The test in this postwar mortal

estate is not to secure choice but to use it—to choose good instead of evil so that we can achieve our eternal goals. In mortality, choice is a method, not a goal. . . . We are responsible to use our agency in a world of choices. It will not do to pretend that our agency has been taken away when we are not free to exercise it without unwelcome consequences.”²⁴ This refusal to acknowledge that certain consequences flow from specific choices is in some ways a self-imposed reduction of freedom. By avoiding or ignoring accountability, we set on ourselves the same kind of limitation originally proposed by Satan. It is as if by claiming “I cannot fall,” we have acceded to the idea that “I cannot rise.” It is by giving in to Satan’s lie that accountability can be effectively separated from agency that people often choose to disobey. And it is disobedience that results in the ultimate loss of freedom.

Loss of freedom through choosing evil. Only when we are voluntarily submissive to the law of God can we be free. Freedom can thus be lost by our exercise of agency to choose evil. Satan seeks to muddy our thinking by tempting us to disregard the stark contrasts of opposites and believe that choices are of equal value. Such rationalization leads to an attitude of moral relativism, the same falsehood preached by Korihor; namely that “whatsoever a man did was no crime” (Alma 30:17). Satan thus deludes us into blurring the black and white choices presented in the scriptures until we start to think everything is gray. Sometimes we forget that he was a liar from the beginning. Satan is such a clever deceiver that he tricks his followers into thinking bondage is freedom. As an example, consider the irony of Cain. After killing his brother, he exclaimed, “I am free” (Moses 5:33). However, even though he had his brother’s flocks, he would still need to contend with the chains of sin.

Thankfully, the Light of Christ acting within each individual and the Holy Ghost inspiring those worthy of its presence can guide us through mists of gray until we discover what is

truly black and white—what leads us to Christ or what leads us away from Him. The scriptures are wonderful tools for putting things into an eternal perspective. The Savior declared, “If ye continue in my word . . . ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:31–32). Only through voluntarily submission to the laws of God can we experience true freedom.

Sometimes freedom is lost because we throw off all inhibitions of tradition or social convention or even of law, declaring that we want total freedom of action. Elder Charles A. Didier said: “History is a great teacher if we are willing to learn. It teaches us that anarchy and permissiveness always lead directly to the dictatorship of sin, to the submissiveness of our spirits, to the slavery of our bodies.”²⁵ Ironically, the quest for total freedom may place us in jeopardy of losing the very freedom we claim to desire. We cannot be allowed unfettered freedom to arbitrarily act out our desires when the consequences impact others. Edmund Burke wrote: “Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites. . . . Society cannot exist, unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters.”²⁶ Thus, if we do not voluntarily control and govern ourselves from within, we will increasingly be controlled and governed from without, which is to say that freedom will be diminished.

Speaking about a person choosing to abandon faith in a quest for so-called freedom, Morris L. West wrote, “Without the Faith, one is free, and that is a pleasant feeling at first. There are no questions of conscience, no constraints, except the constraints of custom, convention and the law, and these are flexible enough for most purposes. It is only later that the terror comes. One is free—but free in chaos, in an unexplained and

unexplainable world. One is free in a desert, from which there is no retreat but inward, toward the hollow core of oneself.”²⁷

President Marion G. Romney described the diminution of freedom resulting from choosing evil in these words:

Notwithstanding the fact that through its misuse, political, economic, and personal liberty are lost, free agency will always endure because it is an eternal principle. However, the free agency possessed by any one person is increased or diminished by the use to which he puts it. Every wrong decision one makes restricts the area in which he can thereafter exercise his agency. The further one goes in the making of wrong decisions in the exercise of free agency, the more difficult it is for him to recover the lost ground. One can, by persisting long enough, reach the point of no return. He then becomes an abject slave. By the exercise of his free agency, he has decreased the area in which he can act, almost to the vanishing point.²⁸

President Brigham Young summed up the resultant tragedy as follows: “It behooves us to be careful, and not forfeit that agency that is given to us. The difference between the righteous and the sinner, eternal life or death, happiness or misery, is this, to those who are exalted there are no bounds or limits to their privileges, their blessings have a continuation . . . they increase through all eternity; whereas, those who reject the offer, who despise the proffered mercies of the Lord, and prepare themselves to be banished from his presence, and to become companions of the devils, have their agency abridged immediately, and bounds and limits are put to their operations.”²⁹

Loss of freedom through actions of others.

The third primary way in which freedom is abridged is by the actions of others, including governments. Only in an environment of freedom can we, as Heavenly Father’s children, attain the full potential of our development. If Sa-

tan can limit freedom to choose and the ability to realize the consequences of choice, he can limit potential growth and the possibility of learning and experiencing all the Father desires for us in mortality. Thus Satan has influenced countless leaders throughout history to limit their follower's choices and consequences, superimposing the leaders' will over individual freedom. Unrighteous leaders have restricted action, punished words, and even attempted to squelch thoughts that ran contrary to their plans. When leaders of a government seek to control people, making them nameless automatons to further their domineering agendas, they are effectively following Satan's desire to restrict freedom and are thereby frustrating the plan of salvation. By removing the fruits of choice and accountability, they have compromised the ability of those so oppressed, restricting their chance to experience eternal growth and thus limiting their reach for the eternal promises offered in the Lord's plan.

In civil society, an individual's freedom of action and expression may be lost through many means. These include war—conquest and enslavement—despotic or dictatorial rulers, the operation and deception of secret combinations, and spiritual darkness or apostasy overtaking a people, such as when freedom in a democratic society declines under the control of an evil majority. Because freedom is fundamental to the Father's plan, the fight for freedom is the Lord's fight. To quote Pahoran, "The Spirit of God . . . is also the spirit of freedom" (Alma 61:15, also 2 Corinthians 3:17). God wants to preserve accountability for actions so that the plan may work its way to fruition in the lives of each man and woman. His concern about governments maintaining the requisite freedom allows him to hold "men accountable for their acts in relation to them, both in making laws and administering them" (D&C 134:1).

The Book of Mormon is replete with such examples. The Lord's desire to foster freedom is evidenced in examples such as His inspiring Mosiah to institute a reign of judges chosen by

the people (see Mosiah 29:11) so that "every man should have an equal chance . . . [and] answer for his own sins" (Mosiah 29:38). When the people of Ammonihah were studying to "destroy the liberty of [the] people" (Alma 8:17), the Lord sent Alma and Amulek to warn them of certain destruction if they did not repent. He further sustained the Nephites in many battles as they fought "to preserve their land and their liberty and their church" (Alma 43:30). In a similar way, it may be presumed that He assists those in all nations who struggle to achieve and maintain freedom. As to the Lord's intervention in the history of the United States of America for the establishment of freedom, see Milton V. Backman's article in this volume.

Sometimes the loss of external freedom is hastened by our voluntary exchange of freedom for a supposed or promised security. While Satan cannot remove agency, he sometimes entices us to relinquish it to others, to individuals, groups, or governments who promise to care for us. Such an enticement is reminiscent of his original proposal. Speaking of such an abdication of individual freedom to government, Elder Romney said: "Some argue that we have voluntarily surrendered this power to government. Be this as it may, the fact remains that the loss of freedom with the consent of the enslaved, or even at their request, is nonetheless slavery."³⁰ The comfort and complacency of modern society, with its attendant quest for freedom from the ups and downs of life, too often results in security purchased at the expense of true freedom. In other words, the desire to be freed from the normal consequences of life's ebb and flow may result in an actual loss of freedom and its attendant potential for growth.

Thus freedom can be lost through personal abdication. It can also be compromised through self-aggrandizing power seekers or paternalistic governments, where the ability of individuals to experience the consequences of their choices is stifled. As stated by Elder Romney: "Now the

world today is in the throes of a great social and political revolution. In almost every department of society laws and practices are being daily proposed and adopted which greatly alter the course of our lives. Indeed, some of them are literally shaking the foundations of our political and social institution. . . . Do they facilitate or restrict the exercise of man's divine endowment of free agency? Tested by this standard, most of them will fall quickly into their proper category as between good and evil."³¹ Those who seek for worldly power and honor in mortality, who strive for dominion over the souls of others so that they alone may excel, are following in Satan's footsteps. Behavior forced on an individual from an external source cannot lead to desired strength of character. Even if the actions which result from compulsion are good, the ultimate outcome is not progression. Taking a step because one is forced to do so does not foster the self-control or internal commitment to move forward. President McKay talked about the need "to perfect society by perfecting the individual, and only by the exercising of Free Agency can the individual even approach perfection."³²

Sadly, history teaches that free institutions and competent governments are often short-lived, for as the Prophet Joseph Smith indicated, "it is the nature and disposition of almost all men, as soon as they get a little authority, as they suppose, they will immediately begin to exercise unrighteous dominion" (D&C 121:39). One of the reasons for the Lord calling prophets and opening new dispensations of the gospel is to reenthroned the principle of freedom so all people may act freely on their choices. President John Taylor declared, "Besides the preaching of the gospel, we have another mission, namely, the perpetuation of the free agency of man and the maintenance of liberty, freedom, and the rights of man."³³ Elder Benson taught:

History, both sacred and secular, clearly records that the struggle to preserve freedom has been a continuous one. Prophets of God, as

watchmen on the towers, have proclaimed liberty. Holy men of God have led the fight against anarchy and tyranny. Moses was commanded to 'proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof.' (Leviticus 25:10)

Why have prophets of God been commanded to proclaim liberty and lead the battle to preserve freedom? Because freedom is basic to the great plan of the Lord. The gospel can prosper only in an atmosphere of freedom. This fact is confirmed by history, as well as by sacred scriptures. The right of choice—free agency—runs like a golden thread throughout the gospel plan of the Lord for the blessing of His children.³⁴

Because of Satan's powerful presence in this mortal world and his often successful attempt to limit external freedom, in the eternal plan there had to be provision for the renewal, restatement, and reintroduction of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the postmortal spirit world to those deprived of full opportunity to know it and accept or reject it in mortality (see 1 Peter 3:18–20, 4:6; D&C 138:28–35). There people will enjoy the enhanced opportunity to exercise agency in an atmosphere of freedom. As the prophet Isaiah exulted, one of Christ's roles is "to bring out the prisoners from prison" (Isaiah 42:6–7).

LOSS OF FREEDOM FRUSTRATES THE PLAN OF SALVATION

Why is the loss of freedom, for whatever reason, so dangerous a deterrent to the fulfillment of the plan of salvation in our lives? Cannot God judge us by the thoughts and intents of our hearts in the absence of our being able to act upon our choices? He certainly can. However, a major and preeminent part of the purpose of mortality is that all of Heavenly Father's children may be proved, "to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them" (Abraham 3:25). The proving of each individual is to see, among other things, whether they will by word and deed "stand as witnesses of God

at all times and in all things, and in all places . . . even unto death" (Mosiah 18:9). This testing of our willingness to obey is not for God's benefit alone but for our benefit also. We need to prove to ourselves that we would be faithful under all circumstances. Even though God can judge hearts and reward accordingly (D&C 137:9), how can we really know what we would have done under certain circumstances without actually being able to live through those experiences? How can we really come to know ourselves without being able to exercise agency, carry out choices, and then realize the consequences? If external freedom is restricted so as to deny us the opportunity to carry out the very choices which would have verified our faithfulness, how can we actually know the sense of victory or defeat which results from overcoming temptation or succumbing to it? How can we experience the sense of accomplishment that comes through enduring adversity faithfully? How can we adequately explain to another the feeling of being cheerful at moments when faith and patience are being tried? (Mosiah 23:21; 24:15).

Abraham, the "Friend of God" (James 2:23) was told by the Lord that he stood among the "noble and great ones" who had been chosen to be the "rulers" (Abraham 3:22-23). Yet the Lord still commanded Abraham to offer up his son Isaac as a supreme trial of faithfulness. Certainly the Lord already knew what Abraham's response would be. Why then, the test? Undoubtedly because, as stated by President Hugh B. Brown, "Abraham needed to learn something about Abraham."³⁵ Similarly, we all need to come to know ourselves as God already knows us. We need to enjoy the same freedom that Abraham had. Only by that degree of liberty which allows us to act on our choices can we come to really know that we would be faithful under all conditions. The resultant knowledge allows our "confidence [to] wax strong in the presence of God" (D&C 121:45).³⁶

In part then, the danger of not enjoying freedom may be to prevent us from fulfilling in mortality all we were foreordained to do. In so doing, it may even compromise our desire to reach the heights we originally sought by dampening our resolve and sense of self-worth. Note how Elder Benson linked liberty in mortality with the prospect of eternal life when he warned, "Unless we as citizens of this nation forsake our sins, political and otherwise, and return to the fundamental principles of Christianity and of constitutional government, we will lose our political liberties, our free institutions, and will stand in jeopardy before God of losing our exaltation."³⁷

CONCLUSION

Agency is a gift of God, bestowed upon all His children because of His love for them. It is a crucial component in the eternal plan of salvation made possible by the Atonement of Jesus Christ. Through the proper exercise of agency, we can return to our Father's presence eternally. A war in heaven was fought over this principle. Satan, who "sought to destroy the agency of man" (Moses 4:3), and his followers were cast out of heaven. The same war is now being fought on earth. Satan and those who followed him provide the element of opposition in mortality to all who reach a state of accountability. Seeking to make mankind "miserable like unto himself" (2 Nephi 2:27), Satan tempts everyone to abuse this gift of agency. He seduces us into believing the false doctrine that we are not accountable for our choices or actions or by tempting us to choose evil or by promising us a false sense of external security. In other instances, he encourages leaders to remove freedom from their unwitting followers by alluring such leaders with a promise of power or wealth or fame. While he cannot wrest away the gift of our agency, he can diminish the degree of freedom we should enjoy to act upon our choices. The Lord Jesus Christ is so concerned that we not have our freedom abridged that He has inspired wise leaders throughout

history to establish and maintain governments where individual freedom is assured. Sadly, the tendency of the “natural man” (Mosiah 3:19) is to let liberties slip away until he finds himself in bondage. Righteousness and continued vigilance are the only hope for the long-term maintenance of freedom for an individual or a society. To preserve that freedom, it is incumbent on us all to believe and act in accordance with the declaration of the great Nephite chief judge Pahoran, “My soul standeth fast in that liberty in the which God has made us free” (Alma 61:9; compare D&C 88:86). By so doing, the gifts of agency and freedom will have fulfilled their divine role in the salvation of the children of God.

NOTES

1. Gordon B. Hinckley, *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 55. For a philosophical assessment, see David L. Paulsen and Blake Thomas Ostler, “Sin, Suffering, and Soul-Making: Joseph Smith on the Problem of Evil,” in *Revelation, Reason, and Faith*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), 237–84.
2. B. H. Roberts, *Seventy’s Course in Theology, Second Year* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1907–12), 23–24.
3. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1977), 49.
4. David O. McKay, “Whither Shall We Go? Or Life’s Supreme Decision,” *Deseret News*, June 8, 1935, 1.
5. Richard Draper, “The Remarkable Book of Moses,” *Ensign*, February 1997, 19.
6. Marion G. Romney, “Jesus Christ, Our Redeemer,” *Ensign*, January 1974, 11.
7. Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 70.
8. See the discussion in Orson Pratt, *The Seer*, April 1853, 53–54.
9. John Taylor, *Meditation and Atonement* (Deseret News: Salt Lake City, 1882), 96.
10. Ezra Taft Benson, *A Heavenly Banner* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 2–3.
11. Boyd K. Packer, *Let Not Your Heart Be Troubled* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 78.
12. Orson Whitney in *Cowley and Whitney on Doctrine*, comp. Forace Green (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1963), 287.
13. Dallin H. Oaks, “Free Agency and Freedom,” in *The Book of Mormon: Second Nephi, The Doctrinal Structure*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1989), 15.
14. Smith, *Teachings*, 303.
15. Smith, *Teachings*, 218.
16. *The New Dictionary of Thoughts*, comp. Tryon Edwards (n.p.: Stanbook, 1977), s.v. “adversity.”
17. Howard W. Hunter, in Conference Report, April 1980, 34.
18. Ezra Taft Benson, in Conference Report, Philippines Area Conference, 1975, 11.
19. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–86), 8:66.
20. John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 24:197.
21. Oaks, “Free Agency and Freedom,” 10.
22. Wilford Woodruff, *The Discourses of Wilford Woodruff*, ed. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969), 8–9.
23. Spencer W. Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 155.
24. Dallin H. Oaks, “Weightier Matters,” *Ensign*, January 2001, 13–14.
25. Charles A. Didier, “Liberty,” *New Era*, July 1986, 6.
26. Edmund Burke, “Letter to a Member of the National Assembly,” in *The Works of the Right Honorable Edmund Burke* (London: Oxford University Press, 1925), 4:319.
27. Morris L. West, *The Devil’s Advocate* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1959), 292.
28. Marion G. Romney, “The Perfect Law of Liberty,” *Ensign*, November 1981, 45.

Window of Faith: Latter-day Saint Perspectives on World History

29. Brigham Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, comp. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1941), 63–64.

30. Marion G. Romney, in Conference Report, April 1966, 98.

31. Marion G. Romney, in *Speeches of the Year*, (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1957), 10–11.

32. David O. McKay, in Conference Report, April 1940, 118.

33. John Taylor, *The Gospel Kingdom*, comp. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964), 222.

34. Ezra Taft Benson, *An Enemy Hath Done This* (Salt Lake City: Parliament, 1969), 324.

35. Hugh B. Brown, cited in Truman G. Madsen, *The Highest in Us* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1978), 49.

36. See Larry E. Dahl, “The Abrahamic Test,” in *A Witness of Jesus Christ, The 1989 Sperry Symposium on the Old Testament*, ed. Richard D. Draper (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 64.

37. Ezra Taft Benson, *This Nation Shall Endure* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1977), 35.