

Moral Free Agency

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Daniel H. Ludlow

The subject I should like to discuss is basic to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and yet I am not going to talk primarily of faith or of repentance or of the atonement. But faith, repentance, the atonement, and all the other principles, ordinances, and doctrines of the gospel are based on this principle—indeed, they would be virtually inoperative and non-existent were it not for the subject that we will discuss—moral free agency.

Concerning the principle of free agency, President David O. McKay has written:

Next to the bestowal of life itself, the right to direct that life is God's greatest gift to man. . . . Freedom of choice is more treasured than any possession earth can give. It is inherent in the spirit of man. It is a divine gift to every normal being. . . . Everyone has this most precious of all life's endowments—the gift of free agency—man's inherited and inalienable right.¹

In discussing this topic, I would like to start at the beginning, but so far as I can tell there never was a beginning as far as the exercising of free agency is concerned. According to the Prophet Joseph Smith, our minds or intelligences—that part of our being with which we think and make choices and determine actions—have always existed. The Prophet said:

The mind or the intelligence which man possesses is co-equal with God himself. . . .

The intelligence of spirit had no beginning, neither will it have an end. . . . There never was a time when there were not spirits; for they are co-equal [that is, co-eternal] with our Father in heaven. . . .

Intelligence is eternal and exists upon a self-existent principle. It is a spirit from age to age, and there is no creation about it.²

Thus the capacity of choice, which is a most essential element in free agency, has evidently always been part of our being.

In the process of time our intelligence was clothed with a spiritual body by heavenly parents and we became personages of spirit with bodies that had eyes and ears and hands and feet. All of us on this earth had the same Father of our spiritual bodies, and because he lives in heaven, we have been rightfully taught to refer to him as “our Father in Heaven.”

Our spirit bodies were capable of tremendous accomplishments, but they also had some serious limitations. There were some laws that they could not obey, and therefore there were some blessings not available to them. Thus our Heavenly Father called us into a grand council in heaven

where he proposed a plan that would give us further opportunities for growth and development by giving us further opportunities of choice. There the importance of moral free agency and its four necessary and essential conditions were explained to us: first, we must have the opportunity of choice—that is, the operation of law; second, there must be the possibility of the existence of opposites—good and evil, virtue and vice; these make possible the third, the freedom of choice—that is, free agency; then finally, a knowledge of the law and its consequences. All four of these conditions are necessary to accomplish the progression which would enable us to become as our Father in Heaven, which was the main purpose of this new earth plan that he proposed.

When we lived with our Father in Heaven, we did not need to exercise faith in whether or not he existed. We knew that he was because we saw him, we walked and talked with him. We knew he existed and were *convinced* of his existence, but were not necessarily *converted* to him or to his great principles because our knowledge of him had come from external sources with virtually no effort on our part. So that we would come to a knowledge of him in and of ourselves, our Heavenly Father proposed that when we came into this earth life a veil of forgetfulness would be placed over our mind so that we could not remember our pre-earthly existence with him. Only then could the choices that we make here upon the earth truly come from within us. Our Father in Heaven then promised us that while we were here on the earth he would give us law and provide the possibility of opposites, give us free agency, and send angels and prophets to teach us and give us scriptures so we could learn the law and understand why we should keep them. Thus he promised us the necessary conditions on this earth so that we could become morally free before him.

The nature of law was also explained in that pre-earthly council—that each law has consequences, opposite and equal. Whenever a law is obeyed, the consequence is a blessing which results in joy or happiness. Whenever a law is disobeyed, the consequence is a punishment which results in misery or unhappiness. This simple and perhaps overgeneralized explanation of the law of justice portrays how order is accomplished, for in the payment of the law of either obedience or disobedience, the law is brought back into a state of balance and thus order prevails. The law of justice then always requires a payment.

But another law also operates in the moral realm—the law of mercy, which in no way robs or violates the law of justice, but which makes possible the vicarious payment of broken law. For example, the law of mercy permits a person's disobedience to be atoned for by the obedience of the Savior, providing that the person who disobeyed the law will cease being disobedient—in other words, providing that the person repents.

The great plan of salvation and exaltation was then explained to us: why the possibility of opposition must exist upon the earth and how it would occur through the fall of man, how the law of justice would require a payment for the broken law, and how the law of mercy would make the atonement possible. The explanation of these things was later revealed to the prophet Lehi, and he taught it to his family in these words:

For it must need 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. . . .

There is a God, and he hath created both the heavens and the earth, and all things that in them are, both things to act and things to be acted upon.

And to bring about his eternal purposes . . . the Lord God gave unto man that he should act for himself. Wherefore, man could not act for himself save it should be that he was enticed by the one or the other. . . .

And the Messiah cometh in the fulness of time, that he may redeem the children of men from the fall. And because . . . 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. . . .

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 mediation of all men, or to choose captivity and death. . . . (2 Nephi 2:11, 14–16, 26–27)

It was then explained to us in this great pre-earthly council that as we would come to the earth the Spirit of Christ would be placed within each of us and another member of the Godhead, the Holy Ghost, would then be empowered to witness, reveal, and testify to our spirit. Then, even though we had a veil of mortality over our minds, the Holy Ghost would be able to bring all things to our remembrance if we would listen to the prophets, would read the scriptures, and would respond to the Spirit of Christ that is within each of us by praying to our Father in Heaven. This time, however, the knowledge would come to us by an act of will on our part. We would have internalized it; it would have become part of our very being, and therefore no one throughout all eternity could take this knowledge away from us unless we by an act of will would allow it to be taken away.

Now there were other purposes, of course, for earth life. We came here also to receive physical bodies capable of procreation. But the God-given power to have children would not be placed in our physical bodies until we had arrived at an age of accountability and had matured in experience so we could exercise our free agency in using these powers in righteousness.

It was soon evident when this great plan was presented to us that because of the atonement and the principle of free agency, this earth life could become a great testing and proving period where, if we proved faithful to all the laws given to us by our Heavenly Father, we would become

even as he is and share with him his power and glory. Perhaps it was when we realized this that the “sons of God shouted for joy” as recorded in Job 38:7. There were some, however, in that pre-earthly council who did not shout for joy. They either lacked faith in our Heavenly Father, in the Savior, in the gospel plan, or in their own ability or willingness to keep the law that would be given to them; thus they actively opposed the plan of our Heavenly Father. Their leader was called Lucifer, “the son of the morning”; he is also known as the devil or Satan.

Lucifer not only opposed the plan of our Heavenly Father, but he sought to change the terms of salvation by denying men their free agency and by dethroning our Heavenly Father. The exact words of Lucifer’s boast are contained in the book of Moses: “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).

We do not know all the details of Lucifer’s amended plan, but we do know from revelation that he “sought to destroy the agency of man” (Moses 4:3). This could be accomplished in many ways, including denying us either the opportunity or the freedom of choice. In either case, not “one soul” would have been lost. It is sin that causes a soul to be lost, but how can a person sin if he does not have the opportunity to sin? That is, how can a person disobey a law if he does not have a law?

Lucifer’s plan appealed to some, but it did not appeal to any of us in this audience. We saw that under his plan we would lose the challenge of growth and progression. We did not want to live in a world where we would be on the same plane forever. We had enough faith in our Heavenly Father and in his plan, in Jesus Christ, and in ourselves that we wanted to live in a world where there would be opportunities for further development. At the same time I am sure we realized that if we were not faithful to these laws and opportunities we might be even worse off than we were before.

Thus there was a great war in heaven and a key issue in that war was whether or not man was to be a morally free agent while upon the earth. A vote was taken. (By the way, that in itself indicates that we had our free agency there; in a sense Lucifer exercised his free agency in an attempt to deny us the right to exercise our free agency.) Two-thirds of those present voted for the plan of our Heavenly Father; one-third voted against the plan and did not participate in it.

So the plan was put into operation. A physical earth was created. Physical bodies were prepared for Adam and Eve. Their spirit bodies were placed in those physical bodies, and they became living souls. Then our Heavenly Father started to keep the promises that he had made to us by giving them the opportunity of choice. He did this by giving them law, by telling them what they should do and what they should not do: “Partake of the

fruit of the tree of life.” “Multiply.” “Do not partake of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.” Through his selection of the laws, he also gave them the possibility of opposites.

Next he explained the consequences of those laws: “Partake of the fruit of the tree of life and you shall live forever.” “Multiply, and you shall have joy and rejoicing in your posterity.” “Partake of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and you shall surely die.” Then our Heavenly Father did one other thing: he explained the consequences of their choices and also explained that they would have the freedom to choose under this great earth plan. Notice how all of these elements are present in one verse in the book of Moses:

But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it, nevertheless, thou mayest choose for thyself, for it is given unto thee; but remember that I forbid it, for in the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die, (Moses 3:17)

Well, you know the rest of the story. Lucifer and his followers were cast out of heaven. In order to make all of us subject to him, thus enabling him to put his throne above the throne of God, he needed to accomplish two things: first of all, to get sin into the world, and then to keep Jesus Christ from atoning for that sin.

Therefore, Lucifer tried to get Adam to disobey one of the laws. When he was unsuccessful in this, he concentrated on Eve and finally enticed her to partake of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Eve then persuaded Adam to partake of that same fruit. Although Adam and Eve had great intellect and powers of reason in the Garden of Eden, they were without experience; although they had the opportunity of choice and the freedom of choice in the Garden of Eden, yet they were not morally free because they did not fully understand the consequences of their choice. Oh, they heard the words of our Heavenly Father, “In the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die,” but what was death to Adam and Eve? The veil of forgetfulness had already been placed over their minds—they had never seen death nor experienced it; they could not understand it. And because they did not fully comprehend the consequences of what they did, their disobedience of the law is referred to as “transgression,” not as “sin,” and consequently comes under the unconditional part of the atonement of Jesus Christ.

As a result of those transgressions, two deaths were introduced onto the earth: physical death, which resulted from their partaking of that particular fruit, and spiritual death, which resulted from their disobeying our Heavenly Father. Thus misery and suffering, which are the consequences of broken law, entered into the world.

Now because of limitation of time, let us skip 4,000 years of history and come down to the birth of Christ—a time which was a very important period so far as all mankind is concerned. Indeed, the prophet Jacob in the Book of Mormon said that if Jesus Christ did not atone, then all mankind must unavoidably perish and we would all “become devils, angels to a devil, to be shut out from the presence of our God, and to remain with the father of lies, in misery unto himself” (2 Nephi 9:9). The plan was that Jesus Christ would be born into this earth as the Only Begotten Son of God in the flesh and would have power over the physical death. The plan also required that Jesus Christ would be sinless while he lived upon the earth so that he would have power over all the laws and would be able to atone for the spiritual death introduced by the fall of Adam and Eve.

Lucifer knew these two essential and necessary characteristics which Christ must possess. He may have known this because of his pre-earthly experience; if not, then surely he knew it because of the words of the prophets of God here upon the earth. Therefore when the Savior was born, Lucifer tried in every way that he could think of to keep Jesus Christ from achieving his great divine destiny. He tried to get him to deny his divine Sonship, but the Savior replied, “I came into the world to do the will of my Father.” He tried to get Jesus Christ to break one of the laws, for he knew that if he could get him to break only one law—to commit only one sin—then the Savior would not have power over all of the laws and therefore could not atone for the sins of all mankind.

But Jesus completely resisted the enticements of Lucifer; Jesus did not disobey any laws, and so he is referred to in the scriptures as the Sinless One. Jesus Christ was thus able to atone for both the physical and the spiritual death. He was *able* to atone for the *physical* death because of the power that he inherited from the Father as the Only Begotten Son of God in the flesh; he was *able* to atone for the *spiritual* death because he was sinless.

The next crucial question was would he be *willing* to atone for those deaths? Would he be willing to endure the intense suffering and pain that would be required to pay for the sins of all mankind? Would he be willing to submit to the chains of physical death and thereby voluntarily break the bands of physical death for all mankind? The New Testament records the drama of the experiences of the Savior in Gethsemane, at Golgotha, and at the tomb, in which he fully atoned for the two deaths, conquering both the grave and hell and thus becoming the great Savior and Redeemer of all mankind. In remembrance of the two aspects of the atonement, we have been commanded that when we partake of the sacrament we partake of two emblems—bread in remembrance of the body of Christ, which he gave as a ransom for all, and a liquid in remembrance of the blood of Christ, which he shed for the remission of our sins. (See Matthew 26:22–25, Inspired Version)

As a result of the atonement of Jesus Christ, we are all freed from the bondage of the original transgression of Adam and Eve as well as from all those transgressions we committed before we arrived at the age of accountability. As the Savior himself has said, "I, the Lord God, make you free, therefore ye are free indeed; and the law also maketh you free" (D&C 98:8). Therefore, because of the atonement the extent of our individual free agency today is in direct proportion to the number and kind of laws we know and keep. Likewise the loss of free agency today can be measured in direct proportion to the number and kind of laws we disobey. Perfect freedom is made possible to us through the atonement, but it can come only through perfect obedience to the law.

The atonement of Jesus Christ also meant that Lucifer could not obtain his goal. He cannot win of all us. He cannot win Christ; Christ is already beyond his power. He cannot win those who have already lived on the earth obedient to the laws of our Heavenly Father and who have now been resurrected.

But Lucifer is trying to run up as high a score as he can, and he does this by trying to keep us individually from achieving the great divine purposes for which we came here upon this earth, including the exercise of our free agency. He can do it by denying us any one of the four essential qualities of moral free agency. He can do it by denying us the opportunity of choice, and he tries to do this through governments, dictatorships, through anarchy, and so on. He tries to do this by destroying, in our minds at least, the idea that there is a necessity of opposition, and therefore he tries to teach us, "There is no sin. It mattereth not what a man does; whatsoever a man doeth is not sin. Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die." Thus he destroys the role of opposition in our lives, or at least he attempts to do so.

He can also do it by destroying our freedom of choice by enticing us to give up our right of free agency to other persons or to other institutions and allow them to make our choices for us, resulting in the evil that presidents of the Church have seen in communism and socialism and other orders of this type.

He also does it by trying to encourage us not to come to a knowledge of our Heavenly Father by not listening to the prophets, by not studying the scriptures, and therefore not knowing of the consequences of our choices: "The scriptures are irrelevant today. They were written a long time ago. Don't pay any attention to them," he says. "There are no such thing as prophets upon the earth; they ceased at the time of Christ." Or he says that the heavens are sealed; there is no revelation today. He even says that God is dead!

Thus in one way or another he tries to entice us to become like him and to become subject to the misery and unhappiness that he now suffers. To achieve his devilish aims, Lucifer can and does work through many

means: business combines, governments on all levels, military forces, educational institutions, secret combinations of all kinds, and even families, teachers, and churches. Wherever and whenever you find a person or an institution that seeks to destroy the free agency of man, there you will find the influence of Lucifer.

President Henry D. Moyle talked on this subject in these words:

All we have to do is . . . examine any movement that may be brought into our midst . . . and if it . . . attempt[s] to deprive us the slightest respect of our free agency, we should avoid it as we would avoid immorality or anything else that is vicious. . . . Free agency is as necessary for our eternal salvation as is our virtue. And . . . as we guard our virtue with our lives, so should we guard our free agency.³

President Marion G. Romney, when he was a member of the Council of the Twelve, in a 1957 baccalaureate address given here at BYU, gave this advice:

One of the fundamental doctrines of revealed truth is that . . . God endowed men with free agency (Moses 7:32). The preservation of this free agency is more important than the preservation of life itself. . . . Everything which militates against man's enjoyment of this endowment persuades not to believe in Christ, for He is the author of free agency.

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 institutions. If you would know truth from error in this bitterly contested arena, apply Mormon's test to these innovations [as recorded in Moroni 7:16–18]. 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.⁴

As an example of how sin can put us into bondage, let us consider for a moment the Word of Wisdom, because this is a physical law that we can see and understand rather readily. The Lord has said tobacco is not good for man—that is the law. We have our free agency either to obey or disobey the law. If we obey the law and do not use tobacco, we enjoy better health than we would had we disobeyed the law. Also by keeping the law we still have our free agency as to whether or not we will continue to keep the law. However, as soon as we disobey the law—in this case, when we use tobacco—we not only suffer the penalty of poorer health, but we also practically lose our free agency in the matter. The broken law has a claim over us; we have become slaves to the drug, and the broken law will continue to have a claim over us until we stop breaking the law—that is, until we repent. And essentially the same principle is involved in all of the laws given to us by our Heavenly Father.

Now rather than interspersing this discussions with some scriptural quotations, I wanted to develop at least this much and then simply to quote a few scriptures pertaining to these principles:

- (1) If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. (John 8:31–32)
- (2) Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered; And being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him. (Hebrews 5:8–9)
- (3) Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage. (Galatians 5:1)
- (4) Men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness; For the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves. And inasmuch as men do good they shall in nowise lose their reward (D&C 58:27–28)
- (5) *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. Italics added)
- (6) 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 a knowledge and he hath made you free.
He hath given unto you that ye might know good from evil, and he hath given unto you that ye might choose life or death; and ye can do good and be restored unto that which is good, or have that which is good restored unto you; or ye can do evil, and have which is evil restored unto you (Helaman 14:30–31. Italics added)
- (7) Be not deceived; God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. (Galatians 6:7)
- (8) To him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin. (James 4:17)
- (9) The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 6:23)
- (10) This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent. (John 17:3)

An atmosphere of freedom is necessary for the teaching and accepting of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The missionaries and the message of the restored gospel have been received by the nations of the earth in almost

the same proportion as those nations have accepted the principles of freedom. So intertwined are the principles of the gospel and the principles of free agency that they have become almost as one. This characteristic was pointed out by President John Taylor as early as 1878:

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. . . . We have a right to liberty—that was a right that God gave to all men; and if there has been oppression, fraud or tyranny in the earth, has been the result of wickedness and corruptions of men and has always been opposed to God and the principles of truth.⁵

Now if what we have been saying here today is true, we as Latter-day Saints should be the most free of any people on the face of this earth. We have all the opportunities of choice that other people have—and more, because we have the additional laws and principles of the restored gospel. We have all the possibilities of opposites shared by other people—and more, because of the differences between the brightness of the noonday sun of the restored gospel as compared with the moonlight of Protestant and Catholic Christianity and the darkness of skepticism, agnosticism, and atheism. We have all the freedom of choice enjoyed by other people—and more, because we have modern scriptures and living prophets to guide us day by day. Thus if we as Latter-day Saints are not the most free people on the face of the earth, then we should be, because we have to a greater extent the necessary components of free agency.

Now essentially that is the message that I wanted to give today, and I hope that you will agree with me now that the theme could apply as well at a Fourth of July celebration or at a political rally as in sacrament meeting. However, before I finish I should like to share with you a statement by the late Elder Richard L. Evans pertaining to this topic which he gave in conjunction with an Independence Day celebration. The title of Elder Evans' brief address is "Thank God for Freedom":

May we take a moment from some of the side issues and from some of the irrelevant celebration, and clear, our thoughts and humble our hearts and get down on our knees and simply, fervently, thank God for freedom—and then get on our feet with a firm resolve to preserve it against all who secretly or openly would set it aside.

Thank God for freedom—and for the Founding Fathers who reaffirmed to a new nation, an eternal, timeless truth: that the right of choice—that the free agency of man—is a God-given inalienable right, and is essential to the peace and growth and progress and salvation of the very soul.

This truth has been challenged again and again, and will yet be challenged again and again. It was challenged in the heavens before time began, by the brilliant but rebellious Lucifer. There was war in heaven—for freedom. And anyone who seeks to enslave men in any sense, in mind, in spirit,

in thought—anyone who seeks to enslave the minds, the hearts, the spirit of men is essentially in league with Satan himself—for “where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty” [2 Corinthians 3:17].

Thank God for the Constitution of our country, which was brought into being “by the hands of wise men whom [the Lord God] raised up unto this very purpose” [D&C 101:80]. Thank God for the promise that in this choice land, men “shall be free from bondage, and from captivity, and from all other nations under heaven, if they will but serve” God. [Ether 2:12]

Thank God for the right of choice, for the right to become whatever we can become in a free and provident land that, despite its imperfections, has proved to be more efficient for progress and human happiness than any society founded on the false philosophies that would seek to enslave the minds and souls of men.

God grant that we may repent wherever we have departed from the principles of freedom—that we may preserve the right to fail and the incentive to succeed, and live, as did the Founding Fathers, knowing that there are no acceptable substitutes for freedom.⁶

We teach our children when they pray they should thank our Heavenly Father for the blessings that he has given to them. I hope that in our daily private and family prayers we will always thank our Heavenly Father for the great blessing that he has given us on this earth—the gift of moral free agency—and also for the right and opportunity to exercise this gift as members of his Church and kingdom and as citizens of this country.

I bear my personal witness to the fact that our Heavenly Father and his divine Son, Jesus Christ, are the fountainhead of all truth and freedom. By following their teachings we can be free indeed and can find the joy and happiness that “surpasseth all understanding.” This is their Church. President Spencer W. Kimball is their prophet on the earth. I bear witness and testimony to you this day of these things in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Devotional address delivered at Brigham Young University, 2 July 1974.
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1. David O. McKay in *The Improvement Era* 65 (February 1962):86.

2. Joseph Fielding Smith, compiler, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1973), pp. 353–54.

3. Henry D. Moyle in *Conference Report of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, October 1947, p. 46.

4. Marion G. Romney, *BYU Speeches of the Year*, 30 May 1957, pp. 10–11.

5. John Taylor in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1878), 23:63.

6. Richard L. Evans, *From the Crossroads* (New York: Harper & Bros., c1955), p. 45.