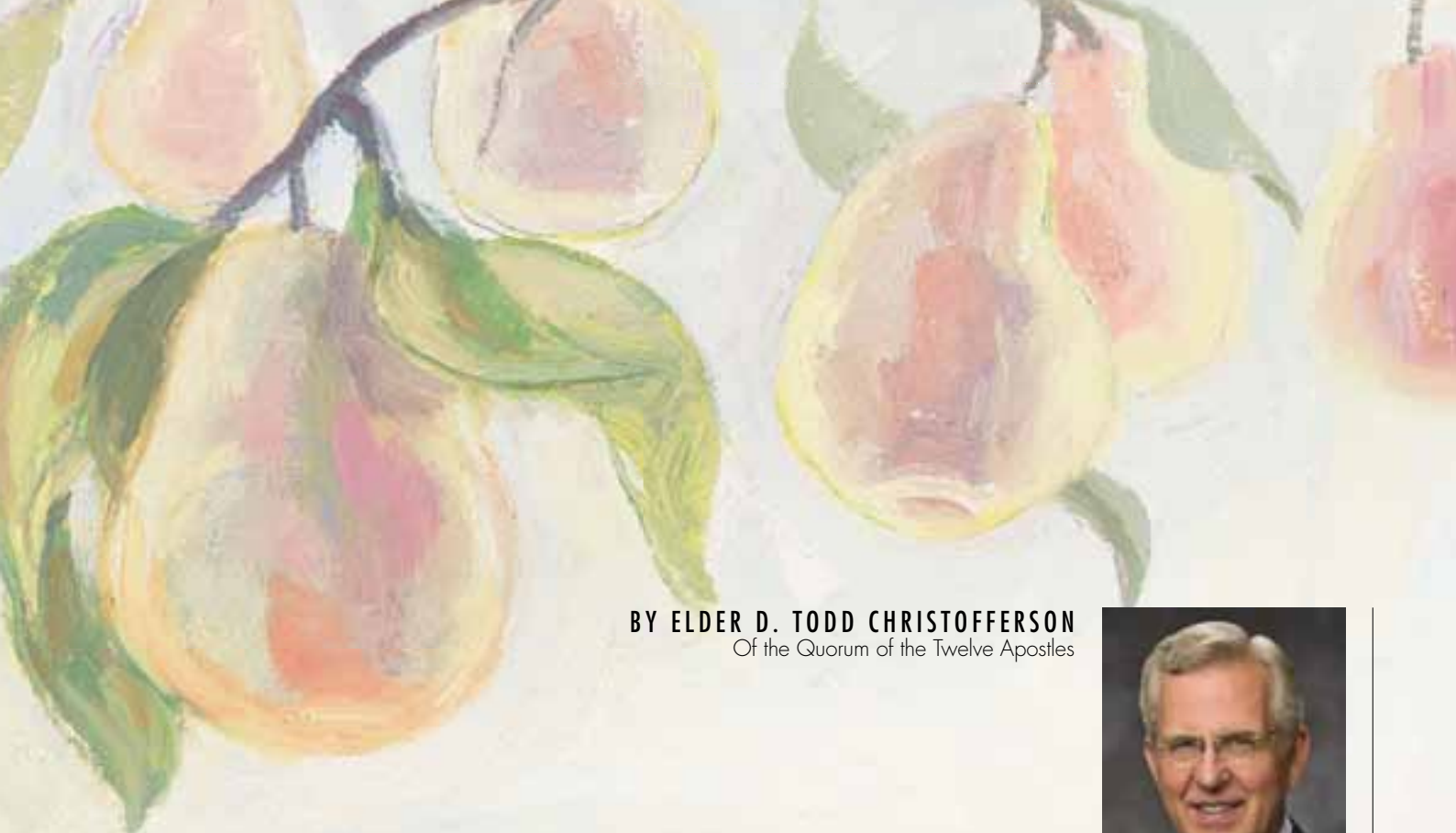


# Moral Agency





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In years past we generally used the term *free agency*. That is not incorrect. More recently we have taken note that *free agency* does not appear in the scriptures. They talk of our being “free to choose” and “free to act” for ourselves (2 Nephi 2:27; 10:23; see also Helaman 14:30) and of our obligation to do many things of our own “free will” (D&C 58:27). But the word *agency* appears either by itself or with the modifier *moral*: “That every man may act in doctrine and principle . . . according to the *moral agency* which I have given unto him, that every man may be accountable for his own sins in the day of judgment” (D&C 101:78; emphasis added). When we use the term *moral agency*, we are appropriately emphasizing the accountability that is an essential part of the divine gift of agency. We are moral beings and agents unto ourselves, free to choose but also responsible for our choices.

### The Elements of Moral Agency

What, then, are the elements of moral agency? To me there are three.

First, there must be alternatives among

which to choose. Lehi spoke of opposites, or “opposition”—righteousness and its opposite, wickedness; holiness versus misery; good versus bad. Without opposites, Lehi said, “All things must needs be a compound in one; . . . no life neither death, nor corruption nor incorruption, happiness nor misery, neither sense nor insensibility” (2 Nephi 2:11).

He further explained that for these opposites or alternatives to exist, there must be law. Law provides us the options. It is by the operation of laws that things happen. By using or obeying a law, one can bring about a particular result—and by disobedience, the opposite result. Without law there could be no God, for He would be powerless to cause anything to happen (see 2 Nephi 2:13). Without law, neither He nor we would be able to predict or choose a particular outcome by a given action. Our existence and the creation around us are convincing evidence that God, the Creator, exists and that our mortal world consists of “both things to act and things to be acted upon” (2 Nephi 2:14)—or, in other words, choices.

***With His gift of moral agency, our Heavenly Father has graciously provided us help to exercise that agency in a way that will yield precious, positive fruit in our life here and hereafter.***



**M**any of God's children fall into unanticipated traps and unhappiness because they either lack or ignore gospel light. They are unaware of their options or are confused about the outcomes of their choices.

Second, for us to have agency, we must not only have alternatives, but we must also know what they are. If we are unaware of the choices available, the existence of those choices is meaningless to us. Lehi called this being “enticed by the one or the other” (2 Nephi 2:16). He recalled the situation of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden when they were presented with a choice, “even the forbidden fruit in opposition to the tree of life; the one being sweet and the other bitter” (2 Nephi 2:15). Adam and Eve’s choice, of course, brought about the Fall, which brought with it a knowledge of good and evil, opening to their understanding a multitude of new choices. Had they remained in Eden, “they would have remained in a state of innocence, having no joy, for they knew no misery; doing no good, for they knew no sin” (2 Nephi 2:23). But with the Fall, both they and we gain sufficient knowledge and understanding to be enticed by good and evil—we attain a state of

accountability and can recognize the alternatives before us.

The beauty of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that it pours knowledge into our souls and shows things in their true light. With that enhanced perspective, we can discern more clearly the choices before us and their consequences. We can, therefore, make more intelligent use of our agency. Many of God’s children fall into unanticipated traps and unhappiness because they either lack or ignore gospel light. They are unaware of

their options or are confused about the outcomes of their choices. Ignorance effectively limits their agency.

Third is the next element of agency: the freedom to make choices (see 2 Nephi 10:23). This freedom to act for ourselves in choosing among alternatives is often referred to in the scriptures as agency itself. For this freedom we are indebted to God. It is His gift to us (see Moses 4:3).

“The Lord said unto Enoch: Behold these thy brethren;



they are the workmanship of mine own hands, and I gave unto them their knowledge, in the day I created them; and in the Garden of Eden, gave I unto man his agency” (Moses 7:32).

King Benjamin reminded us that in addition to giving us the freedom to choose, God makes it possible for us to use the gift because He “is preserving you from day to day, by lending you breath, that ye may live and move and do according to your own will, and even supporting you from one moment to another” (Mosiah 2:21).

Freedom of choice is the freedom to obey or disobey existing laws—not the freedom to alter their consequences. Law, as mentioned earlier, exists as a foundational element of moral agency with fixed outcomes that do not vary according to our opinions or preferences. Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles observed, “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.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Satan’s Attack on Agency**

We recognize the gift of agency as a central aspect of the plan of salvation proposed by the Father in the great premortal council, and that “there was war in heaven” (Revelation 12:7) to defend and preserve it. The Lord revealed to Moses:

“Wherefore, because that Satan rebelled against me, and sought to destroy the agency of man, which I, the Lord God, had given him, and also, that I should give unto him mine own power; by the power of mine Only Begotten, I caused that he should be cast down;

“And 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” (Moses 4:3–4).

Satan has not ceased his efforts “to destroy the agency of man.” He promotes conduct and choices that limit our freedom to choose by replacing the influence of the Holy Spirit with his own domination (see D&C 29:40; 93:38–39).

Yielding to his temptations leads to a narrower and narrower range of choices until none remains and to addictions that leave us powerless to resist. While Satan cannot actually destroy law and truth, he accomplishes the same result in the lives of those who heed him by convincing them that whatever they think is right *is* right and that there is no ultimate truth—every man is his own god, and there is no sin.

Of course Satan’s ongoing opposition is a useful and even necessary part of moral agency. The scripture states, “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).

Remember, though, that we retain the right and power of independent action.<sup>2</sup> God does not intend that we yield to temptation. Like Jesus, we can gain all we need in the way of a mortal experience without yielding.

### **The Central Role of Jesus Christ**

We have reviewed the elements of moral agency and its divine origins, but we need to always remember that agency would have no meaning without the vital contribution of Jesus Christ. His central role began with His support of the Father’s plan and His willingness to become the essential Savior under that plan. The plan required a setting for its implementation, and Jesus was instrumental in the creation of this planet for that purpose. Most important, while the Fall of Adam was a critical element of the plan of salvation, the Fall would also have frustrated the plan if certain of its consequences were not mitigated by the Atonement and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It was necessary in God’s plan for our future happiness and glory that we become morally free and responsible. For that to happen, we needed an experience apart from Him where our choices would determine our destiny. The Fall of Adam provided the spiritual death needed to separate us from God and place us in this mortal condition, as well as the physical death needed to provide an end to the mortal experience. As Alma put it:

“And now, ye see by this that our first parents were cut off both temporally and spiritually from the presence of the Lord; and thus we see they became subjects to follow after their own will” (Alma 42:7).

Death had to be permitted, but it also had to be overcome or we could not return to the presence of God. Jacob, the brother of Nephi, explained:

“For as death hath passed upon all men, to fulfil the merciful plan of the great Creator, there must needs be a power of resurrection. . . .

“ . . . For behold, if the flesh should rise no more our spirits must become subject to that angel who fell from before the presence of the Eternal God, and became the devil, to rise no more.

“And our spirits must have become like unto him, and we 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, like unto himself. . . .

“O how great the goodness of our God, who prepareth a way for our escape from the grasp of this awful monster; yea, that monster, death and hell, which I call the death of the body, and also the death of the spirit” (2 Nephi 9:6, 8–10).

Thus, if our separation from God and our physical death were permanent, moral agency would mean nothing. Yes, we would be free to make choices, but what would be the point? The end result would always be the same no matter what our actions: death with no hope of resurrection and no hope of heaven. As good or as bad as we might choose to be, we would all end up “angels to a devil.”

With resurrection through Jesus Christ, the Fall can achieve its essential purpose without becoming a permanent death sentence. “Hell must deliver up its captive spirits,” “the grave must deliver up its captive bodies,” and “the paradise of God must deliver up the spirits of the righteous” so that “the spirit and the body is restored to itself again, and all men become incorruptible, and immortal, and they are living souls, having a perfect knowledge like unto us in the flesh, save it be that our knowledge shall be perfect” (2 Nephi 9:12, 13).

But there was one more thing that Christ needed to accomplish so that moral agency could have a positive potential. Just as death would doom us and render our agency meaningless but for the redemption of Christ, even so, without His grace, our sins and bad choices would leave us forever lost. There would be no way of fully recovering from our mistakes, and being unclean, we could never live again in the presence of the “Man of Holiness” (Moses 6:57; see also 3 Nephi 27:19).

We cannot look to the law to save us when we have broken the law (see 2 Nephi 2:5). We need a Savior, a Mediator who can overcome the effects of our sins and errors so that they are not necessarily fatal. It is because of the Atonement of Christ that we can recover from bad choices and be justified under the law as if we had not sinned.

“Wherefore, 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; see also Alma 42:22–24).

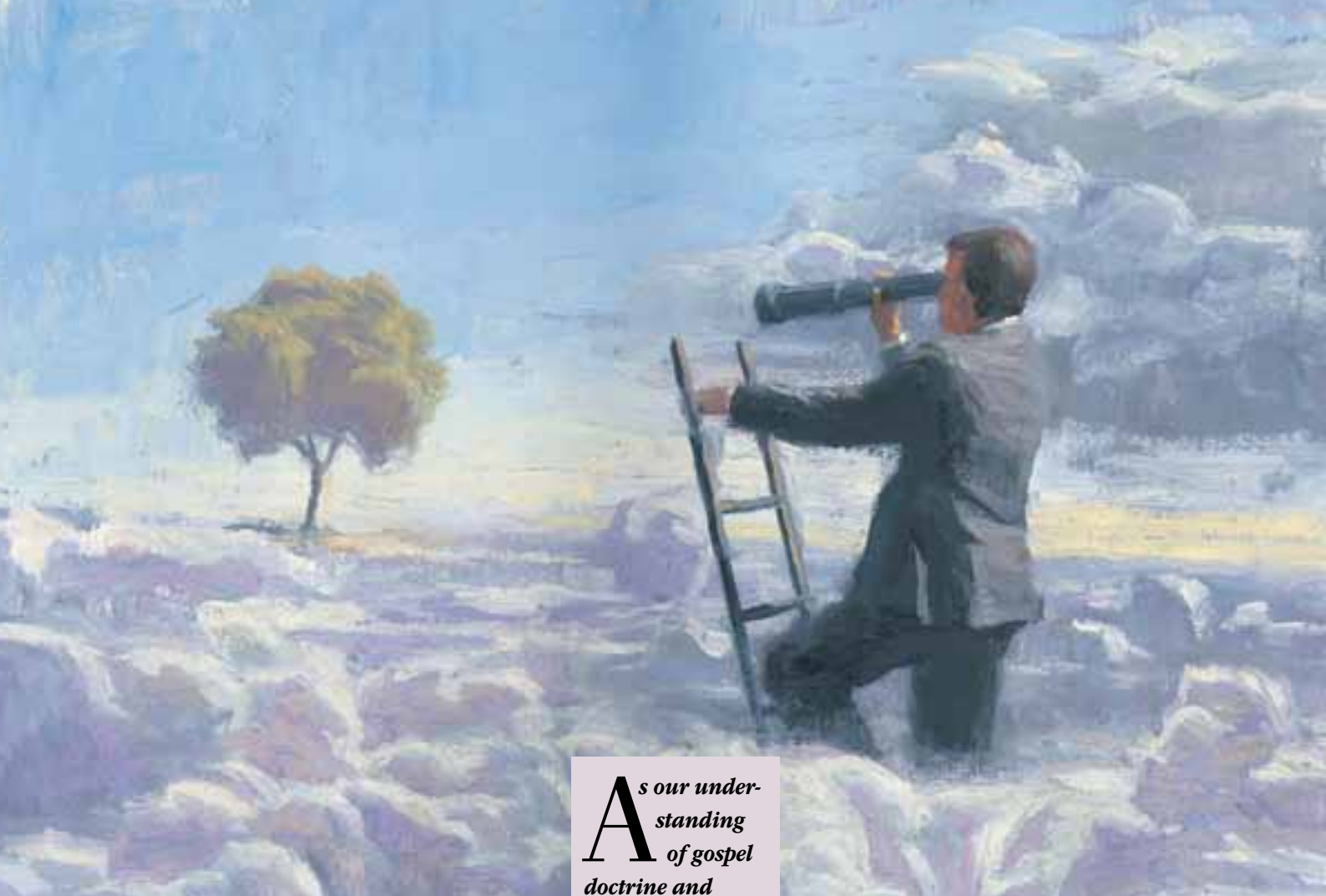
### **The Savior’s Exemplary Use of Moral Agency**

The Savior’s use of moral agency during His lifetime is an instructive example for us. At one point in His teaching He revealed the principle that guided His choices: “He that sent me is with me: the Father hath not left me alone; for I do always those things that please him” (John 8:29; see also 3 Nephi 11:11).

I believe that much of the Lord’s power is attributable to the fact that He never wavered in that determination. He had a clear, consistent direction. Whatever the Father desired, Jesus chose to do.

Being Jesus’s obedient disciple—just as He is the Father’s obedient disciple—leads to truth and freedom: “If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed” (John 8:36).

To the secular world it seems a paradox that greater submission to God yields greater freedom. The world



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looks at things through Korihor's lens, considering obedience to God's laws and ordinances to be "bondage" (Alma 30:24, 27). So how do obedience and truth make us free? We can easily think of some practical ways in which truth gives us the ability to do things we otherwise could not do or to avoid disasters we might otherwise suffer.

A young British girl learned in school about the characteristics of water along a shoreline that signal the approach of a tsunami. Two weeks later, on vacation with her family in Thailand, she observed those phenomena and insistently warned her parents and the people around her. They escaped to higher ground just in time when the December 26, 2004, tsunami hit south Asia. More than a hundred people owe their lives to that girl's knowledge of certain truths of the natural world.<sup>3</sup>

But the Lord's statement that the truth will make us free has broader significance. "Truth," He tells us, "is

knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come" (D&C 93:24). Possession of this knowledge of things past, present, and future is a critical element of God's glory: "The glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth" (D&C 93:36). Does anyone doubt that, as a consequence of possessing all light and truth, God possesses ultimate freedom to be and to do?

Likewise, as our understanding of gospel doctrine and principles grows, our agency expands. First, we have more choices and can achieve more and receive greater blessings because we have more laws that we can obey. Think of a ladder—each new law or commandment we learn is like one more rung on the ladder that enables us to climb higher. Second, with added understanding we can make more intelligent choices because we see more clearly not only the alternatives but also their potential outcomes. As Professor Daniel H. Ludlow once





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expressed it, “The extent of our individual . . . agency . . . is in direct proportion to the number and kind of laws we know and keep.”<sup>4</sup>

The Lord promises that if, in the exercise of our agency, we follow His example and always do those things that please Him and the Father, then we will come to know and understand all things:

“And if your eye be single to my glory, your whole bodies shall be filled with light, and there shall be no darkness in you; and that body which is filled with light comprehendeth all things” (D&C 88:67).

“That which is of God is light; and he that receiveth light, and continueth in God, receiveth more light; and that light groweth brighter and brighter until the perfect day” (D&C 50:24).

“He that keepeth [God’s] commandments receiveth truth and light, until he is glorified in truth and knoweth all things” (D&C 93:28).

“And the Spirit giveth light to every man that cometh into the world; and the Spirit enlighteneth every man

through the world, that hearkeneth to the voice of the Spirit.

“And every one that hearkeneth to the voice of the Spirit cometh unto God, even the Father” (D&C 84:46–47).

These are magnificent promises: to be filled with light and truth, to comprehend all things, to be glorified in truth and know all things, and to come even unto the Father. I have no doubt regarding the literal fulfillment of these promises in those who exercise their agency to choose obedience, but along with you, I recognize that they are not realized in a day. Much obedience and experience are required before we enjoy a fulness. We should, however, be encouraged by what John said of the Savior:

“And I, John, saw that he received not of the fulness at the first, but received grace for grace;

“And he received not of the fulness at first, but continued from grace to grace, until he received a fulness” (D&C 93:12–13).



## HELPS FOR HOME EVENING

1. List and discuss the three elements of moral agency as described by Elder Christofferson. Consider doing the following activity: Present your family with two identical boxes with different items inside, for example, a rock and a cookie. Have them choose a box and open it. Ask if they would have made a different choice had they been aware of what was inside both boxes. Read the paragraphs associated with the second element of moral agency and discuss how knowledge helps us to make better choices. Conclude by reading the final paragraph of the article.

### Testing as Part of the Essential Experience

A consistent effort will educate and refine our desires so that in time our desires will become aligned with the Father's. But we should expect to be tested. The gift of agency is intended to give us experience. We "taste the bitter, that [we] may know to prize the good" (Moses 6:55). And Jesus, "though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered" (Hebrews 5:8).

Joseph Smith was told to expect some severe opposition despite making good choices. Said the Lord, "Know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good" (D&C 122:7). We are in a mortal experience because we cannot become as God without that experience. We must prove to Him and to ourselves that we can consistently make the right choices and then stick to those choices, come what may.

Some think that they should be spared from any adversity if they keep God's commandments, but it is "in the furnace of affliction" (Isaiah 48:10; 1 Nephi 20:10) that we are chosen. The Lord's promise is not to spare us the conflict but to preserve and console us in our afflictions and to consecrate them for our gain (see 2 Nephi 2:2; 4:19–26; Jacob 3:1).

Exercising agency in a setting that sometimes includes opposition and hardship is what makes life more than a simple multiple-choice test. God is interested in what we are becoming as a result of our choices. He is not satisfied if our exercise of moral agency is simply a robotic effort at keeping some rules. Our Savior wants us to become something, not just do some things.<sup>5</sup> He is endeavoring to make us independently strong—more able to act for ourselves than perhaps those of any prior generation. We must be righteous, even when He withdraws His Spirit, or, as President Brigham Young said, even "in the dark."<sup>6</sup>

Using our agency to choose God's will, and not slackening even when the going gets hard, will not make us God's puppet; it will make us like Him. God gave us agency, and Jesus showed us how to use it so that we could eventually learn what They know, do what They do, and become what They are.

Remember that with His gift of moral agency, our Heavenly Father has graciously provided us help to exercise that agency in a way that will yield precious, positive fruit in our life here and hereafter. Among other resources, we have the scriptures that contain the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ, mentors and parents who love us, the voice of prophets and apostles living among us, the covenants and ordinances of the priesthood and the temple, the gift of the Holy Ghost, prayer, and the Church. May we draw upon these resources constantly to guide our choices, always doing those things that please God. ■

*From a devotional address delivered January 31, 2006, at Brigham Young University. For the full text, visit <http://speeches.byu.edu/?act=viewitem&id=1515>.*

### NOTES

1. Dallin H. Oaks, "Weightier Matters," in *Brigham Young University 1998–99 Speeches* (1999), 148.
2. "If man is to be rewarded for righteousness and punished for evil, then common justice demands that he be given the power of independent action. . . . If he were coerced to do right at all times, or were helplessly enticed to commit sin, he would merit neither a blessing for the first nor punishment for the second" (David O. McKay, "Free Agency . . . A Divine Gift," *Improvement Era*, May 1950, 366).
3. See "Girl Honored for Saving Lives with Pre-Tsunami Warning," *Deseret Morning News*, Dec. 27, 2005, A2.
4. Daniel H. Ludlow, "Moral Free Agency," in *BYU Speeches of the Year 1974* (1975), 182.
5. "The Final Judgment is not just an evaluation of a sum total of good and evil acts—what we have *done*. It is an acknowledgment of the final effect of our acts and thoughts—what we have *become*. It is not enough for anyone just to go through the motions. The commandments, ordinances, and covenants of the gospel are not a list of deposits required to be made in some heavenly account. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a plan that shows us how to become what our Heavenly Father desires us to become" (Dallin H. Oaks, "The Challenge to Become," *Ensign*, Nov. 2000, 32; emphasis in original).
6. Brigham Young's Office Journal, Jan. 28, 1857, Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; as quoted in James E. Faust, "The Light in Their Eyes," *Ensign*, Nov. 2005, 22.