



WHY AGENCY?

A knowledge of the gift and power of agency helps us understand our purpose and find joy in this life.

By Charles Swift

One day when I was a freshman at a university in the southwestern United States, I found myself sitting alone in the library, frustrated and confused. On the table in front of me were two stacks: one with the publications I had received from the missionaries, and another with the books I had checked out of the university library. I did not realize at the time that all of the library books were intense anti-Mormon publications. I had no idea that such publications existed, so I assumed that what was written in those books was accurate. Later I would realize they were far from reliable.



For the past couple of months I had studied both sets of material, talked with people, and prayed. But now, as I sat looking at the two stacks, I realized that I had spent more effort in reading than I had in pondering and praying. At that moment I came to the conclusion that I could not figure out what I should do by relying mainly on my intellect, so I made a decision: I would put my whole heart into praying about the restored gospel and try my best to find out from the Lord what was true.

Although I did not realize it at the time, I was exercising my moral agency in the library that day by deciding to be even more diligent in seeking truth. I have come to appreciate the significance of not only that one particular

decision, but the gift of agency as well. By gaining a better understanding of what moral agency is and why we have it, we will be able to more effectively exercise our agency for good and deepen our gratitude for the Savior's role in Heavenly Father's plan of salvation.

What Is Moral Agency?

Moral agency is a gift from our Heavenly Father (see D&C 101:78). It is "the ability and privilege God gives us to choose and 'to act for [ourselves] and not to be acted upon' (2 Nephi 2:26)."¹ The ultimate use of our agency is the ultimate moral choice: we are "free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and

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death, according to the captivity and power of the devil” (2 Nephi 2:27; see also 2 Nephi 10:23). We cannot choose the consequences of our decisions; if we choose the wrong and do not repent, we cannot expect to have “liberty and eternal life.”

Why Do We Need Moral Agency?

On a personal level, one reason we need moral agency is that the act of choosing good dramatically changes the quality of our lives and the lives of those we love. “When we follow the prophets’ counsel to hold family home evening, family prayer, and family scripture study, our homes become an incubator for our children’s spiritual growth,” taught Elder Robert D. Hales of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. “There we teach them the gospel, bear our testimonies, express our love, and listen as they share their feelings and experiences. *By our righteous choices and actions*, we liberate them from darkness by increasing their ability to walk in the light.”² Agency is essential to our happiness as individuals and families.

Moral agency also is important in our striving to become like the Savior and Heavenly Father. Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve wrote, “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. . . . This spotless and perfected state will result from a steady succession of covenants, ordinances, and actions, *an accumulation of right choices*, and from continuing repentance.”³ The moral decisions we make in this life—and how we act on them—matter.

Moral Agency and the Plan of Salvation

Another reason we need moral agency is because of the fundamental role it plays in the plan of salvation. As Elder Hales has taught, “Agency is essential to the plan of salvation. . . . Without agency we would be unable to make right choices and progress.”⁴ Agency is so important to Heavenly Father’s plan that in the premortal life,

Lucifer “sought to destroy the agency of man” (Moses 4:3). Elder D. Todd Christofferson of the Quorum of the Twelve wrote about three elements of moral agency as found in 2 Nephi: alternatives among which to choose, knowledge, and freedom to make choices.⁵

Alternatives. Lehi taught that there must be “an opposition in all things.” Without such opposition, “righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness, neither holiness nor misery, neither good nor bad.” Everything would be “a compound in one; wherefore, if it should be one body it must needs remain as dead, having no life neither death, nor corruption nor incorruption, happiness nor misery, neither sense nor insensibility” (2 Nephi 2:11). Thus, opposition and the alternatives that come with it are essential characteristics of our existence, for if there were no opposition and no alternatives from which to choose, there would be no agency, and the “wisdom of God and his eternal purposes,” as well as His “power,” “mercy,” and “justice,” would be destroyed (2 Nephi 2:12).

Expanding on the concept of opposition, Lehi explained the consequences of having no law: without law, there would be no sin, which would mean there would be no righteousness nor happiness. Without righteousness and happiness, there would be no punishment nor misery. (See verse 13.) Then Lehi taught us the ultimate consequence of there being no opposites: “If these things are not there is no God. And if there is no God we are not, neither the earth; for there could have been no creation of things, neither to act nor to be acted upon; wherefore, all things must have vanished away” (2 Nephi 2:13).

In other words, without opposition, there could be no life! Opposition is essential to the plan of salvation.

Knowledge. Elder Christofferson taught that “for us to have agency, we must not only have alternatives, but we must also know what they are.” Otherwise, “the existence of those choices is meaningless to us.”⁶ Because of the Fall, wrote Elder Christofferson, we have “sufficient knowledge and understanding to be enticed by good and evil—we attain a state of accountability and can recognize the alternatives before us.”⁷ If it weren’t for our knowledge of

good and evil, we could not act for ourselves, but only “be acted upon” (2 Nephi 2:26).

Freedom to make choices. The third element of moral agency is the freedom or ability to act on the knowledge we have of the opposites and choose between them (see 2 Nephi 2:27).⁸ Elder Christofferson clarified that “freedom of choice is the freedom to obey or disobey existing laws—not the freedom to alter their consequences.”⁹ Through our obedience or disobedience, we 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 2:27). With our God-given agency, we are “free to act” for ourselves, “to choose the way of everlasting death or the way of eternal life” (2 Nephi 10:23).

Our Gratitude to the Savior

As I look back on that day in the library, I realize that my decision to pray more diligently led to an even more important decision: to get baptized. President Thomas S. Monson has said that some of our decisions “will make no difference in the eternal scheme of things, and others will make *all* the difference.”¹⁰ My decision to exercise the gift of moral agency to pray more diligently in order to find and accept truth, and then to eventually be baptized, has indeed made all the difference in my life, and I am deeply grateful.

As we keep in mind the importance of using our moral agency to choose good over evil, we must also remember the Savior’s role in the plan of salvation and be eternally grateful for the decisions He made and for all that He did for us. As Elder Christofferson wrote, “We need to always remember that



agency would have no meaning without the vital contribution of Jesus Christ.”¹¹

Because of the Atonement and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, we can be forgiven of our sins and be resurrected. “Just as death would doom us and render our agency meaningless but for the redemption of Christ,” wrote Elder Christofferson, “even so, without His grace, our sins and bad choices would leave us forever lost.”¹² Though the exercise of moral agency is essential to our salvation, we do not “earn” eternal life through our good choices. There is no eternal life without the Savior and what He did for us. I am grateful to the Savior and to our Heavenly Father for the gift of agency and for the possibility of being blessed with eternal life, “the greatest of all the gifts of God” (D&C 14:7). ■

NOTES

1. Robert D. Hales, “Agency: Essential to the Plan of Life,” *Liahona* and *Ensign*, Nov. 2010, 24.
2. Robert D. Hales, “Agency,” 26, emphasis added.
3. Dallin H. Oaks, “The Challenge to Become,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2000, 32, 33, emphasis added.
4. Robert D. Hales, “Agency,” 24.
5. See D. Todd Christofferson, “Moral Agency,” *Ensign*, June 2009, 46–53.
6. D. Todd Christofferson, “Moral Agency,” 48.
7. D. Todd Christofferson, “Moral Agency,” 48.
8. See D. Todd Christofferson, “Moral Agency,” 48–49.
9. D. Todd Christofferson, “Moral Agency,” 48.
10. Thomas S. Monson, “The Three Rs of Choice,” *Liahona* and *Ensign*, Nov. 2010, 67.
11. D. Todd Christofferson, “Moral Agency,” 49.
12. D. Todd Christofferson, “Moral Agency,” 50.

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