

FREEDOM OR CAPTIVITY

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When I was a priest, our quorum went on a hike to Donut Falls near Salt Lake City, Utah, USA. The trail is short and leads to an impressive waterfall. We rushed ahead of our leaders until we came to a fork in the trail. To the right was a service road that went uphill. To the left was a small trail that continued across a meadow. We didn't know which one was the right way, but we decided to take the service road. It looked more rugged and exciting.

A dozen yards past the junction, we heard our bishop call to us, telling us we were heading the wrong way. He urged us to come back and take the other trail. We argued that both trails probably went to the same place. We wanted to take the more interesting route. The bishop shrugged his shoulders and we walked up the service road.

And we walked. And walked. We continued about two miles before we decided this was definitely the wrong road and turned around.

When we returned to the fork in the trail, the bishop's wife was waiting for us in the early twilight. We said we hadn't found the falls. She pointed to the trail we'd ignored earlier. "You still have time to get there before it gets dark."

Half a mile up the trail, we came to the falls. We scrambled up the rock face and into a cave where a torrent of water flowed through the roof and out the mouth of the grotto.

Choices

In life, we have many choices to make. These choices are like the trails I hiked in the wilderness. Each one leads

Choosing an action means choosing a consequence.

someplace. I choose my destination the moment I choose which trail to take. If I want to go someplace specific, like that waterfall, I need to carefully choose the trail that will lead me there and follow the directions of those who know the way.

As we exercise agency, the choices we make have consequences that can result in freedom or captivity. Making righteous choices brings the Spirit. Having the clarity of divine direction in our lives is a form of freedom. Making unrighteous choices diminishes the influence of the Spirit and leaves us more vulnerable to the influences and captivity of Satan.

Lehi taught this eternal principle to his son Jacob: "Men 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).

Agency

Agency, or the ability to choose, is a gift that helps us become more like Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ. Our wise use of it in the premortal life gave us the opportunity to come to earth. "Without agency, we would not be able to learn or progress or follow the Savior."¹

But along with the ability to choose come the consequences of those choices. These consequences can be placed widely in two categories: freedom or captivity.



Freedom

Freedom is the state of being free from the control or domination of another.²

Each time we make righteous choices we gain more freedom and strength to follow God's plan. The *Gospel Principles* manual explains:

"When we choose to live according to God's plan for us, our agency is strengthened. Right choices increase our power to make more right choices.

"As we obey each of our Father's commandments, . . . we find it easier to make right choices."³

Making righteous choices brings us freedom partly by giving us more opportunities. For example, in our home our children must complete and turn in homework if they want the freedom to watch movies, play games, or interact with friends online. Each day our children must decide if they want to do their homework and turn it in and thus gain more freedom.

As a freshman in college, Elder Craig A. Cardon of the Seventy was invited to a Saturday-night party. He asked if there would be alcohol. When his teammate said no, he agreed to attend. His friend drove him to the party and Elder Cardon found that everybody was drinking. He chose to sit by himself rather than participate. Later, police raided the party. They allowed Elder Cardon to drive his teammate's car home, returning at 3:00 a.m. His alarm went off a few hours later. After a small debate with himself, Elder Cardon got up and went to priesthood meeting, arriving a few minutes late. When he got there, Elder Cardon saw his father in the congregation. His father greeted him with the words, "I knew I would find you here, Son."

Elder Cardon's choices, both to turn away from unwholesome activities as well as to be where he was supposed to be, blessed him.

"When my teammate misrepresented the party's activities, I felt a spiritual unrest that I did not heed. When confronted with that reality, I was more disappointed with myself than with my teammate. But keeping myself apart from the crowd brought spiritual comfort and later temporal benefit when the police allowed me to return home.

"However, the greatest blessing of liberty came when, in the privacy of my dormitory room early Sunday morning, I chose to be where I should be, not knowing beforehand the treasure that awaited me there. Such experiences, accompanied by the ministration of the Spirit, foreshadow the liberty associated with the blessing of eternal life."⁴

Captivity

The opposite of freedom is captivity. We choose captivity when we make unrighteous choices. In the example of my children and their homework, if they choose to ignore homework, then they choose to not use electronic devices. They are captive because their choices have been limited; they can no longer choose to participate in certain activities.

Consider the temple. If we live our lives in the right way, we are free to enter the temple and partake of its blessings, but when we live contrary to the standards of the temple, we lose the freedom to attend.

The problem is that sometimes, like that service road, the wrong path looks more interesting. We have to remember our ultimate goal, or we'll lose the destination we're seeking.

Elder Robert D. Hales (1932–2017) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles taught:

"When we don't keep the commandments or follow the promptings of the Holy Ghost, our opportunities are reduced; our abilities to act and progress are diminished. . . .

". . . Obedience to the commandments ultimately protects our agency.

"For example, when we hearken to the Word of Wisdom, we escape the captivity of poor health and addiction to substances

that literally rob us of our ability to act for ourselves.

"As we obey the counsel to avoid and get out of debt now, we use our agency and obtain the liberty to use our disposable income for helping and blessing others.

"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. . . . By our righteous choices and actions, we liberate them from darkness by increasing their ability to walk in the light."⁵

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An experience during my missionary service in France taught how addictions can rob us of the ability to choose our actions. One day my companion and I were walking through a park in Pau, when a homeless man walked up to us.

This man laughed at us. He told us we were slaves to our religion. He bragged about how he could commit immoral acts and we couldn't.

"If I want to drink wine, I drink wine. If I want to do drugs, I do drugs. But you can't," he said dismissively. "Your church has taken away your ability to choose."

He continued telling us all the ways the commandments were holding us back. As he did so, he became increasingly agitated. Finally, he asked, "Do either of you have a cigarette? I need one now."

When we told him we didn't, he ran off to find a cigarette.

That moment showed the reality of captivity and freedom. My companion and I could have done any of those things he talked about. We still had the agency to make those choices and to suffer the consequences. But this man didn't have the same freedom. Through repeated

bad choices he'd lost the ability to not smoke. His choice to participate in behaviors that could lead to addiction had led to captivity. He could still regain that freedom, but the road back from addiction is often long and difficult.

Conclusion

That day on the trail with my priests quorum, I learned the importance of trusting those who have more experience and of listening to my leaders. I also learned that no matter how attractive the other choice looks, taking the wrong road will never lead me to the right destination.

We're here to become more like our Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ. We can do this by following the example of our Savior and making righteous choices that will free us to better follow Them. Doing so will help us as surely as taking the correct trail led my priests quorum to that waterfall. ■

NOTES

1. "Agency and Accountability," Gospel Topics, topics.lds.org.
2. See *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (2003), "freedom."
3. *Gospel Principles* (2009), 19.
4. See Craig A. Cardon, "Choosing Liberty and Eternal Life," *Ensign*, Feb. 2008, 21–22.
5. Robert D. Hales, "Agency: Essential to the Plan of Life," *Ensign*, Nov. 2010, 25, 26.