

# FREE AGENCY OR MORAL AGENCY?

*Wise use of agency keeps our choices open and improves our ability to choose correctly.*

**By Michael R. Morris**  
Church Magazines

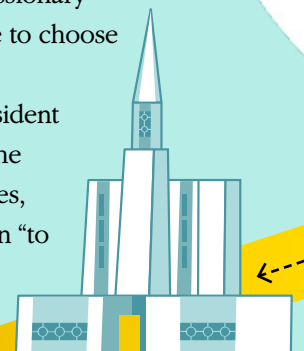
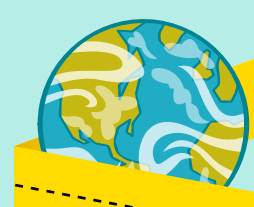
I still remember how anxious I was as I prepared to see my bishop about serving a mission. I wondered if I was good enough. Like the Prophet Joseph Smith, I wasn't "guilty of any great or malignant sins" (Joseph Smith—History 1:28), but I was nervous just the same.

I was nervous because I couldn't help but think about my friend Danny (name has been changed). For months Danny had been talk-

ing about how much he looked forward to serving a mission. But that changed after he met with the bishop.

Because Danny had engaged in unworthy behavior with several young women, he later told me, he had disqualified himself from full-time missionary service. He was no longer free to choose a mission.

Danny, in the words of President Boyd K. Packer, President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, had fallen to Satan's temptation "to misuse [his] moral agency."<sup>1</sup>



True freedom, as *For the Strength of Youth* teaches, comes when we use our agency to choose obedience. Loss of freedom, as Danny learned, comes from choosing disobedience.

“While you are free to choose your course of action, you are not free to choose the consequences. Whether for good or bad, consequences follow as a natural result of the choices you make.”<sup>2</sup>

### Agents unto Ourselves

Because the scriptures teach that we are “free to choose,” “free to act,” and free to do things “of [our] own free will” (2 Nephi 2:27; 10:23; D&C 58:27; Helaman 14:30), we often use the term “free agency.”

But did you know that the phrase “free agency” does not appear in the scriptures? Instead, the scriptures teach “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” (D&C 101:78; emphasis added).

Elder D. Todd Christofferson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has taught: “The word *agency* appears [in scriptures] either by itself or with the modifier *moral*. . . . 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.”<sup>3</sup>

President Packer adds, “Agency is defined in the scriptures as ‘moral agency,’ which means that we can choose between good and evil.”<sup>4</sup> This God-given gift means 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).

### Satan’s War against Agency

Because moral agency plays an important role in the plan of salvation, Satan sought to destroy it in the pre-mortal world. He was cast out for his rebellion and now seeks “to deceive and to blind men, and to lead them captive at his will” (Moses 4:3–4).

Satan wants us to make choices that limit our freedom, lead to bad habits and addictions, and leave us powerless to resist his temptations. The beauty of the gospel is that it makes us aware of our choices and the consequences of those choices. Wise use of agency keeps our choices open and improves our ability to choose correctly.



### The Savior’s Example

When the plan of salvation was presented in the Grand Council in Heaven, the Savior showed us how to use our moral agency correctly. He said, “Father, thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever” (Moses 4:2). Because He was willing to do the will of the Father then and later in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross (see Matthew 26:39; Luke 22:42), Jesus paid the price for our bad choices and provided a way for us to be forgiven through repentance.

If we follow the Savior’s example, instead of saying, “I do what I want,” we will declare, “I do what the Father wants.”<sup>5</sup> Using our moral agency this way will bring us freedom and happiness.

As I went to see my bishop for my first mission interview, I was grateful I had made good choices. A few months later I was serving the Lord in Guatemala—teaching others the plan of salvation and the vital role moral agency plays in that plan. ■

#### NOTES

1. Boyd K. Packer, “These Things I Know,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2013, 8.
2. *For the Strength of Youth* (2011), 2.
3. D. Todd Christofferson, “Moral Agency,” *Ensign*, June 2009, 47.
4. Boyd K. Packer, “These Things I Know,” 8.
5. See Wolfgang H. Paul, “The Gift of Agency,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2006, 35.