



By Elder
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Covenants, Ordinances, and Blessings

During my first semester of law school, my contracts class was taught by a distinguished professor who was very kind and gracious—when he was not in the classroom. In class, he was a master at teaching using the Socratic method—a method of teaching that involves asking probing questions in a way intended to develop critical thinking.

For most class periods we were assigned to read three legal decisions or cases. During class, a student was called upon to summarize the facts of the case and then describe the legal principles of contract law that the cases established. The unfortunate student was then subject to the professor's probing, twisting questions that followed. This was almost always a humbling experience.

The first time I was called upon, the cases dealt with a principle of contract law known as *unilateral acceptance*. As a result, I have never forgotten that principle.

Offer and Acceptance

Among other things, to form a binding contract under the laws of man, there must be an offer and an acceptance. Generally, a contract is formed when one party makes an offer and the other party accepts the offer.

For some agreements, such as a contract to purchase real estate, the law requires that the offer and the acceptance be in writing. In other situations, the parties need only verbally agree. But for some agreements, the acceptance of an offer is made simply by performance. This is known as unilateral acceptance.

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For example, I might say to you, “If you bring me a dozen bananas, I will pay you \$100.” To accept my *generous* offer, you don’t need to sign an agreement or even say you will bring me bananas. You simply need to go to the store or marketplace, buy a dozen bananas, and bring them to me. Or, in some parts of the world, you might actually pick the bananas yourself. Either way, if you bring me a dozen bananas, I am contractually obligated to pay you \$100. Why? Because you accepted my offer by your performance.

We Must Act

Covenants with our Heavenly Father work in much the same way. To receive the *generous* blessings He offers, we must act to accept them. There is not a negotiation followed by a signed acceptance. Instead, by our affirmative expressions and by acting in accordance with His will, including receiving essential ordinances, we show our desire and willingness to make covenants with Him. As we then keep our covenants by what we do, we qualify for the abundant blessings He has promised.

In the Doctrine and Covenants we learn:

“There is a law, irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundations of this world, upon which all blessings are predicated—

“And when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated” (Doctrine and Covenants 130:20–21).

The Savior taught, “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21).

In other words, we accept our Heavenly Father’s offered blessing of eternal life in the kingdom of heaven not simply by what we say but also by what we do. And when we covenant with Him, He has assured us, “I, the Lord, am bound when ye *do* what I say.” He also made clear that if we do not do His will—if we don’t accept His offer—then we have no agreement: “When ye *do not* what I say, ye have no promise” (Doctrine and Covenants 82:10; emphasis added).

Ordinances of Salvation and Exaltation

We enter into those covenants necessary for salvation and exaltation by receiving sacred ordinances. As stated in the *General Handbook*: “Members make covenants with God as they receive the ordinances of salvation and exaltation. . . . All who endure to the end in keeping their covenants will receive eternal life.”¹

The ordinances of salvation and exaltation are baptism, confirmation and the gift of the Holy Ghost, Melchizedek Priesthood ordination for men, and the endowment and sealing ordinances of the temple.² Each of these five ordinances is performed vicariously in the temple for deceased ancestors because these ordinances are essential for all God’s children.

The record of Alma teaching at the Waters of Mormon illustrates the relationship among covenants, ordinances, and blessings. Notice how God, through His prophet, sets the conditions, describes the promised blessings, and declares how we may receive those blessings.

To those gathered at the Waters of Mormon who expressed a desire to come into the fold of God—*desire* being an important first step (see Alma 32:27)—Alma taught what was



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expected of them. They had to be “willing to bear one another’s burdens, . . . mourn with those that mourn; . . . comfort those that stand in need of comfort,” and “stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places . . . even until death” (Mosiah 18:8, 9).

Alma then described their promised blessings: “Ye may be redeemed of God, and be numbered with those of the first resurrection, that ye may have eternal life” and that “the Lord . . . may pour out his Spirit more abundantly upon you” (Mosiah 18:9, 10).

What did the people need to do to accept those remarkable blessings? In Alma’s words: “You . . . [must be] baptized in the name of the Lord, as a *witness* before him that ye have entered into a *covenant* with him, that ye will serve him and keep his commandments” (Mosiah 18:10; emphasis added). Notice that the ordinance of baptism, a sacred act that most of us clearly remember, serves as a witness or evidence that we have entered into a covenant with God.

The people were so eager to do this that “they clapped their hands for joy, and exclaimed: This is the desire of our hearts” (Mosiah 18:11). They freely desired to enter into a covenant as they entered into the waters of baptism.

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Similarly, as we receive each of the other ordinances of salvation and exaltation, we receive additional promises of great blessings. The covenants we make are sacred and binding on us and with God. We choose to accept His offered blessings when we exercise our moral agency to receive ordinances and keep the associated covenants.

The Sacrament

The ordinance of the sacrament invites us to remember the Savior and our covenants. When Jesus Christ instituted the sacrament among the Nephites, He gave priesthood power to His disciples and instructed them to “break bread and bless it and give it unto the people of my church, unto all those who shall believe and be baptized in my name” (3 Nephi 18:5).

We often think of partaking of the sacrament to renew our baptismal covenants. Though that is correct, notice the language used by the Savior. When He instructed His followers to partake of the bread, He said, “This shall ye do in remembrance of my body, which I have shown unto you. And it



shall be a *testimony* unto the Father that ye do always remember me” (3 Nephi 18:7; emphasis added).

When they drank of the wine, He said, “This is fulfilling my commandments, and this doth *witness* unto the Father that ye are willing to do that which I have commanded you” (3 Nephi 18:10; emphasis added).

In other words, when we partake of the sacrament each week, we *testify* and *witness* anew that we will always remember Jesus Christ and that we are willing to keep His commandments. If we do always remember Him and keep His commandments, His Spirit will be with us (see 3 Nephi 18:7, 11).

Blessings We Receive

Reflecting on the blessings that come to us as we partake of the sacrament, President Dallin H. Oaks, First Counselor in the First Presidency, has observed: “Because it is broken and torn, each piece of bread is unique, just as the individuals who partake of it are unique. We all have different sins to repent of. We all have different needs to be strengthened through the Atonement of the

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Lord Jesus Christ, whom we remember in this ordinance.”³

I have found it helpful to ponder verses 10, 12, and 14 of 3 Nephi 18. In each of these verses the Savior says to those who partake of the sacrament, “Blessed are ye,” but He does not specify what the blessing will be. Perhaps because each person who participates in this sacred ordinance is as different as the shape of each piece of bread, we each need different blessings. Though our challenges, circumstances, and needs differ, the Savior has promised each of us who keep the sacramental covenant, “Blessed are ye.”

Love and Mercy

Now I highlight an important distinction between the laws of God and the laws of man: the role of love and mercy in God’s plan of redemption for His children. As noted, in many cases we invite His offered blessings through our actions. As loving parents do, Heavenly Father mercifully

considers the desire of our hearts as well as our works (see Doctrine and Covenants 137:9). He realizes that sometimes the opportunity to act may be limited by circumstances beyond our control. An early death, a serious disability, the simple lack of knowledge or opportunity, or any other unfairness that occurs in a fallen world may seem to block our progress and the receipt of promised blessings we desire.

Thus, central to the great plan of happiness is a Savior, Jesus Christ, who makes up the difference, overcomes the unfairness, and allows all—all who truly desire and do all they can—to ultimately accept and receive the promised blessings of a loving Heavenly Father.

Heavenly Father wants us to return to His presence, but He wants us to return because we desire to do so. As Elder Dale G. Renlund of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles taught: “Our Heavenly Father’s goal in parenting is not to have His children *do* what is right; it is to have His children *choose* to do what is right and ultimately become like Him. If He simply wanted us to be obedient, He would use immediate rewards and punishments to influence our behaviors.”⁴

Heavenly Father requires a willing heart as well as effort on our part. Many of the rewards for choosing what is right come in the future, and they are far more than we deserve—which is why some rewards are referred to as a gift (see 1 Nephi 10:17; Doctrine and Covenants 14:7). Like the generous, merciful parent Heavenly Father is, He gives us much—far beyond anything we merit. Thus, exaltation is not earned, but it must be chosen, accepted, and gratefully received.

In all seasons and all circumstances, may each of us act with faith, obedience, diligence, and gratitude to prepare to receive “all that [our] Father hath” (Doctrine and Covenants 84:38; see also Alma 34:32).

A Righteous, Covenant People

We live in a wonderful time when the blessings of the gospel are readily available to those who accept them. President Russell M. Nelson has taught:

“We have front-row seats to *witness live* what the prophet Nephi saw *only in vision*, that ‘the power of the Lamb of God’ would descend ‘upon the covenant people of the Lord, who were scattered upon all the face of the earth; and they were armed with righteousness and with the power of God in great glory’ [1 Nephi 14:14].

“*You*, my brothers and sisters, are among those men, women, and children whom Nephi saw. Think of that!”⁵

Our Heavenly Father loves us and truly desires to bless us. Through the infinite Atonement of His Son, Jesus Christ, all can be made whole. As we trust God and act in faith to make and keep sacred covenants with Him, how great will be our joy now and throughout eternity. ■

From a devotional address, “Covenants—Accepting God’s Offered Blessings,” delivered at Brigham Young University—Idaho on September 22, 2020.

NOTES

1. *General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 3.5.1, ChurchofJesusChrist.org.
2. See *General Handbook*, 18.1.
3. Dallin H. Oaks, “Introductory Message” (address given at the seminar for new mission presidents, June 25, 2017), 2.
4. Dale G. Renlund, “Choose You This Day,” *Ensign or Liahona*, Nov. 2018, 104.
5. Russell M. Nelson, “Hear Him,” *Ensign or Liahona*, May 2020, 88.



A SACRED PROMISE

“In legal language, a covenant generally denotes an agreement between two or more parties. But in a religious context, a covenant is much more significant. It is a sacred promise with God. He fixes the terms. Each person may choose to accept those terms. If one accepts the terms of the covenant and obeys God’s law, he or she receives the blessings associated with the covenant.”

President Russell M. Nelson, “Covenants,” *Ensign or Liahona*, Nov. 2011, 86.