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De [Parson, Adam and Eve Kneeling at an Altar, courtesy of Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

As we learn about Adam and Eve, we learn about every man and woman. Their dilemmas are essentially our dilemmas; their story of salvation is our story of salvation.

## “Wherefore, Ye Are Free”: How the Plan of Salvation Ensures Perfect Agency and Accountability

THOMAS E. SHERRY

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Among the doctrines restored through the Prophet Joseph Smith is the soul-pleasing assurance that we are infinitely valued by our Father in Heaven and that his work and glory is to bring to pass our eternal life (see Moses 1:39). The Prophet further taught, “At the first organization in heaven we were all present and saw the Savior chosen and appointed and the plan of salvation made, and we sanctioned it.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, we “shouted for joy” at the plan when it was made known to us as we learned that it was “God’s will that we be free men and women enabled to rise to our full potential both temporally and spiritually.”<sup>2</sup>

Essential to God’s “great plan of happiness” that enables the glorious possibility of life eternal in his presence is both the necessity and assurance of absolute freedom to choose our eternal fate, and thus from the very beginning God placed us in a “sphere to act for ourselves” in the great saga of eternal progression (see D&C 93:30–31). In the heavenly plan, “agency is absolutely central to our ability to learn and to make correct choices, making it possible to return to our Heavenly Father.”<sup>3</sup> How did God ensure unfettered agency and thus create an equitable sphere for us to act in as we choose our eternal

destiny? We are especially grateful for the Book of Mormon's contribution on this critical subject, as it describes the key elements needed to have moral agency: knowledge, opposition, enticement, time, and accountability. This paper explores each of these elements and why all are necessary in God's plan of salvation.

### Wherefore, Ye Are Free

In 2 Nephi chapters 2 and 9, the prophet Lehi and his son Jacob eloquently teach us about agency, accountability, and salvation through the experience of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. As we learn about Adam and Eve, we learn about every man and woman. Their dilemmas are essentially our dilemmas; their story of salvation is our story of salvation. As these prophets unravel the mystery of Adam and Eve and their agency to choose the course of life they would travel, we likewise begin to understand God's plan for all mankind and how our agency and accountability are perfectly preserved within that divine plan.

"Wherefore, men are free according to the flesh; and all things are given them which are expedient. . . . And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator . . . or to choose captivity and death, according to the . . . power of the devil" (2 Nephi 2:27). In this passage, Lehi assures us that every "expedient thing" has been provided in God's eternal plan such that his children are ultimately free to choose liberty and eternal life or captivity and spiritual death. No external force or entity can, or will, prevent us from realizing the desires of our hearts unless we choose to give away that agency. The Prophet Joseph taught: "All beings who have bodies have power over those who have not. . . . The devil has no power over us only as we permit him; the moment we revolt at anything which comes from God, the devil takes power."<sup>4</sup> Thus our fate rests in our hands, not that we can "save ourselves," but that we may *choose* Christ, who can save us, or Satan, who desires to enslave us.

Elder David A. Bednar has taught: "In the grand division of all of God's creations, there are things to act and things to be acted upon (see 2 Nephi 2:13–14). As sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father, we have been blessed with the gift of moral agency, the capacity for independent action and choice. Endowed with agency, you and I are agents, and we primarily are to act and not just be acted upon. To believe that someone or something can *make* us feel [or think a particular way] . . . diminishes our moral agency and transforms us

into objects to be acted upon. As agents, however, you and I have the power to act and to choose how we will respond" to outside influences.<sup>5</sup>

To meet the purposes of God in our salvation then, he ordered the plan of salvation such that we were placed in a condition (sphere) wherein we could act for ourselves. To act for ourselves we must have the knowledge, right, and ability to choose something or to not choose it, otherwise there is no meaningful accountability. The range of agency we experience expands as we choose "light and truth," or contracts as we choose darkness through disobedience (see D&C 93:28–40; Alma 12:9–11). As Jesus said, "If ye continue in my word . . . ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31–32).

In acting for ourselves, we inexorably move in the direction of the desires of our heart and over time develop a character and destiny of our choosing. This was the fundamental purpose of our Heavenly Father's plan. That plan perfectly provided for this purpose and hence allowed everyone to ultimately choose his or her eternal fate—no wonder it was also called the "great plan of happiness" (Alma 42:8) and the "plan of redemption" (Alma 12:25–34). No child of our Heavenly Father would be forced into an eternal kingdom not of their choosing, nor be precluded from attaining the condition of their choice. Indeed, "agency is the impelling source of the soul's progress. It is the purpose of the Lord that man become like him. In order for man to achieve this it was necessary for the Creator first to make him free."<sup>6</sup> "No true character was ever developed without a sense of soul freedom."<sup>7</sup>

### All Expedient Things

Expediency gets at the idea of that which is useful or suited to the circumstance in effecting the desired result. What does Lehi include in "all expedient things"? Or, we might ask, what things are required in time and eternity such that every person is free to choose their eternal destiny without force on the one hand or ignorance on the other? Since this is what God desired for his children, what did he include in the gospel plan to make possible the desired result? In 2 Nephi, Lehi masterfully explains God's plan to ensure perfect freedom through five essential elements and conditions (i.e., "expedient things"): *knowledge, opposition, enticement, time, and accountability*.<sup>8</sup> The inclusion of each and all of these elements creates a "sphere" wherein our agency can fully function and which allows everyone to attain the desires of their heart (see D&C 93:30).

## Knowledge

See 2 Nephi 2:5–8, 13, 26; 9:13–14; Alma 12:28–34; Helaman 14:30–31; Moroni 7:16; D&C 84:46–51; 138:56

### SUMMARY

*The plan of salvation requires that we be “instructed sufficiently.” This instruction began in the premortal realm and continues in mortality through the Light of Christ, the Gift of the Holy Ghost, the holy scriptures, words of the living prophets, and personal inspiration. Our instruction is completed in the postmortal spirit world preparatory to final judgment.*

Every one of our Heavenly Father’s children is progressively instructed relative to the plan of salvation through one means or another throughout their existence. Before final judgment, adequate (i.e., “sufficient”) teaching and choosing will have been the blessing of all mankind. Our understanding of the plan of salvation began at the feet of our Father in Heaven in the premortal world, where we “received [our] first lessons in the world of spirits and were prepared to come forth [to the earth] in the due time of the Lord” (D&C 138:56). In the mortal sphere, some have more or less opportunity to continue in learning truths of the gospel, but all who hearken to the light of Christ within them will be prepared to receive more knowledge of truth when it is available (see D&C 84:47). No person living in any time, culture, or place will be ultimately deprived of any element of truth that would limit their ability to know God, to understand the *plan*, or to choose salvation prior to their final judgment. To suppose such would deny the perfect character of God and his love for each of us.<sup>9</sup>

While we are counseled to seek knowledge of every sort (see D&C 88:77–80; 130:18–19), Lehi emphasizes that the critical knowledge we need most to know is twofold: (1) Above all the knowledge imparted by God, awareness of our inability to “work ourselves into heaven,” and hence the absolute need for a redeeming Messiah, stands at the pinnacle of truth’s hierarchy (see 2 Nephi 2:5–8). In the Atonement of Christ, we “have become free forever” to act for ourselves and not to be acted upon (2 Nephi 2:6–9, 26); and (2) knowledge imparted via the “law” or commandments of God (2 Nephi 2:5).

The laws of God teach us right from wrong, good from bad, and better from worse. On the role of the commandments in enabling moral agency, Elder D. Todd Christofferson taught that “God will not act to make us something we do not choose by our actions to become. Truly He loves us,

and because He loves us, He neither compels nor abandons us. Rather He helps and guides us. Indeed, the real manifestation of God’s love is His commandments.”<sup>10</sup> The “plan” provides that accountability is imposed only after knowledge is gained. Speaking of Adam and Eve, Alma wrote, “Therefore God gave unto them commandments, *after* having made known unto them the plan of redemption” and the consequences of choosing evil (Alma 12:28–32; emphasis added; see also Joseph Smith Translation, Romans 5:13).

Notice that 2 Nephi 2:5 simply states that “sufficient” instruction is necessary. Not *perfect* instruction or perfectly *complete* instruction, but merely *sufficient* instruction. Sufficient to the moment, to the person, to the situation according to the Lord’s will and design. The Prophet Joseph Smith summarized an eternal perspective on gaining sufficient knowledge in this way: “When you climb up a ladder, you must begin at the bottom, and ascend step by step, until you arrive at the top; and so it is with the principles of the gospel—you must begin with the first, and go on until you learn all the principles of exaltation. But it will be a great while after you have passed through the veil [died] before you will have learned them. It is not all to be comprehended in this world; it will be a great work to learn our salvation and exaltation even beyond the grave.”<sup>11</sup>

## Opposition

See 2 Nephi 2:11–12, 15

### SUMMARY

*The plan of salvation requires all things to have opposition. Without such opposition we may have awareness of something but cannot discern whether it is good or bad, because it does not exist in contrast to something else. Without such contrasts, all things become a “compound in one,” or without meaning.*

Imagine yourself in a restaurant of a foreign country. There are two menu choices before you, neither of which you have any visual recognition for, and you are not able to read the menu description. Are you free to choose? Technically yes, but effectively no. Upon what criteria would the decision be made and what would be the meaning of that decision? If the food looks neither appealing nor unappealing, if you cannot discern whether one is sweet or bitter, spicy or mild, then the choice between them certainly cannot constitute actual freedom but rather mere blind decision. For true agency

to operate, there must be both knowledge and contrasts, or *opposition*, for choices to really reflect personal desires.

Years ago, I had a friend who was in a coma and on life support for months following an automobile accident. Gratefully, she eventually awoke and partially recovered enough to marry and have a family. During the period of her coma, family and friends struggled over her state and future. She wasn't dead but could not be considered more than technically alive; she didn't seem happy but neither did she seem sad. Was she hungry or full, at peace or anxious? No one could tell. Sadly, she seemed to be a "compound in one" (2 Nephi 2:11). That is precisely Lehi's point. If things do not exist in contrast or opposition to one another, there is technically nothing between which to choose and hence we could experience neither "happiness nor misery, neither sense nor insensibility" (2 Nephi 2:11). We would not be free to choose because our choices would have no distinguishing characteristics. The plan of happiness required opposition to be introduced such that agentive choice could reflect the desires of our hearts.

An oft-asked question deals with whether God's perfections would allow him to place Adam and Eve in the midst of "contradictory" or opposing commandments (e.g., "multiply and replenish" but don't partake of the tree of knowledge). Second Nephi 2:15 settles the question: Yes, God did place the two trees (commandments) in opposition to one another because Adam and Eve could not have been "free to choose" (2 Nephi 2:27) if there was only one choice. President Boyd K. Packer taught, "There was too much at issue to introduce man into mortality by force. That would contravene the very law essential to the plan."<sup>12</sup> So it is with us, and though God is not the author of evil, he made provisions for evil to be present in mortality, thereby requiring active choosing from moment to moment.

### Enticement

See 2 Nephi 2:16–18; D&C 29:39; Moroni 7:12–17; James 1:12–14

#### SUMMARY

*Though one may have knowledge and opposition (thus creating a sphere wherein agency may function), we may not act without being "enticed" by the choices. God always entices us to choose good, and Lucifer always entices us to choose evil. Each pulls in opposite directions such that we must make the choice. God will not force us to choose good and he has not given Lucifer power to force us to choose evil.*<sup>13</sup>

Think again of the food dilemma in the foreign restaurant. If the menu items had a description in your language, the description would "entice" you one way or another. For example, "spicy hot and delicious," or "low-fat and soothing." Now the foods beckon to your desires and entice you towards consumption or avoidance. You are left to choose as informed by the nature of the product and your personal desire of the moment. But mortality was not designed to simply reflect a choice between "spicy or mild." It is a purposeful tutorial often studded by contrasts between good and evil. God always entices us toward goodness, joy, and peace, while Lucifer always entices us toward evil, misery, and unrest (see 2 Nephi 2:18; Moroni 7:12–17).

This concept is the theme of a hymn: "Know this, that ev'ry soul is free / To choose his life and what he'll be; / For this eternal truth is giv'n: / That God will force no man to heav'n. / He'll call, persuade, direct aright, / And bless with wisdom, love, and light, / In nameless ways be good and kind, / But never force the human mind."<sup>14</sup> In opposition, lyrics reflecting Lucifer's plan might read like this: "Know this, that no soul is free to choose his life and what he'll be; for this eternal truth is given: that Satan wishes no man to heaven. He'll call, persuade, direct awry, and impart ignorance, hate, and darkness, in nameless ways be evil and unkind, and always try to force the human mind."

Contrast the edifying descriptions of God and his great plan of happiness with what Jacob calls the "cunning plan of the evil one." Lucifer's plan was to usurp the power of God and destroy our agency as he seeks to make us all miserable like unto himself (see Moses 4:1, 3; 2 Nephi 2:18, 27). In 2 Nephi 9:28–39, Jacob observes the consequences of vain, frail, and foolish mortals who reject God and hearken to the enticements of Satan. Satan's plan encourages them toward intellectual pride, which leads to disobedience; love of money and neglect of the poor; ears that will not hear the word of the Lord and eyes which will not see truth and salvation; uncircumcised hearts; lying; murdering; immorality; idol worship; and a persistent refusal to repent. In summary, President Packer taught that it is "the single purpose of Lucifer to oppose the great plan of happiness."<sup>15</sup> Elder Robert D. Hales has observed:

It is our sins that make the devil laugh, our sorrow that brings him counterfeit joy. Although the devil laughs, his power is limited. Some may remember the old adage: "The devil made me do it." Today I want to convey, in absolutely certain terms, that the adversary cannot make us do anything. . . . Every decision we make, we are either choosing to move in his direction or in the direction of our Savior. But the adversary must depart if we tell him to depart. He cannot influence us unless we allow him to

do so, and he knows that! The only time he can affect our minds and bodies—our very spirits—is when we *allow* him to do so. In other words, we do not have to succumb to his enticements!<sup>16</sup>

President Howard W. Hunter also noted:

God's chief way of acting is by persuasion and patience and long-suffering, not by coercion and stark confrontation. He acts by gentle solicitation and by sweet enticement. He always acts with unfailing respect for the freedom and independence that we possess. He wants to help us and pleads for the chance to assist us, but he will not do so in violation of our agency. . . . To countermand and ultimately forbid our choices was Satan's way, not God's, and the Father of us all simply never will do that. He will, however, stand by us forever to help us see the right path, find the right choice, respond to the true voice, and feel the influence of his undeniable Spirit. His gentle, peaceful, powerful persuasion to do right and find joy will be with us "so long as time shall last, or the earth shall stand, or there shall be one man upon the face thereof to be saved."<sup>17</sup>

In bitter irony, Lucifer, who in the premortal realm had "sought to destroy the agency of man" (Moses 4:3) and make them "miserable like unto himself" (2 Nephi 2:27), was cast down to earth to help ensure the full exercise of that agency. Though not responsible for every temptation in the world (see James 1:14–15), Lucifer plays a role in providing both opposition and enticement: "And it must needs be that the devil should tempt the children of men, or they could not be agents unto themselves" (D&C 29:39). Because he "knew not the mind of God," he thought he could destroy the plan of happiness by enticing us toward evil, while in reality he was merely assisting the plan to work precisely as designed by God (see Moses 4:6).

Lucifer, who entices with evil and lies, became known among the righteous as the deceiver, "the father of all lies" (Moses 4:4–6). He must entice with lies because the *truth* is that the things he wants us to love and do always will bring misery and captivity in time. Thus, in order to entice us, he has to lie and tell us they'll bring happiness! When we partake, we eventually become miserable like him and often exclaim in our hearts, "It was a lie—I'm not happy like I was persuaded to believe I would be" (see Helaman 13:38; Alma 41:10; 30:53, 60). What sadness is reaped when we follow Lucifer! What joy and peace comes from following God! "God loves us; the devil hates us. God wants us to have a fullness of joy as He has. The devil wants us to be miserable as he is. God gives us commandments to bless us. The devil would have us break these commandments to curse us."<sup>18</sup>

It is important to note that if the force and power of enticement from either God or Lucifer were overwhelming, we would not be free. The very power of such enticement would coerce our choice in that direction. Generally, God ensures that the forces of enticement are relatively equal in strength, thus leaving us to choose according to the desires of our hearts. During difficult challenges, we sometimes forget this principle and cry out: "Why doesn't God just make it more plain if he wants me to do this?" "Why didn't God prevent that?" Or "Why doesn't he just give me a clear sign so I'll know without any doubt?"

Though heartfelt, each of these yearnings would, if answered, contravene the plan and nearly force us by the sheer strength of their "enticement" (i.e., answer) to choose that path. Instead of living by faith and the "still small voice" beckoning us to choose good or to proceed in a certain direction, we sometimes want God to make the choice for us by virtue of the very power of his enticements. Though understandable, such desires would in reality weaken our agency that is the fundamental building block of the plan of salvation.

"The Spirit does not get our attention by shouting or shaking us with a heavy hand. Rather it whispers. . . . Occasionally it will press just firmly enough for us to pay heed. But most of the time, if we do not heed the gentle feeling, the Spirit will withdraw and wait until we come seeking and listening and say in our manner and expression, like Samuel of ancient times, 'Speak, for thy servant heareth.'"<sup>19</sup>

### Time

See 2 Nephi 2:21; 9:27; Alma 12:24, 26; 34:32–35; 42:4–13; Mormon 9:28; D&C 29:42; Matthew 6:24

### SUMMARY

*The plan of salvation mercifully includes a period of time (probation) for us to learn by our own experience to choose good or evil. With time, we experience the necessary repetition that enables us to see clearly the consequences of our choices. Eventually, our minds and hearts become settled in a determination to "hold to the one, and despise the other" (Matthew 6:24).*

Lehi taught that our days "were prolonged, according to the will of God, that [we] might repent while in the flesh; wherefore, [our] state became a state of probation" (2 Nephi 2:21). Subsequent prophets repeatedly emphasize the same theme, that our time on earth is a time of choosing and experiencing

the consequence of those choices and they continually encourage us to mark that time by drawing near to God: “For behold, this life is the time for men to prepare to meet God; yea, behold the day of this life is the day for men to perform their labors” (Alma 34:32). “And thus we see, that there was a time granted unto man to repent, yea, a probationary time, a time to repent and serve God” (Alma 42:4).

President Ezra Taft Benson has noted, “Daily, constantly, we choose by our desires, our thoughts, and our actions, whether we want to be blessed or cursed, happy or miserable.”<sup>20</sup> In time, we become more disposed to choose in the direction of past choices. The outcomes of our persistent choices begin to evidence the “rewards” of such choices and incline us to choose similarly again. Habits and opinions are formed and the desires of our hearts become clearer to us. Such clarity may, at times, startle us and give the necessary impetus to change (repent), or it may simply confirm in us the direction we have chosen to travel.

A favorite story gets at this point: “Once there were two men who met in the sunshine on the street. These men often spoke of important things. And one day one of them said, ‘Good and evil are like two dogs inside me, vying for dominance, clawing and biting and snarling.’ ‘Oh?’ his companion asked. ‘Which one wins the fight?’ The first man looked at his friend with candid eyes and answered simply, ‘The one I feed.’”<sup>21</sup> So it is with all of us—over time we decide to nurture certain types of thought patterns and behaviors that eventuate into a settled character for eternity. This truth is effectively conveyed in these couplets: “We sow our thoughts, and we reap our actions; we sow our actions, and we reap our habits; we sow our habits, and we reap our characters; we sow our characters, and we reap our destiny.”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Elder Neal A. Maxwell taught, “What we insistently desire, over time, is what we will eventually become and what we will receive in eternity. . . . Only by educating and training our desires can they become our allies instead of our enemies!”<sup>23</sup> Though a sometimes reluctant convert to this principle of character development, I have come to be grateful for the blessing of time. If we are faithful, time heals wounds, salves the troubled soul, brings wisdom, and gives us opportunity to discover who we really are and what we most desire. And God has provided in the end that all will obtain that kingdom which we most truly desire as evidenced by our thoughts, actions, habits, and character developed through the exercise of agency.

While we may experience a powerful instantaneous witness of a gospel principle through the Spirit, only time yields the proving ground for our adherence to such witnessed principles. We may hear a talk on service to others and feel the burning witness that the principle is divine, but only through our sacrifice in service over time do we really learn that “when ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God” (Mosiah 2:17; see also Matthew 25:34–45). We may be deeply stirred by a call to share the gospel with others, but only through sharing it ourselves over time do we truly understand that “the worth of souls is great in the sight of God” and if we “bring, save it be one soul unto [Christ], how great shall be [our] joy with him in the kingdom of [the] Father” (D&C 18:10, 15). Our hearts may be touched by the soft wisdom seen in those who have endured great suffering and trials, but only through our own righteous endurance of such trials do we feel the indescribable kinship with our Lord, who counseled that “all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good” (D&C 122:7–9). The very nature of learning in this mortal sphere requires time, or, as the scriptures phrase it, “a state of probation” (2 Nephi 2:21).

### Accountability

*See 2 Nephi 2:26–29; 9:5–12, 15–18, 25–27, 38; Alma 12:14; 41:3–13; 42:25–27; D&C 101:78; 130:20–21; 137:7–10*

### SUMMARY

*The plan of salvation requires that every person be accountable for, and at some time experience, the consequences inextricably tied to their choices. However, we also realize that there are consequences that befall us incident to actions of others and from which we may not fully escape during mortality. In the “merciful plan of the great Creator” we will be freed from all such consequences as they are swallowed up in the Atonement of our Lord.*

What good would freedom to choose be if we did not receive the consequences of such choices? Our faith would wane and our desire to act would wither if accountability had little or nothing to do with our actions. We could not be sure if our righteous actions would become a blessing or curse, benefit or disadvantage. At its worst, the resulting insecurity would paralyze our faith and our will to choose. Perhaps this is precisely how Satan “sought to destroy the agency of man,” by simply disassociating agentive action from consequential accountability and thus, no matter what a person chose or

failed to choose, Lucifer would still “redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost” (Moses 4:1–3). In contrast, God knew that for true agency to be granted unto us, perfect accountability must also be preserved. The plan of salvation requires that no good thought, deed, or desire of the heart will go unrewarded and vice versa.

“God intends,” said Elder Christofferson, “that His children should act according to the moral agency He has given them, ‘that every man may be accountable for his own sins in the day of judgment.’ It is His plan and His will that we have the principal decision-making role in our own life’s drama. God will not live our lives for us nor control us as if we were His puppets. . . . In matters both temporal and spiritual, the opportunity to assume personal responsibility is a God-given gift without which we cannot realize our full potential as daughters and sons of God. Personal accountability becomes both a right and a duty that we must constantly defend.”<sup>24</sup>

In time, our spirits and bodies take on the nature of the eternal kingdom in which we choose to dwell. In the resurrection and final judgment, we receive a body consistent with the choices we make. Those who hearken to a celestial law are sanctified and receive a celestial body preparatory to entrance into that kingdom. This is also true for all other kingdoms (D&C 88:20–35). Hence our spirits and bodies become the evidence of our choices, and accountability is indelibly imprinted upon them.

“In a real though figurative sense, the *book of life* is the record of the acts of men as such record is written in their own bodies. It is the record engraven on the very bones, sinews, and flesh of the mortal body. That is, every thought, word, and deed has an affect on the human body; all these leave their marks, marks which can be read by Him who is Eternal as easily as the words in a book can be read.”<sup>25</sup> Further, our perfect accountability is also ensured by other records kept on earth and in heaven (see Revelation 20:12; D&C 128:4–7). Thus, in the end, we are judged both by our works and our intent: “For I, the Lord, will judge all men according to their works, according to the desire of their hearts” (D&C 137:9).

It is important to note, however, that at times there are consequences imposed upon us by the actions of others and by our own actions that are born of burdens not of our doing. Often, these are the source of life’s greatest sorrows and suffering. Whether from abuse or neglect, savagery or accident, evil design or simply the tragedies and inexplicable ironies incident to this mortal sphere, we are assured that all things not of our doing will be removed

from us in time (perhaps only after this life) through the mercies of Christ. Then, unburdened, we may learn things we could not grasp in mortality and choose the good that could not find its way to us through the mists of darkness that pervaded the mortal sphere we inherited through no fault of our own. Even the sufferings of our “pains, sicknesses, and infirmities” will be swallowed up in the Atonement of our beloved Savior such that they will no longer color our range of choices for eternity (see Alma 7:11–13). On this, Elder Christofferson has noted, “The Atonement also satisfies the debt justice owes to us by healing and compensating us for any suffering we innocently endure.”<sup>26</sup> President Packer further emphasized this comforting truth when he taught, “The mercy and grace of Jesus Christ are not limited to those who commit sins either of commission or omission, but they encompass the promise of everlasting peace to all who will accept and follow Him and His teachings. His mercy is the mighty healer, even to the wounded innocent.”<sup>27</sup> This truly may be the best of the “good news” in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

“Jesus thus not only satisfied the requirements of divine justice but also, particularly in His Gethsemane and Calvary ordeals, demonstrated and perfected His capacity to succor His people and his empathy for them. . . . The agonies of the Atonement were infinite and firsthand! Since not all human sorrow and pain is connected to sin, the full intensiveness of the Atonement involved bearing our pains, infirmities, and sicknesses, as well as our sins.”<sup>28</sup>

Our time of probation allows us to learn by our own experience the consequences of our choices. Those choices will be both bad and good as we develop the desires of our hearts and determine the direction we wish to travel in this mortal state. To our everlasting gratitude, sinful choices can be atoned for and healing can come through the Atonement of Jesus Christ. Alma summarized the absolute necessity of the Atonement in allowing perfect accountability despite the perils inherent in our time of mortal probation when he taught: “And now, the plan of mercy could not be brought about except an atonement should be made; therefore God himself atoneth for the sins of the world, to bring about the plan of mercy, to appease the demands of justice, that God might be a perfect, just God, and a merciful God also” (Alma 42:15).

Were it not for the Atonement, we could not be free. Yet with this freedom comes accountability. We cannot escape the consequences of our choices for better or for worse. We are free to choose how to act but the “merciful plan of the great Creator” has set the boundaries and outcomes of those decisions.

We are not free to choose the consequential dimension of our actions, but we are free to access the compensating grace of the Atonement (see 2 Nephi 2:26).

## Summary

The holy scriptures testify that without true agency being granted unto humankind, God's very work and glory could not be realized. Through the Book of Mormon, we learn that like Adam and Eve, all of God's children are—in time and eternity—placed in spheres to act for themselves through knowledge, opposition, enticement, probation, and accountability. Together, these elements ensure perfect freedom of choice and thus our eternal judgment and destiny are, in the end, absolutely controlled by the choices that grow out of the desires of our hearts (see D&C 137:9).

In God's perfect plan, we have been made free to act, not to be acted upon. This could not have been the case without the plan of salvation and the divine Atonement of Christ that is the very heart of that plan. With its *saving* grace, the Atonement unconditionally delivers us from the grasp of consequences that resulted from acts not of our own doing. And with its *enabling* grace, we can be delivered from our own sins and find strength beyond our own to choose that which will best benefit us and others.

Indeed, in our sphere of agency we have been made “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,” and we must “look to the great Mediator, and hearken unto his great commandments; and be faithful unto his words, and choose eternal life, according to the will of his Holy Spirit” (2 Nephi 2:27–28). **RE**

## Notes

1. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2011), 209.
2. D. Todd Christofferson, “Free Forever, to Act for Themselves,” *Ensign*, November 2014, 19; see also Job 48:7.
3. Merrill C. Oaks, “Respecting Agency,” *Marriage and Families* (School of Family Life, Brigham Young University), Fall 2006, 3.
4. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith*, 211–14.
5. David A. Bednar, “And Nothing Shall Offend Them,” *Ensign*, November 2006, 90. See also 2 Nephi 2:16; Alma 12:31; D&C 93:30–31; Moses 7:32.
6. David O. McKay, in Conference Report, April 1950, 32.

7. *Man May Know for Himself: Teachings of President David O. McKay*, comp. Clare Middlemiss (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1967), 80.

8. The style of this presentation includes a set of scriptural references after each element is introduced. From the information in these references, a summary statement in *italics* has been crafted. The author hopes that the reader will take time to study the references when each element is introduced to further set the stage for remarks made in each section.

9. See 2 Nephi 26:23–33.
10. Christofferson, “Free Forever, to Act for Themselves,” *Ensign*, November 2014, 17.
11. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith*, 268.
12. Boyd K. Packer, “Atonement, Agency, Accountability,” *Ensign*, May 1988, 70.
13. See *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 181.
14. “Know This, That Every Soul Is Free,” *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 240.
15. Boyd K. Packer, “For Time and All Eternity,” *Ensign*, November 1993, 21.
16. Robert D. Hales, “To Act for Ourselves: The Gift and Blessings of Agency,” *Ensign*, May 2006, 6.
17. Howard W. Hunter, “The Golden Thread of Choice,” *Ensign*, November 1989, 18.
18. Ezra Taft Benson, “The Great Commandment—Love the Lord,” *Ensign*, May 1988, 6.
19. Boyd K. Packer, *That All May Be Edified* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 336–37.
20. Ezra Taft Benson, “The Great Commandment—Love the Lord,” *Ensign*, May 1988, 6.
21. Author unknown.
22. Quoted by Wayne S. Peterson, “Our Actions Determine Our Character,” *Ensign*, November 2001, 84; see also Mosiah 4:30; and Alma 12:14.
23. Neal A. Maxwell, “According to the Desire of [Our] Hearts,” *Ensign*, November 1996, 21–22. “If you are not proactive in educating your desires, the world will do it for you. Every day the world seeks to influence your desires, enticing you to buy something, click on something, play something, read or watch something. Ultimately, the choice is yours. You have agency. It is the power to not only act on your desires but also to refine, purify, and elevate your desires. Agency is your power to become. . . . Always ask yourself, ‘Where will this choice lead?’ Develop the ability to see beyond the moment.” Randall L. Ridd, “The Choice Generation,” *Ensign*, May 2014, 56–57.
24. Christofferson, “Free Forever, to Act for Themselves” (inset scriptural quote is from D&C 101:78).
25. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 91.
26. D. Todd Christofferson, “Redemption,” *Ensign*, May 2013, 110.
27. Boyd K. Packer, “The Reason for Our Hope,” *Ensign*, November 2014, 7.
28. Neal A. Maxwell, *Not My Will, But Thine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 51.