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The Power to Repent

Author(s): Paul R. Cheesman

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Abstract: Writes concerning the doctrine of repentance. Helaman 13-15 (see especially Helaman 13:38) indicates that as individuals choose evil, their power to choose is taken away until destruction is made sure. As individuals choose righteousness, their power to choose increases. The concepts of freedom and free agency are directly related.

SPIRITUAL ASPECTS OF
THE BOOK OF MORMON
FIRST IN A SERIES



The Power to Repent

by Paul R. Cheesman

The abrupt entrance of Samuel the Lamanite into Nephite history is recorded in Helaman, chapters 13-15. At this time, about six years before the birth of the Savior, the Nephites were generally more wicked than the Lamanites. The circumstances surrounding Samuel's visit to the Nephites indicate that the Nephites had been members of the Church or known about the gospel, and many had now declined into a state of complete apostasy. Samuel preached repentance, prophesied of the coming of the Savior, and finally made this declaration to the Nephites:

But behold, your days of probation are past; ye have procrastinated the day of your salvation until it is everlastingly too late, and your destruction is made sure; yea, for ye have sought all the days of your lives for that which ye could not obtain; and ye have sought for happiness in doing iniquity, which thing is contrary to the nature of that righteousness which is in our great and Eternal Head. (Helaman 13:38.)

There are important lessons to be learned here. The first concerns the involved nature of our free agency. Free agency is the *ability* or *power* to choose. To illustrate: A man can now understand the laws necessary to take him to the moon and he has a choice of going or not going. But how many of us have the *power* to choose to go to the moon? It takes

For the general use of Course 9; for Course 15, lesson 13 (December 14), "Out of Gloom Into Light"; for Course 17, lesson 22 (February 8), "Getting Acquainted with the Book of Mormon"; for Course 19, lessons 20 and 21 (February 1 and 8), "Endurance" and "Repentance"; for Course 25, lesson 17 (January 11), "Rationalization"; for Course 27, lessons 16 and 19 (January 11 and February 8), "Spiritual Guidance" and "Deeds and Motives"; to support family home evening lesson 17; and of general interest.

a certain amount of training, education, age, and other qualifications to be an astronaut and therefore be put in a position to choose. I cannot, therefore, go to the moon; even though the understanding of the law is present. My *power* to choose is limited.

Losing Our Will to Repent

In reflecting on the scripture quoted above, I would like to submit that the power to choose increases in proportion to the number of God's laws a man is able to incorporate into his life, and that that power diminishes in relationship to his departure from God's laws.

TO BE FREE

*Freedom! he says,
I will not hear!
And so he walks
The broad road
Filled not with
Happy travelers
But with men
Shackled by powers
That bind the will.*

*Free?
When, step by step,
He chooses disaster,
And then, at last,
The will is gone.
O unwise,
Why in the guise of freedom
Does he choose the way
That leads to freedom lost?*

O men, hear your Creator,
Whose path is one that builds
and fills
Man with the greater
Power to choose—more free
To choose again.

—Millie Foster Cheesman.

Now notice again what Samuel stated: “. . . Your days of probation are past; ye have procrastinated the day of your salvation until it is everlastingly too late, and your destruction is made sure. . . .” (Helaman 13:38.) Samuel is not saying that God has made it impossible for anyone to repent; he is saying that these apostate Nephites have gone so far into iniquity and depravity that they have lost their *will* to repent; their *power* to choose and feel has decreased to such an extent that they have no *desire* to repent, and therefore they will not repent. Samuel therefore teaches that if we procrastinate our repentance and become further and further imbedded in the morass of sin there will come a time when we too reach the point of no return, and our “destruction is made sure.”

All eight-year-old children, as they become responsible for their actions, start choosing between two eternal forces: the enticings of the devil and the influence of the Lord. With the exception of Jesus Christ, no one has yet made it through mortality without yielding to the power of the adversary at some time. If, in this existential world of predicaments, a person can profit from his mistakes and continually strive to obey God's laws, then, according to the formula, his *power* to choose increases; whereas, if he chooses evil rather than good, his power to choose diminishes. The Lord has stated that his Spirit will not always strive with men. (See Genesis 6:3.) A man who continually, year after year, takes narcotics, thereby succumbing to the will of the devil, soon becomes a slave to this habit and eventually reaches a point of no return—losing his power to choose. In this condition, without the spirit and influence for good, a man may not even know what is right or wrong—or even care. He is bound from within to his course of action; for him there are no alternatives; there is no choice.

Increasing Our Power to Choose

On the other end of the spectrum, the person who continues to choose the good will increase his *power* to choose, and will, in time, be able to overcome all obstacles. Surely those of the prophets and apostles who fall into this category have more power to choose among the many alternatives of life and truly

become *free*. One other fact is also evident: Those who operate on this end of the spectrum with such great knowledge and power to choose are also those who alone possess the power to choose the greatest evil—that of a son of perdition. Only one blessed enough to have *known* and *partaken* of the power of Christ is eligible to cast himself into total damnation. (See Doctrine and Covenants 76:31, 32.)

A young person who has learned in his youth to obey God and has chosen the way of obedience has a source of *reserve power* that will provide him with the actual strength to make the right choice in times of great stress.

I know of several military men who have had tremendous temptation during wartime conditions. Some of them have confided to me how they became so frustrated that they wanted to sin and had even decided to sin, but that there was some *power* within them that would not *let* them commit that sin. They sometimes referred to this power as “. . . maybe my testimony.” Whatever the name, the *reserve power* to choose the right was there. Most of these young men had attended priesthood, sacrament, and auxiliary meetings, obeyed their parents, and tried to live a good life in their pre-military days; therefore this *reserve power* was stored, giving them the will they needed when an important moral decision had to be made.

Our Point of No Return

Another important and potent force exerts itself in this principle of power to choose. Remember Alma the younger? This wayward young man was visited by an angel because of the vicarious power of Alma the elder, his father. Suppose a boy in the service is about to choose evil? The gospel teaches that the *prayers* of a righteous parent, brother, sister, or loved one can transfer to him the *power* to choose the good.

As Samuel's words are digested, let us remember that we do not know what our own point of no return is—and the closer we get to it the less aware we will be. The possibility of losing the will to repent is a part of mortality, and procrastination of repentance is a powerful suggestion of the devil to lessen our power to choose.

The second lesson to be learned from Samuel's warning to the Nephites concerns the reason he gave as the *cause* of the terrible slavery in which the Nephites found themselves, and will be treated in the second article of this series.

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