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"CHOOSE ETERNAL LIFE"
AGENCY IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

Sherrie Mills Johnson

IT IS INTERESTING THAT THERE IS ONE GOSPEL concept that is taught or exemplified on almost every page of the Book of Mormon, and yet the word we use for that concept never appears in the book. The concept is agency, and Lehi beautifully explains the law and its ramifications in 2 Nephi 2. In verse 16 he says, "The Lord God gave unto man that he should act for himself," and in verses 28 and 29 he says that men should "choose eternal life, according to the will of his Holy Spirit; and not choose eternal death, according to the will of the flesh and the evil which is therein."

The dictionary defines an agent (someone who has agency) as one who has the power or authority to act. This power is the ability to make choices—any choice. However, Lehi is speaking of something more specific. He is explaining a certain type of agency—moral agency. Moral agency is the ability to make choices between good and evil and is the kind of agency spoken of throughout

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scripture. As President Boyd K. Packer explains, “The phrase ‘free agency’ does not appear in scripture. The only agency spoken of there is moral agency, ‘which,’ the Lord said, ‘I have given unto him, that every man may be accountable for his own sins in the day of judgment’” (D&C 101:78).¹

In any given day each of us uses his or her agency to make many choices. We choose what to wear, what to eat, where to go, and what to do with our time. However, when one of those decisions involves a commandment of the Lord or a prompting from the Spirit, the choice becomes a matter of moral agency. Thus, while a choice between milk and orange juice is a matter of agency, for Latter-day Saints a choice between coffee and milk is a matter of moral agency.

SPIRITUAL CONSEQUENCES

But what difference does it make whether we recognize that a choice is one of moral or nonmoral agency? It matters because whenever we use our moral agency there will be lasting, spiritual consequences—always. When we use our nonmoral agency, there are no spiritual consequences. There may be physical consequences, however. For example, if you are allergic to milk and drink it anyway, you will suffer physical consequences but no lasting, spiritual consequences.

Moses explains the law of moral agency to his people by saying, “Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse; a blessing, if ye obey the commandments of the Lord your God . . . and a curse, if ye will not obey the commandments of the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 11:26–28). In the Book of Mormon, Lehi explains, “Wherefore, the ends of the law which the Holy One hath given, unto the inflicting of the punishment which is affixed . . . is in opposition to that of the happiness which is affixed, to answer the ends of the atonement—for it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things” (2 Nephi 2:10–11). In our own day, the Lord has spoken through the Prophet Joseph Smith: “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” (D&C 130:20–21).

The laws are set. We have been told what we need to do to come back into the presence of God and have been given the gift of moral agency to do it. As Lehi tells his sons, “Men are free according to the flesh; and all things are given them which are expedient unto man. And they 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; for he seeketh that all men might be miserable like unto himself” (2 Nephi 2:27).

In addition to explaining that there are eternal consequences that come from the use of moral agency, King Benjamin tells his people that consequences are immediate. In his great sermon from the tower, he says the Lord “doth require that ye should do as he hath commanded you; for which if ye do, he doth immediately bless you” (Mosiah 2:24).

The problem is that when we read Benjamin’s words we usually think of blessings such as “men are, that they might have joy” (2 Nephi 2:25), to “prosper in the land” (2 Nephi 4:4), or to “run and not be weary” (D&C 89:20) and are confused. Wasn’t Job “perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil”? (Job 1:1). And yet he lost everything and suffered greatly. If we identify prosperity, joy, or health as the blessing for obedience, Job was not immediately blessed. In addition, throughout scripture we read of mighty prophets who suffered all manner of afflictions. We also have neighbors, friends, and family who live the commandments and do not receive health, prosperity, or joy. So what was King Benjamin talking about?

Many who have gained a testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ have struggled with this issue and come to realize that there is a process of trial and testing that often comes before the reception of the promised blessings. However, the promises are still fulfilled. Job eventually received the blessings, as will every righteous person, but they will be given the blessings according to the Lord’s timing. These blessings, therefore, are not the immediate blessing King Benjamin speaks of. So what is?

The answer is found in the lives of the prophets. They suffered. They endured hardships. They were sometimes weary and sometimes did not prosper materially, but what empowered them to endure these trials was their great faith—faith that was given to them because they used their moral agency to obey God.²

The immediate blessings of obedience are spiritual gifts, and paramount among these spiritual gifts is faith. Elder Bruce R. McConkie explains, “Faith is a gift of God bestowed as a reward for personal righteousness. It is always given when righteousness is present and the greater the measure of obedience to God’s laws the greater will be the endowment of faith.”³

In Alma 25:16 we are told that the people “did not suppose that salvation came by the law of Moses; but the law of Moses did serve to strengthen their faith in Christ.” It is the same for us. Salvation does not come to us through the law, but whenever we use our moral agency to obey the law, we are strengthened: we are blessed with increased faith and other spiritual gifts that will help us to return to our Father in Heaven. Elder Henry B. Eyring explains, “First comes obedience, and then come the confirming assurances, the revelation of truth, and the blessing of light.”⁴

A REASONING PROCESS ACCOMPANIES OUR USE OF AGENCY

Besides the wonderful explanation of moral agency Lehi gives us, the small plates of Nephi contain examples that illustrate the process involved in the use of that agency. Since any kind of agency is a mental power, when we use it we usually go through a reasoning process. However, when we are about to exercise our moral agency, the reasoning process will be value ridden and full of rationalization. Lehi explains that “man could not act for himself save it should be that he was enticed by the one or the other” (2 Nephi 2:16).

The distinction between the thought process when we use our nonmoral and our moral agency is important because if we recognize the thought processes we are using, we can know long before an action has been committed what the consequences will be.

Remember, choices of moral agency always have spiritual consequences. Choices of nonmoral agency do not. When our reasoning resonates with value judgments and rationalizations, we can know that we are about to make a choice that will either increase or deplete our faith and other spiritual gifts.

In the beginning of the Book of Mormon, Nephi recounts the reasoning processes he and his brothers use to make their decisions. In 1 Nephi 3, Lehi tells Nephi that the Lord has instructed him to send his sons to Jerusalem to get the brass plates from Laban. This is no simple task. Besides the long journey back, the boys know they will have a difficult time obtaining the plates. Lehi tells Nephi that he has already asked his older sons to return and says, "Behold thy brothers murmur, saying it is a hard thing which I have required of them" (1 Nephi 3:5).

Laman and Lemuel receive the commandment and rationalize on the basis of their own selfish desires. We can imagine the grumbling: "Going back will be difficult for us." "Getting the plates will cause us a lot of trouble and grief." "Why should we leave this place where we're camped and finally comfortable to travel back through that desert to Jerusalem?" To ease their consciences, they also rationalize that this is not a commandment from God, but is merely a request from their visionary father. They are not disobeying God, they tell themselves, only Lehi, so it's all right.

Nephi, on the other hand, listens to his father, recognizes this to be a command from God, and reasons God to be right. "I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded, for I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them" (1 Nephi 3:7). The conditions have not changed. The long journey, the unwanted confrontation with Laban, and all circumstances are the same for Nephi as they are for Laman and Lemuel. However, Nephi makes his decision based upon teachings of the gospel and promptings of the Spirit instead of selfish desires. His thoughts are something like this: "If the Lord wants me to do this, I can do it." "The Lord is always right." "Whatever the Lord wants is what I want."

Despite their objections, Laman and Lemuel are convinced or maybe coerced, and the brothers return to Jerusalem for the plates. But just as Laman and Lemuel predicted, it is hard. Doing what the Lord wants us to do often is. Twice they try to get the plates from Laban and both times are rejected. The second time Laban tries to kill them. Angry because of the hardships they have endured, Laman and Lemuel blame Nephi and Sam and beat their brothers with a rod. At this point, an angel intervenes to chastise Laman and Lemuel and to reassure them, saying, “Ye shall go up to Jerusalem again, and the Lord will deliver Laban into your hands” (1 Nephi 3:29).

They have now received another commandment directly from an angel: “Return to Jerusalem.” Thus, they are at a point where they are about to use their moral agency. This decision should be easy because they have been given a promise—by an angel—that they will succeed. So what do they reason? “How is it possible that the Lord will deliver Laban into our hands? Behold, he is a mighty man, and he can command fifty, yea, even he can slay fifty; then why not us?” (1 Nephi 3:31). This time, besides their own selfish desires, Laman and Lemuel base their thinking on the logic of men: “We don’t stand a chance! Laban has an army that can slay fifty men easily, and there are only four of us. What the angel said is impossible. We can’t possibly do that.”

In contrast, Nephi responds, “Let us go up again unto Jerusalem, and let us be faithful in keeping the commandments of the Lord; for behold he is mightier than all the earth, then why not mightier than Laban and his fifty, yea, or even than his tens of thousands? Therefore let us go up; let us be strong like unto Moses; for he truly spake unto the waters of the Red Sea and they divided hither and thither, and our fathers came through, out of captivity, on dry ground, and the armies of Pharaoh did follow and were drowned in the waters of the Red Sea” (1 Nephi 4:1–2).

After much discussion, Nephi convinces his brothers to return and wait outside the walls of Jerusalem while he finds Laban. This time Nephi tells us that he is “led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand the things which I should do” (1 Nephi 4:6). In contrast to his

brothers, he abandons the reasoning or logic of men and follows the Spirit, doing in each moment what the Spirit directs him to do.

It is at this point that we read one of the most detailed and interesting accounts of this reasoning process to be found in scripture.⁵ In 1 Nephi 4:10, Nephi receives the impression from the Spirit that he should slay Laban and explains that “I said in my heart: Never at any time have I shed the blood of man. And I shrunk and would that I might not slay him.” We can be grateful that most of us will never face a situation where the Spirit instructs something contrary to an existing written commandment. But we can also be grateful that it is included in scripture because of the lessons it teaches us about Nephi and about the process of using our moral agency. One of the most obvious lessons is that while Nephi reasons about the commandment he has received, he never reasons as to whether this is the Spirit speaking or not. Nephi knows which voice is speaking to him. The voice is the Lord’s. Previous to this experience, Nephi has learned to recognize and to know the voice of the Lord. This can only happen through mighty prayer, trial-and-error experience, and extensive reliance on the Spirit. Nephi’s concern is not whose voice is speaking to him but rather the contradiction between written commandment and instruction from the Spirit. Because he knows who is speaking, he listens as the Spirit explains that the Lord has delivered Laban into his hands because it is better that “one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief” (1 Nephi 4:13).

Nephi ponders what the Spirit has told him, and we are privileged to hear the reasoning process that leads to his decision. He does not think about how difficult this will be or worry that the soldiers Laban commands will catch him and kill him. There is never one selfish thought in Nephi’s reasoning. Instead he remembers the words the Lord spoke to him in the wilderness: “Inasmuch as thy seed shall keep my commandments, they shall prosper in the land of promise” (1 Nephi 4:14), and he realizes that they could not keep the commandments of the Lord without the brass plates to guide them. Knowing the command came from God and basing his decision

upon selfless thoughts concerning his family, Nephi reaches a decision: “Therefore I did obey the voice of the Spirit” (1 Nephi 4:18).

It is no accident that this reasoning process is taught in the first four chapters of the Book of Mormon. Learning to recognize who is speaking to us and understanding the thought processes we undergo as we attempt to obey are crucial to our spiritual development. When we use our moral agency, we will usually go through a similar process. The important thing to realize is that we can know exactly where a decision will take us by paying attention to the type of reasoning we are using. If we base a decision on our own selfish desires and the logic of men, our actions will usually be acts of disobedience and in consequence we will find it harder and harder to understand the ways of God (see 1 Nephi 15:7–10). This will lead to a condition the scriptures refer to as a hardened heart (see 1 Nephi 14:4) and eventually to living our lives in a state of misery, fear, captivity, and eternal death (see 2 Nephi 2:18, 27–29).

On the other hand, if our reasoning is based upon faith, the teachings of the gospel, and the promptings of the Spirit, we will choose obedience at the point of action, and in consequence we will be blessed with an increased understanding of the ways of God (see 1 Nephi 15:11). In this state the Lord can change our hearts (see 1 Nephi 2:16) and lead us to peace, increased faith, liberty, and eternal life (see 2 Nephi 2:27–29; see also D&C 59:23; Mosiah 2:24).

Learning to recognize the reasoning process helps us identify when we are about to use our moral agency, but what about impulsive behavior? There are moments when we make decisions that are instantaneous. Out of anger or jealousy or other such emotions we speak unkind words or hit the wall or throw dishes or perform other ill-tempered acts. In these cases we don’t consciously stop and reason out what we are going to do next, and yet these are often matters of moral agency because we have been commanded not to do them.

THE USE OF REASONING IN IMPULSIVE DECISIONS

Again, we learn from Nephi and his brothers that the reasoning process is part of impulsive behavior, but the timing of the

reasoning process is different. At some point each person either decides he or she will give in to impulsive behavior or fight against it. Nephi chooses to overcome it. Laman and Lemuel do not. After returning to Jerusalem to invite Ishmael and his family to accompany them to the promised land, Nephi's brothers again turn against him. In anger, they tie him with cords and determine to kill him. But Nephi prays, receives the power to break the cords, and calls his brothers to repentance (see 1 Nephi 7:16–17). This moment of release is a crucial moment. Nephi seems to be acting instinctively and could lash out in retaliation, as many people in a similar situation might do. However, Nephi does not do this.

Once free, his thoughts are not on retribution or vengeance. Instead his concern is for his brothers' eternal situation. Nephi's instinctive behavior is selfless. He teaches his brothers and begs them to repent and to turn to the Savior. Out of love, he urges and pleads for them to be obedient. He knows the path they are choosing is wrong and wants to help.

Later while crossing the waters, Laman and Lemuel again bind Nephi with cords and "treat [him] with much harshness" (1 Nephi 18:11). What does Nephi do? This time instead of the Lord breaking the cords, Nephi is made to suffer the abuse for four days until finally his brothers loose him. At this point, Nephi takes the compass and prays (see 1 Nephi 18:21). That compass would not work if there were anger or malice in Nephi's heart. But it works, which is a clear indication that his heart is full of positive feelings such as forgiveness and love. At all times Nephi uses his moral agency to obey God whether the command is to break out of the cords or to endure the suffering. Nephi chooses righteousness, which fortifies him and allows the Spirit to change the natural man in him so that even his instinctive behavior is good and righteous. Obviously, he has at some point reasoned something like "If God wants me to control my temper and to let the Spirit guide me, I can do it." We aren't told how long it took, and we all know that for some people it is harder than for others, but Nephi has to have made a conscious effort to overcome the natural man. In contrast to this, Laman and Lemuel's thought processes are different: "It's human nature to get angry and

to lash out with emotion. We can't change the way we are.” They refuse to do anything about it. The result is that despite the trials and tribulations, Nephi's actions are not reactions to his brothers; they are responses to the Spirit.

THE CHOICE IS OURS

Like Nephi, we can condition ourselves to use our moral agency righteously in matters of impulse by consistently choosing righteousness when we have time to reason out the decision. When we hear ourselves rationalizing such things as “This once won't matter” or “Everyone else does it,” we should remember Nephi. It does matter. We never know when situations that elicit instinctive actions will confront us. We never know when we are going to need to call upon our faith to sustain us through a trial or adversity. But we do know that faith and spiritual strength are cumulative. One decision at a time, we develop faith. Thus, when we need faith and spiritual strength, it is either there or it is not. In time of need, it is too late to accumulate it. This is why every decision involving our moral agency matters despite how small the adversary tries to tell us it is.

Knowing the importance of agency, we can do things to help us use it correctly. One thing we can do is create an environment where the Spirit can be present. The stronger the influence of good around us, the better chance we have of making correct decisions. Another thing we can do is to educate our conscience to make right choices. As Mormon explains, “The preaching of the word had a great tendency to lead the people to do that which was just—yea, it had had more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword, or anything else, which had happened unto them” (Alma 31:5). Likewise, the more we study, the more we feast upon the word of God, and the more we educate our own conscience, the more we are apt to use our moral agency correctly. Another thing we can do is to predetermine that in any given circumstance we will use our moral agency to obey God.

Each of these suggestions for helping us to use our moral agency correctly also involves the reasoning process noted earlier,

but in these cases the reasoning process takes place long before the events it concerns. If we don't make a concerted effort to use our moral agency correctly, to reason through and correct even our impulsive behavior, we will find our lives—like Laman and Lemuel's—overpowered by instinct, impulse, and negative behavior.

God, in His wisdom and love, has offered us every “tool” we need in order to accumulate spiritual strength. As Lehi says, “Men are instructed sufficiently that they know good from evil” (2 Nephi 2:5). We have been given knowledge of good and evil from scriptures that teach principles and from the examples of prophets and other people. We have general conferences where living prophets of God instruct us in the ways of the Lord. In addition, we have the light of Christ to guide us. Mormon tells us that this gift “is given to every man, that he may know good from evil” (Moroni 7:16), and in Moroni 7 he goes on to explain exactly how to know if something is good and therefore of God or if it is evil and therefore of Satan. All who follow the light of Christ will eventually (in this life or the next) be led to the gospel of Jesus Christ, where they can receive the gift of the Holy Ghost, which, if used properly, allows the Spirit to sanctify them so that the very desires for evil that haunt their mortal journey are burned from their being.

But the path we choose depends on the use of our agency. We, like Laman and Lemuel, can reason, “This isn't the Lord asking; it's just the bishop.” Or we, like Nephi, have the power to reason, “This is of the Lord. He will help me do it.” We, like Laman and Lemuel, can think about the difficulty of the task and how much stress it will cause us. Or we, like Nephi, can listen carefully to the Spirit and do what we are instructed one step at a time until we accomplish the task. We, like Laman and Lemuel, can grow fearful, doubtful, and miserable. Or we, like Nephi, can grow faithful, graceful, peaceful, and free to progress. This leads us to the final irony.

While Satan entices with promises of liberty (“The commandments are bondage!” “If you follow me, you'll be free to do whatever you want!”), his path leads to bondage—to a state that allows for no progress or even joy. In this state, one is not free to enter the temple of the Lord, let alone into the Lord's presence. On the other hand,

Jesus Christ says, “Take my yoke upon you” (Matthew 11:28) and in return promises liberty—a state which allows us the freedom to obtain eternal happiness and joy, the freedom to live with God eternally, and to be co-inheritors with Christ of all that is divine. This is why it is so important that we recognize when we are about to use our moral agency and more importantly how we are about to use it.

Just as a runner accomplishes a race one step at a time, we accomplish our mortal probation one choice at a time. Every moral choice is either for Jesus Christ or against Him. Every righteous choice adds to our faith and to our spiritual strength.

NOTES

1. Boyd K. Packer, “Our Moral Environment,” *Ensign*, May 1992, 66.

2. President Joseph F. Smith said, “The men and the women who are honest before God, who humbly plod along, doing their duty, paying their tithing, and exercising that pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father, which is to visit the fatherless and the widows in their afflictions and to keep oneself unspotted from the world, and who help look after the poor; and who honor the holy Priesthood, who do not run into excesses, who are prayerful in their families, and who acknowledge the Lord in their hearts, they will build up a foundation that the gates of hell cannot prevail against; and if the floods come and the storms beat upon their house, it shall not fall, for it will be built upon the rock of eternal truth” (*Gospel Doctrine*, 5th ed. [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1939], 7–8).

3. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 264; emphasis in original.

4. Henry B. Eyring, *BYU Speeches of the Year, 2000–2001* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2001), 81.

5. Of this account, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland says, “I believe that story was placed in the very opening verses of a 531-page book and then told in painfully specific detail in order to focus every reader of that record on the absolutely fundamental gospel issue of obedience and submission to the communicated will of the Lord. If Nephi cannot yield to this terribly painful command, if he cannot bring himself to obey, then it is entirely probable that he can never succeed or survive in the tasks that lie just ahead” (*BYU Speeches of the Year, 1988–1989* [Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1989], 79).