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Free Agency and Freedom

Elder Dallin H. Oaks

I appreciate this opportunity to participate in BYU's annual symposium on the Book of Mormon. This year you are focusing on the book of 2 Nephi. That book provides some of our most important doctrinal insights on the significance of free agency in the gospel plan. I have therefore chosen to speak about free agency and freedom.

The scriptural terms are *agency* and *free*. When we refer to agency, we usually combine the two words and say *free agency*. *But we sometimes use this term to refer to freedom as well as agency. And the scriptural term free* sometimes means free agency and sometimes means *freedom*.

In view of this confusion, I need to define the terms I will use. When I say *free agency* I refer to what the scripture calls *agency*, which means an exercise of the will, the power to choose. (In view of the current prominence of this term on the sports pages, I must add that this "free agency" does not refer to the contract status of professional athletes.) When I say *freedom*, I mean the power and privilege to carry out our choices. This includes everything from thoughts, such as hate, to actions, such as running.

In the first part of my talk I will speak of the doctrine of the Church. In the second part I will describe some applications of that doctrine.

I. Doctrine

Sister Oaks is my best critic. She tells me that when I speak about doctrine my talks are pretty dry, probably more understandable to read than to hear. Perhaps it would help listeners through this first part if I began with an outline of the nine points I will make from the scriptures.

1. Before the world was created, we existed in the presence of God.
2. Free agency is a gift of God.
3. We had free agency in the pre-existence.
4. There Satan presented a plan that would have taken away our free agency.
5. When God rejected Satan's plan, he and those who followed him rebelled and were cast out of heaven.
6. Pursuant to God's plan, Adam and Eve made the choice that caused the Fall, making mankind subject to mortality and sin in the world.
7. We are here to be tested, and this cannot occur without opposition in all things.
8. To provide that opposition, Satan is permitted to try to persuade us to use our free agency to choose evil.
9. If we choose evil and do not repent, we can ultimately become captives of Satan.

To appreciate the significance of the added gospel knowledge restored in this dispensation, notice how many of these essential gospel truths are revealed or clarified in the Book

of Mormon, especially 2 Nephi, and in the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price.

1. *Before the world was created, we existed in the presence of God* (see D&C 93:29). Abraham saw that God stood in the midst of these spirits and chose some of them to make his rulers (see Abr. 3:23). We do not know much about the pre-existence. The scriptures sometimes refer to pre-existent “intelligences” and sometimes to pre-existent “spirits” (see Moses 6:36; Abr. 3:18-23; 5:7; D&C 93:29-33). For present purposes it is unnecessary to distinguish between the two. The important thing is that in the pre-existence we had individual identity and we dwelt in the presence of God.

2. *Free agency, the power to choose, is a gift of God.* As we read in 2 Nephi: “Wherefore, the Lord God gave unto man that he should act for himself” (2:16). Further, “Therefore, cheer up your hearts, and remember that ye are free to act for yourselves—to choose the way of everlasting death or the way of eternal life” (10:23). And in modern revelation the Lord said, “Behold, I gave unto him that he should be an agent unto himself” (D&C 29:35).

The Prophet Joseph Smith described agency as “that free independence of mind which heaven has so graciously bestowed upon the human family as one of its choicest gifts” (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* 49; hereafter *TPJS*). The word *free* is also used to describe free agency in this hymn Latter-day Saints have been singing since our first hymn book in 1835:

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.

—*Hymns #240*

3. *We had free agency in the pre-existence.* This is evident from the fact that more than one plan was put forward in the Council of Heaven, and that a third of the Hosts of Heaven could choose to follow Satan and rebel against the Father (see Smith 1:64-65, 70).

4. *Satan's plan, presented in the pre-existence, would have taken away our free agency.* During what we call the council in heaven, the Father explained the conditions of the next step in the progression of his spirit children. They needed to receive a mortal body, and it was necessary for God to “prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them” (Abr. 3:25).

Satan came before God with this proposal: “Behold, here am I, send me, I will be thy son, and I will redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost, and surely I will do it; wherefore give me thine honor” (Moses 4:1). But the Beloved Son, our Savior, who was “Chosen from the beginning” (Moses 4:2), said to the Father: “Here am I, send me” (Abr. 3:27); and “Father, thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever” (Moses 4:2).

In the book of Moses God describes Satan's effort:

Wherefore, because that Satan rebelled against me, and sought to destroy the agency of man, which I, the Lord God, had given him, and also, that I should give unto him mine own power; by the power of mine Only Begotten, I caused that he should be cast down;

And he became Satan, yea, even the devil, the father of all lies, to deceive and to blind men, and to lead them captive at his will, even as many as would not hearken unto my voice (Moses 4:3-4).

Satan's method of assuring “that one soul shall not be lost” (Moses 4:1) would be to “destroy the agency of man” (Moses 4:3). Under his plan, Satan would have been our master, and he would have “lead [us] captive at his will” (Moses 4:4). Without the power of choice, we would have been mere robots or puppets in his hands.

5. *When God rejected Satan's plan, he and those who followed him rebelled and were cast out of heaven.* The contest the scriptures call the "war in heaven" (Rev. 12:7) concerned Satan's attempts to usurp the power of God and to destroy the free agency of God's children. One-third of the hosts of heaven exercised their agency to follow Satan. The Bible describes this in veiled references to Lucifer's attempt to exalt himself and to a war in which the dragon and his agents were cast out of heaven (see Isaiah 14:12-15; Rev. 12:7-9; Abr. 3:28). The event is described more clearly in modern revelation:

For [the devil] rebelled against me, saying, Give me thine honor, which is my power; and also a third part of the hosts of heaven turned he away from me because of their agency;

And they were thrust down, and thus became the devil and his angels (D&C 29:36-37; see also D&C 76:25-26).

In his great poem "Immanuel—A Christmas Idyll," Orson F. Whitney describes this event in the council of Gods when "The destiny of worlds unborn/ Hung trembling in the scale." One arose:

A stature mingling strength and grace,
Of meek though Godlike mien,
The lustre of whose countenance
Outshone the noon-day sheen.
The hair was white as purest foam,
Or frost of Alpine hill.
He spake—attention grew more grave—
The stillness e'en more still.

"Father!"—the voice like music fell,
Clear as the murmuring flow
Or mountain streamlet, trickling down
From heights of virgin snow—
"Father!" it said, "since One must die
Thy children to redeem,
Whilst Earth—as yet unformed and void—
With pulsing life shall teem;

"And thou, great Michael, foremost fall,
That mortal man may be,
And chosen Savior yet must send,
Lo, here am I, send me!
I ask—I seek no recompense,

Save that which then were mine;
Mine be the willing sacrifice,
The endless glory—Thine!”

He ceased and sat; when sudden rose
Aloft a towering Form,
Proudly erect, as Lowering peak
That looms above the storm.
A presence bright and beautiful,
With eye of lashing fire,
A lip whose haughty curl bespoke
A Sense of inward ire.

“Give me to go,” he boldly cried,
With scarce concealed disdain,
“And none shall hence, from heaven to earth,
That shall not rise again.
My saving plan exception scorns—
Man’s agency unknown.
As recompense, I claim the right
To sit on yonder Throne!”

Ceased Lucifer. The breathless hush
Resumed and denser grew.
All eyes were turned; the general gaze
One common magnet drew.
A moment there was solemn pause—
Then, like the thunder-burst,
Rolled forth from lips Omnipotent,
The words: “I’LL SEND THE FIRST!”

‘Twas done. From congregation vast,
Tumultuous murmurs rose;
Waves of conflicting sound, as when
Two meeting seas oppose.
‘Twas finished—but the heavens wept—
And still their annals tell
How God’s elect was chosen Christ,
O’er One who fighting fell.
(*Poetical Writings* 136-39).

6. Pursuant to God’s plan, Adam and Eve made the choice that caused the Fall, making mankind subject to mortality and sin in the world.

But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it [the Lord told Adam and Eve], nevertheless, thou mayest choose for thyself, for it is given unto thee; but, remember that I forbid it, for in the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die (Moses 3:17).

Adam and Eve were able to bring about the fall by choice because they had alternatives and they had free agency, whose essence is described in these words: “. . . thou mayest choose for thyself, for it is given unto thee” (Moses 3:17).

Thus we see that what we call “the Fall” and the “transgression of Adam” was a necessary step that resulted from our first parents’ exercise of their gift of free agency. As we read in Second Nephi, Lehi explained:

But behold, all things have been done in the wisdom of him who knoweth all things.

Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy (2 Nephi 2:24-25).

With the fall came mortality and an opportunity to be tested. The Lord told Adam that his children were given “to know good from evil; wherefore they are agents unto themselves” (Moses 6:56). Alma taught that with the fall man became

as Gods, knowing good from evil, placing themselves in a state to act, or being placed in a state to act according to their wills and pleasures, whether to do evil or to do good (Alma 12:31; see also 42:7).

Similarly, the prophet Samuel taught: “For behold, ye are free; ye are permitted to act for yourselves; for behold, God hath given unto you a knowledge and he hath made you free” (Hel. 14:30). Note that in this teaching the word “free” means free agency.

7. We are here to be tested, and this cannot occur without opposition in all things. On this subject, 2 Nephi enlarges our understanding. Father Lehi taught his son Jacob:

It must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. If not so, my first-born in the wilderness, righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness, neither holiness nor misery, neither good nor bad. Wherefore, all things must needs be a compound in one (2 Nephi 2:11).

In other words, if we did not have opposition, we could not exercise our free agency by making choices. “Wherefore,” Father Lehi explained, “the Lord God gave unto man that he should act for himself. Wherefore, man could not act for himself save it should be that he was enticed by the one or the other” (2 Nephi 2:16).

Without opposition in all things, we could not achieve righteousness. All things would be a “compound in one,” a mixture—no distinction between wickedness and holiness. In that state of innocence, mankind would be “having no joy, for they knew no misery; doing no good, for they knew no sin” (2 Nephi 2:23). As we read in modern revelation, “And it must needs be that the devil should tempt the children of men, or they could not be agents unto themselves; for if they never should have bitter they could not know the sweet” (D&C 29:39).

8. To provide the needed opposition, Satan is permitted to try to persuade us to use our free agency to choose evil. In 2 Nephi, Lehi declares that the Messiah will come “in the fulness of time, that he may redeem the children of men from the fall” (2:26). Then he gives us this important explanation:

And because that they are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon, save it be by the punishment of the law at the great and last day, according to the commandments which God hath given.

Wherefore, 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 2:26-27).

“Free . . . to act for themselves” and “free to choose” refer to free agency. “Free according to the flesh” refers to freedom, as I will illustrate later.

9. *If we choose evil and do not repent, we can ultimately become captives of Satan.* Lehi's assurance that we are free "to act for [ourselves] and not to be acted upon" has this exception: "save it be by the punishment of the law at the great and last day" if we have chosen "captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil" (2 Nephi 2:26-27). He then pleads with his sons not to

choose eternal death, according to the will of the flesh and the evil which is therein, which giveth the spirit of the devil power to captivate, to bring you down to hell, that he may reign over you in his own kingdom (2 Nephi 2:29).

Similarly, Amulek taught:

For behold, if ye have procrastinated the day of your repentance even until death, behold, ye have become subjected to the spirit of the devil, and he doth seal you his; therefore, the Spirit of the Lord hath withdrawn from you, and hath no place in you, and the devil hath all power over you; and this is the final state of the wicked (Alma 34:35).

In summary, free agency, the power to choose, is a gift of God, conferred on his children and exercised by them in the preexistence. It is an essential precondition of the further progression we seek in mortality. But free agency cannot be exercised unless there is opposition in all things. That opposition is provided by Satan, who once sought to destroy our free agency. His effort continues. He tries to persuade us to do evil and to make those choices that will finally give him the mastery he was denied in the pre-existence—to have all power over us, to lead us captive at his will.

II. Application

Now I will discuss some applications of these scriptural principles.

First, because *free agency* is a God-given precondition to the purpose of mortal life, no person or organization can take away our free agency in mortality.

Second, what can be taken away or reduced by the conditions of mortality is our *freedom*, the power to act upon our choices. Free agency is absolute, but in the circumstances of mortality freedom is always qualified.

Freedom may be qualified or taken away (1) by physical laws, including the physical limitations with which we are born, (2) by our own actions, and (3) by the actions of others, including governments.

Lehi taught his son Jacob that “men are free [have freedom] according to the flesh” (2 Nephi 2:27). For example, in the flesh we are subject to the physical law of gravity. If I should hang from the catwalk in the Marriott Center and release my grip, I would not be free to will myself into a soft landing. And I cannot choose to run through a brick wall.

A loss of freedom reduces the extent to which we can act upon our choices, but it does not deprive us of our God-given free agency. A woman who has spent much of her life confined to a wheelchair expressed that thought in verse. Annie Johnson Flint writes:

I cannot walk, but I can fly;
 No roof can house me from the stars.
 No dwelling pen me in its bounds,
 Nor keep me fast with locks and bars.

No narrow room my thoughts can cage,
 No fetters hold my roving mind;
 From these four walls that shut me in,
 My soaring soul a way can find. . . .

And when the long, long day is done,
 I clasp the dearest book of all,
 And through the dim, sweet silences,

I hear my Father's accents fall.
 Then, though in chains, yet I am free;
 Beyond the pressure of my care,
 Above earth's night, my spirit mounts
 On eagle wings of Faith and Prayer.

—“My Wants” by Annie Johnson Flint
 (unpublished copy in possession of writer)

Other limitations on freedom are self-imposed, such as the immobility we seek when we buckle our seat belt or the commitment we make when we sign a contract. In these examples we limit one freedom in order to achieve a larger and more important one.

Many losses of freedom are imposed upon us by others. The science of government is a consideration of the procedures and extent to which the official representatives of one group of citizens can impose restrictions on the freedom of another group. Decisions on the extent to which government power should restrict the freedom of individuals are among the most difficult ones we face in an organized society. How much should zoning laws restrict a person's right to use his own property? How many taxes should we extract, and what compulsory functions should government perform with them? How much harm can society allow a person to do to himself, such as by self-mutilation or drug abuse? These are all questions of freedom.

We have to accept some government limitations on freedom if we who live in communities are to have life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. A condition of uninhibited individual freedom would allow the strong to oppress the weak. It would allow the eccentric desires of one person to restrict the freedom of many.

Interferences with our freedom do not deprive us of our free agency. When Pharaoh put Joseph in prison, he restricted Joseph's freedom, but he did not take away his free agency. When Jesus drove the money changers out of the temple, he interfered with their freedom to engage in a particular activity at a particular time in a particular place, but he did not take away their free agency.

During my nine years at BYU, I read many letters to the editor in *The Daily Universe* that protested various rules as infringements of free agency. I am glad I don't see those funny arguments any more, probably because I no longer have to read the letters to the editor in *The Daily Universe*.

The Lord has told us in modern revelation that he established the Constitution of the United States to assure “that every man may act . . . according to the moral agency which I have given unto him” (D&C 101:78). In other words, God established our Constitution to give us the vital political freedom necessary for us to act upon our personal choices in civil government. This revelation shows the distinction between *agency* (the power of choice), which is God-given, and *freedom*, the right to act upon our choices, which is protected by the Constitution and laws of the land.

Freedom is obviously of great importance, but as these examples illustrate, freedom is always qualified in mortality. Consequently, when we oppose a loss of freedom, it would be better if we did not conduct our debate in terms of a loss of our free agency, which is impossible under our doctrine. We ought to focus on the legality or wisdom of the proposed restriction of our freedom.

Third, we receive assurance from our doctrine that Satan, who sought to take away our free agency in the pre-existence, is not permitted to take it from us in this life. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that the devil cannot compel men to do evil; he has “power over us only as we permit him” (*TPJS* 181; see also 187, 189). Elder James E. Faust elaborated on this in a recent conference, when he said, “Certainly he can tempt and he can deceive, but he has no authority over us which we do not give him” (Faust 35).

Fourth, as suggested by these teachings, Satan is still trying to take away our free agency by persuading us to voluntarily surrender our will to his.

This subject has a morbid fascination for mankind. The long-lived German legend of Faust concerns a man who sold his soul to the devil in exchange for knowledge and power. This is also the theme of Stephen Vincent Benet’s “The Devil and Daniel Webster.” A variety of modern practices tend toward this surrender, and they carry eternal dangers. As Elder Faust warned

us at conference, “The mischief of devil worship, sorcery, casting spells, witchcraft, voodooism, black magic, and all other forms of demonism should be avoided like the plague” (Faust 33).

Fifth, we should also avoid any practices in which one person attempts to surrender even part of his will to another person or another person attempts to take it. Whether the means are chemical, behavioral, electronic, or others not yet dreamed of, such attempts run counter to the heavenly plan and further the Adversary’s. Free agency, the power to choose and direct our thoughts and our actions, is a gift of God, and we should resist any means that would compromise it.

Sixth, we should avoid any behavior that is addictive. Whatever is addictive compromises our will. Subjecting our will to the overbearing impulses imposed by any form of addiction serves Satan’s purposes and subverts our Heavenly Father’s. This applies to addictions to drugs (such as narcotics, alcohol, nicotine, or caffeine), addiction to practices such as gambling, and any other addictive behavior. We can avoid addictions by keeping the commandments of God.

Seventh, we should be aware that some people are more susceptible to some addictions than others are. Perhaps such susceptibility is inborn, like the unnamed ailment the Apostle Paul called “a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure” (2 Cor. 12:7). One person has a taste for nicotine and is easily addicted to smoking. Another person cannot take an occasional drink without being propelled into alcoholism. Another person samples gambling and soon becomes a compulsive gambler.

Perhaps these persons, as the saying goes, were “born that way.” But what does that mean? Does it mean that persons with susceptibilities or strong tendencies have no choice, no free agency in these matters? Our doctrine teaches us otherwise. Regardless of a person’s susceptibility or tendency, his will is unfettered. His free agency is unqualified. It is his freedom that

is impaired. Other persons are more free; because when they unwisely sample the temptations, they seem immune to the addiction. But regardless of the extent of our freedom, we are all responsible for the exercise of our free agency.

As Lehi taught, in mortality we are only free “according to the flesh” (2 Nephi 2:27). Most of us are born with thorns in the flesh, some more visible, some more serious than others. We all seem to have susceptibilities to one disorder or another, but whatever our susceptibilities, we have the will and the power to control our thoughts and our actions. This must be so. God has said that he holds us accountable for what we do and what we think, so our thoughts and actions must be controllable by our agency. Once we have reached the age or condition of accountability, the claim “I was born that way” does not excuse actions or thoughts that fail to conform to the commandments of God. We need to learn how to live so that a weakness that is mortal will not prevent us from achieving the goal that is eternal.

God has promised that he will consecrate our afflictions for our gain (see 2 Nephi 2:2). The efforts we expend in overcoming any inherited weakness build a spiritual strength that will serve us throughout eternity. Thus, when Paul prayed thrice that his “thorn in the flesh” would depart from him, the Lord replied, “My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.” Obedient, Paul concluded:

Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

Whatever our susceptibilities or tendencies, they cannot subject us to eternal consequences unless we exercise our free agency to do or think the things forbidden by the commandments of God. For example, a susceptibility to alcoholism impairs its victim’s freedom to partake without addiction, but his free agency allows him to abstain and thus escape the physical

debilitation of alcohol and the spiritual deterioration of addiction.

Eighth, beware the argument that because a person has strong drives toward a particular act, he has no power of choice and therefore no responsibility for his actions. This contention runs counter to the most fundamental premises of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Satan would like us to believe that we are not responsible in this life. That is the result he tried to achieve by his contest in the pre-existence. A person who insists that he is not responsible for the exercise of his free agency because he was “born that way” is trying to ignore the outcome of the War in Heaven. We *are* responsible, and if we argue otherwise, our efforts become part of the propaganda effort of the Adversary.

Individual responsibility is a law of life. It applies in the law of man and the law of God. Society holds people responsible to control their impulses so we can live in a civilized society. God holds his children responsible to control their impulses in order that they can keep his commandments and realize their eternal destiny. The law does not excuse the short-tempered man who surrenders to his impulse to pull a trigger on his tormentor, or the greedy man who surrenders to his impulse to steal, or the pedophile who surrenders to his impulse to satisfy his sexual urges with children.

I suppose it is inevitable that those who have surrendered to impulse would try to use the defense of “irresistible impulse.” But in the courts on high, this defense will be transparent to the Great Judge, who sees our actions and “knows all the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Alma 18:32).

There is much we do not know about the extent of freedom we have in view of the various thorns in the flesh that afflict us in mortality. But this much we do know; we *all* have our free agency and God holds us accountable for the way we use it in thought and deed. That is fundamental.

God has commanded us in modern revelation not to become entangled in sin (see D&C 88:86). He has said: “Go ye out from among the wicked. Save yourselves. Be ye clean that bear the vessels of the Lord” (D&C 38:42). This principle of individual responsibility and these commands to go out from among the wicked and to be clean apply to a multitude of circumstances. In terms of free agency and freedom, I urge you to apply these commands in this way: If you have a weakness or a susceptibility to some particular transgression, especially one that can be addictive, use your free agency and your freedom to steer a course far from the circumstances of that particular transgression.

May God bless us to live our lives so as to avoid entangling ourselves in sin and compromising our precious and unique gift of free agency. May we accept responsibility for our thoughts and our actions. May we use our free agency to make righteous choices and to act upon them as we have the freedom to do so.

For my conclusion I come back to the words of Nephi in 2 Nephi 33, the concluding chapter:

I, Nephi, have written what I have written, and I esteem it as of great worth, and especially unto my people . . . (v. 3).

And it speaketh harshly against sin, according to the plainness of the truth . . . (v. 5).

And if ye shall believe in Christ ye will believe in these words, for they are the words of Christ, and he hath given them unto me; and they teach all men that they should do good (v. 10).

And I pray the Father in the name of Christ that many of us, if not all, may be saved in his kingdom at that great and last day (v. 12).

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