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“Free to Choose”?

(2 Nephi 2:27)

NEAL A. MAXWELL

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NEAL A. MAXWELL

Thank you so much, President Samuelson. You’re blessed to have this wonderful man as your president. But I miss him at Church headquarters—greatly and personally! It’s always easy to praise Sharon because she represents, as does my wife—as do so many others—the faithful women of this dispensation, without whom this work simply could not be done. They are the kind of souls who are high yield and low maintenance.

I appreciate the special rendering of Merrill Bradshaw’s composition, having had the privilege of spending a little time with him just a couple of hours before he died. I appreciate, likewise, Steve Cleveland’s prayer. This is a man who cares about what happens on the basketball court, but first he’s a disciple. For that I love him the more.

Unsurprisingly, I have become more keenly conscious of the passage of time. Several evenings ago a 13-year-old granddaughter was on her way, all made up, to be in a school play, and I found myself saying, “Kansas, this isn’t Dorothy anymore!” I am unresentful of the passage of time and am still well within the sound range of the kettle drums representing the cacophony of mortality. Yet I sometimes seem to hear, ever so faintly, the distant sounds of beckoning trumpets as these waft in upon me.

I plead for the Spirit to help me. But you must help, too, because of the format of this presentation, which will feature a conversational style and which assumes you will be active, though inward, responders. I hope the Spirit will arc between us so that there is a rapid and shared understanding (see D&C 50:10). In any case, I hope you feel my love and openness and forgive in advance my falling short.

The vital revelations about the agency of man—the freedom to choose—inevitably and simultaneously portray the perfect generosity and perfect justice of God. In the key words that soon follow, we see how deeply serious God is about human joy. The Prophet Joseph Smith declared, “If men do not comprehend the character of God, they do not comprehend themselves” (*Teachings*, 343). In no respect, brothers and sisters, is this more true than with regard to comprehending God’s mercy and justice and His commitment to our freedom to choose.

The doctrine of our freedom to choose is set forth sparsely and is not fully presented

Neal A. Maxwell was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given on 16 March 2004.

in the precious Holy Bible. But we have key phrases that have been given to us in the Restoration scriptures:

1. “I [have given] unto man his *agency*” (Moses 7:32; emphasis added; see also D&C 101:78; Moses 4:3; JST, Genesis 3:4).

2. “Thou mayest *choose for thyself*” (Moses 3:17; emphasis added).

The gift sounds reassuring and really good, doesn’t it? I am free to choose—just as things ought to be! Certainly you and I can handle it—almost effortlessly!

3. “That ye may live and move and do *according to your own will*” (Mosiah 2:21; emphasis added).

The granting of agency is so complete and personal, isn’t it? So breathtaking! Thus there is initial exhilaration. But a disquieting and accompanying realization also emerges:

Satan “sought to destroy the agency of man,” bringing on the war so vigorously fought in the premortal world (Moses 4:3; see also Revelation 12:7).

But never mind, you and I are still free, though admittedly we’re on a path requiring daily decisions as we

4. “act *according to [our] wills* and pleasures, *whether to do evil or to do good*” (Alma 12:31; emphasis added).

Do my viscera feel a catch coming? Otherwise, why does the divine candor seem so stern? Including in these next words:

5. “Whosoever doeth iniquity, *doeth it unto himself*; for behold, ye are free” (Helaman 14:30; emphasis added).

Evaporated by now is the earlier “no-hands” naïveté about how “I am free to choose.” Still, I am free to choose, even if I can *neither be immune from the consequences* of my wrong choices nor avoid accountability (see Romans 14:12; D&C 101:78).

At this point you and I may feel a little nudging. Yes, our freedom to choose is truly a shining and shimmering gift, but it is also

one that can cause some shivering at times. Is this why we are sometimes almost afraid to decide certain things? Are we afraid we might make a mistake? But “no decision” is a decision! Hence this soul sigh: Choosing is no picnic after all.

But we are not alone!

The chilly wind one sometimes feels is more than offset by the warming reality that each of us has within us: the guiding *light of Christ*. We can actually distinguish between good and evil (see 2 Nephi 2:5; Moroni 7:16, 19). We can repent! Further, *the gifts of the Holy Ghost* can guide us and reassure us. And those gifts include peace and joy and love—of which there is such a terrible shortage in the world! Such is the precious and pervading sunshine of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:22; James 1:17; Moroni 10:8, 17).

Mercifully we are therefore not left alone! Nevertheless, we are at risk!

Back now to the more crisp and revealed words about choosing!

6. “[You will receive] according to *[your] desire*” (Alma 29:4; emphasis added).

7. “[And you will receive] according to *[your] wills*” (Alma 29:4; emphasis added).

I’m not sure we grasp how the final judgment will reflect our choices! But my desires and choices really will be honored! How manifestly just of God! How trembling for me! There is the anxiety protruding once again. Are my desires sufficiently educated to choose wisely (see Alma 13:3, 10)? Could the further education of my desires be the most important form of continuing education?

So it is that the chilly dawn of realization is further felt: Real choosing bristles with alternatives, enticements, defining moments, accountability, counterfeits, and consequences!

8. Why then do some actually choose to remain “*willingly . . . ignorant*,” such as of impending Messianic events (2 Peter 3:5; emphasis added)? Yes, some seem to say,

“My mind is made up, so don’t confuse me with cosmic facts. Instead, let me compartmentalize my life and my choices.”

One cannot stay, however, on that naïve plane of understanding very long when he or she reads these next sobering words. They are so ripe with implications. They inform us that some rebels are simply

9. “*not willing* to enjoy that which they might have received” (D&C 88:32; emphasis added).

That cold wind is really blowing at the edges of my mind now. Foregoing enjoyment? But why? Knowingly turning down something vastly better? Why?

So this is a real war—with real casualties—in which there can be no real pacifists. No wonder, brothers and sisters, there’s been such a long shelf life of the wry quip we’ve all heard about “free agency and how to enforce it.” In effect, some seem almost to ask, “Is this gift returnable?”

10. “For, behold, *the devil . . . rebelled against me . . . ; and also a third part of the hosts of heaven turned he away from me because of their agency*” (D&C 29:36; emphasis added).

Lucifer was very angry then, and he is very angry still—choosing to strive to make “all men [to] be miserable like unto himself” (2 Nephi 2:27).

Wait a minute!

One-third deliberately chose *not* to undergo the mortal experience by choosing not to go on choosing? It seems so. It all began such a very long time ago, since

11. “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; emphasis added).

Thus his very temptations become vexing verifications that we’re free to choose.

12. “Wherefore, 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; emphasis added).

Hmmm! So it’s worse still. The choices are not to be made among passive alternatives but among vibrant, alluring choices! Why can’t we just glide through life and cherry-pick what we want? Why must there be “an opposition in all things” (2 Nephi 2:11)? It seems so relentless at times!

13. “That *every man may act in doctrine . . . according to the moral agency which I have given unto him, that every man may be accountable for his own sins in the day of judgment*” (D&C 101:78; emphasis added).

Well, by now any earlier and superficial exhilaration has fully departed. And we see instead unsmiling accountability standing astride every path, every choice.

Time now to let go of this format with my informal and conversational insertions and to review!

Again, what are the ground rules?

Well, the revealed record shows that Lucifer clearly chose to seek his personal preeminence, chose to be angry when he was rejected, chose to lead others astray, and chose misery, not joy. His followers in turn chose to rebel, chose to respond to his false allures, and turned their collective backs on the second estate!

But there’s this ground rule: The Prophet Joseph assured us, “The devil *could not* compel mankind to do evil; all was voluntary. . . . God *would not* exert any compulsory means, and the devil could not” (*Teachings*, 187; emphasis added). Such is our situation.

Professor C. Terry Warner has written that individuals

cannot avoid being both free and responsible for their choices. Individuals capable of acting for themselves cannot remain on neutral ground, abstaining from both receiving and rejecting light from God. [In Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., Encyclopedia of Mormonism, 5 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), s.v. “agency,” 1:26; see also 2 Nephi 2:27–29; 10:23]

If we even just glance at spiritual history, no wonder there is this touching lamentation from long-suffering Jesus, or Jehovah. When speaking of ancient Israel, He said, “How oft would I have gathered you as a hen gathereth her chickens, and ye would not” (3 Nephi 10:5). “How oft”? The “how-oft question” is one of the most haunting in all of eternity (see also Luke 13:34).

It is matched by what the Lord of the vineyard can justifiably say at the end of the salvational day. Reading these words often makes me weep. As He surveyed all that He had tried to do—leaving us free—and all the yield that might have been, and having given us our freedom to choose, He, the Lord of the vineyard, tenderly asked: “What could I have done more?” (Jacob 5:47).

Oh, the special character of God! Oh, His perfect love and patience! Captured eloquently, I think, by President J. Reuben Clark, Jr., who said:

I believe that in his justice and mercy [God] will give us the maximum reward for our acts, give us all that he can give, and in the reverse, I believe that he will impose upon us the minimum penalty which it is possible for him to impose. [CR, October 1953, 84]

So here we are: comprehending the character of God and comprehending that there could be no joy without agency.

I wonder what it means—and perhaps you do, too—when I read the related verse about how Lucifer does not understand about “the mind of God” (Moses 4:6). The details have not been revealed to us. But could it possibly involve Lucifer’s catastrophic failure to comprehend the inviolate interplay of agency and joy?

Once more, therefore, the act of choosing is more than nodding assent or passive shoulder shrugging. It reflects real choices made over time that form definite patterns. Even our

prayers are much affected by our choices. If we have made good choices, we are much less likely to ask “amiss” (2 Nephi 4:35) in our prayers but instead can ask according to that “which is right” (3 Nephi 18:20). And then the promise is there for us to begin to claim more and more. The choices and prayers can be such that we *can* ask, and what we ask for can be “done even as [we] asketh” (D&C 46:30).

Again, there can be no agency avoidance. *No decision is a decision.* Delay is a delusion, and that delay always discards the holy present. It simply throws it away.

Again, choosing to be obedient is a choice. Jesus chose to let His will be “swallowed up in the will of the Father” (Mosiah 15:7). It was a deliberate choice—a choice, of course, that blessed all mortals mightily and everlastingly. Being obedient is a way *of* life, but it is also the way *to* eternal life.

With you I have reflected over that spiritually intriguing phrase “compound in one” and about our freedom to choose. It tells us that without being able to choose among alternatives, life would be no life at all. Things would “remain as dead” with no “sense nor insensibility” (2 Nephi 2:11). And we are told God’s creation would have served “no purpose” (2 Nephi 2:12). Very strong language! Thus for a few moments today we have been discussing a very strong doctrine indeed!

Do I mean of God’s creation there would be no beautiful Grand Canyon to behold? Who would have the sensibility to appreciate it? No mother’s glow over her baby’s first smile? Who would have the capacity for such joy? Do I mean there would never be individuals of holiness to admire? Who could have been free to choose holiness or to admire it? Oh, the annihilating “compound in one”!

I marvel, as many of you know, at the extent of the cosmos—this encompassing vastness and personalness. It is incredible to even contemplate. But it is not as grand as God’s gift to us of the freedom to choose.

There are literally now, science says, more stars in the universe than there are grains of sand in every beach, every desert, and every ocean floor on this planet (see Allison M. Heinrichs, “The Stellar Census: 70 Sextillion,” *Los Angeles Times*, 26 July 2003, A19; see also Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* [New York: Random House, 1980], 196). Scriptural words are not just elegant, extravagant language. Besides, souls matter more than stars. And He wants us to have joy. We cannot do that unless we are free to choose. But neither can we have that joy unless we are willing to be spiritually submissive day in, day out, and unless we exercise that grand and glorious freedom to choose in which people truly matter more than stars.

I testify to you that though the grandness of this doctrine is beyond our comprehension,

it is not beyond our attention and exploration. We are, in fact, in the position of having been given revelations that were then far beyond the Prophet Joseph Smith, bright as he was. Yet he was their enunciator and their declarer. We worship a God whose character is so stunning and who wants us to come home. But He will not force us. *He will not force us.*

God bless you, my young friends, in your daily choices, in the inflections of your decisions, and in the thoughts that traverse your minds. May there be for all of us, including myself, an alignment with Him that brings us home. Home where, as He says, He will give us “all that he hath” (Luke 12:44). There isn’t any more—of which I testify in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.