

Free Forever, to Act for Themselves

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It is God’s will that we be free men and women enabled to rise to our full potential both temporally and spiritually.

William Shakespeare’s play *The Life of King Henry V* includes a nighttime scene in the camp of English soldiers at Agincourt just before their battle with the French army. In the dim light and partially disguised, King Henry wanders unrecognized among his soldiers. He talks with them, trying to gauge the morale of his badly outnumbered troops, and because they do not realize who he is, they are candid in their comments. In one exchange they philosophize about who bears responsibility for what happens to men in battle—the king or each individual soldier.

At one point King Henry declares, “Methinks I could not die any where so contented as in the king’s company; his cause being just.”

Michael Williams retorts, “That’s more than we know.”

His companion agrees, “Ay, or more than we should seek after; for we know enough, if we know we are the king’s subjects: if his cause be wrong, our obedience to the king wipes the crime of it out of us.”

Williams adds, “If the cause be not good, the king himself hath a heavy reckoning to make.”

Not surprisingly, King Henry disagrees. “Every subject’s duty is the king’s; but every subject’s soul is his own.”¹

Shakespeare does not attempt to resolve this debate in the play, and in one form or another it is a debate that continues down to our own time—who bears responsibility for what happens in our lives?

When things turn bad, there is a tendency to blame others or even God. Sometimes a sense of entitlement arises, and individuals or groups try to shift responsibility for their welfare to other people or to governments. In spiritual matters some suppose that men and women need not strive for personal righteousness—because God loves and saves us “just as we are.”

But God intends 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.”² 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, as Lucifer once proposed to do. Nor will His prophets accept the role of “puppet master” in God’s place. Brigham Young stated: “I do not wish any Latter Day Saint in this world, nor in heaven, to be satisfied with anything I do, unless the Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ,—the spirit of revelation, makes them satisfied. I wish them to know for themselves and understand for themselves.”³

So God does not save us “just as we are,” first, because “just as we are” we are unclean, and “no unclean thing can dwell ... in his presence; for, in the language of Adam, Man of Holiness is his name, and the name of his Only Begotten is the Son of Man [of Holiness].”⁴ And second, 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.

We should (and we do) rejoice in the God-ordained plan that permits us to make choices to act for ourselves and experience the consequences, or as the scriptures express it, to “taste the bitter, that [we] may know to prize the good.”⁵ We are forever grateful that the Savior’s Atonement overcame original sin so that we can be born into this world yet not be punished for Adam’s transgression.⁶ Having been thus redeemed from the Fall, we begin life innocent before God and “become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for [ourselves] and not to be acted upon.”⁷ We can choose to become the kind of person that we will, and with God’s help, that can be even as He is.⁸

The gospel of Jesus Christ opens the path to what we may become. Through the Atonement of Jesus Christ and His grace, our failures to live the celestial law perfectly and consistently in mortality can be erased and we are enabled to develop a Christlike character. Justice demands, however, that none of this happen without our willing agreement and participation. It has ever been so. Our very presence on earth as physical beings is the consequence of a choice each of us made to participate in our Father’s plan.⁹ Thus, salvation is certainly not the result of divine whim, but neither does it happen by divine will alone.¹⁰

Justice is an essential attribute of God. We can have faith in God because He is perfectly trustworthy. The scriptures teach us that “God doth not walk in crooked paths, neither doth he turn to the right hand nor to the left, neither doth he vary from that which he hath said, therefore his paths are straight, and his course is one eternal round”¹¹ and that “God is no respecter of persons.”¹² We rely on the divine quality of justice for faith, confidence, and hope.

But as a consequence of being perfectly just, there are some things God cannot do. He cannot be arbitrary in saving some and banishing others. He “cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance.”¹³ He cannot allow mercy to rob justice.¹⁴

It is compelling evidence of His justice that God has forged the companion principle of mercy. It is because He is just that He devised the means for mercy to play its indispensable role in our eternal destiny. So now, “justice exerciseth all his demands, and also mercy claimeth all which is her own.”¹⁵

We know that it is “the sufferings and death of him who did no sin, in whom [the Father] wast well pleased; ... the blood of [His] Son which was shed”¹⁶ that satisfies the demands of justice, extends mercy, and redeems us.¹⁷ Even so, “*according to justice*, the plan of redemption could not be brought about, *only on conditions of repentance*.”¹⁸ It is the requirement of and the opportunity for repentance that permits mercy to perform its labor without trampling justice.

Christ died not to save indiscriminately but to offer repentance. We rely “wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save”¹⁹ in the process of repentance, but acting to repent is a self-willed change. So by making repentance a condition for receiving the gift of grace, God enables us to retain responsibility for ourselves. Repentance respects and sustains our moral agency: “And thus mercy can satisfy the demands of justice, and encircles them in the arms of safety, while he that exercises no faith unto repentance is exposed to the whole law of the demands of justice; therefore only unto him that has faith unto repentance is brought about the great and eternal plan of redemption.”²⁰

Misunderstanding God's justice and mercy is one thing; denying God's existence or supremacy is another, but either will result in our achieving less—sometimes far less—than our full, divine potential. A God who makes no demands is the functional equivalent of a God who does not exist. A world without God, the living God who establishes moral laws to govern and perfect His children, is also a world without ultimate truth or justice. It is a world where moral relativism reigns supreme.

Relativism means each person is his or her own highest authority. Of course, it is not just those who deny God that subscribe to this philosophy. Some who believe in God still believe that they themselves, individually, decide what is right and wrong. One young adult expressed it this way: "I don't think I could say that Hinduism is wrong or Catholicism is wrong or being Episcopalian is wrong—I think it just depends on what you believe. ... I don't think that there's a right and wrong."²¹ Another, asked about the basis for his religious beliefs, replied, "Myself—it really comes down to that. I mean, how could there be authority to what you believe?"²²

To those who believe anything or everything could be true, the declaration of objective, fixed, and universal truth feels like coercion—"I shouldn't be forced to believe something is true that I don't like." But that does not change reality. Resenting the law of gravity won't keep a person from falling if he steps off a cliff. The same is true for eternal law and justice. Freedom comes not from resisting it but from applying it. That is fundamental to God's own power. If it were not for the reality of fixed and immutable truths, the gift of agency would be meaningless since we would never be able to foresee and intend the consequences of our actions. As Lehi expressed it: "If ye shall say there is no law, ye shall also say there is no sin. If ye shall say there is no sin, ye shall also say there is no righteousness. And if there be no righteousness there be no happiness. And if there be no righteousness nor happiness there be no punishment nor misery. And if these things are not there is no God. And if there is no God we are not, neither the earth; for there could have been no creation of things, neither to act nor to be acted upon; wherefore, all things must have vanished away."²³

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; it has been under assault since before the Creation. We must defend accountability against persons and programs that would (sometimes with the best of intentions) make us dependent. And we must defend it against our own inclinations to avoid the work that is required to cultivate talents, abilities, and Christlike character.

The story is told of a man who simply would not work. He wanted to be taken care of in every need. To his way of thinking, the Church or the government, or both, owed him a living because he had paid his taxes and his tithing. He had nothing to eat but refused to work to care for himself. Out of desperation and disgust, those who had tried to help him decided that since he would not lift a finger to sustain himself, they might as well just take him to the cemetery and let him pass on. On the way to the cemetery, one man said, "We can't do this. I have some corn I will give him."

So they explained this to the man, and he asked, "Have the husks been removed?"

They responded, "No."

"Well then," he said, "drive on."

It is God's will that we be free men and women enabled to rise to our full potential both temporally and spiritually, that we be free from the humiliating limitations of poverty and the bondage of sin, that we enjoy self-respect and

independence, that we be prepared in all things to join Him in His celestial kingdom.

I am under no illusion that this can be achieved by our own efforts alone without His very substantial and constant help. “We know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do.”²⁴ And we do not need to achieve some minimum level of capacity or goodness before God will help—divine aid can be ours every hour of every day, no matter where we are in the path of obedience. But I know that beyond desiring His help, we must exert ourselves, repent, and choose God for Him to be able to act in our lives consistent with justice and moral agency. My plea is simply to take responsibility and go to work so that there is something for God to help us with.

I bear witness that God the Father lives, that His Son, Jesus Christ, is our Redeemer, and that the Holy Spirit is present with us. Their desire to help us is undoubted, and Their capacity to do so is infinite. Let us “awake, and arise from the dust, ... that the covenants of the Eternal Father which he hath made unto [us] may be fulfilled.”²⁵ In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

1. William Shakespeare, *The Life of King Henry V*, act 4, scene 1, lines 127–29, 131–37, 183–85.

2. Doctrine and Covenants 101:78.

3. Brigham Young, “Sermon,” *Deseret News*, Oct. 31, 1855, 267; quoted in Terryl Givens and Fiona Givens, *The Crucible of Doubt: Reflections on the Quest for Faith* (2014), 63.

4. Moses 6:57.

5. Moses 6:55.

6. See Articles of Faith 1:2; see also 2 Nephi 2:25; Moses 6:53–56.

7. 2 Nephi 2:26; see also Doctrine and Covenants 93:38.

8. See 3 Nephi 12:48; 27:27; see also Romans 8:16–17; Doctrine and Covenants 84:37–38.

9. See Revelation 12:7–9; Doctrine and Covenants 29:36–38; Moses 4:3–4.

10. See Doctrine and Covenants 93:29–31.

11. Doctrine and Covenants 3:2.

12. Acts 10:34.

13. Doctrine and Covenants 1:31.

14. See Alma 42:25.

15. Alma 42:24.

16. Doctrine and Covenants 45:4.

17. See Mosiah 15:9.

18. Alma 42:13; emphasis added.

19. 2 Nephi 31:19.

20. Alma 34:16.

21. In Christian Smith, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (2009), 156.

22. In Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 156.

23. 2 Nephi 2:13.

24. 2 Nephi 25:23.

25. Moroni 10:31.

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