

President Howard W. Hunter

I am honored to greet a vast audience of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, many of whom are gathered here on Temple Square in Salt Lake City. However, I am aware that by means of modern television technology and the courtesy of a number of television stations, I am privileged also to speak to many who are not members of our church and who may not be familiar with all of its doctrines and beliefs.

The divine right to choose

Today, I would like to address both groups, members of our church as well as others, about one of the most important tenets of our faith and one of the most precious of God's gifts to mankind. It is our freedom, our agency, our inalienable and divine right to choose what we will believe and what we will not believe, and to choose what we want to be and what we want to do. I wish to speak of our responsibility and our opportunity to choose God, and the good, and eternal life, or to select evil, and the destructive, and that which leads to painful misery and despair.

Abraham Lincoln once asked, "What constitutes the bulwark of our own liberty and independence?" He then answered, "It is not our frowning battlements, our bristling sea coasts, our army and our navy. . . . Our reliance is in the love of liberty which God has planted in us" (in John Bartlett, ed., *Familiar Quotations* [Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1968], p. 636).

There are, of course, those who, in bitterness and disbelief, have rejected the idea of an independent spirit in man that is capable of free will and choice and true liberty.

We declare a bright and glorious view of God and man to all who will hear, a view revealed in and illuminated by the restored light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We testify of God's loving goodness and of his eternal respect for each of

us, for us as individual children of God and for what each of us may become.

As our prophet leader, President Ezra Taft Benson has declared:

"The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints proclaims that life is eternal, that it has purpose. . . . [God has a] plan . . . for the benefit and blessing of us, His children. . . .

"Basic to [that] all-important plan is our free agency. . . .

"The right of choice . . . runs like a golden thread throughout the gospel . . . for the blessing of His children" (*The Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988], pp. 80-81).

Our premortal existence

Part of our reassurance about the free, noble, and progressing spirit of man comes from the glorious realization that we all existed and had our identities, and our agency, long before we came to this world. To some that will be a new thought, but the Bible teaches clearly just such an eternal view of life, a life stretching back before this world was and stretching forward into the eternities ahead.

God said to Jeremiah, "Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5). At another time God reminded Job that "all the sons of God shouted for joy" before there was yet any man or woman on the earth God was creating (Job 38:7). The Apostle Paul taught that God the Father chose us "before the foundation of the world" (Ephesians 1:4).

Where and when did all of this happen? Well, it happened long before man's mortal birth. It happened in a great premortal existence where we developed our identities and increased our spiritual capabilities by exercising our agency and making important choices. We developed our intelligence and learned to love the truth, and we prepared to come to earth to continue our progress.

The battle for freedom of choice

Our Father in Heaven wanted our growth to continue in mortality and to be enhanced by our freedom to choose and learn. He also wanted us to exercise our faith and our will, especially with a new physical body to master and control. But we know from both ancient and modern revelation that Satan wished to deny us our independence and agency in that now-forgotten moment long ago, even as he wishes to deny them this very hour. Indeed, Satan violently opposed the freedom of choice offered by the Father, so violently that John in the Revelation described "war in heaven" (Revelation 12:7) over the matter. Satan would have coerced us, and he would have robbed us of that most precious of gifts if he could: our freedom to choose a divine future and the exaltation we all hope to obtain.

Through Christ and his valiant defense of our Father's plan, the course of agency and eternal aspirations prevailed. In that crucial, premortal setting, a major milestone was passed, a monumental victory was won. As a result, we would be allowed to continue to pursue what President David O. McKay once described as the "eternal principle of progress." Later Christ himself would come to earth, President McKay noted, "to perfect society by perfecting the individual, and only by the exercising of Free Agency can the individual even approach perfection" (in Conference Report, Apr. 1940, p. 118).

So we came to our mortality, like Jeremiah, known by God as his literal spirit children, having the privilege to choose our personal path on matters of belief and religious conviction. With Christ's triumph in heaven in overcoming Lucifer, and later his triumph on earth in overcoming the effects of Adam's fall and the death of all mankind, "the children of men" continue "free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not be acted upon. . . .

"Wherefore, men are free . . . to choose liberty and eternal life, through [Christ] 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).

God will not violate our agency

To fully understand this gift of agency and its inestimable worth, it is imperative that we understand that God's chief way of acting is by persuasion and patience and long-suffering, not by coercion and stark confrontation. He acts by gentle solicitation and by sweet enticement. He always acts with unfailing respect for the freedom and independence that we possess. He wants to help us and pleads for the chance to assist us, but he will not do so in violation of our agency. He loves us too much to do that, and doing so would run counter to his divine character.

Brigham Young once said: "The volution of [man] is free; this is a law of their existence, and the Lord cannot violate his own law; were he to do that, he would cease to be God. . . . This is a law which has always existed from all eternity, and will continue to exist throughout all the eternities to come. Every intelligent being must have the power of choice" (in *Journal of Discourses*, 11:272).

To countermand and ultimately forbid our choices was Satan's way, not God's, and the Father of us all simply never will do that. He will, however, stand by us forever to help us see the right path, find the right choice, respond to the true voice, and feel the influence of his undeniable Spirit. His gentle, peaceful, powerful persuasion to do right and find joy will be with us "so long as time shall last, or the earth shall stand, or there shall be one man upon the face thereof to be saved" (Moroni 7:36).

Repent of wrong choices

Given the freedom to choose, we may, in fact, make wrong choices, bad choices, hurtful choices. And sometimes we do just that, but that is where the mission and mercy of Jesus Christ comes into full force and glory. He has taken upon himself the burden of all the world's risk.

He has provided a mediating atonement for the wrong choices we make. He is our advocate with the Father and has paid, in advance, for the faults and foolishness we often see in the exercise of our freedom. We must accept his gift, repent of those mistakes, and follow his commandments in order to take full advantage of this redemption. The offer is always there; the way is always open. We can always, even in our darkest hour and most disastrous errors, look to the Son of God and live.

Choose God's blessings

When the children of Israel returned from Egypt and stood on the threshold of the promised land, they faced the clear choice of what was before them. Of the future that was about to be theirs, the Lord said to them:

"Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse;

"A blessing, if ye obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you this day:

"And a curse, if ye will not obey the commandments of the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 11:26-28).

That is the choice the Lord puts before us as we face our own promised lands and our own bright futures. We are given the knowledge, the help, the enticement, and the freedom to choose the

path of eternal safety and salvation. The choice to do so is ours. By divine decree before this world was, the actual choice is and always has been our own.

Let us be conscious of the fact that our future is being fashioned by the decisions we make. May we exercise our faith and our agency in choosing the blessings God has set before us in the great gospel plan of our Savior, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

President Hinckley

President Howard W. Hunter of the Council of the Twelve Apostles has just addressed us.

We express appreciation to the many who have offered facilities as a public service to bring the proceedings of this conference to a very large audience in many areas of the world.

The Mormon Youth Chorus will now sing "How Great Thou Art," following which the benediction will be pronounced by Elder Jack H. Goaslind of the Seventy, and we will be adjourned until two o'clock this afternoon.

The chorus sang "How Great Thou Art."

Elder Jack H. Goaslind offered the benediction.

FIRST DAY AFTERNOON SESSION

The second general session of the 159th Semiannual General Conference convened in the Tabernacle on Temple Square in Salt Lake City, Utah, on Saturday, September 30, 1989, at 2:00 P.M. President Ezra Taft Benson presided, and President Thomas S. Monson, Second Counselor in the First Presidency, conducted this session.

Music for this session was provided by a Polynesian choir from the Salt Lake Valley. Kuinise V. Matagi conducted, and Clay Christiansen was at the organ.

At the beginning of the meeting, President Monson made the following remarks:

President Thomas S. Monson

My beloved brethren and sisters, President Ezra Taft Benson has asked that I conduct this second general session of the 159th Semiannual General Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.