

Choose You This Day

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The magnitude of our eternal happiness depends on choosing the living God and joining Him in His work.

The fictional character Mary Poppins is a typical English nanny—who happens to be magical.¹ She blows in on the east wind to help the troubled Banks family of Number 17, Cherry Tree Lane, in Edwardian London. She is given charge of the children, Jane and Michael. In a firm but kind manner, she begins to teach them valuable lessons with an enchanting touch.

Jane and Michael make considerable progress, but Mary decides that it is time for her to move on. In the stage production, Mary's chimney sweep friend, Bert, tries to dissuade her from leaving. He argues, "But they're good kids, Mary."

Mary replies, "Would I be bothering with them if they weren't? But I can't help them if they won't let me, and there's no one so hard to teach as the child who knows everything."

Bert asks, "So?"

Mary answers, "So they've got to do the next bit on their own."²

Brothers and sisters, like Jane and Michael Banks, we are "good kids" who are worth bothering about. Our Heavenly Father wants to help and bless us, but we do not always let Him. Sometimes, we even act as if we already know everything. And we too need to do "the next bit" on our own. That is why we came to earth from a premortal, heavenly home. Our "bit" involves making choices.

Our Heavenly Father's goal in parenting is not to have His children *do* what is right; it is to have His children *choose* to do what is right and ultimately become like Him. If He simply wanted us to be obedient, He would use immediate rewards and punishments to influence our behaviors.

But God is not interested in His children just becoming trained and obedient "pets" who will not chew on His slippers in the celestial living room.³ No, God wants His children to grow up spiritually and join Him in the family business.

God established a plan whereby we can become heirs in His kingdom, a covenant path that leads us to become like Him, have the kind of life He has, and live forever as families in His presence.⁴ Personal choice was—and is—vital to this plan, which we learned about in our premortal existence. We accepted the plan and chose to come to earth.

To ensure that we would exercise faith and learn to use our agency properly, a veil of forgetfulness was drawn over our minds so we would not remember God's plan. Without that

veil, God's purposes would not be achieved because we could not progress and become the trusted inheritors He wants us to be.

The prophet Lehi said: "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."⁵ At a fundamental level, one option is represented by Jesus Christ, the Firstborn of the Father. The other option is represented by Satan, Lucifer, who wants to destroy agency and usurp power.⁶

In Jesus Christ, "we have an advocate with the Father."⁷ After completing His atoning sacrifice, Jesus "ascended into heaven ... to claim of the Father his rights of mercy which he hath upon the children of men." And, having claimed the rights of mercy, "he advocateth the cause of the children of men."⁸

Christ's advocacy with the Father in our behalf is not adversarial. Jesus Christ, who allowed His will to be swallowed up in the will of the Father,⁹ would not champion anything other than what the Father has wanted all along. Heavenly Father undoubtedly cheers for and applauds our successes.

Christ's advocacy is, at least in part, to remind us that He has paid for our sins and that no one is excluded from the reach of God's mercy.¹⁰ For those who believe in Jesus Christ, repent, are baptized, and endure to the end—a process that leads to reconciliation¹¹—the Savior forgives, heals, and advocates. He is our helper, consoler, and intercessor—attesting to and vouching for our reconciliation with God.¹²

In stark contrast, Lucifer is an accuser or prosecutor. John the Revelator described Lucifer's ultimate defeat: "And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ." Why? Because "the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night. And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony."¹³

Lucifer is this accuser. He spoke against us in the premortal existence, and he continues to denounce us in this life. He seeks to drag us down. He wants us to experience endless woe. He is the one who tells us we are not adequate, the one who tells us we are not good enough, the one who tells us there is no recovery from a mistake. He is the ultimate bully, the one who kicks us when we are down.

If Lucifer were teaching a child to walk and the child stumbled, he would scream at the child, punish him, and tell him to quit trying. Lucifer's ways bring discouragement and despair—eventually and always. This father of lies is the ultimate purveyor of falsehood¹⁴ and cunningly works to deceive and distract us, "for he seeketh that all men might be miserable like unto himself."¹⁵

If Christ were teaching a child to walk and the child stumbled, He would help the child get up and encourage the next steps.¹⁶ Christ is the helper and consoler. His ways bring joy and hope—eventually and always.

God's plan includes directions for us, referred to in the scriptures as commandments. These commandments are neither a whimsical set nor an arbitrary collection of imposed rules meant only to train us to be obedient. They are linked to our developing the attributes of godliness,

returning to our Heavenly Father, and receiving enduring joy. Obedience to His commandments is not blind; we knowingly choose God and His pathway home. The pattern for us is the same as it was for Adam and Eve, wherein “God gave unto them commandments, after having made known unto them the plan of redemption.”¹⁷ Though God wants us to be on the covenant path, He gives us the dignity of choosing.

Indeed, God desires, expects, and directs that each of His children choose for himself or herself. He will not force us. Through the gift of agency, God permits His children “to act for themselves and not to be acted upon.”¹⁸ Agency allows us to choose to get on the path, or not. It allows us to get off, or not. Just as we cannot be forced to obey, we cannot be forced to disobey. No one can, without our cooperation, take us off the path. (Now, this is not to be confused with those whose agency is violated. They are not off the path; they are victims. They receive God’s understanding, love, and compassion.)

But when we get off the path, God is saddened because He knows that this eventually, but invariably, leads to diminished happiness and forfeited blessings. In the scriptures, getting off the path is referred to as sin, and the resultant decrease in happiness and forfeited blessings is called punishment. In this sense, God is not punishing us; punishment is a consequence of our own choices, not His.

When we discover that we are off the path, we can stay off, or because of the Atonement of Jesus Christ, we can choose to reverse our steps and get back on. In the scriptures, the process of deciding to change and return to the path is referred to as repentance. Failure to repent means that we choose to disqualify ourselves from the blessings God desires to give. If we are “not willing to enjoy that which [we] might have received,” we will “return ... to [our] own place, to enjoy that which [we] are willing to receive”¹⁹—our choice, not God’s.

No matter how long we have been off the path or how far away we have wandered, the moment we decide to change, God helps us return.²⁰ From God’s perspective, through sincere repentance and pressing forward with a steadfastness in Christ, once back on the path, it will be as if we were never off.²¹ The Savior pays for our sins and frees us from the looming decrease in happiness and blessings. This is referred to in the scriptures as forgiveness. After baptism, all members slip off the path—some of us even dive off. Therefore, exercising faith in Jesus Christ, repenting, receiving help from Him, and being forgiven are not onetime events but lifelong processes, processes that are repetitive and iterative. This is how we “endure to the end.”²²

We need to choose whom we will serve.²³ The magnitude of our eternal happiness depends on choosing the living God and joining Him in His work. As we strive to “do the next bit” on our own, we practice using our agency correctly. As two former Relief Society General Presidents said, we should not be “babies that need petting and correction all the time.”²⁴ No, God wants us to become mature adults and govern ourselves.

Choosing to follow the Father’s plan is the only way we can become inheritors in His kingdom; only then can He trust us to not even ask for that which is contrary to His will.²⁵ But we need to remember that “there’s no one so hard to teach as the child who knows everything.” So we need to be willing to be tutored in the Lord’s ways by the Lord and His servants. We can trust that we are beloved children of Heavenly Parents²⁶ and worth “bothering about” and be assured that “on our own” will never mean “alone.”

As the Book of Mormon prophet Jacob said, I say with him:

“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.

“Wherefore, my beloved brethren [and sisters], reconcile yourselves to the will of God, and not to the will of the devil ... ; and remember, after ye are reconciled unto God, that it is only in and through the grace of God that ye are saved.”²⁷

So, choose faith in Christ; choose repentance; choose to be baptized and receive the Holy Ghost; choose to conscientiously prepare for and worthily partake of the sacrament; choose to make covenants in the temple; and choose to serve the living God and His children. Our choices determine who we are and who we will become.

I conclude with the rest of Jacob’s blessing: “Wherefore, may God raise you from ... everlasting death by the power of the atonement, that ye may be received into the eternal kingdom of God.”²⁸ In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.