

# "Choose You This Day": Using Our Agency to Arise as Women of God

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wife, mother, grandmother; teacher; owner of a long red carpet.*

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Some years ago I was hustling around lining up tenders and chauffeurs for my children so I could come to one of these conferences. I had discussed with my husband the possibility of such a fantasy. He agreed that I could go. In fact, he thought that I should go, on one condition: that upon my return I would not try to program him. Now that is revealing! There loomed the possibility that such a thing had occurred in the past. I was shocked! Program him? Who would ever presume such a project?

On closer inspection, however, I pleaded guilty—guilty to soaking up the ideal and returning home to “boot camp” my family into conforming and becoming perfect by hook and by the book. I was exercising my agency, all right, but I was stifling my family’s freedom to choose and act for themselves. Sometimes in my weaker moments, I have thought that Satan’s way had its points. I had even tried some of those points on a difficult child—manipulation, force, coercion, bribery, threats. Do you think impatience might also fall into this category? Sad to say, in exercising my own agency, I was not wise enough to see that I was infringing on my son’s right to choose. I was justifying my actions because of my fears—fear for what lay ahead for him, fear for what he might do to himself or others, fear that his mistakes will have untold ramifications, and none of them good.

I found myself pleading with the Lord to change my loved one, to validate my efforts to *make* him compliant. Over a period of years (that seem like forever!), the Lord has tutored me about moral agency and freedom and what he means when he says to his children, You are free [meaning *all* of his children, including mine]. You “are permitted to act for yourselves; for behold, God hath given unto you a knowledge and he hath made you free”—free to think, choose, and act for ourselves (Helaman 14:30). This magnificent gift from God comes with endless opportunities accompanied by responsibility and consequences. Making good choices and acting on them increases our capacity to exercise our agency. Making bad choices and acting on them limits that capacity, even though we still possess our agency. But agency is not free! We are responsible for the choices we make, and the consequences are inseparably connected. It is about using our agency to arise as women of

God that I would like to speak today.

The world around us makes it difficult to commit our agency to God. Even faithful sisters sometimes vacillate and equivocate trying to walk the strait and narrow path past that great and spacious building where they appear to be having all the fun. Do we sometimes find ourselves confused by an overload of messages and choices that cause us to repeatedly stumble over the Rock Helaman told his sons to build on? (see Helaman 5:12). Nephi warned us about those who would tell us we could have freedom without consequences. They would say, “Eat, drink, and be merry; nevertheless, fear God—he will justify in committing a little sin. . . . There is no harm in this; . . . and if it so be that we are guilty, God will beat us with a few stripes, and at last we shall be saved in the kingdom of God” (2 Nephi 28:8). That is a lie! The temptation to delay commitment to the Lord makes us vulnerable and comes from Satan. What are we waiting for?

Did you hear about the two ladies who realized they needed to lose weight but weren’t quite ready to commit to a diet? Standing in front of the bakery window, they were admiring the calorie-laden goodies. One lady turned to the other and said, “Let’s just go inside and see what happens.”

There was never any question about Joshua’s choice. Near the end of his life, he gathered the tribes of Israel together and reminded them of all the blessings their Father in Heaven had given them. After reciting the goodness of God, Joshua says, “Choose you this day whom ye will serve; . . . but *as for me* and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Joshua 24:15; emphasis added).

President Boyd K. Packer is a modern-day Joshua. He said, “I am not ashamed to say that . . . I want to be good. . . . This was established between me and the Lord so that I knew that He knew which way I had committed my agency. I went before Him and in essence said, ‘I’m not neutral, and You can do with me what you want. . . . You don’t have to take anything from me because I give it to You—everything, all I own, all I am.’ And that makes the difference.”<sup>i</sup> Sisters, when we use our agency to wholly and freely turn ourselves over to God, we will rise as His—free and unburdened.

In a very personal way, I am so grateful that my great-grandmother Susan Kent submitted to the will of the Lord when her heart desperately wished for something else. My great-grandmother was engaged to be married to a man she loved with all her heart when she heard about the Mormon Church. With study and prayer, she knew the Church was true and wanted to be baptized. She pleaded with her betrothed to study and pray about the Church and find out for himself, but he refused and told Susan she would have to choose between him and the Church. With faith in the Lord and her testimony, she turned her will over to the Lord and broke the engagement. For days she would not eat or see anyone. She became sick, and her family feared she was dying of a broken heart. After several days, she managed to take nourishment, and over a period of time, her heart healed. She met and married Evan Molbourne Greene, a righteous man whose mother was Brigham Young’s sister. Evan Molbourne and Susan Kent Greene were promised in a blessing that their posterity would have “believing blood.” Her conscious commitment to choose God’s will, obedience over

rebellion, His agenda over hers, brought about unmistakable spiritual consequences not only to herself but to her posterity—six generations, so far.

The cycle of choice, action, consequences, choice, action, consequences, affects our character and our life experiences. Every day and every decision determines the next. The great cartoon philosophers Calvin and Hobbes teach us this principle. Imagine Hobbes pushing Calvin in a little red wagon.

CALVIN: Faster! Faster!

HOBBS: The turbo is pooped.

CALVIN: That's okay, gravity just kicked in. Ever notice how decisions make chain reactions?

HOBBS: How so?

CALVIN: Well, each decision we make determines the range of choices we'll face next. Take this fork in the road for instance. Which way should we go? Arbitrarily I choose left. Now as a direct result of that decision, we're faced with another choice: should we jump this ledge or ride along the side of it? If we hadn't turned left at the fork, this new choice would never have come up.

HOBBS: (as they are leaping off the ledge into space) I note with some dismay you've chosen to jump the ledge.

CALVIN: Right, and that decision will give us new choices.

HOBBS: Like, should we bail out or die in the landing?

CALVIN: Exactly. Our first decision created a chain reaction of decisions. Let's jump! See? If you don't make each decision carefully, you never know where you'll end up. That's an important lesson we should learn sometime.

HOBBS: (as they're sitting in the river they jumped in) I wish we could talk about these things without the visual aids.

In time we will look back at what may seem like disconnected, independent pieces of our lives and better understand what God is trying to make of us. You remember the analogy quoted by C. S. Lewis: "Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You

thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace.”<sup>ii</sup>

God can make much more out of our lives than we can—if we will let Him.

It is being able to choose righteously that helps us to grow up. Using agency, in harmony with God’s will, helps us learn about ourselves. It teaches us what the Lord already knows about us. He asked Adam where he was because *Adam* needed to know where he was (see Genesis 3:9; Moses 4:15).

Is there something you learn about yourself when you spend hours crocheting leper bandages or tying quilts for those in need? What do you learn about yourself from the movies and videos you watch or when you choose to read a story to your three-year-old instead of watching that favorite TV show? Returning the grocery cart and voting for propositions that affect your community tell about you. Obedience to God’s laws leads to more freedom and greater peace. Disobedience limits our capacity to exercise that agency.

We have repeated the Second Article of Faith since Primary days. If we really believe we will be punished for our own sins, why aren’t we better than we are? Nothing can free us spiritually more than obedience to God’s laws.

A car was invented to run on gasoline. We were created to feast on the “fuel” the Lord offers—His commandments given out of love to make us free and give us peace. And yet too often we resist His outstretched arm. Isn’t it incredible—we have the freedom to reject the God who gives us that freedom.

Christ wept over Jerusalem and her people because of their rebellion. “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, . . . how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!” (Matthew 23:37). Those four words, “and ye would not,” are a sad indictment. Elder Neal A. Maxwell told us we can trust God never to send legions of angels to force or compel us. “He wants conversion without intimidation.”<sup>iii</sup>

Have you noticed through the chain of life’s choices, actions, and consequences that either consciously or subconsciously you are choosing to become the victim? (Elder Maxwell also said some pools of self-pity are Olympic size!)<sup>iv</sup> Either because of a rebellious family member, or other circumstances beyond your control, or your own guilt, you are feeling like a victim of some misdeeds. We can all find plenty of fodder to be the hapless victim. Let me illustrate with a personal experience.

I have a sister who is quite famous in women’s conference circles, and until recently I didn’t have a name—I was her sister, which is okay because she has been my hero all my life and still is. In the recent past, I have taken three trips with Sheri Dew. That amounts to about six weeks of togetherness, so we’ve gotten to know each other pretty well. Every place we go, dear sisters rush up to Sheri to tell her how much they love her and how her talks have changed their lives. It doesn’t matter where we are, the sisters know and love Sheri Dew. On

one of our trips, Sheri turned to me and said, “You know, I’ve always been the bridesmaid.” I could see my opportunity. “Give it up, Sheri,” I said. “All my life I’ve been Ardeth Kapp’s sister, and now I’m Sheri Dew’s traveling companion. *I* am the one who’s the bridesmaid!” I wasn’t going to let Sheri be the victim on this one!

Many of you have legitimate reasons to feel like the victim, because you have been. Viktor Frankl was a psychiatrist who endured years of unspeakable horror in Nazi death camps. He said, “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.

“And there were always choices to make. . . .

“ . . . Fundamentally . . . any [one] can, even under such circumstances, decide what shall become of him—mentally and spiritually.”<sup>v</sup>

As difficult as it might be, we never have to be the victims. As sisters in Zion, we are choosing not only for ourselves. How good are our choices for someone else? We shape the world in more ways than we know when we see the possibilities in the ordinariness of the present. You are raising a happy child when she is physically comfortable, fed, and clean diapered. You are raising a growing boy when you are there for him. You help a daughter discover her potential by listening and making room for her to cry on your shoulder. Children—and husbands—need stability, comfort, and warmth in their lives. These are all consequences of choice.

Striving to perfect our use of agency perpetuates our wise use of it the next time. When we’ve set our course, the Lord will help us set our priorities. The Holy Ghost will be our constant companion. The ordinariness of life will take on new meaning, and we will spend time on things that really matter—like our families.

When our daughter reached kindergarten age, I wasn’t quite ready to let her go (are we ever ready?). I made an agreement with her. We had walked in the rain together since she could walk, so I said, “How will it be if I walk you to school every day it rains?” She thought that sounded fun and so did I. But invariably the mornings it rained were the mornings I was supposed to be three places at once. I was always tempted to say, “We’ll do it next time.” Sometimes breakfast dishes were washed with the supper dishes that night, but we walked to school in the rain. Cars would stop to offer rides, but we were building memories. We did that for seven years. Then came junior high. I woke up one rainy morning and ran into Shelly’s room. “We get to walk to school; it’s raining.” She said, “Oh, Mom, I can’t walk in the rain today. We’re having a dance after school. But would you drive me so my hair doesn’t get messed up?” So drive her I did. I was a little sad that those walks were over, but I was grateful I did them when I could. When she went away to school and wrote the wonderful letter back you always hope for, she said, “How can I get my children to love the rain like I do?”

Now that she’s gone and has a family of her own, I have never said, “Oh darn! I wish I

hadn't spent so much time walking in the rain with Shelly!"

There is not time to live out all our hopes and dreams and opportunities. We can't spend time with every person we would like. Some concerts, plays, and movies will have to go unheard and unseen, and so we develop the skill to give up some experiences for those we want more. Each choosing can help us to know and trust our choices more.

The Lord warned us about spending money for things of no worth or our energies for that which cannot satisfy (see 2 Nephi 9:51). Obeying the promptings of the Holy Ghost will develop our tastes and desires for life on a higher plane that satisfies and brings peace to our souls.

This same daughter, who is now a mother of two—almost three—little boys, brought treats to sacrament meeting to pacify her boys. As the sacrament tray of bread was passed down our row, Jake, then three, whispered in my ear, "Tell them we don't need that bread. We brought our own treats." To a three-year-old, the treats from home looked much more inviting than the pieces of broken bread. Jake did not understand the sacred symbolism of the bread. But what about us who do understand? Do we fill our lives with so much of our own treats that we have no appetite for the Bread of Life that will sustain us? Why does a "mess of pottage," without any of the essential nutrients, seem more appealing at times than the Bread of Life, and we find ourselves passing up the banquet the Lord has prepared for us? Evil designs do exist in the hearts of conspiring people (see D&C 89:4).

*Imaginary* evil seems to be exciting and fanciful, full of life; *imaginary* good appears boring and lifeless. *Real* evil is stagnant and redundant; *real* good is always exhilarating, fresh, and inspiring.

It takes faith to choose the good. Exercising faith in the Lord and His plan for us is spiritual calisthenics. We have opportunities every day to improve that skill so we will not be deceived. As women of God, we can feel His love and His strength every day. Even though we are trying to do the best we can, we all slip and pick ourselves up and try again, and the Lord is there to dust us off. Some of you are carrying heavy, heavy burdens. We are not free from tribulation or weighty loads, but I testify (because I know) that He *will* make you strong to carry the weight placed upon you. Let Him heal your broken heart and broken dreams.

President George Q. Cannon reminds us: "No matter how serious the trial, how deep the distress, how great the affliction, [God] will never desert us. He never has, and He never will. . . . We have made Him our friend, by obeying His gospel; and He will stand by us. . . . We shall emerge from all [our] trials and difficulties the better and purer for them, if we only trust in our God and keep His commandments." vi

We can arise as women of God when we choose to trust Him and keep His commandments. This reassuring song, "Come unto Him," speaks for you and for me.

I wander through the still of night,  
When solitude is ev'rywhere—  
Alone, beneath the starry light,  
And yet I know that God is there.  
I kneel upon the grass and pray;  
An answer comes without a voice.  
It takes my burden all away  
And makes my aching heart rejoice.  
It matters not what may befall,  
What threat'ning hand hangs over me;  
He is my rampart through it all,  
My refuge from mine enemy.  
Come unto him all ye depressed,  
Ye erring souls whose eyes are dim,  
Ye weary ones who long for rest.  
Come unto him! Come unto him!vii

Choose you this day whom ye will serve. As for me, I will serve the One who keeps His promises and has never left me alone.

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i Boyd K. Packer, “*That All May Be Edified*”: *Talks, Sermons & Commentary by Boyd K. Packer* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 272.



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2 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1943), 174.

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iii Neal A. Maxwell, "Content with the Things Allotted unto Us," *Ensign*, May 2000, 74

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iv Maxwell, "Content with the Things Allotted unto Us," 74.

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v Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1984), 87.

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vi George Q. Cannon, “Freedom of the Saints,” in *Collected Discourses Delivered by President Wilford Woodruff, His Two Counselors, the Twelve Apostles, and Others (1890–91)*, comp. Brian H. Stuy, 5 vols. (Burbank, Calif.: B. H. Publishing, 1988), 2:185; also quoted in Patricia T. Holland, “Filled with All the Fulness of God,” in *Clothed with Charity*, ed. Dawn Hall Anderson, Susette Fletcher Green, Dloria Hall Dalton (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 3.

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vii *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 114, verses 1 and 3.