

1.11.2014- Foreordination

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Understanding the Doctrine of Foreordination

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The Importance of Studying and Understanding the Doctrine of Foreordination

Elder Neal A. Maxwell wrote: "The doctrine of foreordination is one of the doctrinal roads 'least traveled by.' Yet it clearly underlines how very long and how perfectly God has loved each of us and known each of us, with our individual needs and capacities. *It is so powerful a doctrine, however, that isolated from other doctrines, or mishandled, it can induce false pride, stoke the fires of fatalism, impact adversely upon agency, cause us to focus on status rather than service, and carry us over into the false doctrine of predestination....* Foreordination is clearly no excuse for fatalism, or arrogance, or the abuse of agency. It is not, however, a doctrine that can be ignored simply because it is difficult. Indeed, deep inside the hardest doctrines are some of the pearls of greatest price" (*But for a Small Moment*, pp. 95-97; italics added).

"Once the believer acknowledges that the past, present, and future are before God simultaneously—even though we do not understand how—then the doctrine of foreordination may be seen somewhat more clearly. For instance, it was necessary for God to know how economic difficulties and crop failures of the Joseph Smith Sr. family in New England would move this special family to Cumorah country where the Book of Mormon plates were buried. God's plans could scarcely have so unfolded if willy-nilly the Smiths had been born Manchurians and if, meanwhile, the plates had been buried in Belgium!" (Neal A. Maxwell, "Foreordination," a talk given at the District Sacrament Meeting in Jerusalem, Oct. 1978.)

The following historical background, summarized from *Church History in the Fulness of Times*, may shed some light on Elder Maxwell's comments: The Joseph Smith Sr. family moved ten times in the twenty-year period from 1796 to 1816. They first moved because of barren, rocky soil; next due to the failure of their mercantile establishment; next they were forced to sell their farm to pay an eighteen-hundred dollar debt incurred because their three-thousand dollar ginseng root shipment to China was stolen. Their next three moves were an effort to find fertile soil and a suitable livelihood. Having finally found a place where they could begin to "contemplate the joy and satisfaction, the prosperity which had attended our recent exertions," they were again forced to relocate because of a typhoid epidemic that swept upper Connecticut valley leaving six-thousand people dead and everyone in the Smith family ill. In Norwich, Vermont, their next residence, they experienced three successive crop failures. They were able to "obtain bread for the family" for the first two years by selling fruit that grew on the property. Their third-year crops were frozen along with everyone else's in the infamous "year without a summer" of 1816. Mount Tambora in the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia) had exploded in what was considered the largest volcanic eruption in recorded history, ejecting an estimated twenty-five cubic miles of volcanic debris which filled the stratosphere obscuring the sun. Unaware of the cause, but discouraged, the Smith family moved finally to Palmyra, New York, where the land was said to be "well-timbered, well-watered, easily accessible and undeniably fertile."

Responsibilities in This Life Effected by Choices Made in Premortal Existence

President Joseph Fielding Smith explained: "God gave his children their free agency even in the spirit world, by which the individual spirits had the privilege, just as men have here, of choosing the good and rejecting the evil, or partaking of the evil to suffer the consequences of their sins. Because of this, some even there were more faithful than others in keeping the commandments of the Lord.... The spirits of men were not equal. They may have had an equal start, and we know they were all innocent in the beginning; but the right of free agency which was given to them enabled some to outstrip others, and thus, through the eons of immortal existence, to become more intelligent, more faithful, for they were free to act for themselves, to think for themselves, to receive the truth or rebel against it" (*Doctrines of Salvation*, 1:58-59).

President Harold B. Lee taught: "There is no truth more plainly taught in the Gospel than that our condition in the next world will depend upon the kind of lives we live here.... Is it not just as reasonable to suppose that the conditions in which we now live have been determined by the kind of lives we lived in the pre-existent world of spirits? ...Between the extremes of the "noble and the great" spirits, whom God would make his rulers, and the disobedient and the rebellious who were cast out with Satan, there were obviously many spirits with varying degrees of faithfulness. May we not assume from these teachings that the progress and development we made as spirits have brought privileges and blessings here according to our faithfulness in the spirit world?" (*Decisions for Successful Living*, pp. 164-65).

President Harold B. Lee also said: "All these rewards were seemingly promised, or foreordained, before the world was. Surely these matters must have been determined by the kind of lives we had lived in that premortal spirit world. Some may question these assumptions, but at the same time they will accept without any question the belief that each one of us will be judged when we leave this earth according to his or her deeds during our lives here in mortality. Isn't it just as reasonable to believe that what we have received here in this earth [life] was given to each of us according to the merits of our conduct before we came here?" (Conference Report, Oct. 1973, pp. 7-8).

President Heber J. Grant taught: "We have been placed upon this earth because of our faithfulness in having kept our first estate. The labors that we performed in the sphere that we left before we came here have had a certain effect upon our lives here, and to a certain extent they govern and control the lives that we lead here, just the same as the labors that we do here will control and govern our lives when we pass from this stage of existence" ("Reward of Conscience," Improvement Era, Feb. 1943, p. 75).

President Joseph Fielding Smith taught: "Every man had his agency there [in the premortal life], and men receive rewards here based upon their actions there, just as they will receive rewards hereafter for deeds done in the body" (Doctrines of Salvation, 1:66)."

Israel Foreordained: "The Election of Grace"

The children of Israel—valiant spirits from the premortal existence—have been born into all the nations of the earth to serve as a leavening agent to bless those nations (see Deuteronomy 32:7-9; Acts 17:26).

President Harold B. Lee taught: "You are now born into a family to which you have come, into the nations through which you have come, as a reward for the kind of lives you lived before you came here and at a time in the world's history, as the Apostle Paul taught the men of Athens and as the Lord revealed to Moses, determined by the faithfulness of each of those who lived before this world was created" (Conference Report, Oct. 1973, p. 7).

President Joseph Fielding Smith taught: "The numbers of the children of Israel were known and the bounds of their habitation fixed, in the days of old when the Lord divided to the nations their inheritance. We conclude, therefore, that there must have been a division of the spirits of men in the spiritual world, and those who were appointed to be the children of Israel were separated and prepared for a special inheritance" (Doctrines of Salvation, 1:59).

Elder Melvin J. Ballard wrote: "There was a group of souls tested, tried, and proven before they were born into the world, and the Lord provided a lineage for them. That lineage is the house of Israel, the lineage of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their posterity. Through this lineage were to come the true and tried souls that had demonstrated their righteousness in the spirit world before they came here" (The Three Degrees of Glory, pp. 218-219).

Elder McConkie wrote: "To bring to pass the salvation of the greatest possible number of his spirit children the Lord, in general, sends the most righteous and worthy spirits to earth through the lineage of Abraham and Jacob.... Those so grouped together during their mortal probation have more abundant opportunities to make and keep the covenants of salvation, ...If the full blessings of salvation are to follow, the doctrine of election must operate twice. First, righteous spirits are elected or chosen to come to mortality as heirs of special blessings. Then, they must be called and elected again in this life, an occurrence which takes place when they join the true Church. Finally, in order to reap eternal salvation, they must press forward in obedient devotion to the truth until they make their "calling and election sure," that is, they are "sealed up unto eternal life (D&C 131:5.)" (Mormon Doctrine, p. 216).

Elder McConkie wrote: "The race and nation in which men are born in this world is a direct result of their pre-existent life. All the spirit hosts of heaven deemed worthy to receive mortal bodies were foreordained to pass through this earthly probation in the particular race and nation suited to their needs, circumstances, and talents. "When the Most High divided to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of Adam," Moses said with reference to pre-existence, "he set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel." (Deut. 32:8.) Not only Israel but all groups were thus foreknown and their total memberships designated in the pre-mortal life. Paul spoke similarly when he averred that God "hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation (Acts 17:26.)" (Mormon Doctrine, p. 616).

Assignments in this Life Effected by Premortal Obedience and Development of Talents

President Ezra Taft Benson said: "To fulfill the purpose of His omniscient design, our Heavenly Father foreordained certain valiant spirit children and assigned them to come to earth at specific times and places to fulfill their appointments. The greatest of these spirits He reserved to come as prophets and priesthood leaders in His kingdom" (Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson, p. 21).

President Spencer W. Kimball said: "Remember, in the world before we came here, faithful women were given certain assignments while faithful men were foreordained to certain priesthood tasks" (The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball, p. 316).

Elder Neal A. Maxwell taught: "Just as certain men were foreordained from before the foundations of the world, so were certain women appointed to certain tasks. Divine design--not chance--brought Mary forward to be the mother of Jesus. The boy prophet, Joseph Smith, was blessed not only with a great father but also with a superb mother, Lucy Mack, who influenced a whole dispensation. (Conference Report, April 1978, p. 13)."

The Prophet Joseph Smith taught: "Every man who has a calling to minister to the inhabitants of the world was ordained to that very purpose in the Grand Council of heaven before this world was. I suppose that I was ordained to this very office in that Grand Council" (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, p. 365).

Elder McConkie explained: "Other spirits, such as those who laid the foundations of the American nation, were appointed beforehand to perform great works in political and governmental fields (Mormon Doctrine, p. 290). The work to be done by John the Baptist, by the ancient Twelve, by Columbus, by the signers of the Declaration of Independence, and by the framers of the Constitution of the United States was all known and arranged for in advance. And all these are but illustrations and patterns, for all of the Lord's work is planned and prepared in advance, and those who are called and chosen to do the work receive their commission and ordination from him, first in the preexistence and then, if they remain true and faithful, again here in mortality" (Conference Report, April 1974, p. 102).

President Joseph Fielding Smith wrote: "The spirits of men were created with different dispositions and likes and talents. Some evidently were mechanically inclined, from them have come our inventors. Some loved music and hence they have become great musicians. We evidently brought to this world some if not all of the inclinations and talents that we had there. The fact that one person finds one bent, like mathematics easy and another finds it difficult, may, in my judgment, be traced to the spirit existence. So with other talents and skills. It was these characteristics that enabled our Eternal Father to choose certain individuals for certain work on the earth, such as Adam, Abraham, Moses and Joseph Smith.... It is my judgment that thousands of others were chosen for their special fields because they showed talents and dispositions in that spirit world" (Answers to Gospel Questions, 5:138-39).

We Can Be Assured that Heavenly Father Knows Our Talents and Abilities Best, and We Should Be Content with the Assignments We Receive

Elder Henry D. Moyle taught: "I am sure today that in our lives many of us wish that we were something other than we are, thinking that their lot is preferable to our own. But Alma said further, (he quotes Alma 29:2-3).

"I believe that we, as fellow workers in the priesthood, might well take to heart the admonition of Alma and be content with that which God hath allotted us. We might well be assured that we had something to do with our allotment in our pre-existent state. This would be an additional reason for us to accept our present condition and make the best of it. It is what we agreed to do..."

"We unquestionably knew before we elected to come to this earth the conditions under which we would here exist, and live, and work. So little wonder it is that Alma of old said that we sin in the thought, or in the desire, or in the wish that we were someone other than ourselves. He said further, (quotes Alma 29:6-9).

"I have a conviction deep down in my heart that we are exactly what we should be, each one of us, except as we may have altered that pattern by deviating from the laws of God here in mortality. I have convinced myself that we all have those peculiar attributes, characteristics, and abilities which are essential for us to possess in order that we may fulfil the full purpose of our creation here upon the earth.

"Once again, that allotment which has come to us from God is a sacred allotment. It is something of which we should be proud, each one of us in our own right, and not wish that we had somebody else's allotment. Our greatest success comes from being ourselves.

I think that we can console ourselves best by believing that whatever is our allotment in life, whatever is our call in the priesthood, the Lord has been wise and just, and I might add, merciful, in giving to us that which we need to accomplish the particular purpose of our call. (Conference Report Oct. 1952, pp. 71-72.)

The Realization of Our Foreordained "Allotment" Is Conditioned on Our Faithfulness

Elder McConkie wrote: "In all this there is not the slightest hint of compulsion; persons foreordained to fill special missions in mortality are as abundantly endowed with free agency as are any other persons. By their foreordination the Lord merely gives them the opportunity to serve him and his purposes if they will choose to measure up to the standard he knows they are capable of attaining" (Mormon Doctrine, p. 290).

President Harold B. Lee taught: "But now there is a warning: Despite that calling which is spoken of in the scriptures as "foreordination," we have another inspired declaration: "Behold, there are many called, but few are chosen (D&C 121:34)." This suggests that... there are many who were foreordained before the world was, to a greater state than they have prepared themselves for here. Even though they might have been among the noble and great, from among whom the Father declared he would make his chosen leaders, they may fail of that calling here in mortality" (Stand Ye In Holy Places, p. 9). "Like reckless spendthrifts they are exercising their free agency... and are losing their birthright and the blessing that were theirs had they proved faithful to their calling" (Youth and the Church, p. 172).

Elder McConkie wrote: "Certain of the spirit children of the Father earned the right... of being natural heirs to the blessings of the gospel. But some of them, ...turn from the course of righteousness and become children of the flesh; that is, they walk after the manner of the world, rejecting the spiritual blessings held in store for Israel. They are disinherited; they shall not continue as children in the family of the prophets when the chosen race continues as a distinct people in the eternal worlds. Thus they are descendants of the prophets in this life but shall not inherit with the sons of God in the life to come" (Doctrinal New Testament Commentary, 2:276-277).

Elder LeGrand Richards taught: "It should be remembered that the devil and his angels, when cast down to this earth, were not deprived of the knowledge they had while in the [pre-earth life].... Consider the experience Jesus had with the man possessed by unclean spirits, whom no man could bind with chains (in Mark 5:6-9).... Because the spirits cast out of heaven with Satan have retained their knowledge and recollection of what happened there before they were cast out, they knew Jesus and the power given to him.... The same was true with respect to the mission of Joseph Smith.... Many other boys of that age had prayed without Satan's molesting them.... Therefore, except for Satan's knowledge and acquaintance that he brought with him from the spirit world, he would not have known that Joseph Smith was different from any other young boy, but he knew who "the noble and great" spirits were (A Marvelous Work and a Wonder, pp. 282-84)."

Elder McConkie taught in relation to this: "Knowledge can be obtained and used in unrighteousness; Satan gains his power on this principle.... The devil has tremendous power and influence because of his knowledge (Mormon Doctrine, p. 86)."

The Balance between "the Foreknowledge of God," "Foreordination," and "Agency"

President Brigham Young said: "Fore-ordination, for instance, and free grace are both true doctrines; but they must be properly coupled together and correctly , o as to produce harmony between these two apparently opposite doctrines" (Discourses of Brigham Young, p. 56).

President George Q. Cannon taught: "People confound foreknowledge with foreordination. Because God fore-knows a thing, it does not follow that He has foreordained it. He foreknew that Pharaoh would fight Israel and would reject the testimonies which Moses and Aaron bore to him. But Pharaoh had the full use of his agency. It was in his power to have accepted the message which Moses delivered; it was in his power also to reject that message. He chose to reject it, and God magnified His name in the earth by showing His wonderful works among the Egyptians. But He did not foreordain Pharaoh to be damned. His foreknowledge extends to the uttermost end of life. He knows all about us.... I would like you to clearly understand that foreknowledge is one thing and predestination is another, and there is a great distinction between the two.... Every human being is ordained to be saved, if he will be. If he is damned, it is because he chooses the path that leads to condemnation" (Gospel Truth, 1:142-143).

President Joseph F. Smith said: "The Lord's hand is over all, and therein I acknowledge his hand. Not that men are at war, not that nations are trying to destroy nations, not that men are plotting against the liberties of their fellow creatures, not in those respects at all; but God's hand is not shortened. He will control the results that will follow. He will overrule them in a way that you and I, today, do not comprehend, or do not foresee, for ultimate good. He foresees the end.... The Lord God Almighty is not pleased, nor was it his purpose or design, or intent, to foreordain the condition that the world is in today; nor did he do so. He foresaw what would come, ...but he had given them their agency, under which they are bringing it to pass. The results of it, eventually, will be overruled for the good of those who shall live after, not for the good of those who shall destroy themselves because of their wicked propensities and crimes" (Gospel Doctrine, p. 89).