

## Why Not Joy?

This morning as I was praying my thoughts turned to 2 Nephi 2:25.

Adam fell that man might be; and men are, that they might have joy.

The context in my prayer was, why wouldn't I choose joy? When I go to the Lord in prayer I inevitably think of the choices that I make in a day that lead away from joy, and I am sorry for those choices. Yesterday in particular there was one choice that I made that started to lead away from joy, which I managed to reverse. But why would I start down the "non-joy" path in the first place?

As I reflect on this, I find that the next several verses in the same chapter deal at greater length with this same issue:

And the Messiah cometh in the fullness of time, that he may redeem the children of men from the fall. And because that they are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever<sup>1</sup>, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon, save it be by the punishment of the law at the great and last day, according to the commandments which God hath given.

Wherefore, men are free according to the flesh, and all things are given unto them which are expedient<sup>2</sup> unto man<sup>3</sup>. And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through 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

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- 1 Note the oft-repeated Book of Mormon theme, tying the creation, the atonement, and the fall together into one great plan. Each was necessary to establish the conditions that God desired for us here in mortality.
  - 2 I have probably commented elsewhere, but I have found that the meaning of the word *expedient* is not always clearly understood. It does not mean *required*, which my children at least assumed was the case. It has more the sense of *appropriate* or *useful*. So freedom is not required, but is given to us according to the will and desire of God. It is not necessary that we be free, but God out of his great love for us has elected to give us freedom.
  - 3 There is something here about which I am not sure, but upon which it is interesting to speculate. The word *man* is used here as the English representation of the human race at large. However, as prophets have commented, the priesthood was given to the males of our race in part to compensate them for what they are *not*. In many senses women do not operate under the same handicaps as men, and it is entirely possible that if all of God's children had the same capacities as women the plan of salvation would be presented in very different terms.

men might be miserable like unto himself.

And now, my sons, I would that ye should look to the great Mediator, and hearken unto his great commandments; and be faithful unto his words, and choose eternal life, according to the will of his Holy Spirit; and not choose eternal death, according to the will of the flesh and the evil which is therein, which giveth the spirit of the devil power to captivate, to bring you down to hell, that he may reign over you in his own kingdom.<sup>4</sup>

As I observed, one of the key issues here is that of *choice*. We are free to choose joy or misery, and one of the keys to progress in this existence is understanding that the spiritual circumstances in which we find ourselves are the consequences of choice. We are not “acted upon” as inanimate objects, being subjected randomly to joy or suffering. We are able to choose.

So I return to my original question: Why would I not choose joy? Given the information from Lehi, let's look at the alternatives.

First, there is the case of Satan. He is unwilling to submit himself to the Father's will, believing that his freedom to choose is limited if he makes a choice someone else has indicated. This is a popular fallacy in our world – you must not follow anyone else or you are not truly free. This is the freedom of Masada, where I will attempt to extinguish myself rather than do what anyone else wants. In that particular case, the will of the Romans was not very benevolent, but what freedom did the zealots attain for themselves by retreating to a mountain then killing themselves rather than submitting? In their effort to avoid following someone else's choice, they denied themselves of all choices. This is Satan's path. Looked at in that light it does not seem to satisfy most of the essential elements of freedom.

The next possibility is that I just don't understand where joy lies. I am choosing at random, so fall short of joy. The reason for Lehi's – and many others' – expositions on the subject is to avoid that dead end. They clearly tell us that joy comes from following the Savior's path, as that was the only reason that he showed us the path. Were we alone in the world, without God, random chance would be the case of all men. However, he has spoken by divers means and at many times to allow men to know where joy lies, because it is the purpose of our existence, and he would not have us be ignorant of the path. In the most recent General Conference President Faust cited a statement by

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<sup>4</sup> 2 Nephi 2:26-29

the First Presidency in 1999 indicating that God spoke through a great number of different people, specifically including the reformers, Mohammad, Confucius, and others, so that all men would have some indication of the path of joy.

Another reason which might cause choosing misery is somewhat less clear. Lehi in verse 29 alludes to some condition of the flesh which leads to evil, and warns us against following that tendency. What this tendency is I have never fully understood. The benighted state of “the natural man<sup>5</sup>” is somehow in contrast to our original state<sup>6</sup> of cleanliness and purity. Is it a consequence of the Fall? Is it something inherent in telestial matter? I am not sure. The fact remains that it does appear to be innate in man, and must be guarded against. It is not, however, unavoidable, because of the action of the Atonement in our lives.

However, choice is not absolute. Lehi allows that there is a level at which we will be acted upon; in other words, at which we will not be able to choose our state, but will be carried as a consequence of other forces. He characterizes this as being “at the great and last day,” when in the final judgment we receive the fruits of our choices.

Finally, Lehi points out that the devil is working actively to dissuade us from the path of joy. He wants us to make his choice so that we will share his misery rather than eternal joy. It is curious that he who would reject all joy to maintain his own choice would deny us choice so that we may avoid joy. The perverseness of that situation is indicative of where Satan has fallen – there simply cannot be any logic or reason in anything he desires or does because he began from a completely false premise.

So why do I not choose joy? Do I, like Satan, now abhor joy? Do I not know where joy lies? Am I subject to some inner tendency which I do not effectively combat? Have I passed the realm of choice? Am I allowing myself to be carried by the influences of Satan?

Ultimately, the answer is an amalgam of all of the above<sup>7</sup>. It begins with a fundamental dishonesty: I am not willing to accept true responsibility for my spiritual state, so I am dishonest with myself and try to blame my misery on others. The situation last night was very

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5 Mosiah 3:19

6 D&C 93:38,39

7 Gee – do you suppose that is why Lehi discussed all of them?

appropriate. I was asked to do something and I felt there was something unfair in the way I was asked. So I immediately fell into rationalizations about how what I was doing was already right, the petitioner should have asked in a different form, etc. I could immediately feel my joy slipping away. So I changed my choices. I recognized that I did not know why the other person acted as they did, but I admitted that was neither here nor there. I recognized that my response was a habit, which makes it hard – but not impossible – to resist. If I was less joyful I was not following Christ, but Satan. I had to step outside of my immediate comfort – tied to the habitual response – and admit that I did know where joy lies, and that I am free to choose it. Having done that my peace was restored, and I felt once again the closeness of the spirit.

Why do we not choose joy? The roots lie in the same dishonesty that prompted Satan's choice. We react to his “comfortable” response rather than exercising the energy to choose for ourselves. Having departed from the path, we reject the existence of the path, and then whine about the injustice of the world. Such self-deception can only be countered by admitting we are wrong, reversing the wrong choice, and resuming the path of righteousness. In other words, we must repent. As with all repentance, it can be done at any time, but the sooner we do it (with time frequently measured in seconds) the more joy we receive, while postponing the repentance causes suffering far beyond the magnitude of the original choice.

What a wonderful plan our God has given us. Joy is the center of that plan. I resolve to choose righteousness, and not follow misery. I am grateful for the power to choose.