

Reconsidering the Three Pillars of Eternity Metaphor

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September 2017

Two recent talks by President Nelson suggest a welcome evolution in thought as he prepares to assume the mantle of Prophet, Seer and Revelator. From his recent ideas come clarifying views on the nature of God and the nature of moral agency, as well as associated important ramifications to our perceptions of our first parents' fall, and Jesus' atonement.

The significance of these talks lies in his willingness to expound on important principles that provide clarification for the membership of the church, relative to the way the Three Pillars of Eternity were previously constructed.

Of course the Creation, the Fall and the Atonement are key events of enormous significance in history, and the relationships between them must be clearly understood. But I wonder about our traditional use of causation—that the need for the Atonement created the need for the Fall, and that the need for the Fall was the reason for the Creation. I would suggest, rather, that we focus on the one, over-arching connecting power for all these elements: God's love for us. It is because of God's love for His children that He established moral agency as the enabling mechanism for us to attain His level of eternal joy. God's love for us is manifest in what He *planned* (the creation), what He *allowed* (our first parents' choice to disobey), and the *contingency* He prepared against (the rescuing effects of Jesus' ransom and atoning work).

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Recall back in 1981 when Elder Bruce R. McConkie first introduced the “Three Pillars of Eternity” idea in his BYU devotional speech by the same name. He described the three great eternal verities upon which salvation rests. The Creation, Fall and Atonement were described as interwoven events integral to the great Plan of Salvation. But the underlying assumption and premise for his entire talk was that each pillar was designed and planned to be this way, intended as the will of God independent of the will of man. This is why they are “pillars”: fixed, determinate, absolute, tangible, self-existent. The idea supposes that each one *had* to be: The Atonement must happen therefore man must fall.¹ This view further suggests that it was and is this way for each of Father's other creations everywhere within the vast universe, as it was for Father Himself.²

But over time and use, some cracks are beginning to appear in the metaphor. New pieces of data upon which to reconsider the underpinning suppositions and the hard, fixed, eternal nature of the three pillars include:

- 1) President Nelson's 2017 CES devotional talk, "Prophets, Leadership, and Divine Law", describing the nature of God, His laws and the reliably predictable consequences of keeping or breaking them;
- 2) President Nelson's April 2017 conference talk, "Drawing the Power of Jesus Christ into Our Lives", focusing our use of language regarding the Atonement into that which reveals Jesus' will and effort in paying our ransom, versus that which suggests a self-determinant power;
- 3) The ramifications of those talks to our traditional treatment of Lucifer's words spoken in the temple as potential sources of doctrine; and
- 4) We may also reconsider how the scriptures were originally used to justify the "pillars" approach, even in preference to plain observation of the earth's fossil record.

The goal of this article is to replace these three significant events previously described as pillars with one key and bridging eternal attribute of God: His boundless love for us. Then we will demonstrate how that love was manifest through His gift of agency. Those three events which were once rigidly described as events in a stepwise, backwards process now become clear expressions of moral agency: that which God *planned*, that which He *allowed*, and that for which He provided a *contingency*.

Farm Tractor Analogy

We have a tractor on our ranch with a hydraulic bucket used to do heavy construction digging and hauling beyond the light utility farming it was designed for. After several years of heavy use, we started to notice cracks around the key lever points on and around the hydraulic ram connections. After finding one or two cracks at important stress points, we started looking at all the stress points and discovered that cracks existed at each location. These observations informed us that not only was the tractor subject to heavy use, fatigue and wear; but that such use was beyond the tool's designed intent.

I would like to draw an analogy to the three pillars of eternity and point out the existence of some cracks there that similarly suggest to us how the three pillars are traditionally used improperly to describe important events, and that reconsideration of those events may lead us to entirely cast aside the rigid 'pillars' metaphor.

Obvious cracks in the immutable description of the Creation, the Fall and the Atonement foremost include the observation that Elder McConkie's logic of causation is backwards. In his mind, man must fall to create the need for a Savior. And the Creation was focused on setting the stage for the Fall. All was willed and intended by God. The crack (fissure, more like) is that this logic of the Fall—claiming the inevitability of the Fall by divine design—creates a duplicitous god, commanding "thou shalt not" and "I forbid it!" while secretly intending the opposite per an unlikely spokesman, "there is no other way."

The passage of both time and scrutiny, however, demonstrate that the reverse causation is true: God gave man agency by giving us an earth and bodies, the combination of which provides us the experiential mechanism to choose, to act, and to participate in all the sensations and consequences of those actions. Man chose unrighteously by directly

disobeying God. This moral choice (not the divine will) gave rise to sin, death, suffering and sorrow, and brought about the desperate need for rescuing actions by a savior.

That the Fall is clearly not representative of God's will or intent is given by His expression of deep sadness and anger as His reaction to the event (“*fire of mine indignation*”, “*hot displeasure*”, “*fierce anger*”), as recorded in Moses 7:³

30 And were it possible that man could number the particles of the earth, yea, millions of earths like this, it would not be a beginning to the number of thy creations; and thy curtains are stretched out still; and yet thou art there, and thy bosom is there; and also thou art just; thou art merciful and kind forever;

31 And thou hast taken Zion to thine own bosom, from all thy creations, from all eternity to all eternity; and naught but peace, justice, and truth is the habitation of thy throne; and mercy shall go before thy face and have no end; how is it thou canst weep?

32 The Lord said unto Enoch: Behold these thy brethren; they are the workmanship of mine own hands, and I gave unto them their knowledge, in the day I created them; and in the Garden of Eden, gave I unto man his agency;

33 And unto thy brethren have I said, and also given commandment, that they should love one another, and that they should choose me, their Father; but behold, they are without affection, and they hate their own blood;

34 And the fire of mine indignation is kindled against them; and in my hot displeasure will I send in the floods upon them, for my fierce anger is kindled against them...

36 Wherefore, I can stretch forth mine hands and hold all the creations which I have made; and mine eye can pierce them also, and among all the workmanship of mine hands there has not been so great wickedness as among thy brethren.

37 But behold, their sins shall be upon the heads of their fathers; Satan shall be their father, and misery shall be their doom; and the whole heavens shall weep over them, even all the workmanship of mine hands; wherefore should not the heavens weep, seeing these shall suffer?

In this same citation we see that our world is the unique outlier significantly different in many ways than every other world in all of Father's vast creation portfolio.⁴ We are told that everywhere else there is “*naught but peace, justice, and truth*” extending to the very throne of God.⁵ Is this not because ours was the only world in which both first parents fell? Is not our world the only one wicked enough to crucify its own God? Is that not because our world is the only one that chose a usurper and pretender for a god?

But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them. (1 Cor 4:3-4)

Elder McConkie cites Lehi and the ‘holy writ’ (2 Nephi 2:22, 23; Moses 5:11) as reasons for unequivocally proclaiming that there was no procreation and no death anywhere on the earth prior to the Fall.⁶ Plain observation of earth's fossil record has well proven that

there was indeed procreation and death all over the earth well before and through the period of the Garden as its events were recorded in the scriptures.⁷

Genesis, Moses, and Abraham all separately record that God's command to be fruitful and multiply was exactly heeded by the animal kingdom in the time prior to the Garden: "...and it was so; ...all things which I had made were very good;" (From Moses 2:)

22 And I, God, blessed [every living creature], saying: Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the waters in the sea; and let fowl multiply in the earth;

*24 And I, God, said: Let the earth bring forth the living creature after his kind, cattle, and creeping things, and beasts of the earth after their kind, **and it was so;***

*31 And I, God, saw everything that I had made, and, behold, **all things which I had made were very good;** and the evening and the morning were the sixth day.*

Why were the entire plant and animal kingdoms able to fulfill God's command to multiply and replenish the earth, and yet the First Flesh (Adam and Eve) were not? This supposition goes directly contrary to the law "irrevocably decreed in heaven" (D&C 130:20-21). Could it rather be that we (and Eve and thence Lehi) have misunderstood something very fundamental, such as God's stated consequence to our first parents' garden disobedience: "Unto the woman he said, I will greatly *multiply* thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children;" (Gen 3:16, emphasis added.) God did not in any way infer they couldn't have children previously. He merely described how the process of bringing forth children would now be *multiplied* in travail as a consequence of their choices, just as Adam's efforts in obtaining food would be multiplied in toil and sorrow.

Where, then, did the notion come from that our first parents could not have children in the Garden, and that in fact they would be trapped therein forever without blatant disobedience to God? It was *Lucifer* who said, "there is no other way." Lucifer's falsehood was then repeated by our *beguiled* (her word) mother Eve, who justified their actions by saying, "It is better to pass through sorrow that we may know the good from the evil," and "were it not for our transgressions we never should have had seed." Did not Lehi then read Eve's words⁸ (1 Nephi 5:10, 11) and do what we all naturally wish to do and believe our parents at face value by *supposing* (his word, 2 Nephi 2:17) their same rationalizations (2 Nephi 2:22-25) into his otherwise beautiful and insightful sermon?

Our First Parents' words as recorded in Moses 5:10,11 conspicuously came on the same day that the angel appeared commanding them to repent (v.8) of their disobedience. Had either of them yet brought their thoughts into alignment with God when their respective responses were objectively recorded? Does sin ever give rise to light and understanding, or do those precious gifts only come after repentance?⁹

27 And no man receiveth a fulness unless he keepeth his commandments.

28 He that keepeth his commandments receiveth truth and light, until he is glorified in truth and knoweth all things...

39 And that wicked one cometh and taketh away light and truth, through disobedience, from the children of men, and because of the tradition of their fathers. (D&C 93:27, 28, 39)

This same D&C revelation gives us a test—specifically tailored to understanding the Garden situation—which can be applied both to our parents’ hypothetical rationalizing, as well as to Lehi’s reading of them, in which he applies *further* conjecture. We find that hypothetical *if-not-for-then* rationalizing and conjecture both fall well outside the revealed boundaries of truth: what is known and what is knowable.

And truth is knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come; And whatsoever is more or less than this is the spirit of that wicked one who was a liar from the beginning. (D&C 93:24,25)

We, not Lehi, have the benefit of this revelatory test, and we can clearly see the falsity of our parents’ pre-repentant perceptions, as well as recognize the ultimate source of those perceptions. We can imagine Lehi, though, scratching his head while recounting his reading of Eve’s words in 2 Nephi 2. We see his efforts to believe her while attempting to logically follow her string of what we easily see as rationalization. We witness his struggle and doubt his v.22-25 assertions, because of our following seven observations:

- 1) Lehi attributes his assertions to *supposition* based on his reading, not revelation;
- 2) The tested-false hypothetical conjecture of *what might have been* (as was seen in Adam’s and Eve’s perspective);
- 3) The contradictory suggestion that sin is necessary to bring about good;
- 4) The contradiction between the nature of a controlling God in v.24 with the earlier (tested-true) description of agency in his v.16;
- 5) The contradiction between the contingent, probationary state associated with the plan of salvation in v.21 and the suggestion that all of this was necessary (v.22, 23, 25) to have children, because God designed or intended it to be this way (v.24);
- 6) Lehi’s v.25 supposition of cause/effect that the Fall was necessary to bring about joy is directly contradicted by the words of God Himself: that our parents’ fall brought about misery and woe; and
- 7) 2 Nephi 2:22-25 are the *only* canonical verses suggesting Garden infertility aside from our parents’ objectively recorded statements of rationalization in Moses 5:10,11.

Taking each of these observations of 2 Nephi 2:22-25 in turn:

- 1) Lehi does not claim any revelation here. His prefacing use of the word “suppose” in v.17 inherently implies both confusion at the obvious paradox and a best-guess inference based on the information he had at-hand. We cannot fault Lehi for an unwillingness or inability to be critical of our parents’ choices.

“And I, Lehi, according to the things which I have read, must needs suppose...”

(2 Nephi 2:17, after reading (1 Nephi 5:11) Eve’s rationalization in Moses 5:11.)

- 2) Eve’s ‘delusion’ carries on here. The false and hypothetical “if only / what would have been...” perspective ultimately has an evil source (D&C 93:24, 25) and leads to frustrating confusion.

*“...And now, behold, **if** Adam had not transgressed **he would not have fallen, but he would have remained in the garden of Eden. And all things which were created must have remained in the same state in which they were after they were created; and they must have remained forever, and had no end. And they would have had no children; wherefore they would have remained in a state of innocence, having no joy, for they knew no misery; doing no good, for they knew no sin.**”* (2 Nephi 2:22-23)

C.S. Lewis’ inspired creator figure Aslan speaks to Eve and to *us* through the character Lucy on the hopeless nature of such hypothetical conjecture:

“You mean,” said Lucy rather faintly “that it would have turned out all right—somehow? But how? Please Aslan, am I not to know?”

“To know what *would have happened*, child?” said Aslan. “No, nobody is ever told that. But anyone can find out what *will* happen.”¹⁰

- 3) Another indication of Lehi’s confusion arises from the false v.23 statement “...*doing no good, for they knew no sin.*” This false precept simply does not stand the test of time.¹¹ No other scripture suggests that God needs us to sin in order to do good. The canon is rich with the opposite. This is not a principle that we would teach our children today. It is not true now, and it wasn’t then either. In the temple, Lucifer promises us the ability to comprehend opposites as a distraction from what opposition really entails—that evil must be allowed to *tempt* us so that good may truly be a legitimate (unforced) path in our test of moral agency.¹² And Lehi himself, mere verses earlier, told us that temptation is all that is needed to activate the plan of agency.¹³

(v.16, with added emphasis) *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.*

That temptation is both necessary and sufficient to fully activate agency is a true, eternal principle, supported by a scriptural *primary source* from God.

*And it must needs be that the devil should **tempt** the children of men, or they could not be agents unto themselves; for if they never should have bitter they could not know the sweet—* (D&C 29:39 Emphasis added.)

- 4) Lehi’s verse 24 seems to be the consummate “tossing up of the hands” in surrender to incomplete understanding. It is basically a statement of “I know this doesn’t make

sense, but it doesn't matter. God is in charge. It will all work out." This is a common escape phrase heard even today when a theological concept is beyond our mental grasp.

(v.24) *But behold, all things have been done in the wisdom of him who knoweth all things.*

No specific meaning should be assigned to such a vague phrase. Let's go back to the earlier statements in v.16 and D&C 29:39, cited above, and agree that agency cannot truly exist unless God gives us each ultimate capacity to make and express our own choices without fear of intervention or manipulation by God. Our choices and actions are our own, as are the associated consequences. Despite being part of the Holy Writ, we cannot concur with Lehi's v.24 statement if it suggests that God is micromanaging all things and that all things (especially disobedience to His own command!) occur according to His great will, with us being but mere pawns upon some great game board. These are truly the philosophies of Lucifer mingled with scripture now debunked by modern prophets:

"Agency is fundamental to the Gospel plan that brings us to earth. God does not intervene to forestall the consequences of some person's choices, in order to protect the well being of other persons. Even when they kill, injure or oppress one another, for this would destroy his plan for our eternal progress. He will bless us to endure the consequences of other's choices, but he will not prevent those choices."

—Elder Dallin H. Oaks, Saturday pm session, October General Conference 2009

"We must use [our agency] wisely, and remain close to the spirit, otherwise we find ourselves foolishly yielding to the enticements of the adversary."

—Pres. Boyd K. Packer, Saturday pm October General Conference 2009

"...we do not have to yield simply because a temptation surfaces. We may want to, but we don't have to." —Elder D. Todd Christofferson, October General Conference 2009

- 5) A probationary state is mercifully given to us as a result of the Fall. In the pre-endowment we hear Father clearly convey that Jesus' Atonement was prepared as a *contingency* upon the actions of agency, as *"If they partake of the fruit thereof, then we shall provide a savior for them, as we counseled in the beginning."*

There is an intrinsic meaning of forfeited opportunity contained within the *probational* concept, "you screwed up your best option, so now you have to make-do with a more limited (and less favorable) set of options." A convicted felon, like Lewis' Lucy character in *Prince Caspian*, will never know what life might have held in store if he or she had made different choices. Implicit in the definition of probation¹⁴ is the concept of suspending the sentence of the one convicted so they can demonstrate rehabilitated behavior. Even Lehi understood the *contingency* aspect of the Plan of Salvation clearly (and remarkably) in the verse just prior to his lapse into

Eve's beguiled mentality of justification. He references both probation and suspension in terms of the lengthening of their time to repent, and clearly demonstrates that their lost state is *because of* the transgression of our parents.

*And the days of the children of men were **prolonged**, according to the will of God, that they might repent while in the flesh; wherefore, their state became a state of **probation**, and their time was **lengthened**, according to the commandments which the Lord God gave unto the children of men. For he gave commandment that all men must repent; for he showed unto all men that they were lost, **because of the transgression of their parents**. (2 Nephi 2:21 with added emphasis)*

Here, the prophets all concur! See also Mormon 9:28; D&C 29:43; 1 Nephi 15:31, 32; 2 Nephi 9:27; 1 Nephi 10:21; Helaman 13:38; 2 Nephi 33:9. Reading these verses helps further clarify another aspect of the “garden infertility paradox”: why would we all be sitting in condemnation and face dire consequences for violating the probationary terms of our suspended sentence if this is what God wanted and needed for us to do in the first place? The known nature of our God has us reject the paradox by accepting Lehi's teaching of the true gospel precepts in v.21 (validated by other prophets) and by rejecting his self-described suppositions in v.22-25, which are never validated by any other scriptural prophet or divine primary source—in fact which are directly contradicted by the same.

- 6) Lehi's phrase “Adam fell that men might be; and men are that they might have joy” suggests to our doctrinal traditions that Adam and Eve fell so that we could experience joy. This conflated concept¹⁵ is never scripturally supported by any other source. The opposite is in fact true, as Enoch demonstrates by quoting the words of God with a clarifying statement as to the source of any confusion (Moses 6:48, 49):

*And he said unto them: **Because that Adam fell, we are; and by his fall came death; and we are made partakers of misery and woe.** Behold Satan hath come among the children of men, and tempteth them to worship him; and men have become carnal, sensual, and devilish, and are shut out from the presence of God.*

Joy *never* results from sin or disobedience (Alma 41:10). No good thing came from the Fall, neither children nor joy:

*And behold, there were divers ways that he did manifest things unto the children of men, which were good; and all things which are good cometh of Christ; **otherwise men were fallen, and there could no good thing come unto them.** (Moroni 7:24)*

Good things came about because of Jesus, *in spite of the Fall!* (See the rest of Moroni 7.) Obedience is the *only* path to any given promised blessing, and this eternal principle should completely negate any and all other rationalizing of Adam and Eve's need to disobey God in order to procreate:

There is a law, irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundations of this world, upon which all blessings are predicated—And when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated. (D&C 130:20,21)

- 7) The doctrine of the hypothetical *need for the Fall* simply dies following Lehi's suppositions. 2 Nephi 2:22-25 are the only scriptures in our entire canon that follow Eve's theme of rationalizing as a *reason of divine purpose* for the Fall,¹⁶ creating the garden infertility paradox:¹⁷ It was Lucifer's implanted suggestion that the Fall was necessary, intended by God in a secret and duplicitous plan, opposite to His direct commandment—that God somehow *needed* His children to become subject to Lucifer: carnal, sensual, devilish and an enemy to God—so that His own commandment to multiply might be fulfilled. Lehi picks up the truth immediately in the next verse.

And the Messiah cometh in the fulness 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, 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. (2 Nephi 2:26)

President Nelson clarifies themes that further erode the rigid Pillars metaphor

The Creation, the Fall and the Atonement are all extremely important. The key is to place them each in the context of moral agency so that they are not viewed as isolated or amorphous stand-alone events that individually or collectively represent the rigid will of God. We must reject that each *must* happen according to God's grand design, independent from actions of human agency.

I suggest that in his more recent talks, April 2017 General Conference and 2017 CES Fireside, President Nelson projects an important clarification of eternal principles driven by the nature of our eternally righteous Father and attributes of moral agency. These are precepts that do not change with the folly of whim, events, circumstances, adjustments of cultural mores or personal opinion; but the eternal principles are rather described in a way that it is clear they are unalterable, timeless and unchanging.

The nature of an ever-righteous God and His immutable laws

Purging a theology that has God planning, manipulating and controlling everything that happens is creating a beautiful theology centered on God's love, manifest through moral agency. Everything works according to Divine Law—predictably, so says President Nelson (“Prophets, Leadership, and Divine Law”, Worldwide Devotional, 1/8/17, BYU):

“But what if it doesn't work?” I replied, “It always works! It works according to divine law.”

Divine law is incontrovertible and irrefutable. Divine law cannot be denied or disputed. And when God's laws are obeyed, relevant blessings always result! Blessings are always predicated upon obedience to applicable law.

Existentialists can expound; relativists can rationalize with their constricted views of reality—that truth is only a subjective experience—laws are laws! God’s truth is really true! What God says is right is right! And what He says is wrong is wrong! That is why it is imperative that you know God’s laws. They control this universe and multitudes of others. When divine laws are broken, consequences follow. Even though our hearts ache for those who break God’s laws, penalties must be paid. Divine law must be obeyed.

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While the world is filled with uncertainty, there need not be uncertainty in your heart and mind about what is true and what is not. Uncertainty is born of imperfect or unknown information. As an Apostle, I plead with you to learn God’s irrevocable laws. Learn them by study and by faith. That means, among other things, “[living] by every word that proceedeth forth from the mouth of God.”

Pray to discern between God’s laws and the philosophies of men, including those cunning counterfeits of the adversary. Through eons of time, Lucifer has honed his craft. He is skilled at distraction, distortion, deception, and misdirection. I plead with you to avoid his cunning snares as you would avoid a plague!

Entrapments designed by Satan can only bring to you misery, spiritual captivity, and death. This is true every time. The sad consequences of yielding to Lucifer’s lures are predictable, dependable, repeatable, and regrettable.

Conversely, I promise that as you keep God’s commandments, as you live by His laws, you will become increasingly free. This freedom will unveil to you your divine nature and allow you to prosper personally. You will be free from the bondage of sin. You will be free to be you—an effective, righteous leader. You will be prepared to lead by precept and by example wherever you are needed. Happily, the blessings of keeping God’s commandments are also predictable, dependable, and repeatable.

President Nelson is unequivocal in his reasoning and speech, as he should be. He is describing a God who speaks “and it is so”. He is describing a God of truth and light, and for whom there is no cunning, duplicity or manipulation. The God whose laws he describes cannot command one thing in the Garden—or anywhere else—while intending the opposite. It is a test of the Divine Law that we should believe it, even at the expense of having to discard certain contradictory words of all else, even including those prophets whom we normally believe as spokesmen. And it should be much easier to believe God at face value than to believe His eternal adversary. So neither the God nor the Divine Laws President Nelson describes can reasonably be credited with using Lucifer as a spokesman for something that is impossible according to Divine Law (“there is no other way”, “...for that is the way Father obtained his knowledge”). President Nelson teaches us that obedience brings blessings of light, wisdom, and understanding, and that God will fulfill all His promised blessings. We can take it to Eden’s bank that this promise includes the

commandment for our parents to procreate while they were yet innocent¹⁸ before God in the Garden.

We can now confidently proclaim, “there are no exceptions!” Not even in the Garden of Eden! Applying President Nelson’s promises to the circumstances of the Garden, we can assess the situation realizing that we too face the same test as our first parents did, every time we attend the temple endowment: will *I* believe God at face value, or will *I* preferentially believe the liar and suffer the same consequences: death, slavery, grief, sin?

No amorphous Atonement or Fall

Similarly, the stand-alone pillar of the Atonement finds itself in a makeover, under President Nelson’s well-considered and inspired thoughts:¹⁹

It is doctrinally incomplete to speak of the Lord’s atoning sacrifice by shortcut phrases, such as “the Atonement” or “the enabling power of the Atonement” or “applying the Atonement” or “being strengthened by the Atonement.” These expressions present a real risk of misdirecting faith by treating the event as if it had living existence and capabilities independent of our Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ.

Under the Father’s great eternal plan, it is the Savior who suffered. It is the Savior who broke the bands of death. It is the Savior who paid the price for our sins and transgressions and blots them out on condition of our repentance. It is the Savior who delivers us from physical and spiritual death.

There is no amorphous entity called “the Atonement” upon which we may call for succor, healing, forgiveness, or power. Jesus Christ is the source. Sacred terms such as Atonement and Resurrection describe what the Savior did, according to the Father’s plan, so that we may live with hope in this life and gain eternal life in the world to come. The Savior’s atoning sacrifice—the central act of all human history—is best understood and appreciated when we expressly and clearly connect it to Him.

Just as Jesus’ Atonement cannot be disconnected from the willful actions of our Savior, Jesus Christ, neither can the Fall be disconnected from the independent, willful choices and actions of our Father Adam and our Mother Eve. Each choice was an individual’s expression of his or her own moral agency. May I paraphrase President Nelson by saying that I believe it is also doctrinally incorrect to speak of our parents’ fall by shortcut phrases as “the Fall” or the “fortunate” fall, or suggest that Father willed or intended they should fall, or that He was pleased in any way that they did so?

Jesus chose to be completely obedient to Father in subjecting Himself as a ransom to his and our eternal enemy so that we could be freed from the same. This was necessary because Mother Eve and Father Adam willfully chose to directly disobey God and to place themselves in servitude to the one who was a liar and a murderer from the beginning (John 8:44). Rather than celebrating Adam and Eve for supposedly having the

prudence and wisdom to disobey God, let us celebrate and honor them for having the humility, vision and willingness to repent, and to show us how to do the same!

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We have demonstrated in this article²⁰ and through the use of recent clarifying talks by President Russell M. Nelson that God’s Law is based on 1) providing us with the means to live, love and learn; to make choices and to experience all the consequences and sensations attached thereto; 2) the highest level of choice—moral agency—is when we are faced with opposition between embodiments of good and evil and then choose to obey the one or the other, so becoming *like* the one or the other; and 3) obedience to God *always* (in the Garden *and* in our own lives) brings the associated promised blessings. Obedience to Lucifer *always* (in the Garden *and* in our own lives) leads to loss of light and understanding, and to unhappiness.

Manifestations of God’s love: the planned, the allowed and the contingent

We should all welcome a beautiful and clearly defined theology that places at its core God’s manifestations of love for us through His gift of moral agency. These include that which He planned, that which He allowed, and that for which He provided a contingency.

The Planned:

The whole purpose of the creation, both of the earth and of our physical bodies, is to give us—God’s children—the ability to *act* upon our choices and to experience all aspects of the consequences, growing and maturing from the challenges arising therefrom. This is Father’s way of teaching us, and eventually of exalting us into His fullness of joy.

It is easy to visualize the Garden as the first Temple on the earth for our parents, in the same context as it is for us today: Father Adam and Mother Eve had been made Lords over the whole earth, and all things on the face thereof were made for their benefit. We can further imagine how they and their posterity were intended to come and go from the world at-large to the Garden Temple as often as they wished. God had, after all, promised to return and bring them further light and understanding. The *world* in God’s intention would not be for them to see as “lone and dreary” because it was intended to be the laboratory of life: to bring challenge and opportunity, mystery and learning, growth and understanding. The difference between this intended life versus the exiled life our parents actually chose and experienced within their perceived “lone and dreary” world (same world, different perspectives) is in the work, disappointment, pain, and failure intended to be among the teaching tools in the one, versus the *multiplied* travail (fruitless toil), sorrow, suffering and sin that were actually experienced in the other.

The Allowed:

An important factor related to the principles of moral agency (often neglected in our failure-averse culture) is the notion that the possibility of failure is an evidence of the love of God. That is, there can be no true success without a legitimate opportunity to fail. Every success we achieve or attempt—every step we make in maturation and growth—comes at the explicit or implicit availability or cost of failure as a legitimate option. (And

in almost all cases failure does not connote sin, but such failure—unlike sin—indeed represents a valuable learning opportunity.)

Exaltation cannot be a legitimate path for us unless we also have damnation (self-destruction) available as a valid alternative. This is the foundational principle of opposition upon which we can legitimately claim that God never intended for our first parents to disobey Him: He placed them before the two trees—the one proffering death set there in opposition to the one promising life—and let them make a choice, either to their eternal happiness and joy or to their utter destruction. He neither manipulated nor intervened. He allowed them to make their own choices and—because He spoke it—they must justly suffer the consequences thereof and become completely subject to their new master, experiencing all the death, suffering, sorrow and sin that that malicious being intended...

The Contingent:

...except that mercy still has both a place and an opportunity. The *place* of mercy is perhaps the greatest manifestation of God's love for us—that He did not wish to see us suffer under the lash of the one who had made himself adversary, and be destroyed. Father was willing to allow another to take our place. The *opportunity* for mercy lay in the fact that Lucifer was cast down from the heavens by his brother, and Lucifer hated that brother above all else combined. Lucifer was more than willing to accept in ransom the One in exchange for his legitimate ownership of the entire human race, who had each betrayed God in sin. He would have the opportunity to maliciously torture the One in Gethsemane, engulfing Him in a barrage of torments from physiological to emotional and psychological, each of infinite magnitude, and all with the intent that Jesus should relent and prefer Lucifer's death to this unlimited suffering. If, perchance, he succeeded, then he would be the master of his hated brother and us too. All would be lost.

Again at the courts and under the scourge, and finally under the nails at Golgotha, the brutal and merciless physical torture that would kill all others was unable to subdue the One who *only* had at His disposal—by ransom agreement—His *will* and divine ability to *choose* to live. Praise be to our Lord, Jesus the Christ, that He was perfectly obedient to the Father—that He chose to suffer *and live* so that we might be freed. Praise be to Him that when the finishing time came He died under His own terms and was so positioned to later break the bands of death for all.

Recapitulation

In his 1981 devotional talk, Elder McConkie lays out his logic for why three historical events are so important that they should be considered pillars of eternity; why one is eternally necessary and cause for the other, working backwards from Atonement (necessary for exaltation of all humanity for all time) to Fall (sin, exile and death creating the need for the Atonement) to Creation (setting the stage for the Fall). Many of his observations are correct and stand up to scrutiny over time, but clearly his use of causation needs to be re-examined because it is backwards and his assumptions are upside-down.

Extending Elder McConkie's circular logic to our current popular tradition, our parents must be cast from the presence of God to become carnal, sensual and devilish *so that* the Savior could come and provide the Atonement to bring man back into the presence of God. In this view, God designs and manipulates how man should become fallen precisely *so that* they could be subsequently rescued. In this view the underlying assumption comes from Lucifer that "there was no other way" to present mankind with the vicissitudes of mortality and to enable them to have children. It is also presumed that this is the way Father obtained his knowledge, based on another of Lucifer's lies.

We can turn these assumptions right-side-up when we follow President Nelson's charge to *always* believe God at face value and always disbelieve Lucifer—without exception or rationalization. Then we can see that experiencing the gift of moral agency is the one common denominator among all the creations of God's vast portfolio, from eternity to eternity. We can now fully comprehend President Nelson's clarification of Jesus' Atonement: On *our* world, our first parents chose badly, which choice necessitated Jesus' ransom to save us from Lucifer's grasp. Our Lord took our place under Lucifer's lash and—as our new master if we so chose—victoriously offered to forgive us and place us back into a probationary path of innocence where we might once again progress as disciples toward eternal joy and *all* that the Father hath.

Referencing the Creation, Fall and Atonement as self-determinant Pillars of Eternity is a doctrinally incomplete and inaccurate concept. Only moral agency adequately describes the vast but definable love of God—its summed cost and price. The *cost* of agency is found in the lives of those He watched use it to their own destruction within their first estate. Further, the *price* of agency is found in the infinite and eternal sacrifice of God's Only Begotten Son, offered in ransom to free those of us who used it to obey and become subject to His enemy while in our second estate. God's love is thus manifest to us in how He *planned* to bring us to joy, how he *allowed* us to fail as a legitimate expression of our agency, and finally how He mercifully, *contingently* provided salvation, returning us to innocence before Him and to the path leading us to His Joy.

Notes

¹ See also “The Purifying Power of Gethsemane”, Bruce R. McConkie, General

² We ignore the Savior’s testimony of His Father’s eternally righteous nature in John 5:19, 20 when we insist with Elder Lorenzo Snow that, “As man is, God once was...” We likewise ignore Enoch’s expansive vision witnessing the holiness of our weeping God, from eternity to eternity (Moses 7:29). I see it as a false justification to boast how wonderful and hopeful it is for the human state to think that God once traveled this same sinful path Himself, later repenting. We have created for ourselves a false, anthropomorphic god, and with the accompanying mystery, a state of blasphemy.

³ Is this Moses 7 account of God's anger a direct response to the Fall, or is it actually a more general condemnation of mankind's behavior since the Fall? There is clearly a general condemnation of humanity, such as the reference to sending in the floods (v.34). But there is also causation, starting in v.32, with the reference to the creation of this race, the bestowal of agency in the Garden and then, significantly, the statement of expectation what that agency was intended to produce—love, because they should "choose me, their Father". Who did they choose instead? Well, who is it that is angry? And who is it that holds the earth veiled in his chains and who mocks us, laughing with his angels (v.26)?

And by the way, what was the ‘knowledge’ God bestowed in that same day that He created them (v.32)? Was that not the promised knowledge Eve declares when she perceives her new master, "I *know* thee now, thou art Lucifer, he who was cast from Father's presence for rebellion"? That was it. Period. No more special knowledge than that.

⁴ I do not suggest there were no other fallen individuals. I only suggest that there were no other fallen worlds. Another way of saying this is that our world is the only one in which both parents succumbed, causing genocidal success for the adversary in the great day of his power. I guess that some individuals in other worlds—overly curious + overtly rebellious children or descendants—face their test of agency and fail. And they must die in the same day spiritually, though they even may not be granted probationary status to repent. So they may die physically in short order too. But who knows? And does it matter?

⁵ Does this phrase refer specifically to God's heavenly abode ("the habitation of thy throne") or does it include other created worlds? Yes, the throne may refer to a chair or to the room it sits in or to the palace in which He resides, or perhaps to Kolob itself. But the context of the surrounding verses is far less constraining. The context is what Enoch has been viewing—the "millions of earths like this" (v.30) in amazement at the length, the breadth and the expanse of all Father's creations from eternity to eternity. I think v.29 is a reference to the holiness of God's footstool, and not just to God Himself. Enoch sees all of God's creations and there are no boundaries but one. Everywhere Enoch looks outside his own world he sees holiness (v.29), mercy and kindness after the pattern of the

Creator (v.30) and peace, justice and truth among the *habitation* of this throne and expansive kingdom (v.31). But the remarkable thing is that as he looks out to see the God of Heaven weeping among all the rest of His righteous creation, a stunning new awareness is opened to him: all of heaven is seen looking *back*. The entire habitation of heaven are *able to discern us*. And they weep at what they see (v.37, 40, 41).

⁶ He also cites a litany of past prophets who would normally carry a great deal of influence if it were not explicitly God's first and great commandment we were discussing. I have chosen to believe God at face value, because of the very nature of the God I claim to worship: a God of truth and light in whom there is no shadow of duplicity. A God who speaks and it is so. A God who excuses not Himself and who does not need others (either Lucifer in the temple or our correlation committee) to do it for Him.

⁷ Far better to focus the discussion now and indicate that Adam was the first "Flesh" meaning that his body was the first on our earth to host a divinely-fathered spirit. And the Garden of Eden was the first Temple on the earth. Inside that sacred place there was no death. But there was opportunity to choose death. Now the debate must be refocused whether such a choice represented God's will or not.

⁸ Adam's and Eve's statements (Moses 5:10, 11) represent accurate, objective records of their actual worldviews at the time the angel came to notify our parents of the existence of a path out of exile. They weren't actually out of exile yet, but a path had been prepared. They weren't taught the Gospel yet, but they would be. They hadn't repented yet but this angel put them on notice that they must do so in order to attain that path. Their exuberant responses were dutifully recorded in vision without editorial comment. Like the two trees, it is up to us to decide what is true and what is not, by measurement against the divinely provided truth standard. In our case we benefit from the unambiguous tests found in D&C 93:24,25 and D&C 58:42,43. Both statements from both individuals carry evidence of the need to repent (i.e., change the way he or she thinks), as both statements bear the distinguishing marks of rationalization. So I am not throwing either of them under the bus. I am simply suggesting that we should not honor and revere our parents for falling, but rather for repenting and for showing us how to do the same.

⁹ The impact of the Holy Ghost was limited to testifying of the Father and of the Son, and permitting Adam to glimpse his future posterity. "There is yet hope and rescue in Christ! And even return from exile!" But see D&C 58:42-43 to highlight the fact that the repentance process was yet incomplete while their attitudes were yet characterized by rationalization.

Behold, he who has repented of his sins, the same is forgiven, and I, the Lord, remember them no more. By this ye may know if a man repenteth of his sins—behold, he will confess them and forsake them.

¹⁰ C.S. Lewis in *The Chronicles of Narnia, Book 4, Prince Caspian*, p.142, Scholastic 1995 (emphasis in original)

¹¹ Must we know sin (perform sin) in order to know good? Absolutely not. Perhaps it means that we need to be exposed to sin, or to see sin or be aware of the same. I don't really see much difference. It all falsely suggests that God *needs* Lucifer to get *somebody* to sin so the rest of us can look pitifully on that individual and realize how much better off we are without it.

¹² *Sin* is not what gives rise to the ability to do good, but the *opportunity* to sin is what is essential here (v.16): that they should be *enticed* by the one or the other. Temptation, *not sin*, is the necessary and sufficient condition to activate agency. The scriptures are full of examples of the divine method for dispensing wisdom and light and understanding, by facing temptation and turning away therefrom (Job 28 is a good example). That is exactly why there was a dark tree planted with an advocate proffering death *in the midst* of the Garden. And it is why, even in the restored church, Lucifer is allowed a (secret by taboo) bully pulpit inside our own sacred temples to tell *us* his very same lies. Which ones should we believe?

¹³ Agency was *fully* active the moment our parents were set before the two trees, having known and been taught and blessed at the hand of God; having been instructed exactly in the consequences of their actions, and having been told that "We will go away, but we will visit you again, and bring you further light and understanding." This test our first parents faced was no different than the test allowed Moses prior to his expansive vision of the eternities, or the test allowed Jesus after His fast, or the test given to us in the temple whenever we sit spellbound in front of Lucifer. Some pass the test and are visited with the promised light and understanding. Some fail and make rationalizations.

¹⁴ Merriam Webster definition of 'probation': *The action of suspending the sentence of a convicted offender and giving the offender freedom during good behavior under the supervision of a probation officer.*

¹⁵ The revealed temple script for the garden scenario provides the clarity that Adam fell only because his wife had already partaken, making Adam feel that his options were very limited. Adam fell to be with his wife so they could remain together and procreate. We must act in faith to consider that an Adam who continued to insist on perfect obedience (without rationalizing) to *all* of God's commandments should expect to be blessed in all things (D&C 82:10).

¹⁶ Nephi clearly understood the purpose of the Creation, so that God's children could have the opportunity to possess the earth (1 Nephi 17:36) and to choose whether they would have Him to be their God, thus becoming either righteous and be blessed or to become wicked and accursed:

36 Behold, the Lord hath created the earth that it should be inhabited; and he hath created his children that they should possess it.

37 And he raiseth up a righteous nation, and destroyeth the nations of the wicked.

39 *He ruleth high in the heavens, for it is his throne, and this earth is his footstool.*
40 *And he loveth those who will have him to be their God. Behold, he loved our fathers... and he remembered the covenants which he had made;*

Jacob similarly has no illusions about the cause of the Fall, that it came because of a willful act of transgression, not because of God's secret need or plan. God's plan was rather one of redemption *because of* the actions of His children (2 Nephi 9).

5 *Yea, I know that ye know that in the body he shall show himself unto those at Jerusalem, from whence we came; for it is expedient that it should be among them; for it behooveth the great Creator that he suffereth himself to become subject unto man in the flesh, and die for all men, that all men might become subject unto him.*

6 *For as death hath passed upon all men, to fulfil the merciful plan of the great Creator, there must needs be a power of resurrection, and the resurrection must needs come unto man by reason of the fall; and the fall came by reason of transgression; and because man became fallen they were cut off from the presence of the Lord.*

¹⁷ In offering further clear instruction about the ever-believable nature of God's words at face value, President Packer indicated in October 2009 general conference that "When the commandment indicates '*thou shalt not...*', we had better pay attention." Does this instruction apply to us but somehow *not* apply to Adam and Eve (Moses 3:17)? Of course it applies to everyone! Our God is infinite and eternal! When He conveys a commandment and a promise, we can absolutely trust Him that it is an eternal principle and that it applies in *all* situations, without rationalization (D&C 82:10, 1 Nephi 3:7).

¹⁸ "Innocent before God" to me indicates the state *prior* to making a choice between good and evil. Once the choice has been made, one is either righteous (obedient), or guilty (disobedient). In the latter case, mercy and salvation may intervene to render the individual once again innocent before God as per D&C 93:

38 *Every spirit of man was innocent in the beginning; and God having redeemed man from the fall, men became again, in their infant state, innocent before God.*

39 *And that wicked one cometh and taketh away light and truth, through disobedience, from the children of men, and because of the tradition of their fathers.*

Therefore "in their infant state" is an entirely favorable state of being blameless before God, and not a state bemoaning immaturity, suggesting being incapable of procreation. These revelatory verses are why we can say that the test of moral agency now applies to us—the descendants of Adam and Eve—as we worship in the temple. It is a 'do-over'. We are once again innocent before God, having been redeemed by the blood of His Son. Let's see if we can get it right this time and reject Lucifer and each of his statements as lies, and accept everything God tells us at face value.

¹⁹ Russell M. Nelson, “Drawing the Power of Jesus Christ into Our Lives”, April General Conference, 2017

²⁰ And elaborated in my book *Satan Gets to Reign, BAD THINGS HAPPEN, God Gets the Blame*, Outskirts Press, 2017