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I have long wondered what the chains of hell are? Where do they come from? How do we get shackled by them? How do we cast them off? What is the instrument of our deliverance to free ourselves from these chains? To answer my questions I turned to the scriptures and started collecting every reference I could find with the word *chain*.

Zeezrom (pronounced Z-ězrom)

I first became aware of the beginnings of a definition of the chains of hell when my wife and I were reading in Alma 12. Zeezrom had just been revealed by Alma and Amulek as a liar before the people of Ammonihah. Alma 12:3-6 are the verses I’ll be looking at.

> 3 Now Zeezrom, seeing that thou hast been taken in thy lying and craftiness, for thou hast not lied unto men only but thou hast lied unto God; for behold, he knows all thy thoughts, and thou seest that thy thoughts are made known unto us by his Spirit;
>
> 4 And thou seest that we know that thy plan was a very subtle plan, as to the subtlety of the devil, for to lie and to deceive this people that thou mightest set them against us, to revile us and to cast us out—
>
> 5 Now this was a plan of thine adversary, and he hath exercised his power in thee. Now I would that ye should remember that what I say unto thee I say unto all.
>
> 6 And behold I say unto you all that this was a snare of the adversary, which he has laid to catch this people, that he might bring you into subjection unto him, that he might encircle you about with his chains, that he might chain you down to everlasting destruction, according to the power of his captivity.

We learned in an earlier chapter that the lawyers earned their money by the number of cases they could drum up. They were, in essence all ambulance chasers. They often had to create their own business by turning people against each other so they could take people to court. This is what Zeezrom was guilty of doing with Alma and Amulek. He had to trap them in their own words and stir up the people so they could hire him to take these two prophets to court and have them evicted from the city or punished according to the law.

By the power of the Spirit, Alma informed Zeezrom that this plan of his was a trap laid for him by the devil, Zeezrom’s adversary. It is important to note here that Satan uses us to exercise his own power. Alma then broadens his preaching audience from just Zeezrom to everyone present.

The question here is found in verse six. Alma says “this was a snare of the adversary, which he has laid to catch this people, that he might bring you into subjection unto him, that he might encircle you about with his chains, that he might chain you down to everlasting destruction, according to the power of his captivity.” What was the snare (trap)? What was Zeezrom doing that would have helped the devil to catch all the people and bring them under the devil’s subjection? And how would that subjection chain them down to everlasting destruction?

The answer is reasonably simple. The snare was to turn people against each other. It was to cause contention. Backbiting, bickering, turning on each other, fighting amongst themselves, breeding a spirit of distrust among neighbors traps everyone in a state of despair and hopelessness. It robs them of happiness, and prevents them from being able to feel the Spirit, which brings peace and joy.

The devil’s power lies in his ability to enslave and keep people down in their ignorance and in a spirit of spiritual darkness. The Spirit’s power lies in His ability to enlighten and bring the Savior’s peace to their souls, freeing them from deception and spiritual ignorance through personal revelation and the power of the Savior’s atonement.

The grand key of knowledge

There are some basic laws of God that govern all that happens to us. Once we learn of these laws and see how they operate in our lives, much of what happens in life begins to make more sense to us. One of these laws is the law of knowledge. Knowledge of spiritual things happens on a principle of addition and subtraction.

Once we have been given any kind of spiritual knowledge, what we do with that knowledge determines what happens next. Remember that the Lord will never force anything upon us until the day of judgment when the law is finally enforced in full measure. Until that time we are able to make our decisions freely, with only minor consequences for our misdeeds.

The law of knowledge works this way. If I am given a spiritual knowledge of a principle then honor that principle, and seek for more knowledge then the Lord will add to my knowledge by giving me the capacity to understand more. All spiritual knowledge is a gift from God. It can be given, and it can be taken away. If I respect what I have been given, and honor the conditions under which it is given then the Lord will grant me more. But if I reject or dishonor that which the Lord has given me, he can take away what I have been given.

When the Lord takes away the spiritual knowledge He has given his children, they cease to be able to understand that which they once understood. Because they hardened their hearts and chose to be disobedient after having received enlightenment (spiritual knowledge), He removes their ability to comprehend that which they once were able to perceive.

Note that God does not do this willy nilly. We choose whether the spiritual knowledge received is increased or taken from us. It is our choice. We make that choice by the decisions we make to obey the commandments and live our lives according to the knowledge we have already received.

For example, have you ever known anyone who was a member of the Church and had a testimony of the gospel of the Restoration? They knew the prophet was a prophet, that God lives and loves us, that the Book of Mormon and other scriptures were given to us from God and are true? Now think about that person who has known all these things, and more, who has fallen away from the Church. Do they currently have that same knowledge?

I can bear testimony that such knowledge is taken from them. Little by little, as they reject truth and act counter to the commandments of God, they lose the ability to comprehend the nature of God and His gospel. They no longer have faith in the atoning sacrifice of Christ, and they have placed themselves outside of God’s mercy and love. They live fully in the world, and can only comprehend that which is of this world and its philosophies.

I have family members who have placed themselves in this condition. I have seen it with my own eyes. They have lost the ability to comprehend spiritual things. They can only understand what their mortal senses present to them. Why? Because in their

rebellion, Satan was able to exercise his power in their lives and bind them down to his own level of ignorance of spiritual things.

Satan has no comprehension of the mind and will of God. He is a purely intellectual being. He is very clever, but cannot understand any of the higher virtues, like compassion, forgiveness, and charity, the love of God. Satan only hates and rages. This is the condition into which he draws those who have hardened their hearts against the truth God has given them. This condition of subjection to Satan’s will is what we call the chains of hell, or the chains of darkness.

This condition of spiritual ignorance is applied by our own choices to turn from the truths revealed to us and to follow our own path away from God’s teachings. The further we travel down the path of spiritual resistance, the heavier become the chains of hell, i.e. the greater our ignorance of spiritual truths.

Scriptural examples

Most of the examples of the term “chains of hell” come from the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants. They may not be referenced much in the bible, but that doesn’t mean the principle is incorrect or didn’t apply to the Old Testament people. The law of spiritual knowledge is eternal - we are either gaining or losing our ability to comprehend the things of God. We are never static. We cannot be, for the law says that we are either being added upon or having that knowledge taken from us by our own choice.

The only New Testament reference I came across about the chains of hell come from 2 Peter 2:4.

> 4 For if God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment;

This verse is a reference to our premortal life. Those who chose to follow Satan fully rebelled against their own knowledge of God, and in being cast out of His presence they were left in a state of complete spiritual ignorance (chains of darkness) until the day of their judgment, which is yet to come.

In this next set of scriptures different descriptions are used, but they mean the same thing. Let’s look at some of the terms being used.

Awake: This means to become aware. Spiritual awareness comes only from revelation from the Holy Ghost. Spiritual knowledge enlivens the soul and causes us to comprehend and see God’s influence and dealings all around us. It is like walking through the woods after having taken a botany class. Now when we stroll among the trees we can recognize not only the types of plants that surround us, but we have a knowledge of how they live, breath, and support each other in their growth. The whole forest becomes, for us, a living unit that before was just a place to take a walk. We now have comprehension, awareness. This is what is meant to have the eyes of our understanding opened.

Sleep: Disobedience to the commandments acts like a narcotic to the soul. The more we ignore or directly disobey the Spirit and the commandments, the more we slip into a spiritual state of numbness. It is so subtle that we don’t even feel it. But what pricked our conscience last month no longer phases us this month. Little by little we cease to be bothered by wickedness and evil. And left in this cycle long enough, the things of the world become more appealing to us than the things of the Spirit. This is what is meant by a spiritual sleep. The only way to awaken from a spiritual sleep is to decide to be more attentive to obeying the commandments and the promptings of the Spirit.

Here is 2 Nephi 1:13, 23-24

> 13 O that ye would awake; awake from a deep sleep, yea, even from the sleep of hell, and shake off the awful chains by which ye are bound, which are the chains which bind the children of men, that they are carried away captive down to the eternal gulf of misery and woe.
>
> 23 Awake, my sons; put on the armor of righteousness. Shake off the chains with which ye are bound, and come forth out of obscurity, and arise from the dust.
>
> 24 Rebel no more against your brother, whose views have been glorious, and who hath kept the commandments from the time that we left Jerusalem; and who hath been an instrument in the hands of God, in bringing us forth into the land of promise; for were it not for him, we must have perished with hunger in the wilderness; nevertheless, ye sought to take away his life; yea, and he hath suffered much sorrow because of you.

This “deep sleep,” this “sleep of hell” is another description of the chains of hell, that state of numbness of the soul where Satan can work through us to accomplish his designs. Only awaking to the things of the Spirit, to become alive in Christ, if you will,

can get us out of this sleep. This awakening to spiritual light is the only way to cast off the chains of hell.

The key to arising from the dust, to shaking off the chains of hell, to awakening and putting on the armor of righteousness, is to “rebel no more.” That is the difference between having knowledge added to us and having knowledge taken from us. Brigham Young referred to this process as the law of addition and subtraction.

Further passages

In Doctrine and Covenants 138:20-24 we are taught that the Savior, during his time in the spirit world, just before His resurrection, organized his priesthood forces to begin preaching the gospel to those who had become spiritual prisoners while in mortality. The purpose of their preaching was to free them through the truth about the Savior and the Lord’s plan of salvation. Only through their acceptance of the gospel plan of happiness could they find release from the captivity of the devil.

> 20 But unto the wicked he did not go, and among the ungodly and the unrepentant who had defiled themselves while in the flesh, his voice was not raised;
>
> 21 Neither did the rebellious who rejected the testimonies and the warnings of the ancient prophets behold his presence, nor look upon his face.
>
> 22 Where these were, darkness reigned, but among the righteous there was peace;
>
> 23 And the saints rejoiced in their redemption, and bowed the knee and acknowledged the Son of God as their Redeemer and Deliverer from death and the chains of hell.
>
> 24 Their countenances shone, and the radiance from the presence of the Lord rested upon them, and they sang praises unto his holy name.

Those who had defiled themselves through disobedience lived in spiritual ignorance (darkness), being under the influence of Satan, their master. But for those who had made Christ their master there was peace. “Their countenances shone … and they sang praises unto his holy name.”

Final Thoughts

What is written in these scriptures is not a metaphor for something else. This is the truth. We all will leave this life with one master, and one master only. We will either

have chosen to follow the Savior and are alive in the spiritual knowledge His Spirit has revealed to us, or we will have chosen to do as “we” wish, and have accepted to be ruled over by Satan, who uses our spiritual sleep to work his own will to the destruction of not only us, but to all others around us.

There is no other option. There is no option three, just options one and two. This is the result of the war that was begun in heaven and has continued here on earth. There are only two camps, two sides to this battle. Either we join the one force or the other. That choice is completely up to us. But we need to understand that by not actively pursuing the knowledge of the Lord that is available to us through the scriptures and through prayer and inspiration from the Holy Ghost, we default to Satan’s side of the conflict.

The chains of hell are forged by our own hands through our own choice to be disobedient to God’s commandments. They are created under the influence of Satan because we have rejected the thought of being obedient to God in something. And just as we create our own chains of hell (state of spiritual ignorance or sleep) by allowing ourselves to become enslaved by Satan’s influence, because we rejected God’s influence in our life, so too are we able to cast off the spiritual slumber and influence of Satan by repenting of our sins and actively seeking the knowledge God wants to give us of His ways and life.

One path leads to permanent separation from God, and the other leads to living with joy in His presence. The choice is ours. We cannot refuse to choose, because not choosing God deliberately is to choose Satan by default. There is no such thing as doing it our way. I will close with one last plea to choose the right and avoid the chains of hell. This was given by Alma and is pretty self explanatory. Alma 13:27-30

> 27 And now, my brethren, I wish from the inmost part of my heart, yea, with great anxiety even unto pain, that ye would hearken unto my words, and cast off your sins, and not procrastinate the day of your repentance;
>
> 28 But that ye would humble yourselves before the Lord, and call on his holy name, and watch and pray continually, that ye may not be tempted above that which ye can bear, and thus be led by the Holy Spirit, becoming humble, meek, submissive, patient, full of love and all long-suffering;
>
> 29 Having faith on the Lord; having a hope that ye shall receive eternal life; having the love of God always in your hearts, that ye may be lifted up at the last day and enter into his rest.

30 And may the Lord grant unto you repentance, that ye may not bring down his wrath upon you, that ye may not be bound down by the chains of hell, that ye may not suffer the second death.

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