God's desire is not to punish, but to bless, not to make miserable, but to create joy. We bring upon ourselves any punishments we receive.

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For some, this concept of punishing the disobedient is cut and dried, and easy to understand. At least it is on the surface. But for others, there remain many questions as to why obedience is required in the first place.

I recently saw a cartoon on social media that disturbed me greatly. It was an image of a priest in robes speaking to a man. The man was trying to understand the message the priest was attempting to convey. The man's comment was something along this line of thinking: "Let me get this straight. You want God to save me from the punishment God will give me if I don't obey Him?" On the surface this makes God look completely hypocritical.

Think about that for a moment. As this sentiment began to sink into my thinking, I became agitated. On the one hand, his comment sounded rude, sarcastic, and almost snarky, full of attitude. But on the other hand, it made sense. How can such a statement be both true and false at the same time? And worse yet, could this statement just be true and only true? If so, why is it true? Why must God punish those who disobey Him? Isn't God supposed to be all about love and peace? If so, then why all this talk of hellfire and damnation? How can God be both the loving God we have been taught He is, and also the God of vengeance this man is referring to?

The more I thought about this, the more I realized that most of the Christian world is missing the biggest pieces to the answer to these questions. The purpose of this article
is for me to answer my own questions in a way that hopefully will satisfy not only me, but you as well. I have written other articles that address parts of these questions, but in this article I will try to tie all the doctrines together to paint a more complete picture of how our relationship with God works.

The nature of God

Some view God as being a supreme being who needs no one and nothing. He is self sufficient and self fulfilling, in that all His needs are met by himself, if He even has any needs. As members of Christ's restored gospel, through modern revelation we have learned more clearly that God is a perfect man - a man with a family whom He loves, and from which He increases in glory as they learn of His ways and honor Him by learning to live and be like Him. In Moses 1:39 in the Pearl of Great Price, He tells us that His work and His glory is to bring about the immortality and eternal life of man. The "man" being referred to is plural for all His children. All that He does is for us. He wants to share with us the happiness, the joy, the power, and the exalted lifestyle He has. In short, His goal is to teach us to become like Him. Here is Moses 1:39.

39 For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man.

Everything that follows hereafter is based on the belief that God is our Father, that He loves us with a perfect love, and that He wants us to become like Him. Mind you, I'm not advocating that we will ever replace Him or be His equal. He will always be our God, He whom we worship. But as our Father, He who gave us spirit bodies in the premortal world, and who gave us a plan to exalt us to a celestial level, He is also a source of intimate love and generosity in our lives. We believe that His plan to exalt us, known as the plan of salvation, was agreed to by all of us who come to earth. We agreed to all the conditions and stipulations of His plan for our happiness, for that is all He wants for us, our happiness.

Understanding Agency

God's plan for our eternally exalted state, and our happiness, required that we learn how to make moral choices. The agency required for us to learn to make moral choices between good and evil required us to leave His presence, so we couldn't be influenced
by His sight. There aren't many who would choose to defy God to His face. This is why we needed to go away.

But we need to mention that there were actually those who didn't like God's plan for our happiness. Lucifer, one of God's most brilliant children, being filled with pride, proposed to God's family what he deemed a better way for our happiness to be achieved. He wanted to take control of our agency, our right to choose. In exchange for us turning over our moral agency to him, he would, based on the other parts of God's plan for our salvation, save all of us. The difference though was that in exchange for saving us he wanted God to step down from His place at the head of the family and give all His glory to Lucifer.

We all understood that when we were given our moral agency, our right to choose between good and evil, there were risks involved. Just as we would be free to choose eternal life and happiness, agency also allowed us to choose eternal misery and damnation. Those who chose to follow Lucifer's plan ignited a war in heaven. In the end they were cast out down to earth as spirits. Their punishment would be that they would never be allowed to progress beyond where they had gotten already, for further progress required that they obtain a physical body, like God has. Those who were cast out became Satan and his devils, because he sought to defy God, claim God's glory, and take away the moral agency of God's children.

The war in heaven was the first lesson we had in what happens when we make poor choices with our moral agency. Our Father in Heaven included in the plan for our salvation/exaltation, a complete set of commandments and conditions we would have to be willing to accept. Accepting these conditions would lead us to obtaining the kind of life God lives. The plan of salvation is designed to teach us of God's ways. By keeping the commandments, the laws of happiness He gives us, we learn to live a life of happiness, like God lives. By using the gift He has given us, the gift of the Holy Ghost, we each have a member of the Godhead to teach us to make wise choices, to protect us from the temptations and distractions of Satan and his followers. Over time, and with a lot of practice, we learn to think more and more like God, and to understand why He does what He does, and why it makes such a difference in the happiness we experience in life.

The Savior's role
Since God cannot tolerate disobedience to His commands with the least degree of allowance, the first time we are willful and do what we want, instead of what He wants us to do, we would forever be cut off from His presence. We would never be able to return to Him. Misery would be our lot for the rest of eternity. For happiness, the way in which God lives His life, can only be had eternally by learning to live as God lives. Anything else, any other degree of disobedience will bring with it, through natural consequence, a degree of misery. So in the end, we really do choose how happy we will be in the eternities. God cannot and will not force us to obey Him, but if we choose to disobey Him, we can never experience the happiness this whole plan for our happiness can give us. Misery and punishment for disobedience is the result.

God knew full well that we all will make mistakes, and at times will be willful. So He called upon His greatest son to perform a sacrifice in our behalf that would enable him to show us the mercy God could not, as the giver of our laws, extend to us directly. With the presence of a God of mercy, we can now find mercy that will enable us to return to God clean from our sins/disobedience. This is the purpose of Jesus the Christ, our Savior, our Redeemer. The price he paid for us in Gethsemane and on the cross satisfied the demands of God’s eternal justice, allowing Jesus to offer us mercy and as many opportunities to repent and change, and improve as we could ever want. Jesus is the only one of God’s children who is worthy to ask the Father for anything and expect to have his request honored because of his own worthiness.

It is Christ's perfectly lived life, and his being half God that enabled him to pay a price none of us could possibly pay for on our own. This role in our lives put Christ at the center of our Father's plan for our eventual exaltation. Without Christ none of this could have happened. Lucifer wanted all the glory for himself, but Jesus was willing to submit himself to our Father unconditionally, showing us the way back to God in all things. Jesus didn’t want all the credit for himself for what he would do. He wanted the credit, the glory, to go to God, our universal Father. It is God, Himself who, in return, glorifies Christ for his obedience and his role in our salvation.

This demonstrates an eternal principle, and that is that glory is never taken, but must be given. God cannot glorify Himself. He must be glorified by those who honor and support Him. And for us to become like God, God must glorify us. Look in your scriptures and you will see that God never tries to take glory, but is always willing to give it to others. The same goes for Christ. He always tells us to glorify God, not himself. Glory/honor is a shared experience, not a claimed experience.
Why commandments?

When a mortal issues commands to another person it is from a position of authority and dominance. Usually it is also accompanied with the understanding that if you don't follow the commandment you will be punished for not being obedient. Love doesn't act this way, so why does God command us in all things? I have contemplated this for years.

What if God only encouraged, supplicated, begged, or urged us to live in such a way we could be happy? He could, but that would place Him in a position of a supplicant, one who is begging or asking for a favor. God really is in a position of authority and dominance. There is nothing assumed or pretend about His power and authority. That being said, it also being understood that all He wants for us is our own happiness, then doesn't it also follow that He would state in the strongest terms possible our need to behave in a certain way in order for us to find the happiness He is trying to lead us to find? We should be disappointed if He used anything less demanding than a commandment.

We need to remember that God has told us that it is in and through Christ that we can be saved or exalted. Our happiness all depends on our willingness to obey the commandments God gave Christ to give to us. Christ commands us to be happy. That sounds a little strange in today's language, but when we think about this commandment as an expression of His and our Father's desire for us to share in their joy, why would Jesus use language with any less strength of purpose. He commands us because he knows there is no other way. We cannot find happiness and become exalted any other way.

Commandments take on a whole new hue when we see them in the light of being given from a position of absolute love and a desire for our own happiness.

How do the punishments work?

Moral agency brings with it a set of consequences. If we do what leads us to goodness, which leads us to God, we will be able to experience happiness, joy, peace of soul and peace of conscience. All good things come from God. And just as all good things come from God, all bad or evil things come from Lucifer, Satan. Here is just one example of how this works. Below is 2 Nephi 32, the whole chapter. As you read the chapter, think
about what I have been saying. All good things come from God. We are taught to become like God through the gift of the Holy Ghost. And just as we are commanded to seek good anywhere we can find it, for it all comes from God, so Satan would command us not to pray and to look anywhere else, rather than to God for our inspiration and our behavior. Nephi is talking to the members of the church about how they should behave once they have been baptized ("entered in by the way").

1 And now, behold, my beloved brethren, I suppose that ye ponder somewhat in your hearts concerning that which ye should do after ye have entered in by the way. But, behold, why do ye ponder these things in your hearts?

2 Do ye not remember that I said unto you that after ye had received the Holy Ghost ye could speak with the tongue of angels? And now, how could ye speak with the tongue of angels save it were by the Holy Ghost?

3 Angels speak by the power of the Holy Ghost; wherefore, they speak the words of Christ. Wherefore, I said unto you, feast upon the words of Christ; for behold, the words of Christ will tell you all things what ye should do.

4 Wherefore, now after I have spoken these words, if ye cannot understand them it will be because ye ask not, neither do ye knock; wherefore, ye are not brought into the light, but must perish in the dark.

5 For behold, again I say unto you that if ye will enter in by the way, and receive the Holy Ghost, it will show unto you all things what ye should do.

6 Behold, this is the doctrine of Christ, and there will be no more doctrine given until after he shall manifest himself unto you in the flesh. And when he shall manifest himself unto you in the flesh, the things which he shall say unto you shall ye observe to do.

7 And now I, Nephi, cannot say more; the Spirit stoppeth mine utterance, and I am left to mourn because of the unbelief, and the wickedness, and the ignorance, and the stiffneckedness of men; for they will not search knowledge, nor understand great knowledge, when it is given unto them in plainness, even as plain as word can be.

8 And now, my beloved brethren, I perceive that ye ponder still in your hearts; and it grieveth me that I must speak concerning this thing. For if ye would hearken unto the Spirit which teacheth a man to pray, ye would know that ye must pray; for the evil spirit teacheth not a man to pray, but teacheth him that he must not pray.

9 But behold, I say unto you that ye must pray always, and not faint; that ye must not perform any thing unto the Lord save in the first place ye shall pray unto the Father
in the name of Christ, that he will consecrate thy performance unto thee, that thy performance may be for the welfare of thy soul.

We are commanded to pray to the Father in the name of Christ so that what we do may be for the welfare of our soul. This is why Satan commands us not to pray.

So what are the punishments God must give us when we don't keep His commandments to be happy and do good? The punishments are described in the scriptures with clarity. Notice as you read these scriptures that God is not inflicting punishment upon us, like you would think of someone standing above you with a whip and hitting you. The punishments we receive are self inflicted. We will be perfectly aware of our disobedience, and the results of our behavior will show us what we have deprived ourselves of ever being able to receive. This is hell.

2 Nephi 9:14

14 Wherefore, we shall have a perfect knowledge of all our guilt, and our uncleanness, and our nakedness; and the righteous shall have a perfect knowledge of their enjoyment, and their righteousness, being clothed with purity, yea, even with the robe of righteousness.

Alma 5:18

18 Or otherwise, can ye imagine yourselves brought before the tribunal of God with your souls filled with guilt and remorse, having a remembrance of all your guilt, yea, a perfect remembrance of all your wickedness, yea, a remembrance that ye have set at defiance the commandments of God?

Mormon 9:3

3 Then will ye longer deny the Christ, or can ye behold the Lamb of God? Do ye suppose that ye shall dwell with him under a consciousness of your guilt? Do ye suppose that ye could be happy to dwell with that holy Being, when your souls are racked with a consciousness of guilt that ye have ever abused his laws?

Alma 24:10

10 And I also thank my God, yea, my great God, that he hath granted unto us that we might repent of these things, and also that he hath forgiven us of those our many sins and murders which we have committed, and taken away the guilt from our hearts, through the merits of his Son.

Mosiah 3:24-27
24 And thus saith the Lord: They shall stand as a bright testimony against this people, at the judgment day; whereof they shall be judged, every man according to his works, whether they be good, or whether they be evil.

25 And if they be evil they are consigned to an awful view of their own guilt and abominations, which doth cause them to shrink from the presence of the Lord into a state of misery and endless torment, from whence they can no more return; therefore they have drunk damnation to their own souls.

26 Therefore, they have drunk out of the cup of the wrath of God, which justice could no more deny unto them than it could deny that Adam should fall because of his partaking of the forbidden fruit; therefore, mercy could have claim on them no more forever.

27 And their torment is as a lake of fire and brimstone, whose flames are unquenchable, and whose smoke ascendeth up forever and ever. Thus hath the Lord commanded me. Amen.

**The judgment**

The scriptures above outline the nature of our moral agency. They explain how it is that we can choose eternal life or eternal damnation. They also show us why so many will choose damnation over peace of conscience and eternal happiness. The principles of repentance and forgiveness through Christ's atoning sacrifice are also taught, as well as giving us the definition of eternal punishment. Remember that Eternal is one of God's names, and His punishment can be called an eternal punishment - not that it lasts forever, but it is the nature of the punishment. The punishment itself is self inflicted by each of God's children who set at defiance God's commandments that will lead us to happiness. The punishment comes when we realize how poorly we have chosen to behave when given the opportunity to prove that we would be obedient to Him in all things.

If our punishment is self inflicted, because it is the natural consequence of our own choices, does it last forever or eternally? In that disobedience prevents us from accepting Christ's atoning sacrifice on our behalf, yes, it does last forever. If we don't continue to repent and try to become better through the merits of Christ we will end up being cut off from the presence of God forever. But that doesn't mean that our misery will last forever, for Christ's mercy will eventually rescue us from even this pain. When Christ tells us that in his Father's house are many mansions, he is referring to all the
different places God's children will end up, depending on the degree of happiness they are willing to receive.

Only those who repent and keep all of the commandments that lead to happiness will be able to return to God and live eternally in His presence. Those who do will be able to continue their eternal progression through the covenants they have made with God. God will honor and glorify them, and exalt them to sit on thrones of their own. All others, like a river that has been stopped, or dammed will be what we refer to as damned. They will receive, according to God's great love for us, a kingdom of glory they were willing to receive through whatever obedience they choose to demonstrate during this mortal experience. The only children of God who will have to be cast out, and receive no glory of any kind whatsoever are Satan and those who followed him.

Back to the beginning

I started this article by mentioning the cartoon about the priest trying to convert a man, and the man trying to understand what the priest was teaching him. "Let me get this straight. You want God to save me from the punishment God will give me if I don't obey Him?" What was the man missing?

What the man hadn't been taught was that our blessings and our punishments are all tied up in the moral agency God granted to all of His children. He was also missing the piece that without Christ's eternal sacrifice on our behalf, none of us could return to God, for none of us could be forgiven for our sins/disobedience. God's plan of salvation is perfect. It provides a way for us to learn at our own pace, and improve over time, making mistakes along the way. We can be forgiven for those mistakes, but only as long as we exercise faith in Christ's atoning sacrifice for us. By making and keeping sacred covenants through God's priesthood power we can be taught by the Holy Ghost to understand the ways of God, the personality of God, and how everything about God leads a person to goodness and happiness.

It is only when we choose to act on our own, and not obey God's commandments for us to live according to the ways of happiness that we experience misery and suffering. All good things will lead us toward God, and anything that doesn't lead us toward God will lead us to His greatest enemy, Satan. Satan teaches us to be willful, for he wants us to be miserable like himself. When we arrive at the final judgment we will be able to see with perfect clarity whether we obeyed God or flaunted His commandments in favor of
personal gratification. It is the guilt that accompanies that recognition that causes our suffering.

God has given us all the basic elements of His plan for our salvation and exaltation. His only desire is that we choose to obey Him so we can become like Him. He knows how happy He is, but we cannot comprehend it at the moment. We must learn to become like Him the same way He learned to become like Him, which is one day at a time, living the kind of life that inevitably leads to everlasting happiness. This is the eternal progression that happens to all who eventually become like God. We all need to learn the same lessons. Better to learn them early rather than late.

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**Why God Punishes Those Who Disobey Him**