

WHERE
DO WE
GO

From

HERE?

THE
ANSWERS TO YOUR
QUESTIONS ABOUT
OUR NEXT LIFE

WESLEY M. WHITE
with RACHEL P. ANDERSEN

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Chapter 1

PREMORTALITY

Preparing for Judgment Day is like being in a three-act play. Before we entered mortality, we lived with God as His spirit children. We had a pretty good life in that environment, but it was not adequate to prepare us for what we, as children of God, have the potential to become. We required additional experience; we had to be exposed to the “dark side” and to unpleasant experiences and suffering. We had to learn firsthand the difference between good and evil.

Our physical birth began the second act, and it certainly lives up to its billing, providing a very broad range of experience, both joyous and arduous.

The third act is the spiritual existence after we leave this body on earth and move to our next domain, where we will continue, in a quite different venue, to prepare for Judgment Day.

Said Elder Neal A. Maxwell, “If we could see man in continuum [all three “acts”] then we could both understand and rejoice more in the plan of life.”¹

We are currently experiencing act two, and the rest of this book is dedicated to act three. However, here are nine truths about our premortal existence that are essential to our “understand[ing] and rejoic[ing] in the plan of life.”²

First, we who believe in a premortal existence are a minority. Most Christians believe that only Jesus Christ existed premortally, apparently disregarding God’s declaration to Jeremiah, “Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations” (1:5).

Elder Neal A. Maxwell informs us that in Judaism, both the Talmud (the primary source of Jewish religious law) and the Misdrash (a textual interpretation of the Talmud) “clearly teach the doctrine of the premortal existence of souls.”³

How did Christianity lose such a salient doctrine? Dr. George Ritchie suggests that an anathema against premortal life was passed in the Fifth Ecumenical Council of 533 AD⁴—apparently another casualty of the Great Apostasy. Elder Maxwell suggests that perhaps this doctrine was intentionally deleted in an attempt to decrease our feelings of liability for our behavior in this second estate. In Elder Maxwell’s words, “[A knowledge of our premortality] brings much needed identity but also much accountability.”⁵

Second, mortality is of much shorter duration than the other two estates.⁶ Elder Maxwell taught, “Compared to the first and third estates, the second estate is a mere afternoon.”⁷

Third, in the first act we possessed agency, reasoning powers, and intelligence. However, performance there varied greatly. Elder Jörg Klebingat of the Seventy taught:

Opportunities for growth and learning were widely available. However, equal access to the teachings of a loving heavenly home did not produce a uniform desire among us—Heavenly Father’s spirit children—to listen, learn, and obey. Exercising our agency, as we do today, we listened with varying degrees of interest and intent. Some of us eagerly sought to learn and obey. With war in heaven on the horizon, we prepared for graduation from our premortal home. Truth was taught and challenged; testimonies were borne and ridiculed, with each premortal spirit making the choice to either defend or defect from the Father’s plan.⁸

Fourth, our performance in that first estate, as well as the characteristics of godhood that we still lack as we transition to mortality, greatly influence our mortal circumstances and assignments. Elder Neal A. Maxwell expressed, “If one’s responsibilities [in mortality] are in some ways linked to past performance or to past capabilities, it should not surprise us. If the tutoring one receives bears down especially upon what remains to be refined, why should it be otherwise?”⁹ He continues:

When we say God has a plan, he truly has a plan—not simply a grand scale, but for each of us as individuals, allocating some special talent to this dispensation and some to another. I regard God as the perfect personnel manager, even though he must work with and through all of us who are so imperfect.

I assume, gladly, that in the allocation to America of remarkable leaders like Thomas

Jefferson, George Washington, and Abraham Lincoln, the Lord was just as careful. After all, if you've got only one Abraham Lincoln, you'd better put him in that point in history when he's most needed—much as some of us might like to have him now. . . . There cannot be a plan for the whole without a plan for each part.” . . . God knew beforehand each of our coefficients for coping and contributing. With regard to our individual traits and personalities, obviously genes and environment play a large part. But more important than we now know is the luggage we bring with us from the pre-mortal world. . . . When in situations of stress we wonder if there is any more in us to give, we can be comforted to know that God, who knows our capacity perfectly, placed us here to succeed. No one was foreordained to fail or to be wicked. When we feel overwhelmed, let us recall the assurance given through Joseph that God, who knows we ‘cannot bear all things now,’ will not over program us; he will not press upon us more than we can bear.¹⁰

However, Elder Maxwell wants us to understand that “there are clearly special cases of individuals with special limitations in life, which we cannot now fathom. Like he who was ‘blind from birth,’ some come to bring glory to God (John 9:1–2). We must be exceedingly careful about imputing either wrong causes or wrong rewards to any of such. They are in the Lord’s hands and he loves them perfectly. Some of those who have required much waiting upon in this life may be waited upon in the next world—but for the highest of reasons.”¹¹ It is reasonable to assume that a person who was very valiant in the premortal life might be born into abject poverty because his covenant mortal assignment was among the poorest of the poor.

Fifth, our premortal preparation included both “general education” provided to all mortals, as well as specialized training for our particular mortal mission. Elder Maxwell taught, “There cannot be a grand plan of salvation for all mankind unless there is also a plan for each individual. The salvational sum will reflect all its parts.”¹²

Sixth, our first and second estates feature very different learning environments. Said Elder Maxwell:

Our first estate featured learning of a cognitive type, and it was surely a much longer span than that of our second estate, and the tutoring so much better and more direct.

The second estate, however, is one that emphasizes experiential learning through applying, proving, and testing. We learn cognitively here too, just as a good university examination also teaches even as it tests us. In any event, the books of the first estate are now closed to us, and the present test is, therefore, very real. We have moved, as it were, from first-estate theory to second-estate laboratory. It is here that our Christ-like characteristics are further shaped, and our spiritual skills are thus strengthened. . . . Such a transition in emphasis understandably produces genuine anxiety, for to be ‘proved herewith’ suggests a stern test, a test that must roll forward to completion or else all that has been invested up to that point would be at risk.¹³

Seventh, as mentioned earlier, our first three estates constitute a continuum. Elder Bruce R. McConkie taught, “All of us are separated by a thin veil only from the friends and fellow laborers with whom we served on the Lord’s errand before our eternal spirits took up their abodes in tabernacles of clay.”¹⁴

Said Elder Maxwell, “Individuals have a genetic and an environmental inheritance, each of which is powerfully important. But there is an even earlier bestowal that follows us from our pre-mortal existence wherein our personalities and traits were developed in various ways and in various degrees and strengths. The third bestowal is at least as important as those involving genes and environment. All three combined would, if fully comprehended, give us a true picture of the human personality and how it has been shaped and molded. This would help to explain human differences that are not explainable solely on the basis of genes and environment, varied as these are.”¹⁵

Eighth, we received our mortal mission by covenant. President Dallin H. Oaks said, “Many of us also made covenants with the Father concerning what we would do in mortality. In ways that have not been revealed, our actions in the spirit world influence us in mortality.”¹⁶

Finally, we came joyously to earth. President Ezra Taft Benson taught, “We could hardly wait to demonstrate to our Father and our Brother, the Lord, how much we loved them and how we would be obedient to them in spite of the earthly opposition of the evil one. Nothing is going to startle us more when we pass through the veil to the other side than to realize how well we know Our Father and how familiar His face is to us. If we only knew it, heavenly hosts are pulling for us—friends in heaven that we cannot now remember who yearn for our victory.”¹⁷

This chapter was somewhat of an afterthought. After writing most of this book, I recognized that some knowledge of the first estate would enhance our understanding of the third estate. For me, it has done much more than that. It has improved my understanding of both the evidence and the importance of the Restoration, and the depth and impediment to mankind by the Great Apostasy. It has brought me greater gratitude for the fulness of the gospel to guide and comfort me in the second estate. May this chapter enhance your understanding of the first estate, and may the remainder of this book heighten your understanding of the third estate.

NOTES

1. Maxwell, *The Promise of Discipleship*, 109.
Elder Maxwell wrote more than thirty books. This one includes a chapter about the spirit world, written just three years before Elder Maxwell's death.
2. Ibid.
3. Maxwell, *But for a Small Moment*, 80. In this book, Elder Maxwell, in his typical elegant prose, compares the emphasis of Joseph Smith's teachings before his incarceration in Liberty Jail with what he emphasized in the years after. Elder Maxwell postulates that the challenges of being the Prophet of the Restoration had kept him so occupied that he'd had little time to deeply study his revelations until he was confined for five months. Two chapters are dedicated to the Prophet's post-imprisonment teachings about premortality.
4. Ritchie, *Return from Tomorrow*, 141.
5. Maxwell, *But for a Small Moment*, 82.
6. Ibid., 88.
7. Maxwell, *The Promise of Discipleship*, 82.
8. Klebingat, "Defending the Faith."
9. Maxwell, *But for a Small Moment*, 99.
10. Ibid., 89–90.
11. Ibid., 99.
12. Ibid., 98.
13. Ibid., 102.
14. McConkie, "God Foreordained His Prophets and People."
15. Ibid.
16. Oaks, "The Great Plan of Happiness."
17. Benson, "Christ—Gifts and Expectations."

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