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“You Will Be Like God Knowing Good and Evil”: Discernment of Truth and Lies

We live in a complicated, sick world full of deceptions. Genesis 3 not only explains how the beautiful paradise was lost by deception and lies,¹ but also presents the terrible consequences of sin and how God reacts to the transgression of His command.² Disobedience brought an avalanche of evil—seemingly starting as harmless but then breaking and tearing down everything that was beautiful, valuable, and profound. It was only a matter of time before this destroying force was plainly visible. It destroys all kinds of meaningful relationships and brings only complications, misery, suffering, and separation. What was originally very good was corrupted and marred by sin. Saying no to God is the cause of all evil. In Genesis 3 multiple consequences of sin are mentioned, but this article will focus on only two of them.

Satan made an offer to the first couple that seemed attractive and advantageous. He promised Adam and Eve that after eating the fruit from the forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil that (1) their “eyes will be opened” and (2) they “will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:5).³ How does one understand these two striking offers? Were they true?

Opened Eyes

After Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, the narrator states, as a matter of fact, that “the eyes of both of them were opened” (Gen 3:7). Yet, their eyes were opened in a different way than they had expected. It was a deception, because Adam and Eve actually lost what they had, and they realized that they were naked. Sin/disobedience opened the eyes of the first couple, and they saw what they did not see before—their nakedness. It means that they began to perceive the reality of life differently as they lost their innocence (3:7). Not only did they lose their garment of light⁴

but after breaking their relationship with God, their very nature was corrupted. Their broken relationship with God led to the broken relationship to “self.”

When Adam and Eve saw their nakedness, they realized and felt for the first time in their lives a sense of shame and guilt. They felt miserable and experienced remorse of conscience (2:25; 3:7). Adam’s and Eve’s nakedness refers to more than a physical bodily exposure. Genesis 3:7 and 10 reveal that when God appeared in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were no longer physically naked, because they were covered with fig leaves (v. 7), yet Adam stated, “I was afraid, because I was naked” (v. 10). They were “clothed” but still naked. Thus, this nakedness was greater than a physical phenomenon. As a result of their broken relationship with God, their nature was broken, and their posterity would inherit that sinful nature, a nature corrupted by sin, with its propensities, inclinations to evil, and tendency to sin (Gen 3:7, 10; 5:1-3; 6:5). It means that every part of our being is corrupted by sin, the integrity of the whole person is lost, and cannot be saved without God’s gracious redemptive activity. For the first time, Adam and Eve felt that bitter burning inside of themselves. It was more than a sentiment of shame, because their cover made out of fig leaves could not help them. The term *’erom* used in Genesis 3 denotes elsewhere in the Old Testament a shameful exposure of nakedness (see Deut 28:48; Ezek 16:7, 22, 39; 18:7, 16; 23:29), which they tried to cover with fig leaves (3:7). Victor Hamilton correctly clarifies their attempt as a self-justifying act: “Rather than driving them back to God, their guilt leads them into a self-atoning, self-protecting procedure: they must cover themselves” (1990:191). Their covering activity can be theologically characterized as “righteousness by works.”

The nakedness after sin signifies inner nakedness, being unmasked, a consciousness of guilt, total shame, loss of integrity, feelings of degradation, defeat, ruined innocence, and the disappearance of light. Gordon Wenham rightly asserts: “A more complete transformation could not be imagined. The trust of innocence is replaced by the fear of guilt” (1987:76). Hamilton describes their situation as the experience of shame, the loss of innocence, and guilt (1990:191). Sin deeply affected human nature and how people are human. After sinning, people did not become stones or automatons. Something remained from God’s image but it was shattered, and everything in humanity was marred by sin. Human beings were not able to save themselves. We are lost, broken, alienated, and condemned to death. Love for sin and inclinations to evil are now superposed on us and are an integral part of our human nature.

This act of distrust and unbelief made Adam and Eve afraid of God. They saw God with different eyes. Instead of enjoying God’s presence and

rejoicing in His Company, they hid from Him. Their disobedience caused by a broken vertical relationship with God resulted in their separation from God (Gen 3:10). They were hiding in shame, guilt, and fear. Consequently, all human beings are born with an alienated and antagonistic attitude toward God and are naturally afraid of Him (Eph 2:1-3). In order to change this misleading caricature of the true picture of God, people need to perceive His true loving character (Rom 2:4).

As the result of disobedience, Adam and Eve saw not only God and the reality of life differently but also their own relationship. The loving admiration for each other was exchanged with blaming each other for the failure (the horizontal dimension of life was broken). Sin traumatizes and alienates people from one another: "But something in them [Adam and Eve] and between them *does* die. Their sense of themselves and their relationship with each other is shattered" (Bartholomew and Goheen 2014:14) "Sin has undermined both the sense of self and the sense of belonging to another" (42). Sinners are blinded and refuse to accept their accountability for wrong behavior. Eve blamed the serpent for the seduction. Adam not only blamed Eve for giving him the forbidden fruit but actually blamed God because it was God who gave her to him. Self-vindication causes one to find fault beyond and not within oneself.

Being Like God in the Knowledge of Evil?

Does the biblical text describe the gaining of some esoteric knowledge after eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (like the devotees in the mystery cults) or is the meaning of this perplexing phrase another deception?

The serpent's second offer is extremely shrewd, because he wanted to create a sense of feeling that they lacked something important, namely, that they did not possess a higher quality of wisdom, and that God had hidden from them the power to decide what was good and evil. Actually the sin/disobedience of Adam and Eve resulted in harming their sense of good and in losing their ability of discernment between good and evil. Satan promised that after eating from the forbidden tree they would "be like God knowing good and evil" (Gen 3:5). The divine statement in Genesis 3:22 that "the man [humanity] has now become like one of us" sounds like an affirmation of Satan's offer. However, I need to underline that this seemingly simple declaration demands a reflective, deep study. The English and other translations, unfortunately, do not pay close attention to the grammar, context, and purpose of the original Hebrew text, because they depend on the Septuagint Greek translation that renders the Hebrew term "*hayah*" as "become" (*ginomai*) instead of "be." The idea

of “becoming” in this particular context is foreign to the purpose of the text and does not do justice to the Hebrew thought. Such a translation and understanding is very problematic for several reasons:

1. A literal translation of Genesis 3:22 is as follows: “Behold, Adam [a man, i.e., humanity] was like one of us to know good and evil. And now he must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever” (translation is mine). In harmony with this rendering is Young’s translation: “Lo, the man was as one of Us, as to the knowledge of good and evil.” According to this close reading of the biblical text, before eating from the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve were like God in their capacity of making a difference between good and evil, namely to discern what was good and evil, but by sinning they lost this faculty, the sensitivity for detecting wrong and lies. When they crossed the boundary and engaged in evil, they lost what they had. It is true that Eve thought that additional wisdom would come to her by eating the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 3:6). Nevertheless, she was not lacking wisdom, that is, the ability to distinguish between good and evil and the power to pursue what was good,⁵ but by choosing to obey the voice of the serpent instead of loving God, this dimension of life was distorted. Real wisdom means to know existentially only what is good, because “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov 1:7). The knowledge of evil puts life not only in danger, but destroys what is good. By sinning Adam and Eve lost their freedom, the natural ability not to sin that they had prior to their fall. Ted Peters powerfully states: “The freedom we have lost is the freedom to live effusively out of the divine wellspring. Subsequently to this loss, freedom in God can no longer be understood as a birthright” (1998:27). The taste of evil destroys the capacity to discern between good and evil. After experiencing the flavor of disobedience, humans love sin. Adam and Eve now knew more, because they overstepped their limits and disregarded their own status as God’s creation, but God never intended that humans would possess this kind of knowledge, because by it they would lose moral discernment. Disobedience does not bring higher capacities, but destroys and takes away the valuable.

2. In order to express grammatically the idea of “becoming” instead of “being,” the verb *hayah* should usually be associated with the preposition *lamed* as in Genesis 2:9. However, our text has the verbal expressions of *hayah* with the same meaning as it is used in the immediate context, for example, in Gen 1:2; 2:18, and 3:1, 5, which describes consistently the state of being, the concept or condition of something lasting and permanent.⁶

3. To be like God in knowing good and evil, does not mean to experience or do evil, because God does not know evil by experience. It has to be

stressed that God's knowledge of evil is only "intellectual," and never "relational." Even though God had to deal with the real consequences of evil after Satan's rebellion against Him in heaven, He has never experienced evil by doing it but only by reacting against it, because He is the *summum bonum*, the absolute good, and from Him comes "every good and perfect gift" (Jas 1:17). He is the Light, and there is no darkness in Him (John 1:4, 5; 3:19; 1 John 1:5, 7; 8:12; 9:5; cf. Rev 21:23; 22:5). Forbidden knowledge of good and evil is related to the experience of sin.

4. Adam and Eve's ability for discerning between good and evil before sinning was not associated with the entitlement to decide for themselves what was right and wrong, because they were only creatures and totally dependent on God as their Creator and Law Giver. Good and evil are given realities, and the first pair should only have followed what was good. To decide what is good or evil is only God's prerogative (Gen 2:16, 17), because He is the Sovereign Creator, the Law Giver, and the supreme Good. Thus, the ability to distinguish between good and evil in our post-sin condition is only possible on the basis of God's revelation. Humanity needs the revealed, divine, codified law in order to know the difference between right and wrong. God's instruction provides this crucial knowledge, which is the reliable compass for distinguishing between true and false values, something that is no longer within us. We need an external objective source of God's revelation to know the real issues of life and follow what is right; people are entirely dependent on it for knowing God's will. There is nothing inside of us to alert us to spiritual danger. Even our conscience cannot give this awareness unless it is purified and informed by the Word of God, and led by the Holy Spirit (Rom 3:20; 9:1; 1 Cor 4:4; 1 Tim 1:5, 19; 3:9; Heb 10:22; 1 Pet 3:16, 21).

5. Eve was enticed to eat forbidden fruit, that is, to transgress and negate God's explicit command, and it would be absurd to think that the first pair would gain the "desired" knowledge by experiencing disobedience. If humans obtained moral discernment by eating the prohibited fruit, this would be a contradiction in itself. It would be completely illogical, because then "humans would possess moral discernment by means of disobedience to the divine will" (Mettinger 2007:62, 63).

6. "The humans were created mortal but were destined for immortality" (48) on the condition of their trust and obedience. Instead of blessings and gain, for the first time the word "curse" appears in the biblical text (Gen 3:14, 17), thus demonstrating a close association between disobedience and sin. If humans do not cultivate the vertical dimension of life, they will live like animals (also created on the sixth day), and ultimately behave like brute beasts. Only God's presence makes them humane and prevents them from living a wild life. "Human disobedience did not make

the humans 'like the gods.' Man is made from dust and ends as dust" (Mettinger 2007:26).

God's Unmasking of Magical Deceptions

The biblical God is a living God, and His power is above all evil powers. Satan may try to deceive, but ultimately he is defeated by God's moral power as in the case of the Egyptian magicians who were using divination during their encounter with Moses and Aaron in order to mislead Pharaoh. Exod 7:11, 12, says that Pharaoh summoned wise men and sorcerers, and these Egyptian magicians did the same things by their secret arts as Aaron did under God's directions: "Each one threw down his staff and it became a snake. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs" (Exod 7:12).

They were also practicing divination during the first two of the 10 plagues and were able to imitate the first plague of turning water into blood: "But the magicians did the same things by their secret arts" (Exod 7:22) as well as the second plague: "But the magicians did the same things by their secret arts; they also made frogs come up on the land of Egypt" (Exod 8:7). However, it is stated that the magicians surrendered during the third plague: "All the dust throughout the land of Egypt became gnats. But when the magicians tried to produce gnats by their secret arts, they could not. Since the gnats were on people and animals everywhere, the magicians said to Pharaoh, 'This is the finger of God.' But Pharaoh's heart was hard and he would not listen, just as the LORD had said" (Exod 8:17-19). In the sixth plague, according to Exodus 9:11, the magicians themselves were affected by the plague, and their magic, different tricks, and divination was proven to be powerless. "The magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils that were on them and on all the Egyptians." Thus, it was demonstrated that evil deceptions cannot stand against God's sovereignty and authority.

The magicians in Babylon also confessed their inability to describe the dream and interpret it for King Nebuchadnezzar even though they constantly claimed that they were able to predict the future and mysteries of life. They openly declared that "no one can reveal it to the king except the gods, and they do not live among humans" (Dan 2:11). On the other hand, Daniel boldly proclaims: "No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about, but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries" (Dan 2:27-28a). The living God of Daniel made known to Nebuchadnezzar the future that will culminate in the establishment of God's eternal kingdom at the Second Coming of Christ (Dan 2:44, 45).

In the New Testament one encounters a similar picture. Satan may

appear as an angel of light" (2 Cor 11:14), but Jesus and Paul warned strongly against deceptions that flow from this evil source in different forms (Matt 24:11, 24; Mark 7:21; Eph 4:14). The book of Revelation transparently unmasks many deceptions (Rev 13:13, 14). However, those who are led by God's word and Spirit will recognize the truth and follow Christ wherever He leads (see Matt 7:21-24; John 12:31, 32; 17:17; Rom 8:14; Rev 14:4, 5). Nothing deceitful will be associated with the righteous as there is zero tolerance for deceit, because those who practice deception will not enter God's kingdom (Ps 32:2; Zeph 3:13; Rev 21:27).

Conclusion

Sin and disobedience not only blinds but also steals from people what they already had. Both results are fatal and tremendously complicate our lives. People do not gain immortality by eating the forbidden fruit but instead they reap alienation and stubbornness. One of the terrible characteristics of sin is that sinners deny their real condition—signs of lostness are not discerned or accepted. Sin leads to the denial of truth about one's own sinfulness and total dependence upon God.

According to Genesis 3, what may at first appear as very innocent and as a gain/profit is a clever and powerful deception.⁷ This is why people have to be constantly on guard in their everyday life. Jesus encourages: "Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass and to stand before the Son of Man" (Luke 21:36 NKJV).

Evil brought death, because the relationship with real life was broken by sin (Gen 2:17; 3:3, 19; cf. Rom 6:23). Adam and Eve would return to dust, the symbol of fragility and death: "Until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return" (Gen 3:19). Death was not a primary theme in Genesis 2 even though it was mentioned by God (Gen 2:17), because the God of Creation is about life and plenty. However, Genesis 3 brought the tragic change as Walter Brueggemann fitly explains: Death "was not a threat but a candid acknowledgment of a *boundary* of life. But the boundary is now altered to become a *threat*. It is transformed into a terror which puts everything in question. It is not God, but the serpent who has made death a primary human agenda" (1982:48). Nevertheless, choosing God and cultivating a relationship with Him means to choose life and abundance (John 10:7-10).

Notes

¹According to the editors of the *Oxford English Dictionaries*, the word of the year for 2016 is *post-truth*, meaning we are living in the post-truth era.

²Even after disobedience, God did not come to kill Adam and Eve, but instead (1) He calls them back to Himself (3:9); (2) He promises that the Seed will conquer and defeat evil; and (3) He provides graciously the skin garment of true righteousness (3:20). For the full exposure of the theology of sin with its consequences and God's redemptive initiative based on Genesis 3, see my article "Genesis 3 as a Model for Understanding the Nature of Sin and Salvation."

³Unless otherwise noted, biblical citations are from the NIV.

⁴Genesis 2:25 does not explicitly indicate in what manner Adam and Eve were without clothes, but the semantic range of *'arom* in connection with Psalm 104:1–2 suggests that the original "garments" of Adam and Eve might have been garments of light. This is a plausible suggestion, because Psalm 104 points out that God Himself is clothed with the glory of His light: "Bless the LORD, O my soul! O LORD my God, you are very great! You are clothed with splendor and majesty, covering yourself with light as with a garment, stretching out the heavens like a tent" (vv. 1–2 ESV).

⁵True wisdom means to have the ability to discern between good and evil and to follow only what is good as it is evident from two biblical passages: (1) 2 Sam 14:17, 20 speaks about the king's ability of discerning good and evil (similar to the angel of God); (2) Solomon asks God for wisdom in order to have the capacity to "discern between good and evil" (1 Kgs 3:9).

⁶About the use of the perfect in Hebrew and translation possibilities of the verb *hayah*, see *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (1910:309–313) and Brown, Driver and Briggs (1907:226–228).

If the meaning of "becoming" would be maintained in this text, then it should be interpreted as God's statement of bitter irony or even as His sarcastic expression. The Lord God would then state that humans now think that they have become like one of Us (i.e., divine) in regard to the knowledge of good and evil. They would in their arrogance attempt to decide and define what was good and redefine evil, so God needed to guard them from the tree of life in order for them not to become everlasting sinners with a perversion of the true values of life. To be a sinner and live eternally is a concept full of contradiction per se, because the natural consequence of sin is death. Sinners cannot live eternally. Life is not a matter of magic, but a gift received in a constant dependence upon God, the unique Source, Giver, and Maintainer of life.

⁷Tragically, the serpent/Satan could easily deceive and persuade Eve to disobey, but in contrast God Himself could not calm Cain's anger, convince him to do what was right in order to avoid murdering his brother Abel (see Gen 4:5–8). The power of deception is bigger than one can imagine. This is why we need to stay on guard.

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