

The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil

God or not God?

Blessing or curse?

Life or death?

This is the decision facing Adam and Eve in garden where stood the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. To better understand this requires some exploration of the phrase “good and evil”.

Knowledge of “good and evil” is not a bad thing. In fact, it is desirable and an appropriate characteristic for those made in the image of God, as long as it is gained through the proper means. In surveying the phrase “good and evil” elsewhere in Scripture, we learn that having the knowledge of good and evil is the ability to wisely discern and judge good from evil, and in doing so, demonstrate that one possesses the wisdom of God (1 Kings 3:9-28) and, in this way, is like God (2 Sam. 14:17). Judging between right and wrong in human affairs is a trait desirable in kings, priests, prophets, and heads of families, and of all the people of God in general (1 Kings 22:8-9; Jer. 42:1-6; Lev. 27:12; Gen. 24:50; 2 Sam. 19:35[Hb. v36]).¹ Failure to properly exercise this discernment and judgment is a defect in God’s people and an abrogation of responsibility, such as when Absalom fails to initiate judicial action against Amnon for raping Tamar and judge that such action was wrong (2 Sam. 13:22; cf. also Is. 5: 20, 23).

This wisdom or knowledge to judge, however, originates in and is to be received from God. In other words, we need a moral compass outside of ourselves. Back in the garden, God prohibits the couple from eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He did not do this to withhold such knowledge from them, but because He wanted them to attain the knowledge directly from Him in the context of relationship. Choosing to eat of the tree represented a circumventing of God and was an attempt by the man and woman to be self-legislating, self-determining creatures with absolute moral autonomy apart from God. It was no less than putting themselves in the position of being the final arbiters of truth, and not God. And ironically, eating of the tree was a poor exercise of the knowledge of good and evil. Such knowledge should have only been sought from God.

¹ Cf. also Deuteronomy 1:39 where the phrase “the knowledge of good and evil” is employed to describe the young Israelite generation who lacked the maturity and authority to be held accountable to the Israelites decision not to enter the land.

We may illustrate the choice at hand as follows:

| Choice A: Abstain from the tree of knowledge | Choice B: Eat of the tree of knowledge |
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| <p>Man will gain knowledge of good and evil through relationship from God. In doing so, man will possess the ability to make decisions with the mind of God determining whether a particular course of action is good for himself and others. Or said another way, like God, man will be able to declare what is good. As such man will bless God, others, and creation, and experience harmony in the whole of life. The tasks to which man puts his hand will flourish and reflect God's ideals.</p> <p>Further, presumably after time of abstaining from the tree, man would be granted access to the Tree of Life confirming his choice to eternally remain in union with God.</p> | <p>Man, in an act of absolute moral autonomy and defiance, snatches after knowledge in attempt to be a self-legislating, self-determining creature. Instead of relying upon and receiving knowledge from God, man takes upon himself the responsibility of trying apart from God to determine whether or not something is good for himself and others. Man still declares what is good, but declares what is good in his own eyes and not in the eyes of God. As such, man will constantly be uncertain of the issues that lay before him and unable to fully foresee and estimate the consequences of his choices. Instead of ruling over evil and the world through his choices, man becomes held in bondage by evil and captive to his own choices. Instead of harmony, man will experience fractured relationships with God, others, and creation and experience an internal warring within himself, as he is unable to discern the stirrings of his own heart.</p> <p>Ultimately, choosing life apart from God will result in death.</p> |