

Naked and Not Ashamed to Naked and Afraid

But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.” He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” (Genesis 3:9–11 ESV)

Because of their disobedience to God, something changed in Adam and Eve’s knowledge of their own nakedness. They gained a new understanding of it as a result of eating of the tree.

Some have argued that what was gained by eating of the tree was sexual awareness or consciousness. The issue with this is that the couple was seemingly sexually aware before eating of the tree. Taking the fruit did not result in a transition from sexually unaware to sexually aware. There does, however, seem to be some sort of change in that awareness. Therefore, a better question to consider might be in what sense did that awareness change? Further, could it be possible the author is communicating truths beyond mere sexuality?

Let’s start with the former. In what sense might we say their awareness of being naked changed? We cannot say this is some sort of sexual awakening where they now discovered themselves as sexual beings. Being sex-gendered creatures and the erotic are all part of God’s “very good” creation. Procreating and the man and the woman becoming one flesh (which certainly has sexual intercourse in view, though not limited to just sexual activity) are quite at home in Genesis 1 and 2 as God’s good design (Gen. 1:28, 2:24). Said another way, sex is not a result of sinfulness or the fall, it is part of God’s good creation.

The change rather seems to have to do with the introduction of shame and fear. In the garden, the couple stood fully exposed in each other’s presence and before on another there was no shame (Gen. 2:25). This would have struck the original audience then just as much it does us today. To be naked before another requires incredible vulnerability. Think about it, right now wherever you are reading this, imagine you are completely naked.

How would you feel?

There is no hiding anything.

But in the garden, in its proper context, this state of being is safe and delightful building intimacy and connection. It's only after eating that the couple sees themselves in a different way. Vulnerability is no longer safe; it is threatening and scary. Insecurities begin to creep in. (Questions like: What if I'm not enough?) Whether this was a result of no longer being clothed in the glory of God or because something had changed in human nature, or both, we may not be able to say definitively. But I think we can all agree that for the woman to now be naked before the man who had lashed out blaming her for eating of the tree, being naked with him would have felt anything but safe and shameless. From this we may conclude that the sense in which the now couple understood their nakedness and sexuality was not in becoming sexually mature creatures (they were already that), rather it was a move from nakedness and sex as safe, natural, and blissfully intimate between man and woman to shameful and even feeling somewhat unnatural now that their lives and relationships were tainted by sin. Evil had begun twisting one of God's most beautiful gifts.

We can now begin to use this as a jumping off point to answer our second question posed above: Is it possible the author could be communicating truths beyond mere sexuality. I would suggest he is by also using nakedness and sexuality as a metaphor.¹ There are two senses in which I think this is happening.

First, as already stated, being naked involves vulnerability and exposure. The author very well could use this as a metaphor for broader life. Consider one of the most common dreams of being either naked or inappropriately dressed in public. Often attached to these dreams are feelings of being ashamed. Psychologists tell us these dreams are related to social anxiety and the fear of being exposed. Because of the broken *shalom* (the fracturing of relationships and our spirit from God's Spirit), life is riddled with insecurity and fear of being found out. It may sound something like, "If they ever know the truth about me, not only will I be found out for the fraud that I am, they will run for the hills and I'll be rejected and alone." This is where we all begin to create masks hiding our true selves for each other – and this was a feature of human existence introduced by the couple gaining knowledge in the wrong sort of way by eating of the tree.

The second aspect is closely related to the first. In many cultures, sexuality (puberty) is the catalyst for coming of age and the rite of passage from childhood to adulthood. Think about children – or I'll just use my kids as an example. They run around naked unabashedly. Then slowly, as they age, begin to realize they are naked increasingly asking for privacy and becoming more concerned about being properly clothed. This

¹ This is also supported by the Old Testament's use of "naked" in connection to the exposure of Israel's sin that laid uncovered before God in judgement (Hos. 2:3 [Hb. 4]; Amos 2:16; Ezek. 16:39; 23:29; cf. Job 26:6)

is all part of maturing. With that maturing also comes increased fear and anxiety. Two-year olds who think they (and their dad's apparently) are invincible eventually go on to learn that they can in fact get hurt, that there are dangers lurking in this world, and ultimately, they soon discover they themselves, or friends and loved ones, can die. They move from having everything provided for them, not worried about what they will eat or wear (at least it should be this way), to the realization of scarcity of resources and having to provide. They move from living in the moment not caring a bit about what the next day will bring, to gaining awareness of the constrictions of time wondering and worrying what lies ahead on the calendar. It is a move away from the childhood bliss of no concern or worries, just abandoned trust in parents, to a life of fear and worry. In this sense the author is using the realization of nakedness (i.e. the transition to adulthood) to stand as the metaphor for the transition from the bliss of the garden to the new harsh reality outside the garden. They have moved from life in the garden with its promise of prosperous and successful advancement in every endeavor, to a painful existence outside of the garden characterized by frustration and grind.

Life wasn't supposed to be that that way. It was a consequence of the couple's choice. Returning to our previous discussion about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and what it represented, the couple was meant to grow in knowledge and awareness. They were to do so, however, in relationship and obedience to God. Life done this way would have looked radically different. They would have continued to spread the borders of the garden and done so with wisdom and guidance directly from God. Instead of life being colored by fear, shame and a mass of paralyzing insecurities, they would have confidently gone forth in God's blessing enjoying unfettered access to His presence as they increasingly overcame the challenges that laid before them.

God still desires for us to grow and mature today – and boldly face and overcome challenges. But at the same time, He entreats us to return to the child-like innocence of the garden characterized by abandoned trust in Him and His provision as we go about our lives (Matthew 18:3) clothed and covered in His grace.