The Knowledge of Good and Evil

"The LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground made the LORD God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil."
—Genesis 2:8,9

ONE OF THE MOST IMPOR- tant features of God's plan is the concept of the knowledge of good and evil. Its importance encompasses all planes of intelligent existence. Having an appropriate understanding of this subject goes beyond a surface appreciation of a good act versus an evil one, or a good word versus an evil one. A complete understanding of good and evil gets to the core of our, and all intelligent creation's, innermost thoughts, motives, and will. We suggest here five progressive steps necessary for a proper and complete understanding of good and evil.

1) Knowing the outward manifestation—the action or word—as to its goodness or lack thereof.

2) Knowing the thoughts and motives which prompt good and evil actions.

3) Measuring both the actions (step 1) as well as the thoughts and motives (step 2) which prompt them against the standard of the Scriptures—the Divine standard.—Heb. 4:12

4) Based on comparing actions, thoughts, and motives to the Divine standard, being then able to quickly and consistently distinguish and discern between what is truly good versus that which is otherwise evil. Put another way, developing a trained consciousness, or conscience, of good and evil.—Heb. 10:22; 9:14

5) Applying such discernment, understanding, and consciousness, through experience, to the development of a character which, over time, tends more and more toward good, both as to motives and thoughts and will, as well as to actions, deeds, and words.—James 1:22-25

These steps are what will be required for all mankind to learn in Christ's coming kingdom if they are to attain perfection and, hence, everlasting life on the earth. For those currently seeking to follow in our Lord's footsteps, however, it is critical that we be doing these things today in order to make our calling and election sure. Two conditions at present make this effort a challenge: first, because we are sinful by nature it is not natural, nor is it pleasant according to the flesh, to follow the five steps outlined. The flesh rebels against the idea of examining actions and motives, and measuring them against the Divine standard. Further, the flesh does not like to change, as it is truly an 'old man,' set in its ways and content with the status

quo. (Eph. 4:22) The second reason why this process is especially difficult now is that, for the most part, it goes against the trend of the world around us. A correct understanding by the world today of the principles of good and evil is terribly lacking, and is surely part of what is leading it further and deeper into the 'time of trouble,' which, if not shortened, the Scriptures tell us, would result in man's own destruction of himself.—Matt. 24:21-22

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE OF GOOD AND EVIL

To understand how to apply the steps of truly knowing good and evil requires that we review how these principles came into being in God's plan as it relates to man. Much of this is laid out for us in the opening chapters of the Bible, Genesis 2 and 3. In chapter 2, as the narrative of Creation is given, we have the first veiled hint of these principles. The record states that in the midst of the garden paradise God prepared for man's dwelling were two trees bearing most unusual names. Verse 9 states, "Out of the ground made the LORD God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil." Our focus here is not on the 'tree of life,' so we will skip discussion of it at this time, but what of this other tree, the 'tree of knowledge of good an evil'? What kind of literal tree it was doesn't really matter, and we are not told. We do know that it bore fruit, which we will see is of significance. The true import of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was in what it symbolized. From this verse alone it is not possible to know the full extent of

the symbol, as all it really indicates is that this tree in some way pointed figuratively to two principles—good and evil—and that it would be important for man to have knowledge of them.

Later, in the same chapter, we find a second reference to this tree, in which God instructed man to not eat of it. These verses state, "The LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." (chap. 2:16,17) Here again it is evident that the import of what God instructed Adam was as a figurative reference to the 'tree of the knowledge of good and evil,' although it was a literal tree. The command itself was clear, and not figurative at all—Do not eat of the fruit of this tree, else you will die. This second reference clearly adds the thought to this symbolic tree that both good and evil have results and consequences.

We must keep in mind that at this point we have no record that Adam knew fully the principles of good or evil, or their consequences. He had seen and experienced good, but not evil, and so was inadequate in some respects to completely fathom the import of what God had told him. Yet he did have an understanding, we believe, of life versus death, because he had surely witnessed both take place among the lower animal creation. He had no doubt seen the propagation process of the lower creation, and the beauty of a newly born animal life. He also surely knew, perhaps even being told by God, that the lower animals were not created to live forever as was man, and he likely had seen the

death (in a natural and peaceful manner) of various members of the animal creation. He knew, therefore, from observation, what death was—oblivion, nonexistence, a returning to the dust of the earth. Knowing this, he had sufficient knowledge to understand that a failure to comply with God's command to not eat of the tree would result in his experiencing the same fate—death and resulting oblivion—which he had seen in the lower animals. Adam knew of God's goodness, he knew what life and death were, and being created in the image of God, he must have known that it was important to follow the commands of the very one who had created him.

SATAN'S LIES

In Genesis, chapter 3, we have the record of Satan's temptation, through the serpent, of our first parents. How Satan used the serpent, and what form it took, are not detailed in the scriptural account, only that it was 'more subtle' than any of the other creatures in the garden. After Eve correctly stated the penalty that had been pronounced if they ate of the forbidden tree—death—Satan told the first of several lies. We read in verse 4, "The serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die." Satan did not deny the commandment God had given, and which Eve had correctly repeated to him. However, he blatantly denied the punishment that had been stated would result from disobeying God's commandment. This is the great lie which not only was part of his deception of mother Eve, but it is the lie that has permeated religious beliefs of every variety for thousands of

years, even to this very day. The Lord's consecrated people, begotten with the Spirit of Truth, are a part of the small minority on earth today who correctly understand the true nature and reality of death.

To Satan, the open and bold statement he had just made was perhaps designed partially to catch Eve's attention, and to lure her into the more subtle nature of what he said next, as recorded in verse 5, "For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil." Satan here suggested that eating of the forbidden fruit would bring them much wisdom and knowledge, so much that Adam and Eve would become gods (Hebrew *Elohim*), just like their Creator and, as such, they would certainly know intuitively, just as God does, all the principles of good and evil. According to Satan, the fruit of the tree itself would give them that knowledge, and they would never need fear to fall into sin because such intuitive knowledge would surely result in their avoidance of sin and hence its consequences. He even boldly said in this verse 'God doth know' that all these things would result if they but ate of the fruit. These were all lies of our great Adversary, Satan.

Satan has used these additional lies down through the ages, causing fallen and deceived man to believe that he knows himself, without any help from God, what is good and evil. The results of this have been disastrous. Such thinking has, through the centuries, produced a continued lowering of the standard of righteousness, to the point now in this present time of trouble much of mankind cannot make a proper distinction between good and

evil. This has occurred because man has taken God out of the equation for the most part, taken away his Divine standards, and replaced them with their own faulty ones, which have at their source the lies of Satan.

FALLING TO TEMPTATION

Going back to the account in Genesis 3, we now see the full extent of Satan's temptation, not just his one blatant lie, but also the other subtle ones. Continuing the account, verse 6 says, "When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat." The first thing we notice here is that nearly all of Eve's attention was drawn to the fact that the tree and the fruit looked good to the eye of the flesh. Perhaps she thought of Satan's statement that she would not surely die and reasoned that such a goodly tree and such beautiful looking fruit could not possibly cause death if eaten. Satan's statement seemed plausible. What's more, the tree seemed to have a particularly attractive, almost mysterious, aura about it which made it stand out from all the other trees and be desired as a result. Of all the trees in the garden, it seemed to be the one that could perhaps bring wisdom and an understanding of good and evil, just as it was so named. The more Eve pondered all his statements, the more she evidently felt that the serpent must be right. Everything he had said made sense to her, and so she, and her husband with her as the account says, took of the fruit and did eat.

OBEDIENCE THE REAL TEST

The beginning of Genesis 3:7 says, "The eyes of them both were opened." Was Satan right after all? He indeed had said their eyes would be opened to gain the wisdom necessary to be gods, and know intuitively good and evil. Although this verse does say that their eyes were both opened, what they were opened to was not wisdom at all, but their nakedness, not just literally, but figuratively their nakedness before God as having been disobedient to his commandment. They were guilty, and they knew it immediately. This is what their eyes were opened to see. Their conscience was seared. They knew they had done evil rather than good in the sight of their Creator. They were now just beginning to learn, in a much different way than Satan had promised in his lies, of the knowledge of good and evil.

In reviewing the experience of Adam and Eve, for all the wiles of Satan expressed through the serpent, and in spite of all the lies he told, the fact remains that simple obedience to God's instruction was the real test to our first parents. God gave a command, and there was no need to try and rationalize or dilute it. It didn't matter what the tree looked like, or its fruit. It didn't matter what the name of it was. It didn't really matter what the penalty was, or even whether Adam or Eve believed the penalty would be carried out. What only should have mattered was that God, the Creator, had given a command to his creation, one that was simple, easy to understand, and easy to keep. Simple obedience was all that was needed, but was absolutely what God required. This principle of obedience,

and, we might add, heart-obedience, has been and always will be the ultimate test for all of God's intelligent creation which must be passed in order to attain life on any plane. Obedience lies at the very core of truly understanding good and evil. Eve, as well as Adam, in all their rationalization and thinking concerning the beauty of the tree, its desirable fruit, its attractiveness, and their skepticism of the penalty, missed what the true test was, and thus failed it—the test of obedience. It is this lesson which the Lord's people now, and all mankind eventually, must learn if they are to truly come to a full knowledge of good and evil.

LESSONS FOR THE CHURCH

As we walk in this narrow way, we must learn the principles of good and evil, and then strive to have our character molded along those properly understood lines, which are, as Paul says in Romans 12:9, "Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good." Let us look again at the five steps identified at the outset, and provide a touchstone with reference to each.

1) Knowing the outward manifestation, the action or word, as to its goodness or lack thereof.

Let us continually examine our actions, words, and deeds daily, to see if they are truly good, or if they are perhaps tainted with even just a small measure of evil. If they are, let us always remember to ask the Lord, and others if necessary, for forgiveness for any evil word said or deed committed.

2) Knowing the thoughts and motives which prompt good and evil actions.

Let us examine our hearts and motives to see if they are founded on good and pure intents. The Scriptures state, "Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life." (Prov. 4:23) "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts."—Ps. 139:23

3) Measuring the actions, as well as the thoughts and motives which prompt them, against the standards of the Scriptures, the Divine standard.

Continue to look to the standard contained in the Scriptures as the measuring rod of our actions as well as our motives and thoughts. Do not water down the standards of good, nor compromise the seriousness of evil, by human reasoning or rationalization. Use the Word of God as that powerful two-edged sword, which pierces "even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart."—Heb. 4:12

4) Based on comparing actions, thoughts, and motives to the Divine standard, being then able to quickly and consistently distinguish and discern between what is truly good versus what is otherwise evil, and develop a trained consciousness of good and evil.

Let us more fully realize that by doing this we are partaking of God's Word as meat rather than milk, as stated in the words of Paul in Hebrews 5:14, "Strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil." In this verse, we see a direct connection between the meat of God's Word and the discernment of good and evil, and that this can only happen if we by

'reason of use,' or habit of use, continue to exercise our spiritual senses. Only then will God's Word be that meat which gives us discernment of good and evil.

5) Applying such discernment, understanding, and consciousness, through experience, to the development of a character which, over time, tends more and more toward good—both as to motives, thoughts, and will, and also to actions, deeds, and words.

Let us continue to realize that all of this is a lifetime work. It will not be done in a day, a month, or a year. It cannot be done perfectly, nor will we always be pleased with our progress. Let us remember, however, that we have a great High Priest and Advocate, Jesus, and also a Heavenly Father, both of whom love us as a parent loves their child. They desire as much, yea, even more than we do ourselves, that we be successful in this endeavor, so "Let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not." (Gal. 6:9) Notice the scripture does not say we shall reap if we are perfect, or we shall reap if we do righteously 75% of the time, or stay clear of evil 80% of the time. No, we shall reap 'if we faint not,' if we continue pressing on.

ALL MANKIND TO KNOW GOOD AND EVIL

If we are faithful even unto death, if we fully come to a knowledge of good and evil, and develop the resulting character likeness of our Lord, we will have the most blessed privilege imaginable, that of assisting the remainder of mankind in the next age with the remaining part of their learning

experience with good and evil. We will have the opportunity of helping them see and experience the contrast between the evil that they once knew and experienced in this life as a result of man's fall, and the good they will be showered with through the blessings and teachings of the New Covenant in Christ's kingdom. Then, having fully eaten of the tree of the knowledge of BOTH good and evil, mankind individually will be able to stand before their Creator whole, fully developed through expe-rience, their eyes truly opened to God's character, and their being and character fully perfected and worthy of everlasting life.

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil will have then accomplished its figurative work and exist only in memory, and the only remaining tree in the midst of man's restored earthly paradise will be the other symbolic tree spoken of in Genesis 2:9, the "tree of life." Revelation 22:14 speaks of this glorious time and condition at the end of the king-dom, "Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city." We pray that this time will soon come, that all may truly have an accurate knowledge of good and evil and have learned its eternal lessons. ■