

LESSONS

1st Lesson: Genesis 2: 8-9, 15-17; 3: 1-7, 22-24

8. The Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there He put the man whom He had formed. 9. And out of the ground the Lord God made every tree grow that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. 15. Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to tend and keep it. 16. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; 17. but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” Genesis 3: 1. Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, “Has God indeed said, ‘You shall not eat of every tree of the garden?’” 2. And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; 3. but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, ‘You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.’” 4. Then the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. 5. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” 6. So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate. 7. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings. 22. Then the Lord God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil. And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever’ – 23. therefore the Lord God sent him out of the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken. 24. So He drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.

2nd Lesson: John 15: 1-5

1. I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. 2. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. 3. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. 4. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. 5. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.

3rd Lesson: Arcana Coelestia 128

The worldly and bodily-minded man says at heart, ‘Unless I am taught about faith and about things that belong to faith by means of sensory evidence so that I see for myself, that is, by facts so that I understand for myself, I am not going to believe.’ And he confirms himself in this attitude from the consideration that natural phenomena cannot be at variance with spiritual. Consequently it is from sensory evidence that he wishes to

learn about heavenly and Divine matters. But this is no more possible than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. The more he wants by this method to become wise, the more he blinds himself, until in the end he believes nothing, not even in the existence of anything spiritual or in eternal life. This arises out of the basic assumption he makes. This is eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And the more he eats of it, the more dead does he become. But the person who wishes to be made wise not from the world but from the Lord says at heart that he must believe the Lord, that is, those things the Lord has spoken in the Word, because they are truths. This is the basic assumption of his thinking. He confirms himself by means of rational, factual, sensory, and natural evidence. And things that are not confirmatory he sets aside.

SERMON

The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil

A Sermon by
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But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die. Genesis 2: 17

Introductory Ideas

Adam and Eve lived in the Garden of Eden, a wonderful paradise where the Lord gave them herbs and fruit trees for food. They could eat of the tree of life and of every tree of the garden. But the Lord warned them not to eat of a certain tree: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If they should eat of this tree the Lord said “you shall surely die.”

In the natural sense “eating” is the ingestion of food for the nourishment of our natural body. But in a deeper, symbolic sense eating represents the nourishment of our souls with goods and truths from the Lord so that we may have spiritual life. Adam and Eve could eat of the tree of life and therefore acquire the life of heaven. It seems quite curious that the Lord did not want them to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Somehow they must distinguish between good and evil, then freely choose what is good, and in so doing avoid the pitfalls and suffering that evils brings.

The Heavenly Doctrine is clear about the kind of knowledge we need: “nothing is more important to a person than to know whether he has heaven within him or hell, for he is going to live forever in one or the other” and consequently, without a doubt “it is necessary for him to know what good is and what evil is, for good constitutes heaven and evil constitutes hell” (AC 7181). During our lifetime in this world it is imperative that we know what good is so that we may live a heavenly life. At the same time we must absolutely know what evil is so we may shun it and avoid spiritual death.

Adam and Eve

Eve, then Adam disobeyed the Lord when both of them ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In what appears to be a contradiction, Adam and Eve did not “surely die” as a consequence of their transgression. They continued living. We cannot find in the Word any reference to the death of Eve. However, Adam lived on and “had sons and daughters” and “all the days that Adam lived were nine hundred and thirty years, and he died” (Genesis 5: 4-5).

The Lord however did cast them from the Garden of Eden. He also banned them from eating of the tree of life. But why couldn't the Lord simply, in His mercy and love, forgive them and permit them to eat of the tree of life? Since they did not die when they ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil there was no need, or so it seems, to partake of the tree of life.

These apparent inconsistencies may give rise to confusion. But we know the Lord is not the source of disorder. He does not speak in contradictions. Therefore we may conclude, and correctly so, that a deeper spiritual reality resides within the Word. While Adam and Eve appear as two different people, they symbolically represent spiritual qualities within a person. We look then to the Word of the Heavenly Doctrine that reveals wonderful secrets about our spiritual development.

Tree of Life

In this story in Genesis a tree symbolizes human perception (AC 102). Human perception is our ability to discern the external world around us and also the inner world of our loves and thoughts. As a result of our perception we are able to gain insights and formulate opinions about the things we observe outside of us and within us.

The tree of life in the midst of the garden symbolically describes a person's ability to have “love and faith derived” from the “perception of truth” and from the “perception of good” (AC 102). The Lord has instilled within human nature two distinct capacities: one, the ability to receive good as a moderator to influence our intentions and two, the ability to receive truth to direct our thoughts.

The marriage of these two, good and truth from the Lord, when joined together within our souls provide the means whereby the Lord can lead us to heaven. We eat of the tree of life when we allow the Lord to define for us what love is. We eat of the tree of life when we allow the Lord to define the truth from which we can develop our faith and know how to live. We must eat of the tree of life, that is, receive of the Lord day by day so we can be saved.

Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil

Let's now shift our focus to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The Heavenly Doctrine teaches that a person is such that he “is to know from perception what is good and true” (AC 125). However, we know from what we've heard many times before that

human nature inclines toward evils and falsities. Therefore in His mercy, the Lord warns Adam and Eve (a person) not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. What could this mean? Surely, of course, we must know the difference between good and evil.

In looking to the Heavenly Doctrine we see that the prohibition against eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil means that we must perceive good and truth “but not from self and the world” (AC 126). The ban against eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil performs the role of a cautionary measure. Avoiding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is a command that we do not abuse our human ability to perceive. The Lord cautions us against perceiving from our self and then determining on our own without Him what is good and what is evil.

This message from the Lord is not difficult to comprehend. “But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” The meaning is simple: we should not define good and evil. On the one hand the Lord has defined good for us: mutual love, peace, innocence, charity, and usefulness. These are some of the angelic qualities that are good. The Lord is storing these goods within us. On the other hand the Lord has also defined evil for us and told us what to avoid: murder, adultery, theft, false witness, and covetousness.

If people eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil they will “surely die.” The Heavenly Doctrine tells us what happens if people decide for themselves what is good and evil. They will become “as a consequence nothing but evil and falsity and so have a warped view of everything” (AC 210). People will have a “warped” distorted view of life when “things that are evil they see as good, and those that are good as evil” and when “things that are false they see as true, and those that are true as false” (AC 210). This kind of mindset stems from the human propensity toward evil and falsity.

This kind of mindset (making evil to be good and falsity to be truth) is horribly backwards. It originates in the love of self. We must realize that our own way of thinking and living is appealing to us. The love of self causes people to justify themselves and to make excuses for sin. The Lord says in the Arcana that “whatever favors a person’s pleasure and desire, because it favors his love, he feels as good - so much so that when he is told it is of hell he can hardly believe it” (AC 1860). If a person eats of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil he will “surely die” and, blinded by evils, he will not even see that he is in hell. Hell is spiritual death.

Adam And Eve Did Not Die

But Adam and Eve did not die. Instead “the eyes of both of them were opened.” And concerning the man, the Lord said he “has become like one of Us.”

Let’s consider that the “eyes” of Adam and Eve “were opened.” The particular meaning for us relates to the consequence of people deciding for themselves what is good and evil. We learn from the Heavenly Doctrine that the “eyes being opened” means that if people

“examine the things of faith from themselves, they would plainly see those things as if erroneous” (AC 204).

Our eyes become opened when we look to “self” instead of relying upon the Lord. The opening of our eyes is actually the opening of our “self.” And we know the Lord has told us that man’s “self” is nothing but evil. The consequence of opening our eyes (looking to self) is the closing of our souls to the Lord.

The sad reality is whenever we open *our* eyes and believe we can decide for ourselves without the Lord, the things of faith will no longer have meaning for us. We will begin to question, doubt and eventually fall into unbelief. If we approach life through the prism of our own eyes and not from the Lord, then we “will be like God” who said of the man “has become like one of Us.”

This proposition of people becoming like God deserves our attention. The Word of the Arcana tells us that people become “like God” when they make decisions on matters of faith “from themselves” (AC 204). Then in this circumstance people “would be as God, and could guide themselves” (AC 204). What can this mean?

The Lord created humans in His likeness. In other words, He has imprinted within human nature an “as of self.” This is an appearance. Only the Lord is. Only the Lord is Himself. He is not “from” Himself as this presupposes something or someone prior. We, as human beings, do not have a “self” from ourselves or of ourselves. The Lord said when He was in the world that “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

Eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is to decide for oneself and not the Lord. We may be guilty of this whenever we believe we know better than the Lord on matters of faith and the life we should live. If we reject the Lord’s leading we would unfortunately guide ourselves.

Guiding ourselves is something we do not want to do because we “will surely die.” Turning away from the Lord and then to “self” is spiritual death in which “the celestial of faith is destroyed” (AC 126) and “all wisdom and intelligence perishes” (AC 198). Man’s “self” which is nothing but evil rejects the “celestial” or in other words, cast aside as worthless the good of love that faith leads to. Our faith, when built upon the Lord’s truths, is a faith grounded in a life of charity. But the human “self” without the Lord’s guidance is a destructive force that can tear down the Lord’s kingdom within a person.

Cast From The Garden

While Adam and Eve did not die, the Lord did however, cast them from the Garden of Eden and banned them from the tree of life. The appearance is of a punishing God when the reality speaks of a person’s own downfall as a consequence of disobeying the Lord. It is possible a person could reach a point where he’s not interested in the Lord’s truths.

In this case, the Lord is extremely careful that the person does not “put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever”

A person who rejects the Lord’s truths cannot eat of the tree of life. In other words, the person is “not to be instructed in mysteries of faith” (AC 298) and the reason is if “he were instructed in them he could never at all be saved, which is living for ever” (AC 298). The person cannot be saved because by turning to his “self” he has erected a barrier that inhibits the Lord’s influence in his life.

Removal from the garden and banning a person from the tree of life is the Lord’s protection of a person who profanes. Profanation is to know and acknowledge truths but to consciously live contrary to them (AC 1008). Rejecting the Lord’s truths and substituting them with one’s own judgment about what is good and evil is to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. People who do this do not acknowledge the Lord. The Arcana is clear that people “within the Church who do not acknowledge the Lord cannot possess faith, nor thus any love to God, and therefore cannot be saved” (AC 10112). We must realize that the more a person is encouraged to accept something he does not love or value, the more he will reject it. The person alone, and no one else, is a fault if he is not saved. Yet the Lord does all that He can to protect people who freely turn away from the truths of the church.

Concluding Ideas

In Conjugal Love the Lord says “to eat of the tree of life is, spiritually, to be intelligent and wise from the Lord. And to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is, spiritually, to be intelligent and wise from self” (CL 353).

This story of Adam and Eve eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is the story of our life whenever we choose for ourselves and not from the Lord what is best for us. The Lord is encouraging us to allow Him to teach us what is good and true on the one hand and what is evil and false on the other hand.

However, if we decide for ourselves on matters of faith and the life we should live we run the risk of turning off our reception of the Lord. Then we will “surely die.” This death is spiritual death.

But from the Lord we have spiritual life. Right before our very eyes the New Jerusalem is descending. Therefore our task is to eat of the tree of life. Let’s continue each day to receive of the Lord and allow Him to guide us.

The Lord showed John “a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lam. In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations” (Revelation 22: 1-2).

Amen.

