

KNOWING GOD AND ESCAPING DECEPTION

In this article we'll consider the potential of knowing God and how Satan does everything in his power to stop that from happening. Finally we'll think about how we can deal with the areas we've been led away from God and get back to following him with all our heart

THE REALITY AND POTENTIAL OF KNOWING GOD

Genesis 1:27-28: So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

After creating the world and all other things in it, God made man and woman. From these two verses, we're told some things that might explain why He created us. Firstly, it says "God created man in His own image". God had created quite a lot in the first five days but this is the first time He creates something in his own image. As we see in 2v7, God breathes His own Spirit into this man and the man comes alive. This man that has been given life now had a closer link to God than anything else in creation. He bore many of the characteristics of God his very life was God's Spirit. Relationship is possible between man and God. I think this is what God wanted from man; people that he could share his heart with.

This relationship gets started in the very next verse and God tells his newly formed humans to be fruitful and increase in number. Earlier on in the chapter, God has been creating the world and everything in it. God is inviting man to be a part of what He's already been doing; people are to share in the work and purposes of God.

So, from the very beginning, God makes his design for human life clear. He wants to open his heart up to his people and live in intimate fellowship with them. He wants humans to be involved in what he's doing by creating and ruling over the earth. The Garden of Eden gives us a glimpse of what this relationship between God and man was meant to be. Genesis 3:8 particularly jumps out at me: "...The man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord among the trees of the garden"

Just look at how close this relationship between God and mankind was: Firstly, Adam and Eve were in the same garden that the Lord was walking through. The day was cool and both God and man were experiencing this at the same time. The man and his wife could actually hear God as he moved. In the next verse, the Lord calls to Adam and he answers.

God is accessible to man and man to God, they can talk freely and live and work side by side. However, we can already see that something has gone wrong. Prior to this verse, Adam and Eve have eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. For this reason they're pulling away from God; the relationship is broken because of Adam's guilt and shame. Despite the fact that Adam and Eve are hiding away from God, God is still pursuing them. He makes the first move by calling out to Adam.

As we know, Adam and Eve's rebellion led to a much bigger divide between man and God. In His mercy, God removed Adam and Eve from the garden and they became mortal. This meant that the evil they had taken into themselves by eating the fruit wouldn't last forever and the sacrifice of Jesus could restore them fully beyond death.

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But where does that leave us? We've just looked at God's intention for us; to live and work with Him and enjoy His love, friendship and conversation every day of our lives. However, our experience is often a pale reflection of this. God made us for a real, intimate, meaningful, joyful, loving unhindered relationship with Himself. Yet our experience of this thing we call 'relationship' is often closer to an idea, a philosophy, a moral code or at worst 'religion'.

In my upbringing in a Christian home, my ideas about God were exactly that, 'ideas'. Whether these ideas were right or wrong was very important to me as my faith was based on understanding doctrine. I understood 'the knowledge of God' and 'knowing God' to be the same thing. As far as I could see, this very distant and far away God loved me (in kind of an abstract semi-real way) and I would say I loved God (without much feeling behind it). Coming from that kind of perspective, the following statement by Tozer in 'The Pursuit of God' was revolutionary and I have to say, what I'd been desperately seeking my whole life without even realising it: "Sound Bible exposition is an imperative must in the church of the living God. Without it no church can be a New Testament church in any strict meaning of that term. But exposition may be carried on in such a way as to leave the hearers devoid of any true spiritual nourishment whatever. For it is not mere words that nourish the soul, but God Himself, and unless and until the hearers find God in personal experience they are not the better for having heard the truth. The Bible is not an end in itself, but a means to bring men to an intimate and satisfying knowledge of God, that they may enter into Him, that they may delight in His presence, may taste and know the inner sweetness of the very God Himself in the core and centre of their hearts."

I now believe that however much we currently know God, there's always more to discover and enjoy. In the last few weeks God's been opening my eyes to two things. One is how shallow my relationship with Him is, and the second is how intimately we can know God and how desperate God is for that deepening of relationship.

I strongly recommend Tozer's book 'The pursuit of God'. In it, he describes a relationship with God that is more real than I ever thought possible. There were many times while I was reading a section that I had to stop, put the book down and just interact with God. There was one time when I was on the bus and I'd stopped reading and I knew that my thoughts were not just my own but God speaking truth into my life.

The very fact that God, the creator of the world and everything, is talking to me has to be exciting. I was experiencing a reality to knowing God rather than just head knowledge. It wasn't so much that I read about God so I knew what He might hypothetically say to me in a given situation, God was actually real to me! I think it's quite a natural thing, if you give your life to God, to want to know Him as intimately as possible. I got a glimpse on the bus just then, how much more really was possible

From all I've experienced of God, I've found Him to be completely good, faithful and trustworthy. I don't know how deeply I can know Him but I know that the more I pursue Him, my life will become more rich and full than it is now. Of course I struggle with sin and I often have a wrong view of God but overall, experiencing God in reality has to be worth it, even if sometimes I don't want it all that much. I think this is going to be an incredible adventure and I'm excited about how far it can go.

ESCAPING DECEPTION

So the purpose of God is that we should live in intimate fellowship with him and share in his purposes for his creation. We're to share in the heart and purposes of God. This is not just a few philosophical ideas, not just a system of morality, not just fire insurance for when we die. This is intimate, two way, moment by moment friendship with God. This is about our life getting mixed up with God's life. This is about our purposes coming together with God's purposes. This is about the deepest joy and love and fruitfulness and creativity and significance and freedom we can ever know.

This is why Jesus says in John 10v10, "I have come that they may have life, life in all it's fullness". But the first part of John 10v10 gives us a warning. If we ignore this warning we will find ourselves dragged away from this life. The first half of John 10v10 tells us: "the thief (i.e. the devil) comes to steal and kill and destroy." In order to help us defend ourselves against his snares we need to know how he attacks us.

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Our battle against Satan is not primarily a power struggle but a truth struggle. If we stand against Satan in our own power we lose, but if we stand in God's power, we're invincible. Satan knows this so his aim is to separate us from God. Once he's done this, then he can neutralise us spiritually. But the way he separates us from God is not by power but by lies and deceit. As Jesus says in John 8v44 "He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies."

Satan will try to deceive us. The dangerous thing about deceit is not that you believe the wrong thing, but that you believe the wrong thing without realising it. And the devil's tactic of choice is to undermine our view of God. I have one very simple message. This is something God has said to me to get me through some really tough stuff in my life:

When we think the best of God, we're always right.

When we think less than the best of God, we're always being deceived.

To unpack this a bit, we're going to look at Genesis 3. Genesis 3 is the archetypal story of how Satan tempts us. It is a blueprint of how he works so we can learn to overcome his lies and recognise his deceit in our lives.

Genesis 3v1-8 Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'"

The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'"

"You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden.

Adam and Eve are about to make a choice that will doom the whole of the first creation. Billions of men and women will follow their lead, and damn themselves to an eternity in hell. The choice they're about to make will lead inevitably to God himself being nailed in naked agony to a stake of wood. How did the devil get them to make such a disastrous choice? What was his first move?

3v1 "Did God really say..." The devil's first ploy is to sow a seed of doubt into Eve's mind. Whenever God says something significant to us in our lives it's always contested. I remember a while back I was going through a period of really deep soul searching about my call to ministry. My dad took his value and significance from work, though retirement seems to have healed him of that fairly convincingly. I began to wonder whether I was just using ministry as a way of avoiding other struggles and questions in my life. Did God really say...?

If the devil is to get us to go against God, his first tack is to cloud our judgement. We're most at risk if we want the thing Satan is trying to tempt us with. If we want to sin, we're much more willing to be deceived so we can justify what we want to do. We're extremely vulnerable if we're willing to collude with the devil and allow ourselves to be deceived.

Doubt is a normal part of following Jesus. Doubt itself is not a bad thing. It always gives the opportunity for deeper faith and confidence. The danger in doubt is how we respond to it. If we honestly bring doubt into the light, if we face it openly and with others, then we can see it for what it is. We can go back to God's word and we see the truth plainly. In the light we can see things as they are and we're freed to walk on.

The really disastrous thing to do with doubt is to squash it down, to try to ignore it and just carry on. The doubt spreads its roots under everything. Because we've squashed stuff down, we're hiding and we can't see what's really going on. We're forced to fake it. The more we fake it, the more guilty and condemned we feel and the harder it is to face the truth. Our heart becomes harder and harder and we move deeper and deeper into deception.

Adam and Eve knew what God had said. 2v16-17 And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.

But already there are warning signs that things are going wrong. Eve replies: “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’ “. You see what she’s done? She’s exaggerated God’s command. God didn’t talk about touching the tree. What’s going on? Eve is starting to drift from what God has said and adding to it.

Having softened Eve up with doubt, the devil now goes for a blatant lie: “You will not surely die,” the serpent said to the woman. This is clearly nonsense and if he stopped here, I’m sure Eve would have told him to be “on his bike”, if the idea of a snake on a bike isn’t too off the wall! The devil is much more subtle than that. He follows up with a killer suggestion: “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

Rather than question God’s knowledge, he questions his motives and thereby his character. It goes like this: “God is insecure and threatened by you... he knows if you eat it you’ll become a threat, a rival...” The devil is suggesting that God has an ulterior motive rooted in fear and insecurity. He makes out that God is a bit like us.

If God is acting deceptively out of fear and insecurity, he can’t be trusted, he’s not totally on our side. “God can’t be trusted” whispers the devil. “I’ll give you special insight into what’s going on, he won’t tell you this himself, but believe me, I know something he’s not telling you.” Now let’s just take a reality check for a moment. Have you ever found yourself questioning God’s motives? Ever found yourself in a situation where you just don’t know what’s going on? Ever had that sneaking suspicion that God may not have your best in mind? That is always a lie of the devil and unless you bring it into the light and confront it, it will undermine everything.

The devil goes on to twist the knife. This is the real poison, and it’s so familiar I reckon most people here will be able to recognise it as something that the devil has used against them. “God is trying to keep good things from you, he’s keeping you from the fun, he’s actually a bit boring. Don’t trust what he says, try it for yourself, you could miss out.” I hardly need to illustrate this, but I will anyway.

I have a very good friend of mine, just a few years younger than me. He was a regular non-Christian lad and in his late teens he dabbled for a while with Cannabis. It made him feel good. It also opened a window to a new world of possibilities in his life. It gave him experiences that made him see reality in new ways. It made him feel like he had special insight that no-one else had. It brought excitement and adventure into an otherwise very regular life.

Then one day he took a full jet of cannabis. For three days he felt like he was completely locked out of reality. He now describes it as a vision of hell. And in the process his brain was damaged. My friend is a great guy who has now met Christ and his life is changed. But his brain is still damaged. He loves God, but he continually has to battle with depression and paranoia and is dogged by the fear of getting locked back into that place of despair. He would do anything to go back and choose differently. “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

What was the serpent’s temptation? It was to “be like God”. In one sense, Adam and Eve were already “like God”, they bore his image. They were to rule and reign with him. But what the serpent was suggesting went beyond that. He was saying “make the rules for yourself, judge for yourself what’s good and bad, don’t trust what God says.” Basically he was saying “try evil for yourself and you decide whether or not it’s good.”

When the serpent uses the word “know” good and evil it is the same word used when it says that Adam “lay with” Eve, literally Adam “knew” Eve. He was not talking about an abstract understanding of evil. He was suggesting that they took something that even God didn’t have, a personal, experiential knowledge of evil. A coming into relationship with evil, a taking of evil into themselves. As Thomas Merton puts it, Adam and Eve “wanted an experience, an existential knowledge of evil.”

+ This is how the devil works. He first causes us to doubt the goodness of God's intentions towards us. He then seduces us with something we want and manages to persuade us to take evil into ourselves. That evil then begins to destroy us from within. +

There was a terrible story in the news about a former Russian agent who was poisoned by his enemies. They deceived him into eating a highly radioactive poison by concealing it in Sushi. A quick tip, if you want to finish me off, don't bother with the poison, the sushi itself will do the trick! But the guy took the poison into himself and it began to fry him from within and within a week he was dead. When we get persuaded to go against God, this is what the devil is doing to us.

The devil makes sin look good. 3v6: "When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it." But it's a lie. The devil is effectively saying "Don't live by trusting God, trust your own senses, your own ideas, you be the judge." And if we give in and follow his lead, we sometimes step across lines that cannot be re-crossed. It tasted good, it looked good, it sounded good, but God was right, it led to death. As we read on in the passage we see the trail of devastation of their choice to go with the word of the devil instead of the word of God: Shame, cover up, hiding, division, blaming, conflict, pain, dysfunction, domination, frustration, fruitlessness, death and decay. The devil was right, now they knew evil. God was right, it really was bad! But by taking evil into it became part of who they were. One way.

When we think the best of God, we're always right.
He's always good. He's always loving. He's always kind. He's always true.
He's always faithful. He's always gracious. He's always right.
When we think less than the best of God, we're always being deceived.

COMING HOME TO GOD

Perhaps you've been deceived and you've just become aware of it. Once we've recognised that we've been deceived by the devil's schemes and that our view of God has been distorted, we need to know how to put this right. I John 1v9 says: If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

It's important to notice what this verse tells us about the character of God: "He is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness". It's crucial that we have accurate picture of who God is as we come before Him. It helps me to remind myself that: God pursues us after we've blown it just as much as before we blow it. God knew Adam and Eve had sinned and He came after them in the garden. God is the father in the story of the prodigal son saw his son a long way off, ran to him, threw his arms around him and kissed him. This is the God kept seeking after Israel when they rebelled, and the God who was willing to send his own son to die to save mankind. This is the God that we come before in confession. If you confess your sin to God and agree with Him that your sin is wrong, he'll welcome you with open arms and great joy.

This process can often help:

- We agree with God that our sins are wrong
- We acknowledge that we've already been forgiven by Jesus' death
- We turn away from our sin and trust God to give us the strength to do that

If you can come before God this morning and say those three things in your heart, you can know that you are forgiven and God holds nothing against you

IN SUMMARY...

God made us for a real, intimate, meaningful, unhindered relationship with him. We often get led astray by the devil and feel so far from that... but, we can experience this reality in our relationship with God. We believe in a God who's so thoroughly good that when we think the best of God, we're always right. When we think less than the best of God, we're always being deceived.

