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HATH GOD SAID? Part Two

Jeffery D. Woodhams

You know, there's a lot more to day-to-day operations of a church than I had realized. There was so much to do this week, in fact, that Barbara and I sat down on Monday morning and made a list. And then, after we made the list, I delegated all the really hard stuff to Barbara. Do you realize how hard it is to watch poor Barbara struggle with all those tasks? You have *no idea!*

I'm just kidding. We work together and we get things done. It's not only us, either. Throughout the week we've contacted some of you about issues within your sphere of influence in the church. It takes all of us working together to get things done the way they need to be done.

What does that have to do with my sermon? Absolutely nothing.

Let's move the conversation to something that is very, very serious. You already know that young people are leaving the church in alarming numbers. We don't have to look very far to see the effects of this epidemic. The question is, *Why are they leaving?*

I have received a book in which the authors conducted an extremely thorough analysis of this problem.¹ Part of what alerted the authors to a problem was research by George Barna, in which it was discovered that two-thirds of young people who grew up in evangelical churches were now disengaged from the church.² These are kids who attended Sunday school and youth meetings regularly, but fell away from the church and no longer attended in their twenties. The Southern Baptist Convention conducted a similar survey with similar results.³ With this research in hand, the author of this book hired a professional researcher to compile scientific data about the state of twenty-year olds who grew up in evangelical, Bible-believing churches, but who no longer attend. What they expected to find was that these young people disconnected from the church when they went to college. Not so! By far the largest group fell away from the church during high school. The researchers had established *when* they left the church, but the big question is, *Why are they leaving?*

What we've discovered is that, even though the children were taught the *right things* in church and Sunday school, at some point they developed *doubts about the truth of God's Word*--and the church did not answer those doubts. The research shows that there was a space of time from when the doubts began, usually in middle school or early high school, before they disconnected from the church. The doubting young people stayed in church for a while, but in their hearts and minds they were already gone. Hence, the authors named their book *Already Gone*.

It all comes back to doubt. Folks, it's not wrong to doubt; the important thing is to run to the Lord with

1 Ken Hamm and Britt Beemer, *Already Gone* (Green Forest, AZ: Master Books, 2009).

2 The Barna Group, "Most Twentysomethings Put Christianity on the Shelf Following Spiritually Active Teen Years." September 11, 2006. Available at <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/16-teensnext-gen/147-most-twentysomethings-put-christianity-on-the-shelf-following-spiritually-active-teen-years>. Quoted in Hamm and Beemer, p. 19.

3 LifeWay Research, "LifeWay Research Uncovers Reasons 18 to 22 Year Olds Drop Out of Church." Available at http://www.lifeway.com/lwc/article_main_page/0%2C1703%2CA%25253D165949%252526M%25253D200906%2C00.html.

our doubts. If we take our doubts to the Lord and let Him answer those doubts, the result is greater faith. He has given us His Word, His Spirit, and His witness in creation. Not only that, but we can look to those faithful Christians who have gone before and learn from them. Some left an indelible imprint of the Christian faith on your life, such as a father or perhaps a godly grandmother. Others are the learned men who have studied the skeptic's arguments and have refuted them. Run to the Lord!

The entire world system is set up to create doubt; and failing that, to ridicule and persecute those who press beyond doubt into greater belief. We see the pattern of doubt woven into the fabric of this very first encounter with the serpent, the Devil, the father of lies. The important thing to understand is that the pattern has not changed to this very day. Look again at Genesis 3:1:

Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?

And the deceiver begins weaving his web with the thread of doubt: "Hath God said...?" The strategy of planting doubt is remarkably effective. Here we have a woman who has walked with God, who was given personally by God to her husband at the world's first wedding. Even though she knew God personally with her physical senses, and even though she had no sinful nature to cloud her perception, she was ensnared by this doubt.

There's something else in this passage that I want you to see: a play on words in the original language. The very last line of the previous chapter states that the man and his wife were "naked." In Hebrew, *naked* is 'arummim. When we look at the very next verse, the first verse of chapter 3, we see that it describes the serpent as *subtil*, which is the old way of saying *cunning* or *clever*; but in Hebrew the word is 'arum. While the man and his wife were *arummim*, the serpent was 'arum. Do you see this? They were naked; they were innocent. The serpent was not innocent; he had a plan to destroy their innocence.

That is exactly the goal of the world today: destroy children's innocence. Starting at a very young age, children are shown visually on TV and in movies, and are bombarded in secular music, that innocence is unnecessary and "uncool." The push to destroy innocence has always been around, but it's very strong now because of the widespread doubt and disbelief regarding God's Word. Wherever there is a widespread rejection of God's Word, you will always find a push to destroy innocence.

I don't know if you have followed the cultural issues in the United Kingdom of late, but just this week there was yet another story of the problem of binge drinking among British youth, and of the host of problems that goes along with it. It's not at all uncommon to find young people in all sorts of compromising situations there, destroying their bodies even as the alcohol destroys their minds.⁴ It should come as no surprise: less than 2.5% of people in the UK consider themselves born-again Christians. The influence of God's Word has all but died out there as a result of widespread doubt that began cankering the church in England more than a century ago.

My point is that unsettled doubt has real and lasting consequences. If you have doubts about God and His Word, don't try to bury them or ignore them. Take them to the Lord.

4 *Mail Online*, "The Streets of No Shame: The Shocking Picture that Epitomises Britain's Ladette Culture." 22 Oct. 2009. Available at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1222090/Reveller-pictured-knickers-ankles-shocking-scene-UKs-streets-shame.html>.

It's time to move on. The serpent has said, *Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?* Eve responds in verses 2 and 3:

And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden:

But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die.

I cannot possibly put this any better than the authors of *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*:

Eve either did not know God's command very well or did not want to remember it. By contrast, Christ gained victory over Satan by His precise knowledge of God's Word (Matt. 4:4, 7, 10). ... Eve **disparaged the privileges, added to the prohibition, and weakened the penalty**--all seen by contrasting her words (Gen. 3:3) with God's original commands (2:16-17). After Satan heard this, he blatantly negated the penalty of death that God had given (3:4). Satan is a liar from the beginning (John 8:44), and this is his lie: one can sin and get away with it. But death is the penalty for sin (Gen. 2:17) [emphasis added].⁵

It sounds as though Eve didn't really take the time to know God's Word as well as she could have. She's not lying about God's Word, because that would have been sinful. Instead, she just wasn't careful to know and understand God's Word.

Let's not be too hard on Eve here; after all, isn't there some of that in each of us? We think we've got a handle on God's Word. Sure we *believe* God's Word; but how well do we really *know* it? Is it something we meditate upon and consider daily, or is it something we sort of just get by with? We need to hide God's Word in our hearts! The danger is shown very clearly here because Eve, even in a state of perfection, had not taken God's Word and hidden it in her heart.

As the authors of *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* noted previously, Jesus "gained victory over Satan by His precise knowledge of God's Word." That is very true. In each of Satan's temptations for Jesus, there was an element of the good that Jesus might accomplish if He went along with Satan's suggestion. Jesus discerned the difference between what *seemed good* and what was *truly good* by quoting Scripture to Satan. If Jesus relied on having God's Word hidden in His human heart, shouldn't we?

We see then that Eve's defense against temptation was weak because she had a very loose grip on God's Word. When Satan saw this, he went "straight for the jugular," as they say:

And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die:

Satan immediately moved from *doubt* to *denial*--outright, open denial. Once we *doubt* God's Word it is not long before we *deny* God's Word. The atheists know this and they exploit it relentlessly. Our educational system is designed to create doubt in the minds and hearts of young people regarding the Word of God. If you haven't watched the movie *Expelled*, you really should take the time to watch it. It shows atheists either talking about their own crisis of faith early in life, or talking about creating such a

⁵ John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), p. 32.

crisis for others. It's very revealing.

You see, Satan says to us today, "It's not like that at all. God didn't really tell you the whole story. He's keeping something from you. There's a whole lot more to life that you should experience for yourself." This comes out in society as, "I'll try anything once," or, "I keep my mind open to all the possibilities." In a sense, where there is no moral issue, that might be a good thing. Maybe you'll try strange new foods if you visit a foreign land, like, you know, *Alabama*. Or maybe you'd be willing to try a new sport or a new hobby. Certainly nothing prevents being open to those possibilities; but often this is used as a means of luring us into questionable, dangerous, or even outright sinful activities. You need look no further than the stereotypical spring break activities of college young people for examples of binge drinking, lewdness and promiscuity.

We've lost the sense, as Eve did in talking to the serpent, that God has our ultimate good in mind; and the world, the flesh and the Devil do not.

Satan continues, following up *doubt* and *denial* with *delusion*:

For God doeth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.

As you probably know, the word God in Hebrew here is *Elohim*. It's a plural form that is used with singular verbs, giving a hint of the Trinity even in these early passages. What the serpent is actually offering here is that the woman will be, not as a god, but as God Himself. This is of course a delusion. It mistakes the very nature of God.

What is the nature of God? What makes God uniquely God? Satan here asserts that God is God because He knows both good and evil; and therefore, if the woman experientially knows evil, she too will be as God. However, that is not what makes God uniquely God. First, God is good and only knows good experientially. He cannot and does not know evil by personal experience. What makes God uniquely God is that He is infinite and all others are finite. God is limitless and all others are limited. A human, an angel or a demon can never become as God because the finite can never comprehend the infinite. What's also interesting here to me is that by allowing evil but never actualizing it or engaging in it, God proves that the fullness of life, real life, is to be found in goodness and goodness alone.

We find that Satan has offered the woman a grand delusion based on a misinterpretation of what makes God uniquely God. Satan informs her that she can be as God, knowing good and evil. She will *know for herself*. She will *make her own choices*. She will assert her independence and step forth as a new being, equal to God Himself. It is sheer deceit, but the appeal is very, very real.

In fact, we have this exact same appeal today, and though it comes to us in many forms, it remains the same at its core. Some religious groups have taken this at face value and have believed this very lie, teaching that because Eve took this fruit, we also in time can ascend to godhood. But for the most part, the lie that ensnares us is this lie that *we have the ultimate right and authority to decide what is good and what is evil*; and this right is based on one's individuality. You may have heard people say, "What's right for you might not be right for me." There is a widespread belief in our culture that there are no moral absolutes (which is in itself an absolute statement). This belief is expressed as, "That's true for you, but not for me," or, "Who are *you* to judge what is right and wrong for everyone else?" The smug

elitists have a more refined way of saying it: “You’re not right; you only think you are.” These could be addressed in a whole other sermon; but for today it’s enough to say that the core of these statements is the lie, “You shall be as gods, knowing good and evil”--you get to choose what is right and wrong for you.

I want to conclude this sermon with two concepts and then an appeal. The first concept is that the woman had no sin nature with which to contend. Her choice is her own to make. There is no behavioral, societal, or psychological conditioning or mechanism that will influence her. She is a free moral agent, able to evaluate the doubt, denial and delusion offered by the serpent against her knowledge of God’s nature and command to her. She is free to choose, and her choice is her own.

The second concept is, again, stated very well by the authors of *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*:

The word of the Lord brought life and order; the word of the serpent brought chaos and death. Truth is older than falsehood; God’s word came before Satan’s lies.⁶

You see, God offered, and still offers, life and life abundant. Satan offered, and still offers, death and death abundant *disguised* as greater life.

My friends, what disguise is Satan holding forth to you? What keeps you from the abundant life in Christ? Do you believe that you can find greater life in seeking pleasure, in acquiring wealth and power, in asserting your morality? My appeal to you today is to see through the delusion and stand in your place as a creature before your Creator. Give Him the right to decide what is right and wrong for you. In doing so, you can find the fullness of life. Seek God today. Tell Him that you accept His goodness, His love, His mercy, and the sacrifice of His Son in place of your own badness, your own evil choices. You can have life, abundant life, starting today. Will you?

6 Ibid.