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From the book “The Ministry of Salvation” (7)

The Knowledge of Evil and the Judgment of Death

1. Why did God give man such a harsh punishment of death after his fall?

2. Why was the tree that God commanded man not to eat from named the tree of knowledge of good and evil?

The answer to the first question is that man knew before his fall that the consequence of sin is death. Therefore, God’s punishment was neither harsh nor a surprise for man because God had previously advised him out of His love. Additionally, death is not only a judgment against man but a natural consequence to breaching the divine commandment. By breaching the commandment, man had entered into a state of disobedience against God for he obeyed the voice of the devil against God’s advice and commandment. Thus, man separated himself from God the source of his life and as a result, he lost his life and entered into a state of death.

If we wonder why the tree was called the tree of knowledge of good and evil? We say that this was a symbolic name, which means that if man ate from it, he would have committed sin, he would have disobeyed God and would have known evil. Man only knew good according to the way he was created. Therefore, God said after the fall of man:

“Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil”. (Genesis 3:22)

Man knew evil, that is to say that he experienced evil and fell under its dominion. As to God, He already knew that there was evil, though He never experienced it, practiced it, or fell under its dominion. God’s knowledge of evil is completely different form that if man’s.

In St. Gregory’s liturgy the priest says: **“And made known to me the thorn of death. One plant there was, from which you forbade me to eat. This of which you said to me: “From this only do not eat!” I ate of my own free will. I laid aside your law by my own opinion. I neglected your commandments. I brought upon myself the sentence of death.”**

St. Gregory the theologian explains that the fall of man under the dominion of sin was by his free will, as it was man who breached God’s law, and was the one who ate from the forbidden fruit. Therefore it was man, not God, who brought upon himself the judgment.

St. Athanasius said:

“But since the will of man could turn either way, God secured this grace that He had given by making it conditional from the first upon two things—namely, a law and a place. He set them in His own paradise, and laid upon them a single prohibition. If they guarded the grace and retained the loveliness of their original innocence, then the life of paradise should be theirs, without sorrow, pain or care, and after it the assurance of immortality in heaven. But if they went astray and became vile, throwing away their birthright of beauty, then they would come under the natural law of death and live no longer in paradise, but, dying outside of it, continue in death and in corruption. This is what Holy Scripture tells us, proclaiming the command of God, “Of every tree that is in the garden you shall surely eat, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, but in the day that ye do eat, you shall surely die.” you shall surely die”—not only just die, but remain in the state of death and of corruption”.

St. Athanasius clarifies that because of God’s goodness; he ensured grace which he gave to man by a commandment and a place. In other words, for man to keep the grace and the gifts that God granted him, God kept him in the Garden of Eden. He also gave him a commandment that if he obeys it, he would live forever. This means that the commandment is a safeguard for man and it’s given to him to protect him not to be the cause for his fall.

Nonetheless, if mankind violates the commandment, as St. Athanasius said, **“they will bring death on themselves according to their nature.”** This means that when man separates himself from God through sin, he goes back to his origin as dust from earth and his expected destiny is death and corruption not life and eternity.

St. Athanasius also offers an important point on this topic as he says that death isn’t only the death of the flesh as we know it, but it is to stay in the state of eternal death permanently without the possibility of improvement or change.

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