

Whatever Happened To Gnosticism? Part Three: Satan's Three Heresies

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Scholars who define "Gnosticism" generally agree that Gnostic philosophies had their source in the Zoroastrianism and Hinduism of Persia and India, and that these ideas were brought into the West via Alexander the Great's conquest of Persia. These Eastern thoughts blended with Greek culture, producing a heady mixture that profoundly influenced the Jews of the time and Christians centuries later. However, the ultimate source of this "falsely called knowledge"—as well as the one responsible for perpetuating these anti-God philosophies throughout time—is, of course, Satan the Devil. Gnosticism is one of the many heresies he has used to deceive the whole world (Revelation 12:9). His words to Eve in the Garden of Eden bear a striking resemblance with the core of Gnostic thought and teaching:

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'?" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; 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.'" Then the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. 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." (Genesis 3:1-5)

In this first message to mankind, Satan introduces three heresies that he has used repeatedly throughout history. First, in verse 1, he sows seeds of doubt as to whether God can be trusted. Satan's very first words were, "Has God indeed said. . . ?" Spoken or not, this sentiment that God is untrustworthy, and that His Word is suspect, has been a regular feature in mankind's relationship with God ever since.

The Gnostics were no exception—in fact, they are a prime example. In its most basic sense, Gnosticism is *knowing*, but its knowledge, while sometimes *including* the Word of God, does not have it as its foundation. Instead, more than what was contained in Scripture, Gnostics valued what they experienced, what elders told them, or what they learned from "angels," astrology, or chemistry (alchemy). Thus, we see elements of Gnosticism in Galatians: a mixture of "lucky days," to which they ascribed spiritual significance (part of their worship prior to conversion) and a belief, brought in by Judaizers or perhaps even an "angel" (Galatians 1:8), that justification could come by works of the law.

Judaism, though it has its *roots* in the Old Testament, sees God's Word through the lens of Hellenism (Greek thought) and the traditions of Jewish scholars and teachers through the centuries. The Galatian Christians gave God's Word lip service, but did not depend on it as the *source* of their beliefs and practices. If they had, they would not have returned to pagan "days, months, seasons, and years," nor believed that justification could ever result from good works—a concept that is *read into* the Old Testament, but not actually found there.

Similarly, the Colossian Christians were affected by an ascetic form of Gnosticism that included "ordinances" (KJV) or "regulations" (NKJV) that are not found in God's Word but were the commandments and doctrines *of men* (Colossians 2:20-23), as well as demons, the "basic principles of the world" (Colossians 2:8).

Modern Distrust of God

This same distrust of God's Word is readily seen in today's Catholicism and Protestantism. The Catholic Church holds that Scripture is only one of three sources from which its dogma is derived—the other two being divine revelation and the writings and traditions of previous Catholic saints. The Bible, while generally utilized as the source of doctrine, can be easily overridden by the words of a Pope or other theologian, living or dead. Once again, human words and traditions are considered more trustworthy than God's.

In some respects, Protestantism has a higher regard for Scripture. However, it, too, accepts the traditions of men in such beliefs as the Trinity, the immortality of the soul, going to heaven, observing Christmas and Easter, and venerating the first day of the week (which the Catholic Church rightly points out makes sense only if one accepts Rome's authority, for there is no *scriptural* authority for keeping any day holy but the Sabbaths).

Modern Gnostics who believe in "progressive revelation" have also succumbed to this first of Satan's ploys. While God *does* reveal things to us, the critical point is that what is revealed—if it truly comes from Him—will *never* contradict what He has already revealed in His Word. "God is not a man, that He should lie" (Numbers 23:19). Yet progressive revelation advocates believe that their revelations are more authoritative than the Bible, rather than complementing and harmonizing with it, making them ripe for satanic influence under the guise of God revealing something new to them. They may sincerely believe that God speaks to them, yet they simultaneously mistrust what He has already said in inspired Scripture. They tend to shy away from Bible study, concluding that they do not need it since God speaks directly to them, and if there is anything important, God will let them know.

Romans 10:17 tells us that "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." But Satan knows this too and believes that, if he can undermine the trustworthiness of God and the validity of His Word, he can destroy the faith necessary for salvation. Currently, the Bible's legitimacy is undergoing an intense assault. Due to popular Gnostic writings like the *Gospel of Judas* and the *Gospel of Thomas*, as well as *The Da Vinci Code* book and movie, many people are questioning why we have the Bible that we do and wondering if something in the ancient apocryphal writings, if it were known, would change Christianity as we know it. Rather than quibbling about this or that point of doctrine, Satan seems to be gunning for the whole package by asserting that the Word of God is subject to the whims of men and thus cannot be trusted. At every turn, faith founded in God's Word is being undermined.

The Second Heresy

Satan's next heresy is found in Genesis 3:4: "You shall not surely die." When expanded, this one claims that we are already immortal, so death has no real hold over us. This idea, proposed at the very beginning, has thrived throughout history. Mainstream Christianity calls it the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, while various Eastern religions contain it in beliefs such as reincarnation. Whatever its moniker, the belief that human beings possess a spiritual, *eternally conscious*,

imperishable component is a major tenet of nearly every religion throughout man's history. In our modern culture, books and movies abound with examples of the spirits of the dead hovering around the living characters, giving them comfort, aid, and encouragement. It is taken as given that death is not the end; somehow, one's conscious spirit will live on when the physical body perishes.

The Gnostic belief in the dualism of flesh and spirit—with the flesh being evil and something to be freed from, while the eternal spirit was good—also originated in the lie Satan told Eve. Gnostics, in general, believed that the purpose of human existence was to return to the spiritual realm from whence all originated. Death, then, was seen as liberation of the spirit.

First, consider how this belief affects a person's attitude and way of life. When Satan undermined the death penalty for disobedience, in addition to sowing further distrust in what God says, he also blunted one of the keenest elements of human motivation, continued self-preservation. If life beyond the grave is assured, how this life is lived makes little difference. It is like guaranteeing a college freshman that he will receive a doctorate degree, regardless of whether anything is learned, any work is done, any classes are attended, or any tuition is paid. While the student may indeed expend some effort, the motivation to apply himself wholeheartedly to his education will be substantially weakened. It would be so easy to slack off and postpone catching up to some time next week. After all, if the goal is certain, why worry about the details in the meantime?

Spiritually, the result is the same. If one already has immortality, and is eternally saved, there is no pressing reason to resist the pulls of carnality. Resisting Satan matters little. Devoting one's life to growing and overcoming has no urgency. Sin is no big deal. Why should one study to come to know God and His truth? *Believing that one already possesses eternal life removes the urgency to live according to the desires and requirements of the Creator.* At best, all that remains is the vague guidance of "just be a good person."

The Bible teaches that there *can be* life after death through the resurrection from the dead. Eternal life is ours *only* if God supplies it, and not because we possess an immortal soul:

» God tells us, "Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine; *the soul who sins shall die.* (Ezekiel 18:4; emphasis ours throughout). God repeats this in Ezekiel 18:20. Clearly, it is possible for a "soul" to die.

» Paul instructs in Romans 6:23 that "the wages of sin is *death*," not eternal life—not even eternal life in ever-burning hell. As with Ezekiel 18, sin incurs the death penalty. Satan, though, would have us believe that since death is not a real threat, sin is no big deal. It is only because of God's grace that we are not struck down immediately—not because of any inherent immortality within us—as the rest of Romans 6:23 explains: "but the *gift* of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Eternal life is a gift, not an inborn quality.

» I Timothy 6:16 says that God "alone has immortality"—not any member of the human race, Christians included!

» Romans 2:7 promises "eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good *seek* for glory, honor, and *immortality*," again proving that eternal life is a gift, not a right, and that immortality must be *sought* (by "doing good") rather than assumed to have it already.

» Finally, in the "Resurrection Chapter," I Corinthians 15, Paul explains *when* Christians receive immortality:

Now this I say, brethren, that *flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God*; nor does corruption inherit incorruption. Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but *we shall all be changed*—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, *at the last trumpet*. For the trumpet will sound, and *the dead will be raised incorruptible*, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and *this mortal must put on immortality*. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this *mortal has put on immortality*, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." (I Corinthians 15:50-54)

It is not until "the last trumpet," when Jesus Christ returns, that the dead will be resurrected and given immortality (I Thessalonians 4:16). At this time, the saints will be changed and given new *spiritual* bodies (I Corinthians 15:49; I John 3:2). Clearly, immortality is not given until the resurrection from the dead, which does not take place until Jesus Christ returns.

That God must resurrect a person for him to continue living means that He retains sovereignty. He is not obliged to grant eternal life to anyone who demonstrates, once he has the opportunity to know God, that he is not willing to be subject to His way of life. However, by belittling the truth about the resurrection from the dead, and telling people that they already have immortality, Satan can distract them from a basic reason *why* they need to listen to God—so that they may be resurrected and continue living!

The Third Lie

The third prong in the Devil's ongoing assault on God's instructions is found in Genesis 3:5: that by taking of the Tree of the *Knowledge* of Good and Evil, human eyes would be opened—implying wisdom and enlightenment—to allow a person to know good and evil as God does. Immediately, Satan places the emphasis on *knowing*, but it is contrasted with *living* eternally. Satan proposes that mankind should be like God in taking to himself the knowledge—the definition—of what is right and wrong, asserting that this is a good thing! In contrast, the Tree of Life represents a way of living in which the meaning of good and evil already exists, and eternal life involves submitting through the Holy Spirit to that definition and the Sovereign who is its source.

Likewise, the Gnostics are those who *know*—who pursue mystical knowledge that they believe holds the key to eternal life through advancing beyond the physical and into the spiritual realm. Recall that the *Gospel of Thomas* states at the very beginning that "whoever discovers the *interpretation* of these sayings will not taste death." Gnostics believed the key to eternal life was contained in right interpretation—knowledge—of those esoteric sayings.

The book of Revelation expounds on the Tree of Life in two places:

- To *him who overcomes* I will give to eat from the *tree of life*, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God. (Revelation 2:7)
- Blessed are *those who do His commandments*, that they may have the right to the *tree of life*, and may enter through the gates into [New Jerusalem]. (Revelation 22:14)

The Tree of Life, then, is associated with a *way* of life—one that requires overcoming (growth against a standard of righteousness) and keeping (doing) God's commandments. The only ones who are allowed to partake of the Tree of Life are those who have changed themselves (with God's help, by His Spirit) to begin living in the same manner as He does. To those who submit to His standard of righteousness, then, He grants life that is both endless and of the same quality that He enjoys.

Satan, though, in addition to casting doubt on what God plainly says, and implying that God is unfair by withholding good things, offers a shortcut. He says, "You do not need to follow God's way, for it is obviously unfair and far too stringent. You can follow your *own* way. You can take knowledge to yourself of what is good and what is evil. You can be just like God in determining what is right and wrong." Adam and Eve took the bait, and ever since, man has rejected God's standard of righteousness in favor of his own.

This third heresy is easily seen in the antinomianism (literally, "against law") of the Gnostics, who may not have been against *every* law, but were certainly against any law—any standard of conduct or requirement of righteousness—that impinged upon *their* standard of conduct. Thus the ascetic Gnostics who grieved the Christians in Colossae held to manmade regulations of "do not touch, do not taste, do not handle" (Colossians 2:20-21), while rejecting the command to "rejoice" with food and drink during the God-ordained festivals. Similarly, mainstream Christianity will (rightly) use portions of Leviticus and Deuteronomy to point out God's abhorrence of abortion and homosexuality, but will claim that the same law is "done away" when it comes to the Sabbath and holy days. They have taken to themselves the knowledge of what is good and what is evil, establishing their own standard of righteousness.

A core issue of the Bible is whether we submit to God's governance or try to form a government based on our own perception of what is good or what works. God's way results in eternal life, but it comes with the obligation to submit oneself to God. It requires keeping all of His commandments and overcoming our human weaknesses that do not rise to that standard. Satan, conversely, seeks to persuade us to do our own thing and to usurp God's prerogative in defining right living. He encourages us to be enlightened, to have our eyes opened, by doubting God and rejecting His way.

The Highest Virtue?

These three heresies, each subtly undercutting God's truth and plan for mankind, have been recycled since Creation, effectively continuing the separation from God begun in the Garden of Eden. Certainly, Gnosticism incorporates these foundational falsehoods, but they also exist in every anti-God system of belief, organized or not.

An area where the wrong approach to knowledge becomes apparent is in love toward God and toward fellow man, and especially toward our brethren and families. The Gnostics tended to disdain those who were not as "enlightened" as they were. Knowledge and understanding were their currency, and they assigned value to people based on what they *knew*, a practice completely contrary to God's way of outgoing concern.

In writing against Gnosticism, the apostle John, both in his epistles and his gospel, emphasizes God's love toward us and our obligation to love the brethren. Similarly, Paul writes, "Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies" (I Corinthians 8:1), and that even if he understood all mysteries and all knowledge,

but did not have love, he would be nothing (I Corinthians 13:2). He also warns Timothy about self-centered people who are "always learning, but never able to come to the knowledge of the truth" (II Timothy 3:7).

To the Gnostics, knowledge was the highest virtue, since they considered it the path to spirituality. They sought the "divine" inside themselves through self-knowledge; they were caught up in an all-important search for the self. They did not need Jesus Christ as Savior, Redeemer, or High Priest, but *only* as a spiritual Messenger who would instruct and enlighten. This approach or philosophy cannot but make a person self-centered, and selfishness lives at the root of all strife within relationships.

For Christians, right knowledge *is* extremely important, but that right knowledge will never contradict faith, hope, and especially love. Ultimately, knowledge will come to nothing (I Corinthians 13:8), but faith, hope, and love will remain (verse 13).