

It Helps To Know What You Don't Know

LORD God to Adam: "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." ([Gen 2:16,17](#))

Satan to Eve: "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" ([Gen 3:1](#))

Eve to Satan: "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.'" ([Gen 3:2](#))

Satan to Eve: "You will not surely die, for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." ([Gen 3:4](#))

Analysis and decision: When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was: 1) good for food, 2) pleasing to the eye, 3) desirable for gaining wisdom, then she took some, ate it and gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. ([Gen 3:6](#))

Observations for living today:

People make decisions based on information they believe to be true or what they know to be real (reality). They avoid making choices based on deceptive information or a misrepresentation of what is true (a lie), which produces a false perception of reality.

Socrates believed "no man voluntarily pursues evil, or that which he thinks to be evil. To prefer evil to good is not in human nature;" specifically, the only time man chooses evil over good is when he lacks adequate knowledge, i.e., has a "false opinion" or has been "deceived about important matters." No one deliberately tries to make their situation worse. ([Protagoras by Plato](#), 380 BC.)

To make correct decisions you not only need to have enough accurate information to understand what is true/real, you also need to clearly know what relevant information you do not have so as to prevent being deceived by others or deluded by your own thoughts. The process is twofold: First, do not think you know something you do not, and second, know enough to understand what is true. Socrates was considered wiser than anyone in his time because he "did not claim to know things he knew he did not know." ([Apology, Crito, and Phaedo of Socrates by Plato](#), 399 BC.) His ability to accurately evaluate what he did not know was the key to success. Second, know enough, that is know what can be known. Alexander Pope wrote, "a little learning is a dangerous thing," to describe the danger that stops learning and precludes understanding reality. A little learning without being aware of what you do not understand will indeed "intoxicate the brain," and lead to a very short list of good choices. ([An Essay on Criticism](#), 1709 AD.) Even today people recognize the importance of acknowledging what is not known. The former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld understood the danger associated with the absence of information and its impact on developing an understanding of reality when he commented specific to planning military operations during the war with Iraq saying, "there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know." ([SECDEF Rumsfeld Quote-Wikipedia](#), 2002)

Case Study of the First Temptation.

Military planners know the study of previous engagements, the strategies and tactics used and their impact on the outcome are invaluable when facing another fight with the same enemy. Let us conduct an analysis of Eve's known knowns, known unknowns and assumptions to see what might be helpful when facing our own temptation. First I will define the terms and summarize the analysis process. I will then propose a breakdown of the information in the record of Eve's temptation into known, unknown and assumptions, before making some observations regarding her choice. Finally, I will propose an outline for applying similar analyzes to any other temptation you may face. The outline may also be used as a prayer guide.

Definition of terms

A Known Known is something you know to be true or real; a fact proven by personal experience or given to us by a respected teacher/source that has proven it to be a fact.

A Known Unknown is something you know you do not know; a gap in information or understanding, usually expressed in the form of a question.

An Assumption is something you believe to be true even though it cannot be proven to be a fact.

Process Summary

Military planners understand things known and unknown, if inaccurate will lead to ineffective decision making and a failure in battle. Every effort must be made to understand what is true/real. What is not known should be clearly identified to better focus efforts to know the truth. Unanswered questions, things we know we don't know, when we are brave enough to be honest, really bother us. We want answers to our questions and we are sometimes quick to fill in the blanks with minimum effort. An unknown should never become an assumption without making the maximum effort to establish it as a fact. Assumptions are necessary for planning/decision making when information critical to a plan/decision is missing and the plan/decision making process cannot continue without it. While assumptions are very helpful in preventing planning paralysis, they should be kept to an absolute minimum, because if they are wrong the result will be failure. Making an assumption about an unknown that can be known is a formula for disaster. Finally, each assumption must be monitored closely to confirm as soon as possible it is either an absolute fact or it was an error and the plan/decision needs to be changed.

Analysis of Eve's Temptation

Known knowns (facts)

- ✦ Plenty of food to eat – access to all trees except one, the one next to the Tree of Life;
- ✦ God said not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge;
- ✦ Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge is pretty.

Known unknowns (information gaps)

- ✦ Is the fruit really good for food?
- ✦ What does it mean to die?
- ✦ Will our eyes really be opened;
- ✦ What will we see?
- ✦ Will we be like God?
- ✦ What is the knowledge of good and evil?

Assumptions (believed to be true but not proven as facts)

- ✦ Surely we will not die;
- ✦ Fruit is good for food;
- ✦ Gaining wisdom of good and evil is desirable;
- ✦ I can be like God.

Observations of Eve's analysis

Notice in Known Knowns the absence of “✦ If we eat from the tree of knowledge we will surely die.” Actions speak louder than words. While Eve said she knew not to eat fruit from the tree, adding you must not even touch it or you will die, she did in fact touch and eat the fruit. She did not believe God, rather she believed Satan when offer the assumption “you will not surely die.”

Additionally she appears to have accepted two additional assumptions made by Satan: the knowledge of good and evil is desirable, and you will be like God.

How much better it would have been for Adam and Eve to have said to Satan, "Please wait here while I go ask God about each of these known unknowns." Keep in mind, they lived every day in the presence of God, where in the cool of the day, He would come walking in the Garden ([Gen 3:8](#)).

Would God have answered any of their known unknowns?

Would an understanding of the potential cost associated with known unknowns have helped?

Analysis Template / Prayer Outline

What choice or temptation to sin am I facing today?

What am I certain I know (known knowns) specific to this choice or trial?

What do I know I do not know (known unknowns)?

What can I learn that I know I do not know--what is knowable?

Is there information available on this unknown and can I access it?

What action can I take right now to better understand this unknown?

What decision or how many choices may be impacted by this unknown?

What is the urgency associated with the consequences of not understanding this unknown?

What things do I not understand (known unknowns), am I certain cannot be known now?

Do I need to make an assumption about this unknown or can I just wait and see, i.e., does not impact any immediate decision.

What known unknown requires an assumption, i.e., critical to an impending decision, which if I'm incorrect I will fail miserably?

Successful execution of any plan/decision requires a continuous evaluation of all things not fully understood (known unknowns) and assumptions, so as to affirm God's truth or recognize an error (bad/incorrect assumption) and thus defend against being fooled by Satan's lie.

Reality in Christ:

You have it better than Adam and Eve. As a Christian you are a new creation ([2 Cor 5:17](#)) in which God's Holy Spirit dwells ([1 Cor 6:19](#)). When you have to deal with a known unknown, remember the promise James gave regarding understanding the trials of this life: "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him" ([Jas 1:5](#)). Always remember what Jesus told us about what is real, "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples" ([Jn 15:7,8](#)).

Let us know with certainty the reality in Christ Paul describe in Hebrews chapter 7 thru 10. Christ came to resolve the greatest known unknown mankind has ever witnessed: Can I know/see God? God is making a new order ([Heb 9:10](#)); through a body that does His will ([Heb 10:5-10](#)); which is living under a new covenant where He Himself puts His laws in the heart and writes them on the mind ([Heb 10:16](#)); and has given continuous access to Him on His throne so we can get His mercy and grace to help us in our time of need ([Heb 4:16](#)); until He completes His work creating a new heaven and new earth ([Rev 21:5](#)) and returns for us.