

THE TREE OF LIFE

As I was contemplating the figure of the tree as a metaphor for our lives as Christians, a special tree, the Tree of Life mentioned in Scripture, began to intrigue me. So, with the permission of the organising committee, I have deviated a little from the other lessons. But it seemed to me to be particularly appropriate to consider the Tree of Life on Sunday as we focus on Christ, his death and resurrection, and the Life he brings.

The Tree of Life is a special tree. In itself it has qualities we can only imagine. There are a lot of things we don't know about this tree – what it looked like, kind of fruit it bore, how one felt when eating from the tree of life, etc.

But here are some things we do know: it is pleasing to the eye; its fruit is delicious, it is abundantly fruitful year round and after Adam and Eve sinned they had to leave the Garden so as not to have access to it. We also know it is a feature of the Holy City mentioned in Revelation.

The Tree of Life bookends Scripture. It is first mentioned in the beginning of Genesis and then again in the last chapter of Revelation.

Let's look first look at **Genesis 2:8-9, 15-17**.

Here two trees are given special mention, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life.

Let's imagine a few things about this Garden God made for man.

1. I like to try to imagine the garden: The fragrances (no flowers without scent?), the colours, the tastes (winter tomatoes have no taste), the abundance, the bird song, and the animals at peace with man and God as companion.
2. We know the trees in the Garden were pleasing to the eye and good for food. **Beauty and sustenance.** This suggests that from the beginning God created us to enjoy/need beauty as much as to need food.
3. Notice in verse 15 that man is put in the garden "to work it and take care of it". Nature and man attuned to each other. Work is not a punishment; it is a gift we were created for. It is Godlike – 2:2, "God finished the **work** he had been doing." And he left man to continue to enhance and oversee the Garden, to be creative in God's creation.

4. Then comes the prohibition: don't eat of **one particular tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil**. (This was given before Eve was created, so Adam would have shared this knowledge with her.)
5. Why was it in the garden? To give them a **choice** to obey or disobey God, to trust in him and depend on him. To be truly free they needed to be able to choose.
6. What do we know about this tree? It had edible fruit ("good for food"), was pleasing to the eye and eating the fruit had **deathly consequences**.
7. Did Adam and Eve know right from wrong? Yes, they knew the consequence of bad choices, as Eve explained it to Satan, vs. 3. "We must not eat of it or touch it or we will die."

Read 3:4-6

Eve chose to believe the serpent. All the other trees were good for food and pleasing to the eye as well. But this tree had a pull on her. **(e.g. The Secret Life of Five Year Olds and the chocolate fountain)**

So if they knew right from wrong (wrong to eat from the tree), how is "the knowledge of good and evil different"?

Consider the moral state of young children. Children don't have to be taught that there is such a thing as right and wrong, or that hurting people is wrong. What they do have to be taught is which particular actions are wrong and why.

It's possible that Adam and Eve's initial state was similar to this. In other words, they had the foundations of moral knowledge: they knew there was such a thing as right and wrong, and if one of them had hurt the other, they probably would not have regarded the act as morally neutral. However, they lacked specific knowledge, and therefore learned some things when they ate the fruit. Their relative innocence still didn't provide them with a valid excuse, as their awareness of morality coupled with God's explicit instruction meant they knew it was wrong to eat the fruit. It was a defiance of God.

Would Adam have been blindly obeying God up to this point? Or did he have reason to choose to obey God? Consider Adam's life up to the point of eating the fruit:

- He'd always lived in a garden, which was described as "very good."

- Presumably he knew God created him and the garden: he knew God created Eve for him by using his rib,
- God communicated with him,
- God gave him an occupation as a gardener,
- He provided for all his needs (both food and companionship),
- He gave him a good measure of freedom (he could eat from any tree except one),
- He and his wife were free to talk to someone opposed to God,
- Adam had no reason to think God was giving him false information or was acting against his best interests in any way when he said, "Don't eat from that tree or something bad will happen to you."
- On the other hand, what reason did he or Eve have to believe the serpent? **Adam and Eve chose to trust a stranger and to doubt God's goodness and wisdom.**
- They chose to undermine God rather than trust in Him.

John Piper:

The forbidden tree was there to test them: Will we keep looking to God as the giver and lover and treasure of this garden so that all our eating is thanking and all our savouring is a savouring of God? Will we keep on enjoying God in the enjoying of the trees?

It was a warning. "If you choose *independence* instead of *God-dependence*, you will lose the pleasure of the garden and God with it."

"But if you keep trusting me and enjoying me as your greatest delight and highest treasure, you will have this garden and I will be the pleasure of all your pleasures."

The forbidding of one tree is a way of securing that the pleasures of all the other trees in the garden are supremely pleasures in God.

The knowledge of good and evil seems to us like a good thing to have, but the question is: where should this come from? The "sin" of Adam and Eve is that they want to be "like God." **This means that they do not want to depend on God for the guidance of what is good and**

evil. They want to know it for themselves, which makes them the judge. They want the option in the future to say what is good and what is evil.

In fact, God is the only judge in these matters. Adam and Eve apparently wanted to experience for themselves good and evil. That experience changed them and the world in profound ways.

We can ask ourselves – do I trust God to reveal to me what is good and what is evil.

THE TREE OF LIFE

The tree of life in Eden must have had some role to play in maintaining the life of Adam and Eve. Adam would “live forever,” even in his fallen condition, if he had eaten the tree of life after his sin. God placed a sword-wielding cherub at the entrance to the garden specifically “to guard the way to the tree of life” (verse 24). **It seems access to the tree of life would have prolonged Adam’s physical life indefinitely, dooming him to an eternity in a fallen world.**

The Tree of Life stood in the centre of the Garden of Eden which elsewhere is called ‘The Garden of the LORD’. It was a real tree, to be sure, but let me suggest that it was also symbolic of the fact that God was, and is, the source of eternal life and blessing. Adam and Eve were to have their life centred in Him, even as the Tree was in the centre of His Garden.

Other passages in the Bible also mention The Tree of Life. In Ezekiel 47:12 we read of trees whose ‘fruit will be for food and their leaves for healing’. This image is taken up also in *Revelation 22:2*. **In Proverbs a number of things are referred to as ‘a tree of life’ (wisdom (3:15), the fruit of the righteous (11:30), desire fulfilled (13:12), and a soothing tongue (15:4)) It is clear that the Tree of Life in these references symbolises that which brings joy and healing to people.**

This, I suspect, was what the original, the real Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden symbolised. It was material, yet it stood for the blessing of eternal life which God would give to Adam and Eve, and their descendants, if they were to pass the test of obedience.

But Adam sinned. He failed the test and lost his right to eat from the Tree. As one commentator puts it, **‘that he might understand himself to be deprived of his former life, a solemn excommunication is added; not that the Lord would cut him off from all hope of salvation, but, by taking away what he had given, would cause man to seek new assistance elsewhere.’**

Adam would have been further condemned if he had presumed to eat the fruit to which he was not now entitled. Mercifully, God did not permit this to happen. Adam was cast out of the Garden of Eden. No longer could he even contemplate eating from the Tree of Life. It was beyond his reach.

Now that Adam had the knowledge of good and evil, he was faced with constantly having to make a choice between the two. And all who follow after him have the same dilemma. Very quickly we see that it is a difficult challenge, and many fail to choose wisely.

Physical death now began to enter the human race. Adam began to die! But in the Garden, even before Adam and Eve are banished from it, there is a promise of redemption. (Gen. 3:15)

This promise was fulfilled many thousands of years later when God returned to Earth to finally defeat Satan through the death and resurrection of his son, so that through faith in Him, we may now inherit the eternal life Adam forfeited. Indeed, Jesus says 'To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the Tree of Life which is in the Paradise of God.'

THE TREE OF LIFE IN THE NEW JERUSALEM, THE HOLY CITY

Turn to Rev. 21

Rev. 21:1-4

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. **They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes.** There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

Rev. 21:22-22:3a.

²² I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. ²³ The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. ²⁴ The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendour into it. ²⁵ On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. ²⁶ The glory and honour of the nations will be brought into it. ²⁷ Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who

does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

22 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ² down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³ No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him.

What a city! Eternal life is once again available. The wonderful, abundantly fruitful Tree of Life draws all nations together in the Holy City.

So how do we become a citizen of this City of God where eternal life is enjoyed? (Rev. 2:7) How can we "eat of the tree of eternal life"?

We have access through the One who was promised in Genesis, the One who would defeat Satan and become the way back to the Tree of Life.

This promise would have given hope to Adam and Eve even as they were leaving The Garden.

This One is, of course, Jesus who defeated Satan. Satan tempted Jesus, as he had Adam and Eve. Jesus had been fasting in a desert for 40 days. He didn't have fruitful trees around him. Satan thought this was his opportunity and that he could find a way to defeat Jesus. Knowing how hungry he was he tempted him to create food; then he offered him worldly riches and power. But Jesus resisted all of them and Scripture tells us that Satan "left him until an opportune time". This time came, so Satan thought, in another garden, the Garden of Gethsemane. But Jesus, though strongly tempted, resisted to the end. And because of this, he once again opened the way to eternal life through offering himself as the way back. He overcame death by his resurrection.

As he said, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." John 14:6

He is the gateway to God's gift of eternal life, the way back to the Tree of Life that Adam had been barred from. Let's read some passages from the apostle John.

John 3:14-16

¹⁴Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him." ¹⁶For

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

John 3:36

³⁶Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them.

John 6:68

⁶⁸Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.

John 10:27-28

²⁷My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸I give them eternal life and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.

1 John 5:11

¹¹And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.

And Paul writes:

Romans 6:22-23

²²But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. ²³For the **wages** of sin is death, but the **gift** of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

AS WE CELEBRATE THE LORD'S SUPPER, LET'S REMEMBER WHAT WE ARE CELEBRATING.

- We celebrate the gift of eternal life that God promised to those who believe in him and obey him.
- We celebrate our rebirth to an eternal life that begins here and now.
- We celebrate Jesus' resurrection to eternal life where he has prepared a place for us in the Holy City where there will be eternal access to the Tree of Life.

Before we celebrate this in the Lord's Supper, take a moment to savour it through a **Dramatic Reading**.

Sources: www.christianthought.com; www.rationalchristianity.org; www.gotquestions.org; www.answersingenesis.org