

## ***The Trees of the Garden***

By Dr. Dave Neale

Throughout Epiphany we were working with the picture of the banyan tree as a metaphor for the Christian community.

As we come to this, the first Sunday of Lent, we again find the tree as a metaphor for a way of looking at our relationship to God.

Trees are a symbol of life in the Bible because the Land of Israel is arid with few trees. That the temple has wood in it is a sign of its special significance. Wood was scarce. There was scrub oak and pistachio and some pine. But no lumber trees. There are the cedars of Lebanon, but never the Cedars of Israel!

There are two trees in our Genesis narrative. One is the tree of life which stands in the midst of the Garden of Eden and the other is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

First, the tree of life. There are the only two references to the tree of life in the Bible. The story of salvation begins and ends with references to the tree of life, Gen 2:9, where it stands in the midst of the Garden.

And Revelation 22:2, where we find John the Revelator gazing on ***the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and from the Lamb through the middle of the street. On either side of the river is the tree of life.***

The tree of life in Genesis represents, of course, eternal life, eternity, but also the perfection of the original creation, in all its innocence. The tree of life in Revelation represents the restoration of creation after we have finished sinning our way through history.

The second tree in the Garden is the more obscure “tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”

***The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”*** (Gen 2:15-17)

Eve eats the fruit of this tree in spite of the command of the Lord, and gives some to her husband. This is usually represented in art as an apple, but the text just calls it fruit. When they are found out by God there is this somewhat comical blame game that Adam and Eve get up to – but there is culpability all around.

This is what we call the “fall” of humanity, meaning the fall from eternal life and from innocence.

Whereas the first story of creation in chapter Genesis 1 focuses on the *creation* of the world, the second story of creation in chapter 2 focuses on the *relationship* between God and the human beings He created. The second story provides the explanation (a theodicy) as to *why* the world is now in the “fallen” state that we find it.

We call the time *before* the fall ***prelapsarian*** and the age we are in as the ***lapsarian*** age. Lapsarian meaning: “that which pertains to the fall of humankind from a state of innocence.”<sup>1</sup>

You may have noticed, in fact, that innocence, except for new babies, is in rather short supply in this world of ours. We are in a lapsed state. We live, as it were, in a time between two trees.

Before the fall, Adam and Eve are forbidden the tree of knowledge, and *after* the fall they are forbidden the Tree of Life. The first couples' relationship to these two trees becomes a metaphor for the human condition.

***But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not 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 3:4-5)

The serpent was a trickster because, of course, Adam and Eve died, which is the Bible's explanation of the fact that we all are now mortal.

What does the tree of the knowledge of good and evil represent? Here are the three most compelling options:

- The ***emergence of moral values*** and with that knowledge comes the responsibility we have to choose between right and wrong. In short, the necessity in life we now have of choosing good or evil.
- Some say the tree represents the ***right to self-determination***, which is a related idea to that of moral choice.
- Some say the tree represents the ***perils of self-aggrandizement, ...and you will be like God!***

### From the Text

As we ask the question about what this means for how we should live, I turn to our NT reading from Paul for the day. Paul, in Ro 5 unpacks the Adam and Eve story for meaning. He views the Garden narrative from a theological perspective. He calls Adam ***a type (pattern) of the one who is to come*** (Ro 5:14). How we are to understand and apply the Garden story are deep waters indeed.

But I will try...

The long shadow of John Calvin's theology haunts the modern imagination still. His was an angry, vengeful God for whom Adam's failure of obedience "provoked [God] to inflict such a fearful vengeance on the whole human race.." (*Institutes*, Book II.4).

For Calvin it was the beginning of the descent to "total depravity." Calvin goes on to describe the redemption in Christ, of course, but many people just can't get over the Angry God part.

Jonathan Edwards's famous (and appalling) sermon of 1741 in the Congregational Church in Enfield Connecticut, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. Edwards preached that we have fallen away from Puritan ethics and face a "frightening evocation of the suffering of hell" (*Jonathan Edwards's Famous Sermon*, connecticutthisotry.org).<sup>2</sup>

This imagery has had a profound and long-lasting influence on the popular perception of God even today, among Christians and non-believers alike.

Many people *still* think of God as angry and judgmental, impatient to punish sinners with a great club of judgment. Impatient to judge... me. Standing nearby to toss me into eternal torment.

But this is not true at all; it is not the biblical vision of God. The opposite is true.

Paul, commenting on Gen 2, describes our relationship with God in this lapsarian age this way:

***If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who are receiving the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness will exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.*** (Ro 5:17; compare 5:12).<sup>3</sup>

The meaning of this text is so powerful that I hardly know how to grasp at it!

Because of the disobedience of the one man, our world became a “kingdom of death” (βασιλευω, *basileuō*, to rule); mortal death, spiritual death of heart and soul; or, our world “became ruled by death.”

Into this lapsarian world came the plan of God to send forth the Son. And of the Son it is said, that as the lapse could come through one man, the remedy would come through one man, Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God.

And ***we who are receiving.... The abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness*** through Christ, called to a “kingdom of life”; that is, we “ruled by life!”

Just as in the Garden, so it remains: It is still our choice. The Garden is come again in Christ. Innocence and forgiveness have come again, through Christ. This is the Gospel.

The lapse has been provided for, the door is open to abundant grace and the free gift of righteousness, the Edenic state, if only we will choose to receive it.

Who says there will be no work in Paradise or no choices to be made? The Garden of Eden had both.<sup>4</sup> We don't know what Paradise will be like.

But we do know that we need not live in fear of an angry God. We need not surrender to the fallen nature of our times. We can choose to receive the grace and then work every day of our lives to put right what our fallen world has destroyed.

Rejoice!!

I read this week in the 2022 report of the Compassionate Resource Warehouse that we have sent 21 containers to 9 different countries. Sent out 4 teams to 4 different countries. 4 full containers to Ukraine/Poland with medical supplies, building materials with the amazing support of dozens of local companies and individuals.

Now that is how we live life between the two trees! In the words of Kate Bowler, living the lives we actually have, what wonderful opportunities we have to show our gratitude to God and our love for others!

Amen

<sup>1</sup> So the biblical view of runs like this. You have *prelapsarian*, the time of creation and the innocence of the Garden. You have the *lapsarian* age, the one we are now in. It is divided into the time before Christ and after Christ. And you have the final stage of restoration, or the Kingdom of God as the Bible calls it.

<sup>2</sup> An idea nourished in the Puritan movement of the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century by such figures as Milton, Calvin, Edwards and William Blake's art, etc.

<sup>3</sup> “Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste brought death into the world, and all our woe, with the loss of Eden, till one greater man restore us, and regain the blissful seat” (*Paradise Lost*, Book 1:1; Romans 5:12).

<sup>4</sup> Our text tells us that ***The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it*** (Gen 2:15). The great commentator on Genesis, Gerhard von Rod reminds us Eden was not a place of repose and freedom from work. We all can't wait to stop working in this retirement-oriented culture of ours. "...man's purpose in being is the garden: he is to work it and preserve it from all damage, a destiny that contrasts decidedly with the commonly accepted fantastic ideas of "Paradise."" (*Genesis*, p. 80).