

Truth for Today

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Some trees of the Bible: The Tree of Life

The Bible is full of pictures. Many of these pictures are taken from the natural world and used to illustrate spiritual things. There are numerous trees mentioned in the Old and New Testaments. These include oak, palm, olive, fig, and cedar trees.

In the Garden of Eden two trees are named: "The LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there He put the man whom He had formed. And out of the ground the LORD God made every tree grow that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Genesis 2:8-9).

The first of these trees, the Tree of Life, is our subject this morning. The precise location of the garden of Eden is not known, but we do know its name means "delight" and is connected to the word "paradise". We also know God planted the garden and put Adam in it (Genesis 2:8). Although this creation story is marked by great simplicity, its lessons are profound. It is in this garden that Adam developed in his relationship with God and the natural world. It is an interesting aside, that when Eve was created and Adam entered into a new relationship with his wife, he was prepared for this by his developing a relationship with God and by his experience of responsibility. It is equally important today that in preparing for marriage we have developed spiritually and demonstrated an ability to be responsible.

Mankind was placed in a perfect setting. The garden of Eden demonstrated the perfect provision of God and a natural world in complete harmony, a lot different to the world we now live in. The garden provided abundantly and beautifully everything man needed, but it was also a place where there were spiritual and moral challenges. The tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil highlight these challenges. God said to Adam, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; 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 surely die" (Genesis 2:16-17).

Adam is described as living in the garden of Eden for an unspecified time before Eve is created. During this time he did not eat of the fruit of either of these trees. When we think of these events and what followed we tend to concentrate on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the fall of man. But the Tree of Life highlights a key question, "Why did Adam not eat of this tree?"

It seems that in his innocence, Adam's horizons were fixed on earth. He obeyed God initially by not eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but the meaning of the Tree of Life and an existence beyond even the beauties of Eden had not entered into his thinking. He had not realised he had the potential for a life with God described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:9: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him."

We do not know if Adam's conversations with God embraced what was eternal. What we do know is that Adam obeyed God for a time in regard to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and that he never ate the fruit of the tree of life, which he was not forbidden to do, but from which he and Eve were barred after the Fall (see Genesis 3:24).

Some commentators shrink from saying too much in regard to the Tree of Life: others give the tree a precise meaning, suggesting it is a picture of Christ, and the river which flowed out of Eden is a picture of the Spirit. The basis of such suggestions are, for example, Christ describing Himself as the true vine in John 15:1, "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser." Then in John 7:37-39 Jesus describes the Spirit as "rivers of living water": "On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, 'If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.' But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified."

The water of life and the tree of life appear at the beginning of the creation and again in relation to the new creation in Revelation 22, the final chapter of the Bible: "And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing

of the nations. And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. There shall be no night there: they need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light. And they shall reign forever and ever” (Revelation 22:1-5).

In Revelation 22:1-5 we find a fuller explanation of the attributes of the Tree of Life. There is no tree of the knowledge of good and evil. There are no challenges to the fullness of God’s love and grace. Sin has been removed, and the glories of the new heaven and earth are described - at the beginning of Revelation 21: “Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, ‘Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away” (Revelation 21:1-4).

The Tree of Life and the river of life at the commencement of the old and new creation provide, I think, a remarkable insight into the heart of God.

Water in the Bible is used in two ways. It illustrates judgment and righteousness, for example, in the Flood, the crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 14:1-31), the crossing of the River Jordan (Joshua 3:1-17), and in baptism. But it also represents blessing and healing, as in the waters of Elim (Exodus 15:27), the water from the temple in Ezekiel 47:1-12, Naaman’s baptism (2 Kings 5:9-14) and, of course, the water of the word of God in Ephesians 5:25-27.

The rivers flowing in Genesis and Revelation are a great reminder of the outflowing of God’s blessing. But for us to enter into the blessings of God’s love and grace required a means by which man is brought to God. This way was not by the innocence of Adam or by man’s subsequent belief in his own righteousness. It was only possible by the intervention of God Himself in salvation, and, as we shall see, this salvation is centred on a tree.

Adam and Eve were prevented from eating of the tree of life after the Fall. Sin had ensured they could not benefit from its blessing, and eating of it would only place them in an everlasting fallen state: “Then the LORD God said, ‘Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil. And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever’ - therefore the LORD God sent him out of the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken. So He drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life” (Genesis 3:22-24).

But as we go through the Old Testament we see salvation and blessing often illustrated by trees and associated plants. Exodus 3 continues this theme: “Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian. And he led the flock to the back of the desert, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. And the Angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush. So he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, but the bush was not consumed. Then Moses said, ‘I will now turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush does not burn” (Exodus 3:1-3).

This common bush found in the desert was remarkable because the fire did not consume it. I think the bush illustrates the revelation of God in Christ. God becomes man - the bush; but is still God - the fire. Ultimately, the man Christ Jesus is born into His own creation and demonstrates in manhood the power and love of God. This is really borne out by the words God speaks to Moses from the bush: “And the LORD said: ‘I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows. So I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and large land, to a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 3:7-8).

These words not only describe the redemption of Israel, but I think also refer to the future coming of the Son of God as the Saviour of the world (see John 4:42) - the great “coming down”! Another principle is established that God would operate through lowliness and grace.

Moses’ experience with another tree demonstrates this principle in Exodus 15: “So Moses brought Israel from the Red Sea; then they went out into the Wilderness of Shur. And they went three days in the wilderness and found no water. Now when they came to Marah, they could not drink the waters of Marah, for they were bitter. Therefore the name of it was called Marah. And the people complained against Moses, saying, ‘What shall we drink?’ So he cried out to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a tree. When he cast it into the waters, the waters were made sweet” (Exodus 15:22-25).

It is striking that at the outset of their journey to the promised land God leads His people to a place where there are bitter waters. This was not a mistake. God leads them to the waters of Marah. God chooses to teach His people an

important lesson at the beginning of their long journey. The people complain about the waters being bitter, and also against Moses. Moses turns in prayer to God to know what to do. The answer is very beautiful. God shows him a tree. Moses takes the tree and throws it into the water and the water becomes sweet, or fresh (see Exodus 15:25).

The application of this picture to our own lives is powerful. The bitter experiences we pass through are not necessarily mistakes or because of our failure. God sometimes simply leads us into testing experiences. It is here we learn about ourselves and about Him. We are prone to blame others for our distress. God points us to the healing power of Christ's love fully demonstrated on the cross - the tree. This love has the power to transform bitterness into sweetness. The lesson is in the next verse, "If you diligently heed the voice of the LORD your God and do what is right in His sight, give ear to His commandments and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you which I have brought on the Egyptians. For I am the LORD who heals you" (Exodus 15:26).

The book of Ruth emphasises this principle. When Naomi returns to her home with Ruth she tells her neighbours not to call her Naomi but Mara - "bitter" (Ruth 1:20). But at the end of this lovely book she finds that God, through Ruth the Moabite, turns her bitterness into blessing.

It was from Marah that God then led His people to the further blessings of Elim, "Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve wells of water and seventy palm trees; so they camped there by the waters" (Exodus 15:27).

What happened at the waters of Marah and what we find in Revelation 22 is very interesting. Revelation 22 describes the water of life and then the Tree of Life which had healing in its leaves. The Children of Israel experienced the healing of the tree and the refreshment of the waters. The love of God shown at the cross of Christ not only heals us through forgiveness but also sustains us through the rest of our lives.

Later, in Numbers 21, following the children of Israel's disobedience, snakes plague their camp. This time it is they who ask Moses to pray for them. God answers his prayer by saying, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live.' So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived" (Numbers 21:8-9).

In the Gospel of John Jesus refers to this incident: "No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:13-15).

In John 12 the Lord Jesus refers again to being lifted up in crucifixion: "Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.' This He said, signifying by what death He would die" (John 12:31-33).

Peter describes what the Lord Jesus did on the cross: "who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness - by whose stripes you were healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls" (1 Peter 2:24-25).

There is a clear connection drawn by the Lord Jesus Himself with regard to the Old Testament incident of the serpent on the pole and His own sacrificial death on the cross of Calvary. Peter describes Jesus as bearing our sins in His own body on the cross or tree (1 Peter 2:24).

God's love was displayed in all its fullness and wonder when the Son of God gave Himself upon the cross. The cross, in Greek "*stauros*", was a bare upright stake. It came from a tree but was stripped of all its life and beauty. It had no branches, it had no leaves, and it had no fruit. But this bare wooden pole held the Son of God as He gave Himself for the sins of the whole world (see 1 John 2:2) and as "He loved me and gave Himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

The cross is the Tree of Life. Its beauty is illustrated in Eden, its eternal quality is foretold in Revelation but its reality and power are seen in all the starkness of the cross on that lonely hill outside of the city of Jerusalem.

Psalms 1 has been seen both as a description of a godly man but also as a picture of the Messiah. In Psalm 1:3 the Psalmist writes, "He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither; And whatever he does shall prosper."

It is not difficult to see how this as a description of Jesus the man. Isaiah describes Him as a root out of dry ground in Isaiah 53:2, and in Isaiah 11: "There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots. The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD" (Isaiah 11:1-2).

The blessings of God are seen as emerging from a branch - part of a tree. What God is explaining is that the power

and glory of His redemptive work would be shown through the humility and lowliness of Christ.

More than this, Christ redeems us by becoming a curse for us on a tree. "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree'), that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (Galatians 3:13-14).

In Ezekiel 47:3-11 the prophet describes features connected with the temple similar to those in the garden of Eden in Genesis and the new creation in Revelation 22. First in Ezekiel 47:3-6 he writes of the gradually deepening waters which remind the reader of the river flowing from the garden of Eden and the water of life flowing from the throne of God: "And when the man went out to the east with the line in his hand, he measured one thousand cubits, and he brought me through the waters; the water came up to my ankles. Again he measured one thousand and brought me through the waters; the water came up to my knees. Again he measured one thousand and brought me through; the water came up to my waist. Again he measured one thousand, and it was a river that I could not cross; for the water was too deep, water in which one must swim, a river that could not be crossed. He said to me, 'Son of man, have you seen this?' Then he brought me and returned me to the bank of the river."

Lower down, in Ezekiel 47:12, he describes trees with characteristics of the Tree of Life described in Revelation 22: "Along the bank of the river, on this side and that, will grow all kinds of trees used for food; their leaves will not wither, and their fruit will not fail. They will bear fruit every month, because their water flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for medicine."

In Revelation 22:2 we read: "In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations." The Tree of Life is central to the new creation.

The Tree of Life is also mentioned in Revelation 2:7: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God." In Revelation 2:7 there is an individual invitation to eat from the tree of life, which seems to refer to communion with God.

The final mention of the Tree of Life is in Revelation 22:14: "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 the city." Again it suggests communion with God and access into the city.

The picture is drawn of those redeemed by Christ having an eternal future with Him and entering into the experience of 1 Corinthians 2:9 which I mentioned at the outset of this talk: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him."

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