

“The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil”—Genesis 2:15-17

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, “The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil”, is Genesis 2:15-17 → *The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely 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 surely die.”*

This is the text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

Could it be that the story of our lives can be pictured by the trees in Scripture? Sounds kind of strange. Yet, from the very beginning of life trees actually played an important role in the spiritual lives of those created *in the image of God*—we human beings (cf. Genesis 3:27). Many times trees were used figuratively when Yahweh spoke His Word to His people through His prophets in reference to their relationship with Him. Trees with the ability to produce fruit were often used in God’s Word and the teaching ministry of Jesus to picture our life of faith in Him, obedience to Him and it’s affects on the people around us.

During our Lenten journey we will look at some of these trees and

consider their role in the spiritual lives of God's people. Tonight we consider *the tree of the knowledge of good and evil* which Yahweh placed in the Garden of Eden.

Throughout the history of mankind *the tree of the knowledge of good and evil* has been viewed as kind of the "bad" tree in the Garden of Eden. Questions arise such as, "Why did God put the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden?", implying that there was something wrong with this tree. To the contrary. There is nothing in Scripture which says this tree was bad. Rather, it is included in the statement of Genesis 1:31 → *God saw **everything** that He had made, and behold, **it was very good**.*

It is very difficult to imagine life in all its forms existing in harmony in the perfect world which the LORD created. Throughout the centuries Christian theologians have written volumes describing their ideas of what this life looked like and inevitably have come up wanting in many areas. Even Luther, striving to describe the importance of trees in this perfect environment said: "Adam was immortal because the trees created for him had the power to maintain his life unimpaired. But this immortality had not been made so sure for him that it was impossible for him to fall into mortality. (Luther, M. © 1999. Luther's works, vol. 1: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 1-5. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 1, p. 111). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.)

It is difficult, if not impossible, to describe the indescribable. Thus, God uses many analogies in connection with His creation to picture His relationship with us. The revelation of His inspired Word is given to us to define relationship, not determine religious speculation. This is why we respond upon hearing it read to us in worship with, “Thanks be to God!” We are the recipients of the manifold blessings of God revealed to us in His written Word and realized by faith in Jesus Christ!

After placing *the man . . . in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it* (verse 15), Yahweh delivered the first “sermon” to him and it had to do with trees. It is the only recorded requirement placed upon Adam as he was privileged to live in a loving relationship of obedience with the LORD. He was free to *eat of every tree of the garden except for the tree of the knowledge of good and evil* (verse 16). As with all of God’s laws given to us it too was based upon the gracious bestowal of His blessings. Adam was given the fruit of all the trees in the garden for food. God created them to sustain his physical life.

In the midst of the LORD’s command prohibiting Adam to eat from *the tree of the knowledge of good and evil* he placed a serious consequence in verse 17 of our text: *in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die*. I can only imagine that Adam’s understanding of such serious consequences connected with disobeying Yahweh, while living in perfect relationship with Him, could have seemed confusing to him. Die? What’s

die mean to a guy who only knows life? Death is a result of sin. It is very probable in his context that Adam could not even comprehend such a concept.

We can relate to some extent as sinners who live a new life by faith in Jesus Christ today. Whenever you read God's Laws do they always make sense to you? Can you perfectly "wrap your brain around them" even when explained in ways that cause you to say, "that makes sense"? Surely not. Isn't the temptation of satan to get you to be disobedient to your Lord by trying to place a "loop hole" in God's Law, many times preying on the illogical nature of His Laws? The point is that it doesn't matter if you can "unpack" God's Laws logically in an effort to have good reason why they should be followed. The relationship of love obeys even in the midst of inability to completely understand the law's directions. As Jesus said in John 14:15 → *If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.*

The serious nature of the consequences of Adam's disobedience would be the death of a right relationship with Yahweh. It was not *the tree of the knowledge of good and evil* which brought sin into our lives. Rather, it was Adam's disobedience of God's Law—*but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat* (verse 17). Disobeying this law completely changed his and our relationship with Yahweh.

As the temptation and disobedience unfolded in the record of

Genesis chapter three, you will notice that Adam & Eve did not immediately fall over dead when they disobeyed God's law by eating the fruit of *the tree of the knowledge of good and evil*. Yet, the LORD had told Adam ***in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die***. While physical death for all mankind was a consequence of Adam & Eve's disobedience, the death which took place happened spiritually. James, describing the process of temptation, says in James 1:15 that *desire . . . gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death*.

You see this spiritual death at work in Adam & Eve after eating from *the tree of the knowledge of good and evil*. They were ashamed of their nakedness and separated themselves from each other with *fig leaves* (cf. Genesis 3:7). When the LORD came to fellowship with them they *hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden* (cf. Genesis 3:8). The trees intended to preserve their lives they now used to hide their sin. When given the opportunity to repent of their sin they could only blame God, each other and the devil. Furthermore, even though they admitted that they had done the deed they could not accept responsibility for it (cf. Genesis 3:11-13).

They were now *dead in their trespasses and sins* (cf. Ephesians 2:1,5). Instead becoming like God with clear wisdom, they became *darkened in their understanding and alienated from the life of God* (cf. Ephesians 4:18). But it didn't end there. Unfortunately they passed on this spiritual death

in relationship to their loving Father to you and me. Paul put it this way in Romans 5:12,14 → *Just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned . . . Yet death reigned . . . even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam.*

Adam & Eve displayed that they were completely lost and helpless to restore the righteousness with which God had created His people so they could once again walk in a right relationship with Him. His heart still filled with a love for His children and longing for that right relationship with them, Yahweh gave the promise to restore it Himself. He would send another Adam who would crush satan's power, win the victory over both spiritual and physical death and make it possible for all people to live in a right relationship with their loving Father again. Only God can bring forth life from death but it would have to happen by using another tree.

Galatians 4:4-5 says: *When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.* This redemption happened when God's Son, Jesus, willingly offered His life to die on the tree of the cross for the forgiveness of your sins. In your baptism you were adopted as His sons (i.e. children) (cf. Galatians 3:26-29). Whether from a societal or spiritual perspective, adoption happens on

the basis of the efforts of others, not your efforts. In other words, you are brought into this relationship **by God's doing**.

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil may appear to have endowed all mankind with “too much information,” especially in the department of evil. However, because Jesus bore the tree of the cross, you are endowed with a release from the curse of God's Law which sin produces in you. He took that curse upon Himself so it no longer falls on you, as Galatians 3:13 says: *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone **who is hanged on a tree.**”*

Because of the Person & Work of Jesus you can be different than Adam & Eve. By the power of the Holy Spirit you can acknowledge your sin, take responsibility for it and confess it in repentance to the LORD. And because of the Person & Work of Jesus you are forgiven, with all your sins nailed to the tree of His crucifixion. Amen.

You, who were dead in your trespasses . . .

God made alive together with Jesus,

having forgiven us all our trespasses,

by canceling the record of debt

that stood against us with its legal demands.

This He set aside, nailing it to the cross.

Unless otherwise indicated, all scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.