

Two Trees: Two Options for Living Life

By Bob Young

The first few chapters of the Bible introduce us to two trees in the Garden of Eden—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and the tree of life. The significance of the tree of life has been frequently observed because of its presence in the heavenly city of Revelation 21-22. The significance and contrast of the two life options presented by the two trees in the garden has been less often outlined.¹ This article explores the significance of the two trees in the Garden of Eden. These two trees represent two options for approaching God. Human beings today are faced with the same decision as were Adam and Eve. Which tree do we want to eat from as we seek God?

The Purpose of the Gospel

When Adam and Eve were deceived and partook of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, it may have appeared to them that they were helping God along toward a legitimate goal. Human beings were created in God's image (Gen. 1:26-27), and the serpent claimed that eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil would make them like God (gods).² If the result was seemingly desirable, the fact is that they were disobedient in eating from that which was forbidden. Their disobedience resulted in their separation from the tree of life (if they had eaten of it, they would have lived forever and never died—a primary distinguishing characteristic of God (gods)). The fall resulted in separation from God so that the God of creation began a process of re-creation which could restore human beings to relationship with the Creator.

This process involved the law which was designed to point to Christ.³ The gospel properly understood and properly applied brings human beings into a healthy relationship with God through Jesus Christ, doing that which the law could not do. The gospel reflects a right approach to God—an approach which can fully restore relationship. To understand God's intent and to accomplish the purpose of God, the core message of the gospel be correctly understood. This is Paul's intent in contrasting faith and law, law and promise, law and gospel in the book of Galatians. Paul stands squarely in the Jewish prophetic tradition as he responds to those who would extend the demands of Judaism into the Christian era.

Two Approaches to God

Paul's letter to the Galatians contrasts the Old Testament approach to God (which we may characterize as the "knowledge of good and evil" approach), and the New Testament approach to God (which we may characterize as the "tree of life" approach). The question is how we can come into the presence of God. Do we enter God's presence by applying our knowledge of good and evil in our own lives so that we eventually always make right choices? Such is humanly impossible (all have sinned and continue to sin). Further right living in the present cannot deal with past failures. The only option for entering God's presence is through life granted not on the basis of our own goodness, but on the basis of imputed righteousness.

¹ Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola recently explored this theme in *The Jesus Manifesto* (2010). Their book provided additional insights for some of the thoughts presented in this article.

² With the plural in parentheses, I remind that the plural form translated God may also at times refer to lesser gods.

³ It is beyond the scope and space of this article to trace the purpose and function of the Old Testament law to point to and prepare the way for Christ. Paul explores this concept in depth in Galatians 3-4.

These two options are first set forth in Scripture in the description of the two trees in the Garden of Eden. We must not miss the point. We today still choose whether to approach God via our own knowledge, goodness, and abilities, or by total dependence on the life that only God can give.

Many of our sermons, and much of our evangelism and mission work, tend to be built on the assumption that one can be a successful Christian if one just tries hard enough. Our Bible classes and sermons present things to be understood, things to be done, things to be accomplished. Our message, even when we subtly disguise it, is that you need to try harder, get more in tune with what you should do (moralizing), or that you need to get more serious about Christianity. Such is biblically flawed, and Paul writes Galatians to challenge just such a misunderstanding. God is not to be approached by a legal system of law-driven works.

Think back to your own church experiences. How many sermons have you heard that were built on the idea of getting Christians to put their noses into the Bible a little deeper (so far so good)? The problem is that when people begin to study the Bible for themselves and seek to do all of the good things (and avoid all of the bad things), they see different things in their study of Scripture. Some see the presence of God's Spirit enabling the early church in benevolent, compassionate activities—healing the sick, casting out demons, helping people with miracles. Some see those same activities but understand them as Jesus' call to a new order of social justice—feeding the poor, helping the oppressed, loving the outcasts and rejected. Others see the need for rejecting the world and holy living; still others the obligation to share the good news evangelistically, telling how to be saved and how to save others. Some focus on doctrinal correctness—what to believe, while others focus on the application of Jesus' teachings—how to live. The result of these segmented views is that few clearly see the fully integrated life of Jesus. Trying to get Christianity right is humanly impossible on several fronts—we cannot see the completeness of the picture by focusing on right and wrong, we unknowingly accept or reject what we see based on our own perspectives, and the entire undertaking is beyond human spiritual capacity given that we cannot live sinless lives.

Let us return to Genesis 1-3. The two trees in the garden continue to play a role throughout scripture. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life are still relevant. Consider these contrasts:

- First, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil says make your own decisions, determine for yourself what is right and wrong, be self-sufficient, be self-determining. (Become your own god.) The tree of life represents receiving the uncreated life of God into one's self, to be indwelt, guided, loved, and led. These are two very different options.
- Second, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil says do the good and avoid evil; get things right, know the boundaries. Here is legalism and life lived on the fine line between acceptability and that which is not acceptable. In contrast, the tree of the knowledge of life says let the life of God flow within you and through you; yield to God's instincts, use God's energy.
- Third, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil represents the desire to define intellectually good and evil, right and wrong, to know good from evil, to try to do good. The tree of life says live by the life of God, which is goodness itself. The desire to define and to know goodness as the ultimate goal of life is the counterfeit of living by the tree of life.

The difficulty with our Bible classes and sermons (and much of our ministry and mission work) is that we think that we can find the real knowledge of good and evil through our human efforts to unravel the

mysteries of God's revelation.⁴ Many preachers and missionaries turn Bible study, teaching and preaching into methods of gaining the knowledge of good and evil. The Bible thus becomes the raw material for learning how to gain control of life, how to live life, and how to make life understandable and more predictable. This is a grievous misuse of the Scriptures. This results in Christians who try to be Christians according to their knowledge and by toeing the line.⁵

What Does God Want—the Gospel in Perspective

Jesus did not misuse the Bible to gain control of life. The Bible is a way to know the Father (and the Son and Spirit) better, to connect with genuine life, and to learn how to live lives devoted to our mission and God's purpose. Consider Jesus' interaction with the Pharisees. The Pharisees saw things from the point of view of Old Testament Judaism (tree of the knowledge of good and evil). When we consider Jesus' contrasts presented in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5), we should understand that their version of Judaism was flawed. Christianity is not a fresh or updated version of Judaism in which Christ now provides more power for correct living. Christianity is not fundamentally about ethics and morality. Christianity can never be understood or lived according to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Spirituality and morality are two different things. Too many Christians are listening to too many preachers preaching too many sermons which encourage us to eat from the wrong tree.

Christians are not mistaken in condemning immorality, but we are mistaken in our approach. The proper reaction is not to run as hard as possible in the opposite direction. The idea that Christians must deal with the world by keeping it at arm's length is flawed (remember the first century Jewish sect, the Essenes, and their withdrawal from society). This approach is rooted in a dependence on the knowledge of good and evil. Living by the tree of life is the antidote. Christ had compassion for the brokenhearted and rejected. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil leads to the wrong faith, or at least a twisted version of faith. The tree of life empowers us to go into a godless world as servants of its unacknowledged Lord.

What the Bible says is important, but it is important because it shows us the person and nature of God and Jesus. We Christians may be people of the book; that is commendable. We may do even better to become people occupied and even obsessed with a person. Truth is ultimately a person, Jesus Christ (John 14:6). The Scriptures are truth because Jesus is truth, and the Scriptures contain the words of Jesus. Do not stop short. Christianity is not about following a book, but about following a person in life. The road map of the Bible does not lead to correct doctrine—it leads us to Jesus.

This contrast between the two trees in the garden illustrates the problem of forgetting the core message, or of replacing the core message with a substitute message. Effective ministry, spiritual leadership, and mission work not only demand that we have something to say, but that we get the right message and get the message right. One cannot be a minister or a missionary without having something to say, but does what we typically say make sense in the context of Jesus' call? Are we calling people to God so that they can participate in the re-creation process that makes full fellowship with God possible? Or are we leading people to a false dependence on getting things right—right doctrine, right understanding, right teaching, right living.... (The list is much longer, always demanding that we fully and completely define what is right and wrong.) How long will it take us to realize that if our relationship with God depends on us getting everything right, and avoiding everything wrong, we are

⁴ This attitude of often associated with and attributed to our acceptance of the view set forth in the Enlightenment.

⁵ This is the subtle message of the "health and wealth" gospel, and also of many media evangelists today. "Your life on earth will get better when you follow God."

doomed? I want to do right and I want to avoid wrong, but my dependence is on God's provision of the tree of life!

Effective ministry and mission work depends on understanding and preaching the true gospel, not perversions or misdirection plays. Only the true gospel can bring people to continuing saving relationship with Christ: saved by the grace of the promise, saved by the grace of Christ. Can Christ save me if I get almost nothing in life right? Is salvation in Christ dependent on my having completely right understandings and reasonably correct lifestyles? Or is my salvation in Christ based on my dependence on God, who will satisfy my longing as I hunger and thirst desiring to eat of the tree of life and live—because I know that true life is not possible in any other way?

We must ask ourselves hard questions: "Salvation by whose power? Ministry and missions by whose power?" The tree of the knowledge of good and evil says it depends on us, at least a little. The tree of life says it depends on God's gracious provision. It cannot be both. Which tree will we choose?