

THE TREE OF LIFE (1)

A Meditation on Genesis 3:22-24

John Frame said, “Everything in creation bears some analogy to God. All the world has been made with God’s stamp on it, revealing Him. Creation is His temple, heaven His throne, earth His footstool. Thus Scripture finds analogies to God in every area of creation: inanimate objects (God the ‘rock of Israel,’ Christ the ‘door of the sheep,’ the Spirit as ‘wind,’ ‘breath,’ ‘fire’), plant life (God’s strength like the ‘cedars of Lebanon,’ Christ the ‘bread of life’), animals (Christ the ‘Lion of Judah,’ the ‘lamb of God’), human beings (God as king, landowner, lover; Christ as prophet, priest, king, servant, son, friend), abstract ideas (God as spirit, love, light; Christ as way word, truth, life, wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, redemption). Even wicked people reveal their likeness to God, with, of course, much irony—see Luke 18:1-18.

“Similarly, Bavinck wrote that God is compared to a lion, Isa. 31:4; an eagle, Deut. 32:11; a lamb, Isa. 53:7; a hen, Matt. 23:37; the sun, Ps. 84:11; the morning star, Rev. 22:16; a light, Ps. 27:1; a torch, Rev. 21:23; a fire, Heb. 12:29; a fountain, Ps. 36:9; the fountain of living waters, Jer. 2:13; food, bread, water, drink, ointment, Isa. 55:1; Jn. 4:10; 6:35, 55; a rock, Deut. 32:4; a hiding place, Ps. 119:114; a tower, Pro. 18:10; a refuge, Ps. 9:9; a shadow, Ps. 91:1...”

James B. Jordan concludes, “All this can be boiled down to a simple fact: The universe and everything in it symbolizes God. That is, the universe and everything in it points to God. This means that the Christian view of the world is and can only be *fundamentally symbolic*. The world does not exist for its own sake, but as a revelation of God” (James B. Jordan, *Through New Eyes*, p. 23).

Many are proud of their “literal hermeneutic,” which simply means interpreting the Bible at face value. This, for example, is why I hold to a young earth view, and believe God created the world in six literal 24 hour days. Genesis one repeatedly talks about “evening and morning, the first day...the second day,” and so on. Then when we get to the Ten Commandments, we read, “For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy” (Ex. 20:11). The creation account itself, as well as subsequent commentary on creation supports a literal interpretation of creation.

At the same time, we must realize that the Bible is full of poetry, apocalyptic literature, hyperbole, figures of speech, parables, metaphors, symbols and types. For example, no scholar that I know of interprets Revelation 1:16 with a rigid literalism: “from his (i.e. Jesus’) mouth came a sharp two-edged sword.” Are we to believe that Christ literally has a metal sword protruding from His mouth? Of course not, this is a reference to the Word of God. Hebrews 4:12 and Ephesians 6:17 both employ the sword imagery to describe God’s Word.

Furthermore, if we miss the meaning of the symbols, types, etc., and just stick with the “literal meaning,” we will often miss the real message that is being communicated. For instance, we read this prophecy concerning the coming kingdom of God: “On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined...He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken” (Isa. 25:6, 8). Then when we turn to the New Testament, we see the Messiah performing His first miracle, which is turning about 150 gallons of purification water into wine (Jn. 2:1-12). Yes, Jesus literally turned water into wine, but the “deeper meaning,” if you will, that can only be ascertained by an awareness of symbolism is that the kingdom has arrived and the wine is beginning to flow down the mountain. And of course, Jesus Himself used wine to symbolize the New Covenant in His blood (Matt. 26:27-28). I believe the feeding of the 4,000 and the 5,000 should be understood the same way. The Messiah has come and He is setting a feast before His people, just as Isaiah said He would.

In our last chapter, we saw that nakedness didn’t just represent Adam and Eve’s physical condition; it also represented their emotional, physiological and spiritual condition. Consequently, the animal skins that God made for Adam and Eve covered their physical bodies, but more importantly they covered their guilt, shame and sin, and thus they were symbols of justification. A woodenly literal interpretation would have missed the real spiritual significance of the atonement for sin God was providing.

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THE TREE OF LIFE (2)

A Meditation on Genesis 3:22-24

Genesis 3:22-24 provides us with a sad summary of chapter three. First, we see that Adam and Eve have achieved part of what they desired, namely becoming like God. “Then the LORD God said, ‘Be-hold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil’” (Gen. 3:22a). The tree of the knowledge of good and evil provided Adam and Eve with a means of attaining knowledge apart from God, and a way of becoming their own god. The serpent had claimed, “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (3:5). Interestingly, Satan accurately defines God as knowing good and evil.

When Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden tree they were defining for themselves what was good and what was evil, instead of submitting to God’s authoritative Word. Consequently, the man and the woman are now like God; they can decide for themselves the difference between good and evil. And they can make that decision based upon God’s Word or their own desires. Similarly, every time you and I sin, we play God, and in essence we believe the lie of Satan that Adam and Eve did, which was basically that God is holding out on us, and we would really be much happier if we disobeyed Him and trusted our own instincts. “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate” (vs. 6).

Next, we see that man is barred from life. “‘Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever’... he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life” (vv. 22b, 24b). Would this tree actually have imparted eternal life? I believe so. However, the common view is that if they had eaten of the tree of life now, they would have lived forever *in a sinful state*. So God was being merciful by not allowing them to partake of the tree. I doubt this is the correct interpretation. In fact, I believe this is another example of an overly literal interpretation.

For starters, eternal life in the Bible is always more than never-ending life; to be sure, it is certainly not less than that, but it also far more than that. Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life” (Jn. 5:24). Is this merely the promise of life without end, or does this also refer to a quality of life? A life of deliverance from the mastery of sin? In John 10:10, Jesus made it clear that this life was one of “abundance.” Those who live forever *in their sin* are in hell. But is hell ever called *life*? The answer of course is an emphatic “No!” The wicked “will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matt. 25:46). Everyone will “live” forever, but hell is never described as life. On the contrary, it’s described as death, the second death, destruction, burning sulfur, etc., but never life. Therefore, Genesis 3:22 is not a depiction of the mercy of God, but of the judgment of God. At least for a time, Adam and Eve have missed out on eternal life.

Before we move on, I want you to notice the symbolism. Life comes from a tree. And this life is physical as well as spiritual. So if mankind is to receive life, God will have to open the way back to the tree of life, or provide another tree (We’ll come back to this shortly).

Last, we see that man is bound by the curse. “[T]herefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken” (Gen. 3:23). Hard work is his lot; paradise has been forfeited. Additionally, “He *drove* out the man...” (vs. 24, italics added). God forced Adam (and Eve) out of the garden; he had no desire to leave, but God made him leave. No longer will he dwell in the sanctuary, and live day in and day out in the very presence of God. This is what we were created for, but we will have to wait till we get to heaven to experience this unspoiled fellowship again.

If man is denied access to the tree of life how will he live? God will provide another tree; otherwise known as a cross. “He himself bore our sin in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness” (1 Pet. 2:24a). And His death on this tree took away the curse (Gal. 3:13). But not only did Christ die on a tree, He also is the tree. “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit” (Isa. 11:1). Finally, in heaven God’s people will once again have unhindered access to the tree(s) of life, and will enjoy its life-giving fruit forever (Rev. 2:7, 22:2).

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