

James R. Olson

Professor Mohr

Bible Survey

7 February 2023

Tracing the Tree of Life in Redemptive History

The opening three chapters of Genesis introduce a myriad of themes, all of which God progressively reveals throughout the course of redemptive history until they find their fulfillment in Christ and His eschatological promises. Among the most sparsely mentioned of these is the Tree of Life, which appears explicitly in only the first and last books of Scripture. Nonetheless, the Tree of Life bears a towering significance, which carries with it implications for God's people from Adam to believers today. This paper will examine the Tree of Life, its function contrasted with the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, Adam's failure to attain it, Christ's salvific work in winning its fruit on His people's behalf, and its presence in the New Jerusalem.

Before continuing any further, it should be noted that while both the Edenic trees represented and pointed to realities beyond themselves, they were indeed historical trees with real roots and bark, branches and twigs, and of course, fruit. They existed in a historical land with Adam and Eve, who were historical people. These are truths that must be confessed if the purpose and overtone of the trees is to have any meaning for the believer. The Tree of Life in particular represented visibly to Adam the promises of God—namely, everlasting life. This was not merely to be a life without death but a constant enjoyment of the presence of God. The first question and answer of the Westminster Shorter Catechism harkens back to the realities of this wonderful promise in its explication of mankind's chief end. Per the catechism, man in all his life

is not only to bring God glory but to enjoy Him forever.¹ His own eschatological aim has then endured even after the Fall and while being subjected under its curse. This is because God, when making Adam, imbued within him an innate desire for the blessings of everlasting life, which He made visible for him in the Tree of Life. Adam could then look onto the Tree of Life in his work and be joyfully reminded of what would follow in his obedience: unbroken fellowship with his Creator. Such a desire has not been quenched in the hearts of man to this day. In his heart of hearts, a longing persists for that which pertains to the Tree of Life, though he in his fallen state suppresses, twists, and does all he can to supplant it. Therefore, the Tree of Life—invisible as it is to human sight—still casts its light onto the life of man, this manifesting in his chief end. And so everlasting life as promised by God and made tangible in the Tree of Life was to be Adam's incessant and uninterrupted enjoyment of His Maker and Father.

But everlasting life was not a gift freely given. Rather, it was to be the reward bestowed unto Adam and his progeny upon the meeting of certain requirements, these being the exercising of stewardly dominion over creation, the multiplying of the human race through procreation, and the refraining from the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Such were the probationary stipulations of what has been termed the Covenant of Works; and upon Adam's perfect and perpetual obedience, he and all of mankind were to receive the covenantal blessings as represented by the Tree of Life. The Covenant of Works even in its seed form was eschatological—everlasting life in its purview. As such, Adam was placed in a unique position as federal head of the human race—a crown worn only twice in the history of man. As the recipient of the Covenant of Works, he was to be either humanity's justification or damnation.

¹ Westminster Shorter Catechism. The Westminster Standard. (2016, March 10). Retrieved February 6, 2023, from <https://thewestminsterstandard.org/westminster-shorter-catechism/>

If the Tree of Life represented the blessings for Adam's obedience, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil represented the conditions for such blessings to be meted out. Here it must be said that the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was not a 'tree of evil'. It did not stand in opposition against the Tree of Life. It was fashioned by God before the Fall and was thus "very good".² Many theories have been put forward as to the meaning of the phrase 'knowledge of good and evil', but it should be clear that no dualism exists between the two trees. Rather, the one stands as the condition for the enjoyment of the other. In this sense, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was a type of the Law, representing that which required perfect and perpetual obedience so as to merit the blessings of everlasting life. And so both trees pointed to soteriological and eschatological realities beyond themselves in sapling form.

Genesis 3 recounts the Fall, in which Adam failed to keep the Covenant of Works in his passive and active disobedience against God. Passive was his failure to tend and keep the garden, letting the Serpent in and standing idle when it whispered its venom into the mind of Eve. Perhaps his ear, too, was inclined to the Serpent's words; and active was his taking of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and consuming it in his pursuit to become wiser than the one who had made him from dust. Thereby, Adam forfeited and lost the promise of everlasting life as represented by the Tree of Life, condemning himself and all the human race unto a treeless wilderness as it were—both physically and spiritually, these being the curses attached to the Covenant of Works. No longer would Adam enjoy the walk of the Lord in the cool of the day—and neither would any of his children.³ Now he was doomed to fear and hide from His Father, and feel the shame of nakedness with even his own wife. And worst of all, Adam and all of man would be consigned to suffer the inevitable approach of death—the end of

² Genesis 1:31

³ Genesis 3:8

his flesh, in which he would return to dust. If Adam were to have ever looked upon the Tree of Life after his fall, his mind would not have found repose in its lustrous promises but only torment in the harrowing reminder of all that was now lost.

But though the Tree of Life lay far beyond the grasp of man, God did not destroy it. He preserved it in the Garden of Eden, in this way maintaining the Covenant of Works. This was an act of sweet and tender grace, for the blessing of everlasting life thereby remained. But it was not to be won by Adam nor any of his depraved issue. It would have to be recovered by another—a second Adam who could prove Himself of greater worth to don the representative crown of all mankind upon His brow. And so God banished Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden and placed His cherubim and a flaming sword to guard the Tree of Life, but not before He set them under the Covenant of Grace, promising one who would undo the curse of the Fall.

Though a historical event, man's exile from the garden encapsulated his loss of status, by which he had once enjoyed friendship with God. No longer was there a way for man to reenter Eden on his own. If he were to try, he would be met with a blade of fire. But this also was a mercy, for in warding off Adam from attempting to creep into the garden by his own will, God was guarding him against an immortal state of sin and misery, and the danger of moralism and pride, lest he think it achievable to eat of the fruit of the Tree of Life by his own strength or guile. Indeed, it was utterly impossible for Adam to have even come near to the Tree of Life without being destroyed. Thus, he would have to wander in exile until his dusty end, clinging only to God's promise of one to come.⁴ But God would not leave His people in darkness; nor would He deprive them of His Word.

Throughout the ages following Adam's fall, God formed a people from His servant Abraham; and He provided for them a land and anointed kings to rule over them. It was through

⁴ Genesis 3:15

the quills of King David and King Solomon that God first reminded His people of the Tree of Life and the blessings thereof. The book of Psalms likens the man who meditates on God's Law to a tree planted by a stream.⁵ In Proverbs 13:12, Solomon writes that the desire of a man fulfilled can be rightly compared to a tree of life. He also describes wisdom, a gentle tongue, and the fruit of the righteous as being like unto a tree of life.⁶ In these passages, God prepared His people to anticipate all that pertains to *the* Tree of Life—the wisdom of the Promised One, His gentle tongue, and the fruit of His righteousness applied to believers on their behalf. But the inspired writings of David and Solomon could only implicitly recall the tree and muster forth its hope in shadowy form.

The final allusion of the Tree of Life in the Old Testament is found in Ezekiel 47, in which God lays out a vision of a grand temple. Ezekiel is led out of this temple through a stream of water, harkening back to Psalm 1, until he comes to the river bank. There, he is shown a vast multitude of trees on each side of the river. The leaves and fruit of these trees are promised never to wither nor fail, since they are watered by the stream from the temple. Finally, Ezekiel is told that the “fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing” (Ezekiel 47:12). Though the promises of the Tree of Life have yet to be realized, they are foretold in greater light than in Psalms and Proverbs. The vision is filled with splendor and joy, as Ezekiel is shown scenes of abundance and prosperity, hinting at the overflowing of God's gracious blessings to come. What should be noted here is the trees of life seen in Ezekiel's vision are watered by the stream that is sourced in God's temple. So it was for the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden; there was no special power within the Tree itself; rather, that which made it special (i.e. its promise of life) was drawn from God's covenant and presence as its source.

⁵ Psalm 1:2-3

⁶ Proverbs 3:18, 11:30, 15:4

In the fullness of time, God placed upon His Son the crown of man and sent Him into the world to be born. For the first time since his Fall, man would behold with his own eyes the blessings of the Tree of Life in their fullest form. God would once more walk with man. For Christ in a sense took the Tree of Life in Himself out of the Garden of Eden, leaving heaven to bring everlasting life, and gave it to man in his exile. He also sent the Holy Spirit, who transformed the fallen hearts of His people to desire and partake of the fruit of the Tree of Life. But this would not be a gift free of cost, for the curse of sin and penalty of death remained under the still enduring Covenant of Works.

And so, Jesus subjected Himself to the curse of the Fall, suffering the penalty for Adam's eating of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil as if He Himself had partook. No longer would He walk with His Father in the glory of heaven. Instead, He was to be humbled low on the earth and endure the penalties for sin, and He would feel the shame of nakedness upon the cross. Worst of all, He would be condemned to await the ever approaching hour of death, through which He would be forsaken by His Father and left to hang alone and cursed on Adam's Tree of Death. But through His suffering and death, Jesus satisfied the legal demands of that ancient covenant Adam and his descendants had long transgressed, and thereby recovered the lost promises signified by the Tree of Life.

But Christ did not only reclaim everlasting life for His people by His death. He also merited unto them His righteousness by His perfect and perpetual obedience in the sight of God. Whereas Adam had fallen in the lushness of Eden, Jesus resisted the venomous words of the Serpent in the harshness of the wilderness, being half-starved and exhausted. When offered the forbidden fruit, He refused, finding nourishment instead in the Word of His Father—that same

Word Adam had rejected in his disobedience.⁷ For “man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4).

Therefore, through both His death and obedience, Christ has won the blessings of the Tree of Life for His people and now calls them to freely partake of its fruit. Moreover, God has placed His people in the garden of His Church with His Son, from whom pour forth rivers of life into the hearts of believers, these being His Holy Spirit. And He has hedged them in with the flaming sword of the Spirit so that none might enter to take them out nor they ever leave after their own wandering hearts. And He has promised an even greater Eden—one where His people will dwell in unity with no sickness nor death, where their tears will be wiped away by the gentle hand of their Maker and Father. As they wait on this earth, they are made like little trees of life, bearing the Fruit of the Spirit after Christ, who Himself is the first-fruits of the resurrection to come.

And when this final and great resurrection occurs, all the host of God’s people will be given glorified bodies, and they will worship their rightful and worthy King—the second Adam who submitted Himself to the first Adam’s curse, prevailed where he had failed, suffered the penalty for his disobedience, and merited that which he had forfeited: the neverending enjoyment of God in His presence. And as they render Him praise in the New Jerusalem, there in the city’s center will tower the Tree of Life, stretching across the River of the Water of Life, its fruit for food and leaves for healing.⁸ There, the curse is no more, and neither will the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil dig its roots in the courtyard of the New Jerusalem. For the Law—even in its smallest letter and tiniest stroke of pen—will disappear, as everything will have been accomplished.⁹ No longer will there be conditions for the rewards and blessings of the Tree

⁷ Matthew 4:4

⁸ Revelation 22:2

⁹ Matthew 5:18

of Life, for Christ has triumphed and fulfilled all. Truly, there will be only one Tree in glory. And in this period of waiting, God has called His people to look forward and upward to His promises won for them by Christ; and in their waiting and longing, they can find hope in that promised repose beside the Tree of Life in the New Jerusalem, and even now enjoy shade underneath its branches of grace from the oppressive heat of sin.

Bibliography

Westminster Shorter Catechism. The Westminster Standard. (2016, March 10). Retrieved February 6, 2023, from <https://thewestminsterstandard.org/westminster-shorter-catechism/>

Plagiarism Statement

I understand and have not violated the Seminary's position on plagiarism.