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A TALE OF TWO TREES

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Sir Francis Bacon said, “God Almighty first planted a garden. And indeed, it is the purest of human pleasures.” The Garden of Eden represents to us Paradise--unfortunately, paradise lost. It was God’s gift to man: a place for man’s *education*, a place for man’s *occupation* (living and working), a place for man’s *communication* with God.

We’ve touched on the educational aspects. God showed man his garden home. He showed him trees that were good for food, which is practical knowledge, and trees that were beautiful to the eyes, which is aesthetic knowledge. He showed man the basics of his labor, which is implied in telling man to dress and to keep the garden. He revealed to man that he is distinct from the rest of creation, and in fact is to subdue and have dominion over creation. The naming of the animals and the making of Eve also play into the educational aspects of this very first day of Adam’s creation. That’s quite a lot of information! And yet Adam was able to understand and respond insofar as we can tell from this record. He was formed fully functional and able to communicate.

We talked last week about the implications of God’s creating this garden as a place for man to work--work! Can you imagine? Work is part of God’s perfect creation, not because Adam was a slave, but because God knew the blessings and benefits that come from work. Work in its best form has both *purpose* and *incentive*. It is both *honorable* and *rewarding*. Anything outside of that is a distortion and an abuse.

Today I want to delve more into the *communication* between God and man on that first day, mainly regarding God’s single moral instruction to Adam. First of all, let’s look at Genesis 2:9:

And out of the ground made the LORD God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

We’ve already talked about the education involved in God showing Adam two kinds of trees: trees for beauty and trees for food. However, there are two additional trees that serve their own purposes, a tree of life and a tree of knowledge of good and evil. Let’s read Genesis 2:15-17:

And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.

And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat:

But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.

There has been a great deal of speculation about these two trees. Let’s look carefully at what the text says and then at what it does not say, and then we’ll compare other Scriptures and I hope come away with an honest and keen sense of the breadth of these verses of Scripture.

We see first of all that which was allowed and encouraged: Adam was able to eat of almost any tree in the garden. He has access to perpetual banquet of the fruit of many kinds of trees. There is instruction here, not only regarding what he can eat, but also regarding the fact that he needs to eat at all. Man's body is made in such a way as to require fuel; and God provided an abundance of supply for that need. As you know, food is also a source of pleasure (or of misery, if it be bad!). We also note that the fruit of one of the special trees, the Tree of Life, is included within this category of edible fruit. Adam was allowed and encouraged to eat the fruit of the Tree of Life. Let's come back to this tree in a minute.

We next see that there was one prohibition within this garden, one tree of which man was not to partake, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. God gives the prohibition along with an explanation: *for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die*. All of the other trees were for life; but this one tree would be the source and well spring of death.

We also note that both the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil are located in the center of the garden--that is, they are near each other, and they are central to man's existence.

Now, that is all that this part of the account says about these various trees: trees for beauty, trees for food, and a Tree of Life, along with a Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, of which it was forbidden to eat.

The account does not tell us that the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil was an apple tree, as so many pictures show. That is part of our popular culture, but it's not scriptural in the least. We do not know anything about the appearance of tree or its fruit except that it had a definite appeal to the senses as recorded in Genesis 3. That tree, along with all of the other trees originally in that garden, were destroyed. The garden is gone, and all traces of it have been entirely erased. We know this because of the events recorded in Genesis 6-9 and because of the evidence we find in the earth today relating to that record--the record of the Great Flood.

The account does not say there was a good tree and an evil tree, showing some sort of dualistic nature of God; no! It's important to note that the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil was *in and of itself a good tree*; it was part of God's original, pristine creation, into which sin had not entered, and which God Himself declared to be "very good." In other words, it was created by a good, just, and loving God to serve a good and holy purpose in His perfect universe. He had a perfect intention and plan for that tree and for mankind's relationship to it. The tree was *not* evil.

In summary, we know that God created many trees for the life and the enjoyment of Adam; and we know that God created one tree which was forbidden to Adam.

At this point it would be wise to compare other scripture. Do we find other mention of a tree of life? Certainly! There are a few mentions of a tree of life in Proverbs, but these seem mainly to serve as a basis of comparison. It is portrayed as something that is "good for you" in the sense that it brings joy and healing.

Prov. 11:30--*The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life; and he that winneth souls is wise.*

Prov. 13:12--*Hope deferred maketh the heart sick: but when the desire cometh, it is a tree of life.*

Prov. 15:4--*A wholesome tongue is a tree of life: but perverseness therein is a breach in the spirit.*

These references seem to basically say that something that is good for you is a tree of life. A “tree of life” is connected to joy and healing; but what about other places in the Bible? Again, the answer is yes. Observe Rev. 22:2:

[The river flowed] In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

The picture is of a tree that apparently has parts on both sides of the river, and yet it is one tree. I don't know if it is one tree, one set of roots, with multiple shoots, or if it's a tree whose branches reach across the river; either would seem to fit. Ezekiel chapter 47 has a very similar picture of trees whose leaves bring healing and produce a different fruit every month, although the trees there are not called trees of life, and they are also referred to in both singular and plural. I guess we could call it a “tree-system”; but the physical description isn't what we need to focus on. In the New Jerusalem, the heavenly city, God will give us access to the Tree of Life.

The Tree of Life then speaks of life with God. It is in God's very presence, and figures prominently in the New Jerusalem, just as it figured prominently in the garden of Eden--it was centrally located. No matter where one was in the garden, he wasn't far from that tree. As long as Adam obeyed God, he could partake of that tree and enjoy fellowship with a holy God. The tree of life then symbolizes fellowship, communion, obedience, and blessing. It was a reward and comfort for the man who obeyed God.

On the other hand, we do not find the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil outside of these early chapters of Genesis. The purpose it served is no longer needed. Obviously, God Himself did not need to know the difference between good and evil. He is His own basis of comparison. All that is in God--His plans, His purposes, His thoughts, His desires--all is good. All that is outside of God's plans, purposes, thoughts, and desires is evil. He is the standard. The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, then, served the purpose of giving man the choice--*will God be my standard of knowing good and evil, or will I be my own standard?* Will I trust God about what is right and wrong, or will I make up my own mind?

Let's be very clear about this: God did not set mankind up just to make him fail. James 1:13 reminds us, *“Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man.”* God did not set Adam up for failure. God loved Adam, and He loves all of mankind; but how could Adam possibly show that he loved God in return? The only possible way was through choosing to trust God and let God be the standard of right and wrong. Adam had a choice to live a God-centered life or a self-centered life.

You know, even without a Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, we find that the choice remains throughout the Bible. In the book of Deuteronomy, God reiterates His law to the children of Israel after their forty years of wandering in the wilderness. (Deuteronomy means “the second naming of the law.”) After repeating the law, and showing them the ways in which He will bless them if they obey, and punish them if they serve idols (which is really self-worship), He makes this declaration to them in Deut. 30:19-20:

I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live:

That thou mayest love the LORD thy God, and that thou mayest obey his voice, and that thou mayest cleave unto him: for he is thy life, and the length of thy days:

The promise of life with God and the blessings that attend such a life were based on the personal choice of the Israelites (and in the previous chapter God extended the same promise to anyone, Israelite or not). They could choose to let God be their standard of conduct, of determining right and wrong, or they could be their own standard. In truth, we find that when the children of Israel stayed from following God, the Bible tells us, “Every man did that which was right *in his own eyes*”--as it reveals some very atrocious behavior from Judges 16 to Judges 21.

As we well know, the Law in itself cannot save anyone. It was, as Paul said, “a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ.” It was God’s way of showing us that we could not earn righteousness on our own. Truly, those whose lives generally reflected obedience to God and His commandments enjoyed the blessings that God promised; but of course no one could keep the Law perfectly, then or now. Isaiah 64:6 states,

But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.

We are going to come back to this theme of the universal sinfulness of man when we explore Genesis chapter 3, but for now let’s keep exploring this idea of morality based in God and His Word, or based on ourselves. You see, in just the same way that Adam had a choice, and that the children of Israel had a choice, so we also have a choice. Jesus said in Matthew 7:13-14, “*Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.*” Jesus revealed Himself to be “the way, the truth, and the life; no man cometh unto the Father but by me.” Any other way is the way of destruction. We can choose today life with God, or life with ourselves. Proverbs 14:12 tells us, “*There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.*” We can let God set the standard of morality, or we can set our own standard.

This, my friends, is the real reason that evolution is believed, promoted, and defended so rigorously, even though very little of what we actually find in the universe is predicted by the evolutionary model. Evolution has to *explain away* more of what we find in the natural world than it can *adequately explain*. It is the real reason that atheists work so tirelessly to removed God from all aspects of public life.

Let me tell you a true story which I doubt you’ve heard. In 1934, a group of World War I veterans erected a monument, shaped like a cross, in the Mojave Desert as a way to honor all war dead. Riley Bembrey, one of those who helped erect the monument, took care of it for decades; and before he died, he asked his friends Henry and Wanda Santoz to continue his work in honor of those who died in war. However, some who were offended started a lawsuit claiming that the cross violates the Establishment Clause of the US Constitution. Under President Bush, the US Congress passed a number of bills aimed at protecting the monument, including denying funds to the National Park Service to remove the cross and exchanging that one acre of federal land for five acres of private land elsewhere in the area, but those measures weren’t good enough for the ACLU and the courts. The monument is currently cased in plywood. The US Supreme Court agreed in February of this year to take the case, without which the

monument would have been destroyed. Its fate hangs in the balance.

Why is it that a monument in the middle of the desert is such a problem? The answer given is that it offends those who aren't Christian. What is so offensive about that? Why the hatred? The answer is that it goes to the very core of our being--the choice of whether to obey God or decide for ourselves what is right or wrong. Those who try to smother the name of God do so because they want to deny that the choice even exists. Man is the measure of all things. Man alone has the right to moral values and judgments.

This is why evolution, and evolution only, must be taught in the public schools. Dr. Eugenie Scott, head of the National Center for Science Education has adopted this motto for the organization: "Defending the teaching of evolution in the public schools." It's right there on the banner of the website. The whole organization is dedicated to making sure that public schools teach evolution--and *only* evolution. If evolution from molecules to man is so perfectly well established, if there can be no doubt about it, then what is there to fear in the teaching of creationism? If a student who was well informed about both would obviously choose to believe evolution, then why not teach creationism and show its weaknesses? That is totally unacceptable to Eugenie Scott and many others like her. It should not be surprising that Dr. Scott is also a signer of the 2003 *Humanist Manifesto*, an expression of the doctrines of humanism--which boils down to the idea that we don't need God and we make our own moral choices.

In fact, there is a court battle right now in Texas because the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board told a private institution "that it could not move its [well-established] Master of Science program to Texas, nor could it recruit students from Texas to apply to its California graduate school."¹ The stated reason was that this private institution "does not teach science from an *evolution-only* viewpoint."² Friends, that is censorship! It's bad enough to restrict academic freedom at a public institution, but it's totally unacceptable to interfere with academic freedom in a private institution--not to mention a violation of interstate commerce with regard to being denied the ability to recruit students. Again, we have to ask ourselves why it is so important to suppress creation science; the underlying answer can only be that creationism makes us responsible to obey God's standards, while the absence of creationism makes us masters of our own morality.

In other words, we have essentially the same choice that Adam had. Two trees in the garden represented Adam's mastery of his life, whether it would be of God or of himself. That choice is still before us: will we choose God, or will we choose ourselves? Who determines what is right and what is wrong? This goes to the very core of our beings. It is a question for every man, every woman, every child, and it is one we all will answer. I urge you today to choose Christ, to choose life, to choose blessing, to choose eternity.

Romans 10:9-10:

That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.

For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.

1 James J. S. Johnson, "Censorship in Texas," *Acts and Facts*, May 2009, 18-19.

2 *Ibid.*