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Genesis 3,1-24

Lent 1 — 22 February 2015

Greeting: To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; mercy, peace, and love be multiplied unto you. Amen.

We hear a portion of the first lesson from the First Book of Moses, the third chapter of Genesis, which was read earlier:

Then the LORD God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil; and now, lest he stretch out his hand, and take also from the Tree of Life, and eat, and live forever” — ²³ therefore the LORD God sent him out from the Garden of Eden, to cultivate the ground from which he was taken. ²⁴ So He drove the man out; and at the east of the Garden of Eden He stationed the cherubim, and the flaming sword which turned in every direction, to guard the way to the Tree of Life.

So far the reading. Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O LORD, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Introduction: Sometimes it seems people make the worst possible trades imaginable.

Think, if you will, about the twins, Esau and Jacob. Esau was the older and he should have had first dibs on his father’s blessings and inheritance. But when he was hungry, Jacob had Esau trade

away his birthright for a bowl of porridge. How stupid can one be?

But there is another trade off spoken of in the Bible that is even stupider and with far worse consequences for those involved as well as us. Adam and Eve traded life eternal and communion with God for a bite from the fruit of the Tree of Good and Evil. And that bite meant that now sin would stalk every human ever to be born and the end of life would be the bite of death.

What on earth would possess our first parents to choose death? What did God mean when He said, “Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil”? Did Adam and Eve even know what good and evil were? Did they really become like God?

So many questions. All of this, however, now brings me to my sermon theme for today, “**The Cross Of Christ Is Our Tree Of Life.**” I’ll develop this theme in three parts:

- 1) Two Trees In The Garden**
- 2) Deceptiveness Equals Choosing Death;** and,
- 3) Only Through The Cross Does God Give Life**

1) Two Trees In The Garden. Explicitly in the second chapter of Genesis and implicitly in the third chapter, we know that there were two important trees in the Garden of Eden: The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and the Tree of Life.

In the Bible, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is mentioned explicitly only two times, and both citations are in the second chapter of Genesis.

The Tree of Life, however, is mentioned several times in Genesis and Proverbs, and then four times in the Book of Revelation.

In the pagan nations of the Middle East, there are references to a tree of life. In Egypt, the gods of Egypt ate from a sycamore tree to obtain immortality. In India there was a tree of heaven from which their gods drank “soma,” which was a potion that gave immortality. In Greece the gods ate the sacred food “ambrosia.” In Summarian mythology the gods were going to give Gilgamesh the fruit of immortality but a snake ate it – and, no, I don’t know if the snake gained immortality.

What is different in all these tales from what the Bible records? In the Bible the true God — Father, Son, and Holy Ghost — does not need to eat of anything that He made. When God created the world He did not do so for Himself; He created it for man.

What do we conclude from this? The Bible does not reflect pagan mythology. The Bible is a true record of what happened. Probably pagan mythology is but a poor, broken, and sinful reflection from what was recorded in the Bible.

As far as scholars can figure out, there is no parallel in pagan mythology to the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

But exactly what kind of knowledge was this tree to give? What might be so special about being able to distinguish between good and evil?

I won't bore you with what people have thought; most of the speculation is just that, speculation.

The decisive fact is that the knowledge lay in the prohibition itself; that is, God telling Adam and Eve, "Don't eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil."

When Adam and Eve ate, the knowledge they received was probably not what they expected. Instead of having this wonderful insight in properly dividing what was good and evil in God's creation, they were left with shame, guilt, and expulsion.

But why expulsion? Their knowledge would have permitted them to then grasp what they had lost — life.

But the life which they would have grasped by eating from the Tree of Life was not the life God wanted to give them.

True life with God is not granted through a magical tree. True life with God is based on a right relationship with God, a relationship which only God can establish, and only God can give.

Satan deceived Adam and Eve by getting them to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and this:

2) Deceptiveness Equals Choosing Death. When Satan began his work of deception, he mixed truth and falsehood together, so that it was difficult to separate them. Satan told Eve a half-truth when he said, "You surely shall not die!"

What was the half-truth? On the one hand, neither Adam and Eve fell over dead after their appetizer of forbidden fruit. On the other hand, they were dead men walking — physically death had come into the world and spiritually they would have been dead to God unless God had not reached out to them in spite of their sinfulness.

Eve looked at the tree and saw that “the tree was desirable to make one wise.” We should pause here for a moment and reflect on her thoughts.

Once she and Adam began to question God, they were on the road to death. By the way, it is pretty clear that Adam was standing beside Eve when Satan and Eve were speaking with one another.

But more than that, she confused knowledge and wisdom. She thought that she was going to wise, that somehow she would be able to handle the distinction between good and evil. She was wrong on both counts.

Her way of thinking was built on another half-truth. Yes, it’s true, that in order to use knowledge properly, one needs wisdom — and I’ll talk more about that in a moment. But when she questioned God, she lost both her ability to be wise in a perfect sense, and also her ability to properly distinguish between good and evil.

When she questioned God, she deceived herself, just as the serpent had deceived her. When she questioned God and ate, she made herself the judge of what was good and evil. Although God had said, “Don’t eat,” she ate — and so did Adam.

So in her questioning and eating, what were they saying to themselves and to God? “God, You may have said ‘No,’ but we’re saying ‘Yes’ to Your ‘No.’ We’re going to be like You; we’re going to be gods!”

God, of course, had the last word. They didn’t become like God. In fact, they were expelled from the garden so they would not have the chance to further exercise their sin-tainted wisdom and their sin-tainted knowledge, and then grasp earthly life so as to escape an earthly death. Their sin had brought them death, and they were like deadmen walking.

But in His goodness God held out hope for them. He held out the hope of a right relationship with Him, but on His terms, and not theirs. He promised He would send a Savior Who would crush the head of the serpent, thereby defeating him who had brought death and sin to our first parents.

The pages of Scripture reveal that:

3) Only Through The Cross Does God Give Life. There is another tree mentioned in the Bible, and that is the Tree of the Cross. Of this tree Paul wrote:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us — for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree” — (Galatians 3,13)

And Peter said:

The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, Whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a tree. (Acts 13,29)

The Scriptures make it perfectly clear how sin and death came into the world: through the disobedience of one man, Adam. And it is clear how life and salvation came into the world: through the obedience of one man, Jesus Christ, Who was obedient unto death, even death on the Cross.

Having tried to make himself into a god by disobeying God, Adam was prevented from gaining earthly life by being expelled from the garden. Jesus, Who was God, in obedience to the will of the Father, for us grasped the tree of death to gain life for us.

Human wisdom and knowledge would say Jesus had been foolish and was choosing a bad or evil thing when he willingly went to the Cross. In fact, His disciples had tried to talk Him out of it. Jesus' reaction to this foolish talk reflecting earthly wisdom, especially Peter's comments, was pointed,

Get behind me, Satan! ... for you [that is, Peter] are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's. (Matthew 16,23)

From the time of Adam, man has not been able to figure out God's interests. And when God reveals His Word, the natural reaction is to say: "Indeed, has God said?" The implication in such a question is always the same: "You man, you be the judge and forget about what God says. You can be as 'a' god."

Jesus rejected this way of thinking when tempted by Satan in

the wilderness. To each temptation Jesus always replied, “It is written.”

Jesus had already heard the voice of the Father say, “You are My Son.” But now Satan wanted Jesus to prove it. The implication? “Indeed, has God said? Is God’s Word enough? Why don’t You, Jesus, show me?” But thanks be to God, Jesus trusted the heavenly Word of the Father, even trusting it to the Tree of the Cross.

From small things to big things, mankind since Adam has not trusted God’s Word, but trusted in its own wisdom and own knowledge. More often than not, things do not work out well for man.

Right now I’m doing my taxes. There is always the temptation to stretch things a bit, and I’m not talking about interpreting the regulations in a way that is favorable to me, that’s OK. I’m talking about things like, “Is this really income?” God says to obey the governing authorities. So I plod on.

Think of abortion. Think of the Scripture references that make it clear that God knows each person — each one of us — from the womb on. Think of God’s command, “You shall not murder.” Think of the ways in which the unborn baby is not described as a baby at all, but by the Latin *foetus* — which, by the way, means “unborn offspring.” But abortion advocates re-define life and re-define God. “Indeed, has God said?”

Think of all the false religions that are based on man’s efforts

to get to God. But in mercy and grace, God has only come to us in and through His Son, Jesus. But to millions upon millions, Satan asks, “Indeed, has God said?”

Think of Lutheran churches that have departed from both the form and substance of the true faith. Back in the 1970s I remember reading in a liberal Lutheran newsletter, the *Lutheran Forum*, about a debate on the Trinity the Lutheran Church in America was having at its synodical convention. The writer, a member of the LCA, said that any church that puts the Trinity up for debate has left the faith, and he was getting out. Things have not gotten better. “Indeed, has God said?”

Think of Solomon in the Old Testament. What did he ask for? He asked for “wisdom.” Why? So he could properly apply the knowledge of good and evil in judging his people and leading the nation. But tragically even he late in his life departed from God’s Word by marrying many, many foreign wives, all of whom worshiped their idolatrous gods in the midst of God’s holy city.

Conclusion: Human reason is beclouded by sin. There is no getting around it. Our decisions based on our reason sometimes hit the mark, but more often than not, in a thousand different areas, they fall short. They fall short because we have neither God’s wisdom nor the proper knowledge of good and evil. By nature, before God, all people are dead men walking.

But God has given us a Tree of Life in the Cross. Here God shows us His Son, Who died for our sins. Here God shows us that Jesus rose from the dead, fulfilling the promise to crush the

serpent's head and defeat sin, death, and the power of the devil.

God's Word is our only sure guide. This is the Word which shows us the Cross, death for Jesus but life for us.

This is the Word that shows us the empty grave, a triumph for Jesus and a foretaste of our eternal life.

In Christ God made the choice for us that we ourselves could never make — a choice for spiritual and eternal life.

This is the life which He shares with us as we partake of the true Body and Blood of His Son, given and shed for us for the forgiveness of sins. This Word of the Cross is the true fruit of the Tree of Life, which nourishes and sustains us now and to eternity. Amen.

Now, the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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