

TWO TREES GREW IN EDEN

Paul N. Wanamaker, Pastor, the Evangelical Congregational Church of Easton, MA
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Introduction

One can only imagine the paradise that was once the garden of Eden, with its lush trees that were "pleasant to the sight and good for food"¹, and the river that ran through the garden to water it. And it was in this garden that God placed Adam to work it. But amongst the many trees, there were two which held particular and very special significance. Both trees were laden with fruit like the other trees in the garden, but one, the tree of life, promised life, while the other, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, threatened death. The promise of life we know was conditioned upon Adam's obedience for "God commanded the man, saying 'Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die'."² We also know that Adam joined his wife Eve in succumbing to the serpent's temptation to eat of the tree which, as promised, resulted in their deaths spiritually and finally physically, and "through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned."³

Adam was driven from the garden and barred from partaking of the tree of life. And it would be the shadow so to speak of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that would, and has hung over the course of human history. And yet it would be the hope of ultimately once again gaining access to the tree of life which would characterize God's redemptive purposes which He has progressively revealed and simultaneously brought to pass.

The Savoy Declaration of Faith articulates these truths as follows,

God gave to Adam a law of universal obedience written in his heart, and a particular precept of not eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, as a covenant of works, by which he bound him and all his posterity to personal, entire, exact and perpetual obedience; promised life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it; and endued him with power and ability to keep it.⁴

It's interesting that the writers of the above paragraph did not include the tree of life along with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in their description of what is called the

¹ Genesis 2.9

² vv 16-17

³ Rom. 5.12

⁴ Chapter XIX, *Of the Law of God*, Paragraph I

covenant of works. In the case of Gen. 2.16-17, Louis Berkhof identified the elements of a covenant to be that; “two parties are named, a condition is laid down, a promise of reward for obedience is clearly implied, and a penalty for transgression is threatened.”⁵ God and Adam are of course the two parties, death is the threatened result for disobedience and life is the implied reward for obedience in that it is the clear alternative to death. The two trees therefore were the visible representations of these elements of the covenant of works. The reward of life was visibly represented by the tree of life, and its counterpart, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, was a visible warning of the threat of death for failure to be obedient to God’s clear commandment forbidding the eating of the fruit from that tree.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of these two trees that grew in Eden as they relate to this covenant of works, as well as to God’s ultimate redemptive purposes in His Son, Jesus Christ.

The Covenant of Works and the Two Trees

Before delving into the character of the covenant of works, it should firstly be noted that not all reformed theologians understand this prohibition regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil as constituting a covenant. John Murray wrote, “The term is not felicitous... it is not designated a covenant in Scripture. Hosea 6:7⁶ may be interpreted otherwise and does not provide the basis for such a construction of the Adamic economy. Besides, Scripture always uses the term covenant, when applied to God’s administration to men, in reference to a provision that is redemptive or closely related to redemptive design. Covenant in Scripture denotes the oath-bound confirmation of promise and involves a security which the Adamic economy did not bestow.”⁷

However, other reformed theologians like John Owen saw in this prohibition to Adam all the elements of a covenant (promises and threatening, rewards and punishments). He wrote, “The rule of obedience and reward that was between God and him was not expressly called a covenant, but it contained the express nature of a covenant; for it was the agreement of God and man concerning obedience and disobedience, rewards and punishments.”⁸ He went further in stating that this covenant may be understood in two ways, as law only and as a covenant. He wrote, “As it was law only; so it proceeded from, and was a consequent of the nature of God and man, with their mutual relation unto one another. God being considered as the Creator, governor, and benefactor of man; and man as an intellectual creature, capable of moral obedience; this law was necessary, and is eternally indispensable.”⁹ Adam was created in the image of God such that he possessed “a law of universal obedience written in

⁵ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1993, p. 213

⁶ “*But like Adam they transgressed the covenant; there they dealt treacherously with Me*”

⁷ John Murray, *Collected Writings*, Banner of Truth, 2001, 2:49

⁸ John Owen, *Hebrews*, Banner of Truth, 1991, 6:60

⁹ *Ibid*

his heart” as the Savoy expresses it. All of his faculties were originally and supremely predisposed to know, serve and love God as expressed by his keeping of that law written in his heart, and Adam’s enjoyment of God sprung from this inherent holiness. Owen went on to write that the promise and the prohibition given to Adam could be considered as a covenant because it “depended on the will and pleasure of God.”¹⁰ And this consisted in God establishing a promise of reward which was an expression of grace, and a threat of punishment which expressed justice. God then gave external and visible signs of the promise and the threat; “the first in a tree of life, the latter in that of the knowledge of good and evil... signs and pledges of this covenant.”¹¹ In this way, Owen’s covenantal understanding of God’s administration of Adam in the garden was derived not only from the law written on Adam’s heart, but the two trees which were tangible representations of the promise of life and the threat of death. For Owen to describe these trees as “signs and pledges” was to essentially identify them as sacraments. This understanding of the two trees by Owen is confirmed where he wrote, “first, he [God] appointed a church-state for man in innocency, and completed its order by the sacramental addition of the two trees, - the one of life, the other of the knowledge of good and evil.”¹²

Francis Turretin took a similar view. In his treatment of what he called the covenant of nature, he wrote, “Strictly and properly, covenant denotes the agreement of God with man by which God promises His goods (and especially eternal life to him), and by man, in turn, duty and worship are engaged (certain external signs being employed for the sake of confirmation)... The covenant of nature is that which God the Creator made with innocent man as his creature, concerning the giving of eternal happiness and life under the condition of perfect obedience. It is called ‘natural,’ not from natural obligation (which God does not have toward man), but because it is founded on the nature of man (as it was as first created by God) and on his integrity or powers. It is also called ‘legal’ because the condition on man’s part was the observation of the law of nature engraved within him; and of ‘works’ because it depended upon works or his proper obedience.”¹³ His use of the words “signs” and “confirmation” in referring to the trees are consistent with the words ‘signs’ and ‘seals’ which are often used to denote God’s purpose in the giving of sacraments.

Along the lines of Owen and Turretin, Thomas Goodwin wrote, “He (Adam) had, in like manner, the principles of God’s whole mind and will sown in his heart; even the seeds of all that moral law which we find in the Scriptures, Adam had then sown in him in the utmost spirituality thereof: the notions of it grew up naturally in his heart... But the whole law was to him even a law of nature written in his heart, naturally known to him by common dictates inbred in him. And thus in like manner was that promise known to him, that by *doing* he should live, together with that threatening, that by transgression of the law, or any part of it, he should die the death. These were known to him by principles written in his heart, *though*

¹⁰ John Owen, *Hebrews*, Banner of Truth, 1991, 6:60

¹¹ *Ibid*, 6:60-61

¹² John Owen, *Works*, 15:229

¹³ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, P&R Publishing, 1992, I:574-5

further confirmed to him by two sacraments, the tree of life, and of the knowledge of good and evil, even as his other notions of God were helped and enlarged by the works of God ; yet so as *the knowledge of this covenant, and of the promise and threatening annexed to it, was natural*, though it were strengthened and enlarged by those two sacraments.”¹⁴ Clearly, Goodwin was asserting that Adam inherently knew the stipulations of the covenant of works in its promises and threats, and the trees, therefore, simply confirmed the covenantal nature of his relationship as creature to his Creator.

Another puritan, William Strong, wrote, “In the covenant God made with Adam there was a Life promise, of which the tree of life was a Seal; and there was a Death threatened, which was seal’d by the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil... One is called the *Sacrament of Life*, and the other the *Sacrament of Death*.”¹⁵ As such, it’s important to see both trees as representative of this covenant of works.

It was noted earlier that John Murray thought the term “covenant of works” was “not felicitous”, and yet he characterized the tree of life as “symbolic of life, and we may infer in some way it would have been the seal of everlasting life.”¹⁶ Although he does not apply this terminology to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he appears to use the language of a sacrament as regards the tree of life.

The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil

In Colossians 3.10 and Ephesians 4.24, the Apostle Paul described a regenerate person being renewed in Christ, as being restored to true knowledge, righteousness and holiness, which is essentially the perfect moral image of God possessed by Adam prior to the fall. And it was after God created Adam that He “saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good.”¹⁷ So why would God introduce the possibility of Adam falling from that perfect state of being through the means of this tree with its prohibition and the accompanying temptation offered by the serpent?

For Geerhardus Vos, the issue of Adam being “very good” needed to be confirmed. He wrote, “Man had been created perfectly good in a moral sense. And yet there was a sense in which he could be raised to a still higher level of perfection”. Vos anticipated the raised eyebrows and so continued with, “the advance was meant to be from unconfirmed to confirmed goodness and blessedness; to a confirmed state in which these possessions could no longer be lost... (therefore) man’s original state was a state of indefinite probation.”¹⁸ Theologians have

¹⁴ Thomas Goodwin, *Of The Creature*, in Works, 7:47, (*italics mine*)

¹⁵ William Strong, *A Discourse of the Two Covenants*, 1, (quoted in *A Puritan Theology* by Joel Beeke and Mark Jones, Reformation Heritage Books, 2012, 223-4

¹⁶ John Murray, *Collected Writings*, Banner of Truth, 2001, 2:48

¹⁷ Gen. 1:31

¹⁸ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 22

termed this as the potential for Adam to transition from *posse peccare* and *posse non peccare* to *non posse peccare*, all of which hinged on his obedience or disobedience. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil provided the means of testing Adam in his state of innocence. Turretin wrote, "that exploratory law was necessary in addition to the natural law impressed upon the conscience of men... in order that God, who had granted dominion of all things to man, might declare himself to be the Lord of man and man might understand himself to be a servant bound to obey and adhere to Him."¹⁹

This concept of confirming or testing seems consistent with God's dealings with His people in other portions of Scripture. Of course there's a difference in Adam's testing as compared to the testing of God's people after the fall. Adam was capable of resisting the temptation and therefore able to be obedient to the prohibition. He was endowed with natural strength as a consequence of being perfectly created in the image of God. Those after the fall are utterly reliant upon God's overcoming or supernatural grace and the Holy Spirit to be obedient to God's commands. However, the principle of testing or exploring (as Turretin expressed it) obedience is the same.

In several instances of God's dealings with the wilderness generation of Israel, He tested them. We read, "The Lord said to Moses, 'Behold I will rain bread from heaven for you. And the people shall go out and gather a certain quota every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in My law or not', and when Moses exhorted the people, "You shall remember that the Lord your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not."²⁰

And so, in a similar way, God provided a means by which Adam's love for God could be tested. Adam's potential obedience would not be the result of coercion or force, but would spring forth naturally out of his love for God. As such, Adam's obedience would give glory to God since it would be an outward expression of what God created him to be, and declared to very good. Or to state it differently, this prohibition in this covenant of works was put in place to display God's glory as Creator. The Apostle Paul touched on this truth in his admonition to the Romans. We read, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, *that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.*"²¹ Paul was addressing fallen sinners who were beginning their journey towards recovery of what was lost in the fall, but the principle is the same. To do God's will in being obedient is to experience the wisdom and goodness in His laws, which is to experience the wisdom and goodness of God. And this glorifies God. How else could David have written, "Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day"²², if he had not first experienced the delight and pleasure associated with obedience. And David knew that God's law was an expression of the

¹⁹ Turretin, I:579

²⁰ Ex. 16.4; Dt. 82

²¹ Rom. 12.2 (*italics mine*)

²² Psalm 119.97

excellencies of God Himself. For David, to obey was not only to glorify God, but as the Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it, it was to enjoy God.²³ David wrote, "In your presence is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore."²⁴ Thus while Adam continued in his obedience, he glorified God in exercising His created perfections.

But what is meant by the tree being specifically named the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? Was the knowledge of good and evil to be obtained only through disobediendly eating the fruit from the tree, or was there a knowledge of good and evil obtainable by abstaining? To begin with, Adam already possessed a knowledge of evil in his state of perfection. Evil was present in the garden, and he and Eve encountered it with the serpent at the tree. Further, he knew evil in that he knew the consequences of evil which was that he would surely die if he ate from the tree. Likewise, Adam knew good in what he saw and experienced of creation, which God declared to be very good. John Murray wrote, "In the event of successful probation the experience of the crisis of temptation, and the experience of assured and indefectible goodness, would have imparted a renewed and greatly increased knowledge of the contrast between good and evil, and a renewed appreciation of the good as the opposite of evil... Empirically, knowledge is knowledge of good and evil as co-related and contrasted realities."²⁵ If Adam had obeyed, he certainly would have obtained further knowledge and understanding of this co-relation and contrast between good and evil, which would have included further knowledge of the existence of evil and the reality of Satan as opposed to the goodness of God.

But Adam failed his probation and so by eating the fruit, Adam and Eve experienced a fullness of the knowledge of the contrast and the relationship between good and evil. They were overcome by a previously unknown sense of guilt, shame, and fear. They experientially came to know not only the presence of evil, but the harsh consequences of submitting to it. And this new knowledge was significantly enhanced by the memory of the goodness of their experience before their act of disobedience. In his explanation for the existence of the prohibition associated with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Turretin wrote, "That sin might be more conspicuous by that external symbol and the evil of the concealed ulcer be dragged to the light (or the virtue of obedience be far more clearly exhibited). For the virtue of obedience would have been the more illustrious as the evil was because forbidden of God."²⁶ In both cases, obedience or disobedience, there would be obtained by Adam an enhanced knowledge of *both* good and evil.

This view that the knowledge of good and evil would be acquired in either case of obedience or disobedience removes the negative connotation which is often applied to the tree. Or to put it differently, the knowledge of good and evil in and of itself is not a bad thing. Knowledge

²³ WSC, question 1

²⁴ Psalm 16.11

²⁵ John Murray, *Collected Writings*, Banner of Truth, 2001, 2:52

²⁶ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, P&R Publishing, 1992, I:579-80

was not something that God had forbidden. Thus, as Geerhardus Vos pointed out²⁷, this knowledge is not descriptive of an 'act', but of a 'state'. The tree and its name are morally neutral. It was the disobedient 'act' of eating from the tree which was evil, and which placed Adam in a fallen 'state' with its corresponding knowledge of good and evil.

Vos concluded that the tree was "the God appointed instrument to lead man through probation to that state of religious and moral maturity wherewith his highest blessedness is connected."²⁸ And that "moral maturity" would result not only from the presence of the tree with its prohibition, but from the temptation to violate the prohibition presented by the serpent. Adam's succumbing to the temptation took him into the experiential realm of seeing the good in plain conflict and contrast to the evil. This knowledge he would attain to, Vos wrote, "by taking either fork of the probation-choice."²⁹

As regards this concept of the knowledge of good and evil being the result of either a successful or unsuccessful probation, Greg Beale called the tree "a symbolic place where judgment was to be carried out (much as courthouses and courtrooms are adorned with the symbol of Lady Justice)...the tree seems to have functioned as a judgment tree, the place where Adam should have gone to 'discern between good and evil' and, thus, where he should have judged the serpent as evil and pronounced judgment on it, as it entered the garden... Adam should have discerned that the serpent was evil and should have judged the serpent in the name of God at the place of the judgment tree."³⁰

It was the serpent who successfully undermined the neutrality and purpose of the tree in the minds of Adam and Eve. He introduced the false understanding that the knowledge of good and evil could only be obtained by eating from the tree, as if the power of this transfer of knowledge resided with the fruit of the tree (Gen 3.5b "You will be like God, knowing good and evil"), and that God was withholding this knowledge by the use of His threat of sure death. Further, he essentially deceitfully substituted the knowledge which could be gained by *not* eating from the tree with the false promise that they would become like God in that they would exist and operate independent of God, becoming gods themselves. The irony of course is that they were already like God in their moral perfection, and that by disobediendly eating the fruit, this moral integrity became radically corrupted. And the loss of their inherent righteousness would dramatically add to the misery of their fallen condition.

The serpent had successfully stirred up in Adam and Eve an envy of God, and essentially brought God's goodness into question by suggesting that God was holding out on them. In reality, in contrast to the tempter's claim, it was part of God's overall goodness to place the tree in the garden. Obedience would have resulted in bringing Adam and Eve into further

²⁷ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology*, Eerdmans, 1991, p.31

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Ibid, 32

³⁰ G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, Baker Academic, 2011, p.35

blessedness as they experienced “that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”³¹ This principle of blessed obedience as a result of testing is beautifully illustrated with God’s testing of Abraham with his son Isaac. The account is well known, we read of this testing and the result; “Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham... do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me... because you have done this thing... blessing I will bless you... because you have obeyed My voice.”³²

We find a final allusion to this tree where we read, “Then the Lord God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil...”³³ Commentators have wrestled with this statement. Matthew Henry saw it as an “ironical upbraiding of them”, as if to say, “A goodly god he makes! Does he not?”³⁴ As such, in Henry’s view, it was meant to humble them and bring them into a fuller sense of the profound foolishness of their disobedience. Calvin held the same view and called the statement, “An ironical reproof, by which God would not only prick the heart of man, but pierce it through and through... And, truly, it was a sad and horrid spectacle; that he, in whom recently the glory of the Divine image was shining, should lie hidden under fetid skins to cover his own disgrace, and that there should be more comeliness in a dead animal than in a living man!”³⁵ Murray, however, understood what the Lord said as being a simple statement of fact with no irony attached. He did not go on to explain what it was for Adam to “become like one of Us”, but wrote that “irony would not provide the ground for the liability and expulsion” expressed in verses 22b-23.³⁶ In either case³⁷, it’s clear that the consequence of Adam’s succumbing to the temptation to eat the prohibited fruit was the gaining of a bitter *experiential* knowledge of evil, and a sharper and fuller knowledge of good from their recollecting the goodness of their experience before the fall. He came into a significantly enhanced understanding and knowledge of the contrast between good and evil.

But can it not be said that there is an element of compassion and pity in what the Lord said? It’s as if God expressed a lament that man had entered into that forbidden realm of *experiencing* evil with all of its horrific consequences, and in that way came into a measured experiential knowledge of evil that God already knew from all eternity. There is a sense, therefore, where perhaps it can be said that man became like God in his acquisition in part of the experiential knowledge of evil. That knowledge known by God in eternity would become known in time and space in the Person of Jesus Christ. It would be that experiential knowledge of evil and its contrast with good that Jesus the Man of sorrows would come into

³¹ Rom. 12.2

³² Gen. 22.1,12,16-18

³³ Gen. 3.22a

³⁴ Matthew Henry, *The Bethany Parallel Commentary*, Bethany House Publishers, 1983, p. 18

³⁵ John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, The Ages Digital Library Commentary, Ver. 1.0, 1998, p.111

³⁶ John Murray, *Collected Writings*, Banner of Truth, 2001, 2:52, Gen. 3:22b-23 “... ‘and now, lest he put his hand and take us also of the tree of life, and eat and live forever’ – therefore the Lord God sent him out of the garden of Eden”

³⁷ Some commentators like John Gill and Adam Clarke, citing the original Hebrew and what they believe to be the more authentic versions, suggest that the statement could alternately be translated as, “Behold, the man *was* as one of Us”. That rendering gives a whole new sense which this writer has chosen not to explore in this paper.

that would bring Him great grief in the course of His earthly walk. His weeping at the death of His friend Lazarus was expressive of a grief that went far deeper than the loss of a beloved friend. He was overcome in anguish with the whole ruinous and miserable reality of death brought on by Adam's (man's) entrance into the experience of evil. We see it again in His heartfelt weeping over Jerusalem.³⁸ Indeed, the ultimate experiential knowledge of evil was at the cross where He who knew no sin became sin for His people that they might become the righteousness of God.³⁹ There Christ experienced to the fullest that which was threatened in the garden if Adam were to eat from the tree, namely death.

We read no more of this tree in Scripture, but we certainly read of the impact of Adam's violation of the prohibition associated with it. Not only did Adam forfeit the promise associated with the tree of life for himself, but he acted as the federal head and representative of all mankind, and thereby plunged us all into spiritual and physical ruin. Adam's federal headship and the consequences of his actions affecting all are made clear by what the Apostle Paul wrote; "Just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned... Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam... by the one man's offense many died... the judgment which came from one offense resulted in condemnation... by the one man's offense death reigned through the one... through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation... by one man's disobedience many were made sinners."⁴⁰ Adam's legacy to his descendants is not only a shared guilt for his disobedience, but a corrupted nature such that amongst fallen men, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God", and now "there is none righteous, no, not one... there is none who does good, no, not one."⁴¹ And so, no one is able to keep the demands of the covenant of works as a means of obtaining life. The probation ended in failure, and the tree, which along with the tree of life sacramentally represented the covenant of works, has served its purpose and is now gone.

Calvin wrote regarding this tree "that it was prohibited to man, not because God would have him to stray like a sheep, without judgment and without choice; but that he might not seek to be wiser than became him, nor by trusting to his own understanding, cast off the yoke of God, and constitute himself an arbiter and judge of good and evil... a judgment had been given him, by which he might discriminate between virtues and vices... We now understand what is meant by abstaining from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; namely, that Adam might not, in attempting one thing or another, rely upon his own prudence; but that, cleaving to God alone, he might become wise only by his obedience."⁴²

³⁸ Luke 19.41

³⁹ 2 Cor. 5.21

⁴⁰ Rom. 5:12,14-19

⁴¹ Rom. 3:10,12,23

⁴² John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, The Ages Digital Library Commentary, Ver. 1.0, 1998, p.62

An interesting question arises as to the relationship of the covenant of works to the moral law given to Israel at Sinai. We read in the Savoy, "This law... was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in ten commandments."⁴³ The "this law" is a reference back to the preceding (11.1) paragraph in the Savoy where it is written that "God gave to Adam a law of universal obedience written in his heart..."⁴⁴ It appears that the framers of the Savoy regarded the law given at Sinai as a re-publication of the covenant of works. If that's so then the "first" or old covenant referred to in Hebrews 8 would be in essence the covenant of works. However, Owen argued that the old covenant of Hebrews 8 is different from the covenant of works in that it is not only a covenant, but it is a testament.⁴⁵ He cited Heb 9.16 where we read, "where there is a testament, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator", and then wrote, "In the making of the covenant with Adam, there was not the death of anything, whence it might be called a testament. But there was the death of beasts in sacrifice in the confirmation of the covenant at Sinai."⁴⁶ As such, Owen went on to write, "That first covenant made with Adam, had, as unto any benefit to be expected from it, with respect unto acceptation with God, life, and salvation, ceased long before, even at the entrance of sin... God had provided a way for the salvation of sinners, declared in the first promise... but as unto all those who receive not the grace tendered in the promise, it doth remain in full force and efficacy, not as a covenant, but as a law."⁴⁷ Owen was essentially saying that life was no longer offered to Adam (all of us) through the covenant of works in that it had been violated, and there was no provision in it for recovery. The act of disobedience could not be undone. But God who "is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and great in mercy"⁴⁸, marvelously proclaimed that "first promise" in Gen. 3:15.⁴⁹ Those, however, who persist in what amounts to placing their hope of acceptance with God based on their supposed obedience, will find the curse of that covenant of works to be still in full effect for "the wrath of God abides on him."⁵⁰ As such, the fall made no change in the ultimate relationship between God and man. God did not remove the requirements of the law and put into place a plan B. Owen wrote, "For its (*the law*) commands and curse depending on the necessary relation between God and man, with the righteousness of God as the supreme governor of mankind, they must be answered and fulfilled."⁵¹

⁴³ Savoy, 11.2

⁴⁴ Savoy, 11.1

⁴⁵ John Owen, *Hebrews*, Banner of Truth, 1991, 6:61

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Ibid, 6:61

⁴⁸ Psalm 145.8

⁴⁹ Gen. 3.15 "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel".

⁵⁰ John 3.36

⁵¹ John Owen, *Hebrews*, 6:62, *parenthetical insert mine*

The Tree of Life

The covenant of works given to Adam in his probation consisted of both a covenant curse and a covenant blessing. As stated earlier, these two contrasting aspects of the covenant were represented by the tree of the knowledge of good and evil with its associated prohibition, and the tree of life with its associated promise of life. As such, the two trees acted as a pair.

As with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the tree of life was just a tree like the others in the garden except that God had given it a special designation. Its fruit only gave one life in that it provided life sustaining nourishment like the other trees, but in no way was its fruit capable of providing the eater with eternal life. Turretin argued that "A finite power could not have an infinite efficacy of extending life to an infinite time."⁵² Further, as the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was neutral in that it was not a "bad" tree, so too this tree was neutral in that it was not a "good" tree per se. They were both just fruit-bearing trees like the other trees in the garden.

However, the question that has arisen for many is whether Adam ever partook of fruit of the tree. For some, the answer seems to hinge on the meaning of what God said and did regarding Adam as it is recorded in Gen. 3.22. There we read, "'And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever' – therefore the Lord God sent him out of the garden of Eden... so He drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life". Clearly, after the fall, God took measures to prevent Adam from eating the fruit of the tree of life. But some cite the use of the word "also", as implying that the only fruit Adam ate from either tree was the forbidden fruit.

In order to properly address the question of Adam's partaking of the tree or not, it's helpful to re-state that most reformed theologians have considered the tree to be a sacrament whereby God intended to seal the promise of life which would be given upon a successful probation. Turretin wrote, "As often as he [Adam] tasted its fruit, he was bound to recollect that he had life not from himself, but from God." Turretin understood Adam's eating of the tree as a "sealing sign of the happy life to be passed in paradise and to be changed afterwards into a heavenly life, if he had continued upright." To put it succinctly, Turretin wrote that the tree "was a sacrament and symbol of immortality which would have been bestowed on Adam if he had persevered in his first state."⁵³

In commenting on Gen. 2.9, Matthew Henry wrote regarding the tree of life that, "it was chiefly intended to be a sign and seal to Adam, assuring him of the continuance of life and happiness, even to immortality and everlasting bliss, through the grace and favour of his Maker, upon condition of his perseverance in the state of innocency and obedience."⁵⁴

⁵² Turretin, I:580

⁵³ Ibid, I:581

⁵⁴ Matthew Henry, *The Bethany Parallel Commentary*, Bethany House Publishers, 1983, p. 9

Of this same tree, Calvin wrote regarding Adam, "He was bidden to hope for eternal life so long as he ate from the tree of life."⁵⁵ Clearly Calvin understood this tree in Adam's pre-fall state to be sacramental. When Adam ate sacramentally from the tree, he received the blessing of a confirmation of God's conditional promise of life. Later in the *Institutes* in his discussion on the sacraments, Calvin again identified the tree of life as a sacrament. After defining a sacrament as that which "embraces all those signs which God has ever enjoined upon men to render them more certain and confident of the truth of His promises", he discussed the tree of life as one such example. He continued as regards the tree that, "Adam and Eve ... might assure themselves of [immortality] as long as they should eat of its fruit."⁵⁶ It's also instructive to read Calvin's comments on Gen. 2.9; "He (God) does not indeed transfer his power into outward signs; but by them he stretches out his hand to us, because, without assistance, we cannot ascend to him. He intended, therefore, that man, as often as he tasted the fruit of that tree, should remember whence he received his life, in order that he might acknowledge that he lives not by his own power, but by the kindness of God alone; and that life is not (as they commonly speak) an intrinsic good, but proceeds from God. Finally, in that tree there was a visible testimony to the declaration, that 'in God we are, and live, and move.' But if Adam's hitherto innocent, and of an upright nature, had need of monitory signs to lead him to the knowledge of divine grace, how much more necessary are signs now, in this great imbecility of our nature, since we have fallen from the true light?"⁵⁷

There are others, however, who although holding to the sacramental nature of the tree, maintain that Adam could not partake of the tree of life until he had completed a successful probation. Some point to Rev. 2.7 where we read, "To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God." Apparently, they see a direct parallel between one's overcoming and Adam's continued obedience. But this is to confuse Adam's prelapsarian state with his postlapsarian state. Before the fall, Adam was not overcoming anything. He was simply continuing in his obedience in order to obtain that which he was promised. In his writing on the covenant of works, Dr. Vickers has written, "God graciously bound Himself to reward our first parents' works of faithful obedience. If our first parents had been faithful in discharging the responsibilities that their Creator had imposed upon them, then in accordance with God's sworn promise they would have merited, and would have been rewarded with, entrance into a state of eternal life... that, in the shortest terms in which it can be put, is what we have referred to as a 'works principle' coming into effect."⁵⁸ Dr. Vickers made it clear earlier that in regards to the covenant of works, "We are in no sense speaking here of 'salvation by works.' We are at this point speaking of our first parents' *potential entitlement*..."⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.4

⁵⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.18

⁵⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, The Ages Digital Library Commentary, Ver. 1.0, 1998, p.61

⁵⁸ Douglas Vickers, *Divine Redemption and the Refuge of Faith*, Reformation Heritage Books, 2005, p. 44

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 43

The “overcomers” Jesus spoke of in Rev. 2.7 are fallen sinners who overcome and gain access to the eschatological promise of the fruit of the tree of life by virtue of their persevering repentance and their faith in their Savior who kept the terms of covenant of works on their behalf, and also suffered the full extent of the curse of that covenant on their behalf. This overcoming life of faith and repentance is made possible by God who works in the true believer both to will and to do for His good pleasure.⁶⁰ To eat from the tree of life in the paradise of God will be to enter into the fullness of what the tree of life in the garden pointed to.

As referred to earlier, there are those who point to the word “also” in Gen 3.22 as an indication that Adam had not yet eaten from the tree of life. A better understanding however, is to take the “also” as pointing to Adam potentially compounding his disobedience when he ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, by presumptuously, and “also” eating from the tree of life, a tree to which he was no longer entitled to because he was no longer qualified to eat its fruit. That is to say, it was no longer available to him as a means of confirming God’s promise of life through obedience in his time of probation. That way of gaining eternal life through Adam’ obedience was gone. Murray wrote, “May we not regard the tree of life as having a twofold reference, the sign and seal of life on the highest level of realization on the one hand, and also of that life in death and misery to which Adam degraded himself on the other? In this condition and state, the tree would still have its sealing significance, but in the opposite direction, confirmation in the life of sin and death. In Adam’s expulsion we should find, therefore, a signal manifestation of preventive grace, not only the grace of preventing an aggravation of Adam’s sin... but of preventing confirmation in sin, misery, and death, of preventing a sin that would have sealed his doom. God shielded Adam from the sin that would have put him outside the sphere of redemption”.⁶¹ In this way the words of God in Gen. 3.22, “lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever...” can be understood from its sacramental significance, and not inferring in any way that the tree had some inherent ability to communicate eternal life through the continued eating of its fruit.

In regards to this matter, Dr. Vickers has written, “The splinter of wisdom in the “non-prelapsarian-eating” position is that it does hold to the sacramental significance of the tree. But at its best it imagines at the same time that the sacrament of the tree could not be taken unless perfect righteousness before God had been attained. What is lost sight of in that position is that *that is precisely what Adam had before the fall*. Before his fall he did, in fact, have perfect righteousness before God. And because he had that perfect (even though he was mutable) righteousness he was qualified, on those grounds, to take of the tree. If we don’t see that, we have a defective doctrine of creation and of man’s initial state... Adam’s pristine righteousness was inherent, intrinsic, and essential to the very nature of his created personhood as he stood in the image of his Creator. If we don’t hold that, and hold to the implications of it, we must hold to the alternative, that Adam’s righteousness was only a

⁶⁰ Philippians 2.13

⁶¹ John Murray, *Collected Writings*, Banner of Truth, 2001, 2:55

donum superadditum, something added on after his creation and not intrinsic to it. In that case our theology is Roman Catholicism and not Reformed.”⁶² One clear consequence of that position as held by Roman Catholicism has led them to their false doctrinal teaching of salvation by works.

Conclusion

Other than God’s final allusion to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Gen 3.22, we read no more of it, and yet “nevertheless death reigned.”⁶³ It served its purpose as a means of testing Adam during his time of probation, and there is no do-over, or make-up test. But if we stay true to our understanding of God’s sovereignty in that He “works all things according to the counsel of His will”⁶⁴, then we need to affirm that God ordained Adam’s disobedience. We also affirm that God does not tempt, and Adam therefore was entirely responsible for his actions.⁶⁵ Although he tried, he could not justifiably blame God for his disobedience. But having said all that, the failed probation through the use of the tree essentially provided the means whereby God would then begin to reveal what all along was His eternal redemptive purpose.

After the fall, God began to make known that purpose when He declared to the serpent in the garden, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.”⁶⁶ In the light of what we know from God’s additional revelations in His word, that “Seed” is Jesus Christ, the Son of God in the flesh.⁶⁷ The metaphor of bruising the head of the serpent and bruising the heel of the Seed would find its fulfillment in Christ, who as the greater Adam, gained access for the elect to the eternal life that the tree of life sacramentally represented. This access, contrary to Adam, He fully accomplished in His perfect obedience to the law as required in the Covenant of Works⁶⁸, but Christ’s heel would be bruised in His death on the cross where He would exhaust the curse of death for the elect brought on through Adam’s disobedience in eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We read, “For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil.”⁶⁹ One writer has noted, “It is no accident that

⁶² This is a quote from an email sent to me by Dr. Vickers several years ago. It was one of many in an exchange of emails with Doug discussing the tree of life. I assure the reader that in that exchange I was grasshopper!

⁶³ Rom. 5.14

⁶⁴ Eph. 1.11

⁶⁵ James 1.13-15, many verses such as John 6.37, and Acts 2.23; 4.27-28 affirm the dual truths of God’s sovereignty and man’s accountability.

⁶⁶ Gen. 3.15

⁶⁷ Galatians 3.16

⁶⁸ The prohibition and the implied promise associated with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil were representative of the entire moral law which was “inherent, intrinsic, and essential to the very nature of (Adam’s) created personhood as he stood in the image of his Creator.”

⁶⁹ 1 John 3.8

human sin which began at the foot of a tree... (Gen.2.9ff), found its resolution on another tree, the cross of Calvary."⁷⁰

In this way, through the probationary use of the two trees, the stage was set for God's ultimate intention to have a redeemed people for Himself, so that "in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ... that we who first trusted in Christ should be to the praise of His glory", and "by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of the cross."⁷¹

And so, the access to the tree of life that was denied Adam in his fallen state has now been made available to all who exercise faith and repentance in Jesus Christ, thereby manifesting their spiritual union with Christ in His death, resurrection and glorification. The Apostle Paul wrote, "for as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive.", and "For as one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one man's obedience many will be made righteous."⁷² In the Revelation, John heard Jesus say, "To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God."⁷³ John received further vision when "he (an angel) showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him."⁷⁴

⁷⁰ R. Laird Harris, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Moody Press, 1980, 2:689, (Robert Starke quotes this writer in his paper, "*The Tree of Life: Protological to Eschatological*", <http://www.kerux.com/documents/keruxv11n2a3.asp>)

⁷¹ Eph. 1.10,12; Col. 1.20

⁷² 1 Corinthians 15.22; Rom. 5.19

⁷³ Rev. 2.7

⁷⁴ Rev. 22.1-3