

Genesis 3; Mt. 26:26-28

Sacramental Comparisons and Contrasts

So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life – v. 24

Genesis chp. 3 presents to us the greatest tragedy of the history of mankind. God created man to be a living being. He created man to commune with him and glorify him and to enjoy him forever; but in this tragic chapter you find man being driven away from God and man barred from the tree of life. And with the way to life barred, instead of being a living being man becomes a dead and dying being.

Like Nicodemus of old we read such a chapter as this and ask *how can these things be?* There is a remarkable simplicity to this chapter in that it gives such a clear account of the fall of man but at the same time there's a mystery to it that defies understanding. How could man fall into sin? How could one created in the image of God and placed in a perfect environment who had every advantage and every privilege including the privilege of communion with his maker – how could he, nevertheless, choose to destroy himself?

We'll never plumb the depths of what is rightly called elsewhere in Scripture *the mystery of iniquity* but we certainly are able to see that the proof is in the pudding. We all know sin and we all know that the wages of sin is death. All men die. All men, no matter how wise or how rich or how lofty or lowly, they all die. Every cemetery you pass gives confirmation to the word of Ge 2:17 *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*. No matter how skeptical men may be toward the truth of the Bible, every grave marker says amen to that verse.

The book of Genesis draws its name from the Latin word meaning *beginning*. Creation begins in this book. Life begins in this book; The universe and our world begins in this book; and sin begins in this book. There's a sense in which you could say that all the problems we face in this world can trace their beginning to Genesis 3. I wonder how many of you had problems this past week? Maybe you had personal problems or family problems. We certainly see the beginning of the kind of problem that would become commonplace throughout history which is the problem of a husband with his wife. *And the man said, The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat* (v. 12). Here is the beginning of the "blame your wife" phenomenon. All of your failed aspirations are her fault so we reason as men.

Maybe, by the grace of God, you faced a minimal amount of problems this past week. Maybe your week was problem free. Even in such a case you're undoubtedly aware that you're surrounded by problems in others. You've heard of the problems of others. Isn't this the number one topic is group discussions? Perhaps you've read about problems on the local level or the national or international level. It does seem like tensions are heating up with North Korea these days.

With regard to all of these many kinds of problems whether they be found on a personal level, a family level, whether they be found in the church or the denomination or whether they escalate to a national or an international level, the chapter we have just read from the book of Genesis provides us with the account of where all your problems originated. Today I want to focus on the picture that is given to us in v. 24. Perhaps this particular verse more than any other magnifies the tragedy of the chapter when we read *So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.*

We take this scene to be a literal one. There really were Cherubim guarding the entrance to the tree of life. There really was a flaming sword between the Cherubim. Some commentators take this flaming sword as being in the hand of God himself so that we're given a picture in this scene of God dwelling between the Cherubim. What a contrast to the mercy seat where God also dwells between the Cherubim. The scene in Gen. 3 is not a scene of mercy although, as we'll see in our study there is even in this scene of prohibition to the tree of life a manifestation of mercy.

The point I want to make is that while this is a literal scene it may also be taken as a sacramental scene. A sacrament, you see, is a sign with symbolic significance and there is certainly symbolic significance to this scene. There is the symbol of life to be found in the tree of life. There is the symbol of justice to be found in the flaming sword. This scene becomes a perfect symbol of paradise lost, the blessing of God lost, communion with God lost.

We also read this morning of another sacramental scene in Mt. 26. The Lord's supper is a sacrament in which the elements are signs. There's a symbolic significance to the elements of this table. The bread symbolizes the broken body and thus the true humanity of Christ. The cup symbolizes his blood which was shed for us. So between the symbolic meaning of Gen. 3:24 and the symbolic meaning of the sacramental elements of Mt. 26 you could say that we're facing two sacramental scenes.

What I want to do this morning is to simply compare and contrast these two sacramental scenes. I would entitle this message: The Flaming Sword and the Lord's Table.

Consider with me first of all that between these two scenes:

I. There is a Comparison and Contrast that Pertains to Life

I said just a moment ago that the tree of life symbolizes life. In Gen. 2:7 we read *And the LORD God formed man [of] the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.*

This breathing of life into the nostrils of man is what elevated man above the creatures. He was given the gift of a conscious vitality. He could think and speak and move freely. He had strength and energy and the capacity to enjoy God and to enjoy God's creation. And even though spiritual life was forfeited by the fall of man, man, as a sinner, still has

this vital source of self consciousness within him which leads him to recognize that life is the most precious thing he possesses.

There is a lot of truth to the devil's general statement about life that he makes to God when he says: *Skin for skin, yea, all that a man hath will he give for his life* (Job 2:4). Christ himself said in Mt. 16:26 *For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?* In this statement the word *soul* is very often translated by the word *life* so that other English versions translate the verse: *For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life?* (ESV).

The value of life is certainly depicted by the tree of life in our text. Matthew Henry says with regard to this tree 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 this state of innocency and obedience. Of this he might eat and live.*

This tree of life was not a prohibited tree; it was a tree that functioned like the other trees in that it provided the necessary fruit that sustained life but, as Matthew Henry notes, it was also a tree that functioned sacramentally by serving as a sign and seal to Adam's soul of the promise of everlasting life upon condition of perfect obedience to God.

Where life is concerned, then, this sacramental tree has something in common with our communion elements. Our time of communion can be described as a time of life. This spiritual feast pertains to our spiritual lives. Christ was speaking spiritually when he said in Jn. 6:53-55 *Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. 54 Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. 55 For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed.*

Christ is the source of our lives. He's the One who bestows life; He's the One who gives meaning to life; As he himself said in Jn. 14:6 *I am the way, the truth, and the life.* He's the only One that can make life satisfying and fulfilling and in our time of communion, at the remembrance of his sacrificial love we draw the strength and assurance that we need for life, for life that is focused on glorifying and enjoying him.

It's interesting that in the book of Revelation Christ makes reference to the tree of life. To the church at Ephesus we read in Re 2:7 *He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.* It would seem, then wouldn't it, that Christ has done what Adam failed to do. Christ has won this tree. Eternal life is given by Christ.

So there are a few comparisons then between our sacramental scenes. The flaming sword and the Lord's table both pertain to life. But let's note some of the contrasts.

One notable contrast might be drawn between what could be called two trees. The tree of life was a beautiful tree. It's described in Gen. 3:6 as good for food and pleasant to the

eyes and desirable to make one wise. By way of contrast the communion elements point us to a sight that is repugnant to the flesh but becomes beautiful to spiritual sight when its meaning is understood and believed. We're pointed to a man, the God-man hanging on a tree. His body is broken so that his bones are out of joint. His face has been beaten making him beyond recognition. His back has been whipped and nails have been driven into his hands and feet and he bears the ugly and reproachful appearance of common criminals that were sentenced to death and executed. To the natural man the sight is repugnant. But to those that know him and believe in him that sight is wonderful. We know he went to that tree voluntarily. We know that at any time he could have summoned the angels of heaven to deliver him. We know that he went to that tree for us and that his being nailed to that tree is the manifestation of his love and his Father's love to unworthy sinners.

So there's the contrast between two trees. Another notable contrast is found in the way that the tree of life is prohibited but the way of the cross is open. Cherubim and a flaming sword bar man from the tree of life in Gen. 3. Life has been forfeited through disobedience to God and neither Adam or his descendents have access to the tree of life. What was originally intended to be a sign and seal of life became a sign and seal of death instead.

I wonder how long that tree of life was visible to passers-by? Presumably the Cherubim and the flaming sword would have remained in view of men until the time of the flood. This would have meant that there would have remained in the world for a number of generations a very vivid and telling testimony that life had been lost and that man had forfeited the very life that had been given to him by God and that he was completely helpless and hopeless to do anything about it.

Do you suppose men and women could have come in range of the sight of that flaming sword and knowing that it barred their way to the tree of life they would have sighed and cried? Perhaps they marveled at the entrance of sin into this world the same way we marvel at it with wonder and astonishment.

The Lord's table, on the other hand, stands in a very notable contrast. We are not barred from this sacrament, we're invited to it. *Take, eat* Christ says by way of invitation *this is my body which is broken for you. This do in remembrance of me.* There's an irony to this contrast in that the tree of life found men in original righteousness but left them in an estate of sin and misery and death. The Lord's table, on the other hand, finds us as vile and guilty sinners but takes us to an estate of salvation and everlasting life by virtue of what the elements represent.

So we find comparisons and contrasts in these two sacramental scenes that pertain to the issue of life. Would you consider next and finally that:

II. There are Comparisons and Contrasts that Pertain to Judgment

The tragedy of Genesis 3 is that the scene is a scene of judgment. Man is barred from the tree of life in an act of judgment. Man is driven out of the garden of Eden in an act of

judgment. Fellowship with God is broken as part of that judgment and man would return to the dust from where he came in that judgment.

You could say that the flaming sword became emblematic of God's justice. God's justice demanded the death of man and that sword would have had the power and authority based on justice to keep man from the tree of life. Such a scene ought to serve to convince each child of God that when it comes to God's faithfulness he is faithful to his word as his word pertains to salvation and his word pertains to judgment. I think it's worth noting, however, that the scene in Genesis 3 is not a scene of judgment unmingled from mercy. While the emphasis is on judgment there is great mercy in this scene as well.

Do you not find it interesting to note that while the tree of life is guarded by the Cherubim and the flaming sword, the tree of life is not plucked up and cast away. God does not treat this tree the way Christ would one day treat a fruitless tree by pronouncing a curse upon it so that it never bring forth fruit again. So long as there remained a tree of life there also remained hope that God would make a way for that tree to be accessed again.

But if that tree was to be accessed again it would take nothing short of Divine wisdom and Divine grace. And if man was to be spared and saved, his nature as a rebellious sinner would have to be changed. One author of the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia notes:

After guiltily partaking of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and the sinful tendency having thus been implanted in their natures, the man and woman are driven forth from the Garden lest they should eat of the tree of life and live forever. The idea seems to be that, if they should eat of it and become immortalized in their sinful condition, it would be an unspeakable calamity to them and their posterity. For sinful beings to live forever upon earth would be inconceivably disastrous, for the redemption and development of the race would be an impossibility in that condition. Earth would soon have been a hell with sin propagating itself forever. To prevent such a possibility they were driven forth, cherubim were placed at the entrance of the Garden, the flame of a sword revolving every way kept the way of the tree of life, and this prevented the possibility of man possessing a physical immortality.

Think about it for a moment. As Christians we possess new natures that coexist with our old natures. Even with a new nature and even with the help of the Holy Spirit you still find yourself in the struggle described in Rom. 7 doing the things you wouldn't do and not doing the things you would do. Would you really want to continue forever in that kind of struggle? We live in a world that is still dominated by sin. Would you really want that kind of world to continue? Is it any wonder that we've seen Paul's first choice in our studies of Philippians which was to depart and be with Christ which is far better.

So our scene in Genesis 3 is truly a judgment scene but it's also a testimony that in his wrath God has remembered mercy. He's given the promise of a Savior to come in v. 15 and he's clothed Adam and Eve with coats of skin in v. 21 which would foretell a covering of righteousness to come on the grounds of a sacrifice made.

Our communion time also bears testimony to a judgment. *The Son of man goeth as it is written of him* Christ says to his disciples, right before instituting the Lord's supper. And indeed he would go forward to judgment. Soon he would be before a judgment bar that would find him guilty of blasphemy and not long after he would, through the manipulation of an angry mob, be sentenced to death at the judgment bar of Pilate.

But beyond the mock trial and travesty of justice that would be carried out by sinful men, Christ would undergo the judgment of his Father in strict accord with the standards of heaven's justice.

And here it is that we are able to bring both of our sacramental scenes together in order to see the fuller picture of salvation. Think again of that flaming sword that bars man from the tree of life. No man could extinguish that sword. No army could overpower that sword. Indeed not the combined armies of the kings of the earth could penetrate the guard that God placed on the East of Eden.

But picture Christ himself now approaching that flaming sword. He approaches it as a man, as the God-man, and as our mediator, the second Adam he's referred to twice in Paul's epistles. Picture him deliberating placing himself in the reach of that revolving flaming sword. He's willing to contend with that sword. He's willing to satisfy the demands of that sword. He's willing to apply himself to the extinguishing of that sword.

There's scriptural warrant for such a picture. Listen to the words of Zec 13:7 *Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man [that is] my fellow, saith the LORD of hosts: smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered: and I will turn mine hand upon the little ones.*

And so the sword of God's justice was awakened against God's only begotten Son and the shepherd was smitten and propitiation was made and justice was satisfied, satisfied so completely that the flaming sword was extinguished. Picture that flaming sword twisting and turning and barring the way to the tree of life and then picture the flame of that sword going out and the sword itself either dropping to the ground or being sheathed.

We know this to be the case because Paul could, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, write in Rom. 8:1 *There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus.* And so both of our sacramental scenes make reference to judgment but the contrast between the scenes is great.

In the garden of Eden there is judgment against man which bars him from the tree of life. In the Lord's supper there is the remembrance of judgment against our Savior so that the way to life is opened and accessible. In the first scene there is a flaming sword; in the second scene there is an extinguished sword.

This is good news to those that are yet in their sins. Do you know that the way to life is opened to you? Do you know that even though you could never have gained access to life by anything you've done you now have access to life through what Christ has done? To

you who believe in him you have so much for which to be grateful. Your life, the gift of life does not have to be lost. You have gained life. You have gained eternal life.

Hear the word that Christ himself spoke in Jn. 11:26 where he says: *And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?* If you believe then confess that belief before God and Christ and those around you today as you partake of these communion elements. May your partaking of these elements by faith renew and refresh your lives and bring them into sharper focus as to their chief end which is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.