

Scripture Reading: Genesis 2:

“4 This is the history of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that Jehovah God made the earth and the heavens, 5 before any plant of the field was in the earth and before any herb of the field had grown. For Jehovah God had not caused it to rain on the earth, and there was no man to till the ground; 6 but a mist went up from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground. 7 And Jehovah God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. 8 Jehovah God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there He put the man whom He had formed. 9 And out of the ground Jehovah God made every tree grow that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. 10 Now a river went out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it parted and became four riverheads. 11 The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one which skirts the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. 12 And the gold of that land is good. Bdelium and the onyx stone are there. 13 The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one which goes around the whole land of Cush. 14 The name of the third river is Hiddekel; it is the one which goes toward the east of Assyria. The fourth river is the Euphrates. 15 Then Jehovah God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it. 16 And Jehovah God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; 17 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."”

"The Trees of the Garden"

We have been considering the summary of God’s Creation given to us in the second chapter of the Book of Beginnings with the focus on the creation of man & woman.

- This morning begins our transition to chapter three where we learn about the fall of man.

As I did when we first considered the summary given in verse four which we just read I have included in the order of worship some study tools. The Hebrew language is a very rich and pictorial language that is often very hard to translate into English, like the plural use of Elohim or God in the first chapter.

The Hebrew writers also used many literary styles that we don’t often see in English. Most of us know, or should know, the power of language styles from the use of poetry in English where things can be said in ways that simply do not come across with simple prose. Many of us have experienced the fact that you can have great actors and a big special effects budget and still have a very poor movie if the script or plot are weak.

We have stressed the historical nature of the Book of Beginnings in many of these early sermons but if we are going to learn all that God desires to teach us we must remember that He is telling His story and that story includes, and is focused on, the fall and redemption of mankind. As the Book of Beginnings continues to give us the early history we see more and more about how it all fits together.

Nate Wilson has said, you can summarize this story of God’s salvation as ‘Boy gets the girl and kills the dragon.’ We can see that more clearly when we have read the whole story, but here we are first learning about the girl and the dragon.

- The girl is mankind, created male & female in the image of God, who will grow up into the glorious Bride of Jesus who crushes the head of the dragon.

The dragon is Satan the great deceiver and enemy of God who we will meet next week in Chapter three.

- We know that the Gospel is the Good News that comes to man because he is lost in his sin and now here as we move into chapter three we learn about how he got into this mess.

Again we will be faced with the question of whether WE believe that God is telling us real history as the one who was there as He tells the story!

- If we deny the real history God reveals here, then just how do we later make sense of why Jesus needed to come & save His people from their sin?

So we are still in the Garden before the fall and God tells us about two particular trees. Once again it is difficult for us to picture what is presented in our fallen state, but as with the gardens and rivers and treasures and even marriage we see that the rest of the Scriptures give us great insight into these trees.

So we are going to consider the nature these trees, we are going to talk a bit about choices, or the subject of free-will that everyone seems to enjoy wrestling with & of course the implications of God's story for us today. There is some discussion among the commentators about God referring to two types of trees, but I think that plain reading of the text would have us see two single trees near the center of the Garden where man has been placed. Both fruit-bearing trees.

- As their names imply one tree gives life and the other knowledge.

We see at the end of chapter three that both trees are effectual in their work: Genesis 3:22 "22 Then Jehovah God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil. And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever"-- 23 therefore Jehovah God sent him out of the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken. 24 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."

- Man has partaken of the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and fallen into sin and we see no more of this tree.

God then prevents man from partaking of the tree of life in his fallen state lest he live that way eternally, but we see the great tree of life return in the Revelation given to John...

22:1 "And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. 2 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."

- There is little controversy as to what the tree of life was intended to impart!
- There is a great deal of discussion as to just what the other tree imparted!

Some think it had something to do with sexual sin which is nowhere found in the text or anywhere else.

Others argue that the tree was merely a tool to test man's obedience:

- It was this, but it did more than just act like a door that announces with a sign what lies beyond.

Some argue it would teach man what is right and wrong, but God has already given commands and responsibilities to man and he was expected to obey.

The simplest explanation is to have the tree impart what its name implies...

- Wisdom: The ability to know good and evil.

The natural follow-up question is: Then why did God prohibit them from eating the fruit of this tree?

- Wisdom is something God wants us to strive after which is the whole point of the Book of Proverbs!

Believing this simple answer is the right answer, some have then argued there would have come a time when Adam & Eve would have been brought to this tree: When they were ready for such knowledge.

I think there are two very good reasons why this cannot be the case:

First and foremost is the clear instructions that God gave regarding this tree: “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; 17 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.” The hard truth is that the text does not say ‘until you are ready.’

- **And I think there is another good reason as well if we understand the wisdom represented by the tree here in the Garden as the fullness of God’s Wisdom which man cannot attain.**

Yes, we are to learn wisdom and to grow in our maturity, which begins with the proper fear of God. Not a frightened fear but the awe of thinking about who God really is. This was the lesson that Job, a righteous man, who was in the end blessed by God, had to learn in the midst of his trials. Listen to his first response to God as Jehovah spoke to him from the whirlwind:

“Moreover Jehovah answered Job, and said: 2 "Shall the one who contends with the Almighty correct Him? He who rebukes God, let him answer it." 3 Then Job answered Jehovah and said: 4 "Behold, I am vile; What shall I answer You? I lay my hand over my mouth. 5 Once I have spoken, but I will not answer; Yes, twice, but I will proceed no further."

We are also reminded of this principle in the Book of Proverbs, the very book where we are encouraged to be wise! In Proverbs 30, Agur says we may not have knowledge of the Holy One, meaning the fullness of God’s knowledge. These passage make it clear that we cannot know all of God’s wisdom:

Gordon Wenham is not my favorite when it comes to commentators on this Book, but I think he gets it very right on this point when he says, “There is a wisdom that is God’s sole preserve, which man should not aspire to attain, since a full understanding of God, the universe, and man’s place in it is ultimately beyond human comprehension. To pursue it without reference to revelation is to assert human autonomy, and to neglect the fear of the Lord which is the beginning of knowledge.” *[If man is to know anything, then God must speak!]*

So we have these two trees in the midst of the garden and God gives man a very simple and sobering command. Genesis 2:16 “And Jehovah God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; 17 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."

As you would suspect there is also a great deal of discussion about just how Adam & Eve would die if they disobeyed God’s simple command. We know they did not die physically on the day they ate the fruit because Adam went on to live over nine hundred years.

- **But we should remember that Jesus said that physical death was not what we should fear, but rather we should fear Him who can punish both body and soul in the Lake of Fire forever!**

As we shall see at length in chapter three this disobedience had far reaching effects on man, on woman and on all of creation.

- **God’s story is how all of these things are being put right in Jesus!**

We will consider all of this in the coming weeks, but this morning I want to come back here before the fall and focus on the choice that Adam was given...

- **Was it a real choice?**
- **Did it have real consequences?**

We will certainly learn that the second is true, but what about the first?

This brings up the whole discussion of free will which I think it is important for us to spend a few moments on since many, many people struggle with it today! I would argue that both Christians and non-Christians say that it is very important for man to be free:

- **You will hear people saying something like, ‘if man is not free, then he is just a robot!’**
- **This is a BIG problem for modern man!**

Of course, even modern man because he is made in the image of God fights against the determinism of materialism: But that is sadly the only conclusion their world view can reach. Thus the world must try to come to grips with the fact that man is simply not in control of everything. I have often quoted Bertrand Russell who was a very honest humanist who powerfully describes man’s great despair...

- **Concluding that such despair is the only foundation for hope!**

But I may have a new favorite in Jerry Coyne who wrote an article awhile back for USA Today entitled, “Why You Don’t Have Free Will.” He did an outstanding job of showing that without God [he did not say that part, but it is implied in his materialism] we are all completely controlled by the forces of physics and chemistry. What we think are free choices, like I think I will wear blue today, are really predetermined by chemical reactions in our brains before we actually make that decision.

In the end he concludes that: “there is not much downside to abandoning the notion of free will.... And there are two upsides. The first is realizing the great wonder and mystery of our evolved brains & contemplating the notion that things like consciousness, free choice, and even the idea of ‘me’ are but convincing illusions fashioned by natural selection. Further, by losing free will we gain empathy, for we realize that in the end all of us, whether Bernie Madoffs or Nelson Mandalas, are victims of circumstance – of the genes we were bequeathed and the environment we encounter. With that under our belts, we can go about building a kinder world.”

- **Mr. Coyne is a chilling example of the lostness of the world in our generation that Jesus has put us in to be the beautiful feet that come sharing the Good News.**

But sadly many in the Church also struggle with thinking people must be robots IF God has sovereign control over all of His Creation including our choices!

- **So why do some Christians struggle with free will and do we really have a better answer?**

I will give you Exodus chapter 28 as some homework for next week when we consider the fall of Satan, but it is tightly related to the fall of man. Adam did have a real choice to make in the garden. He could obey God and live forever in eternal bliss or he could disobey God and strive to be a god on his own and fall into sin. Ah but, a sharp materialist might ask at this point, don’t you believe and teach that God in complete control of everything that happens in His Creation.

- **Well yes in fact He is!**
- **So, does this mean that Adam did not really have a choice?**
- **Only if your god is too small to be able to sovereignly control free choice along with everything else!**

You see as Christians who take the Bible seriously, we don’t see just mindless forces of physics behind the choice Adam is going to make, we see the eternal loving God who has planned out all that is going to happen in His Creation, just as an author does with his or her novel.

- **So just how is this different from being just robots, some will still ask?**

Let’s see if the illustration of a great novelist can help us see how this works: In a great book I think we would agree that we do get caught up with the characters that are created...

- **What will Mr. Darcy do next???**

On the other hand, a poor author has very predictable characters and you get bored very quickly.

So take that concept of authorship to about the trillionth power and we get just a glimpse of how God goes about telling His story here in the creation.

- **Yes, we are characters in His story and He knows where the end is going and the part that each and every one of us is to play but we are by no means robots.**

I will give you two examples from the Scriptures that clearly illustrate a bit of how this all works...

We should all know and will soon study the life of Joseph which included a lot of choices, like his brothers selling him into slavery. Here is what he tells them in the end... Genesis 50:24 “you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.”

- **The brothers acted wickedly, but God’s control of their wickedness was meant for good & brought much good.**

On a grander scale you have the wicked actions of men putting Jesus to death on the cross: Peter tells the Jews in Acts 2:23: “Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death.”

And again in Acts 4 Peter prays in verse 27: “For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together 28 to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done.” All the Jewish & Gentile leaders with the support of both peoples conspired to commit the most wicked act in history, which God purposed to be the most loving act of history!

Once we begin to grasp the concept of how real choice works in God’s foreordained Creation we can also understand different levels of ability. Adam was completely free to choose either tree: He could to good or evil.

- **He was warned that the consequences were significant and he chose to ignore that warning.**

It has always been interesting to me that most of those who are worrying themselves about the significance of man’s choice, both inside and outside the church will usually be the same people who are greatly offended by the fact that Adam’s significant choice not only changed him, but all of mankind.

- **That is not fair they will cry!**
- **Just what is not fair about God keeping His promise to Adam: “In the day you eat you will surely die...”**

And that language could not been stronger: literally ‘dying you shall die!’ or Thou shalt die the death!

So Adam’s choice changes things as we shall see in the coming weeks but we must remember that Jesus came to put things right. Adam’s decision greatly impacted man’s ability to make decisions: As children of Adam we can only chose sin and death unless God intervenes.

- **This is why Jesus had to come and save His people from their sins. With God’s gift of faith we can once again make good choices.**

For those of us who have been given the gift of faith, we have made the right chose by accepting Jesus as our Savior. We can look forward to the day where we do partake of the Tree of Life and never again have the ability to sin. That is hard for us to ponder, but again it is the fulfilment pictured here in the Book of Beginnings where Adam could have taken fruit from the right tree and lived forever in righteousness.

In closing this morning I want to challenge us as those who love Jesus with the fact that we have one more type of choice to consider:

- **Will we obey Jesus.**
- **Another way that Nate Wilson would encourage us to think about that question is, will we like our character in God's story!**

The choice that God gave Adam was not complicated: Don't eat of this one tree. God gives us simple commands as well in most cases.

As we move into chapter three we will see how badly Adam failed this simple test: Now that Jesus has given us new hearts how are we doing when it comes to listening to God and making good choices?

When God tells us to give thanks in everything, what should we do?

When God tells us to honor our mother and father, what should we do?

When God tells us to forgive others as Christ Jesus has forgiven us, what should we do?

It is so easy to see the gross sins: Abortion, divorce, fornication, or something like bank robbery.

- **What is much harder to see are the little things that led someone down that path.**

Yes, as Christians our choices are real and significant and often the most important choices are the simplest choices.

As we move along in ordinary time in the Church calendar this year, may we learn to make better choices in our lives looking to God's Word as we are encouraged to do in Psalm 19:8

“The statutes of Jehovah are right, rejoicing the heart; The commandment of Jehovah is pure, enlightening the eyes; 9 The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; The judgments of Jehovah are true and righteous altogether. 10 More to be desired are they than gold, Yea, than much fine gold; Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb. 11 Moreover by them Your servant is warned, And in keeping them there is great reward.

Communion Meditation: Psalm 1

“Blessed is the man Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, Nor stands in the path of sinners, Nor sits in the seat of the scornful; 2 But his delight is in the law of Jehovah, And in His law he meditates day and night. 3 He shall be like a tree Planted by the rivers of water, That brings forth its fruit in its season, Whose leaf also shall not wither; And whatever he does shall prosper. 4 The ungodly are not so, But are like the chaff which the wind drives away. 5 Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, Nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous. 6 For Jehovah knows the way of the righteous, But the way of the ungodly shall perish.”