

THE TREE OF LIFE

When we consider the condition of Creation before the Fall, we find that Adam was formed in a “very good” state, and was therefore free from any form of defilement or decay. We see that he was not created a dying creature, but as the Apostle declared, death entered into the world subsequent to, and as a consequence of transgression (Rom 6:12).

But there are those who feel that Adam was created mortal and they teach that it was necessary for Adam to eat of the Tree of Life in order to arrest the decaying process which was inherently within him. As the Divine command was “of every tree thou mayest freely eat” (Gen 2:16), and as “every”, here must include the Tree of Life, so it is said, they must have eaten of this also. Yet, as we shall show, this is no more than supposition, as nowhere in Scripture is the Tree of Life spoken of in this way.

Although it does not in itself prove our case, it should be pointed out that this is not a new idea by any means, it has been around for many years, and is a theory which Christadelphians have long resisted. In 1896, Bro Roberts spoke of it, calling it:

“a plausible theory to the effect that we do not inherit death from Adam by any physical law, but merely by denial of access to the tree of life; that the sentence of death took no effect on Adam’s body, and therefore not in ours: that, in fact, we are the “very good” and uncursed Adamic nature ... that our nature is not an unclean and sinful nature: that there is no such thing as sin in the flesh ... it is the old doctrine of Renunciationism in a new form. It is worse than Renunciationism ... while apparently an innocuous and harmless theory, it fatally corrupts and upsets and perverts the truth at its very threshold ...” (The Christadelphian, July 1896).

These are strong words, even for Bro Roberts’ day! But when we carefully consider the logic of his reasoning, these words are fully justified. For, if Adam was created subject to decay already, then the wages of sin would not be death (Rom 6:23), but merely the exclusion from a particular life-sustaining fruit. This would then mean that the nature of man is not in itself under condemnation, as the Scriptures teach, but is still in the “very good” state in which it was first formed. And this would seriously undermine our understanding of how we are affected by Adam’s sin, for rather than inheriting a defiled, condemned nature, as Christadelphians have always believed (and as the Bible teaches), the only way in which we can be under condemnation is in some “legal” sense; because of Adam’s sin, we can’t eat from the tree! And this would totally nullify our understanding of the Sacrifice of Christ, for he would not need to overcome the diabolos in our sinful nature (Heb 2:14), and so overcome death itself, to stand before God as our representative (Heb 9:24). Rather, as our nature itself would not be the problem, he must have died as some kind of substitute, to suffer our punishment so that we might walk free. And these beliefs are held in great sincerity - by some of the churches around us. So then, although it may seem to be an “innocuous” suggestion, as Bro. Roberts wrote, it has serious ramifications which negates the whole of Scripture teaching concerning the Atonement.

What then, do the Scriptures teach? It is true that the Lord gave permission for Adam to eat “of every tree of the garden”, but nowhere in Scripture are we told Adam

actually ate from the Tree of Life. At best, this can be no more than an inference. Permission was given, but nowhere are we told that Adam actually did eat from every single tree which existed in the garden. And in any case, the expression “of every tree”, does not mean any tree without exception - it did not include the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The Lord said “Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil thou shalt not eat of it ...” (Gen 2:16,17). When Adam was given permission to eat “of every tree”, as we shall see, this meant every tree which was placed in the garden for food, not every tree which existed - the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was not formed for food, and was not to be so used.

But the Tree of Life was not formed for Adam to feed upon either! This is clear from Gen 2:9, where a distinction is made between trees for food, and those other two unique trees: “And out of the ground made Yahweh Elohim to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil”. The Lord made trees for food, and “the Tree of Life also”, that is, in addition to, and distinct from the other trees. Thus, God allowed Adam to eat of any food-bearing tree, but this did not include the Tree of Life, or the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, which were in different categories of their own.

Again, we read of the Tree of Life in Gen 3:22, following the transgression of our first parents, and the subsequent covering of their nakedness: “And Yahweh Elohim said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: Therefore Yahweh Elohim sent him forth from the Garden of Eden ...”. Here, the Tree is spoken of as giving everlasting life, and clearly if the Tree of Life gave immortality, then Adam couldn’t have eaten from it, or else he would still be alive! And in addition to this, the phrase “lest he ... take also of the tree of life” is used, which would also imply that he hadn’t previously eaten of the tree.

But against this, those who press the point tell us that although the Hebrew word for “also” is usually translated in this way, it can also mean “again”, which would suggest that Adam had eaten of the tree, and that he was being prevented from doing so again. And as to the Tree of life giving everlasting life, they tell us that the Hebrew word translated “ever”, (as in “live for ever”), does not in itself contain the idea of eternity, (although it can be used in this sense), but it literally means a time of unspecified duration, and can also be used for short time periods. So, the Tree had previously been eaten, we are told, the eating of which gave them life for a limited period, which meant they had to keep eating of it at intervals to prevent death. Thus, the sentence against Adam needed only to be exclusion from this type of food, and he would naturally die.

But again, there are clear errors in this reasoning. Firstly, it is recognised that the AV rendering of these words is in accordance with the meaning that they can carry. And secondly, it is also recognised that the AV rendering is the usual way these words are translated - thus the case is far from proved. But in addition to this, there is a third point - surely there is something wrong with building a doctrinal structure, the logical outcome of which undermines fundamental points of our faith, upon a foundation which is no stronger than the possible meaning of two Hebrew words?

As a body, we have long recognised that the correct way of understanding Bible teaching, and learning doctrines, is by “comparing Scripture with Scripture”. So then, to learn about the Tree of Life, we need to consider what other parts of Scripture tell us.

A REWARD FOR FAITHFULNESS

In the Apocalypse, the Tree of Life is used to represent the reward given to the faithful: “to him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God” (Rev 2:7). Here, being permitted to eat of the Tree of Life is used as a representation of the reward given to those who have “overcome” a period of trial. This clearly contrasts with the expulsion from the Edenic paradise of those who failed to overcome, in order to prevent them from partaking of the life-giving Tree, and also suggests to us that had Adam overcome, he also would be permitted to eat from the Tree, as a reward for his faithfulness.

We read of this antitypical tree again in Rev 22:14: “Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life ... “. Similarly, we have another contrast with those who did not obey God’s commandment; they did not have a right to the tree of life, and were driven from it’s presence.

So then, from these two passages, we learn that as a symbol in the Apocalypse, the eating of the Tree of Life speaks of a reward given to those who endure and overcome a period of trial, who obey the commandments of God. Thus, it speaks of the bestowal of Immortality by the Lord Jesus Christ upon his brethren. We would suggest that if in Eden, the Tree was not present for this purpose, it would not be an appropriate symbol in the Apocalypse.

When we consider the literal Tree in Eden, every indication suggests that it’s existence was ready for the rewarding of man’s faithfulness (had he obeyed the Divine Command), with the bestowal of Immortality. Indeed, it’s very name, (the “Tree of Lives”, as it could be better rendered) is suggestive of this, it would give life to all those who would partake of it. In this, it stands as a great contrast to the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, which would cause death to those who transgressed the command in partaking of it. How appropriate for there to be a Tree which would give life consequent to obedience, and a Tree which would be the cause of death to those who transgressed.

This appears to be the reasoning of Bro. Thomas, for speaking of the Tree of Life in Elpis Israel, he wrote: “Its fruit, however, was of a quality entirely opposite to that of which they had eaten. Both trees bore good fruit; but that of the Tree of Life had the quality of perpetuating the living existence of the eater for ever ... It is probable that, had he (i.e. Adam) been obedient to the law of the Tree of Knowledge, he would have been permitted to eat of the Tree of life, after he had fulfilled his destiny as an animal man; and, instead of dying away into dust, have been “changed in the twinkling of an eye” (E.I. p70).

What this means, is that Adam and Eve had immortality to look forward to, had they remained obedient. But following the Fall, access to the Tree was barred, and the

sinful pair were thrust out from it's presence. We can only begin to imagine how Adam and Eve must have felt outside of the Paradise in Eden, knowing they were to lead a life of travail and suffering, as dying they would surely die. At one time, they were faced with the prospect of being like the Elohim in nature - if they had obeyed, but now all was vanity as they were denied access to the Tree of Life, and condemned to return to the ground from whence they came.

But this hope was only deferred, not removed altogether! The Lord, in His Kindness and Mercy had ordained a "Way" back to the Tree, which was preserved by the Cherubim, and Flaming Sword, placed at the entrance to the garden (Gen 3:24). And, even before their expulsion from Eden, both Adam and Eve were taught the need for Sacrifice in order to provide a covering (atonement) for sin, a practice they were to continue at the entrance to the Way, as we learn from the opening verses of Gen 4.

This situation is aptly described in Proverbs thus: "Hope deferred maketh the heart sick: but when the desire cometh, it is a tree of life" (Prov 13:12). Despite the sickness of heart Adam would experience because of the condemnation of death, he nevertheless had a hope of life. As He stood at the entrance to the Garden (which was also the place where "the Way of the Tree of Life" began), to offer his Sacrifice, it is quite possible that he would be able to look beyond the sword of fire, wielded by the Cherubim of Glory, along "the Way", to the Tree in the distance, yielding it's life-giving fruits. Indeed, the role of the Cherubim to "keep", or "preserve" the way (Gen 3:24) would suggest this, for the record states that it wasn't simply the entrance to the way, but the way itself, which was preserved. The features of the Cherubim would teach him what he must become, being a depiction of the glorified Body of Christ (Ezek 1). And the fiery sword, being the means by which the Way was preserved would teach that he, as all who seek "glory and honour and immortality" (Rom 2:7) have the duty to preserve the Way of God (Ps 119:33-35, cont Gen 6:12) by the effective use of the Sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God (Eph 6:17), cutting down the high things which exalt themselves against the knowledge of the Truth (2Cor 10:5). And being a Fiery sword, as well as speaking of the bright flame of the Word, it would also teach him that keeping the true Way is often accompanied with a fiery trial (1Pet 4:12) of affliction.

And so as Adam gazed past these things, along the "Way" to the Tree which was "afar off" (Cp Heb 11:13), in the midst of the Garden, he would be able to look beyond his sentence of death, and all that it entailed, past the depiction of what he must do to be saved, to the glory which lay ahead. And this place itself, being a place of Sacrifice, would teach that the means to access the things that this tree offered would ultimately be provided by the One who had the power to overcome, through death, even the Lord Jesus Christ.

THE TREE OF LIFE ELSEWHERE IN SCRIPTURE

The fruits of the work of Christ, is that a means is provided for those who would seek to "overcome" to access the antitypical Tree of life. Thus, we read in Prov 11:30 "The fruit of the righteous (or, Righteous One) is a tree of life and he that winneth souls is wise". The Lord Jesus is the One who is righteous and wise, and who is able to win (or "take", as the word means), souls from the bondage of death, that they may be redeemed by his Sacrifice. Having truly "overcome", he is himself the Antitypical

Tree of which believers must partake in order to be ultimately glorified in immortality. As he said, “he that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life”, and again, in a clear allusion to Gen 3:22, “he that eateth this bread shall live for ever” (Jno 6:54,58).

Here, we need to appreciate that the Lord is speaking as the Word made flesh (Jno 1:14). To partake of the True bread of life, which is the Lord Jesus as the antitypical Manna, is to consume the spiritual nourishment which comes from him, and this is the Word which he spoke. As it is written “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God” (Mat 4:4). The Words which proceed from God, then as spoken through His Son, and others constitute this Spiritual bread, which we must be partakers of. And the Lord Jesus, being the Word made flesh is an embodiment of that Word, the fulfilment of the things testified in the Oracles of God concerning him. Thus, to feed upon the word which testifies of the Saviour, is to feed upon the Saviour Himself. To feed upon this word, is to eat the flesh, and drink the blood of Christ (Jno 6:56), which will enable us to partake of the everlasting life he is able to impart, for to partake of him, is to partake of the Antitypical Tree of Life.

The Word of God, then, being the Word of life, those whose tongues are guided by, and influenced by it, themselves are able to impart words of life. As it is written: “a wholesome tongue is a Tree of Life” (Prov 15:4), words which have their fullest application to the Lord Jesus, whose words truly can give life to the hearers. But, this being so, it is not surprising for us to find the Tree of Life being spoken of in connection with the wisdom which comes from hearkening to these words. Thus, we read in Prov 3 of the wisdom of God, “her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to them that lay hold on her, and happy is every one that retaineth her” (Prov 3:17,18). Wisdom, then, is a Tree of Life to those who are able, and willing to grasp hold of her. Being a Tree of Life, her “ways”, and her “paths” are paths of the Tree of Life (cp Gen 3:24) along which a person must walk in order to find life, and peace, a peace which “passeth all understanding” (Phil 4:7).

The ways of wisdom collectively form the “narrow” way which the Lord informs us leads us to life, as opposed to the “broad” way which leads to destruction. “Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it” (Mat 7:14).

Just as Adam and Eve were faced with two trees, a tree of life, and a tree of death to those who partook of them, so their progeny are faced with two ways. And just as Adam was led by his wife to walk the path to the tree of death; this is the way the multitudes have chosen ever since; a way of wilful disobedience to the will of their Maker. The other way is a way, which must be sought for. Although it is partly obscured by the traditions of men, it is being kept open, by those who wield the sword of the spirit, in cutting away the thorns of apostasy. This way, although it must be diligently sought for in these days of corruptness and evil, is a narrow way. And being narrow, it is not designed to accommodate the ignorant multitudes who follow every whim and fancy of man, but those few who would walk it in faith, looking to the end, beyond the trial of this life, to the vision of the Tree of Life in the Kingdom, even the Lord Jesus himself (Heb 12:1,2).

A FURTHER POINT

But there is a further point to consider. The question naturally arises, “If the Tree of Life gave Immortality, why didn’t Adam and Eve simply go to that tree, and eat from it after the Fall?” Indeed, it would seem that they did have opportunity to go to the tree, as after they transgressed, and before their appearance before God, there was a time when they were hiding in the trees of the Garden. A possible explanation, is that there was no fruit on that tree for them to eat, for the Scriptures say nothing about it yielding fruit, prior to transgression. In Gen 1:14, we read that there were “seasons”, and we know that trees bear fruit according to their particular season. In “very good” conditions, trees would give fruit at their appointed time. And as the Tree of Life was designed for the reward of faithfulness, a season for it to bear fruit, surely would be when faith had been shown? And being a Type of Eternal Life in Christ, to those who are in need of healing from mortality, in the event of transgression taking place, another season for it to bear fruit would surely be after transgression, and after a way of reconciliation had been appointed? If there were fruit on this tree, we would suppose that there would be great urgency to drive man out from before it. Yet, in Genesis 3, we find that this was the last thing to be done, immediately following the appointment of Sacrifice.

So then, the presence of the Tree of Life in the Garden taught Adam and his wife that if they were faithful, their faithfulness would be rewarded. But even in the event of their transgression, there would be a Way of Life provided - on God’s terms, as it duly was. The expulsion of Adam and his wife from the Garden taught that the way of life can only be accessed by the means of God’s appointing. Thus, the tree stands as a powerful exhortation to us, not to devise fables which contradict the main thrust of Scripture, not to walk along the broad way that leads to destruction, but rather to understand and accept the way of Salvation, as appointed by the Lord Himself. We must seek wisdom, and then walk in its ways, which are the ways to the Tree of Life. And then, if we show ourselves to be faithful, if we “keep” God’s ways, if we seek to “overcome” sin, then by God’s grace, when the Lord returns, we might partake of the Antitypical Tree, and so be “partakers of the divine nature” even as the Lord has promised (2Pet 1:4).

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