



Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden by Johann Wenzel Peter. Between 1800 and 1829.

Whenever anyone turns their minds to reflect on our human condition, certain questions immediately present themselves: Where did we come from? Where are we going? What is the purpose of life? What went wrong? Why is there so much evil in the world? Is there a God, and if so, what is He like? Does He care about us? Many men of great genius have thought and written about these questions from ancient times until the present. I think we will find more light shed on these basic questions in the first three chapters of the Book of Genesis than we will in all the volumes of merely human writings. Of course, this is what we should expect from a work whose principal author is God Himself.

I would like to reflect on just one aspect of the story

we read in the second chapter of Genesis in order to consider what it reveals to us about the nature of God and the human condition. In the second chapter of

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Genesis, we find God planting a garden and placing Adam in the garden. God causes the growth of many trees in the garden, trees that are pleasant to the sight and good for food, but two trees in particular are pointed out: the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

God gives Adam leave to eat of all the trees of the garden with just one exception. God commands Adam not to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil lest he die. These two

trees naturally arouse our wonder. What is the meaning of these trees? What do they signify? What do they tell us about God, about His relationship to us, and what do they tell us about our human condition?

The fact that God placed the Tree of Life in the middle of the garden and gave Adam leave to eat of it freely whenever he should please, shows us that God wants to bestow immense blessings on man. God's intention for man is that he live life to the full; that he have available a constant source from which he can experience nourishment and growth in what brings true life. At the end of chapter three, we learn that this tree is a source of immortality, of unending life. The gift of the Tree of Life manifests a generous and loving Father who created man to enjoy a fullness of life forever.

But we can ask ourselves: What, more precisely, is this Tree of Life? What does it symbolize? There is only one other place in the Old Testament that makes explicit reference to the Tree of Life. In the Book of Proverbs, it is used as a metaphor for wisdom—wisdom that comes from God, especially as expressed in His law. It is also used as a symbol for righteous living. In this case, we can see the Tree of Life as a sign of man's ability to have familiar companionship and communion with God, as a source of wisdom, enlightenment, and strength. The Tree of Life was a source of life for man's mind, manifesting how God wanted him to live in such a way as to grow and flourish. As long as man ate from this tree, he would remain immortal.

Now, if God's gift of the Tree of Life reveals to us God's generosity towards Adam and His desire to see Adam flourish, we might wonder if this fundamental attitude of God toward man is actually called into question by the fact that God also placed in the midst of the garden the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. This act of God might cause us to harbor some suspicions about God's good intentions for man. If God really only had man's benefit in mind, why did He also put this source of temptation and this obvi-

ous occasion for man's downfall in the garden as well? In order to address this question we have to consider more closely what the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil signifies.

One possible explanation, sometimes offered, is that Adam and Eve were like innocent children who didn't know the difference between good and evil and by eating of the tree they were given the ability to distinguish good and evil. However, on reflection, that explanation does not work: if our first parents didn't already know the difference between good and evil they would have been incapable of sin, but it is obvi-

ous that they sinned. So one might suggest that the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil symbolizes the *experiential* knowledge of good and evil. With this understanding, Adam and Eve would have had previous knowledge of the difference between good and evil, but only after eating the forbidden fruit did they come to an *experiential* knowledge of evil. There are a couple of difficulties with this



explanation. This tree is not only the tree of *evil*, it is the tree of *good* and evil. Also, these first chapters of Genesis tell us that the knowledge here in question is a knowledge possessed especially by God Himself, but God can have no *experiential* knowledge of evil. The fact that this knowledge of good and evil is spoken of as a knowledge that is proper to God can give us the best clue as to how to understand this tree.

God knows good and evil by *determining* what is good and evil. God is the one who *sets the boundaries* between good and evil. So the best explanation of this tree is that it represents man's desire to be the final arbiter of good and evil; it signifies man's desire to be the one who can determine for himself what is good and what is evil without reference to God and the order He has established. In this way, we see that this tree is a symbol of a prideful rebellion against the or-

der of creation established by God.

With this understanding of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, we can see that if God was to give true freedom to man and if God wanted to grant man abundant life only through the use of that freedom, in a certain sense, there *had* to be a Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the midst of the garden. God could not turn over to man something that necessarily belongs to Him in His role of creator. Only God can establish what is truly good and truly evil. Yes, God wants to bestow immense blessings on man, but He also wants man to be somehow responsible for receiving those blessings and so He gives man freedom. But the attainment of those blessings has to be on God's terms, not on ours.

As we continue our reading of the Book of Genesis and come to the central figure of Abraham, we see in Abraham, and particularly in his greatest trial, a kind of reversal of the sin of Adam. God also promised to Abraham immense blessings and that he would be the source of blessing for the whole world. But in order to obtain these blessings, Abraham had to accept God's terms, and this meant he had to accept that God is the true source of good and evil. Abraham had to accept and submit to God's command to do something that surpassed his comprehension by sacrificing his own son. By obeying God and placing all his trust in Him, Abraham becomes, in a way, what Adam was meant to be—a source and channel of blessing for the whole human race: “because you have obeyed my voice, by your seed shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves”. It is on account of Abraham's obedience that we are given the people from whom the Savior of the world will come. Of course, the sacrifice of Isaac was a foreshadowing and a type of the great sacrifice of Christ. With Christ's great sacrifice, the Cross now becomes the Tree of Life for mankind.

Just as in the case of Adam and Eve, we also stand before these two trees. We also experience the temptation to derive our nourishment from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. We do this whenever we make ourselves and our own judgments the sole standard of what is good and evil; when we grasp after happiness by our own lights rather than by submitting our small minds to the wisdom of God and His commandments. We eat from this tree whenever we say, in effect, “if I were God, things would be different in the world; if I were God, things would be different in my life”. The

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Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is the path of rebellion and discontent.

But God has also placed before us the Tree of Life in the cross of Christ, and we are free to eat of the fruit of this tree whenever we wish. We can readily avail ourselves of all the fruits that grow on this tree, from the sacraments to the gifts of the Spirit. Our Lord also invites us to join Him in His work of redemption, by accepting our trials, hardships, and suffer-

ings and, in this way, we can become a source of blessings for others as well. I think we find the inner disposition of those who want to eat from the Tree of Life beautifully expressed in the second half of the Serenity Prayer:

*God, grant me[to live] one day at a time,
enjoying one moment at a time;
accepting hardship as a pathway to peace;
taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is,
not as I would have it;
trusting that You will make all things right
if I surrender to Your will;
so that I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with You forever in the next.
Amen.*

