

Robert Vannoy, Old Testament History, Lecture 9
Genesis 2 – The two trees in the Garden

3. Garden of Eden ...

b. The Trees of the Garden

We were discussing Genesis chapter 2 under the heading, “The Garden of Eden,” which is B.3. and we had looked there first at its geographic location that brings us to 3.b. “The trees of the garden.” What I would like to do is first turn to the text of Genesis chapter 2 and take a quick look at the biblical statements that pertain to the trees of the garden. You find that in Genesis 2:9 where you read, “And out of the ground the LORD God made 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 the knowledge of good and evil.”

So two trees there are mentioned in verse 9. In verse 17 you read, “But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat of it. For in the day that you eat thereof you shall surely die.” And then over in chapter 3, verse 3 where the serpent is speaking with Eve, you read in Eve’s response to the serpent, “But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, ‘you shall not eat of it, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” So you have two trees mentioned specifically in the Garden of Eden. Adam was commanded not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, in 2:17, and when that command was broken as we find in chapter 3, Adam and Eve were put out of the garden and not permitted to have access to the tree of life, that’s at the end of chapter 3.

1. The Tree of Life

So let’s look at these two trees. You notice on your class outline sheet there is a sub-point 1. and sub-point 2., 1. is “The tree of life,” and 2. Is, “The tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” First of all the tree of life, the question is: what is its significance? What is the meaning of the name? Why is it called the tree of life? There’s no exposition of that in the text itself. It leaves us to a degree to draw

inferences from the text and there's been a fair amount of discussion of what the significance of the tree is. In Genesis 3:22-24, after the Fall, you read, "The Lord God said, 'Behold, the man has become as one of us, to know good and evil, and now lest he put forth his hand and take also the Tree of Life and eat and live forever. Therefore, the LORD God sent him forth from the Garden of Eden to till the ground from where he was taken, so he drove out the man and he placed at the east of the garden cherubim and a flaming sword which turned every way to the guard the way of the tree of life."

Tree of Life as Sacramental Symbol - Calvin

Now, one of the commentators that has discussed the significance of the name, and the significance of this tree being a tree of life is John Calvin. I might just say by way of comment on Calvin's commentaries, if you have never looked at Calvin's commentaries, you ought to do that sometime even though he is someone who lived a number of centuries ago, his exposition of Scripture in most cases is very insightful, and they are excellent commentaries in many respects.

I think the view of Calvin on the tree of life is attractive, and I'd like to give you an idea of what he says on it. He sees the tree of life as a sacramental symbol of life and fellowship with and dependence on God. Now those are my terms trying to summarize his view, but he sees it as a sacramental symbol of life in fellowship with and dependence on God. That's the essence of his view.

I think on your bibliography under 3.b., which is two-thirds of the way down page 8 you have a reference there to Calvin's commentaries pages 116 to 118. Now, what's he mean when he says that it is a sacramental symbol? In commenting on the sacramental nature of the tree of life, here's what Calvin says: "He gave the tree of life its name, not because it could confer on man that life with which he had been previously endued, but in order that it might be a symbol and memorial of the life which he had received from God." So he gave it its name, the Lord is the one who names the trees, he gave it its name in order that it might be a

symbol and memorial of the life which he had received from God, for we know it to be by no means unusual that God should give to us the attestation of his grace by external symbols. He does not, and this is important, transfer his power into outward signs but by them he stretches out his hand to us because without assistance we cannot ascend to him. So he sees the tree as a symbol and memorial of the life which he has received from God, not that there was a power inherent in the tree, but it is made sacramental to man as an outward symbol of that spiritual reality.” So eating from that tree of life, in Calvin’s view, was a sign and seal of life and fellowship with and dependence on God.

That life, however, of fellowship with God and dependence on God would remain man’s possession only as long as he walked in the way of obedience, and the other tree marked that requirement. He was given a command with respect to it, when he broke that he would no longer have access to the tree of life, and to that which it symbolized.

When Calvin comments on the removal of Adam and Eve from the Garden and proximity and access to the tree after the Fall, he says and this is on pages 183 and 184. He says, “By depriving man of the symbol, he also takes away the thing signified. Not that the Lord would cut him off from all hope of salvation, but by taking away what he had given would cause man to seek new assistance elsewhere. Now there remained an expiation in sacrifices, he can only recover life by the death of Christ.” Then this statement again which I think is significant, “It is certain that man would not have been able had he even devoured the whole tree, to enjoy life against the will of God. There never was any intrinsic efficacy in the tree.” In other words, it’s not a tree whose fruit had some sort of chemical properties that would give man eternal life. “There never was any intrinsic efficacy in the tree, but God made it life giving so far as he had sealed his grace to man in the use of it. So it becomes a sacramental symbol, there is a grace, you might say, sealed to man in the use of that symbol, but when the thing itself is

gone, that thing being life and dependence and obedience to God, when that is gone, then the symbol is also removed.”

I think an analogy might be, maybe it's not a perfect analogy by any means, but you get in the book of Judges, you remember Samson and his long hair and there was a relation between that hair and the strength that Samson possessed. When he lost the outward sign he also lost that which it symbolized. I think with the tree we should think of it not as something that in itself intrinsically had this life giving property, but something which God used as a sacramental symbol. Yes?

In Calvin's words, “by depriving man of the symbol he also takes away the thing signified.” He sees a very close connection there between the symbol and the thing signified. Man is not permitted to have access to that symbol once he has disobeyed and lost that which it symbolizes. Now admittedly the wording of Genesis 3:22 may suggest that there was something inherent in the tree. Calvin would explain it in the way I just said reading from his statement. Now there are some who would feel that Calvin doesn't do justice to that statement. That's probably the weakest point of his view. You notice that part of his view is also something that is not always held and that is that man partook of the tree of life presumably on a regular basis prior to his fall and his expulsion, as a sacramental symbol of his life in fellowship with and dependence on God.

If you recall reading Vos, Vos' view is very similar to Calvin's, as a sacramental symbol. He speaks of the principle of life sacramentally symbolized by the tree of life, and Vos says, “The truth is set forth that life comes from God that for man it consists of a nearness to God that is the central concern of God's fellowship with man to impart this.” But on the question did Adam and Eve eat of the tree of life, Vos says, “no.” They never ate of it and once they fell into sin they were expelled so actually it was never partaken of. Now perhaps Vos' conclusion in that regard is related to that last phrase of verse 22. He doesn't make that explicit or clear, but perhaps his view does more justice to that. But on the other hand, I think Calvin's explanation is adequate.

If you reflect on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, was there something intrinsic to the chemical properties you might say to me tree of the knowledge of good and evil that in some way would give people that knowledge, whatever it was? We'll discuss that. Again, it doesn't seem that that's the point. The point with respect to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is a probationary test and the test was in the obedience not something inherent in the qualities of the fruit. So there is a parallel there between the two trees.

Comments on Sacraments

Let me just make a few comments on sacraments in general. I think among protestant evangelicals and particularly the fundamentalist camp there's sort of a reluctance to use the term sacrament probably as a reaction to Roman Catholic theology in which you have a sacramental kind of theology which is labeled by the Latin expression *ex opere operato*, "by the work it is worked." In other words, you go through the ritual and mechanically or almost magically, some result is produced, whether you talk about baptism, baptismal regeneration or whatever. The mass and forgiveness of sins, you just go through the rite and it produces the result. That idea I don't think is biblical at all. You have a lot of biblical statements that speak against any kind of ritual act in a formalistic sense like that of having any value. In fact, the reverse is true in the Old Testament with the rituals of the Old Testament. The Lord says to the Israelites repeatedly, think of Isaiah chapter 1 for example, Amos chapter 5, "Your sacrifices are an abomination to me, away with them, I don't want them. What I want is obedience, more than sacrifice." I want that heart that is right with me. Then, of course, there is a place for sacrifice. What Israel had fallen into was that ritualistic kind of formalism combined with heathenisms and then living a life of complete disregard and disobedience to the law of the Lord thinking they could set everything right by going through a ritual.

There are certain analogies to that in the way in which Roman Catholic

theology is developed with respect to sacraments, but in a reformed approach to the sacraments, let me just give you the definition of the Westminster Shorter Catechisms, question 92. The question is what is a sacrament? The answer is: “a holy ordinance instituted by Christ wherein by sensible signs, [and by sensible that means sensory, those that can be perceived by the senses] wherein by sensible signs, Christ and the benefits of the new covenant are represented, sealed and applied to believers.” It’s an ordinance instituted by Christ in which, by sensible signs, Christ and the benefits of the new covenant are represented, sealed and applied to believers. Now, of course, in the reformed view in the present era of the economy of God with his relationship with his people there are two sacraments, the Lord’s Supper and baptism, but those would then be viewed as outward visible signs of a spiritual reality and they represent them as an aid to faith. Of the sacraments and the Word, they differ in necessity. That is the Word of God, the Scripture. The Word is indispensable to salvation, sacraments are not. The sacraments are nothing less but nothing more than a visible sign of the Word. So a sacrament is a visible form of an invisible grace, and I think in that sense you could apply that term to the tree of life in the Garden of Eden.

Student Question: “Are you saying that the sacraments are merely a symbol, how about the traditional point of view that there’s actually some efficacy?”

There is a grace that is imparted through participation in the sacraments. Yes, to apply that back to Genesis 2 with the tree of life, that life in fellowship with and dependence upon God was symbolized, sealed and applied to man through his use of it. That is why Calvin would say they partook of it. There was a grace involved in that, but it’s not mechanically or magically achieved.

Tree of Life in Revelation

Let me go a bit further with this tree of life. In Revelation, you have a tree of life like in Genesis chapter 2, the very beginning of the Scripture and of man’s

beginning of existence on earth, you have a tree of life in Revelation 2:7, and also in 22:2, 14, and 19 of Revelation. Let's look at those passages. In Revelation 2:7 "He that has an ear let him hear what the Spirit said to 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." And in Revelation 22:2, "In the midst of the street of it," this is the New Jerusalem translation, "and on either side of the river was there the tree of life which bore twelve kinds of fruit and yielded her fruit every month and the leaves of the tree that it were for the healing of the nations." And then down in verse 14, "Blessed are they that wash their robes that they may have the right to the tree of life and may enter in through the gates into the city." Verse 19, "If any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the tree of life and out of the holy city and from the things which are written in this book." Now I think clearly the tree of life in Revelation is a reflection of the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2.

The Bible begins and ends with paradise. In Genesis 2 it's the Garden of Eden prior to the Fall, in Revelation it's the New Jerusalem. The way to the tree of life which was closed off in Genesis 3 is open again in Revelation to God's believing people. See I think that's the analogy, it again has become open in Revelation to God's believing people. Why, you might ask? How is that made possible? It's made possible by Christ because you read in verse 14 of chapter 22, "blessed are they that wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may enter through the gates into the city." That reference to washing the robes, what's the significance of that? Look at Revelation 7:14. You read in 7:14, "And I said unto him, 'Sir, you know,' and he said to me, 'these are they that came out of the great tribulation, have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb.'" So you see you have that symbolism involved there, of washing the robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb. It's the blood of Christ which makes these robes clean as it were, it's the righteousness of Christ which is applied to the believer, and that is what gives access again to the tree of

life. So those who seek forgiveness and purification from sin through the work of Christ receive the right to the tree of life, I think that's the idea, the teaching, but the disobedient, those who are outside of Christ will have no access to it. So to get back to the question, I think there's a great similarity between the significance of the tree of life in Revelation and what there is in Genesis 2.

I don't think there was anything intrinsic in the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil which gave man that knowledge of good and evil. It wasn't the fruit, it was the act. It seems to me then consistent to say there wasn't anything intrinsic in the fruit of the tree of life as well. The illustration of Samson was to say there wasn't anything intrinsic in the hair itself. Admittedly you could read Genesis 2 and particularly 3:22 or 3:23 in a way that would be in agreement with a more literal and efficacious role of the fruit. The question is, is that the best way to take it? It's possible.

2. The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil

a. Gen. 2-3 Text on the Tree

Let's go on to 2. 2. is: "The tree of the knowledge of good and evil." You've already read Vos on both these trees and as you're aware in the tree of the knowledge of good and evil there are a number of diverse views and a fair amount of discussion and dispute over what the significance of the name is and consequently, what the meaning is which is to be associated with the name. Again let's look at the information first that's given in the text. That small a. on your outline sheet, that's for information given in the text. First it's a tree that the Lord names and calls the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. You see that in verse 9 of Genesis 2, the Lord gives it the name. Secondly, verse 17 which we had already read, the Lord tells Adam that he is not to eat of that tree and the day in which he eats he will die. Now again to get back to this point we have just been discussing, let me just say parenthetically, he was told not to eat, he was not told it was a poisonous tree. The death that comes will be God's punishment, that doesn't

necessarily mean it's the physical effect of the chemical composition of the fruit. We'll come back to that later, but he's told not to eat it, he's not told it's a poisonous tree. Thirdly, it's the only tree of which he was forbidden to eat, and we take that from the statement of Eve in, "you shall not eat of it neither shall you touch it."

A fourth point that comes up with respect to just the biblical data concerning the tree is a question, you read in 3:5, the statement of Eve, "For God knows that in the day you eat thereof." This is not the statement of Eve, it's the statement of the serpent, "For God knows that in the day you eat thereof then your eyes shall be opened and you shall be as God knowing good and evil." Now the question is concerning that statement of the serpent in verse 5, was he speaking the truth? Would man be like God if he ate of the tree? That's what Satan or the serpent says, "God knows that in the day you eat your eyes will be opened you will be as God knowing good and evil." I would respond to that, I would say yes, and I would say that on the basis of Genesis 3:22. You read in 3:22, "The LORD God said, 'behold, man is become as one of us to knowing good and evil. Now lest he puts forth his hand, take the tree of life,'" and so forth. He is expelled from the garden. But God himself says in 3:22, "Man is become like one of us, knowing good and evil." Now, I think that gives us most of the information, the question now is interpretation. What's the meaning of the name and of these statements connected with it?

Mythical View of the Tree

There have been several views advanced, one is a mythical view. Vos summarizes that, this is a view that has been characteristic of the higher critical school of thought that sees mythological insertions into biblical material. The idea is that this story is derived from pagan mythology and is placed in the biblical record and it reflects the jealousy of the gods, "lest man should gain something that was their private divine privilege," and that is the knowledge of good and evil.

Now Vos discusses that mythical viewpoint and objects to it, he says, “God himself planted the tree in the garden and after man had eaten of the tree God does not act as though he had anything to fear from man, that doesn’t seem to be the point. In the mythical view, the knowledge of good and evil is variously interpreted, some see it as the rise of man from an animal state to reason, and to the human level, and the idea would be the gods wanted him to remain an animal. Others would understand it not as the rise of man from a state of reason but barbarism to a state of civilization with the idea being that the gods wanted to keep that privilege of their own, this state of civilization, the gods wanted to keep that their own privilege.” Vos’ objection is that to know good and evil is ethical, not physical. In other words, in the context of the chapter it’s not something that’s beneficial or harmful, that’s the issue in the physical sense, it is a moral issue, it’s an ethical issue, and this mythological interpretation doesn’t do justice to that.

Vos’ View of the Tree

Now over against that sort of an approach, Vos develops his own interpretation. And let me summarize that for you, this would be Vos’ view. He says the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is called the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because it is God’s appointed instrument to lead man through probation to the state of religious and moral maturity, and that in essence is his view, and I’ll repeat that. It’s the God appointed instrument to lead man through probation to the state of religious and moral maturity. That’s on page 31 of Vos. Now notice in connection with that in Vos’ view, the name is neutral and does not prejudice the results. The name is neutral, in other words, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil there is not something in that name, knowledge of good and evil that is either desirable or undesirable, it’s neutral. Notice also that to attain a knowledge of good and evil is not an undesirable or a culpable thing, this is in Vos’ view, not something for which you would be guilty if you achieved it. And of course in connection with that in Vos’ view, man was not forbidden to know

good and evil, and the prohibition against eating from the tree was not to imply that man was forbidden to know good and evil.

In Vos' view, man would attain that knowledge of good and evil by taking one of two forks of the probationary choice. In other words, he could obey and achieve the knowledge of good and evil along the route you might say of obedience, by not partaking of the tree, or he could disobey and take that route, he would also attain the knowledge of good and evil by going that route. You see the tree in his view is the God appointed instrument to lead man through probation to the state of religious and moral maturity, but he would achieve the knowledge of good and evil by taking either fork of the road you might say. Let me read from page 31 on over to page 32, a paragraph from Vos. He says, "man was to obtain something he had not before, he was to learn the good and its clear opposition to evil, and the evil and its clear opposition to the good. Thus, it will become plain how he could attain to this by taking either fork of the probation choice. Had he stood then the contrast between good and evil would have been vividly present to his mind, the good and evil he would have known from new illumination his mind would have received through the crisis of temptation in which the two collided. On the other hand, had he fallen, then the contrast of evil with good would have been even more vividly impressed itself upon him because the remembered experience of choosing the evil and the continuous experience of doing the evil in contrast with this memory of the good would have most sharply shown how different the two are." So you see what Vos is saying, he would achieve the knowledge of good and evil which was not something necessarily undesirable or culpable, he would have achieved it in any case either by obeying or disobeying, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil was the means of bringing him to religious and moral maturity through putting him in the position of having to make the choice of whether to obey or not to obey.

Vannoy's Response to Vos' View of the Tree: Self-Deification View

Okay, a couple comments on this. I find some problems with Vos' view. I think it's a possible view only in connection with Vos' understanding of Genesis 3:22. In 3:22, where the Lord says, "Behold, the man is become like one of us knowing good and evil," Vos says it is an ironical statement. So it's not true in fact or actuality. Now I think that's crucial to Vos' understanding of what's going on. If you reject Genesis 3:22 as being ironical and say that it is literal and true, then your entire interpretation is affected. In other words, if you say 3:22 is absolutely true and God is saying something that in reality happened when man ate of that fruit, then you are saying that by eating, man in some way became like God in a way that he wasn't before. "He has become like one of us knowing good and evil." The question then is, how? How did man become like God in a way that he was not before. And the additional question is why was that something for which man was culpable or guilty before God? That brings me to the third view. We've looked at a mythical view, Vos' view and now a third view which is the one I would hold, not that I have developed it.

For lack of a better terminology, I'll call it the self-deification view. With that statement in Genesis 3:22 in mind, "Man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil," we must ask the question, what is the meaning of the word "know," "man has become like one of us knowing good and evil." What's the meaning of "knowing"? If you determine that, I think, you have also determined what the meaning of the word "knowledge" is in the expression the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The word "knowledge" is a very unusual Hebrew expression in the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It's an infinitive form, it's a verbal noun kind of idea, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But if you determine what "know" is in Genesis 3:22 then I think it's the same meaning that you would apply to the noun form in the name of the tree. Clearly when you say "man has become as one of us knowing good and evil," that's not to be taken

as experiential knowledge, in other words if the knowledge of a type like that which God himself possesses and God can have no experiential knowledge of evil. In other words, God cannot do something evil, it's a violation of his character. I think it is best to understand the word "know" there in the sense of the power to distinguish between, to specify, or to decide. To distinguish between, to specify or decide between good and evil. In other words, to make value judgments.

If you look at Deuteronomy 1:39, you read, "Moreover your little ones who you said should be a prey and your children who in that day had no knowledge between good and evil. They shall go in there and unto them I will give it and they shall possess it." Now this is in the context of the generation that died in the wilderness. The young children were to grow up and they were the ones, the next generation, who would inherit the land. But he says and here were your children who in that day had no knowledge between good and evil. They weren't able to distinguish between, to specify, or to decide to determine good and evil. They were too young for that. It seems to me that is the sense of the word in Genesis 3:22. It can be taken as real and true and not ironical as Vos does. And what it means is that man has set himself up as his own norm to specify for himself what is good and evil. "Man has become as one of us, knowing what is good and evil." To know in a sense of to specify, to decide, to designate. When he took of the fruit of the forbidden tree what he was doing was choosing to live according to his own insight and judgment independently of God, that's what that act meant. So God says, he has become as one of us, he set himself up as a determiner of values. He's made himself his own god as it were, in doing that he usurps a prerogative that belongs to God alone. I think the heart of the issue in that probationary choice is that man wants to be his own norm, man wants to specify for himself what is good and what is evil.

Now, it's occurred to me, to suggest that in this sense the tree becomes a negative sacrament if you could speak in those terms. It was prohibited to man as a sacramental symbol to man out of fellowship with and independent of God which

is in essence death.

But in any case to get back to that phrase in Genesis 3:22 “the man has become as one of us knowing good and evil.” This is very close to the view which I have just described to what Vos calls the linguistic view where he discusses this kind of an idea attached to the word “know,” which he dismisses by saying its hardly a likely view because it gives the name of the tree an evil omen, anticipating the disastrous result. While I think it may have that implication, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, I’m not sure that’s a strong objection to this particular view. I think the question is, who is God, and who is the one who sets the standard for right and wrong? When man chose to disobey he took God’s place in setting that for himself.

Bavinck’s View of the Tree

Now a person who promotes this understanding is Herman Bavinck. I didn’t put that on the sheet, I probably didn’t because Herman Bavinck was a theologian in Holland in the early 1900s who wrote a four volume *Reformed Dogmatics*, systematic theology which has never been translated into English but its sort of the equivalent of Charles Hodge roughly in time and certainly in scope, it may be a better work than Charles Hodge’s. It’s an excellent systematic theology. In his volume three let me just read you a paragraph where he discusses this because I think he expresses it so well. He says, “knowledge of good and evil,” now this is my own translation, “speaks of the ability to stand on one’s own feet and to find the way oneself and speaks of the desire of man to emancipate himself by this ability from God. Genesis 3 is not directed so much to the content of the knowledge but to the manner in which it is attained. Clearly the nature of the knowledge of good and evil here meant is described by the fact that with it man would become like God, Genesis 3:5 and 22. By breaking the commandment of God and eating of the fruit he would make himself like God in this sense, that he places himself outside and above the law and just as God will determine and

judge himself what is good and what is evil. The knowledge of good and evil does not mean the knowledge of the helpful and the harmful, but as in 2 Samuel 19:35, Isaiah 7:16, the ability and capacity to distinguish independently good from evil. Genesis is concerned with the question of whether man will develop in dependence on God, whether he will seek his happiness in subjection to God's commandment or if he will break God's commandment and withdraw himself from his authority and law, stand on his own legs, choose his own way, and determine his own route to happiness. When man fell, he got then what he wanted, he made himself like God, independent by his own insight and judgment of good and evil, Genesis 3:22." Genesis 3:22 is terribly earnest, see this is quite the opposite of Vos, "is terribly earnest yet this emancipation from God did not and cannot lead to true happiness. Thus God in the probation commandment forbade the urge to freedom, this longing for independence, but man deliberately chose to chart his own course, and in that he sees the significance of the name the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and of course the significance of the Fall as well."

That is the human dilemma and we still struggle with it.

Okay, we'll stop this point and pick up with the creation of woman tomorrow.

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