

(GENESIS 3:20-24)

The opening chapters of Genesis are located in the Garden of Eden, which speaks of paradise, however that is to be understood, but, as the final consequence of divine judgement on the sin of Adam and Eve, they are banished from the garden and denied access to the Tree of Life. What does that mean? It is hard to avoid the obvious truth that for Adam and Eve and all their offspring and all the generations of humanity that have followed, life ends at death – “in Adam all die” – there is no access to the Tree of Life. That is not all. Life outside the garden is no picnic and involves a cocktail of sin and suffering, along with death. And that, dear friends, is our reality. We don't live in paradise; we are heavily impacted by sin, both personal and in the structures of society; we will encounter suffering in one form or another in our lives – some of us having to ship loads of it – and we will ultimately all die.

That is bad, but not hopeless. Two things immediately become apparent. Firstly, God is committed to the continuance of the race of Adam's offspring, namely Homo Sapiens. We see that very graphically in the account of the flood in Genesis 5-9 where, despite the prevalence of human wickedness, God makes provision for humanity to continue. Secondly, God does not wash his hands of his rebellious creature – humankind – and walk away, but continues to be involved and, indeed, to bind himself to us through solemn covenants. Repeatedly we see God acting to redeem humanity from their folly and plight. Quite frankly, in the light of the Genesis judgement, that is amazing!

All that, however, doesn't change the fact that we all live our lives outside the garden in a realm of hardship and tears. So what is the deal with this Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil? Why did God plant it in the garden at all? We can see the glory of the Tree of Life, but why this other tree. I want to make something of a radical statement here. God doesn't make mistakes, he does things according to his purpose and his purpose is always wise and good. The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is a necessary tree and we need to go through life outside the garden to be formed into the people God designed us to be.

Just like gold needs fire to refine it, so we need two things. Firstly, thorough acquaintance with choice and its consequences and the issue of whether we will assert our free will against God or bring it in submission to his loving grace. We need to know the reality of the struggle against temptation and our

inability, in our own strength to conquer it. We need to learn our need of dependence on God.

Secondly, we need the qualities that can only – only – be forged in suffering; qualities like courage, self-sacrifice, compassion, comradeship, mercy, forgiveness and perseverance. In fact, the most noble aspects of our humanity need this life outside the garden and could never be forged in the trouble-free environment of paradise. For me, that is the most compelling argument that helps me answer the really difficult question, “Why does God allow suffering?” So, in that sense, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is a necessary tree and gives us some sort of gift even in its bitter fruit. You would be amazed to see how much the New Testament has to say about suffering and how central it is to our calling to walk in the way of Christ and share in his work of redemption – check it out through a word study sometime.

But all that is rendered meaningless by the third reality, death. How is the fact that Adams race is ultimately sentenced to extinction to be dealt with? Does God change his mind on this consequence of sin? No. “The wages of sin is death”, says Romans 6:23, and that does not change. Yet that text goes on to say, “...but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” So how does that work? Well death has to happen and something new has to come into being, something completely independent of the taint of Adam.

*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here! (2 Cor. 5:17)*

*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. (Gal. 2:20)*

*For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3:3)*

*For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. (Romans 6:5)*

Do you get the picture here? There is no escaping death; not only physical death, but a deeper death than that – death to all I am as a child of Adam – and there has to be a new birth.

*Jesus replied (to Nicodemus), ‘Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.’*

*‘How can someone be born when they are old?’ Nicodemus asked. ‘Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!’*

*Jesus answered, 'Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, "You must be born again." (John 3:3-7)*

So, we are not left hopeless. By his resurrection, Jesus has defeated death and all who are in Christ are enabled to enter life beyond death and beyond the consequence of Adam:

*For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. (1 Cor. 15:22)*

Jesus, who defines himself as “the way, the truth and the life”, is in a real sense “the Tree of Life”, and “in Him” we finally get to eat its glorious fruit.

So there, dear friends, is a quick tour of life in Paradise Lost; let's talk about it.