

Trees . . . and the Christmas Story

Genesis 2:17; Galatians 3:13; Revelation 22:2

Introduction

One of my favorite things about the Christmas season is the decorations. I want to thank the volunteers on our church decorations team for their gift of time. They have made our facilities and this platform, especially, so beautiful. I really like all the Christmas trees.

My wife has a habit of keeping every artificial Christmas tree we have ever had. We have used real ones at times, but they have to be thrown away. She tends to use most of the artificial trees throughout our home during the Christmas season. She surprised me, with the help of our daughters, by putting a tree in my study this year – covered with ornaments and lights. I think it is terrific.

Some might argue that Christmas trees are a corrupted symbol of pagan worship. Certainly, we can trace the evergreen tree, as well as mistletoe and holly, to pagan mythology and practice.

The Romans decorated their temples with greenery and candles during the winter season. When the Romans conquered the British Isles, they found Druids who worshipped mistletoe and Saxons who used holly and ivy in religious ceremonies . . . all these things found their way into Christmas customs that have been around for centuries.ⁱ

Some then, would say we are borrowing too heavily or too dangerously upon worldly customs. I happen to believe, however, that the pagans were not the first ones to come up with this stuff. When you study the religions and customs of the world, you can see and hear echoes of the gospel; kernels of truth, although re-packaged in lies and distortion.

Two scholars in India are in the process of challenging Hinduism's adoption of Christian truth and rewriting it as if it were their story. They point to one of Hinduism's sacred texts, the *Vishnu Purana*, composed in the first century. This text revealed that their god Vishnu, had several incarnations, with the most important one, of course, being Krishna. According to the story, Krishna's foster earthly father, Nandu, journeyed with his wife, Yashoda, to pay their taxes. The result was that Krishna was born while on their journey. He was born in a cow-stall, with shepherds coming to adore the baby. A powerful meteor appeared at the birthplace and a prophet told King Kansa that the child would overthrow him; Kansa ordered the male children of the country put to death.ⁱⁱ

Does that story sound familiar?

Well, back to the subject of trees!

Isaiah spoke for God when he wrote, in Isaiah, chapter 60, verse 13a,

The glory of Lebanon will come to you, the juniper, the box tree and the cypress together, to beautify the place of My sanctuary . . .

In other words, God was honored by these magnificent trees which were used in the building of His sanctuary. His glory was revealed in the evergreen and the cypress and His house was made beautiful by their materials.

It should not be a surprise that Satan and his demonic underworld would counterfeit and corrupt even this – just as he counterfeits everything else. He would have his followers adopt the use of evergreen and holly so that God is not glorified and honored above His creation; so that that our purely motivated

appreciation and use of God's creation to communicate biblical truth could be misunderstood or, more tragically, entirely missed.

That is the way Martin Luther, the converted monk, viewed Christmas trees, by the way. Quoting this particular text in Isaiah, Luther, in the mid-1500's, used the evergreen tree at Christmas and hung globed candles on its branches. That decoration was his way of communicating to his culture that Jesus Christ was the Light of the world. As far as we know, Luther was the first person to attach light as a symbol of Christ to the Christmas tree.

I have been thinking a lot, in the past few days, about Christmas trees. What initially prompted my thinking was the back cover of a magazine that I received in the mail. There were verses of scripture listed which summarized God's plan of redemption. It struck me that the gospel of God is undeniably, uniquely related to a couple of trees.

Now, I say that and immediately realize that I sound like some kind of "new ager". Well, if you know me very well, and most of you do, I am not into the new age view of trees, or anything else for that matter.

I have been to France and watched people in a park, hugging three hundred year old trees. They believed they would receive from that hug, a spike of energy and meaning and identity. The only thing they truly walked away with was some bark stuck to their sweaters – although they would be convinced otherwise.

Trees do not have spirits or souls or the ability to impart spiritual energy. They do not get irritated when the wrong kind of birds nest in their branches or hurt when they are harvested for building supplies. Only mankind, according to Genesis chapters 1 and 2, was made in the image of God, with immortal spirit and soul.

The Christmas Story . . . and a Couple of Trees

Has it ever occurred to you, however, that the Christmas story and a couple of trees go hand in hand?

A tree of prohibition

Once upon a time, there was a tree – a very special tree created by God in the garden of Eden.

The Bible records in Genesis, chapter 2, verses 15 through 17,

Then the Lord God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it. The Lord God commanded the man, saying, "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die."

This tree represented the only prohibition in this garden of "delight," which is what "Eden" means in Hebrew.

In other words, "Adam, you can eat anything from any tree you like – just don't eat from this one – if you do, you will surely die."

It was a tree of prohibition. And because of that, this tree was actually a tree of priority. What would remain preeminent to mankind? Would it be obedience and worship and fellowship with God? Or would it be selfish desire and disobedience and independence from God?

Would the man choose to follow after God or would he choose to defy God and follow himself? You know the answer.

Satan came to Eve and asked the first recorded question in human history. It is found in Genesis, chapter 3, verse 1.

. . . has God said . . . ?

He was crafty to start with that question, simply because she had never heard God say it. The record of scripture reveals that God told Adam about this tree and what it stood for and what it would mean if he ate from it, before Eve was created.

God evidently expected Adam, as the head of the wife, to communicate and explain the prohibition of this tree to Eve. Even in this first marriage, there is the implication that God intended the man to theologically safeguard his wife.

Did Adam shepherd Eve? Evidently not well enough. Did he prepare her? Evidently not well enough. Did he give her the reasons why God prohibited that tree? Evidently not.

So, Satan meets her by that tree and asks the first question designed to cast doubt on God's love and plan and care and grace.

. . . has God said . . . ?

Both Adam and Eve will eat the fruit of that tree and begin to die. They lose their innocence before each other; they lose their fellowship with God; they lose their innocence between each other and their trust in one another.

Why? Adam and Eve failed at this first tree because Eve doubted God's word and Adam defied God's word.

I find it interesting that when the second Adam, Jesus Christ, was introduced into ministry by the prophet John, Jesus was met immediately by Satan in the wilderness. Would Jesus doubt God's word? Would He defy God's word to suit Himself?

Three times Satan hurled at Him a temptation. And three times, Jesus Christ responded by saying, "It is written! It is written! It is written!"

Let the Messiah teach you an unforgettable lesson. The path to spiritual victory is bound up in those three words.

No matter what the attraction . . .

no matter what the pressure . . .

no matter what the temptation . . .

- if you will obey what has been written . . .
- if you will follow what has been written . . .
- if you will apply what has been written . . .
- if you will surrender to what has been written . . .

...

. . . you will stand and not stumble!

Adam and Eve stumbled, and both of them ran from God. Adam said to God, in Genesis, chapter 3, verse 10a,

. . . I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid . . .

This is the first time in the history of the world of humanity that we find the experience of *fear*. This is the first time in the Bible the word *afraid* appears.

Genesis, chapter 3, verse 10, records that when God came to the garden to visit, they ran *from* God rather than *to* God because they were now afraid *of* God.

Before God expelled Adam and Eve from the garden, He gave them a promise in Genesis, chapter 3, verse 15. The seed of the woman – the Messiah – would crush the head of the serpent – Satan – while Satan would be allowed to bruise the heel of the Messiah. This text is called the "proto-evangelium" – the first mention of the gospel!

The coming Messiah, who would bear the penalty of Adam's sin, would be bruised in the process. But, in that same redemptive process, He would crush the strategy of Satan by defeating death and conquering the grave.

A tree of pardon

So, at this first tree, Adam and Eve were told about something that was going to happen on another tree.

Did they know about a Messiah? Yes! Did they know about a crucifixion? Yes! The Old testament saints knew more than we imagine!

According to Galatians, chapter 3, Abraham knew about Jesus Christ the Messiah. Paul writes to the Galatian believers in verse 8a,

The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham . . .

The Scripture, "preached the gospel" or delivered the gospel. And what is the gospel? It is, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, in I Corinthians, chapter 15, verses 1 through 4, the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ!

In fact:

- Micah told where the Messiah would be born (Micah 5:2);
- Isaiah wrote of His virgin birth and even what He would look like (Isaiah 53);
- David told of the way in which the Messiah would die on a cross (Psalm 22).

David wrote of the Messiah's crucifixion experience in Psalm, chapter 22, verses 16 through 18, saying,

. . . They have pierced my hands and my feet. . . and for my clothing they cast lots.

The gospel has not changed in all of these four thousand years.

The gospel of the Old Testament believer was that the Messiah was coming; the gospel of the New Testament believer is that the Messiah came. The Old Testament believer looked forward to the cross; the New Testament believer looks backward to the cross.

What a wonderful message the angels delivered on the night of Christ's birth, as they announced in the heavens that the Messiah had finally arrived. I find it fascinating that the very first words of this angelic announcement were, according to Luke, chapter 2, verse 10,

. . . Do not be afraid . . .

God was coming back to the garden, lost as it was; infested with sin as it was; groaning under its

guilt. God was coming back, as it were, to physically walk, this time in the flesh, on planet earth among mankind.

More than that – Jesus Christ came to die on a tree.

Paul wrote to the Galatian believers, in chapter 3, verse 13,

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us – for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”

In ancient Judaism, a criminal who was executed, usually by stoning, was then tied to a post, a type of tree, where his body would hang until sunset as a visible representation of rejection by God. He did not *become* cursed because he was tied to a tree, he was tied to a tree as a sign that he *was* cursed by God already.ⁱⁱⁱ

The critical issue of Christmas is not that Jesus was born, but *why!* There was no salvation in His birth. He could not save in His healing power nor by His incredible teaching. He had to die!

Without a doubt, Jesus Christ came and revealed God’s truth to mankind. He came and revealed incredible teaching that literally mesmerized and stunned His audiences. He healed sick people and brought others people back to life.

All of that is incidental, however, to His ultimate purpose for coming. Jesus Christ was born so that He could die! He would hang, having become cursed for our sake, to bear the penalty of our sin, so that we could be freed from the curse of sin and have communion with God restored!

The Persians believed the earth was sacred and did not wish to defile the earth with the body of an evildoer. So, they nailed them to a cross and left them there to die, looking for the vultures to finish the job.

Alexander the Great seemed fond of this form of execution, crucifying two thousand prisoners of war at a time. He introduced the practice to the Carthaginians, and the Romans later perfected the torture to produce a slow death with maximum pain and suffering.

To prolong the process, the Romans added a crude seat, called a “sedulum,” which allowed the condemned to live up to four or five days. They usually died from a combination of dehydration, shock, blood loss, paralysis of the diaphragm, and impatient vultures, or from Roman soldiers who

broke their legs and pushed them sideways off the saddle. Their broken legs would be unable to push them back up and they would die of asphyxiation – unable to inhale and exhale properly as they hung helplessly from their hands.

You need to know the ancients considered the “hand” to include not only the fingers and palm, but the wrist as well. Because the spikes would have easily torn through the tissue and small bones of the palm, we know from historical accounts that the Romans actually drove the spikes through the wrist.

The feet would be nailed next, with the legs bent in a crouching position and turned to one side. The feet would be overlapped and, with one long spike, pinned to the cross.

A skeleton was discovered some time ago, of a young man who had been crucified. His wrists bones were punctured and a spike was still embedded in the bones of his ankles.

The pain of this form of execution would have been excruciating. It is interesting that the word “excruciating” came from the Latin language and literally means, “out of the cross”. This form of death created its own vocabulary for pain.

I have discovered that respected and godly women of the city began a ministry of mercy. They did this in obedience to Proverbs, chapter 31, verse 6a, which says,

Give strong drink to him who is perishing . . .

These women were known to mix a narcotic, pain-reducing drink that they offered the condemned criminals.

Jesus refused this narcotic. He would allow no alleviation of suffering and would maintain His lucidity. This allowed Him to minister mercy to the dying thief, as well as to give His wonderful final words (which we will look at in our next discussion).

Now, if you were a Roman citizen, you need never fear death in this way. Cicero, the Roman statesman, said, “Let the cross never come near the body of a Roman citizen; nay, not even near his thoughts or eyes or ears.”

Cultured Gentiles refrained from even saying the word “cross”.

That had interesting implications as Paul would later write to Roman and Gentile believers that every believer was “crucified with Christ.” Paul would write, in Galatians, chapter 6, verse 14,

. . . may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ . . .

In the seventeenth century, a popular devotional writer was Lewis Bayly. Rather unknown today, his devotional handbook, *Practice of Piety*, was popular reading a few centuries ago. In fact, John Bunyan, who would later write, *A Pilgrim's Progress*, was given this devotional volume by his wife as a wedding present. Near the end of that devotional guide, there is a conversation between the soul and Christ in which Christ explains to the soul the meaning of the cross. Let me read a few lines of that imaginary, yet profound conversation.

Soul: Lord, why wouldst Thou be taken, when Thou mightest have escaped Thine enemies?

Christ: That thy spiritual enemies should not take thee, and cast thee into the prison of utter darkness.

Soul: Lord, why wouldst Thou be bound?

Christ: That I might loose the chords of thine iniquities.

Soul: Lord, why wouldst Thou be lifted up upon a cross?

Christ: That I might lift thee up with Me to heaven.

Soul: Lord, why were Thy hands and feet nailed to the cross?

Christ: To enlarge thy hands to do the works of righteousness and to set thy feet at liberty, to walk in the ways of peace.

Soul: Lord, why wouldst Thou have Thine arms nailed abroad?

Christ: That I might embrace thee more lovingly.

Soul: Lord, why was Thy side opened with a spear?

Christ: That thou mightest have a way to come near to My heart.

Ladies and gentlemen, there was a tree in Eden . . . and it revealed the pride of man. There was a tree on Calvary . . . and it revealed the pardon of God.

The foot of Calvary's tree touched earth, as if to say, "God has come to earth to touch man." The top of the cross pointed toward the heavens, as if to point the way there. The arms of the cross stretched outward, as if to say, "Whosoever will, may come."

There was a tree in Eden . . . but there was a tree on Golgotha. The first tree brought separation . . . the second tree brought reconciliation.

A tree of paradise

There is another tree, however, and this one is still in our future.

Revelation, chapter 21, describes the new heaven and the new earth. And Jerusalem, the heavenly city, is an amazing, spectacular wonder.

Made of jewels, gates of pearl, streets of translucent gold. The measurements of the city more than two million square miles. The ground floor alone would provide enough living space for more people than have ever lived in the history of the world.^{iv}

The city has a main boulevard coming from the throne of God. In the center of the boulevard is a crystal clear river flowing with incredible beauty (Revelation 22:1-2).

And guess what has been planted next to this river flowing throughout the eternal city? A tree. It is the only vegetation mentioned in the description of heaven, not because it is the only vegetation, but because it is the most important vegetation. And, it happens to be a tree – the tree of life.

The tree of life was in the garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were banished from it, lest they eat of it and live forever in the flesh, bound to sin.

Now this tree shows up again. It may not even be one tree, but an orchard of trees, planted along the river in the heavenly city. It will bear fruit every month all year long.

My friend:

- if you have been cursed by the sin of the *first tree* – and you have, as Romans, chapter 3, verse 23, tells us, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,"
- then you must run to the *second tree* – where you find pardon in the death of Christ,
- and if you have come by way of the second tree, you will one day eat the fruit of the *third tree* – and enjoy the splendor of heaven and join the celebration of the redeemed.

Conclusion

The next time you look at a Christmas tree, remember the trees of the gospel story; the trees of Christmas:

- The first tree communicated prohibition;
- the second tree communicated pardon;

- the third tree communicates the return to eternal and everlasting paradise.
- The first tree represented the pride of man;

- the second tree revealed the humility of God;
- the third tree reveals the glory of heaven and the grace of God.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 12/21/2003 by Stephen Davey.

© Copyright 2003 Stephen Davey

All rights reserved.

ⁱ John MacArthur, God With Us: The Miracle of Christmas (Zondervan Books, 1989), p. 37.

ⁱⁱ World Magazine (Dec. 29, 2003).

ⁱⁱⁱ John MacArthur, Galatians (Moody Press), p. 78.

^{iv} Samuel Gordon, Revelation: Worthy is the Lamb (Emerald House, 2001), p. 432.