

The Two Trees in Hebrews 1—2

Although there are no explicit references in the first two chapters of Hebrews to the two trees of Genesis 2:9, there are some definite indicators. Hebrews 2:14 speaks of “him who has the might of death, that is, the devil.” The devil is the subtle serpent, and death is the outcome of partaking of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Moreover, Hebrews 2:5-8 quotes Psalm 8:4-8, a prophecy concerning the fulfillment of God’s purpose in creating man, as revealed in Genesis 1:26. This further indicates that the content of this portion of Hebrews is closely related to the content of the first three chapters of Genesis. God created man with a purpose, and He provided the tree of life for man as the means to fulfill that purpose. Satan seduced man to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, ruining man for God’s purpose and causing him to die. The underlying thought in Hebrews 1 and 2 concerns these two trees; they are once more before man whom God has created and redeemed.

The Principle of the Two Trees

In the garden of Eden, God’s purpose for man was not fulfilled simply by man’s being in the presence of God. God further commanded man to eat, clearly indicating that He intended man to eat of the tree of life (Gen. 2:9, 16; 3:22). This tree, which would cause man to have eternal life, “signifies the Triune God embodied in Christ as life to man in the form of food” (Recovery Version, 2:9, note 2). In creating man, God breathed the breath of life into his nostrils, but man still did not possess the life and nature of God. For man to receive God’s life there was the need of a tree growing out of the earth with fruit for man to eat. By eating the tree of life, man would receive God as his life, and God would become his content. Even though Adam enjoyed God’s presence, protection, and material supply and also participated in God’s work (v. 15), he did not have God as his life and content. He still needed a tree that embodied God as life. By eating the fruit of this tree, he would partake of God.

Satan’s counterplot was to usurp the man whom God had made and to cause him to rebel against God. He intended to induce man to receive from another source, defiling him with the satanic nature of sin and causing him to die. Through man’s fall, the entire creation under man’s headship would also become subject to vanity and corruption

(Rom. 8:20-21). Hence, God’s entire work would be spoiled and His purpose annulled. However, man enjoyed the presence of God, including His provision, protection, and speaking. Satan therefore needed a certain craftiness to induce man to forsake God and rebel against God’s command in order to fall into his snare.

The key to Satan’s strategy was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This tree, like the other trees in the garden, was good for food and a delight to the eyes (Gen. 3:6; cf. 2:9). The knowledge of good and evil was a knowledge that belonged to God (3:22). To know good is to know what God approves, and to know evil is to know what God disapproves. The tree promised to make one like God, the highest and noblest aspiration for man (vv. 5, 22; cf. 1:26; 1 John 3:2). Yet it was a source other than God that caused man to become independent of Him. Satan utilized something that was very close to God, yet apart from God. The tree of knowledge was actually the embodiment of Satan himself as the source of death to man. By partaking of the tree of knowledge, man joined Satan in his rebellion against God and became the dwelling place of sin (Rom. 7:17, 20). The way of the tree of life became closed to man and, with it, the way for him to fulfill God’s purpose.

The items that constitute the tree of the knowledge of good and evil are all things that are apart from God which may be utilized by God’s enemy to cause us to rebel against God and be independent of Him. The tree of knowledge is present at the very beginning of Hebrews. God’s speaking of old in many portions and in many ways to the fathers in the prophets is something close to God yet which is now apart from God Himself, who is speaking in the Son (1:1-2). To remain in God’s oracles of old and not enter into God’s present speaking in the Son is to partake of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Therefore, even God’s former speaking can become a tree of knowledge, competing with the tree of life, God’s speaking in the Son (John 5:39-40). The opening verses of Hebrews are a contrast between the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Furthermore, the entire book of Hebrews is a contrast between these two trees. The subject of the book is concerning Christ being superior to Judaism and everything related to it and concerning the new covenant, which He

consummated, being better than the old covenant. The items of Judaism that the writer compares with Christ—the angels, Moses, Aaron the high priest, and the old covenant with its services—were God-given and God-ordained. However, they were now things apart from God, and God’s enemy utilized them to cause men to rebel against God and be independent of Him. How difficult it was for the Hebrew believers to realize this! How subtle the serpent was to take the very oracles of God and use them as part of the tree of knowledge which promised a way to God that was detached from God Himself and that rather caused man to become one with Satan and die. The key to the Hebrew believers’ rescue was for them to see the superiority of Christ as the tree of life for their enjoyment.

Let us now consider Hebrews 1—2 with regard to three aspects of the tree of life: its content, its process, and its consummation.¹ The content of the tree of life is life; this pertains to the revelation of the Son’s divinity in chapter 1. The process of the tree of life is the means by which its life content is dispensed into man; this pertains to the revelation of the Son’s humanity in chapter 2. The tree of life consummates in God gaining His purpose in man, the glorious expression of God in man, first in Christ individually and consummately in the many sons of God corporately. This is also revealed in chapter 2.

The Content of the Tree of Life—the Son’s Divinity

The term *life* is not used in the first two chapters of Hebrews. However, the revelation of Christ’s divinity as the Son of God is a revelation of the divine life. The designation *Son* implies the Triune God—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament God spoke to His people “by means of the prophets” (1:1, Wuest); in the New Testament, He speaks “in [the person of the] Son” (v. 2, Darby). This shows that both the means and the manner of God’s speaking have changed. God’s speaking in the prophets was His speaking indirectly through men. God’s speaking in the Son means that He speaks in Himself, because the Son is God. However, for Him to speak in this way requires the attribute of His being triune. He does not speak in the person of the Father but in the person of the Son. By speaking in the Son, God is expressed:

In the Old Testament, God spoke in the prophets, in men borne by His Spirit (2 Pet. 1:21). In the New Testament, He speaks in the Son, in the person of the Son. The Son is God Himself (v. 8), God expressed. God the Father is hidden; God the Son is expressed. No one has ever seen God; the Son, as the Word of God (John 1:1; Rev. 19:13) and the speaking of God, has declared Him with a full expression, explanation, and definition of Him (John 1:18). (Recovery Version, Heb. 1:2, note 2)

Thus, in the Old Testament God and the means through which He spoke were separate. In the New Testament these two become one: the speaking God speaks in Himself, that is, in the Son, who is God expressed. Undoubtedly, this indicates that the Son is God coming out, God issuing forth, in His expression. Moreover, the coming out of God implies God’s dispensing. The Father as the fountain emerges in God the Son as the spring for our drinking and enjoyment that results in eternal life (John 4:14). Christ the Son is the Word in whom is life (1:1, 4), and this life is for man to receive (v. 12).

Hebrews 1:3 mentions two attributes of God in relation to the Son: *glory*, God’s expression, and *substance*, His inward essence. The Son is the effulgence of God’s glory, because He is the shining, the brightness, the “out-raying” of the Father’s glory (Wuest 515). Just as the rays that convey the sun’s expression are the sun reaching us, so the Son as the effulgence of God’s glory is God in His expression reaching us. The Son is also the impress of God’s substance. “The impress of God’s substance is like the impress of a seal” (Recovery Version, Heb. 1:3, note 1), the “impression, as of a seal on wax” (Conybeare 791); hence, the Son is “the exact reproduction of His essence” (Wuest 515). Christ, as the impress of God’s substance, also implies God’s coming to us as a seal to mark us with the exact reproduction of what God is in His inward essence, His substance. God’s full salvation is accomplished by His sealing us with the Spirit as a living seal (Eph. 1:13), not once for all but throughout our Christian lives, until ultimately our bodies are redeemed (v. 14).

The effulgence of God’s glory and the impress of God’s substance are attributes of the person of the Son in the Godhead. With regard to His work, Hebrews 1 reveals further attributes of the Son. In creation we see how extensive the Son is: in the past all things came into existence by Him and through Him (vv. 2, 10); in the present He upholds all things by the word of His power, that is, all things cohere in Him (v. 3; Col. 1:16-17); and in the future as Heir He will inherit all things (Heb. 1:2). The entire universe was created by the Son, exists through the Son’s power, and will be inherited by the Son. Moreover, the Son’s work continues with His redemption. While His work in creation displays the power and surpassing greatness of His divinity, His work in redemption manifests that He is all-inclusive. He was incarnated and suffered death by crucifixion in order to make purification of sins for all men in all time, and He died even for the entire creation (v. 3; 2:9). Because He has completed this work, He is now seated at the right hand of God in the heavens, signifying that His work has been accomplished and that He is resting (1:3). All that remains is for God to set His enemies as a footstool for His feet (v. 13).

Verse 4 tells us that the Son inherits a more distinguished

name than the angels. This is the name of the Son that He received from the Father when He was resurrected from the dead. Prior to His resurrection, He was the only begotten Son of God (John 1:18; 3:16). However, when He resurrected, He was begotten in His humanity as the firstborn Son of God (Rom. 1:3-4; 8:29). He is the seed of David; God has become His Father, and He has become God's Son (Heb. 1:5). This indicates that the revelation of the Son's divinity in Hebrews 1 includes His becoming a man. Without His humanity the expression of His divinity would not be complete.

Furthermore, God's begetting of the Son in resurrection was for the propagation of the life embodied in Him. God did not beget only one Son in the resurrection of Christ but a multitude of sons, the many sons of God as the brothers of Christ (1 Pet. 1:3; Rom. 8:29). The title *Firstborn*, therefore, not only implies the Son's humanity but also indicates that the divine life, His divinity, receives its full expression in the Son, not individually but corporately, that is, in the many sons of God. The Son in His divinity is for the dispensing of God's life into man, causing men who were born of the flesh to become the sons of God, having God's life and nature just as the Firstborn. This aspect of the Son's divinity is not for our adoration; that is a job for the angels (Heb. 1:6). As human beings created by God for His purpose, the Son's divinity is for our participation. The Son is the tree of life for us to eat so that we may become the same as He is in life and nature but not in the Godhead.

In addition, He is coming again as the Firstborn in order to receive the kingdom (vv. 6, 8). This aspect of the Son's divinity is also for our participation. Although we will not be worshipped by the angels, for only He is worthy of worship, we will nevertheless be the cause of praise and glory and honor to Christ (1 Pet. 1:7); He will be glorified in His saints and marveled at in all those who have believed (2 Thes. 1:10). At the Son's coming, there will be the revelation of the sons of God, for which the creation is anxiously watching (Rom. 8:19). Moreover, in His kingdom all the faithful sons of God will be co-kings with Christ (Rev. 20:4; 2 Tim. 2:12). Thus, our participation in the Son's divinity is not only in resurrection but also in His second coming.

The Process of the Tree of Life—the Son's Humanity

The revelation of the Son's divinity in Hebrews 1 is followed by the revelation of His humanity in chapter 2,

indicating the process whereby the divine life becomes available to man. This requires not only that man's problem before God be resolved through the propitiation for sins (v. 17) but also that the divine life itself become available, obtainable, and accessible. In Genesis 1 and 2 there was no need for propitiation, because man had not sinned. God and man were entirely at peace. But the tree of life in Genesis 2:9 indicates that there was a need of a process in order for God as life to be available to man. The life embodied in the tree was to be received by eating the fruit. Eating requires a process. We may say that God as life could not be partaken of directly. He needed to be processed in order to be received by man. The revelation of the Son's humanity in Hebrews 2 reveals the process through which Christ passed in His humanity so that God as life could be received by man for the accomplishment of God's purpose. This process comprises His incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, glorification, and exaltation.

In His incarnation the Son partook of blood and flesh, just as the children have partaken (v. 14). This indicates that by becoming man, Christ became the same in nature as we. By partaking of our nature, He was qualified to accomplish redemption. Christ's death satisfied the righteous requirement of God for man's sin and dealt with the problem of sin within man's flesh. On the cross He condemned indwelling sin, the element of Satan in man's flesh, and thereby destroyed the devil (v. 14; Rom. 8:3; John 12:31). Christ's partaking of our nature, however, was not a temporary matter. He is still a man, exalted by God and waiting for His enemies to be subjected to Him (Heb. 1:13). Thus, the incarnation accomplished a great matter: it brought God into man and accomplished the mingling of God and man. Moreover, through His incarnation Christ also became like His brothers in all things that He might become a merciful and faithful High Priest, able to be touched with the feeling of our weaknesses (2:17; 4:15).

In His crucifixion, Christ tasted death on behalf of everything (2:9), made propitiation for the sins of the people (v. 17), destroyed the devil (v. 14), and released us from slavery under the fear of death (v. 15). These aspects reveal the all-inclusiveness of His death, which included not only sin but also all men, all things, the devil, and death itself.

Verse 12 reveals that in resurrection, as the Son of God, Christ is no longer alone. There are now many brothers, all of whom were begotten, regenerated, with Christ in His resurrection (1 Pet. 1:3). When He met with His brothers

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in His resurrection, He did two things: He declared the Father's name to them, and He sang hymns of praise in the midst of the church. In John 20:19-22 the Lord appeared to His disciples on the evening of the day of His resurrection. He breathed into them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." By imparting the Spirit into them, He imparted the divine life of the Father. This imparting was His declaring of the Father's name to them. By receiving the Holy Spirit into them, the disciples received all the things of the Father, which are given to the Son and received by the Spirit (16:14-15). Prior to this, the Father and the Son were one (10:30); now the Son and the disciples also became one as the disciples sang hymns of praise to the Father. This indicates that the incorporation of the Divine Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—had been enlarged to include the many sons of God.

Then Christ entered into glorification and was crowned with glory and honor (Heb. 2:9). As such, He became the Pioneer, the Forerunner, who entered into glory first so that many others may follow Him into glory (v. 10; cf. 6:20). Finally, Christ was exalted by God to have dominion over all things. In His exaltation, Christ was made Head over all things (2:8).

Therefore, in Hebrews 2 we see five major aspects of Christ in His humanity. To appreciate the significance of these aspects requires the entire revelation of the economy of God. Through these steps, from incarnation to exaltation, God was brought into man—sharing his nature and tasting death—and man was brought into God. God became man that man might become God in life and nature but not in the Godhead; through these steps the life of God, embodied in Christ, was released and imparted into man (John 12:24; 1 John 4:9); through these steps God gained His expression in man, not merely in one man individually but in a great corporate man universally. In other words, through these steps the life of God became available as the tree of life to be received by man, enabling God to become man's constituent in an organic way.

The Consummation of the Tree of Life—Glorification

The partaking of the tree of life was for the fulfillment of God's purpose. In Hebrews 2 this purpose is seen in the glorification of Christ and the glorification of the many sons of God (vv. 9-10). The goal of God's salvation, mentioned in 2:3 and 2:10, is to bring God's many sons into glory, the full expression of God. On our side it is a salvation, but on God's side it is the fulfillment of His original intention for man. By eating the tree of life, by receiving God's life and being constituted with God organically, man fulfills God's purpose of expressing Him (Gen. 1:26).

Christ, as the Author, or Captain, Originator, Leader, and Pioneer of our salvation (Heb. 2:10), took the lead to enter into glory, and thus He pioneered the way for us to enter (6:20). He entered into glory when He was resurrected from the dead, according to John 12:23-24, Luke 24:26, and 1 Corinthians 15:36, 42-43. The divine life that dwelt in Christ was full of the glory of God. His glorification was the release of this divine life from within Him. The glory of Christ's divinity was concealed within the shell of His humanity. This may be likened to the glory of a carnation being concealed within a carnation seed. Through His death, His divinity was released from the shell of His humanity. In Luke 12:49-50 Christ longed for the baptism of His death, because until that baptism was accomplished, His divinity was altogether pressed and constrained. In His resurrection His divinity invaded His humanity, bringing His humanity into the sonship of the only begotten Son of God. Therefore, it was in His humanity, not in His divinity, that in resurrection He was designated, or fully declared to be, the Son of God, the expression of God in full (Rom. 1:3-4).

Undoubtedly, Christ's glorification in glory and honor was with splendor and majesty. However, it was a splendor and majesty that related to His divinity within, a glory that Peter, James, and John saw momentarily shining from within Him on the Mount of Transfiguration (2 Pet. 1:16-18). Christ's glorification was the consummation of a process that began with His incarnation and was completed with His resurrection and exaltation. It was a process that was accomplished through sufferings, the ultimate suffering being death, because it required the breaking of His humanity, His human life, for the release of His divinity, His divine life. Such sufferings "perfected" or "completed" Him to become the Author, or Captain, of our salvation (Heb. 2:10). This was a perfection in terms of qualification.

It does not imply that there was any imperfection of virtue or attribute in Jesus, but only that the completing of His experience of human sufferings was needed to make Him fit to become the Author, the Leader, of His followers' salvation. (Recovery Version, Heb. 2:10, note 5)

As the many sons of God, we are also passing through the same process in order to enter into glory. Through regeneration, we have received the divine life of God. We have partaken of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4) and are thus divine. We are just like the firstborn Son, having been begotten out of the same one Father (Heb. 2:11). However, our divine nature, our sonship, remains concealed and hidden within our humanity, which belongs to the old creation and does not express God. The entire creation is anxiously watching for our revelation as the sons of God, when it will behold us as the children of God in glory (Rom. 8:19, 21). Our glory as the children of God

will be the expression of God in His many children. This glory is being worked out from within us. It is a process, as clearly indicated in the following passages:

But we all with unveiled face, beholding and reflecting like a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, even as from the Lord Spirit. (2 Cor. 3:18)

Therefore we do not lose heart; but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For our momentary lightness of affliction works out for us, more and more surpassingly, an eternal weight of glory. (4:16-17)

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the coming glory to be revealed upon us. (Rom. 8:18)

To whom God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory...When Christ our life is manifested, then you also will be manifested with Him in glory. (Col. 1:27; 3:4)

So that the proving of your faith, much more precious than of gold which perishes though it is proved by fire, may be found unto praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. (1 Pet. 1:7)

But the God of all grace, He who has called you into His eternal glory in Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a little while, will Himself perfect, establish, strengthen, and ground you. (5:10)

The glory into which we will enter is our hope for the future, but it is a hope that is fully related to our present salvation. At the Lord Jesus' coming, we will be glorified, and He will be glorified in us (2 Thes. 1:10). But this will take place only if we experience His organic salvation today, His sanctification (Heb. 2:11). The divine life of glory, the divine seed, is within us fighting its way to glory, and we need to cooperate with this seed. Otherwise, we will be put to shame at His coming, for we will fall short of His glorious expression (1 John 2:28). This is a great incentive for us to endure today as we pass through affliction and suffering. We are able to do so, however, because our Captain, who has pioneered the way into glory, leads us on.

Christ's ministry as High Priest fulfills His duty as our Captain of salvation (Heb. 2:16-18). As Captain, He has gone before, He has pioneered the way, and we are following Him. As our High Priest, He is present with us to help us, to assist us, and to succor us. *Succor* indicates a helpful rescue in which Christ gets into us, puts us upon

Him, bears us, carries us (Isa. 40:11, 31), and ministers God into us. As the heirs of salvation on the pathway of glory pass through sufferings how needful is the assistance and succoring of such a merciful and faithful High Priest so that they may be brought into the glorious expression of God!

Conclusion

In Hebrews 1 and 2 we see Christ as the tree of life for our participation. He is the Son of God, as God, in His divinity, to be life to man; He is the Son of Man, as man, in His humanity, who passed through a wonderful process of incarnation, death, resurrection, glorification, and exaltation to become available to man. By eating Him, that is, by receiving and enjoying Him in His glorious salvation, we become the sons of God, the same as He, the Firstborn, entering into the glory of God as He did and becoming His partners in the glorious expression of God in man.

To the tree of life, that is, to the Son and His salvation, we need to give heed more abundantly and beware of neglecting it (2:1, 3). Otherwise, we may drift away, as Adam did, and be enticed by the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Let us beware that anything apart from God, even a religion that springs from the oracle of God and contains the messengers of God, the prophets, the apostles, the appointed priesthood, and the covenant of God, can be a tree of knowledge of good and evil. If we neglect the tree of life, God's speaking in the Son, we will drift away to the tree of knowledge, rebel against God, become one with the enemy of God, and suffer spiritual death.

by Jim Batten

Notes

¹For the interpretation of Hebrews 1—2, see Witness Lee, *Life-study of Hebrews*, Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1984, pp. 17-151. For an excellent summary of this interpretation, see *Crystallization-study Outlines: The Epistle to the Hebrews (1)*, Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1998, pp. 7-27.

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