



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“TWO TREES”

John Galbreath
Bible Study Series

Text: I Corinthians 15:12-22
Date: April 14, 1963 (Easter)

About Westminster's Galbreath Bible Study Series:

This lesson is one taken from a sermon preached by John Galbreath at Westminster Presbyterian Church on April 14, 1963 (Easter).

To complete the lesson, we suggest that you begin by reading the designated Bible passage (I Corinthians 15:12-22).

Next, review sermon.

Then, review the study questions posed about the lesson — whether by yourself or in your small group.

Finally, share your thoughts on the Galbreath Bible Study blog on the Westminster Intranet.

I. We are going to read from the scripture this morning as it is found in Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth from the 15th chapter.

II. "I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day and that He appeared to Peter and then to the twelve and then He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive although some of whom have fallen asleep. Then He appeared to James and then to all the apostles. Last of all as one untimely born He appeared also unto me. Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep for as by a man came death by a man had come also the resurrection of the dead for as in Adam all died so also in Christ shall all be made alive."

III. The redemption drama is focused in the story of two trees. The first was found in the Old Testament parable in Genesis 2, the story of creation. God created a garden and in the mist of that garden placed the tree of life, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It was created "very good" and all that man might need was a hand. Only one thing was forbidden man and that was to seize the fruit of this one tree. But man saw fit to disobey God and to seize that fruit. Thus he ushered in death and sin.

IV. Our concern here is not in history but in parable. It is in theology not in anthropology. It is a story that is very ancient but also very contemporary. God did indeed create a world that was all very good. The writer of Genesis told of the goodness of God's creation and yet he knew but a portion of God's goodness. He couldn't know what we know now about the majesty of God's creation. He saw alone what the eye could see. But to our generation has been given the privilege of seeing far beyond what the eye has known, the vast world greater than our own, farther distant than the eye can see; myriad upon myriad each proclaiming the greatness of God and it has been to our generation that the secret of peering into the molecule that man himself could bear witness to the microcosm in God's creation in that which is infinitely tiny. The writer of Genesis knew somewhat intuitively of the goodness of God but we have laid open so much in vast prospective the majesty of God's creation and certainly we can say with the writer of Genesis that it is all very good.

V. And yet the world that we know is not a happy world. It is a world that knows so much ugliness and so much of hurt and suffering. I think of the words (I believe they were Will Roger's) "There is really nothing wrong with the world - it's just the people in it." And this is but a mirroring of the words of Genesis. It wasn't the world, it was man within it that brings to the world its ugliness. God created the tree of life but man seized the fruit and made of it a tree of ugliness and suffering and death. God intended good but of it man intended ill. This is true of every good gift that God gives and the better the gift the greater potential for suffering and ugliness. God gave us science and we have turned it upon our fellow men. He has given us insecticides which can deliver us from insects but on the other hand it is possible of giving us the death of the "silent spring." He has given us the family life with all the height of joy that it holds in possibility but there is no deeper tragedy that man can know than is found in the family who have turned their back upon God.

VI. God has given us so much of joy that we have turned to ugliness and sorrow. Those of you who have had small children must understand how God must feel. You have to do your house cleaning while the youngsters are taking their naps or after they have gone to bed for you know very well that if you try to clean house while they are awake they will leave a shambles right behind you. Now we don't hate our children for it for this is the way children are. Everything they touch somehow goes into disarray by their very presence and this is what man has been doing, following around God in his beauty and order only to leave behind God our own shambles and debris. God gave us a tree of life and we turned it to ugliness and death.

VII. I think of an occasion when we stopped upon one of the magnificent ridges of the Pennsylvania mountains to view the valley beneath, the panoramic view in this majesty and as we wondered of the glory of God our noses were struck by the aroma of stale beer and we looked down to see the tin cans that somebody had dumped over the side of the hill. God intended beauty and joy but somehow we always manage to transform it into ugliness and death. God gave the tree of life and we seized its fruit to make it a tree of death. We have cluttered the world about us; we are dumping our nuclear garbage in our stratosphere. And we can hardly wait to get to the moon. God must get very discouraged.

VIII. But there are two trees in this drama. First is the tree of life to which man brought death but the second is the tree that man made, a rough-hewn tree of two beams, one upright with a horizontal transverse. This man created to be a tree of death; this was the instrument with which Rome executed its criminals. It was a tree of shame, a means to make a public example of her worst criminal. The prisoner was stripped and suspended naked upon a peg. His chest was wrapped around with a rope that was tied to the cross beam and to this his hands and legs were either tied or roped to those beams or nailed. Left there immobile he was unable to cope with cold or heat or insect. Incapable of meeting his bodily needs he was the subject of the indignity and the ridicule of all that passed by. Little wonder was it that the Jews had a saying, "cursed be he that hangs upon the tree." But it was intended not alone to be a symbol of suffering and shame but also of pain. The cross was not intended to kill people. They were not allowed to hurt any of the vital organs as they hanged a man from its frame. Death did not come from the cross but rather came from hunger, thirst, exposure and fatigue. Jesus' death was more merciful than those to his side. In all probability his death came not from the cross but from the inhuman scourging that was the preliminary to Calvary. Little wonder was it that no Roman citizen should be crucified no matter how vile his crime. This little innovation of man was reserved for the slave and the foreigner. Man created this to bring death to Jesus Christ. God created a tree of life for man; man hewed a tree of death for God.

IX. But as man was able to transform God's tree of life into death, so God was able to transform man's tree of death into life. The cross had been the symbol of shame and degradation. But for the past 2,000 years the cross has been a symbol of that which is highest and best. In stone, metal and the finest woods, men across the church have glorified this symbol of God's grace. Even the secular world has appropriated this sign, the symbol of mercy becomes the red cross and the symbol of healing the blue cross. All of this because God took the tree of death and transformed it into the tree of resurrection. The cross is only a cross and it would yet be the sign of vilification had it not been for Easter. But resurrection morning proved that God's intent is not to be bound by man's evil deeds, that there is no evil that man can do that God is not capable of transforming. Paul knew the meaning of this, Paul who had been stoned, who had been beaten, who had been imprisoned, who had been vilified and who was able to say "Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through Jesus Christ" and out of all his suffering was able to say "All things work together for good to those who love God." Each of us can recite the event in our own life that seemed to bode nothing but tragedy and pain from which somehow God was able to bring victory and joy. Men have created war and yet out of war came penicillin and nuclear energy and the United Nations. Try as we may to revolt against God, God takes the ugly patches of history that we give him and remolds them for his glory.

X. We read the tragic story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one of the martyrs of our generation, imprisoned in the prison camps of the Nazi and finally put to death and out of the writings of those prison camps have come theology that has stirred the church worldwide.

XI. And yet the word of Easter is not a Pollyanna message that no matter what happens it will all be alright in the end. For life does not last long enough to see that good that comes from the evils of men. We glory in the message of what God was able to do in the prison camps to Dietrich Bonhoffer but where does that leave Dietrich Bonhoffer unless there is something beyond life that is everlasting. There are too many that live suffering and die suffering. There must be hope beyond else all is futile and God is defeated. All men throughout the world one way or another have had a confidence of life beyond death and yet the confidence that you and I have is not the confidence of vague hope, it is not the confidence of nature worship nor is it even the confidence of philosophical conjecture but the message of Easter is the confidence that comes through the witnessing of the power of God over sin and death in the life of a risen Lord, risen over 2,000 years ago yet alive in our very midst. This is the confidence that those who suffered in the life of the early church greeted one another saying, "Christ is risen" and the response "Christ is risen indeed."

XII. Winter months have taken a toll upon us. Physical energy is drained and our spirits too lose their courage. Our vision is dimmed. Pessimism sets in until a crocus dares to push its head above the ground and the song of a bird returned and the sun in its warmth is felt and we take new courage and a new vision and new spirit within ourselves. But the Christian message goes beyond this message or the season. For the Christian message is the message of the day for all of this is simply a setting of the stage for the great message that we have through Jesus Christ. That He was the object of man's scorn, He who was the object of man's tree of death has risen from the dead and has broken the bonds of death for all times of sin and death that we may know only eternal victory of life everlasting. God created a tree of life for man, a tree of life and man took this tree and seized its fruit and made it a tree of death. Man made a tree for God, a tree of death but God seized this tree and transformed it to make the tree that is a gateway to everlasting life that God who was our creator is also our redeemer. Thanks be to God who gives us this victory through our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Study Questions -- Part I

Bible Reading: I Corinthians 15:12-22

I Corinthians 15:12 through 16 say: ¹² Now if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³ But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; ¹⁴ if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. ¹⁵ We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised.

- Why do you think the writer repeats the thought in several ways?

I Corinthians 15:17 through 22 say: ¹⁷ If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied. ²⁰ But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. ²² For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.

- Why do you think the passage includes the reference to Adam?

Study Questions -- Part II

Sermon :

III. – How do you think it came to be that this story is so often misquoted as being about an apple tree? How does it change your reading of the story to think about it as the tree of good and evil?

IV. – What do you think the people of Genesis would think if they could now, in fact, know more of the wonder of creation and the intricacy of the world? Do you think it would strengthen their faith or would they think it removed God from the story?

V. Which of God's gifts that man has spoiled concerns you the most? What can we be doing to reverse the damage?

VI. Are there things in your life that you have turned to ugliness? How can you work to restore it to God's perfection? How can you help restore what has been destroyed by others?

VII. This sermon was delivered in 1963, years before man stepped on the moon. How has our impact on the world changed since this sermon was written?

VIII. Why do you think Jesus had to suffer the death of a foreigner?

IX. How do you react to "cross sightings" in the world around you?

IX. Has there been a time in your life when God turned tragedy and pain to victory and joy? How did that impact your faith?

XI. How do we reconcile the reality of those who "live suffering and die suffering" with the promise that we have in Christ?

XI. How would you describe to others your confidence in life beyond death?