

**“The Tree of Life”**  
**Genesis 3:20-24**

**May 31, 2015**

**SI:** We’re studying the first eleven chapters of Genesis this summer.

Genesis 3 is one of the most important chapters in the Bible.

It doesn’t just tell us what happened, it interprets human life and human history.

It’s foundational for a Christian world view.

So I’ve taken more time with this chapter.

But this morning we finish, and after this I’ll pick up the pace.

**INTRO:** A few years ago I stumbled across Pete Rose’s autobiography.

The title is *My Prison Without Bars*. It was published about ten years ago.

I’m not a baseball fan, but the title intrigued me.

It sounded like a book by a man who had thought deeply about his flaws.

But it wasn’t what I expected.

I’m sure most of you know the story.

Pete Rose was an immensely talented and successful player and manager,

but in 1989 he was permanently banned from MLB for betting on games.

He was also banned from ever being inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame

He denied all charges and fought them for years.

He had all sorts of other problems and went to prison for tax evasion.

Since then he’s made a living selling baseball memorabilia

and in financial ventures of varying success.

I soon realized that this autobiography was his attempt to make the case

that he should no longer be banished from baseball—

that he should be allowed back and even considered for the Hall of Fame.

This was his defense. This was his side of the story.

But he could not have told a more damning tale against himself.

He not only told about his baseball successes but about his

gambling and womanizing and extravagant living and obnoxious ways.

And he basically said he never did anything wrong because he is Pete Rose.

He was just being true to himself, that’s who he is

and if people don’t like it, they are just jealous.

And no, he never betted on baseball.

But then, at the end of the book, he admits he that he did—

but he never betted against the teams he was managing, that's the important thing. So why can't the baseball commissioner understand that?

Why can't powers that be see he never did anything intentionally to hurt baseball?

Why is he still banished? Why can't he return to the sport he loves?

What's sad about his story is that you can tell that all these years later

he is grieved and hurt by being banned from baseball; he still wants back in.

But everything he has done to try to get back in, even his fundamental attitude toward the sport and those in charge, is all wrong.

But we shouldn't be quick to judge,

because Genesis 3 shows us that we are all Pete Rose.

After Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit,

the consequences of their action began to fall like hammer blows.

They were filled with shame at their nakedness, they were afraid of God,

they turned on each other in blame and recrimination.

They heard God's sentence, the curse—

for both the man and the woman, pain, disappointment, frustration

in those areas of life that touch most deeply on their personhood—

for the woman, her family relationships, for the man, his work and responsibility.

Now the final blow. God drove them out of the Garden. He banished them.

Remember, the Garden was a real place,

but it was also symbolic of life as it is meant to be—

a place of beauty, curiosity, happy work and

and happy relationships with each other and with their Creator.

And to keep them from getting back into the Garden and eating the fruit

from the tree of life, God stationed a strong, terrifying angel with flaming sword.

(We'll talk about that tree and it's fruit later.)

Do you see what is implied by the stationing of that angel?

That Adam and Eve would want to get back,

that if they tried to get back by their own devices, they would fail.

But there is also something hopeful implied.

If they ever were to get back to the Garden and eat from the tree of life,

it would only be if God himself made a way and opened the door.

They could do nothing, but God could. And, of course, that's the story of Bible.

These early chapters of Genesis don't just tell us what happened,  
they are an interpretation and explanation of human life as we experience it today.  
It explains what drives Pete Rose  
and how every one of us are just like him in own ways.  
We were banished with our first parents from life as it is meant to be.  
We all have a sense of banishment, we all want back in, and try to get in.  
And God, in his grace has provided the only way.

Let's look at those three points as we delve into the passage.  
I'll give them to you as we go, since they are a little long.

**MP#1 Banishment from the Garden accounts for  
the universal longing and restlessness characteristic of human life.**

If I can pick on poor Pete Rose one more time,  
longing and restlessness pervades his autobiography.  
He longs to be back in baseball, the epitome of life and happiness in his mind.  
And these 25 years he's been banished have been full of restlessness  
as he has tried all sorts of things to fill the void.  
But what's obvious is that he was longing and restless even  
before he was banished, even when he was still in baseball.  
That's what got him in trouble, his incessant thrill-seeking and risk-taking.

You see this feature of human life everywhere in a thousand different forms.  
I was in St. Louis a few months ago for an Old Testament seminar  
and one of my fellow students was a Korean pastor.  
He began to tell me about the challenges of doing ministry in Korea.  
How Korean society is characterized by an intense competitive  
drive for financial success that is producing all sorts of social ills.

Wealth and position are supremely important.  
So parents put enormous pressure on their children academically.  
Young men can't get married because all the girls their age are looking  
for wealthy men in their late 30s and early 40s.  
That enforces all sorts of anti-social behavior among the 20 something age group.  
South Korea has the highest suicide rate in the world, abortion rate soaring.  
What is that but longing and restlessness writ large over a particular culture?

On the opposite end of the spectrum, whenever we go to North Carolina to visit my parents and go into Asheville, I'm struck by the numbers of young people who have consciously rejected American wealth and materialism. They've tried to drop out of the capitalistic system and adopted a lifestyle of radical environmentalism.

They are intensely opinionated about food, moral and immoral food, vegetarianism. They don't bathe or wash hair as a protest against the chemical companies that rape the earth by making soap and deodorant.

I always pick up some of their free publications, which are everywhere in Asheville, and they are full of longing and restlessness.

Longing for an egalitarian society connected to nature.

Restlessness and anger at clueless Walmart shoppers like us standing in their way. I could go on and on with dozens of examples.

What accounts for this longing and restlessness that transcends ages and cultures and is a universal characteristic of human life?

It's the pain of banishment.

It's a deep memory of the Garden of Eden in every soul.

We were made for the Garden.

We were made for a life of uninterrupted fellowship with God.

We have inside us capacities and potentialities that ache because they were given to us so that we might experience the Holy One up close and intimately.

We were made to talk with God and enjoy God and to experience the satisfaction and wholeness of life in communion with God.

We were given minds with the capacity for deep thoughts, and bodies capable of hard, satisfying work together and deep pleasures.

All this has been corrupted.

Banishment from the Garden means that human beings are cast adrift to seek some new purpose in life.

But whatever purpose we find it is only a shadow of what we were made for and it only draws from us the tiniest bit of our potentialities.

Put a cow in clover and he is content and will stay content.

Put a man in the perfect life he's dreamed of—whether it is baseball hall of fame, or financial success, or anti-capitalistic commune, only content for a short time.

Then comes the longing for something more.

And whether he knows it or not, is life with God in the Garden he wants.

All the great preachers and theologians have expressed this.

St. Augustine said:

You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you.

Blaise Pascal said:

There is a God shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator, made known through Jesus.

That brings us to the second point . . .

**MP#2 Sinful man is determined to get back to the Garden in his own way.**

Yes, there is a longing and restlessness for God that is essentially good.

The God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man.

But fallen man is a rebel at heart.

God anticipates the consequences of that and closes the Garden in order to frustrate man in his effort to reclaim the life taken from him as punishment.

God puts a cherubim with a flaming sword to keep Adam and Eve from getting back into the Garden and eating from the tree of life.

And the rest of the Bible and tells the tale of mankind's effort to get back into the Garden by his own strength and on his own terms.

We've already seen this in the examples I just mentioned.

God has provided a way back to the Garden.

We're going to talk about that in the last point.

God has established the terms for getting back in the Garden and eating the fruit from the tree of life.

It's by surrendering yourself to God, repenting of your sins, walking by faith in Christ who has done what the first Adam could not do—perfectly kept the covenant of works.

But mankind seeks to regain what he has lost without surrendering himself to God, without repentance, without walking by faith in Christ.

John Bunyan has a character in one of his allegories called Mr. Loth-to-Stoop.

Bunyan was illustrating different spiritual conditions through his characters.

Mr. Loth-to-Stoop represents this tendency of mankind to want life and blessing on his own terms without having to bow the knee to God.

Mr. Loth-to-Stoop didn't want to acknowledge his guilt and of his need for grace.  
He didn't want to stoop in repentance from his pride and sin.  
He didn't want to stoop in surrender to Christ's lordship,  
He didn't want to stoop to walking the straight and narrow in following Christ.  
He wanted to get back into the Garden without any stooping on his part.

That's the story of mankind.

People are willing to do anything, even hard things, to regain what is lost  
and find a way back to the Garden, except the blood of Christ,  
and bowing down to God in repentance.

All the religions of the world, no matter how different in outward appearance,  
have this in common. They are programs of self-salvation.

Some religions require people to do very hard and demanding things.

I read recently about a Buddhist sect that requires followers to walk 26 miles a  
day around a sacred mountain for 200 consecutive day for 7 straight years—  
then you get into the Garden of Eden.

But you don't have to bow to Christ and trust his grace.

And this tendency is just as real in the lives of secular people  
who don't have connection to any organized religion.

In a few weeks we'll get to Genesis 11 and the Tower of Babel.

All the men on earth came together to build a tower to reach heaven.

What does that mean? How do you build a tower to reach heaven?

It's about the first arrogant attempt to use technology and the power of the state  
and to get back to Garden.

That spirit is still alive today. We're not going to trust God.

We're done with those backward superstitions.

We believe in science and in government.

We're going to use the power of both to eliminate all the problems  
of humankind and usher in a new golden age. But it can't.

Of course technology is a good thing in itself and benefits mankind,

but can't get us to the Garden of Eden. Can't make us better and happier people.

Does your cell phone make you worry less? Does TV make you more content?

Same with civil government—instituted by God for the good of mankind.

But it will never save us.

As great man once said, nine most terrifying words are:

“I’m from the government and I’m here to help.”

Human ways back to the Garden will always be, to one degree or another, false, impure, ugly and sometimes downright destructive. That brings us to the last point, the good news.

### **MP#3 God in his grace has provided a way back to the Garden.**

How do we get back into communion with God? How do we get life?

We’re Christians. We know the answer.

It’s by faith in Jesus Christ and repentance of our sins.

That’s certainly true. But that’s not all that can be said.

The Bible is a beautiful and amazing book.

It’s been given to delight us and intrigue us and make us long for salvation.

So I want to trace out for you this theme of the tree of life.

First, what was the tree of life?

Told in chapter two that when God planted Garden he put in the middle two trees, the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was a test for Adam and Eve.

Would they love God and serve him or not?

The test was not going to last forever, it was probationary.

Evidence for that is the tree of life.

It’s not stated directly but implied that upon passing the test, they would eat from the tree of life and be confirmed in holiness and immortality.

In other words, they would be good and happy forever, never fall.

The fruit of the tree of life was not magic. God alone gives eternal life.

The tree was sacramental. A sign and seal of God’s promise of life for obedience.

The reason God barred the way to the tree of life after he banished Adam and Eve was not because he was worried they might make a mad dash and eat the fruit and snatch life out from under his nose.

No, this was mercy on God’s part.

If they had eaten the fruit from the tree of life, it would have destroyed them.

Would have been worse than eating from tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Because it would have confirmed them in their fallen condition.

There would have been no possibility of salvation.

They would have lived forever, but in an eternal, living death.

They would have become horrible creatures, cut off forever from God's mercy. Only obedient people could eat the tree of life and have it bless them.

So God barred the way, because he had something better in mind.

The better thing he had in mind was that he would make a way for sinful people again to come into the Garden and eat from the tree of life.

You have to look for it, but the tree of life appears in the Old Testament in some subtle ways. It's in the Temple, represented in the golden lampstand. Made like a tree with blossoms and buds and fruit.

To complete that image, remember what figures were woven into the veil of the Temple—cherubim, these fearsome angels barring way to holy of holies. So Old Testament worship had this powerful visual reminder of Garden of Eden.

The prophet Ezekiel picks up the theme in his vision of the restored temple.

He also connects the temple to the Garden of Eden.

He sees a river of life flowing out of the temple, and life springs up everywhere this river flows, and he particularly mentions groves of trees along the river. He doesn't call them the tree of life, but the hint is there.

It's a lovely prophecy of the coming Messiah's work of restoring all things.

But then we come to the very last book of the Bible, to Revelation,

the tree of life suddenly reappears by name—like bookends to the Bible itself.

The first place it occurs is in chapter 2, Risen Christ himself speaks:

To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God.

And then at the end of the book, John gathers together all these themes, the Garden of Eden, the restored temple, the river of life, the tree of life.

Heaven comes down to earth, as the new Jerusalem, this is how John describes it: Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

So the tree of life has become a whole garden of trees, a park, a paradise in the middle of the city of God. A never-ending crop of fruit, even leaves heal.

Then John hears Jesus say:

Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life



and may go through the gates into the city.  
We're going to eat from the tree of life.

When we do, we'll be confirmed in holiness and happiness.  
The blessing that Adam forfeited will be restored in overwhelming superabundance.  
That sounds good. I want that. No more longing and restlessness.

One more detail. How do we, fallen, sinful people eat from the tree of life  
without being destroyed? Only the perfectly obedient can eat from it, we're not.  
But Jesus is, and we are united to him and share his righteousness.  
The New Testament frequently refers to Jesus being hung on the tree.  
That's what the cross is often called, the tree.  
Cursed is anyone who hangs on a tree—it's significant of him taking our curse.

But very soon after the time of the Apostles, in the very earliest days of the church,  
Christians began to take that imagery one step farther—  
they began to associate the cross with the tree of life.  
Very often on Christian tombs the cross drawn as a living tree with leaves.  
And, of course, we agree. The cross is indeed the tree of life.  
When Jesus died, the veil of the temple was torn—  
that veil with the images of the cherubim barring the way to the holy of holies,  
barring the way to the Garden of Eden and life with God as it is intended to be.

And it is in the cross that we find forgiveness and love  
and adoption as sons and the hope of glory.  
And we don't have to wait until the new heavens and new earth to start eating  
the fruit of the tree of life, we can get a little taste now.  
We can eat a sign and promise of life with God as we come to the Table.

Let me ask you a question:  
What are you looking for to fill your longing and restlessness?  
It may be something perfectly good in itself,  
or it might be something intrinsically destructive.  
But in either case, it won't fulfill you.  
You've been banished from the life you want.  
But God, in his mercy has provided a way back through Jesus.

Maybe you know that, but you've wandered from him into some pretty sad things.  
Look what he has in store for you.

What a day it will be when you walk with Jesus through the streets of the city,  
down the river and amongst the trees—and eat the fruit from the tree of life.  
Why mess with anything less than that?