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Tree Story  
April 20, 2003  
Peter Hiett

[Movie Clip: The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring. Orcs tear down trees at the command of Saruman.]

Orc: What orders from Mordor, my lord? What does the Eye command?

Saruman: We have work to do.

Orc: The trees are strong, my lord. Their roots go deep.

Saruman: Rip them all down.

Have you ever noticed that bad guys hate trees? I wonder why?

[Four trees are displayed on stage.]

This tree is a bristlecone pine. The oldest living thing on earth is a bristlecone pine named Methusala. It's 4,767 years old. So when it was 673 years old, God said, "Abram, I'm going to bless the nations through you" — the seed of Abraham. When it was 1,714 years old, King David was born. It was 2,731 years old when Jesus hung on the cross.

This tree is a giant sequoia. I'm going to plant it in my yard so that in 3,000 years my ancestors can drive a bus through its trunk. It will weigh 2.7 million pounds, and it grows from a seed the size of an oat flake. Jesus said the kingdom of God is like that.

This is my schefelera tree. I got it from my Grandpa Ralph in 1978 just before he died. These bends and turns tell a story . . . like when my college roommate dropped his bike on it, and when I grew it on a shelf, and when my parents tried to throw it away. For the last ten years, it's been in six different offices here at the church. It's like my *life tree*, and it tells a story (like the rings in a bristlecone or redwood tell a story). Trees tell a story and often come up from a root.

Scripture says Jesus is the root of David. Like the orc said to Saruman, "The roots go deep, my lord." Yes . . . deep in space and time.

This tree is a fruit tree. I'm going to plant it in my yard so it will tell a story and also give life to my kids. My children will eat the fruit from this cherry tree for years to come. Through photosynthesis, the leaves of this tree absorb light, and then mysteriously the tree mixes light with dirt and steer manure from my back yard, absorbed by the roots, and makes *life*: cherries, fruit, and seed.

So then just as God breathed into dirt and made a human soul, so trees put light into dirt and make life. A tree is a long story of life, life that is dirt redeemed by light.

The Bible is a long story too. In chapter one of Genesis, Scripture records that God created everything in six days and rested on the seventh. On the sixth day He says, “Let us make man in our own image.”

A few years ago a physicist from MIT named Gerald Schroeder calculated the age of the universe, factoring in the mass of the universe and the rate of expansion since the Big Bang. Schroeder figured that the universe is roughly 15 billion years old . . . from the standpoint of earth. But time is relative to where you’re standing. So he calculated from the standpoint of the Big Bang, looking at earth. Then he found that standing at the point of creation, the universe would be not quite six days old . . . and on the edge of the seventh. In that case we’d still be living in the sixth day, still being made in God’s image.

Well, no matter what, by the second chapter of Genesis, Scripture is back to describing the sixth day, for God is making man and woman in His own image. And then the first thing He does is plant trees. And in the very middle of paradise, He plants *the* tree — the tree of life. I wonder what it looked like?

What kind of tree would make you live forever — give you eternal life?

What kind of tree would make you born again if you ate its fruit?

And then, right next to it in the very middle of the paradise garden, he plants the strangest tree of all: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. I wonder what it looked like?

What kind of tree would make you know what is good and what is evil, and at the same time would kill you if you partook of it?

God said, “The day you eat of this tree, you will die. Don’t do it.” The tree of knowledge— He puts it in the *very middle* of the garden!

Well, there are different ways of knowing:

Up until 1964, Methusala, the bristlecone pine, was only the second oldest living thing on earth. Another bristlecone pine was named Prometheus. (Prometheus was the Greek god who brought fire and art to mankind and then suffered for it.) Well, in 1964 a grad student named Don Curry wanted to know how old Prometheus was. So he cut Prometheus down in order to count his rings. There were 4,862.

So did Donald Curry *know* Prometheus the tree? Yes and no. He knew *about* Prometheus, that he had 4,862 rings, yet he did not *know* Prometheus, for Prometheus was dead. And when Donald Curry counted the rings, I bet a piece of him died too. For he knew that he had just *killed* the oldest living thing on earth. He killed what he wanted to know.

I can know about my wife by cutting her down and dissecting her parts (“there’s her liver . . . there’s her spleen”), or I can know my wife by surrendering to her love and loving her in return. But love hurts. Yet love bears fruit . . . even babies. When Adam *knows* Eve in chapter 4, she gets pregnant. There really are different ways of knowing.

The Snake tempts Adam and Eve saying, “Take the fruit . . . steal the fruit . . . conquer the tree . . . you’ll be like God, knowing good and evil.”

The “knowledge of good and evil” — What is that?

Well, first, it’s the law—God’s law—what is good and what is evil.

Well, isn’t the law good? Isn’t the tree good?

Yes!

Then what’s bad?

I guess the way you *take* it.

Eve takes it to be *like* God, to get power over God. Adam and Eve want to make God part of their story rather than entrusting themselves to God’s story. So they eat, and all at once they *know*. They know they are evil, for they cut down the One who is good—“the good” they most truly wanted to know.

The Evil Serpent hates people and hates trees, that is, stories of life.

So God curses the Snake and the world, and Adam and Eve are driven from the garden, barred from the tree of life, lest they eat of it and live forever as they are, unable to love: *hell*.

Now, most folks act as if God didn’t see that one coming . . . so this fallen world is beyond His plan: that is, Satan won and wrecked the story right at the start, so God had to scramble and come up with Jesus and the cross. They would say that’s why 9-11 happened — because Satan tempted us, and we screwed the whole thing up! That’s true . . . but not *all* the truth.

Today is April 20. Four years ago today was the Columbine Massacre. Someone told a friend, “I’m not coming to church with you. I’m not going out on April 20. That day’s *cursed*.” That may be true . . . but not *all* the truth.

April 20 is also Hitler’s birthday. Some of you may remember the story Elie Wiesel told of his time in Hitler’s death camp at Auschwitz. He told of watching three men hung from a gallows. One of them was an innocent boy whom he called the “sad-eyed angel.” He wasn’t heavy enough to die quickly, so he hung on the gallows twitching for half an hour. The Nazis made the prisoners file past. The man behind Wiesel muttered, “Where is God? Where is God now?” Wiesel writes, “I heard a voice within me answer him. ‘Where is He? Here He is. He is hanging here on this gallows.’”

Where *is* God in this evil world? Is He still the storyteller?

Where is the plot—the meaning?

Is it a gallows without meaning, a gallows without plot?  
Is life a story, a good story, a gospel?

When I watched The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring, and the orcs attack the trees, and Saruman rises in power, and Frodo is stabbed by the Cave Troll . . . I didn't yell out in the theatre, "Oh God no! Please no! How can it be?" I didn't yell out in terror; I leaned forward in hope, because it's a *good* story. And every evil in a good story always gets redeemed in glory. For a good author infuses every detail with his meaning, the plot.

Today is April 20, and it's also *Easter*. Whether you scream in terror or lean forward in hope would all depend on who you believe is writing the story. Satan? Us? Someone else?

Scripture says, "God accomplishes all things according to the counsel of His will." And God creates and upholds all things by His Word—The Word—The Plot.

Well, what gives me great hope is that *before* the Fall, right after God formed man, He planted a tree.

In the old days in the deep South, when a slave baby was born, the women would sneak out into the woods and bury the placenta and birth waters at the base of a tree. Then when the child was sold into slavery, the momma would go sit by the tree, hoping to commune with the spirit of her child. And the child knew there was this tree — his story tree.

We sold ourselves into slavery, but God had already planted a tree. I wonder if He would go sit by it?

In the Old Testament, wild and weird stuff happens with trees. The Hebrew word for tree is "ates." It's also translated "wood," "staff," "gallows" (the wood on which you would kill a man). When combined with another Hebrew word, it's translated "carpenter." In the Old Testament:

- Noah and his family get saved by an ark made of wood.
- Moses parts the Red Sea with his staff of wood.
- The Israelites are saved at Mara when Moses throws a special tree into the poison water, and it becomes sweet.
- They conquer in battle because God is somehow present in the Ark of the Covenant made of wood.

The New Testament is written in Greek, and when the Old Testament was translated into Greek, "ates" was translated as "xoolon." The Greeks had other words for trees, but "xoolon" carried the range of meaning to best translate "ates."

Like "ates," "xoolon" means "tree," "wood," "staff," "gallows," and "cross."

- When Jesus is born, He's placed in a manger of wood.
- He grows up as a carpenter ("ates worker").

- He spends a lot of time in wooden boats.
- He has a bizarre relationship with trees.

Right before He dies, Jesus curses a fig tree because it's not bearing fruit, and the tree dies. Fig trees are a symbol of Israel. A few days later, the religious people—Israel—curse Jesus. They cut Him down and nail Him to the tree. Although He's the only sinless man who ever lived, the One who is good, they crucify Him to guard their religion—their story—their knowledge of good and evil (the law). They crucify Him on a “xoolon”—*this tree* [the cross].

In Matthew 7 Jesus says, “You shall know a tree by its fruit.” What kind of tree *is* this tree [the cross]? Well, when we come to this tree, we do know something: We know what is good . . . not really *what* but *who*.

The good is the bleeding heart of a lover.

The good is Jesus from the bosom of the Father.

The good is our Maker not just waiting by a tree but nailed to His own tree for the love of us.

What is evil? — That we nailed Him to the tree. Every time we sin, we nail Him to His tree—the law. For even before He planted the tree, He chose to die in our place.

Peter writes, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.”

Paul writes, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us — for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree.’”

So now we go to the tree longing for the good, confessing we're dead. We know evil, because we killed the Good. We cut Him down and tried to count His rings, tried to steal His kingdom and make ourselves into gods. We *know* evil.

But we look to the tree longing for good, and there's a man hanging on it! We can't steal the fruit, for now He gives us the fruit saying, “Take and eat my body broken, blood shed. Unless you eat my body and drink my blood, you have no life in you.”

Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth [about good and evil] and the life.”

- He is the life crucified on the tree of knowledge (the law), but resurrected from the dead by the power of God.
- He is the good, but not the *dead* good, not the *dead* word (a theory or law or religion).
- He is the Living Word, the Living Good, the Great Lover of our souls.
- I believe He is the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Do you know Him? (We are “joined with Him in a death like His” when we see that we killed Him.)

- I believe He is also the fruit of the tree of life. (We are “joined with Him in a resurrection like His” when we believe His love.) Do you know Him?

In the end there is one tree, and that tree is His cross. “This is the plan for the fulness of time to unite all things in Him, making peace by the blood of His cross.”

If I lost you, listen now: God is still telling His story . . . *History*. He is the best author, and it is the very best story. It is a tree story. Easter is the fruit of the tree, Christ risen. Easter is the revelation of the plot. Easter is eternal!

In the Revelation, John sees the eternal city, the New Jerusalem, the paradise of God, the seventh day, heaven. In the midst of the city, he sees the “xoolon”—the tree—the cross of life. It bears twelve kinds of fruit (fruit for each month and tribe). The leaves are for the “healing of the nations.”

Leaves take light and mix it with dirt and manure absorbed through the root, and the tree turns it into life and fruit. We surrender our dirt and manure to the light at the cross, and He turns our sin and sorrow into life—the fruit of His grace. He changes the meaning with Himself, the Plot. The tree is for the healing of the nations, the salvation of the world. On His cross, He redeems *everything* that is anything.

On 9-11 when the World Trade Center crumbled to the ground, in the midst of the debris the relief workers found a tree . . . a “xoolon” . . . a cross . . . five stories high! It reminded us of the plot.

A few mornings after April 20, 1999, do you remember what mysteriously appeared on the hill behind Columbine High School? — Fifteen crosses (not thirteen, fifteen). They reminded us of the plot.

And what an incredible plot and amazing story!

When Elie Wiesel stared at the boy hanging on the gallows (the “xoolon”) and heard, “Here is God, He’s hanging on this gallows,” I think he heard *truth*. Perhaps Jesus hangs on every gallows, for He is the meaning of every cross. (I bet Elie Wiesel was longing to believe in Jesus.)

I believe Jesus hangs on the gallows with that boy and before that boy in space and time. And I believe Jesus catches him when he falls. And I suspect He takes that boy to glory. And that sad-eyed boy has tasted the love of God poured out for him on the gallows of Calvary—the cross of Christ. That taste is treasure forever.

In the beginning, God willed to make man in His own image. His image is Jesus, His heart is Jesus, and Jesus is the love of God poured out, love willing to die the ultimate death for the ones He loves. His story is *the* love story. We each taste a minute fraction of His suffering born for His love of us. For He not only bears our sufferings, He bears our hell.

In the beginning, God willed to make man in His own image, and then He planted a tree, knowing full well He would be nailed to that tree once and for all, for all people in all time, bearing our hell so we wouldn't have to, yet allowing us to taste His pain so we would know His love. He bears the pain of all time . . . to make us in His image for all eternity.

I have a friend who has been seeing visions in worship as we've preached through the Sermon on the Mount. A few weeks ago he wrote:

At the beginning of the evening God took a sword and cut my chest open and asked me for my heart. . . . Once He got me out of the way so I could see, He said, "Come up here with me and I will show you." He was on the cross and so He crucified me on the cross with Him.

As I looked out over the room, I saw many different people doing many different things. I saw people praying, worshipping, crying, scared, anxious, children running around . . . Next I started seeing a lot of suffering. I saw people with cancer, enduring horrible abuse, involved in ritualistic sacrifice. I also saw a person executed while on their knees, face and hands uplifted as their body was riddled with bullets. I saw people die in the German concentration camps, and I saw Peter (from the Bible) get stoned.

At that point the vision just ended and I told God, "This is a message of hope. That can't be it. There must be more." He told me to be patient and to come up a little bit higher and then to look closer. When I did, I saw that all of this was happening all at once within the walls of the New Jerusalem, the gleaming white walls with flags flying in the wind. "This is heaven," He said. "This is what the New Jerusalem is made of."

In the New Jerusalem, in heaven, there shall be no more mourning nor crying nor pain. Yet the New Jerusalem is made up of . . .

People who know "the good" and have known "the evil," yet "live."

People who freely chose to love even if it hurts like hell.

People in God's image. Jesus is God's image.

Easter is the revelation of the plot, and Jesus is the plot. Jesus is the "first fruit of the new creation," and we are being made in His image, the fruit of the tree. "As in Adam all die, so in Christ will all be made alive."

That's the plot, that's the story, that's the tree story.

The only question is, Are you part of that story? In one sense, everyone is . . . You can't *not* be. So what I'm asking is, Are you surrendered to the plot, or are you just an extra?

An extra is someone in a story who is just a backdrop for the real characters. Extras have no character development, no meaning in themselves, no heart. I believe Paul called them "vessels

of wrath, whom God endures in order to make known the riches of His glory to the vessels of mercy” (Romans 9). It appears you *can* go to hell . . . if you want to.

In the movie Toy Story II, there are thousands of Buzz Lightyears. They’re all packed in boxes, existing in a delusional state on toy store shelves. But the real Buzz Lightyear has the mark of Andy on the sole of his space boot.

Paul wrote, “I bear on my body the marks of Christ.” They were scars born in love, the marks of Christ’s cross (the “xoolon,” the wood). That is, Paul was rather “woody.”

Remember in Toy Story II, Woody had been the star of his own TV show in the 50’s. The real Woody is tempted to forget about Andy, the boy who loves him. He is tempted, because sometimes love hurts. He thinks he’ll *die*. Woody’s tempted to exist forever in a glass box on a museum shelf. (It’s a picture of hell: living forever alone without love.)

Buzz says to Woody, “Somewhere in that pad of stuffing is a toy that taught me life is only worth living if you’re being loved by a kid.”

So they choose love. They surrender to Andy’s story, the Toy Story.

Surrender to the Tree Story. “We love because He first loved us.” His love makes us real.

God planted the tree in the middle of the garden so that one day you would see the depths of His love and surrender to His love, so He could write his signature upon your heart—make His mark upon your soul—that you would be made in His image: that is, look like Jesus.

So on the night our Lord was betrayed, having given thanks, He took bread and broke it saying, “This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way, after supper He took the cup and said, “This is the cup of the New Covenant in my blood, shed for the forgiveness of sins. As often as you drink of it, do it in remembrance of me.”

It’s Easter. We invite you to come eat the fruit of the tree (the “xoolon” of life) in the New Jerusalem. If you eat this bread and drink this cup:

. . . you are making a public profession of sin, that you see good and evil . . .

. . . and you are making a public profession that you want life, Jesus in you.

And if you do so in faith, you’re not an extra. And this is your story: *Easter*.

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[Movie Clip: Toy Story II]

Woody: I don’t have a choice, Buzz. This is my only chance.

Buzz: To do what, Woody? Watch kids from behind glass and never be loved again? Some life.

[50’s TV show song] You’ve got a friend in me . . .



Woody: What am I doing? Buzz! Wait!

Prospector: Woody, where are you going?

Woody: You're right, Prospector. I can't stop Andy from growing up. But I wouldn't miss it for the world!

Prospector: No!

Woody: Buzz! I'm coming with you!

So God the Father sends His Son into our world. He was born among us as one of us, and we laid Him in a manger made of wood. He grew up among us knowing our sorrows, and then one day absorbing our sins and our shame. We crucified Him on a tree, and God raised Him from the dead. And He has sat down at the right hand of the Father. He has inherited His kingdom. And it is finished. And, Woody, He will *never* forget you! For you are His treasure.

If you came forward and took His body and blood in faith—just a little bit of faith—you're His treasure, and He has written His signature upon your heart. He has placed His mark upon your soul, and He will not forsake you. He will not let you go!

So don't let Stinky Pete or Satan lie to you. It's the true story. It's the great love story. And it's *your* story, Bride of Christ.

Sometimes I think I've overestimated the goodness of God. If there's a God and He's good, do you think I could overestimate His goodness? So believe the Gospel, in Jesus' name.

Happy Easter! Amen.

### Further Reading

The master gave his teaching in parables and stories, which his disciples listened to with pleasure – and occasional frustration, for they longed for something deeper. The master was unmoved. To all their objections he would say, “You have yet to understand, my dears, that the shortest distance between a human being and truth is a story.”

Anthony DeMello

The word “story” comes from “store house.” So a story is a store or storehouse. Things are actually stored in the story, and what tends to be stored there is its meaning.

Michael Mead

Jesus used stories to tell all these things to the people; he always used stories to teach them. This is as the prophet said: “I will speak using stories; I will tell things that have been secret since the world was made.”

Matthew 13:34-35

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth . . . .” Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree (“xylon” in the Greek version of the Old Testament) that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree (xylon) of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree (xylon) of the knowledge of good and evil. . . . Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree (xylon) of the garden?’” And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees (xylon) of the garden; but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree (xylon) which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” . . . Then the LORD God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree (xylon) of life, and eat, and live for ever” — therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree (xylon) of life.

Genesis 1:26a; 2:7-9; 3:1-3, 22-24

“And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree (xylon) . . . .”

Deuteronomy 21:22

“ . . . the word which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism which John preached: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we are witnesses to all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree (xylon); but God raised him on the

third day and made him manifest; not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that he is the one ordained by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that every one who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Acts 10:37-43

“Brethren, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you that fear God, to us has been sent the message of this salvation. For those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers, because they did not recognize him nor understand the utterances of the prophets which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled these by condemning him. Though they could charge him with nothing deserving death, yet they asked Pilate to have him killed. And when they had fulfilled all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree (xylon), and laid him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead; and for many days he appeared to those who came up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people. And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus . . . . Let it be known to you therefore, brethren, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him every one that believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses. Beware, therefore, lest there come upon you what is said in the prophets: ‘Behold, you scoffers, and wonder, and perish; for I do a deed in your days, a deed you will never believe, if one declares it to you.’”

Acts 13:26-33a, 38-41

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse for it is written, “Cursed be every one who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, and do them.” Now it is evident that no man is justified before God by the law; for “He who through faith is righteous shall live”; but the law does not rest on faith, for “He who does them shall live by them.” Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us -- for it is written, “Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree (xylon)” . . . .

Galatians 3:10-13

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.

1 Peter 2:24

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree (xylon) of life, which is in the paradise of God.”

Revelation 2:7

Then he showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree (xylon) of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree (xylon) were for the healing of the nations. There shall no more be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and his servants shall worship him . . . . Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree (xylon) of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters, and every one who loves and practices falsehood. “I Jesus have sent

my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, the bright morning star.”

Revelation 22:1-3, 14-16

But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the richness of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you.

Romans 11:17-18

You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? So, every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit.

Matthew 7:16-17

But in fact 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 has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.

1 Corinthians 15:20-23

“So God created man in His own image . . . .” (Genesis 1:27)

“So we know and believe the love God has for us. God is love . . . .” (1 John 4:16)

The Bible

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