

The Tree in the Middle of the Garden (Who You Know and What it Means II)

Genesis 2:15-17

December 14, 2008

Peter Hiett

This sermon really is a continuation of last week's sermon, and all the sermons that have gone before. So if you get confused, which you will, be sure to look on the website and listen to the sermons there.

Let's pray: Father, this whole preaching and talking about you thing seems kind of insane to me. Lord, you are so big, and you are so good. You are so astounding, and who are we that we could even talk about you? So Lord God, would you send your Holy Spirit to help us? Father, there are profound mysteries in what we'll be talking about tonight, so if I am messing up, would you erase it from everybody's mind? But Father, whatever is You, I pray that it would be planted deep in our hearts, and bear the fruit that is life. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

Genesis 2:15-17 - The Lord God took the man (the Adam) and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

"Tree of knowledge"... not the tree of witchcraft... not the tree of vodka and dirty magazines... but the tree of knowledge. What's the problem with knowledge? Why does God warn Adam about "knowledge"?

Last week I started reading a book titled Expecting Adam. Martha Beck and her husband John were both Harvard PhD students, addicted to acquiring knowledge, when much to her dismay, Martha discovered she was pregnant – with life. She writes:

This is a story (a true story) of two driven Harvard academics who found out in midpregnancy that their unborn son would be retarded. What they did not realize is that they themselves were the ones who would be 'born,' infants in a new world, where magic is commonplace...

Toward the end of the book she writes:

I was afraid that Adam would never think the way I was taught to think at Harvard. He doesn't.

At institutions of higher learning, you're taught to take knowledge by comprehending things:

-If you want to know a tree, you cut it down and count its rings.

-If you want to know a frog, you dissect it and analyze the pieces (of course the frog dies, but that's ok – you've conquered it and gained knowledge).

-If you want to know a wife, it gets more complicated.

-If you want to know God... well, many intellectuals argue that he's dead, and wonder why.

Well, Adam wasn't an intellectual. Martha describes how she tried to teach Adam the alphabet and totally failed. Adam had no interest in knowledge for its own sake. Adam didn't care that "E" stood for "egg." But when he realized "E" stood for "Elizabeth," it really mattered. Elizabeth was his sister. For Adam, knowledge was important, only insofar as it served someone he loved. Adam used knowledge to love people, not the other way around.

Martha writes:

As we figured out how he learned, the landscape of our son's mind began to reveal itself to us. Instead of a rationally constructed structure of empirical observations, logical conclusions, and arbitrary symbols, Adam's mental world seems to be more like a huge family reunion.

In this world, Adam learns as fast as anyone I know. Long before he could read or write even the most basic words (or so I thought), Adam came home to tell me, in his garbled tongue, about the new boy who had just moved into his class, and who had become Adam's friend. When I couldn't understand his pronunciation of the boy's name, Adam grabbed a pencil in his stubby, grubby little-boy fingers, and wrote "Miguel Fernando de la Hoya" on a piece of paper – a piece of paper, needless to say, which I intend to frame. If I ever need a dose of Adam and he isn't around, I'll be able to look at that clumsily written name and remember what it is like to tap into an intelligence powered exclusively by love.

"Intelligence powered exclusively by love." Adam - and Jesus is the eschatos Adam. "Intelligence powered exclusively by love." Jesus is wisdom. Satan is an "intelligence powered exclusively by malice and for *him*." For him, knowledge is solely a weapon. As C.S. Lewis write in Perelandra, Satan the "Un-man" regards "intelligence simply and solely as a weapon."

Well, last time we asked: "Is knowledge good or bad?" And we said perhaps it depends on how it's acquired. There are different ways of knowing – you can willfully take knowledge (for your own purposes) or you can receive knowledge (as a gift). Different ways of knowing, and different things to be known. You can know things less than you – through science and empirical observation. And you can know things greater than you – through wonder, worship, and relationship. If you try to know persons like you know a thing, its abuse, or rape, or murder. And when you know a person as you know a thing, you actually don't know the person. You may know about them (the part that's less) – carbon, oxygen, nitrogen – vital statistics. You can take them. But spirit, soul, and person – you can only receive that, if they choose to reveal that, by grace.

So ironically, the more you take knowledge, the less you may know. It's the man who rapes women, who's least likely to know one. It's the ruler who murders and dissects his subjects that's least likely to know one. It's the bride who takes from her groom, who's least likely to receive her groom, and be known by her groom... impregnated with the life of her groom.

Well, at the snake's tempting, Eve took fruit from the tree of knowledge. Humanity took knowledge, and lost knowing God. We got religion, and lost relationship, communion and ecstasy with God.

You know, sometimes when we're intimidated or jealous of a person, we'll try to gain knowledge about that person, to diminish that person, defend ourselves against that person. Well God is a person (not a thing) and we're pretty intimidated by him. So it makes sense, doesn't it, that it was religious folks that crucified Jesus. They wanted to comprehend Him, but not be comprehended by Him. They wanted to know about Him, but not be known by Him. So they nailed Him to the tree, according to their knowledge of good and evil.

Sometimes it's the theologians and pastors who hate God the most, psychologists who hate people the most, and lawyers who hate justice the most. Perhaps it's intellectuals who hate truth the most, if indeed truth is a person. You see, by knowing all about a person, we defend ourselves from knowing that person, or being known by that person. In other words, with knowledge, we defend ourselves against love. Love is a person, as well as the meaning of all things.

Remember this scene from the movie Good Will Hunting? Matt Damon plays Will Hunting, and Robin Williams is his counselor. Will is an absolute genius who astounds the faculty of MIT with his brilliance, and yet Will's life is a relational hell. Will knows all about everyone, but can't seem to know anyone. In the previous scene, he uses his knowledge of psychology to dissect his counselor's soul, and crucify his love for his deceased wife. The next day, his counselor takes him to a garden and says this:

Good Will Hunting movie clip:

[Sean and Will sit in the bleachers at the mostly empty park.]
[They look out over a small pond, in which a group of schoolchildren on a field trip ride the famous Swan Boats.]

SEAN:

So if I asked you about art you'd probably give me the skinny on every art book ever written... Michelangelo? You know a lot about him. Life's work, political aspirations, him and the Pope, sexual orientation, the whole works, right? I bet you can't tell me what it smells like in the Sistine Chapel. You've never actually stood there and looked up at that beautiful ceiling.

And if I asked you about women you'd probably give me a syllabus of your personal favorites, and you may have even been ---- a few times. But you can't tell me how it feels to wake up next to a woman and feel truly happy.

You're a tough kid. If I asked you about war you'd probably throw Shakespeare at me: "Once more into the breach, dear friends." But you've never even been near one. You've never held your best friend's head in your lap and watched him gasp his last breath, looking to you for help.

And if I asked you about love you'd quote me a sonnet, but you've never looked at a woman and been totally vulnerable. Known someone who could level you with her eyes. Feeling like God had put an angel on Earth just for you. Known someone who could rescue you from the depths of hell. And you wouldn't know how it felt to be her angel. To have the love to be there for her forever. Through anything, through cancer. You wouldn't know about sleeping sitting up in a hospital room for two months holding her hand because the doctors could see in your eyes that the terms "visiting hours" don't apply to you. And you wouldn't know about real loss, because that only occurs when you love

something more than you love yourself, and I doubt you've ever dared to love anybody that much.

--

Terrified of Love, we crucified love on a tree in a garden.

Eve took knowledge of the good and so crucified the good – the good is a person – took knowledge of God and so nailed Him to a tree, crucified the eschatos Adam. Well, that's what we talked about last time and we realized this isn't just a story about humanity and a tree in a garden long ago and it's not just a story about religious people and a tree in a garden in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago... it's a story about you and me, and the garden of your heart – today.

We also saw that according to Scripture (Deuteronomy 1:34, Romans 7:9, and even John 15:22), there was a time for each of us before we had the “knowledge of good and evil.” That's why in Deuteronomy it's the children who don't have the “knowledge of good and evil” that are allowed to enter the land. Perhaps that's why Jesus said *“You must become like a child to enter the kingdom.”* And that's why little Adam Beck lived in a rather “magical world.”

Like Alice in Wonderland, children are small and receive everything by grace. They don't have enough knowledge to use it as a weapon, and so defend themselves against love. Children know things by faith in persons, through relationship. Children know through surrender, rather than conquest. Remember the E.T. video clip last week? The adults and scientists wanted to take knowledge from E.T. by controlling him and cutting him to pieces. They wanted to know about him, but the children wanted to know him: E.T. – the extra-terrestrial man – the heavenly man – Eschatos Adam. Remember a scientist said to Elliot's brother, “So are you telling me Elliot thinks its thoughts?” And his brother said, “No, Elliot feels his feelings.”

To know God, you must become like a child. And knowing God, communion with God, is the essence of paradise.

And if you're following me, you ought to be asking one huge question (you can ask it in different ways):

- Why didn't God kill us all when we were children? Before we knew sin? Why did He let us grow up?
- Why would God put the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” smack dab in the middle of the garden, with two half-baked, naked people and an evil talking snake?
- And why would God command them not to eat, when they did not know if the commandment was good or evil, because they did not know if God was good or evil, for they had not taken the knowledge of good and evil?

In other words...

- Why did God subject the creation to futility, chaos, evil and the void?
- Why did God consign all men to disobedience?
- Why does God allow so much suffering in this world?

Well now let me switch gears for just a moment... I want to ask you a question. You know God a bit... What do you like about God? Turn to 3 or 4 other people, tell them your name and ask them this question.

Congregational Answers:

Comfort

Present all the time

Compassionate

Hope

Severe Mercy

Faithful

Grace

If you could put it all in a word, what would it be? Love.

Is it safe to say one of our favorite qualities is grace or mercy? Grace is the way we experience his love. You know everything is grace. Paul writes: *"Who has given a gift to God that he might be repaid for from him, to him, and through him are all things."* In other words, we didn't create ourselves. Everything we have and are is a gift.

Put your finger on your neck and feel that pulse. Its blood pulsing through your body. It's life. The life is in the blood. Our next heartbeat exists solely because God wills it to exist, and speaks it into existence through His Word. Everything exists by grace, but grace isn't just a thing, it's a person. What lies at the core of reality is not a formula like $E=mc^2$. No, the foundation of all reality is a person who is grace.

Carl Barth writes: "God's free grace is God himself, in His most inner and essential nature. God himself as He is"... "God himself is free grace."

You may say God is love, and He is, but His love for us is not love between equals. God is love, and we experience Him as grace, undeserved love – Hesed, that is mercy. God is grace (and we like that Grace – it's good). And Grace is a person. If you wrap Him in flesh, His name is Jesus, and His glory is revealed (made known) on a tree – a skulon – a cross.

In other words, the thing you like so much about God is Jesus, and more specifically, Jesus Christ and Him crucified... on a tree. As John puts it, *"Jesus from the bosom of the Father. He has made him known – made God known."* And God wants to be known.

Isaiah and Habakkuk (11:9 and 2:14) prophesy *"the earth ('the eretz', the land) will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, and water covers the sea."*

In The Revelation, John sees blood from a winepress. Wine that is blood, and blood is life, and it covers the land to the depths of a horse's bridle. In Luke, Zechariah prophesies that Jesus came to give *"knowledge of salvation in the forgiveness of sins."* That knowledge will cover the land, like water covers the sea. It flows from a tree on which the heart of God is crucified. *"Jesus Christ from the bosom of the Father, He has made him known."*

Ok, let's review.

1. Grace is good – we like it. God is Grace.
2. Grace is a person who...
3. Desires to be known. So...
4. God who is grace, and is good, planted a tree in the midst of the Garden – the tree of the knowledge of good and evil – saying “the day you eat of it, you will surely die.”

So if you did eat of it, in that day, there’s one thing that you’d surely know. God is good – you are evil, and you desperately desire, want and need grace. You need a helper, named Grace.

The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil – what exactly is it?

- A. Well, its knowledge, as we talked about last time, and you can take knowledge as in murder or rape, or you can receive knowledge as in a revelation of grace. Just because God said “don’t eat it” or “don’t take it”, doesn’t mean that he didn’t in some way plan to give it. Indeed, He gives you “all things” in Christ Jesus. He knew they’d take it, but I think even that was part of how He planned to give it.
- B. Well, the tree is knowledge, but more specifically it’s the knowledge of “good and evil.” If someone wants to take the “knowledge of good and evil,” what do they want? Law. And why would they want it? To judge – to justify.

Well, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is the tree of law. Romans 3:2 *“By works of the law, no human being will be justified in His sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.”*

If you’re ever confused about the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil”... why God would plant it, whether it’s good or evil, and what it’s for, read the book of Romans, and substitute the phrase “knowledge of evil” for “law.”

Romans 7:15

What then shall we say, that the Law (the knowledge of good and evil) is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for (the knowledge of good and evil) the law, I would not have known sin. Sin finding opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and by it killed me. So the law (knowledge of good and evil) is Holy and the commandment is holy, just and good. Did that which is good, then bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working death in me, through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and, through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.

You know, according to Scripture, Eve was sinful before she took the fruit, *“for whoever does not proceed from faith is sin.”* Eve took the fruit, because she didn’t have faith that God was good. And how could she have faith that God was good, without knowledge of the good?

Well, Eve was sinful before she took the fruit; she just didn’t know it. Kind of like Eve was uncovered, incomplete, and naked before she took the fruit; she just didn’t know it. She gave some to Adam, who was with her, and they both knew – knew that they were naked, unfinished, uncovered, and guilty. So they tried to cover themselves, finish themselves, redeem themselves, justify themselves, with “knowledge of good and evil.” They made excuses, they hid their shame and hid themselves in the trees, with the trees -- the law, and we’ve been doing it ever since.

God covers them with the skin of a sacrificial animal, and they're exiled from the garden, to the East. The garden is veiled and hidden. It's closed and guarded by the Cherubim, and a flaming sword. How will Adam (mankind) ever get back?

As we saw last time, the inner sanctuary in the Tabernacle or Temple was a picture of that sealed garden. There was a great veil and behind the veil, two golden Cherubim. Between the Cherubim in the Ark were the Ten Commandments – the knowledge of good and evil. On the ark, covering the law, was the mercy seat, where the High Priest sprinkled blood that was life. There God would commune with men above the Ark of the Testimony. Get this picture: Knowledge of good and evil, and life, veiled and guarded by Cherubim. The only way to enter was through blood – sacrificial blood, which covered the knowledge of good and evil, like God covers us with mercy. Terrifying. Mysterious. Awesome.

And I used to wonder “what’s the point?” I mean, I understand the law, the knowledge of good and evil, and the theology of grace, and “God, I said the prayer... I know the stuff. So why? Why the blood and the bleating lambs and the darkness and the fire? Why the mystery, confusion and pain? Why all the sacrifice in a temple of pain?”

Maybe God would sit in the garden and say, “Peter, you know about love. “If I asked you about love, you might even quote me a sonnet.” But you don’t know what it is to sacrifice your son for the sins of the world. Peter, you know about me, but I want you to *know me*.”

When Christ was nailed to the tree in the garden and died, that veil in the temple was ripped from top to bottom. “Revelation” literally means “unveiling.” The Fall was the great veiling, but Jesus Christ and Him crucified was the great unveiling... the unveiling of the heart of God, who is mercy, who is grace.

Romans 5:20 - *The law (knowledge of good and evil) came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.*

Romans 8:19 - *God subjected the creation to futility in hope.*

Romans 11:32 – *God has consigned all to disobedience that he may have mercy on all ... for from him, through him, and to him are all things.*

And He will fill all things with Himself, and He is mercy. You can’t be full of mercy and full of yourself. You can’t be covered in His righteousness if you’re covered in your own. And how could you receive mercy unless you know what it is? Unless you know you need it? Unless you “have the knowledge of good and evil?” Unless you know God is good, and you’re not?

When Jesus was crucified on a tree of law, in strict accordance with the religious leader’s knowledge of law. “We have a law, and by that law, he must die,” they said. Knowledge as a weapon – intelligence powered by malice. Jesus was innocent, and yet He became sin for us, the Sacrifice for us, the blood that covers our knowledge – mercy. And that’s good. That’s the good.

But do you see?

We take the “knowledge of the good” by murdering the good. For God to say “don’t eat the fruit of the tree” is to say “don’t take the life of my son.” And yet, that was His gracious choice... the plan from the foundation of the world.

His body and blood is knowledge of good, which exposes evil, and His body and blood is life. In Him was life, and we took His life. Yet even as we took His life, He gave His life. Even as we stole the good, He gave the good. He forgave His goodness and life, crying “Father, forgive!” At the cross, He ambushed the thieves with mercy. He ambushed the murderers with life.

His tree is knowledge of good and evil, and His tree is life. It’s law covered in blood. It’s grace. There’s one tree in the New Jerusalem and from it, flows a river of life which covers the earth with the knowledge of the glory of God, and the glory of God is grace. As Jesus cried “Father, forgive” and gave up His Spirit, like seed, the veil in the temple ripped from top to bottom. The way was open to communion with God, but not like Adam and Eve knew in the Garden – better than the Garden, for we become the garden filled with mercy. We become the Bride filled with her groom in ecstasy. We become the tabernacle filled with the glory of God.

And you may say “Cool! That’s neat. But that happened 2,000 years ago. And I don’t know about you, but it doesn’t feel like Paradise ‘round her.”

Well, the story happened in a garden at the foundation of the earth, and the story happened in a garden in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago, but the story is still happening in the Garden of Your Heart right now. You have been subjected to futility, in hope. You have been consigned to disobedience so that you might know mercy, so that you might know God, and not just about God, but really know God... be known by God. Like mercy born into you; like a manger of sorrow.

On the 6th day, the day He hung from the tree, He took bread, and broke it, saying “This is my body given to you.” And in the same way, He took the cup, saying “This is the cup of the new covenant in my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Drink of it, all of you. Do this in remembrance.”

This is fruit from the tree. Come to this table and confess your sin. Surrender the fruit you stole – your judgments – and receive His fruit: grace, mercy, Himself. It’s fruit. And the fruit is seed. The seed lodges deep in broken soil – the womb of your heart. Then you become just like Martha Beck (enamored with her knowledge), pregnant with His life – Adam. You are Expecting Adam, and not the first Adam, but the Heavenly Adam, the Eschatos Adam. It’s Christmas – Christ is being formed in you. He’s growing in you, and you actually become His Body. You see, you aren’t to simply know about God, you are destined to know God, and God is mercy.

So why all the suffering? Why did God subject creation to futility? Why did He consign all to disobedience? Why couldn’t we just stay children? Why did we have to grow up before we grow down? Why did He put the tree in the midst of the garden? WHY? And why did he put the tree in the midst of my garden?

He put the tree in the middle of the garden so we’d be sure to see Jesus Christ and Him crucified, there. Not just know about Him... know Him – the heart of God. It may not feel like a gift now, but it’s the greatest gift. Through all the pain and sorrow of this world, God is giving us His heart. So we wouldn’t just think His thoughts, we would feel His feelings.

So one day He might say: “Peter, you don’t just know about art, do you? My beauty is not just a theory to you... but you’ve been to my tree, tasted my body and drank my wine. Peter, you don’t just know about women. You know how it feels to love my bride, and be wounded by my bride. Peter, you don’t just

know about war, you know what it is to hold my children who've been raped by evil, and you know what I endured to set them free. Peter you don't just know about love, and the theology of mercy. Peter, you've been rescued from the depths of Hell by mercy. You've come to the end of yourself, and seen me hanging there in your place. Peter, you know about real loss and now you know real gain. Peter, you don't just know about me, you know me."

You see, your entire life in this world is an invitation to know mercy... as the one who receives it, as the one who gives it (gives Him, who is mercy). *"God consigned all men to disobedience that He may have mercy on all."*

So come to His tree. Come to the Holy of Holies. Surrender your disobedience, and receive his mercy. Receive Him - mercy. Knowing Him is paradise. In Jesus Name, don't trust your own knowledge, trust him. The Gospel.

Communion

--

Benediction:

Close your eyes. And let me ask you, "What hurts?" For some of you, maybe it's something you did. You had an affair. You broke up a relationship. You aborted a child. You told a lie. If it's something that you did, you need mercy. Maybe in your mind's eye, you can look up and see a tree. It's an ancient tree, and there's a man nailed to the tree. He loves you. A river flows from the tree; it looks like blood, and then it turns to wine. It's mercy. He lifts His eyes, He looks at you, and then He says "I forgive you." How does that feel? What is that like? Drink it. Ingest it. A while ago you said it was the thing you liked about God. It hurts to see it the first time, but it's good.

For others of you, maybe you hurt because somebody did something to you. They lied to you. They divorced you. They betrayed you. They slandered you. Do you see what they need? Mercy. You've received mercy. Now give mercy. I know it hurts. You're nailed to a tree with him. You see, there's a river that flows from the tree; it looks like blood, it turns to wine. And it sets them free. It's mercy. It's that thing you like most about God, and look, it showed up in you!

Maybe you're sick. Maybe your finances are falling apart. Well, you still ask for mercy. He's showing you His mercy. And have courage, mercy hurts in this world. Learning mercy... because learning mercy is a blood transfusion. But in eternity it all turns to life... and ecstasy and joy and beauty. And so have courage. The creator is asking you to know Him. And knowing Him is paradise.

So Lord Jesus, I ask that you would help all of us to surrender our lives to you every day, because you're waiting to know us, with mercy. And all of that mercy turns to joy. Lord Jesus, thank you for loving us. It's a severe mercy, isn't it? You're not safe, but you're good. And so, Lord Jesus, be born in us. Live your life in us, and take us home. Help us to believe. In Jesus name we ask it, Amen.