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# COVENANT HISTORY AND THE TREE OF LIFE

DS212—Doctrine of Humanity  
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## THE TREE OF LIFE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

- Genesis 2:8–9, 15–17
  - <sup>8</sup> And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. <sup>9</sup> And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life (HB: עֵץ הַחַיִּים; LXX: τὸ ξύλον τῆς ζωῆς) was in the midst of the garden (HB: בְּתוֹךְ הַגַּן; LXX: ἐν μέσῳ τῶ παραδείσῳ), and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.
  - <sup>15</sup> The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. <sup>16</sup> And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, <sup>17</sup> but of 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.”
  - Before we consider this in greater detail, just notice the references to the tree of life and the Garden of Eden which is described in the LXX as παράδεισος.
- Reformed Theologians on the Topic
  - Francis Turretin: “The tree of life served as a sacrament and symbol of the immortality which would have been bestowed upon Adam if he had persevered in his first state. . . . With respect to the future life, it was a declarative and sealing sign of the happy life to be passed in paradise and to be *changed afterwards into a heavenly life*, if he had continued upright.” (*Institutes*, 1:581)
    - Turretin understands that the tree of life serves as a sign and seal of immortality and heavenly glory obtainable by Adam if he continued “upright.”
    - For Turretin then, the tree of life is a symbol of what Adam would receive upon the condition of his perfect and personal obedience.
  - Geerhardus Vos has a similar view of the tree of life: “The tree was associated with the *higher*, the *unchangeable*, the *eternal* life to be secured by obedience throughout Adam’s probation (or time of testing). After man should have been made sure of the attainment of the *highest life*, the tree would appropriately have been the sacramental means for communicating the highest life . . . After the fall, God attributes to man the inclination of snatching the fruit against the divine purpose. But this very desire implies the understanding that it somehow was the specific life-sacrament for the time after the probation (*Biblical Theology*, 28).
  - The figures, symbols, characteristics, and features of Eden at the time point of creation are aspects of *protology* (the first things). The language for the goal of creation is *eschatology* (the ultimate things).
    - Protology concerns that which, as originally created is *provisional*, *partial*, and *temporary*.
    - Eschatology concerns that which is *permanent*, *perfect*, and *terminal*.

- Eschatology completes what is provisionally present in protology.
- This seems like a lot of speculation on an account in Genesis 2:7, which doesn't actually say much in detail about a future goal.
  - Looking at Turretin's and Vos's biblical reasoning should remind us of our previous discussion of theological methodology.
    - Vos says, "This same piece of symbolism (i.e., the tree of life) reappears in the book of Revelation and is associated with the heavenly goal of paradise for the people of God." (cf. Vos' *Biblical Theology*, 28)
    - Because the tree of life reappears at the end of history, it leads us to conclude that it has something to do with kingdom consummation.
  - The tree of life is presented as a pledge. It is the sacramental means and representation for the Church's participation in the consummate life in and through the resurrected Christ
- Therefore, we must read the entire Bible—not just typology or eschatology—in light of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

## THE TREE OF LIFE AND FUTURE BODILY RESURRECTION

- John references the tree of life in the New Testament in Rev 2:7b.
  - Revelation 2:7b—"To the one who conquers (Τῷ νικῶντι) I will grant (δώσω αὐτῷ) to eat of the tree of life (φαγεῖν ἐκ τοῦ ξύλου τῆς ζωῆς), which is in the paradise of God (ὃ ἐστὶν ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ τοῦ θεοῦ)."
  - Consider this context: Christ has ascended, and now he appears to John as the risen and glorified King of a New Creation.
    - Look how he is described: His hair is white like wool, his eyes are like flames of fire, his feet are like burnished bronze refined in a furnace, his voice is like the sound of many rushing waters, and his face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. Christ has been clothed with the glories of heavenly splendor. He radiates light.
    - In this context of the radiant manifestation of heavenly glory, Christ promises: "to him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God."
- This connects the work of Christ—the *eschatological man*—to a symbol of protology.
  - First, this means that Christ promises his church something associated with the glory and splendor of heaven.
    - The resurrected Christ reveals the heavenly, eschatological glory. Remember from 1 Corinthians 15:35ff, he is the ἔσχατος Ἀδάμ and the man of heaven.
    - He is present to offer something of the quality of life he now experiences. He will bestow something of his realm and mode of existence.
  - Second, while Christ *presently* experiences the blessings of heaven, eating from the tree of life in a paradise of God is something that he presents as a *future reality* for the church.
    - Notice that Τῷ νικῶντι is a present active participle dative masculine singular.
      - This is substantival, and is translated "to him who overcomes."

- The overcomer theme in Revelation has eschatological significance. It describes the person who attains resurrection unto life.
  - The verb here is also illustrative. Notice that δώσω is a future active indicative first person singular verb translated, “I will give.”
    - This means that the giving to eat, the notion of what is best understood as a future sacramental meal.
      - This also seems to be the force of the aorist active infinitive φαγεῖν, meaning “to eat.”
      - It remains *yet future* for the overcoming church.
    - δώσω has an indirect object αὐτῷ, which itself has the substantive participle τῷ νικῶντι as its antecedent.
    - Therefore, those who overcome are promised that they will participate in a future, eschatological, sacramental meal.
  - Third, this sacramental meal will involve eating specifically, “ἐκ τοῦ ξύλου τῆς ζωῆς.”
    - Jesus’s words seem to drive us to an important conclusion. Jesus promises the overcomer that he will eat from the tree of life. This is a blessing in accordance with the realm in which Jesus present belongs. He possesses glorified life (1 Cor 15:42–43—imperishable, honor, glory, power, Spiritual).
    - The blessing that is received is nothing less than glorified resurrection life.
      - This is clear from Jesus’s words to John in Revelation 1:17–18:
 

<sup>17</sup>When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, “Fear not, I am the first and the last, <sup>18</sup>and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.
      - The reference to the first and last in verse 17 (ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος) is immediately qualified in terms of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead (I died, and behold I am alive forevermore).
      - Jesus announces resurrection life to John. This is the reason Jesus tells John not to fear when John falls before him *as dead*. Coordinate this with John’s consideration of eternal life elsewhere (John 14:6; 15).
- If eternal life in John’s theology must be resurrection life through Christ, then the overcomer who eats from the tree of life must be resurrected bodily.
  - Ephesians 1:3 makes clear that believers have *every* Spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.
  - While this is a *present* reality, believers await a future bodily resurrection.
  - Therefore, the tree of life—as something that *will be granted* to the overcomer—symbolizes a future, bodily resurrection life with and in Christ.

## THE TREE OF LIFE: PARADISE AND HEAVEN

- This life also has a *heavenly* focus that transcends the present earthly reality.
  - We have been raised with him and are seated with him in the heavenly places (Eph 2:6). This is not protological/earthly life; it is eschatological/heavenly life.

- That is the realm (ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ τοῦ θεοῦ) in which the overcomer will be granted to eat of the tree of life in the future.
- We want to connect that future παραδείσῳ with heaven.
- The paradise of God has theological significance, especially when considered in light of Christ's resurrection.
  - If the protological paradise, Eden, was an earthly realm of imperfect, provisional life with God, the paradise of God to which Jesus refers is the heavenly realm of perfect eschatological life in Christ.
    - This is the realm of resurrection life, which we sought to establish as the blessing signified by the tree of life.
    - Paul shares something similar in Colossians 3:1–4—“If/since then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup>Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. <sup>3</sup>For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. <sup>4</sup>When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. The above is the heavenly arena—the arena of ascension and session, the arena of glory in resurrection life. This is the heavenly order with which the believer's life is now identified.”
    - In this context, remember Paul says that your life is now hidden with Christ in God. And when Christ appears, you will appear with him in glory.
      - John describes the future participation in resurrection glory in term of the categories of Eden.
      - Yet, the *earthly* Eden and its original tree of life have been *fulfilled and surpassed*.
      - And now Christ offers that life to his people—the overcomers.
    - Christ has obtained what was represented by the tree of life. He now has authority to bestow those blessings upon his people. He brings his people to live and reign with him in the paradise of God.
- There is both a continuity and discontinuity between the symbolic significance of the tree of life in the protological, prefall situation and the eschatological, postfall situation.
  - There is continuity in what is symbolized. It is the same in substance. The tree of life was/is a picture of eschatological life in the paradise of God. It would be bestowed upon the overcomer—whether to prefall Adam or to the redeemed.
    - The tree of life points upward and forward to eschatological life in the paradise of God.
    - Through Christ, we see what the tree of life symbolized/signified from the beginning. Though at the time, it was a shadow/type.
  - But there is also discontinuity.
    - The prospect of eschatological life was held forth to Adam simply on condition of his perfect and personal obedience.
    - But the prospect of eschatological life, the prospect of eating from the tree of life in the paradise of God *after the fall*, requires death and resurrection.
    - The church participates in the glories of resurrection life in an eschatological Eden through the mode of resurrection life in and with Christ.

## THE TREE OF LIFE AND THE NEW HEAVENS AND NEW EARTH

- Revelation 22:1–3 is another text that associates the tree of life with future heavenly glory.
  - <sup>1</sup> Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb (ἐκπορευόμενον ἐκ τοῦ θρόνου τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἀρνίου) <sup>2</sup> through the middle of the street of the city (ἐν μέσῳ τῆς πλατείας αὐτῆς); also, on either side of the river (καὶ τοῦ ποταμοῦ ἐντεῦθεν καὶ ἐκεῖθεν), the tree of life (ξύλον ζωῆς) with its twelve kinds of fruit (ποιοῦν καρποὺς δώδεκα), yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. <sup>3</sup> *No longer will there be anything accursed*, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him.
- To get a handle on this, we should notice some contextual observations from the previous chapter.
  - Revelation 21 describes the appearance of the New Heavens and New Earth.
    - The context focuses on the fulfillment of redemptive history in eschatological glory.
    - Revelation 21:1—“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth (οὐρανὸν καινὸν καὶ γῆν καινὴν), for the first heaven (πρῶτος οὐρανός) and the first earth (πρώτη γῆ) had passed away (ἀπῆλθαν), and the sea was no more.”
  - Notice that there is a displacement and replacement motif present in John’s theology.
    - There is a οὐρανὸν καινὸν καὶ γῆν καινὴν
    - And this appears because the first heaven and earth passes away “ἀπῆλθαν,” which is an aorist active indicative third person plural from ἀπέρχομαι.
    - Note also the connecting γὰρ, which indicates the reason for the emergence of the New Heavens and New Earth. The first heaven and earth pass away and emerging in its place is a New Heaven and Earth.
    - In summary, the πρῶτος gives way to the καινός.
  - This is language that demonstrates the eschatological order both *fulfilling and surpassing* the protological order of creation.
    - Then, beginning in Revelation 21:10 we see the same eschatological reality described in the language of typology. “And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.”
    - In line with Hebrews 12:18–29, for example, the eschatological order is described in terms of the city metaphor.
  - This means, then, that the New Heavens and New Earth is also a New Jerusalem. Christ *fulfills and transcends* what was present in the protological order of creation as well as the typological order of redemption.
- Now, let us consider features of Revelation 22:1–5 that connect future, eschatological significance with the tree of life imagery.
  - First, the reference to the throne of God clearly indicates that we are given a heavenly vision. John says that he is shown, “the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb (ἐκπορευόμενον ἐκ τοῦ θρόνου τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἀρνίου).”

