

# BodyLife Past Article Archive

## Feasting on the Tree of Life

By Wayne Jacobsen with David Hebden and Paul Young

BodyLife • August 2005

For those who don't think we truly died that day in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve chose the knowledge of good and evil over the Tree of Life, you only have to look at the human drive for personal fulfillment. Isn't it a search for life itself? I don't mean physical life that comes with breath and nourishment. I mean the deep, inner sense of peace and fulfillment that comes from a life well lived in the heart of God.

That's what he created us for and everyone is looking for it in one way or another, even when they don't realize that he is the only source of it. Many think they'll find life if they could just find the ideal job, mate, or dream home, or circumstances free of pain or anxiety. Very few, ever get all of those to line up at the same time, and those who do, even if only for a brief time, have assured us that these things are no guarantee of true life. In fact, ideal circumstances can expose how empty our inner life really is. Just ask Solomon. All our temporal joys are fleeting and with each passing day we are all reminded by our aches and pains, both physical and emotional, that we are slowly dying and there is nothing we can do to change that.

Jesus warned us that life doesn't consist of one's possessions. It is not found in what one owns or controls. It doesn't even come from finding the ideal church. True life, quite simply is the practical, knowable presence of Jesus in the reality of our days. It is an inner sense of safety and provision that our whole being is in his hands, and the fulfillment that comes from engaging his purpose in the world. This life isn't derived from circumstances, and in fact supersedes them all. It endures the most horrendous situations and even uses them to transform us ever more to be God's reflection in the world. I've watched people live in its beauty and serenity even in the most severe places of need and pain.

Jesus promised his followers again and again that his kingdom would flood their hearts with the abundance of life. He compared it to a spring of refreshing water flowing out of them and assured them that his words had in mind the fullness of their joy. These are the promises and assurances of the New Covenant - the joy of eternal life in this age with ever-increasing glory and its fullness in the age to come.

But not all believers find their way into that reality. Some do, most certainly, while others seem to search for it through a seemingly endless cycle of emptiness and frustration?

### The Life that Really Is Life

This article is a bit different. I have two co-contributors\* (some might say co-conspirators) on this piece

and that's because this is less an original article than it is an attempt to put into words something that is already coursing through the veins of the body of Christ. Over the last year I have heard numerous people from all over the world share a similar insight that has had a profound effect on transforming their spiritual lives. It has helped them find freedom from the flesh-focused attempts to please God or themselves, and allowed them to live simply in his reality. I've asked two of these to work on this piece with me so that we might blend our thoughts together.

Describing 'life' to one who has never tasted it is like describing color to someone who has been blind from birth. Even though something inside all of us searches for it desperately, it is not easy to actually define. It's something you have to experience to appreciate and even then, it can vanish again overnight to the gnawing demands of this age. Some give up the pursuit, jaded by their disappointments. Others hope for better days, but live constantly frustrated that it eludes them. Still others pursue a relentless search to find it again. But many find that the harder they try to grasp it, the more surely it slips from their fingers.

But this doesn't have to be. Jesus wants nothing more than to lead you into the fulfillment of an ever-deepening relationship with him. Nothing substitutes for this, not a good book, insightful teaching, doctrine or even expression of community life. Religion can't produce it, which is why there is no correlation between someone's religious zeal or activity and the depth of God's life they experience.

Where is that life? It is in Him alone (I John 5:11-12), and only by learning to feast on him as the Life itself, will we ever know the reality that our hearts desperately long for. But that takes eating from a different tree than the one we've grown accustomed to.

## **An Independence of Painful Consequence**

The drama of creation opened in a Garden called Eden where the physical creation was intermingled with spiritual reality in such a way that it was nearly impossible to determine where one stopped and the other started. The Genesis story of the Garden is dominated by the presence of two trees around which the destiny of humanity would revolve. Both trees had a spiritual essence and dramatic spiritual consequences would result from eating the fruit of either one.

The first tree was the Tree of Life. Adam and Eve were invited to eat of it freely and it would provide spiritual life that would make them immortal. But God strongly warned them about the other tree - the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Though it would open their eyes to good and evil it would also bring them certain death.

Their choice to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil ripped the fabric of the universe in two, separating the physical and spiritual dimensions. The consequences were immediate and fatal. They knew good and evil, but knowing they had partaken of evil flooded them with shame. No longer safe with each

other, they sought coverings to hide themselves from each other and to hide from the God with whom they had walked with every day in the creation. Death had begun its work.

What had they done? Why did this one simple act rend apart the universe? How could the eating of the fruit of this Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil been so disastrous? To put it simply, this was their grand declaration of independence. Until that moment only God had defined for them what was good and what was not good (evil). Creation was good, very good. Man being alone in the garden was not good.

In one tragic act, they had taken it upon themselves to determine what was good and not good for them apart from their relationship to God. They had said, "It is good to eat of this Tree" even though God had said it was not good. And they were wrong. Though they now possessed the knowledge to determine good and evil, they had no capacity to choose the good. They could only live by their own perception of what would make them happy, not by God's truth. The result truly was death - spiritual first, with physical death to follow.

### **Not By Principles Alone**

What an unfortunate inheritance! Instead of living in God's goodness they sought to establish their own, which turned out not to be goodness at all. Their selfishness and independence brought death into the world, the very fruit God said the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil would bear. Living by our own desires and doing what we think is best for our own lives, no matter how well intentioned, will leave us bereft of his life.

Sadly enough that is not only true of our fleshy pursuits; it is also true of our spiritual aspirations. We may even think we know what God wants for us, but once we begin to use our own wisdom and preferences to get there, we often end up unwittingly working against him. Jesus exposed how easy it was for the Pharisees to use the law to subvert the law. Instead of honoring their parents by giving them what they needed, they would declare their possessions 'dedicated to God' so they could keep it for themselves with all the religious justification that made them look holy. (Mark 7).

That's why we love following principles more than following Him. We can interpret principles in whatever way suits us. Even New Testament principles can be twisted to justify whatever we want and by doing so, death again works in us. How many people in the name of Jesus have exploited, and betrayed others, certain they were doing what was right? I've heard Scripture quoted to justify the most absurd desires - from building extravagant buildings, to treating others unjustly or pretending to withhold God's grace to punish those that will not conform.

Subtly we are drawn into the mistaken notion that by gathering enough evidence from Scripture or the experiences of other believers, we can conclude what is good for us in any situation. However, failing to

see how our own affections and desires shape our interpretations, we turn out to be wrong 90% of the time. Who of us would have confirmed Hosea's obedience to marry the prostitute, Jesus' surrender to his trial and execution, or Paul's journey into Jerusalem and certain imprisonment?

We may believe that the Father only gives His children good gifts. Jesus said so, claiming his Father would never give us stones for bread or a snake instead of a fish. But if we take it upon ourselves to judge those gifts on our own terms, we'll convince ourselves that the bread he's giving is actually a rock that will hurt us. Some of the things in my own life which I most ardently prayed against, and was devastated when they unfolded, turned out to be the very tools he was using to carve his image in me.

## **Give Us A Model!**

"But what does it look like?"

Whether I'm talking about personal intimacy with Jesus, or body life in his family, this is the most frequently asked question I get. And I always hesitate to answer. It's not that I don't know what it looks like. I do! It's just that it can look like a lot of different things depending on the person or people involved. God's creativity is limitless and though there are consistent underlying priorities to the way he works, those who want to know what it looks like instead of knowing him, will end up caught in someone's model rather than following the Master himself.

Jesus didn't leave us with models and that with good reason. He knew that any model could be easily exploited for personal gain. Instead he left us with his Holy Spirit who would guide us into all truth.

If our focus is on implementing models, no matter how Scriptural we think them to be, instead of living by the Spirit we will miss out on the fullness of his life. Don't get me wrong. Using the Scriptures as an objective compass certainly is a significant factor in knowing how God thinks and how God works in the world. But it does not begin to cover every situation with a principle or every task with a model. It invites us to know him, and only by following him will we find the life that really is life.

In our best efforts to apply principles or implement models we will end up judging good and evil for ourselves. Though we think we're following Scripture, we won't realize when we are only following our misguided interpretation of it. We will still seek to please our flesh on religious terms while convincing ourselves it is his leading. Meanwhile our mindset is still on the flesh and what is most comfortable for us, and that can only lead to death. As long as I am judging what is good and evil for myself, even the most well intentioned of us will end up marooned on the beach of our own reason.

## **A New Covenant**

I know many cringe when I encourage individual believers to listen to Jesus and follow him. We all know

people who claimed to be obeying Jesus as they divorced their spouse for an illicit love or started some outlandish ministry to their own ego. But don't let the abuse of something rob you of its reality. One of the greatest bondages perpetrated by religion is that Jesus is not able to make his way clear to each of us who want to follow him.

Isn't that what Jeremiah prophesied and the writer of Hebrews said that the death of Christ fulfilled?

For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord:

***I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. (Hebrews 8:10-11)***

How often do teachers tell us we don't need them or that we each have an anointing from the Spirit to discern truth and error? The New Testament underscores it multiple times. That's not to say teaching can't be a blessing to us, but if that teaching does not equip us to cultivate our own relationship with Jesus, it robs us of what he desires most. The life of Jesus cannot be lived second-hand. You can't find it by following guidelines and principles laid down by others, even the most gifted teachers. We experience his life only in a personal relationship where we learn to live in his purpose with his wisdom. That's a daily reality each of us is invited to live. Do I really trust people to live like that? That's not the point. I trust him who is able to lead his sheep, even the least of them, because they will know his voice.

He can make his way clear to you by the growing convictions that nestle in your heart as you draw close to him. Don't worry. Following Jesus as he writes his words on your heart will not take you further from the reality of Scripture, but closer to it. He will not serve your agenda, but dethrone it as he invites you into the fullness of his life. For there is no resurrection life unless we first die to our own ambitions, our own demands and our own wisdom.

## **Dieing to the Right**

Those I meet who live deeply in the life of Jesus have one thing in common: they are not using Christianity to get their way, but have abandoned their right to decide what is good or not good for themselves. That was the independence of the Garden and it will betray us every time. Even Jesus refused to do it. "By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me." (John 5:30)

If Jesus didn't trust his own judgment, how can we? To live in his life we have to die to the right to judge anything on our terms and learn to live out of our relationship to Father. To think we can figure out the great puzzle he is putting together, not only in our lives, but also in the lives of others around us and the

church around the world, is to assume intelligence none of us possesses.

Imagine how our lives would change if we stopped wasting the energy we spend frustrated over past events or worried about future ones and used it instead to draw near to him and learn to listen to his heartbeat? He wants to lead us and for us to trust him even through the most brutal circumstances. Clearly he is capable of using even horrendous evil to advance his purpose in us. That doesn't mean we'll ever celebrate evil, or even that God orchestrates it, but neither will we ever give up in the face of it. Joseph was a great example here. He recognized that God was using the great evil his brothers had plotted against him to put Joseph in the very place that would fulfill his wider purpose.

The decision not to judge anything has for me been a very conscious decision with deep and profound ramifications. While I am constantly tempted to decide what is good or evil I don't have the finished picture nor do I have all the puzzle pieces. I am only one piece in the puzzle myself and my place is not to move other pieces around but to simply rest in His hand and let Him put me where He will. I don't even have to seek out my place in the puzzle!

### **At Rest in His Work**

I've thought a lot lately about Peter walking on the water. What if Peter had not let the sea and wind distract him from Jesus? He might have ended up standing beside Jesus, surveying the roiling waves and tossed boat, ready for whatever Jesus wanted to do next. Yet I have more often been like Peter, crying out to him in the midst of the tumultuous seas that I 'know' are dangerous. Once you give up deciding for yourself whether or not the seas and the wind are dangerous you will find yourself beside Him surveying the scene secure that it is in his hands. He may see it as good and that what is 'not good' he will take care of anyway.

I am learning albeit, very slowly, to simply be thankful in everything including the tumults that rage in my own mind and watch in awe as He uses them as opportunities to teach me to walk on water. As long as we live to our own agenda, even what we think God might desire for us, we will miss out on the very life he is giving to us. I find my prayers changing from "God, change this!" to "Father, how are you working in this for your glory?"

When we die to the right to determine good and evil for ourselves we find the freedom to feast on the tree of Life. No longer growing frustrated when our comfort zones are breeched, we are free to see his purpose unfold and not be bogged down by our agenda. Now we are free to live in his life, not be plagued by our own agenda. This has a three-fold effect:

***Freedom from our Unresolved Past:*** Instead of whipping ourselves with blame, or remaining paralyzed as a victim of someone else's bondage, we can see him draw a line of purpose through our past.

There is nothing so heinous that he cannot work into his plan for our lives. There is no failure that his mercy cannot overcome. In Father's hands, even the most painful events in our past become places where he transforms us and builds his compassion for other wounded lives into our hearts.

***Freedom from our Imagined futures:*** Jesus warned us to, "Take no thought for tomorrow" and "Be anxious for nothing." How much of our energy for living is sapped because of our fears and anxieties about the future. But God does not live in our imagined futures. When we do, we live apart from him, which is why stress overcomes us there. By determining what good we want or what evil we must prevent, we end up manipulating everything and everyone around us.

***Freedom to Live In the Moment:*** Jesus had the amazing ability to live in each moment with his eyes and ears on his Father. By living in each moment, free of the past, unharried by the future and divested of his own agenda, he could live in the middle of Father's life and purpose as circumstances unfolded around him.

This is the tree Jesus wants you to feast from and the power of his cross makes it possible. As he reveals his love to you, you too, will find yourself increasingly skeptical of your own agenda and preferences. Instead of wasting all your efforts trying to sculpt your life the way you want it, you'll find the joy of living in the middle of his purpose working out in you. You'll be able to embrace him and his work in you as easily in times of trouble as in times of ease. And by standing in his unfolding purpose you will know the truest joy of being his son or daughter in the world.

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