

The Meaning of the Tree of Life

by the Rev. Kurt H. Asplundh

Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city (Revelation 22:14).

Think of a tree. It grows silently with inner strength, pushing out new buds, adding height and girth. It may bend under the lashing winds of a storm, but, if rooted firmly in the ground, it sustains the storm and stands through the seasons. Some trees live for centuries, giants on the earth.

Solomon, the king of Israel who was known for his wisdom, was fascinated by trees. "...he spoke of trees, from the cedar tree of Lebanon even to the hyssop that springs out of the wall..." (I Kings 4:32). The Temple he built for the worship of the Lord was framed with timbers of Lebanon. Another of Solomon's famous buildings was called the "House of the Forest of Lebanon" because its beams rested on 45 cedar pillars, thirty cubits high. It must have seemed like an indoor forest.

Throughout the Word, from beginning to end, we find mention of trees. The Lord appeared to Abraham at the oak groves of Mamre where He promised the birth of Isaac. In the Psalms, David describes the man who trusts in the Lord as being "like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season" (Psalm 1:3). When the Lord approached Jerusalem at the time of the Passover feast, the people cut down branches from the trees and carried palms to hail Him as their Savior King.

Perhaps the most memorable trees in Scripture are the two particularly mentioned in the garden of Eden: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. At first, it was the tree of life that could be seen in the midst of that paradise of God. But Adam and Eve favored the other tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and they ate of it. After that, Adam and his wife were driven out of the garden and cherubim were placed at the east of Eden with flaming swords to "guard the way to the tree of life" lest the man "put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat of it."

The tree of life is not mentioned again in Scripture until John's visions on the isle of Patmos. Then, John saw the tree of life in its new setting in the Holy City. "In the midst of the street of it and of the river...was the tree of life bearing twelve fruits, yielding its fruit every month" (Revelation 22:2).

The tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil are not trees such as we know. Rather, they are supernatural trees seen in the spiritual world. These two trees, and all the trees mentioned in the Word, are symbolic. "A person himself, in all that belongs to him," we are told, "is like a tree" (*True Christian Religion* 374:3). "There is also a correspondence between a person and a tree" (*Apocalypse Revealed* 400). This is plain from the description of the person whose delight is in the law of the Lord. He is said to be "like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither..." (Psalm 1:3).

The fruitful tree pictures the fruitful life of a good person. On the other hand, the selfish or useless person is pictured by a non-productive tree. Therefore the Lord warned in His Sermon on the Mount, "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Matthew 7:19). It was of people that the Lord said, "By their fruits you will know them" (Matthew 7:20). So it is with all the things in the Word which are said of the trees. Something about the life of people is meant. This signification of trees draws its origin from the spiritual word, we are told, "for in that world trees of every kind are seen, and the trees that are seen correspond to the interiors of the angels and spirits...the most beautiful and fruitful trees to the interiors of those who are in the good of love and thence in wisdom; trees less beautiful and fruitful to those who are in the good of faith; but trees bearing leaves only, and without fruits, to those who are only in the knowledges of truth; and horrible trees, with poisonous fruits, to those who are in the knowledges and in evil of life.... It is from this we are told further, that 'trees' are so mentioned in the Word, and by them are signified the things with men that belong to their minds..." (*Apocalypse Explained* 109:2-3).

Trees, then, symbolize our life and power. The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church tells us that "a tree...corresponds to a person, the tree to a person himself, the wood to his good, the leaves to his truths, and the fruits to his uses" (*Apocalypse Explained* 1084:6).

While the various trees mentioned in the Word correspond to human affections and the fruit to uses, the tree of life does not represent a person and his good. Instead, we are told that the Lord "is the tree of life, from whom comes all good with the person of the church..." (*Apocalypse Revealed* 89). The source of all life is the Lord Himself. This is clear from the Lord's own teaching where He says, "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit: for without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

The tree of life signifies the Lord as to His Divine love. Like a tree that takes root and grows, and brings forth fruit, the Lord's love must find root in our life and give us the inner strength to bring forth uses. "As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me" (John 15:4). By the tree of life, therefore, is meant a person "living from God, or God living in a person" (*Conjugal Love* 135).

This was the state of mankind in most ancient times. Adam and Eve lived in the Garden of God. They drew their life, at first, from the tree of life that was in the midst of the garden. They ate of every tree, but the essence of their life and joy was from Divine origin. Another tree was in that garden: the tree of knowledge of good and evil. At first it was at the border, or circumference, but Adam and Eve made it central to their lives, putting it, instead of the tree of life, in the midst of their garden. While the tree of life signifies the Lord, and the person who lives from Him, this tree signifies the person who believes that he lives from himself and not from God (see *Conjugal Love* 135:2).

We have a spiritual choice in life symbolized by these two trees: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We can choose to strengthen our life from God; or we can choose, instead, to believe that we are gods, and that the love we feel and the wisdom we possess is our own, to do with as we see fit.

The Heavenly Doctrine says that these trees “are in every person...to signify his freedom of choice to turn to the Lord or to turn away from Him” (*True Christian Religion* 520e). Indeed, even in the heavens, we are told, “in some of the gardens there, trees of life are seen in the middle parts, and trees of the knowledge of good and evil in the boundaries, as a sign that...[the angels]...are in free-will in spiritual things” (*Coronis* 27:3).

It is notable that the Scriptural story begins in a garden and ends in a city. Adam and Eve, signifying a fallen race of humankind, are sent from the garden of God because they have taken the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. All of Scripture is the account of the way back. Cherubim with flaming swords guard the way back to the tree of life. It cannot be regained, once lost, by a miraculous return. People can only be regenerated gradually, the Heavenly Doctrine points out. Just so, “a tree cannot reach its full growth in a day...” (*True Christian Religion* 585). The way back is through a process of spiritual development pictured in the Scriptures by journeys, wars, planting and harvesting, the clearing of wilderness and the building of cities. The Messiah comes to teach people of a heavenly kingdom, and of the secret and silent growth of seeds. Though rejected, He promises a return. He gives, at last, a new vision which is the hope of the fallen race. It is the vision of the Holy City, New Jerusalem, recorded in the 21st and 22nd chapters of the Apocalypse. This, clearly, is a place of refuge for us. It is the City of God, the Tabernacle of God, the place where He can dwell with us and we can be His people again.

And what did John see in this city? “In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life...” (Revelation 22:2). Throughout Scripture, since the expulsion from Eden, there has been no mention of this wonderful tree. Yet, in the final chapter of the Word, it is revealed again. Indeed, the Lord, in speaking to John earlier, had promised, “To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God” (Revelation 2:7). And, finally, He says, “Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city” (Revelation 22:14).

What does all this mean? What is the hope of this vision? Most simply, this Holy City is a New Church established by the Lord for the salvation of humankind. Its foundations of precious stone, its streets of gold, its pure river of water of life signify the pure and precious truths of religion which the Lord has newly revealed. The “way back” to the tree of life is through the Word, we are told. Doctrines have been revealed, which, like the leaves of the tree which John saw, ‘are for the healing of the nations. Those leaves, we are told, signify *rational truths* “by which they who are in evils and thence in falsities are led to think soundly, and to live becomingly” (*Apocalypse Revealed* 936).

The Holy City is protected by walls, yet its gates are never shut. All are invited to enter through any of the twelve gates, to come again into the presence of the Lord. But who will come in? Those who “do His commandments,” and who “overcome” in themselves the loves of evil and falsity.

We are told that “The operation of the Divine providence for the salvation of a person begins at his birth and continues until the end of his life and afterwards to eternity” (*Divine Providence*

331). In illustration of this progression, the passage suggests:

Watch a fruit tree. Does it not first have birth as a slender shoot from a small seed, and does it not afterwards gradually grow to a trunk and spread forth branches, which are covered with leaves, and then put forth blossoms, and bring forth fruit, depositing therein new seeds by which it provides for its perpetuity? As there is a correspondence between a person's life and the growth of a tree, let a parallel or comparison be drawn between them. A person's infancy is comparatively like the tender shoot of a tree sprouting up out of the ground from the seed; his childhood and youth are like that shoot growing into a trunk with its little branches; the natural truths that every one first imbibes are like the leaves with which the branches are covered...the person's initiation into the marriage of good and truth, that is, the spiritual marriage, is like the blossoms that the tree brings forth in the spring time; spiritual truths are the petals of these flowers...spiritual goods, which are the goods of charity, are like the fruit... (Divine Providence 332).

This pattern of spiritual growth is repeated often in the Heavenly Doctrine, showing the orderly progression by which we are gradually led to the fruitfulness of spiritual life. The Heavenly Doctrine adds this: "A person is a corrupt tree from the seed; but still there may be a grafting or a budding with shoots taken from the tree of life, whereby the sap drawn from the old root is turned into a sap forming good fruit" (*Divine Providence* 332:4).

What is the result of this transformation of our life? We find new happiness and new strength. This is the promise of the text: "Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city" (Revelation 22:14).

To "have the right to the tree of life" means to have power from the Lord. The tree of life, seen here in the Holy City, signifies the Lord Himself, particularly the living Divine love that flows from Him and is received by those who "do His commandments." This is the quiet inner strength that sustains us and brings us happiness in life. The tree of life brings forth its fruit every month, and in every state of our life, the Lord's power can sustain us from within. Though the winds of temptation and the floods of evil may beat upon us, we are firmly rooted in the Lord.

To have power from the tree of life is to have quiet confidence that the Lord will guide and comfort us. For "Blessed is the man...[whose] delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night. He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither; and whatever he does shall prosper" (Psalm 1:1-3).

Amen.

Lessons: Genesis 1:31-2:17; Revelation 21:9-11, 22-27; 22:1-5; *Conjugal Love* 13.