

The Two Trees

Life is all about choices. There are some who believe that free will is an illusion, but they are missing out one of the most vital parts of human existence. When God created finite beings that have the ability to make choices, he knew he was giving himself whole mass of big problems. Yet he still did it, because only free creatures have the ability to love and to return love.

We often think that the most fundamental choices we have to make are moral ones. We are continuously faced with choices between good and bad, right and wrong, good and evil, selflessness and selfishness... We can come up with all sorts of ways to guide our decision-making, which can generally be categorised under a few headings:

- **Rules:** The law (secular or religious) gives a set of rules that can be applied in all circumstances which give clear instructions on how to proceed. The law tries to depersonalise moral decision-making. In a law-based system, the only choice the individual has is whether to obey the law or not. The Old Testament, from the Book of Exodus, Chapter 20, onwards is the record of a people attempting to live by God-given laws. Jesus' fiercest opponents were those upholding this law to the exclusion of everything else.
- **Consequences:** People in our society today make moral decisions largely by trying to predict the impact of their actions (on themselves and others). The problems with this approach are all around us. How can we accurately forecast what will happen as a result of our actions? How can we balance the possible positive effects of what we do to one person, with a negative outcome for someone else? The arguments about human-originated climate change are an example of the complexity of trying to make moral decisions on the basis of the prediction of consequences.
- **Motivation:** In reaching a moral decision it is often a good idea to examine one's motives. The reasons why we take a particular course of action should be subject to scrutiny, particularly if we can decide whether we are really loving our neighbours as ourselves. However, while this is closer to the Christian ideal than rules or consequences, it is not a foolproof method for exercising our wonderful gift of free-will.

Our inability to come up with a way of deciding how to live our lives that satisfies us (even if we forget God's perspective on all this) suggests that perhaps we are asking the wrong questions. What if there are more fundamental decisions to be made? Perhaps we need to go right back to basics to get clarity on all this. So let's look at how things started. According to the Bible, the first decision that the human race was confronted with was between two trees in a garden.

Genesis 2:8-9...16-17 Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. And the LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground – trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil... And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree

of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.”

Adam and Eve had a real choice as to which tree to eat from¹, but the choice is not between good and evil, but between life and the knowledge of good and evil, and the later choice included death².

Religions differ in the set of rules that they ask their adherents to obey and they have various methods to encourage obedience, e.g. the fear of hell. Down the centuries, Christian churches also have also come up with codifications of the moral teaching found in the New Testament. It is as if we have given up any hope of reversing the first decision of our ancestors, and are content to work within the constraints of living with the knowledge of good and evil. However, the Christian faith is never about making the best of a bad job, Jesus does not call us to ‘make do’ or to compromise. He came to give us the opportunity for each of us to go back to the decision between the two trees.

The third chapter of John's Gospel has probably had more study applied to it than any other part of the Bible. As the first Bishop of Liverpool wrote:

*The conversation between Christ and Nicodemus... is one of the most important passages in the whole Bible. Nowhere else do we find stronger statements about these two mighty subjects, the new birth, and salvation by faith in the Son of God. The servant of Christ will do well to make him thoroughly acquainted with this chapter.*³

There has been much speculation down through the centuries as to why Jesus chose Nicodemus, ‘the teacher of Israel’ (John 3:10) to speak about being born again, but it becomes clear when we realise that he is a real expert on the law. If you needed to make a serious moral decision, Nicodemus was the person who could tell you what the rules say and how to apply them. Jesus was offering this man the opportunity to start again from scratch, to abandon all that he knew and to remake a fundamental decision as to how to live his life.

It is typical of Jesus not to shrink back from a challenge – in human terms Nicodemus had more to lose than anyone if he abandoned the law as the foundation for his life. Yet perhaps because he knew the law so well, he also knew its limitations. We can be grateful to John that he reassures us of Nicodemus' later choice (see John 7:50 and John 19:39).

So what is this fundamental choice? The other tree in the garden is called the Tree of Life. Life starts at the point of conception, and Jesus told Nicodemus that he needed to be ‘born again’. The word used in the Greek of the New Testament for ‘born’ is *gennaō*, which also means to conceive or to beget; it can be applied to the father's part in the production of a new life, as well as the mother's.

John 3:5-8 Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no-one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised

¹ See Genesis 3:22

² The Hebrew of Genesis 2:17 is very emphatic; it has the word for ‘die’ twice.

³ John Charles Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels, St. John*, 156, page 120

at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

There have been a number of theories as to what Jesus meant by being ‘born of water’. Some say that this refers to baptism, others to the way a woman’s waters break just before she gives birth; but the most natural explanation is that Jesus is speaking about a father’s physical contribution to a new life. This means that to be born again is to be fathered by God through the activity of the Holy Spirit. As we became fleshly beings at our natural conception, so we become spiritual beings when we are ‘born again’. We inherit physical characteristics from our earthly fathers so we take on our heavenly Father’s nature in an analogous way. John has already introduced us to this idea in the prologue to his Gospel.

John 1:12-13 Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.

Again the word used for ‘born’ is *gennaō*. In order to be born the first time, your mother consented to allow a new life to be conceived in her. Mary consented by allowing the Holy Spirit to be the means whereby the Son of God was physically conceived in her.

Luke 1:38 “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.” Then the angel left her.

We need to give our consent to being born again, to allow the Holy Spirit to come upon us. Our old fallen nature is, in a sense, the mother of our new being. We give our consent to a most intimate union with the creator of the universe, so that we can receive his nature.

By implication, this is taking the fruit from the tree of life, accepting that our decision-making will not be based on any kind of knowledge, except that of actually knowing God himself, and what pleases him. It is interesting to note that there is one Hebrew word, *yada*, which means ‘to know’ and ‘to sleep with’. For example,

Genesis 4:1 (AV) And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man from the LORD.

When we are born again we are given an ongoing intimate knowledge of the one who is perfect goodness, we have access, not to a body of knowledge that has been accumulated over the years but to *the* truth. It must have been hard for Nicodemus – Jesus was telling him that the investment that he had made in building up his expertise in the law of God now needed to be thrown away. All of us, including this man, need to stop going back to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and to wait for revelation from our heavenly Father through the working of the Spirit. Church leaders today, often have difficulty in accepting what God is doing, because they know it may mean that their investment in acquiring knowledge and expertise based on a previous move of God will become worthless.

Jesus told Nicodemus what this will mean:

John 3:8 “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

If people kept the law according to Nicodemus and the other Pharisees, they were totally predictable. Jesus, when he was on earth, was the complete opposite – as you read the Gospels, you never know what he is going to do or say next, because he is in constant communion with the Father:

John 12:49-50 “For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it. I know that his command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say.”

If we are to be children of God, then we need to deliberately choose to follow our elder brother and live life the same way. Jesus was born again when he was raised from the dead:

Colossians 1:15-18 Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.

When Jesus was born again (from the dead) he was even more unpredictable – he was not constrained by physical limitations. The change was so great that sometimes the disciples needed time to recognise him. This is still the case, we sometimes need to spend time in discerning his voice and his manifest presence, but he is always willing to make his identity clear to those who love him.

So we have discovered a fourth way of making moral decisions:

Relationship: Jesus made decisions through listening to his Father and seeing what he was doing. Although this sounds idealistic, impractical, liable to error, etc. etc., he is calling us to live the same way. If we are willing to receive Jesus and to believe in his name (John 1:12) we too can live as God’s children.

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