

The New Testament Tree of Life

Sermon by Rev Dr John Kennedy

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In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. Revelation 22:2

In a vision John saw a throne, a river and a tree. The throne was "the throne of God and of the Lamb", the river was "a pure river of water of life", and the tree was "the tree of life".

The river issued from the throne, and the tree was "on either side of the river". The pure water of that river as a "water of life" must represent to us the outflow of Jehovah's covenant of grace, originating in an exercise of His own sovereign good pleasure, as He is for ever seated on His throne as God. But never could that water of life proceed from the throne of God unless it were the throne of the Lamb. He, as "the Lamb slain" (Revelation 13:8), opened the channel of this river, and as enthroned He lives to make the outflow perpetual, in order to the everlasting life of those on whom bore the gracious purpose of Jehovah. The Spirit who eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son comes as the Spirit of grace and of life from "the throne of God and of the Lamb" – the Father sending Him in Christ's name, the enthroned Lamb sending Him in the exercise of His own acknowledged right as "both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36), while the Holy Ghost Himself comes in the plenitude of His own sovereign grace and in the power of omnipotence, to do what is required in order to the fulfilment of the Father's purpose and to rewarding the travail of the Son in securing an everlasting salvation to all the Israel of God. A glorious river verily is this, flowing from a glorious throne!

And if, in thinking of the source of this river, we must rise to "the throne of God and of the Lamb", we must not fail to associate with it "the tree of life". The river is not apart from the tree, and it is only as the river reaches us that we can reach the tree and know that its fruit can feed and that its leaves can heal us.

In directing your attention to this text, I purpose to speak of:

1. The tree of life
2. The situation of the tree of life
3. The fruit of the tree of life
4. The leaves of the tree of life
5. Application

1. The tree of life

When we look back in the light of the Old Testament we see an earthly paradise and a tree of life in the midst of it, and when we look forward in New Testament light we see the heavenly paradise and the tree of life in the midst of it. That tree of life in the Garden of Eden we must connect with the covenant of works, this other with the covenant of grace.

In the earthly paradise the tree of life was a sacramental tree. The gift of its fruit, by God, would have sealed man's right to everlasting life if he had fulfilled the conditions on which that life had been promised. If man had been content, as well he might, with the free trees of the

garden, and refrained from touching the fruit of the testing tree, then in due time, when its fruit would be ripe and man's period of probation would be passed, the produce of the sealing tree would be given to him, and life for evermore would be Adam's, both for himself and for all his posterity. But Adam sinned, and finally forfeited (so far as the covenant of works could avail) all right to life, and the seal of that life was carefully placed beyond his reach. But here is a tree of life that secures life, and life eternal, to all the objects of divine love, though they were "dead in sins" (Ephesians 2:1,5) and "children of wrath, even as others" (Ephesians 2:3). The site of that earthly paradise cannot now be discovered – its trees are all gone, of its tree of life there is now no trace, and the spot of the earth on which God covenanted with man may now be no better than a bit of waste wilderness. But in the paradise above there is "a multitude, which no man could number" (Revelation 7:9), and they all feed unceasingly, and shall for ever feed, on the fruit of the tree of life which is in the midst of the street of their city.

He who said, "I am the true vine" (John 15:1) and who also said, "From me is thy fruit found" (Hosea 14:8), who is "life" (John 14:6), "the Prince of Life" (Acts 3:15), "the Bread of Life" (John 6:35), "the Resurrection and the Life" (John 11:25), and who dispenses "the water of life" (Revelation 22:17), is, and must be, "the Tree of Life". The life associated with this tree makes manifest that it sets Christ before us.

But when we think of a tree intended to bear fruit, we cannot refrain from having it before our minds as something that was planted and that grew. But how can we so think of Christ, who is eternal and infinite? True, we cannot – we dare not – trace Him personally to a beginning, nor conceive of Him as affected by any change. But when we think of Him as Mediator, and have Him before our minds under the emblem of a tree, it is essential to a right conception of Him that we consider Him as a tree that was strangely planted and that strangely grew.

We regard the tree of life as planted when we think of him as "set up from everlasting" (Proverbs 8:23) in order (as the Federal [Covenant] Head of the elect of God) to secure to them, according to the grace of God, the benefit of everlasting life. He was then planted as a tree, in order to His being the Tree of Life to all whom the Father gave Him.

Growth we can associate with Him only when we think of Him as the seed of the woman (Genesis 3:15). But what growth appears as we view Him when incarnate! And the growth is just what might be expected in the case of a tree intended to be the tree of life. Think of His miraculous conception and birth as without sin (Hebrews 4:15). Think of His youth and all the season of His quiet retreat and holy meekness in Nazareth. Think of His public ministry, with all its labours and sufferings. Think of His death on the accursed tree, of His burial in the grave of Joseph. Think of His resurrection from the dead, of His ascension to glory, and of His having sat down "on the right hand of the majesty on high" (Hebrews 1:3) in the very nature in which He was born in a stable and slain on a cross. And then consider that, as the result of all this, He has an endless life which is to be developed in giving life to a countless multitude dead in sins! O, surely the tree which thus grew is the "Tree of Life"!

2. The situation of the tree of life

This is described in the text. And what a blessedly strange tree this is, for we are told of its being in heaven, and yielding fruit to all there, and of its being at the same time on the earth, yielding fruit to the hungry who are there!

1. Firstly: It is in the midst of the street of the city. This city is heaven, and there the tree of life is so situated as to be perfectly visible and accessible to all, and ever yielding its blessed fruits to all.

How the vision there of Christ differs from believing on Him here we cannot fully know till we have realised both in our own experience. But this the believer knows while he is here, that

there is much which interposes between him and such knowledge of Christ as he fain would obtain, that there are aspirations from his heart which strain through the believing to the seeing. But not yet can he see Christ as He is. He must be like Him ere he could endure thus to see Him. But he shall soon perfectly be like Him. When this is attained, he himself shall have a perfect power of knowing whatever is presented to him, and to him thus perfected there shall be an opportunity of seeing Christ "face to face" (1 Corinthians 13:12). No veil on his face, and no veil on Christ's: how visible shall He be to all His saints! All of them shall behold the tree of life which is in the midst of the street of the New Jerusalem.

And perfectly accessible shall the tree be which is in the midst of the street. All can reach it there. And all there desire to be near to Him who, while the Lamb in the midst of the throne, is the tree in the midst of the street. How could saved men dispense with being near to Him? How could they feel at home if their kinsman who is on the throne be not beside them? How could they lift up their eyes to the throne unless they were fed in the street? But he shall be as accessible there as they shall desire Him to be. His infinite love desires that they should be near to Himself. And there is now no reason why these, who are white because washed in His blood (Revelation 7:14), should be kept at a distance. He is the public property – the common good – of all the saints in heaven, for He is to them as a tree in the midst of the street.

And He shall supply them all with food. All their views of the divine glory reach them through Him, all their experience of divine love, all their communing and all their service are from, and with, and to God, through the Lamb, for ever and ever.

2. Secondly: The tree of life is situated "on either side of the river". I cannot regard this as a mere repetition, to a certain extent, of what was previously said about the situation of the tree of life. It was described in the first clause of the text as being in the midst of the street of the city above. This does not required to be repeated. By the two sides of the river, we are not to understand the heaven side and the earth side of it. The river has gone forth like the stream seen by Ezekiel (chapter 47), and it has reached the wilderness of this world, and it is as there that on either side of it is found the tree of life. It is on either side of the river because it represents Christ as preached in the Gospel to every creature and putting forth His power to draw all men unto Him.

And there is much to be learned from this association of the river with the tree. It tells us of a distinction between the dispensation of the Holy Ghost in His gracious influences, and the revelation and offer of Christ in the Gospel. But we must not separate the things which the Lord has joined, though we may distinguish them. Neither the river without the tree avails, nor the tree apart from the river. But "river" and "tree" set two things before us.

This association of "tree" and "river" teaches us that unless the Spirit of life reach us, never can we profit by the Gospel through deriving from Christ those priceless blessings which are treasured in His fullness of grace. "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him." "It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing." Such is the teaching of Christ Himself, and let us never forget it.

But there is a sense in which we may associate the "river" and the "tree" with Christ Himself. He can both rightfully give and faithfully fulfil the promise of the Holy Ghost. He has Him in all His fullness dwelling in Him, as the Head of His people. It was He who opened up the channel for the outflow of His Spirit. He pleads for Him in the exercise of His priestly power with God, and in the use of His kingly power He sends Him. It is because of this a poor, witless, helpless, hopeless sinner may look to Him from the ends of the earth, and with a gleaming of hope listen to His words of grace as He says, "Turn you at my reproof: behold, I will pour out my Spirit unto you, I will make known my words unto you" (Proverbs 1:23) Let not the felt want of faith keep you from the object of faith, for He is the author of faith (Hebrews 12:2) as well.

But in whatever state you are, the river of life has long been flowing through this land of ours,

and many dead have been quickened, and many quickened ones have been sanctified. O, friend, do not be content to be passed by. And Christ, the tree of life, is near, as near as the word of the truth of the Gospel can bring Him – so near that you do not require to leave the spot on which you are in order that you may reach Him; so near, that He is at the door of your heart, entreating and commanding you to let Him in – so near that if your will inclines toward Him, He and all His fruit are yours for ever.

3. The fruit of the tree of life

As to the fruit, two things are affirmed: firstly, that it bears “twelve manner of fruits”, or twelve crops of fruit, and secondly, that it bears a crop every month. If “crops” be substituted for “manner” in the first of these statements, the second would seem to be a redundancy. But whichever rendering is adopted, the instruction is the same – all required in order to having life, and life “more abundantly” (John 10:10), is always to be found in Christ. Let us look to the fruit-laden branches of the tree of life and then consider it as unchangeably fruitful, month by month, till the last year of the believer’s life closes in a triumph over death, and he enters into the place where there shall be no more day and night, and when time shall be counted by months no more.

1. The branches of the tree

Firstly: Look to the fruit-laden branches of the tree of life. We referred to the only growth which we could associate with Christ, and the various branches into which the tree of life was developed during that growth.

His birth in our nature is the first of these branches. O, look on, friend, and see what faith can find there! A friend, who is the Son of God and the Son of Man: a kinsman, yea, one who is not ashamed to call the seed of Abraham brethren (Hebrews 2:11); and who, being Emmanuel, is standing in their nature “under the law” (Galatians 4:4) in order to act the part of Surety for the unjust. O, is there not fruit there? Yes, verily, and it is sweet and strengthening – it can be joy and refreshing as well as food to one’s heart.

His life of obedience to the Father who sent Him is a second branch laden with precious fruit. How much of gladness and of strength would be found if a sinner condemned by the law, but still loving it, discerned by faith how the law was magnified by that obedience, and how it could afford to let the sinner go when, in his behalf, it received so much honour from Him who is its Lord. Many a sweet feast have wearied souls found when partaking of fruit such as this!

And His atoning sufferings, crowned and closed in death, is a third branch of the tree of life. And O what fruit it bears! He, in His death, fully satisfied the demands of divine justice, exhausting the curse, making an end of sin, sealing the everlasting covenant by fulfilling all His promise as His people’s Surety, and thus procuring for them a right to all its blessings, overcoming (when he seemed defeated by it) the power of the world, bruising the head of the Old Serpent, and fully opening the channel in which a river of the water of life might flow from the throne of God. O, it would be easier to tell what is not here than to tell what is, that is fitted to be fruit pleasant and healthful to the Church of God.

And His resurrection is another fruitful branch. Was it not this which formed the crowning evidence of His being the Messiah and the Son of God. How sweet is this to a poor soul, tormented by the unbelief of his own heart and by the many objections with which that heart is plied! How often, poor soul, have you felt constrained to say, “O that I could say without guile, Jesus of Nazareth is both the Son and the Christ of God!” And how precious the fruit of the resurrection branch is to you when the Spirit of faith enables you to discover how he who died on the cross was “declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead” (Romans 1:4). And was there not given in Christ’s

resurrection a demonstration of the Father's satisfaction with the work which He finished in His death? And how sweet is this to every soul who desires peace through the blood of the cross! From the empty grave of Jesus beams the light of God's face, and they who in faith have looked into its emptiness shall stand in that light. And how sweet is the resurrection life of Jesus, who was crucified, to all who truly seek Him! A living, loving Saviour for a living, loving soul. And how abundant and good and pleasant is the fruit to be found on the ascension branch of the tree of life! In the very nature in which He died and was buried He went up on high – in true, but glorified, human nature. And He ascended as the Forerunner of His people. After passing through death, He went as an unclothed spirit up to the paradise of God, and can thus sympathise, believer, with you when your spirit is unclothed in death. And when He had passed through resurrection, He went up to heaven with His spirit clothed in a glorified body. Thus both in death and in ascension He was the Forerunner of His people. And the Forerunner was a Conqueror in His ascension – He "led captivity captive" (Psalm 68:18). Sin, Satan, the world, death, and the grave were bound as captives to His chariot wheels, for a victory over all these was won by Him for all who are will willing to be debtors to Him for redemption. And all this is fruit on this branch of the tree of life! O, what feasts has faith found here for the hearts of poor oppressed ones in days gone by! And this branch is quite as fruit-laden today as ever!

And think of the enthronement branch of the tree of life and of all the fruits which it bears. In our very nature, and as His people's Covenant Head, He has taken His place in the midst of the throne. There, in the Son's place, He has the Son's power for the salvation of His people. He is a High Priest upon His throne (Hebrews 8:1), "an Advocate with the Father" (1 John 2:1), "able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him" (Hebrews 7:25) – a sympathising friend as well as an effective pleader. And He is a King upon His throne. All the treasures of divine grace are at His disposal. All power in heaven and on earth has been given to Him (Matthew 28:18), all the angels are His ministers (Psalm 104:4; Hebrews 1:7), all His people are His property, and all His enemies are His captives and shall yet be His footstool (Psalm 110:1; Hebrews 1:13). O, how endless is all the wealth of fruit which faith finds on this branch of the tree of life!

And now look over the branches of this tree, after thinking of Him who is called the Tree, as having in Himself, personally, "all the fulness of the Godhead bodily" (Colossians 2:9), and having also in Himself, mediatorially, all the fullness of divine grace for His people. What does such a birth as His, such obedience under the law (Galatians 4:4,5) as His, such an atoning death as His, such a resurrection, ascension and enthronement as His, yield of precious, healthful and sweet fruit to all who "hunger and thirst after righteousness" (Matthew 5:6)! Verily they shall be filled with good things (Luke 1:53) who eat the fruit of the tree of life.

2. The fruit of the tree

Secondly: This tree yields its fruit every month. There is abundance and variety enough suitably to supply the wants of all the spiritual Israel of God, and the twelve manner of fruits are borne each month of the year. The tree is always laden with ripe fruit. On no month, during all the Church's appointed year of life, can a poor, hungering soul fail to find all the rich fruit of this tree on its branches, and on each month too benefit from this tree shall reach all the "poor and needy" (Psalm 70:5).

Your year, believer, has its seasons and its months. It has its winter, its spring, its summer and its autumn. And on every month, in each of these, this tree is laden with fruit. In the life beyond death – in the land of promise – there will be the ripeness of autumn, the brightness and the warmth of summer, and the freshness of spring together, but there shall be no trace of winter beyond the Jordan. But here the Church's experience is something like that which we have, in our own unsettled climate, where winter intrudes into all the seasons, where bits of the weather of all of them may make up the climate of a week.

(a) The winter months

The Church of Christ will surely have experience of winter months.

First, the Church of Christ will have experience of a dark month, when the face of God is hidden and her hope is almost gone. All light is withdrawn, such as was wont to shine on her when the Word was read and the closet prayer was offered, and when she sought Him in the gates of Zion. She cannot reconcile this darkness with a "good hope" (2 Thessalonians 2:16) of an interest in the favour of God. And the Prince of Darkness finds his opportunity as a tempter under the shadow which is lying on her heart. "Hath the Lord forgotten to be gracious?", "is His mercy clean gone for ever?" (Psalm 77:8,9) are the questions which she is constrained to ask in this dark month. But if there is guilt lying on her conscience while the frown of God is causing the shadow of a dark cloud to rest upon her, and if because of this her heart – sad and almost despairing – is still looking Christwards, there will be meanwhile benefit from realising the holiness of God and admiring it, even when expressed in a frown; and a lesson learned regarding the sovereignty of Him whose is the right to determine when one is to be brought out of darkness into light. And the time is appointed – and shall come – when faith shall find redemption through blood as one of the fruits of the tree of life, and enjoying it anew, shall pass into liberty and light again.

Second, there is the winter month of icy hardness. All frames and feelings that once were pleasant are now gone, like the flowers and the grass on an ice-bound field or garden. No true sense of sin is felt, no impressions of eternal things remain, longings after Christ no longer stir the heart, no wonders are seen in the law of God, there is no outpouring of the heart in prayer, no liberty and gladness in any service. Coldness down to the core of the heart, and no trace of anything there but of the dead, cold, insensate stone. But you learn a lesson, friend, on such a month as that which will be profitable, and at its close you will taste fruit that shall gladden you. The lesson is, "without me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5), and the fruit is the grace of the promise, "I will pour out ... the spirit of grace and of supplications: and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him" (Zechariah 12:10). Towards this fruit of the tree of life you were wistfully looking during your month of felt hardness, but you only reached it when the Comforter came with it to your soul.

Third, there is the winter month of storm, of which the Church has experience. Sometimes the storm comes in the form of afflictive providences, which cause the Church to ask, "If I were a child, would the Lord deal thus with me? And how can I be the better of what so much occupies my thoughts, and interferes, as do the weakness and pain of my body, with meditation on the things of God?" Or the storm may come in the form of assaults by "the prince of the power of the air" (Ephesians 2:2), sweeping before them all spiritual thoughts, and filling the void with suggestions which it is agony to consider, and carrying in every possible obstruction to the exercise of hope. Or the storm may come in the form of persecution by the world. From this the Church has no escape, and should be more afraid of the want of it than of the pain of it. And sometimes all these forms of trial may come at once. Not infrequently have the godly had experience of this accumulation of trouble. Lying on a sick bed, assailed by the powers of darkness, you have to read some paragraph in which the malice of an enemy has been expressed in defaming you, and you have felt as if heaven, earth, and hell were all at once against you. But this was but preparation for producing in you a felt helplessness, which is the Lord's opportunity of relieving the oppressed. For you even then there was fruit enough on the tree of life. What apples are these! "When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee" (Isaiah 43:2). The Lord "shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly" (Romans 16:20). "In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

(b) The spring months

And in the Christian year on earth there are spring months.

First, there is the boulder month. There was a deep ploughing of the soil, and there lay on the surface a covering of boulders and furze, which hid all soil out of sight. Thus, sometimes, seems the state of the soul which has been torn up by a work of conviction. How hopeless it seems then to expect that any spring sowing of the seed of the kingdom can be of any avail. But if you cannot find but an old heart of stone within you, there is a new heart before you, as one of the fruits of the tree of life. "A new heart will I give you, and a right spirit will I put within you". Do not fold your hands though you should feel as if a volcano from hell itself had burst up within you. He can give the soil that suits the seed, and this is one of the "twelve manner of fruits" on the tree of life.

Second, There is a spring month of sowing in tears. There is a bitter remembrance of how neglect had allowed the field to be fallowed, and there is affliction because of what is now found in the soil, when the plough has furrowed it. But there is sowing. The word has been received in faith, and Christ therein as "all and in all" (Colossians 3:11). The power of the truth has begun to tell on the heart, and there are some meltings of affection and some desires for holiness. But sorrow prevails, though the light of hope causes some gleaming of the eye, from which the tears, expressive of that sorrow, are falling. There is some desire for a good reaping time, and some hope which keeps the toiler on the waste field from folding his hands in despair. You, believer, have often had experience of a month such as this. But "they that sow in tears shall reap in joy" (Psalm 126:5), and you may look for the grace of such a promise to the tree of life.

Third, there is a spring month of budding, however. The soul is conscious of such movements of heart as seem to indicate that the good seed has taken root and has begun to spring. This is a hopeful month. The prospect of a summer growth and of an autumn reaping is now greatly brighter than on the spring months which went before. But spring joy must always differ from the joy of autumn. How soon may a blighting wind come that shall nip the buds over which one but lately rejoiced. Your faith may be weakened, your impressions of divine things may be effaced from your consciousness, your sorrow for sin may subside into a sense of hardness, and the fervour of first love may cool down into formality. But they who "go forth with joy shall be led forth with peace (Isaiah 55:12) and the Lord will watch and water the field which He has sown. Keep your eye then and always on Him who says, "From me is thy fruit found" (Hosea 14:8).

(c) The summer months

There are summer months in the Christian's year. But his summer is very like those to which, in this northern climate of ours, we are accustomed. It is as much of a winter, or at least of a springtime, as it is a summer. But we are accustomed to call it summer to distinguish it at least by a name from the other seasons of the year.

First, there is the dry scorching month. There is sunshine, but no rain, there is brightness but there is blighting. It would seem then as if there could be no growth, such as would ripen into autumn fruit. In your summer, believer, there is such a month as this. You are not troubled with the fear of being an outcast. You have the brightness, but the summer rain does not come down. Growth is a-wanting, and signs of blight appear, and you have waited in vain for a shower. On no part of your field is there any appearance of freshness and vigour. You are a mourner even in the time of sunshine. But you must learn who it is alone can send the rain, and bow to His sovereignty, and wait for one of the Lord's "times of refreshing" (Acts 3:19), with our eye on the grace of the promise which is one of the sweet apples on the tree of life – "I will pour water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground" (Isaiah 44:3).

Second, there is the month of rain and sunshine. There is growth then. Warmth and moisture make this month a genial summer one. Of this you had experience when the Lord so revealed Himself to you as to bring you down and to draw you near, and when under His face you could walk, and find peace and pleasantness in His ways. This is always a pleasant month. But you

need then, as surely as at other times, to receive fruit from the tree of life. You need grace to keep you humble, and to make you wise, when you know that you have grace in your heart, as surely as you need it when you are afraid that you never did receive it, and are prone to despair that you ever shall. Never shall the moment come when you can dispense with fruit from the tree of life.

Third, there is the calm month of outward quiet and of inward peace. Neither in your body, nor in your household, nor in your work, do you encounter any special trial, and there is no hiding of the Lord's face from your soul. The Lord sometimes encompasses His children with a still, bright atmosphere while causing their peace of heart to abound. Not that a sense of sin has quite departed from their consciousness, for this they must have to the end; but they are enabled to contend successfully with the flesh, trustingly to look to the Lord for the victory, and to rejoice in the hope of receiving it. At such a time they need to keep their eye on the tree of life that they may receive as fruit what shall keep them watchful unto prayer. Enjoy your calm summer month, and do not spoil to yourselves the enjoyment of it by anticipations of a coming storm; but never forget your dependence on Christ, without whom "ye can do nothing" (John 15:5), and remember the words of Him who said, "What I say unto you, I say unto all, Watch" (Mark 13:37).

(d) The autumn months

There are autumn months in the year of the Christian's life, even on earth.

First, there is a month of disappointment, such as the farmer has when, as the fields are ripening, the crop is short and thin, and no prospect remains of his having his barns filled as he once expected. Thus often feels the true Christian when he surveys his own attainments and the fruit of all his labour. It is not his fear that he shall have nothing to gather, but it is his shame that he has no more. But for the more fruit which he misses, let him seek where he found what he received – in Him who is called The Tree of Life, and who says, "from me is thy fruit found".

Second, autumn has its month of wind and rain, when there can be no gathering of the crop, no filling of one's bosom with sheaves. You know you have reaped a harvest, but you cannot gather and enjoy it. Thus feels the believer when he is so harassed by worrying work, and so perplexed with trials that he cannot have the enjoyment arising from the hope of an interest in Christ, and thus feels Himself deprived of the joy of harvest. Friend, keep your eye on The Tree of Life, that you may be drawn from all that intercepts you from it. Come and take your place under its shadow, and its fruit will be sweet to your taste (Song 2:3); your waning love will be revived, and joy shall be yours "in hope of the glory of God" (Romans 5:2).

Third, there is the month of assurance and of foretaste. This is like the time when believers in the camp of Israel were not only rejoicing in hope of reaching the land of promise, but actually tasting the grapes of Eshcol. O, this is a good and a glad time! He knows that he has produced in new obedience fruit unto God, and that by the blessing of God there has been fruit of his labours in spiritual good to others. And already he knows that he could not be happy away from Christ, and without being utterly and for ever away from sin. Already, too, he is enjoying a foretaste of heaven in the gladness with which he meditates on the glory of God, and in the peace and gladness which he finds in fellowship with Him through the Lamb. O, let him look then, as he never looked before, to the tree of life, that he may discover anew whence came to him all the grace which he received, and whence all must yet come that is required to prepare him for the rest for which his soul is longing.

4. The leaves of the tree of life

The leaves grow out of the tree, there remains a vital connection with the tree; among them

the fruit is to be found, and they often so cover it that it must be searched for beneath them. To what do the "leaves" in the emblem direct our eye, as we turn towards Christ? To what, but to the words of God in Scripture, and especially to the words of grace in the Gospel of salvation. These are the outgrowth of the grace of Christ, as the prophet anointed by God, for He, by His Spirit, gave them to the Church as He received them from the Father. There is an ever abiding and living connection between Him and the word of God, in which He is revealed and offered, so that through the truth He can be grasped by faith, and so that He is ever ready to respond to faith, and to secure its exercise, by bringing His power to bear on the soul through the word. To all carnal understandings Christ and all the benefits secured by His death are hidden in the word, and only by those who search the Scriptures, under the Spirit's guidance, can these benefits be found and enjoyed.

These "leaves" – these words of Gospel grace – "are for the healing of the nations". The Gospel is "preached unto the Gentiles" (1 Timothy 3:16) – to every creature in all the world to whom the word of salvation has come.

But these leaves cannot be the means of healing to any to whom they are not skilfully and graciously applied by the Spirit. This is His work of grace. "He shall take of mine," saith Christ, "and shall shew it unto you". But He wounds ere He heals; He kills ere He makes alive. He convinces of sin through the law, ere He convinces of righteousness by the doctrine of the Gospel, and convinces of judgment by the power of the Gospel. It is His to choose the leaf which to apply to a sin-sick soul; and only to a wound does He apply it, because it is intended to be healing. And He never fails to find a leaf for every sore, whatever it may be, and whoever among the nations may be affected by it. He can effectually apply the word to the understanding to cure it of its blindness, to the conscience to remove its sense of guilt, and to the heart for the cure of all its plagues. He can effectually apply the word to the man who is in felt bondage through the fear of death, to him who is mourning under a sense of corruption, to him who is panting and pining for access to God, to him who is walking in darkness and having no light, to him whom the enemy is oppressing, and who finds himself helpless under his power, to him who is suffering from the persecution of the world, to him who is trembling in view of his dying, to him who is, in prospect of work, weak even to fainting, and to him who has destroyed all his peace and spirituality by his backsliding. To all these the Spirit can apply for healing the leaves of the tree, and those with whom He thus deals are those who, in any nation, can spread a healthful influence around them.

The Gospel often acts as a check where it does not act as a cure. Its doctrines and its fruits tend to produce this result. To know it, to some extent, gives conscience an opportunity of being a drag on progress in overt sinning, and the influence of Christian living is such as to operate in the same way on the conduct of the ungodly. But to those in all nations whom God purposed to save, it shall be applied to the certain effect of their being healed of all their spiritual diseases, till they attain to the full health of perfected conformity to Christ, and enter the city in which no inhabitant shall ever say, "I am sick" (Isaiah 33:24).

5. Application

1. How sad is the condition of those who keep away from The Tree of Life! He who is so called has not kept away from them. And He has come near in all His fruitfulness and in all His healing as well as quickening power; and they with the starving and diseased soul refuse to be indebted to Him for life, or food, or healing! And what if they so continue to the end? In the very measure of Christ's greatness and grace is the awfulness of His wrath when its day shall at last have come. O, friends, how can you dispense with all that Jesus as The Tree of Life can be and do for sinners? Whither will you bring your wants and thirst if you go away from Him in whom all fullness dwells, by whom every wound can be healed, and who is "the true God, and eternal life" (1 John 5:20)?

2. Blessed are they to whom The Tree of Life gives food and healing. What good can they lack? Let them not straiten their desire, nor abate their trust, nor abandon their dependence, nor stint their song. And let them remember that their days of hunger and of sickness shall soon come to an end. Then shall they pass up to be beside The Tree of Life in the midst of the street of the New Jerusalem.

3. Let all who have tasted the fruit and experienced healing from the leaves of The Tree of Life not forget to pray for the nations, that the pure river of water of life may reach them all, and The Tree of Life which is on either side of it, and that healing by the application of "the words of eternal life" (John 6:68) may produce in them all both righteousness and peace.