

“Of Trees & Tears”

Genesis 2:16-17, 3:8-15 ¹

Some of you already know that I’m a big fan of C. S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia*.² Lewis wrote *The Chronicles* as birthday presents for his niece from 1950-1957, and he intended for them to be read aloud. I actually read all seven books to Nathan and Anna on five different occasions when they were children.

Narnia retells the biblical story in a unique way that taps into children’s sense of wonder and mystery, and there are many poignant and moving scenes in those books—so many, in fact, that it was an almost nightly occurrence for Nathan and Anna to gently laugh as they said to each other, “Daddy’s crying again!”

How long has it been since you wept? Can you remember the last time? What kinds of things make you cry? Sometimes we cry because we’re sad. Some people tear up when they get really angry. And sometimes we’re able to get beyond ourselves enough to actually be weeping for someone else.

The Old Testament prophet, Jeremiah, is often called “the weeping prophet” because of his frequent references to his tears, shed for his people: “*Oh, that my eyes were a fountain of tears; I would weep forever! I would sob day and night for all my people*” (Jeremiah 9:1). “*I have cried until the tears no longer come. My heart is broken, my spirit poured out, as I see what has happened to my people*” (Lamentations 2:11).

Jeremiah wept over the sins of Israel as he foretold God’s imminent judgment, as that judgment arrived, and in the aftermath of its destruction. And that is, after all, the difference between a true prophet and a charlatan: a charlatan announces God’s judgment with a sense of glee and hatred; an authentic prophet announces God’s judgment with a loving heart that is truly and deeply broken.

You and I tend to think of Sin as an offense against God’s LAW, such as the Ten Commandments, and that understanding is correct, so far as it goes. But our Sin is much more than simply an offense against God’s Law; on a deeper and truer level, our Sin is a betrayal of God’s LOVE.

I’ve enjoyed reading several books by the somewhat unorthodox popular theologian, Donald Miller. One of my favorites is *Searching for God Knows What*,³ and one chapter of that book speaks powerfully about *God’s* experience of *our* sin

“I have a friend,” Miller wrote, “who overheard his wife on the phone with another man. She did not know he was in the house, and he walked up behind her and leaned against the frame of the door to hear her confess her love and her enjoyment of the other man’s touch. My friend drove around Baltimore in a daze; he went into coffee shops and sat with his head in his hands. He went to a bus station and bought a ticket to Pittsburgh, but he missed his bus because he spent an hour throwing up in the bus station bathroom.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on April 24, 2016. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture is from the *New Living Translation* (Tyndale, 1996).

² http://smile.amazon.com/Chronicles-Narnia-Box-Set-Lewis/dp/0061992887/ref=tmm_pap_swatch_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=1461091614&sr=8-2

³ http://smile.amazon.com/Searching-Knows-What-Donald-Miller/dp/1400202752/ref=dp_ob_title_bk

“Our systematic theology reduces the fall of man to a technical act of betrayal,” Miller wrote. “We hardly think of it as relational at all. But I think this view distorts what actually happened. I think God must have felt like my friend in Baltimore.”⁴

“All this makes me wonder what God must have felt, arriving on the scene just after the Fall, knowing that all He had made was now ruined, and understanding at once the sacrifice that would be required to win back the hearts of His children from the grasp of their seducer. I see God in my mind walking the paths, calling to the couple, and meeting their eyes for the first time. I see Adam and Eve shaking in absolute terror, wondering what had happened, confused by the broken promise of a snake, feeling at once the loss of the trustworthiness of their first love and wondering if God would ever love them again. I see them feeling the hot breath of God’s anger and emotion, hearing God speak for the first time, not as a friend, but as One who had been betrayed: ‘Who told you that you were naked?’”⁵

Can you begin to sense the difference between an offense against Law and an offense against Love? The whole point of the Law always was—and is to this day—God’s loving provision of a road map that leads us out of the wasteland of our rebellion into the radiance and fragrance of God’s Love. The fact that God’s Law and God’s Judgment are actually dimensions of God’s Love didn’t really become clear until after God chose to be born in human flesh and to live among us; but once we know that, we can see it even in the apparent harshness of much of the Old Testament. Let’s look at how that all this works in the words God gave to Jeremiah. . . .

The Bible tells us that “*no prophecy in Scripture ever came from the prophets themselves or because they wanted to prophesy. It was the Holy Spirit who moved the prophets to speak for God*” (2 Peter 1:20-21). Jeremiah’s call was like that: “*The LORD gave me a message. He said, ‘I knew you before I formed you in your mother’s womb. Before you were born I set you apart and appointed you as my spokesman to the world.’*”

‘O Sovereign LORD,’ I said, ‘I can’t speak for you! I’m too young!’

‘Don’t say that,’ the LORD replied, ‘for you must go wherever I send you and say whatever I tell you’” (Jeremiah 1:4-7). Here are some of the words that God told Jeremiah to say

“When I brought you into a fruitful land to enjoy its bounty and goodness, you defiled my land and corrupted the inheritance I had promised you” (2:7). “My people have done two evil things: They have forsaken me—the fountain of living water. And they have dug for themselves cracked cisterns that can hold no water at all!” (2:13).

“So now the LORD says, ‘Stop right where you are! Look for the old, godly way, and walk in it. Travel its path, and you will find rest for your souls. But you reply, ‘No, that’s not the road we want!’” (6:16). And so God said, “The bellows blow fiercely. The refining fire grows hotter. But it will never purify and cleanse them because there is no purity in them to refine” (6:29). “No amount of soap or lye can make you clean. You are stained with guilt that cannot be washed away” (2:22).

So what were the offenses to which God referred in these judgments? Let me mention just three, with their modern counterparts. And each of these is, if we really understand it, an offense against Love.

The first category of offense against which Jeremiah preached was **idolatry**: “*To an image carved from a piece of wood they say, ‘You are my father.’ To an idol chiseled out of stone they say, ‘You are my mother.’ They turn their backs on me, but in times of trouble they cry out for me to save them!*” (2:27). Can you hear in this the heart cry of Love? Of course, you and I are

⁴ Donald Miller, *Searching for God Knows What* (Nashville: Nelson, 2004), pp. 83-84).

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 85-86.

generally more sophisticated than to worship statues. Instead of statues, we modern sophisticates worship things like status in the community, fancy houses, fancy cars, fancy clothes, fancy clubs, and lots of money in the bank—but the effect is the same. We're having affairs with other lovers, and it breaks God's heart.

The second category of offense was **child sacrifice**: *"They have built the pagan shrines of Topheth in the valley of the son of Hinnom, where they sacrifice their little sons and daughters in the fire. . . . They have filled this place with the blood of innocent children"* (7:31, 19:4). The most obvious way in which we are guilty of child sacrifice these days is in our hideous practice of abortion as birth control. I doubt that Israel was ever guilty of so much innocent blood as we are in this respect. But there is a more subtle and much more pervasive way in which we sacrifice our children.

When we allow athletic activities, artistic pursuits, academic achievement or pleasurable endeavors to become more important in the lives of our families and of our children than nurturing the relationship our children have with God, then we are in actuality sacrificing our children to false gods. Make no mistake about it. Our children know what our real priorities are, and if our true priority is not our children's relationship with God, then we are leading them away from Him, and we will be held accountable for that.

The third category of offense about which Jeremiah preached was **injustice**. Speaking of the king, Jeremiah said, *"By not paying [fair] wages, he builds injustice into [the walls of his palace] and oppression into its doorframes and ceilings"* (22:13). And in response, God said, *"I will be merciful only if you stop your wicked thoughts and deeds and are fair to others; and if you stop exploiting foreigners, orphans, and widows"* (7:5-6).

Other prophets added that the people *"spout empty words and make promises they don't intend to keep. So perverted justice springs up among them like poisonous weeds in a farmer's field"* (Hosea 10:4). *"They trample helpless people in the dust and deny justice to those who are oppressed"* (Amos 2:7). *"Righteousness and fair play are meaningless fictions to you"* (Amos 5:7).

Unfortunately, we can see ourselves here, as well. Whether it be importing cheap goods from third-world sweatshops, winking at the employment of illegal workers, paying workers as little as we can get away with, paying women less than men for the same work, or ongoing prejudicial practices in employment, justice has long taken a back seat to luxurious consumption in our land, and it is for this reason among others that many in our world hate us.

Such things as these are no fun to contemplate, and those who first heard Jeremiah didn't like them, either. His neighbors plotted to kill him (11:21), he was flogged and imprisoned in a dungeon (37:15-16), and he ended up kidnapped and taken hostage to Egypt, where he apparently died (43:1-9).

But we still need to remember that this whole story is really about Love. Listen to these words God gave Jeremiah: *"Give them my entire message; include every word. Perhaps they will listen and turn from their evil ways. Then I will be able to withhold the disaster I am ready to pour out on them because of their sins"* (26:2-3). *"Now, Jeremiah, say this to them, 'Night and day my eyes [that is, God's eyes] overflow with tears. I cannot stop weeping for my virgin daughter, my precious people"* (14:17). *"Is not Israel still my son, my darling child?" asks the LORD. 'I had to punish him, but I still love him. I long for him and surely will have mercy on him"* (31:20). *"I am as likely to reject my people Israel as I am to do away with the laws of nature!"* (31:36).

"For I know the plans I have for you," says the LORD. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope" (29:11). *"Long ago the LORD said to Israel:*

I have loved you, my people, with an everlasting love. With unfailing love I have drawn you to myself (31:3). *“This is what the LORD says, ‘O Israel, my faithless people, come home to me again’ (3:12). ‘My wayward children,’ says the LORD, ‘come back to me, and I will heal your wayward hearts’ (3:22). Can you hear God’s passionate Love in these words?”*

Long, long ago, the heavenly court was gathered for a solemn assembly. The leaders of the Council of the Archangels had requested an audience with God. “With all due respect, Sir, we have serious concerns about your plan to create another race of free beings. In our humble opinion, your last creation hasn’t turned out so well. As you know, Lucifer and his rebel army continue to wreak havoc in the cosmos even to this very moment. Are you really sure that you want to go ahead with this ‘human’ thing?”

. . . And God formed Adam and Eve of dust and breathed the breath of life into their nostrils; and they became living beings. God planted then a garden in the east, in Eden. There he put the persons whom he had formed.

“Oh, no, Eve! I think he’s coming. He’s walking in the garden in the coolness of the day.”

“WHERE ARE YOU?”

“Can’t you see, all-seeing Seer? I’m picking daisies here with Mother Eve, daisies of good and evil . . . she loves me, she loves me not.”

“WHO TOLD YOU THAT YOU WERE NAKED?”

“This is good. Who told me, Lord? So tell me when I’m sick; or maybe that I ought to see the barber; but I can manage this one by myself.”

“THEN HAVE YOU EATEN OF THE TREE?”

“THE tree? Good grief! You plant existence in a forest, a veritable jungle where one cannot discern his right hand from his left, and then expect me to distinguish tree from tree! I skipped the merit badge for trees. I am no forest ranger. Trees. Be more specific: the tree of life . . . the tree of the knowledge of good and evil . . . the tree which grows “in the midst” . . . the tree “from which you told us not to eat.”

“Let’s face it, Lord, this is unreasonable. You ask about a tree; forget your silly tree. I will ‘confess’—the woman whom YOU gave to be with me, she gave me fruit.”

“WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?”

“Oh, all right. No more than this: we take the gift with thanks but spurn the Giver’s counsel for its use; or at the very worst, the gift accepted, we reject the Giver.

It may be said we were tricked (a term in any case untrue, since, if deceived, we wished to be deceived). But we were not. We gained the promised knowledge, and we live, enjoying it.

“YOU are the problem, Lord. You force us into disobedience. The theologians want to call it pride, or even by the stronger term, rebellion. But this is nonsense. It is our nature to spurn the docile role of subjugation; to be not merely creature, but creator; to stand . . . alone.

“You give us all creation, to be sure—then shake a disembodied godly finger in our faces about a special tree. Well, God Almighty—if you are almighty—*let us be free of you* . . . or let us die. . . . It is the same, you say, you stubborn God? Then count me out, I say—and come, sweet death!”

“I WILL GREATLY MULTIPLY YOUR PAIN IN BEARING CHILDREN. CURSED IS THE GROUND BECAUSE OF YOU; NOW EAT OF IT IN TOIL. SINCE DUST YOU ARE, TO DUST YOU SHALL RETURN.” Then God sent Adam and Eve away . . . to till the ground from which they had been taken.

“This is a fine romance. A fine romance this is. A beautiful relationship—the Potter and his animated clay; Creator and his free, creative creature; the Father and his independent son—a beautiful relationship is fractured for nothing but a silly little tree. For you, an empty, loveless, lonely garden; for me, frustrated, unfulfilled existence. Congratulations, God and Man. *Well done.*

“Sweet Eve, you say you thought you heard him laugh? I heard him say, **‘HOW CAN I GIVE YOU UP? HOW CAN I HAND YOU OVER?’** Then a word about another silly little tree—an antidotal tree, a redemptive tree. And then—this must be when you thought he laughed—I think I heard him sob.

“I think he wept.” . . .⁶

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<sup>1</sup> Then the angel showed me a river with the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb. <sup>2</sup> It flowed down the center of the main street. **On each side of the river grew a tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, with a fresh crop each month. The leaves were used for medicine to heal the nations.** <sup>3</sup> **No longer will there be a curse upon anything.** For the throne of God and of the Lamb will be there, and his servants will worship him. <sup>4</sup> And they will see his face, and his name will be written on their foreheads. <sup>5</sup> And there will be no night there—no need for lamps or sun—for the Lord God will shine on them. And they will reign forever and ever (Revelation 22:1-5).

Between these two scenes, my friends, between these Trees of Life, lies all of human history. Between these two scenes is your story and my story. Between these two scenes falls a particular day known as April 24, 2016. **And on this day we gather to contemplate how very, very much we are loved.**

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<sup>6</sup>This dialogue is a selected modification of Section I of *Come Sweet Death* by B. D. Napier (Boston: United Church Press, 1967), pp, 16-29.