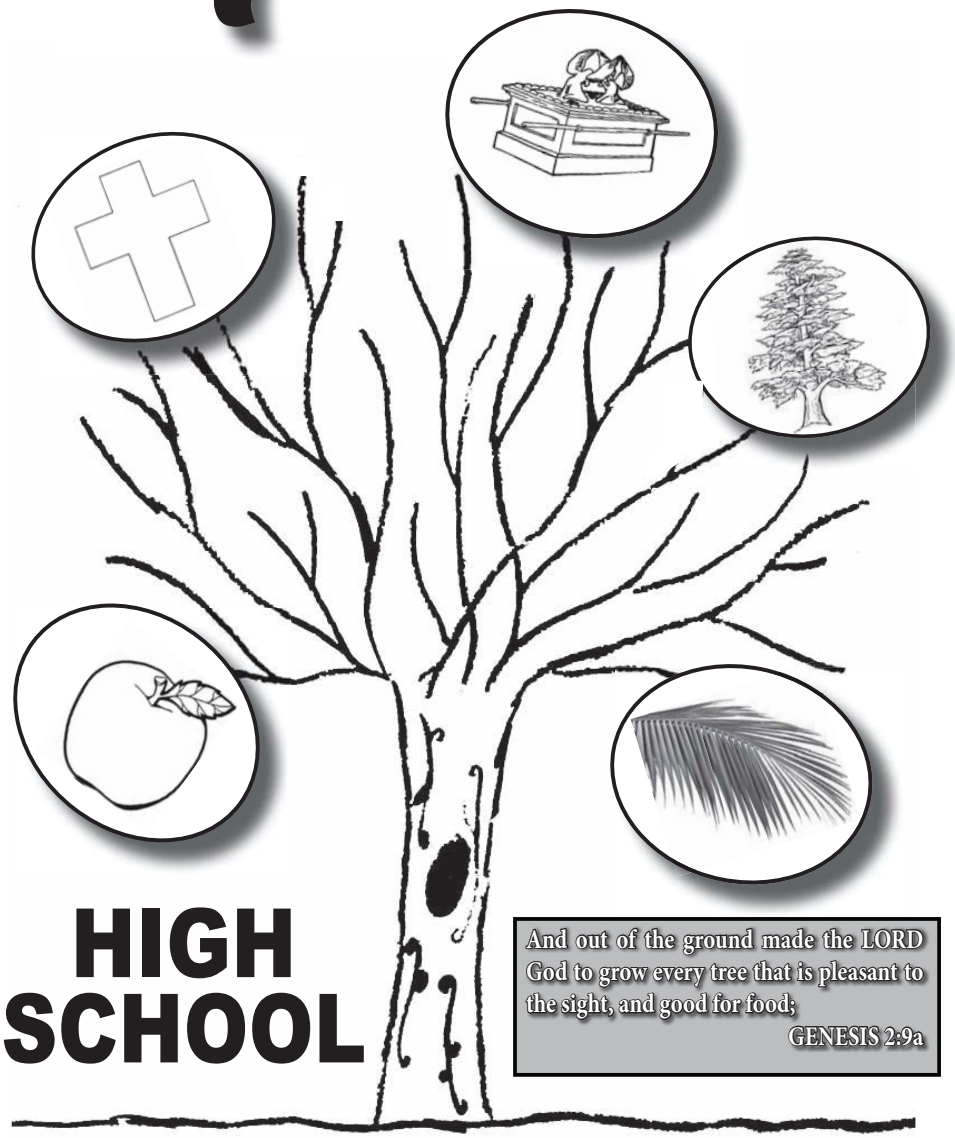
Trees



HIGH SCHOOL

And out of the ground made the LORD God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food;

GENESIS 2:9a

The Missionary Baptist
Vacation Bible School Literature Committee presents

Trees

Vacation Bible School Lessons for High School
Written by Brother Danny Hayes

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LESSON ONE

The Tree of the Knowledge Of Good and Evil

LESSON TEXT
Genesis 2:16-17

WRITTEN BY
BROTHER DANNY HAYES

Genesis 2:16-17
16. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat:
17. But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.

Memory Verse: Romans 3:23
For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;

Have you ever thought about how much information is buried in all of creation? Scientists are constantly drilling down into the physical world to try to learn more and more about what is here. For example, when you pick up a rock, it might not look like much, but it holds data. Some inquiring people over time have discovered that the rock you hold is made of different types of minerals, which are compounds made up of molecules, which are made of atoms, which are made of protons, neutrons, and electrons, which in turn are made of quarks and leptons, and they are still delving deeper. Furthermore, it's not just the composition of things that holds data, but the form of things as well. While you can drill down into water the same as with the rock, we can learn a great deal by observing water as a body. A muddy creek speaks of some degree of flooding somewhere upstream. Fast moving rapids are a clue to the lay of the land that channels it. Ocean tides show the effects of the gravity that drives them. There are whole fields of study that are dedicated to learning more about water, its properties, how it behaves under different conditions, and how it affects objects with which it comes in contact. But the previous two examples begin to look simple when compared to the complexity in understanding living organisms. Then, take these three examples and expand your scope to take in the entire universe, and it becomes mind-boggling to try to comprehend how much information is there.

However, when you consider that this vast amount of physical data was designed and created by God whose eternal considerations are spiritual, it stands to reason that the things that He put here also contain a vast amount of spiritual data. Psalm 19:1 says that "The heavens declare the glory of God…" While the nearly infinite grandeur of the universe certainly does speak of God's awesome physical power and His wonderful capacity for design, His true glory is spiritual because He Himself is spirit. Doesn't it make sense that if His creation declares His glory that it would speak not only in material, but in spiritual terms as well?

Take that rock we were talking about. How can a rock be a source of study for spiritual truths? Look at the characteristics of rock that we value. A rock is solid. A rock is steady, not easily moved compared to many other things. A large rock is a steady place upon which to stand. A rock big enough to get under is excellent protection. It's no wonder that in scriptures as well as the thoughts of man, the Rock is often used to describe our God, who is solid, who will not be moved, who is reliable for us to stand and even build our lives upon, who is our great and mighty protector. A study of the Bible yields much more spiritual teaching that can be gleaned from rock, but that is not our subject. In this series of lessons, we are looking at trees for spiritual lessons.

Have you ever really looked at trees? If not, take a few minutes sometime to do so. It's not hard. They're all around us. They affect and interact with us in many ways. Some provide food. Others lend their structural strength to building materials. They give shade, protection from wind, and are beautiful and inspiring to look at. As ubiquitous as trees are, it's no wonder that they are mentioned so many times in scripture. What spiritual truths can we learn from trees? Take a look at one. Have you ever noticed that almost all trees are in a position of raising their branches heavenward as if straining to reach out to God? There's something there that we can all learn from. But the scriptures go further. They don't just mention trees in passing. In many passages, trees are an integral part of what the Bible is saying. Here's an example: Psalm chapter one speaks of the blessed man, how he walks in good paths and delights in God's word. In verse 3, it then says that "…he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper." The scripture is saying that to be holy and blessed is to be like a tree and certainly those characteristics listed are ones that we would like to emulate. There is much spiritual information that we can glean from a study of trees.

This series of lessons will certainly not be comprehensive, but will concentrate on trees mentioned in the Bible that can guide us in seeking our place in God's service and the path that we should be on. Our first lesson is about a tree that was involved in an event that has actually shaped all of human history, and not for the better – The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

The perfection of creation

When God created the universe, He created it in perfection. How do we know that? In the first chapter of Genesis, we see that for everything that God created, "… He saw that it was good." In fact, when He surveyed everything that He had created, "…He saw that it was very good." Now when you and I perceive something as good, it may not mean much, but what do you think it would mean to the supreme, righteous, perfect Being?

From this, we can safely say that everything was perfect. There was nothing bad. There was no evil or wickedness. Let's try to draw a picture from just this characteristic. We can say that there was no death. There would have been nothing to cause destruction, so we can probably rule out tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, droughts, and any other of the natural disasters that we hear about now. There would have been no threat of a meteor, a comet, or an asteroid hitting the earth, so we can probably assume that the entire cosmos was perfectly stable. Since discomfort is a bad thing, the weather would have been perfect. No hot or cold, it would have been just right. Apparently, all animals everywhere were herbivores (Gen. 1:29-30), so there was no predatory behavior in animals, which would be bad. Neither man nor animal would have aged, since that's a bad thing.

It was, in a word, paradise. The newly created man would have had youth and health, no worries of attack or injury, pleasant weather, and no end to it. And on top of all the other, God created a garden and placed man in it. He didn't just have to live out in the woods somewhere. Wikipedia defines "garden" as "…a planned space, usually outdoors, set aside for the display, cultivation, and enjoyment of plants and other forms of nature." So God planned a beautiful place for man to enjoy and even take part in tending. Even in the midst of perfection, God created a special, beautiful place for He and man to enjoy.

The Reason For It All

Let's step back a moment and talk about why God did all this. Why did He create everything? Why was everything perfect? Why did He create Man?

In God's Revelation to John, John describes a scene in Heaven where 24 elders fall down before God to worship Him. While praising God, they say "…thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created." (Rev. 4:11) So simply, God created everything because that's what He wanted to do. Certainly He did not do it because He needed it. It wasn't because somebody made Him do it. It wasn't the fulfillment of a promise because who would He have made the promise to before He made everything and everyone? We shouldn't read this as God having a whim. God is absolutely perfect and therefore perfectly resolved in anything that He does. He determined to create the universe and to create it in such a way as to declare His glory.

As to why God created everything to be perfect, how else would He, being perfect in every way, order creation? If He had created something less than perfect, would that not be something imperfect about Him? God will not become imperfect. His works will always be perfect, because His works perfectly reflect Him. It makes sense then that God would make everything perfect because He Himself is perfect.

When wondering about why we are here, many people have come up with many things, often with no basis in God's word. We are here neither to live life to the fullest, nor to achieve, advance, and acquire - at least not in the sense that we usually hear these things. We are not here to reach for the stars and we are not here to conquer the earth. We are certainly not here because of an accident of evolution, which would suggest no purpose at all.

We were created as God's offspring. When God created Adam, He did something that He did for no other creature. After He had used the dust of the ground to give man form, God "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." (Gen. 2:7) Man was created a spiritual being with an eternal existence. We were created to be His children. Why would God want children? Sometimes people feel a driving need to have children. Not so with God. He has never needed anything. He made us because He wanted us. He loved us before we existed. He wanted and still wants to be one with us – He as Father, us as His children; He as Provider, us as thankful recipients; He as inexpressibly glorious God, us as adoring, obedient worshipers. We were supposed to have this close, intimate relationship with Him for eternity.

Not All Trees Were Meant For Our Use

In the garden that God prepared, there were many trees, as you would expect of a place designed to showcase nature. In fact, we're told that the garden contained "every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food" (Gen. 2:9). So Adam had access to every tree that he could possibly need. Genesis 2:9 also talks about two other trees specifically in addition to all the others. These were the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

God gave Adam only one commandment and it involved one of these trees. Actually, while it was a commandment, it was also a warning. He said "Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." (Gen. 2:16-17). The first part of God's statement makes it clear that the tree of life was not off limits to man, but the second part completely forbade man from eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Now God is not a "because I told you so, that's why" God. He didn't just say "don't", he gave the reason for the commandment. He told Adam that if he ate of it, he would die, not just sometime, but immediately, the same day.

While we should think of this as a commandment, we should also view it as an admonition from a caring parent. When a parent is aware of something that is available but harmful to their young child, what do they do? They tell them to stay away from it. If they are

old enough to understand, they may also tell them why they should stay away from it. How many times have you heard the parent of a toddler say, “No-no! Hot!”? What they say is both a commandment and a warning to their child. They do this not because they are trying to keep something from their child that they might enjoy, but putting a rule on them that will keep them from coming from harm. It’s for the child’s own good.

God knew the consequences of man eating the fruit from this forbidden tree. God knew that it would bring about spiritual death. We might ask “Why did God put something in the garden that would be harmful to man?” There have been suggestions that God put the tree in the garden to tempt man, but in James 1:13, we see that “God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man…” So while God may test us, He will not tempt us with evil. We are not given direct insight from the scriptures as to why the tree was there, but remember the reason that God created everything, including man and the tree of knowledge of good and evil as well as their placement, was because He wanted to. Obviously, the garden was a showcase for the living things that God had created. We’ve already talked about all trees being there and Genesis 2:19-20 speaks of God bringing all creatures before man - who was in the garden - for him to name. The tree was just one more part of His creation and as such it was placed in the garden along with everything else and God, in His love, warned Adam about it.

The Wrong Choice

After God had created Eve, the first woman, the scriptures introduce us to the serpent. Genesis 3:1 says that the serpent was the most “subtil”, or crafty, of all beasts. And this particular one was very smart, because he could talk and was quite persuasive. Of course, this wasn’t just an animal, as we find through later prophecy that the serpent was Satan himself. Whether Satan possessed an animal or took the form of one, it really doesn’t matter, because to Eve, it was a serpent that came to her. But make no mistake, it was Satan.

The serpent didn’t beat around the bush, but came straight to the point by saying, “Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?” (Gen 3:1). He was saying “surely God hasn’t limited you on what you can eat.” Eve, who was completely without guile, answered and quoted God, saying that they were not even to touch the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, else they would die.

It is here that Satan, through the serpent, began his method of operation regarding man that he continues even to this day. Satan appeals to the flesh. He has nothing spiritual to offer, though he often disguises pleasures of the flesh as spiritual. He began by telling a lie by way of a spun-truth. He said “Ye shall not surely die.” (v.3). He told the truth so far as the immediate

impact upon her body in that she would not physically die at the time she ate the fruit, but in doing so he misrepresented what he knew that God was actually saying. God, being spirit, was speaking of a spiritual death. At this point, we need to talk about what that means.

Let’s pause and take a moment to consider what is actually meant by the term “death”? Merriam-webster.com says that death is a permanent cessation of all vital functions. Vital functions would be those functions that are vital to life. So in a physical sense, death is where functions that support life (e.g. - the beating heart) cease. At the point of death, a person is no longer a person, but an inert package of organic material, in composition no different from a dead animal or even plant, aside from the emotional attachment we may feel to that body.

We can take our definition of death and use it to define spiritual death as well. What is vital to man’s spiritual life? How did it begin? Remember that in Genesis 2:7, it began when God “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.” So what appears to have been vital to man’s spiritual life is that divine living breath of God, the divine spark. Therefore spiritual death would be when the vital life in that breath is taken away. That living spirit is man’s connection to God. It is the basis of God’s kinship to us. Without that life, man is a dead spirit and separated from God. Man becomes something else, an eternal being with no place to exist because eternity belongs only to God and those beings with whom He has a connection. So then, where can man exist? Read on.

We see that Satan to this point has taken the truth that God told to Adam (about a spiritual death) and twisted it to mean something else (physical death) so that he could rebut God’s word. Now he finished his argument with a half-truth mingled with a lie. He said that when they ate the fruit, that their eyes would be opened to know good and evil and that they would be like gods themselves. This was at least partially true in as much as they would acquire a trait that God had – to know good from evil. Remember that Adam and Eve had been created innocent. That is to say that while they were without sin, the only way that they knew what was wrong was by God telling them, as when He told them about the tree. Genesis 2:25 even makes a point of telling us that they were naked and weren’t ashamed, like small children. And now Satan was telling Eve that she and Adam too could have this godlike power of discernment. What he didn’t tell them was that they weren’t equipped to handle this ability. He didn’t tell them that in order to have this ability, they would have to break God’s commandment and give up their uprightness. He had already twisted God’s words to try to downplay to nothing the terrible penalty for eating the fruit. Now he even suggested that God hadn’t been dealing honestly and fairly with His children by implying that God was keeping something from

them that would make them better than they were.

Eve was taken in by all of this. Really believing what Satan had told her, she took the fruit and ate it and gave it to Adam. But Adam was another matter. 1 Titus 2:14 tells us that "Adam was not deceived." Adam knew that eating the fruit was against God's commandment and would bring death. He may not have known exactly what the nature of death was, but he most assuredly knew that it wouldn't be good. He also knew that their eating the fruit would displease God. However, Genesis 3:6 tells us that he ate the fruit anyway. One might understand why Eve would eat the fruit, seeing as how she had been deceived into thinking it was okay to do so, but why would Adam do it when he knew that it was the wrong thing to do? It was because Eve gave him the fruit. She was his wife, his friend, his mate. Adam was deciding through his flesh just like Eve was, but in another way. Perhaps he didn't want to be without her. He knew that she had already eaten and in so doing had sentenced herself to death. In eating, he would be joining her in death and wouldn't have to face the world without her. Perhaps it was because he didn't want to displease her. He might have been the first man to chuck common sense overboard in order to please a woman, but he certainly was not the last.

Immediately, verse 7 tells us, their eyes were opened and they knew they were naked. Their innocence was gone. They had the ability that the serpent had promised them, but they had more...and less. In knowing good from evil, they could see that they had done wrong. They were conscious of themselves. They could feel shame over their nakedness. They could feel the terrible void within them, the dead thing that had been their spotless, eternal spirit, now a black, empty hole that had nowhere to go. They no longer felt the presence of God. They were alone, so terribly alone. Before, they literally had not had a care in the entire world. Now they wanted desperately to cover themselves, and they tried to do just that by sewing together fig leaves. Now they felt the need to run and hide and they did when they heard God coming, walking in the garden as He surely had done with them on happier days before.

God called out to Adam, asking where he was. Of course, God not only knew where Adam was, but what he was doing and why. He was merely drawing him out. Adam told God that he had hidden because he was afraid due to his nakedness. He may or may not have known that he was giving himself away, but given that he had not been deceived about the fruit, he probably knew. God confronted him, asking him if he had eaten of the tree. Adam tried to shift as much of the responsibility from himself as possible. While he did admit that he had eaten the fruit, he suggested that he only did it because Eve gave him the fruit and even suggested that God bore part of the blame by saying it was

"The woman whom thou gavest to be with me..." (v.12). When God turned to Eve, she attempted to pass her blame to the serpent. We see that the traits of misdirection and dishonesty didn't take long to manifest themselves once we had embraced depravity.

The Results of Adam's Sin

There are many consequences of Adam's sin. We can see the effects on the world. In the natural universe, death reigns. Animals kill each other, often for food, but sometimes upon a whim. There are diseases, natural disasters, colliding celestial bodies, accidents, and many other kinds of dangerous, harmful things. In the human sphere, there are wars and conflict on both national and personal levels. There is lying, theft, murder, out-of-wedlock sex and pregnancy, marital infidelity, extortion, threats, drug-use, spouse & child abuse, slavery, piracy, terrorism, atheism, and much more.

The most eternal and dangerous effect of Adam's sin however, and the reason for all these others, is the total depravity of mankind. We all suffer from this effect because Adam's dead spirit became his nature and like any other characteristic of Adam's, it was passed to his children and to succeeding generations. Our depravity is a condition that causes us to be separated from God. Because of that dead and sinful spirit, God will not commune with us, because perfection cannot combine with imperfection. If perfection combines with imperfection, then imperfection is introduced into the union and the union becomes imperfect, infecting all parties. Keep in mind that God is not being hard with us. Remember that our condition is not a punishment, but a consequence. God didn't make us this way. We did it to ourselves! God warned us! He warned us!

In our self-made depraved condition, we can't be with God, so where can we be? Well, God is everywhere, so where does that leave a depraved mankind? There would have to be some other place, wouldn't there? Actually, God has created just such a place to hold Satan and the angels who followed him in his rebellion against God. The Bible calls this place Hell. It is described as a place of flame and torment, but the worst thing about it is that God is not there. Mankind, because of Adam's sin, has destined itself to reside in this place when they reach eternity. A place devoid of anything good. A place of torment with no hope or help of any kind.

So you see how the entire destiny of all humanity pivoted on the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Left to our own devices, this is the end of mankind. Brought down by messing with a tree! Eternal misery and ruin would be our inheritance from Adam.

But you see, God loved mankind...

LESSON TWO

The Cross

LESSON TEXT
1 Peter 2:24

WRITTEN BY
BROTHER DANNY HAYES

1 Peter 2:24
Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed.

Memory Verse: Acts 5:30
The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree.

Yes, God loved us. As stated in lesson one, He created us to be His children. He wanted to commune with us, both in this life and in eternity. God wasn't ready to cast man away, even though we willingly condemned ourselves. Though God and man were now completely separated, God wanted to make a way to heal the rift. Though justice demanded that man be destroyed, God desired to make a way to save man. It couldn't be just anything, however. It had to satisfy all of God's requirements, not just His love for man.

In this lesson, we want to study aspects of what had to be fulfilled in order to bridge the gap between God and us. We'll then look to see if all those things were truly satisfied and how. And we'll see that our collective fate literally hung from a tree.

God's Perfection

God is perfect. We've already stated that. What does that mean? Being perfect means to be without defect and to lack nothing essential to the whole (http://education.yahoo.com/reference/dictionary/entry/perfect). Now we have a hard time thinking about perfection because it's outside our personal experience. Since the sin of Adam, nothing on this earth has seen perfection. But we can talk about it in abstract terms.

God has no defects or imperfections. That means that when we look at any characteristic of God, we see that it is perfect. We also see that there is nothing missing about God. When we look at people, we might say that one is smart in math, but lacks the ability to remember dates. Another might know an amazing amount of facts about animals, but but can't sew a button. God lacks nothing. There is nothing missing about Him. He is ultimately complete.

In addition to these, every characteristic of God is in perfect harmony with every other characteristic of God. For there to be conflict between any two characteristics would be imperfection and that cannot be. So let's look at some of God's characteristics as they relate to dealing with fallen man.

God's Perfect Righteousness

God is not only righteous, but He Himself defines the state of righteousness. Let's not mistake that as saying that God simply defines righteousness as being the way that He is. God is righteous not because He has the luxury of definition, but because He determines what righteousness is and then wills Himself to be righteous. In other words, God is righteous because that's the way He wants to be.

His righteousness prevents Him from being wrong about anything. Also, as was said in lesson one, it also prevents Him from communing with anything that is unrighteous. Hence, God's righteousness prevents Him from communing or being in close contact with fallen man. And since God is omnipresent (another one of His perfect characteristics), anywhere the unrighteous might be would be in close contact with Him. Therefore, God's righteousness actually prevents unrighteous man from existing in eternity with Him.

God's Perfect Justice

Justice is the quality of being just. This is fairness. This is what's right. You would expect a person who is perfectly righteous to be perfectly fair. In our case, what is fair? Think about this example. You're making a paper chain, something most all of us have done as children. You've got your standards and you want the links to be about two inches across, give or take a quarter of an inch. What will you do with a link that turns out to be one inch across? You'll throw it away, won't you?

You cut the paper for the express purpose of it being a two inch link. Now you've got a link that's one inch. Forget about the fact that you're the one who cut it out. The fact that's important here is that the link cannot be used for what you made it. So you toss it. That's fair. No big loss.

God created us to be His children. The link of kinship with Him was severed and we became unsuitable for His purpose. In relation to the universe, we're a small thing, not suitable for anything else. So what's fair? You see where this is going. God's justice says that we should be thrown away, destroyed.

In addition, we disobeyed God. For perfect justice to be served, there must be a consequence of this disobedience. There must be a penalty. It wouldn't be fair that the rule from a righteous Creator could be broken with no penalty to pay. To have no consequence for breaking God's rule would be the same as saying that His rule is unimportant. His rule being unimportant implies that that His righteousness, from which the rule flows, is less than perfect. There must be a penalty. Rom. 6:23 says that "the wages of sin is death..." So we see that what's fair for our disobedience is

death and as we saw in lesson one, the death that God speaks of is a spiritual death. Again, what justice demands is that we be thrown away.

God's Perfect Love

Perfect love is a love that doesn't die. It doesn't fade and it doesn't stop. God, being perfect, can only love with perfect love. God loved mankind. His love for us was and is high above anything that we, who claim to thrive on love, can understand. Merriam-Webster.com says that love is strong affection for another arising from kinship or personal ties and that it is an unselfish loyal and benevolent concern for the good of another.

Though we broke the kinship between us and God, His perfect love did not die. His love seeks our welfare. It seeks a way to span the chasm between us and Him. Let's take another example. Let's say someone that you love dearly does something that makes it clear that they don't care about your relationship the way you do. Even with such a hurtful thing, don't you want to try to mend the rift? Don't you want to find some way to help them care about you the same way you care about them?

Love causes you to seek such a way to heal even an imperfect relationship. God's perfect love also sought a way. He did not want the consequences of our sin to fall upon us.

A Solution Without Conflict

Here's where we are at this point: 1) God's righteousness makes it impossible for us, in our sinful state, to exist in His eternity, 2) God's justice demands that we be destroyed, and 3) God's love wants neither 1 nor 2. Can you see how just these three things could cause conflict between God's perfect sensibilities? Of course, this couldn't happen. For there to be conflict within God would be an imperfection. God is not conflicted, as we so many times are, so God made a solution that would perfectly satisfy these and His other sensibilities. When a conflict is resolved, we often call it a reconciliation. In any reconciliation, there is always the reconciling item – the thing that brings everything back into harmony. What was God's reconciling item?

There is an old story of a small town judge who was well known as one who always handed down the maximum sentence for any crime that was brought before his court. He scoffed at claims of ignorance of the law. He didn't consider excuses or extenuating circumstances. Before pronouncing sentence, he would proclaim, usually loudly, that the law must be upheld and a penalty must be paid.

One day, when the old judge was being seated at his bench, he looked to the defendant's table and saw his oldest, dearest friend standing with his eyes cast down and his face pale. His friend had been caught driving under the influence of alcohol and though it was a first offense, he knew it was a serious thing to come under his friend's judgment. Everyone in the court held their breath. They knew the judge never showed mercy, but they also knew this was his friend. Some were anxious to see if the judge would relax his standards in this case, but many just waited to see what would happen.

The judge slowly pounded his gavel and asked the man how he would plead, guilty or not guilty. His friend, head still bowed and speaking ashamedly in a shaking, choking voice, answered "I am guilty, your honor." The judge again pounded his gavel to stop the hushed whispering within the chamber. He then began his usual practice of lecturing the defendant. He told him what the law said about his offense and then explained in his usual sharp, stinging manner why the offense was considered so grievous. "You have endangered the public in our town and made it unsafe to be on the streets. I therefore give you the maximum penalty, which for the first offense is a large fine. But know that if the law allowed it, I would place you in custody and certainly will if I ever see you in my court for this again." He then stated the amount of the fine, a very substantial amount of money as his friend, head bowed even lower, silently wept tears of sorrow. No other sound was made in the courtroom. The people saw that the old judge truly was just, but wondered about the friendship that his brand of justice may have just severed.

The people in the chamber then watched as the judge stood and removed his robe. He descended from his high desk and came across the floor to the court clerk. He reached in his pocket, retrieved his wallet, and proceeded to pay the fine that he had just sentenced his friend to pay. After doing so, he walked to his friend and embraced him as they wept together. As he held his friend, he then told him that he expected him to come to his home that very evening for dinner and a visit.

God's Perfect Grace – The Reconciling Item

The preceding story is a very good picture of the solution that God made. God's perfect justice pronounced sentence on man. The maximum penalty was the same as the minimum. It was death. Nothing else would do. Only death could satisfy God's justice. At the same time, God's love sought a substitute to die for man, but not just any substitute would do. Man was sentenced to die for his own sins. Whoever this substitute might be, they could not have sins of their own. If they had sins of their own, then they would be required to die for their own sins and would not be able to substitute for anyone else. No, whoever the substitute might be, they would have to be perfect, so that they would be able to bear the sins of others.

Now we've talked about the changes that Adam's sin brought about. We see that since that time, creation is imperfect, therefore any thing or person from creation would be the same. So the search for someone perfect to be our substitute would have to be outside creation. Who does that leave? Only God. Therefore Jesus, being God, because of His infinite love for us, determined that He would become our substitute. The Father, who was God, gave Jesus as a sacrifice for us. Neither was required to do so by any outside influence. The only thing that constrained God was God Himself and His love for us. This is grace. It is the great harmonizer. It is what brought all of God's sensibilities into agreement.

We certainly didn't deserve anything like this. We had taken God's love and stomped on it, favoring instead what we wanted to do. We severed our relationship with God and now we see that He alone cared enough to heal that injury. From our perspective, grace is a great gift, but we need to look at the other end of it and see what God has done to provide that gift.

The Act of Grace

Jesus lowered Himself to become a man, yet He remained God. He patiently endured giving up the glory that He deserved in order to become one of us. He allowed Himself to become subject to the infirmities of being human, including being tempted by the same one who tempted Adam and Eve. But where they failed, He triumphed. Where they did it wrong, He did it right. Where they sinned, he did not. Jesus became that perfect human being. He came to Earth qualified, but perhaps more importantly, He remained qualified to be our substitute. In 33 years of life, he remained spotless.

At the time of His death, Jesus was taken to the place called Calvary to be executed on false charges. The religious leaders of the time in Israel were concerned with their own power and not with God's Son. They saw Him as a threat and so sought a way to get rid of Him. If you read the passages in the gospels concerning Jesus' trial(s) and His execution, you will see that nobody was concerned with justice. They all had their own concerns, each related to themselves. King Herod only wanted to be entertained by a miracle (he was disappointed). The priests as was said, didn't want Jesus messing up their great power in Israel. Pilate, who saw that Jesus was innocent and that the accusations against Him were only political games, ended up authorizing His death for fear of the crowds which had been stirred up by the religious leaders.

It should be said however, that all of them were merely means to an end. Jesus had determined that He was to be sacrificed and they, because of the hardness of their hearts, were being used to that purpose. When the high priest's servants came in force to take Him, Jesus told them "...all this

was done, that the scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled." (Mat. 26.56). That said, it could be stated that any time or any people could have been used as the instrument of fulfillment of God's prophecies. But He chose that particular time and that particular people and by way of that, the particular method of execution.

Crucifixion, as most of us know, is the hanging of a condemned prisoner on a structure made of two beams of wood that have been attached in a cross-shaped configuration. The condemned was fastened to the cross-beam by the wrists, whereupon their body repeated the shape of the cross. The legs were probably fastened to the upright beam to keep them from flailing. Death is usually by asphyxiation as hanging by the arms in such a position eventually paralyzes the diaphragm muscle, making it impossible to breathe.

It has been noted many times that Crucifixion is one of, if not the most, barbaric method of execution that has been devised by man. And even with its inherent torture, the Romans had enhanced it to a point that it was even worse, the torture being so severe that death itself was almost anti-climactic. And yet the real torture that Jesus endured was not physical. Remember our earlier discussion of spiritual death? This is what Jesus had to experience in order to taste the death that God wants to save us from. We don't know what it was like. It would be foolish to speculate on it and because of God's wonderful grace, we don't have to know.

Jesus fully paid the wages of sin for us. That doesn't mean however, that we are automatically heaven-bound. We – each of us – are born with Adam's sin in our nature. It is still there and it keeps us from the relationship with God that He created us for. What Jesus did was to pay the penalty for us. He gave the gift. But we, as sinful beings, are in no position to receive the gift. Why? Because we are still like Adam – self-willed and sinful, even our spirit which God originally gave as spotless.

To receive the gift, we must turn against that nature and humble ourselves. Remember the old judge's friend and how he bowed his head and admitted his guilt? He admitted his guilt because he was convinced of it. His attitude came from his conviction that he was wrong and he had no excuse. He could only wait for the old judge to sentence him because he knew that he was condemned.

Likewise, when we become aware of our sinful nature and we feel the rift between us and God, we must surrender completely all of our self-will and pride. We must be convinced of our guilt before God, realizing that we are not what He created us to be. But where the old judge's friend didn't know beforehand that the judge would pay his fine, we've been told of what Jesus did for us. While admitting our guilt, we can throw

ourselves upon the mercy of His most righteous court. When we do this, turning our back upon what we as humans are, Jesus in His mercy recommends us to God as one of His. We become a new creature, no longer consisting of that awful black hole that was given to us by Adam. We then have a spirit that is clean and pure. And not only is that weight of sin lifted from us, but we then have fellowship with God. Where once we felt only condemnation for what we were, we now feel the comforting presence of God living within us. God is Good.

The Cross

We don't know much about the actual cross that Jesus was crucified upon except that it was made of wood. We don't even know what kind of wood it was. There are stories and traditions about the Dogwood, but Dogwoods don't even grow in that part of the world. It may have been Cedar or Pine as they were both prevalent, but it really doesn't matter. What matters about the cross is that Jesus chose to become a substitute for us and chose to fulfill that purpose by dying on one.

We see then, that just as all of mankind ruined itself by way of a tree, mankind was given the gift of renewal by way of a tree as well.

In our next lesson, another object that was made from a tree – the ark of the covenant.

LESSON THREE

The Ark of the Covenant

LESSON TEXT
Exodus 25:22

WRITTEN BY
BROTHER DANNY HAYES

Exodus 25:22
And there I will meet with thee, and I will commune with thee from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubims which are upon the ark of the testimony, of all things which I will give thee in commandment unto the children of Israel.

Memory Verse: 1 Samuel 4:5
And when the ark of the covenant of the LORD came into the camp, all Israel shouted with a great shout, so that the earth rang again.

After God led the children of Israel out of Egypt and into the wilderness of Sinai, He gave them His law by revealing it to Moses, who wrote it down and passed it to the multitude. God's law, commonly referred to as the law of Moses, was more than the ten commandments. It also consisted of civil laws and religious ceremonial laws with exacting instructions on how worship was to be conducted.

There were also very precise instructions for building a place of worship. The original place of worship that God commanded the people of Israel to construct was a large tent complex known as the tabernacle. The details of its construction did not just consist of measurements, but of the colors and designs of the fabric used, what the fabric was to be made of, and even how many hanging and joining loops each curtain should have. Nothing was left to imagination. Every pole, board, support, tie, and covering were described in such detail that even today, given the correct materials, we could make something that would be very close to what Israel constructed 3500 years ago.

There were also objects that God gave instructions to build that were to go in the tabernacle. Among these objects was one that God called an ark. An ark? Hang on a minute. Isn't an ark a boat? That's what Noah built to float out the great flood. So was God commanding the Israelites to build a boat? In the middle of the wilderness? Well actually, the term "ark" simply means a box. That's probably all that Noah's ark was - a very large, very important, but simple box.

As to the ark from our lesson, we see that later, in Ex. 25:22, the term "ark of the testimony" was used because it held the law that had been given to the people. Of all the objects made for the worship of God while Israel was in the wilderness, the ark was the most revered. When battles were to be fought, the ark was often carried into battle before Israel's army. At a much later time when

Israel lost the ark in battle due to God's displeasure with them and their leaders, all Israel mourned its loss and they greatly rejoiced at its later return. So this ark was also a very important box.

If we search the scriptures however, we will find that the term "ark" seems to have been reserved for these two objects. Noah's ark was a type, or foreshadow, of Jesus. It was a place of safe haven. It saved those who, by faith, entered into it. While all living things outside the ark were subjected to the cataclysm of the flood, all those within the ark were shielded from it.

The ark of the covenant was also intended to be a type of Christ. This is why His instructions for building it were so detailed. He wanted the picture to be accurate. If we want a picture of someone dear to us, we don't want it to look like a stick figure with a big round head and saucer eyes, do we? We want it to look like the person of whom it's a picture. We want to see the features that we use to identify the person that we love. We want to be able to show the picture to someone else so that they can see the person that we love. We want people to see their warm eyes or their quick smile or the kindness of their face. The same with God, but more so. He wanted the important qualities of Jesus to be shown in this article that He wanted built. He wanted everyone to see these qualities. He wanted all who beheld it to not only know why God loves Jesus, but to see why they should love Him too.

In this lesson, we'll look at the ark and try to see what it truly meant to God and to His people. We'll see things about the ark that have meaning for us even today. What does this have to do with a tree? Read on.

The Structure of the Ark

The physical structure and appearance of the ark is described by the instructions that God gave for its construction in verses 10 – 22 of Exodus chapter 25.

The Materials

There were two materials specified to be used in the building of the ark: Shittim (now known as Acacia) wood and gold. Acacia trees that grow in the Sinai wilderness (where Moses and Israel were at the time that God commanded that the ark be built) were one of the most prevalent species in the area. This may be one reason that God chose this type of wood, but there were apparently other types of trees that grew in the Sinai region despite its arid climate. There were Palms and Olive trees. Why not one of them? Acacia wood and not one of the others, was also specified by God in the building of the tabernacle and its fixtures that were to be used in His worship.

Acacia wood is a resinous, strong, durable, fragrant wood valued for its uses in applications where those characteristics are needed. It has been used for furniture, cog wheels, ship-building pegs, and even to make incense. A resinous wood resists rot and articles built of it tend to last a long time. In ancient Egypt, coffins were made of Acacia which survive to this day. In Psalm 16:10, David prophesied that God would not "suffer thine Holy One to see corruption" meaning that Jesus would not see the decomposition of body that we all expect of a person after death. Remember that God was designing a picture of Jesus. What kind of picture would it be if the wood used in making it rotted? Acacia wood by its durability represents our Jesus' human nature. Though He was human and subjected Himself to death, His human body was not subjected to rot.

Another thing about the wood is the fact that after everything was built, nobody ever saw it. The wood was always covered with either material or metal. In the case of our ark, the wood was completely covered with gold. So what we end up with is a box that looks like it's made completely of gold. Why? Which is more impressive to look at – wood or gold? Gold, of course. If you walk into a room where there's a wooden box and a gold box, which is going to demand your attention? The gold one, of course. It leaps out at you because of its shining luster.

Perhaps it's partly because of our cultural conditioning, but gold has always had great value to mankind. What does it say to us? It says "RICHES!" The world's richest men have always wanted to adorn things that they owned with gold for that reason. They believed that it points to them as someone of great worth. In reality, they have no more worth than any of us, but in the case of our Lord, He does. His worth is beyond anything that we can say. He is God! The gold covering our ark symbolizes just that – His divine nature.

As God, the riches of the universe are His and though we would consider that to be riches beyond comprehension, He will someday destroy all of it because He considers it to be corrupted. The real riches of God consist of God Himself, for He alone is from everlasting to everlasting. He alone can create. He alone is worthy. In verse 11, God instructed them after covering the ark with gold inside and out, to "make upon it a crown of gold round about." A crown symbolizes honor and glory and power and authority. Jesus will one day be revealed for who He is to every person who ever lived. Not only that, but He will be acknowledged for who He is by every person who ever lived. This is the picture that God wants us to see in His ark. Jesus as God is our maker and eternal ruler, divine in every aspect, while at the same time, human to His core.

The Mercy Seat

The term "mercy seat" used in this passage is translated from the Hebrew word kapporeth, which means "lid". This is true. The mercy seat was to be a lid for the ark, which was to be an open box. Looking at the Strong's dictionary, we see that kapporeth is derived from the root word kaphar for which the literal definition is to cover. The word kaphar

however, has figurative meaning. A partial list of English words that it could be translated to for this sense include expiate (atone for), appease, cleanse, forgive, pardon, be merciful, and reconcile.

With all of this behind it, the Hebrew word used was not by accident. The lid was to cover the open box of the ark and with it God's written law that was to be kept inside it. Jesus, who was and is the living embodiment of God's law, has fulfilled it, thereby atoning for man's inability to keep God's law. He has appeased God's righteous anger for man breaking His law. When we are in Jesus, we are covered. When God looks at us, He sees Jesus and His wonderful divinity. We are filthy rags, but we are covered by Jesus' beautiful righteousness.

We shouldn't think of the mercy seat as a place for sitting. In reference to the word "seat," think of it as "a place where something specified is prevalent : center <a seat of learning>" (http://www.merriam-webster.com). The mercy seat is a "center" of mercy. It represents how God has made it possible for mankind to obtain mercy from Him. Remember the reconciling item that was talked about in lesson 2? This is a picture of God's grace. It is the physical representation of the place where we are reconciled to Him.

Between The Cherubims

Cherubims are some type of heavenly creature. The first mention of them in the Bible is right after the fall of man when God had banished man from the garden (Gen 3:24). They are described in some detail by Ezekiel in chapter 10 of that book. The creatures noted by Ezekiel seem to be the same ones that John talks about in chapter 4 of his Revelation, where he called them beasts. We don't know what the golden cherbims over the mercy seat of the ark looked like, but we know that they were made by being beaten from solid gold rather than by pouring melted gold into a mold. We also know that they were placed on each end of the lid and that each had wings that extended toward the other cherubim.

The most important thing about the cherubims is not every physical detail of their appearance. The most important thing is that there was a space between them and under their wings. The important thing about this space is that God said "... there I will meet with thee, and I will commune with thee from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubims which are upon the ark of the testimony..." (v. 22).

Now as far as the physical ark went, this meeting was symbolic and was to take place once a year and only with the high priest. The ark was kept in the holiest place of the tabernacle and the priest went in there only after a very strict, stringent purifying process. Even then, if his heart was not prepared to meet with God, he would be struck dead. The reason for all this was once again, a picture. We can only commune with God from a standpoint of righteousness. Of course, we are not righteous and by ourselves could never be. It is only by being covered in the righteousness of Jesus that we can commune with God. We, by ourselves, could not stand in God's holy presence, but being covered by His Son, we can not only stand, but meet with Him.

It is here, the space between the cherubims, where we meet with God. Where God can see the beauty of Jesus, who has protected us in the ark of His salvation. He doesn't look beyond the walls of that ark. When His Son says "They are in me", God knows that Jesus is righteous in that judgment. We are safe and protected and able to approach God's mercy seat ourselves.

LESSON FOUR

The Cedars of Lebanon

LESSON TEXT
1 Kings 6:7-10

WRITTEN BY
BROTHER DANNY HAYES

I Kings 6:7-10
7. And the house, when it was in building, was built of stone made ready before it was brought thither: so that there was neither hammer nor axe nor any tool of iron heard in the house, while it was in building.
8. The door for the middle chamber was in the right side of the house: and they went up with winding stairs into the middle chamber, and out of the middle into the third.
9. So he built the house, and finished it; and covered the house with beams and boards of cedar.
10. And then he built chambers against all the house, five cubits high: and they rested on the house with timber of cedar.

Memory Verse: 1 Kings 6:9
So he built the house, and finished it; and covered the house with beams and boards of cedar.

When Solomon determined, with God's help, that it was time for a permanent temple for the worship of God to be built, he wisely began preparing for its construction. His father David had stockpiled much of the materials to be used for finishing and furnishing the temple (1 Chr. 29:1-21) as well as having the plans drawn up for it (1 Chr. 29:11-19). David's desire had been to build God's house himself. He said in 2 Sam 7:2, "See now, I dwell in an house of cedar, but the ark of God dwelleth within curtains." When he spoke of curtains, he meant the tabernacle, which was still used for God's worship. He wanted to build God a proper house, even though God indicated that He needed none. In Isa. 66:1, God said "The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool: where is the house that ye build unto me?"

Though God did allow the building of a house for Him, He did not allow David to build it as he had been a man of war who had shed blood (1 Chr. 28:3). David was surely disappointed, but he was then blessed by God telling him that his son Solomon would reign after him and would build the temple.

Even with all David's plans however, there was still more material as well as labor to be procured. Solomon sent to Hiram, king of Tyre, which was in Lebanon to the north of Israel, for help with some of it. The most notable material that Solomon sought from him were the famed cedars of Lebanon. He also asked for and received the help of many of Hiram's workmen who were highly skilled in working gold and wood. Of the people of Israel, Solomon used many thousands to cut stone in the mountains. The building of the temple of God was a massive project, but as with many things in the Old Testament, it was also a picture to teach us of spiritual things. Let's look at the temple and its construction to see what it shows us.

The Temple

Solomon's original temple was destroyed a little more than 400 years after it was built when Nebuchadnezzar sacked Jerusalem, so it's been gone for longer than the memory of most civilizations. There is a very detailed description in the Bible however, as well as some ancient records and archeological data. With all of this, there is a wealth of information on what the first temple was like.

The temple itself was about 90 to 120 feet long, 30 to 40 feet wide, and 45 to 60 feet tall. Now that's not big by today's standards, certainly not big enough to make us think that its construction would require hundreds of thousands of people. But the entire project was more than just the temple building. The temple was an entire complex, built on a mountain top – the south end of Mount Moriah.

According to some estimates, the complex may have been as much as 400 feet square. That would be a little bigger than 2 ½ football fields. There are several theories as to the exact location where the temple sat, but most scholars agree that it was right about where the Dome of the Rock mosque sits today.

Given the size of the temple complex, the tools available at the time, and the incredible size of some of the stones used in its construction (the largest surviving stone in the western wall is estimated to weigh 500 to 600 tons), and the detail and perfection that were to be achieved make the size of the labor force seem reasonable. If you are interested in some of the details of the temple, there is a lot of information on the internet that is readily available.

The Construction

The idea in constructing the temple was to have the stones completely ready for use before it ever reached the site. Remember that the temple was a holy place. David was denied the honor of building it because he had been a man of war. The temple was to be a place of peace, even before its dedication. The man who was allowed to build it was a man of peace. Israel did not fight one war during the reign of Solomon. Did you know that in Hebrew, Solomon's name means "peaceful"? It comes from the root word "shalom", which to this day is the Jewish greeting, meaning "peace".

How do you build a building, especially one that has such high demands for workmanship, without making noise? You have to have all the pieces fabricated off-site in such a precise way that when they are brought to the construction site, they fit together perfectly. We should state that knowledgeable observers of the western wall of the temple mound, which is all of this complex that remains today, have noted that the cutting and fitting of the stones is on par with the Egyptian pyramid builders, known for their amazing precision.

The building of the temple was not a slipshod operation. The people were building it for their God, to honor and glorify Him. It was to be a beacon to the rest of the world to show the glory of the God of Israel. Solomon and the people were not willing to sacrifice the soundness and beauty of God's house

for peace on the building site, but neither were they willing to sacrifice the peace of the building site for the soundness of the building. It was all important to them, so they did the one without leaving off the other. Love, care and attention to the business they were about were the things that made this possible.

So all the stone was cut to fit together. They were prepared. Each block would have had to have been numbered or identified in some way so that the assemblers would know where it went and how it was to be oriented. Each block had its very own place. No other place would do. To try to make it fit somewhere else would have jeopardized the soundness and beauty of the entire building. The builders were able to assemble the building like putting together Lego blocks. With such care being taken in the preparation of the stones, no hammer or tool would have been needed. The building would have come together perfectly. It would have been strong and sound.

While verse 7 of our text only speaks of stones being prepared this way, it does say that there was no noise of tools while it was in building, and there is some evidence (1 Ki. 5:17-18) that all of the parts for the temple were prepared in the same manner.

A New Temple

As was said earlier, the form and composition of the temple was not based upon whims of David or Solomon. The way the temple was built means something. And as was stated in lesson 1, God uses physical things that we are good at sensing to teach us of spiritual things that we, being fleshly, are not so good at seeing.

When Jesus was teaching His disciples, He asked Peter who he thought that He (Jesus) was. Peter replied that Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus said "Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." (Mat. 16:17-18). Jesus was not saying, as some believe, that He would build His Church upon Peter. He was saying that the foundation that His Church would be built upon is the relationship between Jesus and Peter (Peter knew Jesus and that Jesus knew Peter). The foundation of Jesus' Church is the fact that Jesus saves and has a relationship with His people. So just as the temple was built upon the firm rock of Mt. Moriah that rises from the Kidron and Hinom valleys below, the Lord's Church is built upon a rock even more steady.

Fitly Framed

The first epistle of Peter is a general letter written to the Lord's churches in what is today Turkey, but being in the Holy Bible, is a letter to all His churches everywhere. In 1 Pet. 2:3-4, he speaks of this relationship that is expected of members of the Church that Jesus founded. But then in verse 5, he goes on to talk of the members themselves, saying "Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ." He's calling members of the Lord's Church living stones. Does this remind you of anything? Not only does he say that we make up a spiritual house, but he hearkens back to the worship of the temple, speaking of a priesthood and of sacrifices. But we should keep in mind that he is speaking in spiritual terms.

The Lord's Church is a holy priesthood. We are to carry God's word to the world. We are to intercede in its behalf, praying for the salvation of many souls even as we carry the word forth. Our sacrifices should not be burnt animal flesh, but in bringing our own flesh into submission, denying our own fleshly lusts. So we see that we (the Church) are compared to the temple.

In Eph. 2:19-22, we see the imagery once again. It says that we are built upon the apostles and prophets (who are in this image the foundation), and that Jesus is the head of the corner. The cornerstone is always the first stone laid when building a structure of stone. Sometime when you're in a city that has old stone buildings, look at one of the front corners. Often there will be an engraved stone that has information about the building. That's the cornerstone. The cornerstone is usually the finest, prettiest, strongest, most perfectly cut stone in the building. It is the stone that all other stones in the building are connected to either directly or indirectly. If the cornerstone is not perfectly square, the building won't be square. If it is weak, the building will be weak. If it looks cheap and shoddy, then it speaks volumes about the care and workmanship that went into the rest of the building. Jesus is the cornerstone of His Church. He is perfect in every way. His beauty surpasses that of the universe. When somebody looks at the cornerstone of our temple, they see just how impressive the building should be.

Our passage continues, saying that in Jesus "all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord:" (v. 21). Just as the material for Solomon's temple was prepared at another place to be brought together at the site without tools, we – God's people – are prepared to be brought together to form a church. When a person has been saved by God, they are a stone prepared for His house. When they know God, there need not be a place made for them. If God has saved us, there is already a place for us in His house. We do not need to be shoe-horned in. No hammering or chiseling is required. There is a place, and one that is made specifically for each of us if we will but take it.

Finally, after we are fitly framed together, in Eph. 2:22 it says that in Jesus "ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit." David wanted to build a house for God. God reminded him that He didn't need a house. In Isa 40:12, God indicates that He has measured out the heavens with the span of His hand. Yet in Ephesians, we are told where God wants to dwell. His habitation is with His people. The new temple. The real temple. The house that Solomon built was only a shadow, a picture of the real temple that was to come. And this temple is forever. In Rev. 20, where John saw the new Jerusalem coming down to the new Earth, he heard a great voice out of heaven. In verse 3, the voice says "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God."

This real temple of God was founded by Jesus when He walked the earth. He

said then that it would stand forever and He does not lie. The real temple is His Church.

This lesson was actually more about stone than trees, but in our next lesson, we'll come back to trees (you knew we wood)– Palms.

LESSON FIVE

Palm Trees

LESSON TEXT
Revelation 7:9-10

WRITTEN BY
BROTHER DANNY HAYES

Revelation 7:9-10
9. After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands;
10. And cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb.

Memory Verse: John 12:12-13 (partial) when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, Took branches of palm trees, and went forth to meet him, and cried, Hosanna

Palm trees are often associated, especially to those of us who live where they will not grow, as symbols of paradise. How often do you see pictures of a tropical beach with crystal blue-green waters where there are no palm trees? Not very. To those of us who don't live in tropical climates, they are exotic. They speak of warmth and comfort and ease. But more than that, they have been symbolic of greater things even to people who lived where they grew.

Palms and their branches are an ancient symbol of triumph and victory. Solomon's temple had palm trees carved into the walls and doors. During the feast of tabernacles (Sukkot), which God ordained in Leviticus chapter 23, He commanded that the branches of palm and other trees be used to make a temporary booth, or tent, in which the feast was to take place for seven days. So you see that palms played a role in the worship of God, partly because they were readily available and partly because of the symbolism attached to them.

Let's look at the palm and how they are connected to events both in and beyond time.

Jesus' Entry To Jerusalem

In the days leading up to the passover during His thirty-third year, Jesus was being actively sought by the Jewish leaders of the day, who wanted Him dead. After He had raised Lazarus from the dead in the city of Bethany, He quit walking openly among the people because it was not yet time for Him to be taken. He therefore left and went to the city of Ephraim, about 20 miles north-northeast of Jerusalem.

By this time, Jesus' fame had spread widely because of His teachings and because of His miracles. Many people had been saved and been healed of

their infirmities, but as many as had listened to and witnessed Him, many more, certainly, had heard of these things. When Jesus had shown His power over even death in His raising of Lazarus, His fame became even greater. That's why the religious leaders of the day wanted to kill Him. They saw that they were losing control of the people. Of course, they were never supposed to have control of the people (God was), but they were consumed with their own power.

As the passover drew near, everyone, it seems, was looking for Jesus. While the Jewish leaders were seeking to kill Him, the people and pilgrims in Jerusalem were anxiously anticipating Him coming to the city for the religious holiday. Some people were true believers. Some were earnestly seeking Him. Many others looked forward to His coming with a nationalistic, political fervor. These believed that He was to be an earthly king who would throw off Roman rule and usher in a new golden age for Israel. There may have been other motives, but much of the city eagerly awaited His coming for one reason or the other.

When the time was right, Jesus began His journey to Jerusalem, stopping in Bethany six days before the passover to visit with His friends Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. While Jesus was not in hiding, neither was He appearing to great multitudes. Yet word got around. The next day, word in Jerusalem was spread that Jesus was coming for the passover. Bethany, being only two or three miles from Jerusalem was only a short commute, but Jesus had His disciples go and fetch a specific donkey for Him to ride. Jesus knew that the donkey would be there. He did this for the fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah where he said, "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass." (Zech. 9:9).

This is where the palms come in. As Jesus rode the young donkey to Jerusalem, a crowd of people gathered around Him. As He neared the city, word and excitement had spread and the crowd became a multitude who had heard that He was coming. His disciples began to rejoice and praise Him with shouts. They cut down palm branches and the limbs from other trees and paved the road before Him with them as well as their own garments. This is an ancient practice and is a show of honoring and glorifying the person it is done for. It is similar to rolling out a red carpet, the symbolism being that the person so honored has such worth that he shouldn't have to dirty his feet with the ground.

The people were praising Jesus loudly, shouting "Hosanna", which means "save, I beseech thee." They followed Him and went before Him as He entered the city, proclaiming Him as they went. The scene would look almost surreal to us today. As Americans, we've grown up with very egalitarian principles. We tend to think that no man should have to bow low to another. It offends our sense of equality, a sense that we've attained with difficulty. So participating in something like this entry into Jerusalem sounds like something many of us wouldn't like to take part in. But what if the man was actually worthy of such praise and honor and excitement? Jesus' disciples knew that He was worthy. They knew that He was the only hope for all of mankind, otherwise destined to be destroyed for their sin. They knew all this because they knew Him.

Perfect Praise Comes From Perfect People

There were probably people in Jerusalem that day who were there for the spectacle of such a scene. There were those who, as was said earlier, were looking for a military hero. There were probably those among the crowd who, less than a week later, were calling for His crucifixion before Pilate. Some of these may even have joined the disciples in shouts of praise, as we know that some people just want to feel like they are part of a movement. So the praise given to Jesus that day was not perfect praise. Even if it had only been His disciples, they were still people, and as such were imperfect and therefore incapable of giving Him the praise and honor that He truly deserves.

There will be a time however, when Jesus will be praised and worshiped and loved as He should be. And it will be done by people, but not the people that you and I see everyday. Those people – all of us – are descendants of Adam. As such, we are rife with sin. Even those of us who have been saved and therefore purified spiritually are still saddled with a body that is sinful and wars against that pure spirit constantly. At best on this earth, we are conflicted. No matter how we put them under subjection to our spirit, our bodies will always fight against righteousness. But a change is coming for those who have found Jesus.

As was said in the first lesson, we are born as heirs of Adam. We inherit his bodily form and the spiritual form that he willingly took on by sinning against God. It is his self-acquired curse, passed down to all his children. With it, we inherit the lusts which pervade our flesh and also an eternal existence in hell. This is our inheritance from Adam.

Now what if you were born to parents who were poor, wretched, miserable, and didn't care anything about you? It would be a pretty bleak future for you. Looking at them would be like looking at yourself in several years or so. But what if the law allowed you to divorce yourself from your parents and put yourself up for adoption? Furthermore, what if the law allowed you to pick your new parents rather than them picking you? And what if you found someone who was kind, generous, happy, and rich who wanted to adopt and you could convince them to adopt you? What would your future then look like? Couldn't you look at your new parents and see yourself in several years? Your future would have been almost miraculously changed.

Being born of Adam, our future looks bleak. A body ruled by sin that with age begins to fail us more and more. When our body gives out, it dies and if unsaved, our spirit is banished to spend eternity in torment. It doesn't have to be that way. By God's grace that we talked about in lesson 2, we have been given the chance to divorce ourselves from Adam. When we truly see what his inheritance is all about, we can seek adoption by God. We must completely break with our human family. We cannot ever want to go back there, even for a visit. We must surrender ourselves completely to God as His child. When we meet His conditions, and He even helps us to do that, He adopts us without reservation.

With our adoption, our future is miraculously changed. Where our destiny was deepening sin, poverty, misery, and pain, it has now become purity, wealth, happiness, peace, and comfort. Where our inheritance was death, it now is life. Where our future dwelling was out of the presence of God, it is now in His loving embrace. God, by His grace, has changed our inheritance!

When our inheritance has been realized, we will be changed. We will no longer have these decrepit bodies that are ruled by sin and break down more every day. We will have perfect bodies that match the spirit that God made new the very instant that He saved us. We will not be as Adam was when he was first created. We will be better. That Adam was fallible. He was pure, but had not the wherewithal to keep his purity. Jesus, the second Adam, had that wherewithal. He came to earth as pure as Adam was created, but with a difference. Though He was tempted in every way as we are, He did not sin. He demonstrated throughout His entire life that He would not sin! And we will be like Him!

When we are made like Jesus, then we will be able to praise Him in the way He should be praised. We will be able to sing in a voice that matches our righteous spirit. We will be able to make the heavens shake with our Hosanna's. We will worship and we will lift Him up eternally, and we will finally be able to do it right!

God and Jesus Triumphant

In Revelation, John talks of witnessing such an occasion. John was allowed by God to see not only into Heaven, but into that future time when God's re-made people could worship Him with perfected praise. The passage is our scripture text for this lesson. Whereas the crowd that thronged around Jesus in Jerusalem was called a multitude, this passage describes a "...great multitude, which no man could number..." from all over the world. They are depicted as standing "before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands;" Even beyond this earth, they are holding palms, (remember, they are a symbol of triumph and victory) praising God and His Son as they hold them.

And this is the reason for their praise: They will be there solely as a result of the gracious actions of the Ones they are praising. Without Them, they would have had no hope, destined for ruin. Now they will be with God forevermore. And looking a little ahead of our scripture text, there is a brief description of their new inheritance, taken from Revelation 7:15-17. "Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple: and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes."

We will be truly perfect and truly saved. Because we are truly perfect, we will only want to do that which is right. Because we are truly saved, we will know that what is right is to serve and worship and praise Him who saved us. We who prepare these lessons hope and pray that you will be there with us.