

BIBLICAL HORIZONS

No. 200

Copyright (c) 2009 Biblical Horizons

January, 2009

The Gospel

by James B. Jordan

The Bible that we have today has three purposes. The original purpose of the Word of God, which doubtless would have taken written form, was to help bring humanity from infancy to maturity – and if neither Lucifer nor Adam had sinned, that is all it would have been. The challenge to maturity came in the form of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. God had told both Adam and Eve that every tree would be food for them, and we are told that all the trees were good for food, but God had also told Adam (before Eve was made) that he was not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge. The prohibition was temporary, and Adam was to learn patience. [Hebrews 6:12-15. For a full discussion of patience and maturity, see James B. Jordan, *Primeval Saints: Studies in the Patriarchs of Genesis* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2001), ch. 5.]

An examination of the phrase “knowledge of good and evil” reveals that it refers to godlike power and authority. [1 Kings 3:9; 2 Samuel 14:17, 20; 19:27; Genesis 31:24; Deuteronomy 1:39; Hebrews 5:13-14. See James B. Jordan, “Merit Versus Maturity: What Did Jesus Do for Us?” in *The Federal Vision*, eds. Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner (Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2004), 165ff.] God looked at His world repeatedly in Genesis 1 and called it good, for He has knowledge of good and evil. Adam and Eve, having no backlog of experience and wisdom, were not ready to pass such judgments. When they were ready, God would allow them eat, they would fall into a deep sleep, and arise to a new life. [On the nature of “deep sleep” in Genesis 2 and elsewhere, and its relation to “death,” see *ibid.*, 160ff. Adam had already gone into such a coma when Eve was made from him, and from this he had an idea of what the “good death” dealt by the Tree of Knowledge might entail. Eating from that Tree sinfully, Adam brought “bad death,” death with a sting (1 Corinthians 15:56).] An examination of the details in Genesis 3 shows that this new life meant moving outside the

garden, with its free food, into the land, where they would need skill to make bread.

Outside the garden, wisdom is the knowledge of how and when to kill things. The cherubim had a flaming sword, and a flaming sword is what is needed to harvest wheat and bake it into bread. You have to have a knife. You have to know when to chop down the wheat. You have to know how to mix it with water and oil and how to apply fire to it. This requires wisdom, knowledge of good and evil.

In human life, after the fall, this wisdom entails knowing how to pass judgment on people and the right way to put them to death. In 1 Kings 2:1-9, David tells Solomon to put several people to death, and he repeatedly tells Solomon that he is to act wisely and do the job the best way. For instance, v. 9, “you are a wise man, and you will know what you ought to do to him.” In 1 Kings 3, we find Solomon praying and confessing that he is still a child and therefore lacks wisdom, which is identified as knowledge of good and evil (vv. 9, 12). God grants him such wisdom and the very next thing we read, the signal event that shows this wisdom, is Solomon’s threat to use a sword (compare cherubim again) to chop a baby in half.

Knowledge of good and evil, then, is godlike authority. It is what the early church called deification. We can also call it glorification. It is maturity in the likeness of God. A vast amount of what is in the Bible is there to help us to grow up in maturity and godlikeness, but not much attention is paid to it these days.

With the fall of the archangel Lucifer and those with him, however, the Word of God took on a second purpose: training in holy war. Our battle is not against flesh and blood ultimately, but against principalities and powers. For those who

think that salvation from sin is all that Jesus came to do, and that the Good News, the Gospel, is only about salvation, it seems strange to read the opening chapter of Mark. Jesus beats up one demon after another in Mark 1, and of course He fights and defeats demons in all the gospels. What's all that about?

Moreover, the psalms are all about fighting the enemy. Because modern evangelicalism has reduced religion only to matters of personal forgiveness and salvation, the book of psalms seems very weird and indeed offensive. Gentle Jesus is all about forgiveness, not about fighting and crushing enemies. The result is that the psalms have disappeared from worship and have been replaced with hymns that naturally never speak of vengeance, of splashing your feet in the blood of God's enemies, of dogs eating God's enemies, and so forth.

The book of Revelation shows that when the saints "under the altar" cry out for vengeance, God acts and the result is trumpets and bowls of wrath and judgment, and then the coming anew of the kingdom of Christ (Rev 6:10). Modern Christians never sing the psalms and pray for vengeance, and as a result, the world is not changed. Modern Christians have rejected the holy war.

With the fall of Adam, however, the Word and work of God takes on a third purpose: redemption. There is no need for me to comment further on this matter, for it is the one area with which modern readers are familiar.

Sadly, the modern church has virtually ignored the first two of these. Everything is about salvation from sin, and virtually nothing is about holy war (which is conducted by singing psalms, mostly absent from the church today), and virtually nothing is about maturation and glorification and God-like dominion over all creation. Because of this, large parts of the Bible that have to do with these first two matters are distorted in order to fit the third.

If, however, we are going to be faithful in our understanding of the Bible, we must be alert to its teaching us how to grow up, to move from childhood to adulthood (Gal 3:23 - 4:11), so that we act like grownups (1 Cor 16:13), so that we no longer need milk but are ready for solid food (Heb 5:11 - 6:3).

The work of the incarnate Son was not only to save us from sin but also to "bring many sons to glory" (Heb 2:10). As the Nicene Creed puts it:

Who for us men,
And for our salvation,

Came down from heaven,
And was incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the
Virgin Mary,
And was made man;

Also was crucified for us under Pontius
Pilate,
And suffered,
And was buried

The purpose of the incarnation, according to Athanasius, was that "God became man that man might become Godlike." Arguably this would have happened as a climax of history even if Adam had not sinned, for humanity was created as a Bride for God's Son. Because of sin, however, the incarnation was necessary for another reason as well, to deliver us from bondage, death, and wrath.

What is the Gospel? What is the Good News? It has three aspects. First, it is the announcement that God has dealt with sin in the cross of Jesus Christ. But second, it is the announcement that God has defeated Satan and removed the world from him and given it to Jesus Christ. And third, it is the announcement that at last a man has come to the full Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, spent some time in a tomb, and arisen in glory and been deified and glorified. [Of course, Jesus Christ was the eternal Son of God and fully God all along, but at His resurrection He also became a "deified" man, mature in godlikeness, glorified. In union with Him, that is, His glorified humanity, we also are mature.]

Any failure to announce all three of these aspects of the Gospel is a failure to announce the true Good News.

Biblical Horizons (ISSN 1050-0588) is published occasionally, funds permitting, by Biblical Horizons, P.O. Box 1096, Niceville, Florida 32588-1096. Anyone sending a donation, in any amount, will be placed on the mailing list to receive issues of *Biblical Horizons* as they are published. The content of all essays published in *Biblical Horizons* is copyrighted, but permission to reprint any essay is freely given provided that the essay is published uncut, and that the name and address of *Biblical Horizons* is given.