

The Garden of the Lord

People who delight in criticizing the Bible claim that it has two creation accounts, one in Genesis chapter 1, and then another one in chapter 2 that (so they allege) contradicts the first. Nonsense. Such people don't have a good heart, so their mind is corrupt. The correct understanding is this: In Genesis 1, God created a physical world, the cosmos, a time-and-space place. Then in chapter 2, God entered His world and went to work. And the first thing He did was, He planted a garden. And in that garden, He placed His beloved human creatures, the first man and his wife. There, they were to enjoy being with Him and to serve Him.

And God continues to work in His world all thru Scripture, from Genesis 2 to the end. Doing what? Working His garden! All of Scripture is the story of the Lord's garden and of the Lord cultivating it. The great drama of God's love for His human creatures occurs in a garden. Let's call this biblical garden the Garden of the Lord.

But rebellion occurred in this garden, right in front of God's face. A serpent sneaked into the garden and wickedly provoked God's first couple to disobey God. It wasn't merely failure, and it was worse than just disobedience. God had made them to be His image, a reflection of His goodness, to serve Him in His garden. But in a heinous act of betrayal, they transferred their allegiance to that serpent, because in this cosmos, we belong to whose words we believe. And so, in judgment, God cast them out of His garden, away from His presence. The rest of Scripture, climaxing at the end of the Book of Revelation, is the story of God drawing them out of the wilderness, out of a state of sin and disobedience, back to Himself, back into the Garden. Except that at the end, so many people have responded to God, myriads of them, that the garden becomes a city.

The Nation of Israel's story fills the Old Testament. Israel was like Adam, created uniquely, called God's "son," received God's Word, and was expected to serve God. And Israel was invited to dwell in God's garden, the "Land," in His presence. But as Adam did, so Israel betrayed God. Therefore Israel too experienced banishment from God's presence, from the Land, from the garden into the wilderness. (Exile is a form of spiritual death.) But just as Adam received a promise of a future restoration (Genesis 3:15), so Israel received promises of future restoration and return to *koinonia*, an intimate relationship with God.

Jesus is the Second Adam. He is also the embodied, perfect, obedient Israel. He is God incarnate. He came to call a beloved humanity out of the wilderness into God's garden, into *koinonia* or fellowship with God. After Jesus' priestly prayer in John 17, **"Jesus left with His disciples and crossed the Kidron Valley. On the other side there was a garden, and He and His disciples went into it"** (John 18:1). There, in that garden, Judas betrayed Jesus. We miss the significance of this because we don't think canonically, biblically. Judas reprised what Adam did, also in a garden. Adam betrayed His Creator God. Judas betrayed God incarnate. And in both episodes, the Serpent was right there provoking wickedness (see John 13:2 and 27).

Then the crucifixion occurred at a garden. **"At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb . . ."** (19:41). In the Garden of Eden there was a tree of life and a tree of knowing good and evil. Eating the fruit of these trees resulted in death. The cross was another tree in another garden. Two trees, each in a garden, each dealing with life and death. In the Genesis garden, death came from life, but in the garden where Jesus was

crucified, life comes from death. Jesus' death and resurrection not only reverses the tragic event in Genesis 3, it results in immensely greater benefit: blessed life in God's presence, forever. The cross is that tree of life, **"He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness"** (1 Peter 2:24; see also Galatians 3:13). Peter understood that that tree of life in the Garden of Eden prefigured and symbolized the cross.

On the morning of the resurrection, Mary encountered the risen Jesus. But she didn't recognize Him. She supposed that **He was the "gardener"** (20:15b). But He *was* the "Gardener!" Jesus dying and rising was God at work in His garden, the Garden of the Lord, the biblical garden. The Second Adam was faithfully at work in God's garden, obediently, sacrificially serving Him—what the first Adam was supposed to do, but didn't. If we believe in Jesus, the Living Word, we transfer our allegiance from the Serpent to Him, and so enter into God's garden for life and blessing.

At the very end of the Bible, Revelation 22, the Garden reappears but it's now a city to accommodate all those who respond to God's Word as God expects and revealed. The tree of life is there, of course. God's work in His physical world, in His garden, has been productive!

If we identify with Jesus, our work is to cultivate God's garden by calling others out of the wilderness into the Garden of God. In the near future, the Kingdom will be the earthly expression of the biblical garden and, after that . . . It's Revelation 22.

Dear reader: The discussion above is a meta-narrative of Scripture. I discuss it here not because it's an interesting concept, nor that it's information about the Bible a well-informed Christian should know. The story exists in Scripture for a compelling reason: to change us. We all live according to the stories that we believe are true. If the stories don't change us, or control us, then we really don't believe they are true. No one lives out a fairy tale; but atheists live out their story of billions of years of godless evolution. Christians must live out the story of their Bible if they really believe it to be true. So let's be sure we grasp the implications for life today of this story of the Lord's garden.

Since the beginning of time and continuing all thru biblical history, to dwell in God's garden means submitting or conforming to His rules, His standards, His revealed will. To live in the garden means obeying God's Word. The Lord's garden isn't like our back yard, where we freely enjoy ourselves as we please. It's a garden that's only for His pleasure; it exists to exalt Him. And we're in it (if we're following the Lord) to serve Him with work, work that He's ordained we're to do to please Him. Our work is the "fruit" of Matthew 13:23 and John 15:8 (as well as in many other places); it's the "deeds" of Revelation chapters 2 and 3. The garden is His!

And the garden isn't a playground. It's a *garden*, so it must be cultivated and guarded, and expanded. To work the garden means we willingly sacrifice our time, energy, our resources, indeed, our life. We do it out of love for the Lord.

We dare not suppose that we can be in the garden yet live as if we're not. This is the compelling significance of the story of the Lord's Garden.

The Bible is a supernatural book. It's coherent and purposeful from its first words to its final word. All of God's Word invites us to join Him in His Garden and to serve Him there. May we be faithful and worthy of our calling.