

A New Look at God's Garden

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My talk today is titled “A New Look at God’s Garden.” What I want to do in this session will probably strike you as a bit different. My goal in presenting this material is not so much to “nail things down” as it is to “open things up.” I’m not going to spend this session debating creation or science or any of that. I’m not even going to give you hard and fast conclusions. What I want you to do is take a new look at God’s Garden.

The Power of God's Garden

- The Bible looks new because of Preterism
- The future of the Kingdom may depend on drawing anew from the story of God's Garden

The Key to the Future is Going Back to God's Garden at the Beginning!



I do not believe that Christians understand the potential power that the Garden story holds for us. This is one area where the future of the Kingdom of God may very well depend on Christians going back into the past and drawing anew from the original story of God's Garden. We need a "fresh start" for a new future. The key to the future is going back to God's Garden at the beginning.

Why do I say that? People in our time already understand the difference between life in a garden and life in a wilderness.

The Waste Land

T. S. Eliot – 1922

I. THE BURIAL OF THE DEAD

April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers...

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of Man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And dry stone no sound of water...

To illustrate this, let me start by reading excerpts from a poem titled **The Waste Land** by T.S. Eliot. As I read these lines consider the context of the poem. Eliot wrote this at a very difficult time in his life. He actually converted to Christianity and joined the Anglican Church soon after he wrote **The Waste Land**. Also consider the timing in 1922. This was right between WW1 and WW2. Eliot captured the sentiment of an entire civilization that had just finished one global war and was in preparation, unwittingly, for another. READ POEM.

The Waste Land

T. S. Eliot – 1922

II. A GAME OF CHESS

My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me.
Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.
What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?
I never know what you are thinking. Think.
I think we are in rats' alley
Where the dead men lost their bones...

The Waste Land

T. S. Eliot – 1922

III. THE FIRE SERMON

...

He wept. He promised “a new start.”
I made no comment. What should I resent?
On Margate Sands.
I can connect
Nothing with nothing.
The broken fingernails of dirty hands.
My people humble people who expect
Nothing
 la la
To Carthage then I came
Burning burning burning burning
O Lord Thou pluckest me out
O Lord Thou pluckest
burning...

The Waste Land

T. S. Eliot – 1922

IV. DEATH BY WATER

...

He passed the stages of his age and youth
Entering the whirlpool

Gentile or Jew

O you who turn the wheel and look windward,
Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as
you...

The Waste Land

T. S. Eliot – 1922

V. WHAT THE THUNDER SAID

Here is no water but only rock
Rock and no water and the sandy road
The road winding above among the mountains
Which are mountains of rock without water
If there were water we should stop and drink
Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think
Sweat is dry and feet are in sand
If there were only water amongst the rock
Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit
Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit
There is not even silence in the mountains
But dry sterile thunder without rain
There is not even solitude in the mountains
But red sullen faces sneer and snarl
From doors of mudcracked houses
If there were water...

The Waste Land

T. S. Eliot – 1922

In this decayed hole among the mountains
In the faint moonlight, the grass is singing
Over the tumbled graves, about the chapel
There is the empty chapel, only wind's home.
It has no windows, and the door swings,
Dry bones can harm no one...

Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves
Waited for rain, while the black clouds
Gathered far distant, over Himavant.
The jungle crouched, humped in silence.
Then spoke the thunder

The Waste Land

T. S. Eliot – 1922

D A

Datta: what have we given?

My friend, blood shaking my heart

The awful daring of a moment's surrender

Which an age of prudence can never retract

By this, and this only, we have existed

Which is not to be found in our obituaries

Or in memories draped by the beneficent spider

Or under seals broken by the lean solicitor

In our empty rooms

D A

Dayadhvam: I have heard the key

Turn in the door once and turn once only

We think of the key, each in his prison

Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison

Only at nightfall, aetherial rumors

Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus

The Waste Land

T. S. Eliot – 1922

D A

Damyata: The boat responded

Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar

The sea was calm, your heart would have responded

Gaily, when invited, beating obedient

To controlling hands

I sat upon the shore

Fishing, with the arid plain behind me

Shall I at least set my lands in order?...

London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down...

These fragments I have shored against my ruins

Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe.

Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.

Shantih shantih shantih

10 Beyond
Creation
Science

Did you get the sense of wilderness in that? It's even more pervasive if you read the whole poem. Eliot alludes to Ezekiel, Solomon, Buddha, and even Augustine in those lines. But the poem is dark. There is a profound sense of confusion, a failure of meaning, purpose, and order in that poem. Eliot looks at life in his wilderness and chokes on it. Yet, even in the middle of such chaos, he is able to express a sense of wonder and grandeur at the human experience of life and consciousness. This kind of "stiff upper lip" analysis of the cold reality of modern life, no doubt, makes him feel alive. The poem was popular because it did the same thing for many of his contemporaries. **The Waste Land** caught on.

Futurism ⇔ Waste Land

- Dealing with the effects of 20th century wilderness Christianity
- Waste land Christianity is separated from God's Garden, beginning and end.
- We now live "between the times"
- Waste Land Christianity

What I will suggest to you is that the Christianity we know in the world around us resembles **The Waste Land** more than the biblical picture of God's Garden. That is **the** problem. Today in the 21st century we are dealing with the effects of the wilderness Christianity that dominated the 20th century. We are not just fighting a doctrine called futurism. That is only a small, though important, part of the picture. We are actually fighting Waste Land Christianity that neither understands nor teaches God's Garden, beginning or end.

I suspect that one of the greatest long-term impacts covenant eschatology will have on Christian theology and the future of civilization is the recognition that the biblical image of the Garden in the New Jerusalem at the end of the Bible is all about the gospel of Jesus Christ. For centuries, Christians have believed that the Garden at the end of the Bible is something we wait for at the end of the world. "We're not there yet!" they have said. We live, according to one phrase, "between the times." That is to say we live in the wilderness, removed from our origin in Eden but not yet arrived to our destination in New Jerusalem. That is wilderness Christianity.

Preterism ⇔ God's Garden

- The Garden in Revelation is the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- To understand the Garden at the end is to understand the Garden at the beginning.
- Isn't the Garden at the end of Revelation the conclusion of the story of the Garden in Genesis?
- To embrace the gospel is to live in God's Garden!

What does preterism do with that? It says, no, we now live in God's Garden at the end because the Garden in Revelation is the gospel of Jesus Christ. But, as I see it, that has remarkable implications for our understanding of the beginning. To understand the garden at the end is to understand the garden at the beginning. Isn't the garden at the end of Revelation the conclusion to the garden story first introduced in Genesis? You know, the tree of life, rivers of water, treasure. If the garden at the end of the Bible is all about the gospel of Jesus Christ, then how can the original garden be about anything but the gospel of Jesus Christ?

I believe the dawning realization that God's Garden in the Bible is all about the gospel of Jesus Christ, Genesis to Revelation, will cause a revolution in Christianity that we cannot imagine right now. Most of you know that Jeff Vaughn and I wrote a book about how preterism impacts the Genesis debate. Honestly, though, I believe the preterist implications for the Genesis debate are small potatoes compared to the dawning realization that God's Garden in the Bible is all about the gospel of Jesus Christ. You know, the Genesis debate is going to go away some day. There will be a winner and there will be a loser. I've placed my bet on one side because of my commitment to covenant eschatology. We'll just have to see how the horses run. But the end of the Genesis debate is coming. There will be as many people debating the age of the earth 500 years from now as there are people debating geocentrism today. The Genesis debate is temporary.

But what happens if Christians begin to understand that God's Garden, Genesis through Revelation, is a presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ? Wow. Christianity will never ever be the same again. Why? Because that means to embrace the gospel is to live in God's Garden, not in the wilderness. Have you ever stopped to think about the comprehensive significance of that shift? I'm not talking about a simple change from futurism to preterism. (I.E. The Great Tribulation: Past or Future?) I'm talking about a comprehensive shift from the psychology of futurism to the psychology of living in God's Garden. I know of some preterists who accept past fulfillment of prophecy, yet remain dominated by the psychology of futurism and continue to foster wilderness Christianity to one degree or another. Let me put it plainly. You do not live in a wilderness; you live in God's Garden! That really changes things... for good.

God's Garden ⇔ God's Garden

Genesis
“created”

Revelation
“made-new”

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. (Rev. 21:1 cf. Heb. 1:10; 2 Pet. 3)

- Why do Christians not understand the Garden scene in Revelation?
- Is it because they do not understand the Garden scene in Genesis?
- Revelation 21-22 portrays the Garden of Eden “all grown up”!

Now let us work from that realization. What if the garden pattern laid down in the first few chapters of Genesis, before the fall, is precisely how God relates to his people today? Isn't the story of the Bible that God redeems or “makes new” the original order he created in the beginning? This comes out better in the Greek of the New Testament. It is a made-new heaven and made-new earth as in redemption or resurrection. Revelation 21:1 tells us, the new heaven and new earth is related to the first heaven and first earth. Do you know why Christians do not understand the garden scene at the end of the Bible? I believe it is largely because they don't understand the garden scene at the beginning of the Bible. They start off with the wrong concept of what God's Garden is all about and as a result do not recognize the Garden at the end. As preterists, should we not consider the possibility that the Garden at the end of the Bible is the original garden of Eden “all grown up”? Let's take a new look at God's Garden beginning in Genesis 2.

God the Gardener

Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden... And the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground – trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. (Gen. 2:8-9)

O God Almighty... you brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it, and it took root and filled the land.” (Ps. 80:8-9)

In that day – “Sing about a fruitful vineyard: I, the Lord, watch over it; I water it continually. I guard it day and night so that no one may harm it. I am not angry. If only there were briars and thorns confronting me! I would march against them in battle; I would set them all on fire...” (Isa. 27:2-4 cf. Heb. 6:7-8)

How does the Bible first present God to us in Genesis? God is a worker, right? God creates. But the creation account is more specific. “Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden... And the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground – trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food.” (Gen. 2:8-9) God is a gardener! What do gardeners do? Gardeners plant things. Gardeners watch things grow to maturity. Gardeners pull weeds, and destroy pests that attack the garden. Gardeners patiently wait for the harvest to come in. If you go out and plant a few seeds and never come back to your garden to take care of it, then you’re not a very good gardener, are you?

God is a good gardener. In fact the story of the Bible is about how God takes care of his garden. See if this looks familiar, “O God Almighty... you brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it, and it took root and filled the land.” (Ps. 80:8-90) Israel knew God as the gardener. From where did they get that idea? Or consider this prophecy: “In that day – ‘Sing about a fruitful vineyard: I, the Lord, watch over it; I water it continually. I guard it day and night so that no one may harm it. I am not angry. If only there were briars and thorns confronting me! I would march against them in battle; I would set them all on fire.” (Isa. 27:2-4; c.f. Heb 6:7-8) God is a serious gardener! Those of you who have experience gardening can understand the metaphor. Taking on weeds can feel like war. It is appropriate to quote a psalm while staring down a weedy garden row while holding a garden hoe: “Praise be to the Lord my Rock, who trains my hands for war...” (Ps. 144:1). Warfare can be a part of Garden life. We don’t often stop to consider that God’s garden needed tending even before the fall.

God the Gardener

The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight. (Isa. 5:7 cf. Ps. 1:3; Ez. 19:10-14)

The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. (Matt. 3:10)

A farmer went out to sow his seed... (Matt. 13:10)

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. (Matt. 20:1)

If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches. (Rom. 11:17-18)

I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener... (John 15:1)



There is also peace in God's Garden: "The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight" (Isa. 5:7). Does that look like Genesis to you? God enjoys walking with his people in the cool of the day. They are a delightful garden. All over the OT we are told that God is the gardener (c.f. Ps. 1:3; ; Ez. 19:10-14). We seldom remember the source in Genesis when we come to the many gardening texts of the NT. Like this one, "The ax is laid at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." (Matt. 3:10). Chopping down trees is a garden chore, right? Or how about this, "A farmer went out to sow his seed" (Matt. 13:3). Who is Jesus talking about? "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard" (Matt. 20:1) and "If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches" (Rom. 11:17-18). God is at it again, cutting off the old and grafting in the new. And one more, "I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener." (John 15:1) From where did Jesus draw his teaching? He is teaching nothing different than the original garden story. Do you see that? The gospel Jesus taught is rooted in what is first revealed in Genesis 2.

Adam the Son

... Adam, the son of God. (Luke 3:38)

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. (Gen. 2:15)

Yet to all who received him, to those who believed on his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born... of God. (John 1:12-13 cf. 1 John 2:29-3:10)

We ourselves who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons. (Rom. 8:23)

He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son. (Rev. 21:7 cf. Rev. 3:21)

Let us go back to Genesis 2. Now that we understand how God is introduced to us, what about the next character? How is Adam introduced to us? Adam is introduced to us as God's son. No Genesis doesn't call him God's son; you'll have to go to the genealogy in Luke 3 to see that. But all of the details in the story point to that fact. "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." (Gen. 2:15) You see, Adam was going to learn to be a gardener just like his Father; he was supposed to learn the family trade. Like Father, like son.

I think the story is telling us that Adam and Eve are God's newborn children who are growing up in God's house. Some preterists have done detailed studies about how the garden motif in Genesis relates to the tabernacle/temple motif introduced in the days of Moses. The temple architecture and furniture goes back to the garden. That shows us how Adam, God's son, was placed in the garden, in God's house, in order to serve as God's priest. In fact the imagery at the end of Genesis 2 is that the children in the Garden "were both naked, and they felt no shame." How do children come into this world? They are born naked and sense no shame.

That gives us a garden background to the NT story. The apostles spoke about how people can become God's children. How is God going to mend his family? Here is John's answer about sonship. "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born... of God." (John 1:12-13; c.f. 1 John 2:29-3:10) That is the gospel, the good news, of the NT. Paul says, "We ourselves, who have the firstfruits (God's at that gardening thing again) of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons." (Rom. 8:23). Do you see how the story comes full circle back to the original garden story? Adam was not in need of adoption while he was in the Garden – he was made God's son by his creation! The story comes back to sonship when God's people find themselves back in the Garden-city at the end living again as a happy family with God our Father. "He who overcomes will inherit (notice the family metaphor; "inherit" not "earn") all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son." (Rev. 21:7; cf. Rev. 3:21)

Garden Grace

- What do Good parents give their Children?

Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. (Gen. 2:8)

- Did Adam have to earn his place in God's Garden?

The family context of God's Garden gives us a sense of the atmosphere in God's Garden. What do good parents give to their children? Grace, right? Do good parents charge their children for everything they need? No that would be absurd. What would you think if I said, "Aletheia, rent is \$50 a month, meals are \$5 each, at least when you start eating at my table. You've got to pay to live here!" Is that a model of godly parenting? No, parents provide for the needs of their children at no charge: grace. Good parents are full of grace toward their children. We model God's grace. Yet many people read the original garden scene as if Adam had to earn his life and relationship to God by the works of his own hands. Is that true? Christians today widely believe that God did to his first children in the garden what none of us would ever do to our own children.

Consider details of the garden story. What was the first thing God did with Adam in the story? A lot of people who misread the story say that the very first thing God did with Adam is give him a command to be obeyed upon the penalty of death. Nope. The first thing God did with Adam was give him pure grace by taking him from the wilderness and placing him in the garden. "Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed." (Gen. 2:8) That is first. Did God make Adam do anything to earn his place in the garden? Did Adam do anything to earn his life in the first place? No. Adam was given life by sheer grace. Adam was charged no price to live in God's Garden. Pure grace.

Food & Water

And the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground – trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food... A river watering the garden flowed from Eden... (Gen. 2:89-10)

- Did Adam have to earn his food and water in God's Garden?

Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him? (Matt. 7:9-11)

To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. (Rev. 21:6)

Note how the story goes immediately to give a description of the food and water in the garden, “And the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground – trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food... A river watering the garden flowed from Eden... (Gen. 2:9-10). Not only was Adam charged no entrance fee to enter God’s Garden, he had access to food and water from his Father at no cost. Is it difficult to see that God is doing for Adam exactly what he does for believers, God’s sons and daughters, today? Consider how Jesus argues from common experience, “Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!” (Matt. 7:9-11). Adam had free access to water in the Garden. There is a parallel to that in the description of God’s Garden at the end of the Bible: “To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life.” (Rev. 21:6)

Gold & Precious Stones

- Did God charge Adam for access to the gold and precious stones?
- God's people are his "treasured possession." (Deut. 14:7; Ps. 135:4; Mal. 3:17)
- Gold and precious stones placed in the Holy of Holies. (Ex. 28:9-14)
- Treasure city made from treasures from both earth (gold & stones) and sea (pearl).

The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl... (Rev. 21:21)

Next in Genesis 2 is a description of gold and precious gems in that location (v. 12). Adam had access to treasure. Again, no charge. It can be had for the taking. This is God's free grace. I believe the story is meant to convey that Adam and Eve **were** God's treasure. God's people are God's treasured possession (Deut. 14:7; Ps. 135:4; Mal. 3:17). Where God's treasure is, there his heart will be also. Think of the Garden treasure as "glorified earth" for they all come out of the ground. There is treasure in close proximity to Adam. Later in the garden story these minerals are used in God's temple. The gold was found in the holy of holies (in the presence) and onyx stones were used on the ephod of the High Priest (who went inside the Holy of holies). Moses called the onyx stones "memorial stones" to bring back the memory of Eden; they were placed in settings of pure gold (Ex. 28:9-14).

As the story comes to the end in Revelation, I believe it is very significant that New Jerusalem is a city made out of precious stones and pure gold (Rev. 21:18-20), glorified earth. God's little treasure mentioned in Genesis has grown to be a full treasure-city at the end. Look at the detail. God's treasure-city revealed at the end of the story is not only made up of treasure from the earth (gold and gemstones), but also something taken from the sea. "The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl..." (Rev. 21:21). The story ends with treasure from both the land and the sea representing both Jews and Gentiles. God is a very rich gardener at the end of the story.

Garden Freedom

- What was the first thing God said to Adam?

You are free... (Gen. 2:16)

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free... (Gal. 5:1)

- What about the Tree of Knowledge?
- Adam and Eve (children) were to learn from the example of God (father).

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. (Gen. 1:31)
[God knows good]

"It is not good for man to be alone." (Gen. 2:18) [God knows evil]

What was the first thing God said to Adam? "You are free..." Adam was given freedom to eat from every tree in the garden except one tree. We tend to focus on the command not to eat from the one tree and overlook all the grace of God. God gave every tree of the garden to Adam to tend, care for, and enjoy. Again, no charge; pure grace. I wonder if the first words God gave to Adam relate to Paul's teaching: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free... (Gal. 5:1). Could the new covenant gospel of Paul be a restoration of the original created order?

I believe that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was made to be a special gift for Adam and Eve in God's time. Remember, "God saw all that he made and it was very good." (Gen. 1:31) That means the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was good. Didn't God make the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? It wasn't Satan's tree, it was God's tree. Adam and Eve were to tend the whole garden, including the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, because God created it for a purpose.

To understand that purpose we have to pay attention to the story. The story emphasizes God's knowledge of good and evil. "God saw all that he made, and it was very good" 1:31 (God knows the good). God also saw that "it is not good for man to be alone" (God knows the evil). God is determining good and evil in the story up to this point. If we take this as a family story, of God raising his children in his house, then we'll see that God had created the tree of the knowledge of good and evil for Adam and Eve... but only in God's time. The kids were going to learn how to be like their pappa as they grew up.

It is important to understand that “the knowledge of good and evil” is not something bad in itself. Rather, it is a characteristic of wise, mature people, and especially of kings (2 Samuel 14:17; 19:17; 1 Kings 3:9). Adam and Eve, being newborns, were not ready to rule (Deuteronomy 1:39; Hebrews 5:14). They needed to serve for awhile and become wise before they would be allowed to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil which God had promised they would obtain in due time (Genesis 1:29 – “every tree... shall be food for you”)

James B. Jordan, *The Handwriting on the Wall*, p. 136.

I like this quote from James Jordan, because I think he captures the essence of the story like few others: “It is important to understand that “knowledge of good and evil” is not something bad in itself. Rather, it is a characteristic of wise, mature people, and especially of Kings (2 Samuel 14:17; 1 Kings 3:9). Adam and Eve, being newborns, were not ready to rule (Deuteronomy 1:39; Hebrews 5:14). They needed to serve for awhile and become wise before they would be allowed to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which God had promised they would obtain in due time (Genesis 1:29 – “every tree... shall be food for you).”

What I’m suggesting is that the prohibition of the tree of knowledge was a dietary food law. We should read this story in the context of how Israel would read it. Note what Eve told the serpent, “But God did say, ‘you must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’” Gen. 3:3. How would an Israelite who understood how dietary laws worked read that? What you don’t eat, you don’t touch, right? The prohibition of the tree was like the food laws in the Law of Moses. That shows us that the prohibition was temporary, for God had planned a day to come when Israel would eat all kinds of animals... “Peter, Get up, kill and eat.” The dietary laws were temporary and designed to teach Israel discipline, holiness, and maturity so that they could fulfill God’s purposes. Likewise, the prohibition of the tree of knowledge was temporary, valid until the time that God determined Adam and Eve had reached maturity through experience.

You parents can understand this. Don’t you have knowledge or things that you want to give your children, that your children will need at some point in life, but wisely refuse to give your children until they mature? That is what is going on in the story. God was home schooling his children in his house. Understood this way, even the existence tree of the knowledge of good and evil, prohibited for the time being as it was, had an element of graciousness bound up in it. God created it for them in his time.

The Best Gift of Grace

- Did God charge Adam for dominion over the animals?

But for Adam no suitable helper was found. (Ge. 2:21)

- Was God acting to bless Adam, and train him up in every step of the story?

This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called “woman” because she was taken out of man. (Gen. 2:23)

- Did God charge Adam a bride-price for Eve?
- Did God require 7 years of hard labor for her hand in marriage?

Next in the story God brings new companions to Adam. “The Lord God said, ‘I will make a helper suitable for him.’” (Gen. 2:18). And God brought all the animals to the man. Again, did God charge Adam for his dominion over the animals? No, they were brought out of pure grace from God’s fatherly desire for Adam to be complete and not alone. Then we have a conclusion. “But for Adam no suitable helper was found” (Gen. 2:21). Don’t you get the impression, from an objective reading, that God was being an honorable, loving father to Adam? Wasn’t God acting to bless Adam, and train him up in every step of the story?

So what does God do next? He puts the man into a deep sleep, opens up the side of the man, and forms woman. This is the very best grace from God so far. In fact, Adam is so impressed with what he saw with his eyes after he awoke that he writes poetry! “This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman’ because she was taken out of man.” (Gen. 2:23). Did God charge Adam a bride-price – you know, tell Adam to go dig up some gold so that he could give it to God as a dowry? No. Did God tell Adam that he would have to work for him seven years in exchange for her hand in marriage? No. God gave Adam his wife to complete him, because God loved his son and wanted only what was best for him.

On any objective reading, the first presentation of God’s Garden to us at the beginning of the Bible is a model of grace, love, and friendship shared between God the Father and Adam the Son. God is not a distant father who conditions his love and favor upon Adam based upon Adam’s works. This is a family story. This is gospel.

The One Sin

- What would cause death? Any and every sin?
- The Garden is a family scene – atmosphere of Grace.
- Jesus warned about one sin.

Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven in this age or the age to come. (Matt. 12:32 cf. Heb. 10:28-29; Rev. 2:11; 20:14)

When Christians don't pay attention to the family context – the gospel context – of the original Garden, they tend to read all kinds of things into it that do not belong. The Garden scene is often presented by traditional theologies as if any sin by Adam would result in the eviction of Adam from God's Garden. In other words, the atmosphere of the Garden was not one of grace, family relationship, and love. It is common to view the scene like this. A vindictive God put Adam in the Garden, gave him a command, stepped away from him, and then lay in wait for Adam to make just one mistake so that God could then jubilantly toss him out of the Garden. Does God treat his children in this manner today? Why would we think God treated his son Adam this way?

What does the text say? It says that there was one command, one sin that would lead to death. Eat from that tree and you will surely die. The text does not say that if Adam committed any sin in the Garden that he would surely die. You know, Adam could have done other things wrong in the garden. God put him in the Garden to tend and keep the Garden, right. What if he woke up and was lazy for one day? What if when he went to chop down weeds he accidentally dinged one of God's trees? What if he was grumpy with Eve one day and didn't treat her as he should have? There were other commands of God given to Adam, implied rules and instructions that did not carry the "one sin" death sentence. And we can understand the parallel in gospel living today. On an experiential level, do God's children commit sin while in the Garden today? Yes. Does God throw them out the moment they commit any and every sin as a child of God? No. So why would we think God treated his first children that way? Does the Garden story present a mean and vindictive God to you?

But there was one sin, "the sin" – singular, that led to death. One sin in the Garden God would not forgive. Does that not sound like Jesus? "Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven in this age or the age to come" (Matt. 12:32 cf. Heb. 10:28-29; Rev. 2:11; 20:14). Note how Jesus' statement regarding the one sin that would not be forgiven, parallels God's original statement to Adam. There was only one sin which God told Adam would result in death. Only one thing that would not be forgiven: eating the fruit from the forbidden tree. Likewise, Jesus affirmed that the one act that guarantees death, in that age or the age to come, was rejection of the Holy Spirit's work. The warning given to the first Adam and preached by the last Adam is a warning against apostasy.

The Necessity of Garden Faith

- Why did God give Adam that command in the Garden?
- God created the world so that Faith was necessary from the beginning.

And without faith it is impossible to please God. (Heb 11:6)

- Adam was created by grace to live by faith in God's word for good works.
- The Garden of Eden is a gospel Garden.

Why did God give Adam that command in the Garden? If we understand the Garden as the first revelation of the Gospel it is not difficult to answer that question. God gave Adam the command because he wanted Adam to live by faith. Adam had experienced the grace of God over and over. The story shows us that Adam had every reason to trust God's Word, live in faithful obedience, and grow up in God's house. Look at all that the Lord had done for Adam as a loving Father! When Adam sinned the one sin that leads to death he sinned against his own experience of the grace of God in his life. Adam lacked faith in God his Father. Why the command? God created the world in such a way that Adam was to live by faith from the beginning. Like Hebrews says, "Without faith it is impossible to please God." That is the way it has been since the beginning.

The garden story is not that difficult to understand. Adam was made alive by grace alone and did not and could not earn any one of God's gifts of grace bestowed upon him by his loving father. This is a gospel Garden. But once Adam was made alive with the breath of life, he was called to live by faith in God's word and obey his Father. Faith and obedience were an essential part of Adam's life in the Garden. One of the reasons why God made a gospel Garden where Adam would maintain his covenant life through a living faith in God's Word is because gardening takes faith... and works. Gardening takes faith; you have to make decisions in terms of things you don't yet see. Gardening takes work; work was necessary in the Garden before the fall and is therefore necessary after redemption is complete. We preterists know that it is not wilderness work. It is garden work. Remember, unlike Eliot's poem, we do not live in the wilderness; we live in the Garden.

If we are not constantly brought to an awareness of this huge God-dimension, trained in attentiveness to this immense God-presence, we will act and speak out of context, as if we are in a wasteland. But there is no wasteland. We are in a garden, a rose garden. No matter how purely motivated we are, we will finally do more damage than good if we do not operate in response to God rather than the environment. We live on holy ground. We inhabit sacred space. This holy ground is subject to incredible violations. This sacred space suffers constant sacrilege. But no matter. The holiness is there, the sacredness is there. If our lives, and in this case, our caring lives, are shaped in response to the violations, to the sacrilege, and not out of the holy, our lives are shaped wrongly. We are responding to the wrong environment, a false environment, a wasteland environment. We are called to be gardeners, not garbage collectors.

Eugene Peterson, *Subversive Spirituality*, p. 164-165.

I'll close today with a statement by one of my favorite contemporary authors that sets the stage for my next presentation on "Life in God's Garden." Here is a glimpse of how a right understanding of the Gospel Garden becomes relevant to us and our future.

"If we are not constantly brought to an awareness of this huge God-dimension, trained in attentiveness to this immense God-presence, we will act and speak out of context, as if we are in a wasteland. But there is no wasteland. We are in a garden, a rose garden. No matter how purely motivated we are, we will finally do more damage than good if we do not operate in response to God rather than the environment. We live on holy ground. We inhabit sacred space. This holy ground is subject to incredible violations. This sacred space suffers constant sacrilege. But no matter. The holiness is there, the sacredness is there. If our lives, and in this case, our caring lives, are shaped in response to the violations, to the sacrilege, and not out of the holy, our lives are shaped wrongly. We are responding to the wrong environment, a false environment, a wasteland environment. We are called to be gardeners, not garbage collectors." Eugene Peterson (*Subversive Spirituality*, pp. 164-165)