

GOD WITH US

Epilogue

THE THREE GARDENS

The more Shirley and I have studied the Bible over the past 45 years, we've come to realize that it's really pretty simple. It's a big love story with a lot of little chapters. *God lost something, and He wants it back.* That's the story in 8 words. Today, as we complete our *God With Us* journey, we take one last look at this love story by looking at the three gardens where the major acts in the story played out. The three gardens are spaced perfectly in the story – one at the beginning, one in the middle, and one at the end. When you stand in these three gardens, you get a feel for the entire love story.

Part One: The Garden of Love Betrayed

Genesis 1 tells us that God created the world; but His crowning act was the creation of man and woman in His image, in His likeness. Humanity was created to have a special love-relationship with the Creator. And God made a special place for that love-relationship to blossom. It was called the Garden of “Eden,” which means “pleasure,” or “delight.”

The Bible tells us that Eden was incredible. It had all kinds of trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. There was a huge river flowing through the Garden, so big that it fed four of the world's most famous rivers, including the Tigris and the Euphrates. There were animals of every kind in Eden, so tame that Adam could personally touch and name each one. Eden became even more delightful when God brought Adam a companion named Eve. One Hebrew scholar pointed out that in Hebrew Adam's exclamation when he first saw Eve could be translated “WOW!” Eve was a WOW! Everything in Eden was a WOW.

But by far the biggest WOW in Eden was the daily rendezvous with the Son of God. He came into the garden in the cool of the day to walk and talk with Adam and Eve. We know it was the Son of God because later in the story we are told that no one has ever seen God the Father, and that it is the Son of God Who has always revealed God to humanity (John 1:18). But the other thing we learn later in the story is that we were created *for the Son*. ***“All things have been created through Him and for Him” (Colossians 1:16).***

This is the key piece in understanding the love story: We were created *for Him*. To use the Scriptural imagery, “*He is the bridegroom and we are His bride.*” That is why He came into the garden to spend time with Adam and Eve. And that explains the two special trees in the center of the garden.

In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And the Lord God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die” (Genesis 2:9,16,17).

They were meant to *live forever with the Son of God* – that explains the tree of life. We are told that as they ate of this tree, it had the power to sustain them *forever*.

But they were meant to live forever *in a love relationship with the Son of God* – that explains the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. True love requires the choice to either love or not love the other. True love cannot be forced, or manipulated. So God gave humans a free will and a chance to exercise that will every day. That forbidden tree was like the wedding ring of their relationship with God. It gave them the daily opportunity to say YES to God, and NO to other options. Sometimes in wedding vows you’ll hear the line, “*forsaking all others, be faithful only to her, to him.*” Well, this tree was the “*forsaking all others*” tree. It was a sign of exclusive commitment to God.

But the place named delight became the place of betrayal, setting the stage for the whole love story. We are not told how much time passed with humanity living in that perfect love relationship with God. What we do know is that eventually the deceiver showed up, the fallen angel known as Satan . . . and he showed up at that particular tree of commitment. He had but one intention, to get Adam and Eve to forsake God, and to walk away with him.

He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’” The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, 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.’” “You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when

you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:1-5).

Doubt God’s intentions. Doubt His love. Doubt that He really cares for you. Believe that He’s cheating you, holding back on you, robbing you of your best life. That was the lie of the one Jesus later called “the father of lies.” The “fall of humanity,” as theologians call it, was choosing to doubt God’s love, and then walk away from His love. And that’s exactly what they did.

“When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves (Genesis 3:6,7).

They instantly knew something was terribly wrong. They felt the sting of guilt and shame for the first time. They began to hide from one another, and hide from God. When the Son of God came into the Garden for their daily rendezvous, they weren’t there waiting for Him, as usual.

“Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, ‘Where are you?’ He answered, ‘I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.’ And he said, ‘Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?’ The man said, ‘The woman you put here with me – she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.’ Then the Lord God said to the woman, ‘What is this you have done?’ The woman said, ‘The serpent deceived me, and I ate’” (Genesis 3:8-13).

They hid, and they blamed. But the fact was that they chose to turn away from God’s love; they chose to betray God and follow another.

Sadly, the Son of God explained the “death” that had now entered their world because of their turning away from Him. Their human relationships would be tainted by conflict. Their work would be filled with toil and sweat. The bearing and raising of children would be filled with pain. Ultimately, their human lives would end in

physical death. And, sadly, they would have to be evicted from Eden, because that Tree of Life had the ability to keep them alive forever. The Son of God did not want them to live forever in this fallen, broken, alienated condition . . . so He removed them from the Garden and from access to the Tree of Life.

But before He ushered them out, two very significant things happened that set the stage for the rest of the love story. First, He promised them that He would someday come to fight for them and to crush His rival, the serpent.

So the Lord God said to the serpent . . . “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Genesis 3:14,15).

Scholars call that the proto-evangelium – the first gospel. The first announcement of good news. I call it the serpent-crusher promise. The Son of God promised that He would someday come to crush the serpent and fight to bring them back to the Garden with Him.

Second, He clothed them with animal skins. That was the first sacrifice in the Bible, right there in Eden before they were ushered out. Was the Son of God showing them what it would cost Him to bring them back – sacrifice and death? Perhaps.

At the end of Genesis 3, Adam and Eve walked out of Paradise into a world of harsh new realities. Sort of like the parable Jesus told about the prodigal son who chose to leave his father’s house and ended up struggling in the far off country. We are all like that – prodigal sons and daughters, Adams and Eves, trying to find happiness and meaning in life apart from the God Who loves us so deeply.

Part Two: The Garden of Love Displayed

Thousands of years passed as humanity waited for the promised one, the serpent-crusher, to come. The apostle Paul summarized those centuries this way:

“From one man He made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and He marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him, though He is not far from any one of us. For in Him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:26-28).

Seek for Him, reach out for Him, and find Him . . . Humanity searching to fill the God-shaped hole in their hearts. Whether through the voice of creation, or conscience, or prophets, or teachers, God was calling lost sons and daughters to come home. He chose one nation to be a nation of priests reflecting God's character to the world. Israel's worship system, involving daily sacrifices, reminded everyone that the promised One, when He came, would have to make a perfect sacrifice for sin.

But Israel's ultimate purpose was to bring the Messiah, the serpent-crusher, into the world. And finally, that time came. The apostle Paul wrote: ***"When the time was right, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law"*** (Galatians 4:4). They called Him *Jesus*, which means, quite simply, *God saves*. Even at His birth it was made clear that He had come to be our Savior. ***"You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins"*** (Matthew 1:21). When Jesus turned 30 and began His public ministry, the first words spoken about Him were these: ***"Look, the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world"*** (John 1:29). Jesus had come from heaven to deal with the sin problem that arose in the first garden. In His own words, He said: ***"The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost"*** (Luke 19:10). And again, summarizing His reason for coming: ***"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many"*** (Mark 10:45). He came to recapture what was lost, by giving His life as a ransom. And that brings us to the second garden.

After 3 years of public ministry, during which He showed us what God is like, and proved that He was God, during His final week He began speaking directly about His real reason for coming.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit . . . Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour. Father, glorify Your name. Then a voice came out of heaven: 'I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again'" (John 12:24,27-28).

Thus, we find the Son of God in the second garden on the eve of His death on the cross. It was called Gethsemane, which means "oil press," indicating that it was a grove of olive trees where there was

an olive oil press. Jesus went there often with His disciples during the final week of His life.

Maybe He was drawn there because olive oil was used to anoint priests and kings in Israel. “Messiah” meant “anointed one.” Did it remind Him that He was the anointed one, the sent one? Or perhaps it was more visual. Maybe the gnarly, twisted trees reminded Him of the twisted state of humanity - His bride, His possession. For whatever reason, He came into this garden to prepare to win His bride back by the sacrifice of Himself.

On that last night of His life, Jesus turned Gethsemane into a battleground where His love for humanity was displayed. Combining the gospel accounts, here is what happened.

They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,” he said to them. “Stay here and keep watch. Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. “Abba, Father,” he said, “everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.” Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Simon,” he said to Peter, “are you asleep? Couldn’t you keep watch for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” Once more he went away and prayed the same thing. An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. “When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him. Returning the third time, he said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!” (Matthew 26:36-46; Luke 22:43,44).

Hematidrosis is a very rare condition when emotional and physical stress cause the capillaries that feed the sweat glands to burst so that a person sweats drops of blood. Jesus was undergoing something painful. He even needed an angel to come along and strengthen Him in that hour.

He was agonizing over the prospect of bearing the weight of humanity's sin, then drinking the cup of God's judgment against sin. That's what He meant when He prayed: *If possible, let this cup pass from Me.* The "cup" of God's judgment was a familiar image to Jews in that day. People could either drink the cup of God's blessing and favor, or the cup of God's judgment. Jesus was faced with the reality of doing what He had come to do – to take God's judgment into Himself; to die for the sins of the world, so that humanity could be forgiven, cleansed and restored to life in Paradise.

We will never fully comprehend what Jesus went through in Gethsemane. I think the fate of humanity hung in the balance during those hours in that Garden that night. The cross would come tomorrow; but the decision to go to that cross came on this night. A place where olive oil was squeezed out . . . blood was squeezed out of the heart of the Son of God. Calvary was where the sacrifice was made. But Gethsemane was the Garden where His love for us was on full display.

Part Three: The Garden of Love Restored

Through His death and resurrection, Jesus crushed the serpent. His death defeated sin; His resurrection defeated death. The Adams and Eves of this world could be forever forgiven – restored to a love relationship with the Son of God. Jesus told His followers to spread the good news that God stands ready to adopt lost sons and daughters into His forever family. And that's what the Church has been doing for the past 2,000 years – spreading that message to the world.

“For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

He also told His followers to spread the news that He would come again someday, to carry His Bride back to the Garden. C. S. Lewis once said: *“If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world.”* The truth is, we were made for another Garden.

Long before I learned how to get my theology from the Bible, I got it from the music I grew up with; the music of the 60s and 70s. One song always rang true to me. It still does. Joni Mitchell captured

what we were looking for, but could not find, in the song *Woodstock*. ***“We are stardust, we are golden, caught in the devil’s bargain, and we’ve got to get ourselves back to the garden.”*** Every generation since Adam and Eve has known, intuitively, that we have been caught in the devil’s bargain; that we were meant for so much more. What it took me years to realize was that the Garden we so longed for was a Garden that we couldn’t get ourselves back to. Only the Bridegroom could carry us back to the Garden.

In the final chapters of the Bible, the Bridegroom comes to carry His bride off to that Garden. In Revelation 19 we hear a heavenly choir singing about the wedding of the Lamb, the Son of God.

“Let us rejoice and be glad and give Him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and His bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear” (Revelation 19:7,8).

Jesus sweeps His bride, away and off they go to their eternal home, a completely new heavens and new earth. The apostle John was given a vision of what it will be like. He saw a new heaven and a new earth, a place where God would dwell with humanity forever; where there are no more tears, no more death, no more mourning or crying or pain. He saw a perfect world ... and in the center of that world, the final garden.

“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever” (Revelation 22:1-5).

There was a big river in Eden. Now we see a river in the eternal city, flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb. There was a Tree of Life in Eden. Here it is again, in the center of the eternal city running down both sides of the river. The curse came in the

first garden; but it is gone in the last garden. God and humanity were separated in the first garden. God will dwell with humanity again, forever in the last garden. We will see His face – and we will know that we have found what we were looking for.

The apostle John, who was given this vision of the eternal city, the “new heavens and the new earth,” heard a loud voice declare these words:

“Behold! God’s dwelling place is now WITH THE PEOPLE, and He will dwell WITH THEM. They will be His people, and God Himself will be WITH THEM and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’ Then He said, ‘Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true” (Revelation 21:3-5).

This was God’s desire from the beginning of the story – to be with humanity, because, after all, we were created to be in a love-relationship with Him. Yes, the whole Bible is one big love story, with a lot of little chapters. But when you step back from it all and see the big picture, it’s about God’s desire to be with us. *God lost something, and He wants it back.* That something is YOU, and ME. His final appeal in the Bible reveals His heart for us one last time:

“LET THE ONE who is thirsty COME; and LET THE ONE who wishes take the free gift of the water of life” (Revelation 22:17).

Afterword: God’s Forever Family



The Bible uses the analogy of “adoption” as one way to describe how God brings us back into His forever family. Our family has learned a lot about adoption during our years at Oak Pointe. In 2008 we adopted Dominic, a South Sudanese Lost Boy into our family. Maybe Jesus knew the parable of the lost son was one of our favorite stories in the Bible, because He gave us our very own Lost Boy!



In 2012 we had the privilege of inviting Nan, with Will, Gracie and Bennett to do life with us. Nan spent many childhood years playing with our kids. We never dreamed a day would come that she would need us to fulfill a new parental role in her life. But that day came and ever since our lives have been enriched because of them.

And then, on an unexpected June Sunday morning two years ago, Oak Pointe Church blessed our daughter with a child. Yes, right out there in the lobby, a woman from Oak Pointe told me about a birth mom who was looking to place her baby with a couple. A few days later, Sarah and Duane connected with the birth mom. In September of 2019, Sarah and Duane became



the proud parents of a beautiful daughter they named River. She's now almost 2, and she is incredible. We all couldn't be happier that we get to have River in our family. Yes, we know about adoption – how special it is to be adoptive parents, and how securing it is to be an adopted child.

We also wish to say a special Thank You to our four biological children. Chuck, Sarah, Scott and Luke . . . You have done so much to establish and grow Oak Pointe Church over the past 25 years. You have made so many sacrifices, endured so many home invasions, allowed your yard and your barn to be “church-central” for a decade during your years at home. You have brought countless numbers to this church, and cheered your mom and dad the whole way. We could not have done this without you. Thank you!



Finally, thank you to our Oak Pointe Church family. Serving in your midst has been a great privilege and joy. From our very small beginnings, trusting our very great God, we have seen Him do *immeasurably more than we could ask or think according to His mighty power that works within us. To Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen (Ephesians 3:20,21).*

Thank you for allowing us to shepherd this flock for so long. Thank you for running with us over so many mountains; for believing God for so many miracles. Thank you for being willing to go on a 3-year journey through the Bible . . . and for having hearts so open that you were good with it turning into a 5-1/2 year trek! Thank you for accepting us in our weakness and loving us all the more. Whoever God raises up as your next shepherd is in for a great, great blessing!

