

Genesis 2.4-17

An Ideal Place

I wonder if you can think of a place that you really like to be, a place that brings you happiness or contentment. For some of you, still living the life of teenagers, that place may be your bed, sleeping in on a Saturday morning. Others dream of being able to lie on a beach, soaking up the warm sun, or reading a book by the side of a pool, with someone bringing you a drink. For another person it might be taking time out in a café, breathing in that coffee aroma, enjoying a delicious piece of cake ...

In the world of the Ancient Near East (ANE), the ideal place to relax was a garden. They didn't tend to sleep in, or lie on beaches, and they didn't have café's or restaurants. The ideal place, experienced by only a few, was a garden.

A Royal Garden

Now when I say 'garden' I don't want you to think about the backyard at your house where there are a couple of fruit trees and a few untended rose bushes ! You could think of the Botanic Gardens, but even that doesn't really come close enough. In the ANE there was a special kind of garden. It was a royal garden, a garden made especially for the king. It was a walled garden, an enclosure in which there was the best and most beautiful trees, plants and flowers known to man. It was a place of serenity, peace and repose. It was a place of refreshment, a place of enjoyment. In the Ancient world it was the best place you could imagine. The Persian word for this kind of garden has entered our own language – and that word is “paradise”.

Now bring this image with you as we come to Genesis 2. Here we have a second look at God's creation – a different take on creation from Genesis 1. This account is focused down on to the human beings and adds more to the picture of Genesis 1. The two presentations of creation compliment each other. This second account dwells in more detail on the *place* that God creates for humans.

Now let's look again at what it says about this in **verses 7-8**:

⁷ then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. ⁸ And the LORD God *planted a garden* in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed.

The place which the LORD God creates for the first humans is nothing less than the best place known to the imaginations of people in the ancient world. God gives them a place fit for a king. He lavishes such kindness on Adam and Eve that he treats them like royalty ! You can see how this dignifies the humans and honours them. It is a wonderful gift from God.

What's more, it shows us the character of God and his purpose of humanity. This is a God who loves enjoyment and wants his people to experience it as well. Hebrew writing loves to use words that sound like other words and call them to mind. The word 'Eden' sounds like the word “pleasure”. There used to be a Christian book about sex that was called “Intended for pleasure” ... a title designed to get the heart racing. But in the eyes of Genesis it could be the title of a book about being human: “intended for pleasure”.

Have a look at the way the writer describes the garden and you can get a sense of this. In *verse 9* it says:

⁹ Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree *that is pleasant to the sight and good for food*, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

God creates a good looking garden. There is pleasure for the eyes and pleasure for the taste buds. It is far from being merely functional. It is beautiful and enjoyable. Again, can you see what this shows us about God and his intentions for human life. The goodness of God here is simply heart-warming.

A Sanctuary

There is another aspect to the way the garden is presented that is more subtle, but quite revealing. Eden is presented as a sanctuary. That is, it is a bit like a temple. It is a place where humans meet with God. It is a place where God's presence is experienced. We get a glimpse of this in chapter 3 where we read of the LORD God "walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze".

We also see this depiction of Eden as a sacred space in the words used to describe the man's task in **verse 15**:

¹⁵ The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

The words translated "till" and "keep" do not normally refer to gardening. The usual way these words are translated is "serve" and "guard". They are the two words used for the role of the Priests and Levites in the Temple later in the OT (for example, Numbers 3.7-8). It is also interesting that rivers flow out of the Eden, since later in the Bible the picture is of a river flowing out of the Temple (Ezekiel 47.1-12).

So it seems that Adam is being presented in the role of a priest, who serves in the presence of God in Eden. When we add this to fact that special gardens were the place of kings, we can see that the man is presented as a kingly priest. It is a wonderful way of depicting his situation and his calling – the man is a royal ruler whose life consists in service before God. Everything he does in the garden, all of his work and rest, is an expression of his *relationship* with God. That is what this story captures so brilliantly.

That this is the purpose of human life is confirmed by the way these terms are repeated throughout the Bible. You see when God forms the nation of Israel, the description God gives to them is this:

Indeed the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation (Exodus 19.6).

This calling is never realised by Israel, who fail in it time and time again. But it is a calling fulfilled by Jesus of Nazareth, who came as the Servant King, the royal priest. This man came "not to be served, *but to serve*, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10.45). Jesus showed us true human living. It had been granted to Adam, and then to Israel, but lost by them as they turned from God. Jesus does everything to bring us back into that life of servant kingship. As it says in at the beginning of the book of Revelation:

“To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a *kingdom, priests* serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen” (Revelation 1.5-6).

This is the destiny of Christians, but I want us to see that it hasn't come out of nowhere. It is a calling that is *founded* in creation, it is the very *fabric* of human living as God created it. And so there is nothing better for us as humans than to experience the wonderful role that we were made for: kingly priests, ruling for God and relating to him in service.

Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness

Yet there is still more of this positive picture of human life with God that we can uncover here in Genesis 2. The picture we find here is of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”. Let's go back to the words of **verses 7-8**:

⁷ then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils *the breath of life*; and the man became a living being. ⁸ And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed.

One of the key words in this account is the word “life”. It's a great word in Hebrew. It is pronounced “hayim”. It has that sense of vitality in the way the word sounds ! You see how the writer tells us that God forms the man and then breathes into the man the breath of life. You get a great sense of the human frailty (we are dust) and yet such a sense of vitality through the life-giving breath of God. We see the man's absolute dependence on God for his life, and yet his great potential as a living being.

We've already seen how God places the man in a fantastic environment for life in all its fullness. God places him in a pleasure garden, a place of peace, beauty, refreshment and enjoyment, all experienced in the presence of the living God. The garden is in the East (v 8), which is where the sun rises, so it's a place close to the source of light (and light is vital to living), and it is a garden watered by a great river (v 10), and water is the other great source of life, fertility, abundance.

Notice what is at the very centre of the garden. You can see it in **verse 9**. It is the “tree of life”. A tree is a great image for lasting life because when every other plant fades and dies in winter or in drought, trees keep living. We also know from verse 16, that God says “you may freely eat of every tree in the garden ...”. So the man was being invited to eat from the tree of life. It is an image of how God gave man the opportunity to share *in his own eternal life* ! It is a gift from God so that God and man can enjoy relationship with each other forever.

Can you see how God's determination is to lavish blessing upon blessing on man ? The quality of the man's life involves a very important factor – liberty ! For life to be enjoyable it must involve freedom ! And we need to see the enormous freedom that God gives to the man. Look again at **verses 15-16**:

¹⁵ The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. ¹⁶And the LORD God commanded the man, ‘You may *freely* eat of every tree of the garden ...

The man has the freedom to till and keep the garden however he wants. He is given full scope for his initiative. He has the freedom to eat from all the trees. We have to hear this *before* we come to the exception. Just let it sink in that the dominant note is freedom, and in all this there is only one rule (**verse 17**):

¹⁷but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.

Again, a tree is being used as an image that represents something about *relationship* to God. The “tree of life” represents the opportunity to share in the eternal life of God. The “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” represents the choice of either allowing God to be the one who determines good and evil for you, OR the man deciding that HE will determine good and evil for himself, without reference to God.

That choice leads to death, that is, a loss of life. And that makes perfect sense. Life is a gift of God. The Lord God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. Man cannot have life apart from God. He depends utterly on God supplying that life to him.

Can you see that there *is* liberty, but it is liberty within bounds, and those bounds are not arbitrary rules, they are *the bounds of relationship* – relationship with God. And that means letting God be God. It means letting God determine good and evil *for us*.

We see here what true freedom is. It is not the absolute ability to do anything at all. It is not simply the maximum amount of choice. True freedom is “freedom in relationship”. It is freedom experienced in relationship *to God*. It is a life of kingly priestly service to God. We see this freedom in the life of Jesus Christ and it is a wonderful thing !

The pursuit of happiness, then, is the enjoyment of the lavish generosity of God in the space that he creates for relationship with himself.

A Wonderful Calling !

I think we can now draw together the threads from Genesis 2. We see the goodness of God in giving the first man the ideal place for life, a royal garden. We see the nobility of the man’s vocation – to be a kingly priest serving God in this wonderful sanctuary. And we see the quality of life, of liberty and of happiness. This is what human life was created to be.

Adam’s commission was to extend this garden sanctuary to the rest of the world. We saw in Genesis 1 how the humans were to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it” (v 28). That is, humanity was to Edenize the earth. Adam failed. Israel failed. But Jesus of Nazareth did not fail! He did for us what we could never do for ourselves! Christ’s faithful life, his saving death, his rising to life and lordship: these bring the wonderful possibilities of Genesis 2 into reality for all believers in Jesus.

In **Revelation 22** we see how God’s plans will be realised when Jesus’ kingdom reaches its final consummation (see **verses 1-5**). See how it picks up the picture of Genesis 2 !

¹Then the angel showed me the *river* of the water of *life*, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ²through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the *tree of life* with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his *servants* will *worship* him; ⁴they will see his face [ie. enjoy his *presence*], and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will *reign* for ever and ever.

Talk by John Miller at St Bart’s Café Church on July 3, 2005