

Series: Shalom

August 7, 2016

Title: God's Gardeners

[Slide 1]

Text: Genesis 2:8-15

The Garden of Eden

Creation: all finished or just begun?

The Creation Story that we have been learning about tells us how God made the world a functioning and ordered place in which we could live and where He Himself would dwell with us. We saw last week that the Seventh Day in the climax of the story. It tells us that God moved into the neighborhood.

And this raises a question about how we see the whole Creation Story. Is it a story about something God finished a long time ago – a perfect world that has long since been corrupted? Or is it just the beginning of a bigger story?

When we think of someone creating a work of art, for instance, we see the process as having a beginning and an end. The painter sits or stands before the canvas, creates a painting, and then when it is finished, she signs her name on the lower right hand corner. All done. In fact, if anyone were to decide to improve upon it by painting over her work, we would consider it a desecration of her art. After all, she signed it off just the way it was supposed to be. All done.

But there's another way to understand the Creation Story. Think, for example, of the creation of an automobile. It begins as a collection of parts on an assembly line, and when it rolls off the line it receives its final inspection. At that point, its creators sign off, saying, "All done." But that is definitely NOT the end of the car's story.

The car isn't worth anything to anybody until you walk into the showroom and buy it. Then you drive it off the lot and put it to work. That's what it was made for. The car's purpose isn't "finished" until it is on the road, taking you to the grocery store, taking the kids to soccer practice, taking you to work.

And this is the way we are to understand the Creation Story. It is a story that is open-ended. It begins with God creating a functioning world. But that is by no means the end of the story!

The Garden of Eden:

Genesis One tells us the story of God creating the world as His Temple – His dwelling place with us. In Genesis Two we get a closer look at His dwelling place, and our role in it. We read:

[Slide 2]

Genesis 2:8-9 NIV

Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed.

The LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground – trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

This garden was no ordinary garden. In the ancient Near East it was quite common for a holy place like a temple to have a garden next to it. John Walton notes:

*The garden of Eden is not viewed by the author of Genesis simply as a piece of Mesopotamian farmland, but as an archetypal sanctuary, that is a place where God dwells and where man should worship him. Many of the features of the garden may also be found in later sanctuaries – particularly the tabernacle or Jerusalem temple. **These parallels suggest that the garden itself is understood as a sort of sanctuary.** (emphasis mine) (Gordon Wenham, as cited by John Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One*, p. 81)*

Living Water:

The Genesis Two story goes on to tell us that this garden was well watered.

[Slide 3]

Genesis 2:10 NIV

A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters.

Ancient sanctuary gardens were noted for their abundant water. The river of water was thought to spring from the god himself. In a dry, semi-desert climate this was the ultimate blessing. When Ezekiel receives his vision of the new Temple, it actually has a river flowing out from the front door!

[Slide 4]

Ezekiel 47:1 NIV

The man brought me back to the entrance to the temple, and I saw water coming out from under the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east). The water was coming down from under the south side of the temple, south of the altar.

This stream of water eventually becomes a mighty, life-giving river, turning the whole world into God's garden.

Think of what it means, then, when Jesus stands in the Temple and announces that He is the true Source of Living water! And think ahead to the picture of God's New Creation in Revelation.

[Slide 5]

Revelation 22:1-2 NIV

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.

The Garden of Eden was God's dwelling place, a place where He was to be worshiped and from which He would bless the whole world.

Creation Work**Enter the gardener:**

Gardens are special places. They don't just happen! They need to be not only planted, but tended if they are to fulfill their purpose. And that's why God put humans in His garden:

[Slide 6]

Genesis 2:15 NIV

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

God had planted the Garden of Eden as a place where He would live among us. But it was now up to humans to carry the story forward. God's Creation was not to be a painting hanging on the wall of a museum – finished and unchanging. Instead, it was to be more like that car that you drive off the lot and put to work. God's Creation Story is open-ended. You and I are empowered by Him to carry it forward. We have a say in how it turns out!

Creation Work:

Specifically, Adam is given the job of "working" and "caring" for the Garden of Eden. If we remember that the Garden of Eden wasn't just an agricultural project, but was a part of God's Temple here on earth, then Adam's work was nothing less than helping to build and maintain God's Temple. He didn't just wander around admiring the flowers and sampling the fruit on the trees. He *worked* the garden to make it ever more pleasing to God.

Secondly, we're told that we "took care" of the garden. The word used here has the root meaning of "to guard." It is a word that was used to describe the work of those who kept intruders out of sacred places. Later, after Adam and Eve sin against God and are expelled from the Garden, heavenly figures take their place, guarding the Garden lest humans try to return!

God's Gardeners

Your place in God's Garden:

God isn't finished with His Creation! Today you are God's gardener. He has placed you in His world with work to do. He has chosen to make *you* His Temple, His dwelling place! And that means that you and I have work to do. Like Adam in Genesis Two, we have living things and people to tend to. And we have sacred spaces to guard.

[Slide 7]

Think about you and your life right now:

- What are the most important things growing in your world?
- Is it a bank account?
- Is it a career?
- Or is it your marriage, your child?
- And what about the most important relationship of all: your relationship with God Himself?

You and I have work to do. We are God's gardeners. We are called to make our space God's space – God's garden. And we are called to guard it, to keep it safe and pure.

Good fruit:

Paul picks up on this idea of our being God's gardeners when he talks about what happens when we let God's Holy Spirit control our lives:

[Slide 8]

Galatians 5:22-23 NIV

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

These are not things we manufacture out of ourselves. These are God's plantings, nourished and brought to fruition by His Spirit. The Holy Spirit, Jesus tells us, is the river of water that flows from God into His garden.

But in order for these beautiful fruits to grow in our lives we have work to do. We must *cultivate* them. We must weed out all competition. We must *guard* against pests and intruders. Most of all, it means letting God lead the way through His Spirit:

[Slide 9]

Galatians 5:25 NIV

Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

God's Gardeners:

A few years ago Suzanne and I planted blueberry bushes along the side of our house. No sooner were they in the ground than a skunk came along and dug one of them up in order to get to that fancy organic plant food we had used to fertilize them. I put up a chicken wire fence all the way around them.

A year or two later we were ready to harvest berries. Seems that the birds knew about the berries, too. So we put a net over the bushes to keep the birds out.

Yesterday I went out and picked a container of perfect blueberries. Good fruit! But it only came by working and guarding. Pulling weeds, mulching the soil, adding fertilizer, fixing the net to the fence, and watching the berries ripen. A bowl of blueberries doesn't happen all by itself!

How much more so for those people and relationships that are growing in your life! Growing a family, a marriage, or a friendship is God-work. It takes our commitment and His watering. But when we carry forward the story of His Creation we make a place where He Himself will live and bless.

We're God's Gardeners.