

## PARADISE LOST

### Genesis 2:8-3:24

In our world there are divergent opinions on just about everything. In America we have Republicans, Democrats and Independents. Other nations call their parties Conservatives and Liberals. Some economists are bullish about the future; others are roaring bears. Some poets are pessimists and others are romantics. But, on one thing we have close to universal agreement—that our world is riddled with deep and troubling problems.

You know the list: diseases from cataracts to cancers; crimes from robbery to rape; disasters from earthquakes to hurricanes; family dysfunctions from incest to addiction and abuse to divorce; social injustices, political corruption, wars, racism, hatred, animosity, revenge . . . and the list goes on. No matter how hard we try it seems impossible to negotiate a lasting peace in the Middle East, eliminate the threat of nuclear war or reduce the rate of divorce.

It's not just the stuff of headline news, either. The problems of our world are woven into the fabric of our everyday lives. Probably every one of us faced some personal difficulty last week and we have another on the agenda for next week.

What does God think about all this? Does he care? Do our troubles matter to him? Why did he ever create our world in the first place?

Once, long ago, God had a dream. It was a dream for a wonderful place, even greater than the mythical Camelot. It was better than any man-made utopia. It was more than the best that any of us could ever imagine. God dreamed of a very special place—a perfect home for his human creatures who were to be his very good friends. It was to be real and magnificent—a paradise on earth.

God's dream came true. He called the place Eden which means "delight" for it was a most delightful place. Genesis 2:8-15 tells us:

*Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man that he had formed. 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. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.*

*A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold. (The gold of that land is good; aromatic resin and onyx are also there.) The name of the second river is Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Cush. The name of the third river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Asshur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.*

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

The place preceded the people, but it is not as if the world was designed with no purpose. It is not as if the world created its human residents. God knew what he was doing. He knew where everything was going. The Garden of Eden was not a venture capital project built on speculation. Everything was designed to perfectly meet the needs of us humans whom God would welcome to live here.

Eden was a truly wonderful place. It was low maintenance designed to water and grow by itself. Food was plentiful. But it wasn't just functional and utilitarian. Eden was beautiful. It smelled good and looked good.

One of the most magnificent places in the world is the Taj Mahal in northern India. It is famous for its design and architectural beauty. The Indian ruler Shah Jahan built it in memory of his favorite wife. It took twenty thousand workers 21 years, between 1632 and 1653, to build. But the Taj Mahal was built for the dead. It is a beautiful and expensive grave. It has no other practical value. It doesn't do anything except house two bodies that have been dead for nearly four centuries.

What a sharp contrast! The magnificent Garden of Eden was built for the living not for the dead. It was exquisitely beautiful and totally practical.

Sometimes we may wonder what God wants for us. Well, here in the story of the Garden of Eden is the answer: **God wants us to have the very best. God wants us to live in paradise.** It was one of the happiest days of God's entire life when he placed his beloved Adam in the paradise he had prepared for him.

But paradise can never be just about things. The richest person in the world may be able to buy a huge house with every convenience and luxury but still be a lonely, miserable person. Places without people aren't much fun and ultimately are not satisfying. Never think that anyone can ever be happy without others. Paradise is really more about relationships than it is about location. Adam was the richest man in the world. He lived in paradise. But it was not enough. In Genesis 2:18-25 we read:

*The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."*

*Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field.*

*But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.*

*The man said,*

*"This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man."*

*For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.*

*The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.*

The symbolism and significance of this ancient story is powerful. God formed the woman from Adam's side, not from his foot or his head. Companionship and equality between male and female existed from the very beginning. They had a relationship that was exclusive—one man and one woman. God did not create them for polygamy or homosexuality. Their relationship was primary. It was more important than parents or anyone else. In future generations when there would be parents, as important as that relationship is, it would never have the priority that the relationship of a husband wife would have to each other. A literal translation

of the words that the man will be “*united to his wife*” means that he will “stick to his wife.” God intended a lifelong unity in marriage.

The paradise of relationship was more than that of soul mates in the man and the woman. It was also a paradise of relationship with God. God himself came to Eden where he walked and talked with Adam and Eve. After all, they were created in God’s likeness. They were meant to be friends. It was beautiful. It was comfortable. It was perfect. There was love and friendship and satisfaction and spirituality. They had the best of the very best. But it wasn't good enough for them. They wanted more. When we turn the page to Genesis 3 we read the greatest tragedy of human literature:

*Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. 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 surely die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”*

They were tempted. It is quite amazing. It gives a deep insight into our own tendency to be discontent. Even in paradise there can be a sense of “never enough”. Even when God gives us more than we could ever need we are still dissatisfied. Even when it means putting everything good at risk we are prone to listen to another offer.

The serpent in this story was deceitfully clever. He made it seem like God was super strict by overemphasizing the one restriction God had given and excluding all the plenty that had been offered to Adam and Eve. God gave them a forest and forbid one tree but it sounds as if God had made excessive and unreasonable rules.

God’s goodness was questioned. The serpent spoke as if God's primary goal was to withhold the very best when the truth is that God wanted to protect them from the very worst.

And God's word was challenged. God said they would die if they ate the fruit of that one tree. The serpent said that God was wrong, that they would not die.

The serpent offered sophistication and spiritual success by telling them they would be better than they were, that they would be just like God.

Adam and Eve had to decide whom they were going to believe. They were tempted to believe that the serpent was right and that God was wrong. They were tempted to put paradise on the gambling table and risk their lives that the serpent and they were smarter than God.

The truth is that this is a temptation that is still repeated every day. God has given us good gifts. Are we willing to risk everything believing that we can disregard and deny God and get a better deal from someone else?

In this story temptation gave way to outright rebellion. There was a mutiny in paradise. Genesis 3:6-13 tells us:

*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.*

*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 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?"*

It sounded good. It looked good. It seemed like such a good idea at the time. She just didn't think it through. She ignored all the long term consequences. She just did it.

I suspect that the moment she did it she realized it was a terrible mistake. She knew the serpent's promises did not come true. She was not smarter or better or just like God. She knew

she had forever given up something wonderful and now it was too late for her to go back. So she invited her husband to join with her in this rebellion—and he quickly and deliberately agreed.

For them everything looked different. They saw life in a way that was worse, not better. What was beautiful had been touched by shame. What was wonderful was now polluted. And they did something that is typically human. They each found someone else to blame.

God did not question them to get information. God already knew exactly what they had done. God questioned them to elicit a confession that never really came. Instead of taking responsibility for their own behavior, Adam pointed to Eve and Eve pointed to the serpent. They didn't realize, or were unwilling to acknowledge, that **God holds each person accountable for his or her behavior regardless of what others say and do.**

It really was a great tragedy. Here God had designed them to help each other. That was the whole purpose. God wanted them to make each other better and stronger, but they did just the opposite. They hurt each other. Instead of bringing each other closer to God they rebelled against God together. They sinned together. They deeply hurt each other when they could have helped each other.

It still happens today. Marriages and other friendships are made by God for good and turned by people into something bad. Instead of helping, we hurt. Instead of blessing, we curse.

What the story is about simply is sin. Sin is ignoring what God says and doing what we want. It grows out of the gross misconception that we are smarter than God. The Bible is loaded with God's advice. Most often we have a clear idea of what God wants us to do and not do, yet too often we think we know better. That is sin. And sin against God always leads to consequences from God.

In Genesis 3:14-24 we read:

*So the Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, "Cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And 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."*

*To the woman he said, “I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.”*

*To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat of it,’*

*“Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”*

*Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living.*

*The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them. And the Lord God said, “The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.” So the Lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.*

The consequences were real and long term. For the rest of their lives there would be constant reminders of what they had done. What had been intended for joy would be plagued with pain and problems—everything from childbirth to farming. But, the greater consequence was that they had lost the paradise of Eden forever. Gone was the perfect place. Over were the perennially happy days. Damaged was the blissful marriage relationship. Broken was their friendship with God.

They had traded God’s dream for a lifelong nightmare. I picture a repeated scene night after night where they would hold each other, remember Eden and cry themselves to sleep. If only they could redo that moment, believe God and do it God’s way.

You know, of course, that this is the story for us today. God still gives us good even if it is not paradise. God still tells us what is best. We still face temptation. We still must decide whom to believe. We still face consequences if we rebel and do it our way.

If this were the end of the story it would be unspeakably sad. The best it would do is give us some sort of explanation for the mess we are in. It would explain why relationships can be so hurtful. It would explain why our world has diseases and disasters. It would explain the problems and pains of our everyday lives. But, that would be a little like a life sentence on death row, like being in prison for the rest of your life with no possibility of escape and a guaranteed execution at the end.

But there is more to the story. The rest of the story is the gospel of Jesus Christ. In fact, it is what the rest of the Bible is all about. God looked at the mess and decided to intervene. He chose to save his human friends from the eternal consequences of our misbehavior. He came up with a plan to regain paradise. God sent his Son, Jesus, to earth to live a perfect life. He showed the world that it could be done. He showed the way life in Eden was supposed to be. He showed that obeying God is the better way.

Then Jesus died on the cross to pay for human sin and to buy us a ticket back to paradise. He took the consequences of Eden on himself so they wouldn't have to stay with us. Anyone who accepts Jesus Christ and what he did benefits forever.

We have the opportunity to reverse the story of Eden's rebellion. That's what it means to accept Jesus as "Savior and Lord". He is our Savior from sin and all of its consequences. He is our Lord when we commitment not to be like Adam and Eve but to do what God tells us to do.

For those who are Christians God promises paradise—not a return to Eden but an eternity in heaven. It will be as good as and better than the way it used to be.

But, what about now? Do our pains and problems go away? They do not. We live in a badly damaged world where the consequences of Eden's sin still run wild. However, **God has given us as Christians the opportunity to show the world the way Eden was supposed to be and the way it will some day be in heaven.** Our marriages are not just for our happiness but to show others what God intended. Our relationships are a demonstration of God's intended design. Our contentment demonstrates that we are satisfied with whatever God gives us.

Even though we are in a broken world, with God's help we can live to show the world now what paradise was supposed to be like and what heaven is sure to be through Jesus Christ.

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