

All Things New: The Garden of Grace
By Jason Huff
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Genesis 2:8-9; 3:22-24; John 7:37-39; Revelation 22:1-7

Our final Scripture reading this morning is Revelation 22:1-7. May God bless the reading of His sacred, unfailing, and perfect Word. “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. The angel said to me, “These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place.” “Behold, I am coming soon! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book.””

During hard times in Russia, having a dacha could make the difference between life and death. Dachas are for the most part little country cabins, many without electricity unless they were built in the last 20 years. Really nice dachas were originally given as summer homes to the friends of the Tsar and nobility in the 1800s, and then to the upper class during the Soviet era. But by the 1960s, over a quarter of city dwellers had a dacha out in the countryside.

It wasn’t the summer home that was so important, because the dachas of average folks were little more than shacks. What mattered was the garden. For the poor, the garden meant food when the official supply lines ran dry. Onions, potatoes, beets, cabbage, radishes...when drought and famine hit or you weren’t connected with someone in the government who could get you more, what your dacha provided made the difference between hunger and having enough.

I don’t know if we take our gardens quite as seriously here, but gardening is something some of us pursue during our summers. Growing up in a condo, I never had a garden, and I never wanted one – gardens can be an awful lot of work! But we appreciate what they produce. And I think there’s something satisfying about food you grow yourself. You planted it, watered it, tended it, and then you get to enjoy all that hard work.

I think that the appreciation of a really good garden, whether it be vegetables or fields of trees or a vineyard or flowers, whatever it might be, I think that’s planted in human nature. Because even when we build huge cities, we have parks, we have places where we still let nature grow, where we tend our gardens. We have this in our makeup, I think, because our first parents, our ancestors, were made to be gardeners. They were told to fill the earth and subdue it, and their first step towards that was working a garden.

The garden of Eden looms large in both Jewish and Christian thought. A paradise made for us but lost due to our rebellion against God, Eden explains our predicament and explains why we expect things should be better than what they are. We were not made for this world as it is.

But what's fascinating to me is that Eden doesn't pop up often in the Bible. Isaiah prophecies once in Isaiah 51:3 that God will make the deserts of Zion, of Jerusalem, into Eden. The prophet Joel mentions Eden in passing when declaring that the day of the Lord's judgment will bring a mighty army that will lay waste to everything before it. Ezekiel makes brief mention of Eden. But there's no lengthy discussion of Eden after Genesis 3. There's no thought of reclaiming Eden or having another earthly paradise.

It's also interesting that there's only one discussion of a tree of life after Eden in the proverbs, comparing righteous actions to a tree of life. It's not that they were never thought of again...ancient Jewish rabbis discussed it a lot, and we still have many of their conversations recorded. But what was there to do about it? Nothing. Why long for something you can't have?

That's why it's all the more stunning that we suddenly come across this picture of Eden as we enter the final chapter of Revelation. Not the Eden of Genesis, not the paradise come and gone, but a new paradise, a better paradise if you can imagine it. But there's a permanent fixture there that has made it from Eden...the tree of life. We'll talk about that today and what it means for us as we look to a glorious future with God.

If you remember last week's passage, we got an amazing view of the city of God, the new Jerusalem, the new Zion, measuring larger than life, with gates of pearl and foundations laid by the gospel the apostles preached. It was a view of a wonderful city, not a city of crime and pollution, not a city of drugs and poverty, but a pure city, a perfect city, where nothing false or unholy could ever enter. We saw that God loves the city and that His permanent dwelling with us is a city, not a rural wilderness but a metropolis beyond imagining.

But here is where things get truly amazing. At the heart of the city is not concrete and skyscrapers but the river of the water of life, the living water, the blessed stream that gives us true eternal life, flowing from heaven, from the throne of the Father and Son, down the middle of the great street of the city. The water is clear as crystal, clearer than any water we've ever known. We're not even sure what to make of a river going down a street. And yet there it is, spreading life throughout the city. We think of underground pipes keeping water relatively safe to drink – a wide-open waterway seems ripe for contamination. But this is the water of life, and despite being front and center, it is still utterly pure.

Then this fascinating return to the garden – “on each side of the river stood the tree of life.” The tree of life is singular, only one, and yet it is on both sides of the river. We would think maybe it's multiple trees, but that's not what the text says. The tree of life that once stood in the Garden of Eden, the tree that promised eternal life for those who ate of it, the tree denied to Adam and Eve once they had disobeyed so that they would not live on in sinfulness forever, finds its fulfillment here. With the dimensions of this enormous city, I see one gigantic tree.

Those of us who are here today can see massive trees in our backyard that have to be three stories tall at least. The so-called Tree of Life, the fake tree that stands at the center of Disney World's Animal Kingdom, is 145 feet tall. The tallest tree in the world is called Hyperion. It's a redwood in the forests of California 380 feet tall. Surely the tree of life in the perfect city of God can have roots that span the river of life.

This amazing tree bears twelve crops of fruit with a yield every month. Remember that number of perfection we've seen in Revelation, 144? 12 crops 12 times a year? There you go. The crops themselves aren't important; it's the tree, which stands for the wonderful eternal life denied to us for so long because we needed Christ to save us from our sin before we eat from it. And these crops spell out God's abundance. Where in our world trees only bear fruit in their seasons, they go fallow most of the year, the tree of life is always filled with everything we need. And there is no guardian around it. In Genesis, an angel with a flaming sword protects the tree from anyone who would touch it until it disappears entirely from earth. Here, the fruit of the tree is there for all for the taking.

The leaves are for the healing of the nations. This is an idea that I found very few scholars dwelt upon much; many don't know what to do with it. I'll tell you what makes the most sense to me. The leaves themselves point out that the nations themselves need to be healed – and we're talking here about the people groups. God will deal with our individual hurts; He will dry every tear; there will be no more sadness or pain. But until now, we haven't seen the redemption of the nations. There is no pure people group, no one innocent, no one unaffected by the curse of Adam and Eve. Every culture on the planet has been stained by sin, violence, lust, and greed. There is no pure culture; some have been far more moral and righteous than others, but even the best have been tainted by the world.

And yet God ordained that there would be nations. God ordained at the tower of Babel that there would be different languages and people groups, different races as we think of them. I don't believe that those parts of us will magically fade away in eternity. I think that just like every part of us, those elements of our cultures and tribes and people groups will be redeemed by God. The nations in the Kingdom will no longer fight. We will no longer have these deep divisions caused by war and oppression and racism. The wonder of the Kingdom of God is going to be how with all of those differences, all of that diversity, we are made one as children of the King, sisters and brothers to the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

That's why there will no longer be any curse, as the next verse says. Not only will individual sins be purged and forgiven, the sins of the fathers and mothers, the sins of the tribes, the sins of the cultures, will also be purged and forgiven. Every vestige of sin will be utterly erased. The curse will no longer plague us in any way.

We will be free to obey God, and we will be changed in such a way that we will always want to do so. I read a great quote from the Christian author Frederick Buechner this week that said this: "The final secret, I think, is this: that the words "You shall love the Lord your God" become in the end less a command than a promise. And the promise is that, yes, on the weary feet of faith and the fragile wings of hope, we will come to love him at last as from the first he has loved us."

The next thing to really take note of is this: the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city. Throughout the entire revelation, John has seen this throne in heaven. Now it is in the city of God. There is no separation any more. God's place is among His people. The place that speaks most directly of His power and reign, His holiness and worthiness to rule us, is not in a lofty heaven far away but right in our midst.

But it gets better. God's people will see His face. Maybe this doesn't sound like such a big deal until we realize what it means. Since the garden, no one has been able to look on God the Father and live. Moses, the ideal man of the Old Testament, has to be shielded in a rock for the glory of God's back to pass by for him to see. The mere presence of God in His glory was enough to scare the Israelites into hoping He would just go away. Jesus comes to us as a man we could look upon, could see and touch, and yet no one has seen the Father face to face.

In the cleansing that has happened and is to come, in our purification through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross for our sakes, through the changing of us called sanctification by the Holy Spirit, by the immense grace of God, we will be able to look upon our Lord. We will be with Him and see Him as He really is and not have to be afraid. We will see Him with all the love that He has for us. God the Father, the great and unknown mystery who cannot appear before anyone unholy, will reveal Himself to us as He has made sure we are cleansed from all unrighteousness.

And His name is on us. We see Him face to face, He is claimed by us. I think of *Toy Story* and how Andy wrote his name on all his toys to say that they belonged to Him. But God isn't going to write it on our boot – He's going to write it front and center on us. It will be no secret that we belong to Him. He will enjoy us for who we are and claim us as His very own. What a blessing!

We have more descriptions of who we are in the city. We serve God, and yet we reign forever and ever. That seems like a contradiction; servants serve and rulers reign. Yet Christ is our servant leader, the One who rightfully rules all things as the only begotten Son of the Father and yet who led us by making Himself nothing and serving us even to the very end of His life.

It is not a paradox that we serve and reign at the same time. Here, we think of serving as hard work, demeaning work, often we avoid it. Yet serving God? It is a privilege to even think about it. When I think about playing my guitar for you amongst friends, I don't worry too much about my mistakes. But when I think about playing for the King of all Kings – I think I need a little more practice!

Then we have some repetition from last week's passage. "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." Why would we need to hear that again? Why is it so important that God is our light, that there's no need of any other source for it? Why is it important that there is no night? After all, the cycle of day and night existed before sin entered in the world. It's not like night is a result of the fall into sin.

I believe it is what night represents after the fall. I remember being told when I was young that nobody needed to be out much after midnight. While we might quibble about the exact time, it's still true...most of us know that the majority of crime and accidents and nasty things happen in the darkness. You know that a crime was really brazen if it happens when? In broad daylight. But the darkness is a cover that makes us think we can get away with things. Ask any business in a busy area that's installed security cameras just what kind of things go on outside their doors, and you'll probably be shocked what's popped up.

Jesus was arrested at night, betrayed at night, so that His ordinary followers wouldn't show up and raise a fuss. Night is not inherently bad, but after the fall, it became synonymous with evil. Even when everything is OK, we have a fear of darkness, of the unknown. Troubles seem worse in the dark. The promise we have is that God will fully illuminate everything. There won't be the need to go outside or turn on a lamp for light; there will never be a time that we need to be afraid of what might be out there. Night and sleep and darkness are such a part of our lives that we can't imagine a world without them. And yet there we are. God promises a world where there is no darkness as all, no evil, no sin, no harm. It's beautiful.

And what's so beautiful about this garden, this tree, this river, is that it's a garden of grace. As great as Eden was, it was a garden of works. There was a mandate on Adam and Eve; they were to obey God perfectly in order to stay in relationship with Him. They didn't, and that relationship was broken. That garden withered. But this garden is one where God's grace reigns supreme. Instead of commanding us to be perfect in order to be in relationship with Him, God has extended His grace to us so that we will be perfect, so that we will be in relationship with Him. This garden, this perfect green place in the heart of the perfect city, exists because God has showered us with His grace.

There are two last concepts in this short passage. One is that these things are going to start happening soon. We have to be careful with how we understand soon, for God's timing is perfect – He's bringing about everything soon, which means at just the right time. We must remember that because Revelation is a book of cycles, and some cycles have come and gone. People in every age should be ready for what is to come, for what's described in this book.

Finally, Jesus says to us, "Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book." In this moment, we start to move away from the close-up shot we have on the Kingdom of God and zooming out to a view of the entire book, the entire prophecy that John has recorded. We've been given this gorgeous view of what is to come of the new heaven and the new earth, we're awestruck, overwhelmed, grateful. Now we need to come back to earth, back to the here and now. "Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book."

Keeping the words of the prophecy doesn't mean respecting them or having a copy of them. It's about obedience. Months ago, we heard the seven letters Jesus dictated to John for the seven churches. We heard how each of them had things to do to become or remain faithful. Since then, we've heard of Christians staying faithful during tempests and trials, through the bowls of wrath and dragons and beasts, wars and oppressions and famines. The book of Revelation is not so much about how to be faithful – the apostles taught the churches that, Paul wrote letters that we still read informing us about it. Revelation is a call to persevere, to not give up, to carry on in the face of danger and storm, of persecution and hardship and trouble.

And that's our final call this morning. Rejoice in the beauty of what is to come. Let it guide your hearts and minds. Eagerly await the day when you will be with Jesus and see the magnificence of the Lord face to face. The way we can be sure to have that day in our future is to stay faithful. Do not let the world crowd out your belief. Do not become so enamored with this world that you forget what is coming for you in the next. May we all live in such a way that we might one day eat from the tree of life and enjoy the garden of paradise far better than Eden.