

The Garden Of God

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After presenting the Creation narrative, God intriguingly sets the Bible's first scene in an agricultural environment, the Garden of Eden (Genesis 1:29; 2:8). In that garden, God had placed two trees—the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil—that represent man's choice of relationship with God and each other (Genesis 2:9). Clearly, Adam and Eve chose the wrong tree, and their progeny has lived with the consequences ever since, frequently replicating this wrong choice in their daily lives.

Throughout the Bible, God scatters numerous positive examples of the lives of God's people in which He emphasizes agricultural settings and symbols. Psalm 80:8-11 speaks of the vine, Israel, which God took out of Egypt and replanted in Canaan. In Isaiah 5:1-4 God carefully plants, tends and protects His vineyard, which represents His chosen people. Ezekiel 17:5-8 and 19:10-11 describe the vine as fruitful and plentiful with strong branches.

The New Testament is also rife with parables and illustrations with agricultural themes. Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 examines the familiar Parable of the Wheat and Tares. Mark 4:26-29 relates the Kingdom of God to a man sowing seeds. Jesus reveals how each Christian will receive the same "wage" in the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard in Matthew 20:1-16.

Each of these scriptures reveals positive actions by someone—usually God—as well as both positive and negative results, often seen in the response of the "plants." Psalm 80:12-19 follows the positive actions of verses 8-11 with these negative words:

Why have You broken down her hedges, so that all who pass by the way pluck her fruit?
The boar out of the woods uproots it, and the wild beast of the field devours it. Return,
we beseech You, O God of hosts; look down from heaven and see, and visit this vine.
And the vineyard which Your right hand has planted, and the branch that You made
strong for Yourself. It is burned with fire, it is cut down; they perish at the rebuke of
Your countenance. Let Your hand be upon the man of Your right hand, upon the son of
man whom You made strong for Yourself. Then we will not turn back from You; revive
us, and we will call upon Your name. Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; cause Your face
to shine, and we shall be saved!

Obviously, God's initial favor toward the "vine" did not produce lasting peace and prosperity. Something occurred in the meantime to change God's favor to anger (verse 4). Isaiah 5:5-7, in the form of warnings and promises, gives us some indications of what happened:

"And now, please let Me tell you what I will do to My vineyard: I will take away its
hedge, and it shall be burned; and break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I
will lay it waste; it shall not be pruned or dug, but there shall come up briars and thorns.
I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain on it." For the vineyard of the Lord
of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are His pleasant plant. He looked for
justice, but behold, oppression; for righteousness, but behold, weeping [a cry for help].

Ezekiel 17:9-10 and 19:12-14 speak of the dire consequences the "Planter" allows or causes because of the "vine's" disobedience:

Say, "Thus says the Lord GOD: 'Will it thrive? Will he not pull up its roots, cut off its fruit, and leave it to wither? All of its spring leaves will wither, and no great power or many people will be needed to pluck it up by its roots. Behold, it is planted, will it thrive? Will it not utterly wither when the east wind touches it? It will wither in the garden terrace where it grew.'" (17:9-10)

But she was plucked up in fury. She was cast down to the ground, and the east wind dried her fruit. Her strong branches were broken and withered; the fire consumed them. And now she is planted in the wilderness, in a dry and thirsty land. Fire has come out from a rod of her branches and devoured her fruit, so that she has no strong branch—a scepter for ruling. (19:12-14)

Lessons Not Learned

Many of these Old Testament examples illustrate God's involvement in the lives of His chosen people, Israel. They reveal a God who is personally involved in His people's lives. He is the One who sent them to Egypt and called them there as His chosen people. God Himself led Israel through the Red Sea to free them irrefutably from the slavery most of them knew from birth. In the pillar of cloud and fire, He went before them throughout their wilderness journey.

When Moses sent the twelve spies into the Promised Land, they brought back fruit of unparalleled proportions, physical proof of the blessings of God and His promise of a new future. However, being God's chosen people was not worth it to many of them. Their continual complaints about their "lack" of food, water, a god to worship and other misgivings only exacerbated their situation. God had made clear the terms of His covenant to these people (e.g., Deuteronomy 30:15-20), only to have them disregarded. Israel continued to show their contempt for God's ways throughout the lives of the various kings, priests and rulers that they demanded after they dismissed God as their Provider and Sustainer.

The Bible depicts God's response in various ways but often with an agricultural or farming theme. This method has been very effective, for it provides living examples that pertain to the everyday efforts of most people throughout history. The examples are easily understood because most of its readers have come from agrarian societies. God often uses tools that hit people right where they live.

Unfortunately, most people are extremely slow learners. They do not see or react to events, such as a lack of rain, famine, blight, pestilence and insect infestations, as signs or punishments from God. Solomon, in his prayer of dedication for the Temple in I Kings 8:35-37, acknowledges Israel's lack of response to these disasters, and he pleads for God to hear those who do respond:

When the heavens are shut up and there is no rain because they have sinned against You, when they pray toward this place and confess Your name, and turn from their sin because You afflict them, then hear in heaven, and forgive the sin of Your servants, Your people Israel, that You may teach them the good way in which they should walk; and give rain on Your land which You have given to Your people as an inheritance.

When there is famine in the land, pestilence or blight or mildew, locusts or grasshoppers; when their enemy besieges them in the land of their cities; whatever plague or whatever sickness there is. . . .

God works with people using situations and illustrations that most affect them. He wants a change of heart and direction to occur in their lives. However, as the Bible's pages reveal, His chosen people are too often hardhearted and disregard the most pointed of trials to continue in their own ways.

Repeating History

Even with the advent of the spirit of the law in the New Testament, we still see agrarian examples of human interaction and behavior. Many of those whom God called were involved with agricultural endeavors. When Christ spoke of the wheat and tares, people could easily relate to the consequences of allowing the tares to crowd out the healthy and productive wheat, if not dealt with in time.

Those with a farming occupation during Christ's life could have easily understood the lessons from the Parable of Sower (Matthew 13:3-9, 18-23, 36-41). Any farmer knows that proper ground is necessary for producing a successful harvest. An interesting facet of Christ's parables is that people like the Pharisees and scribes misunderstood or ignored them. Even though their livelihoods may have had some connection with agriculture, they probably deemed their endeavors to be more important than the physical labor of sowing, cultivating and reaping. If they knew the consequences of these agricultural parables, either they forgot or God blocked their understanding.

The New Testament repeats the theme of disregard for God and His desires. The Parable of the Wicked Vinedressers (Luke 20:9-17) bears out how men refuse to learn, even some of those chosen by God. Repeatedly, the owner of the vineyard, God, sends someone to collect the bounty of His own field. Three times His servants are beaten and sent on their way. Even when He sends His Son, these evil people decide that killing Him is more important than fulfilling their parts of the bargain.

The Sermon on the Mount also includes a pointed reference to the positives and negatives of man's decisions, using trees and fruit to illustrate Jesus' meaning:

You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them. (Matthew 7:16-20)

Some of the books written after the Gospels reveal that many of those God chose denied His power and wishes just as readily as their predecessors in older times. Like them, they failed to be faithful to God and neglected or flatly denied their obligations under God's covenant.

Lessons for Today

In modern times within God's church, we also have difficulty maintaining a "fruitful" existence in relation to God and His ways. The garden in which He has planted us—His church—contains many plants that have rooted themselves in various plots of ground. Some have been choked out by the cares of this world, while others have no depth of understanding of the truth and God's will. Too many struggle in differentiating between the tares and the wheat. Others are as forgetful of their

promises to God as were the children of Israel or the apostate New Testament church. We seem to continue to repeat the same mistakes of living unproductive spiritual lives and failing to bear the fruits of godliness.

In contrast, we should see the need to renew the growth that is essential before God harvests us into His Family (Revelation 14:15). Christ knew that the laborers would be few, and this fact makes it even more imperative that we take our responsibilities seriously (Luke 10:2; Matthew 9:37-38). We cannot take the attitude that someone else will take care of them (John 4:34-38). The Parables of the Pounds and the Talents emphasize each individual's need to increase what God has given. Even though trials and difficulties continually hamper our progress, we must patiently wait on God to help us bear the fruits through our relationship with and understanding of Him (James 5:7-8).

We have to know our proper place in the entire growth process. We have to realize that God has not promised us a "bed of roses" existence. The Christian life is one of planting, watering, weeding, fertilizing, pruning and bearing fruit—some of which we do, and some are done to us. It is producing a harvest of righteous character through a personal relationship with the Father and Jesus Christ by prayer, study, meditation and fasting. We must recognize that God is the Master Gardener who knows perfectly how to water, fertilize, and prune us to produce perfect fruit (John 15:1-5). If we do not allow Him to cultivate us, we will die on the vine.

One factor that inhibits real growth is not knowing what godly fruits are. Do we really know and use these fruits? "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law" (Galatians 5:22-23). Or do we embrace these?

Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. (verses 19-21)

Are we seeing real growth in ourselves because God lives in our hearts and minds (Colossians 2:3-6)? Can we honestly say that we are "[yielding] the peaceable fruit of righteousness" (Hebrews 12:11)? Do we consider our prayers to God as "the fruits of our lips," and in the same vein, is our behavior toward each other "the fruit of righteousness" (Hebrews 13:15-16; James 3:18)?

Unfortunately, many in God's church today see themselves as the "select" harvested people of God, bearing a self-proclaimed definition of godly fruit. Like our predecessors of old, we often fall prey to our own designs and definitions, and usually they are merely what we feel comfortable with. In addition, a great deal of herbicide has been advertised as fertilizer to feed God's plants, and it has taken its destructive toll.

God is the only Master Planter, Cultivator, and Harvester. Our destiny in life is to regard the truth as precious nourishment He gives to all of us in His garden. He wants us to share it with one another, not compete for followers with it. We have a serious need to get back to the "trunk of the tree" in our relationships with God and each other, in our beliefs, in overcoming, and in seeking God's will rather than our own so that we will be prepared for the harvest of firstfruits that will soon take place.

The Bible ends—of course—with a final agricultural scenario. Revelation 22:2 speaks again of the Tree of Life as a centerpiece of New Jerusalem: "In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations." It seems that this symbol figures in at the beginning of very two different times. In the Garden of Eden, man made a mistake and chose the wrong tree. God, as a loving and benevolent Master Gardener, gives individuals another chance—a chance to heal all breaches and problems for all eternity.

If God has called us, we have that chance now; we need not wait until New Jerusalem comes down from heaven to choose the Tree of Life. By God's forgiveness and gifts, we already have the ability to bear the right fruits in our lives. We must take complete advantage of this golden opportunity and grow strong and productive in the garden of God.