

+ Genesis 3:15 + A Field of Defeat Becomes a Garden of Promise¹ + Ash Wednesday + 5 March 2014 +

It had been such a beautiful place. Everything about it was literally perfect. The view was breathtaking—the flowers bursting with color, the trees loaded down with fresh fruit, the water clear and clean and cool. Eden was a garden that put any manmade garden in the history of our world to shame. Even the animals lived in perfect harmony. There was no food chain, no violence, no cries of fear or screams of death. It was beautiful. It was perfect. It was Adam and Eve's home where they daily spent time with their Lord and one another enjoying God's perfect creation and love.

Now God had given Adam and Eve a single command—***“You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.”*** (Genesis 2:16-17) Was God tempting them to sin? Was he trying to push them to disobey? No, the Lord was giving his perfect creation the opportunity to demonstrate perfect love and obedience for their God who loved them so much. There was no war or hostility between God and people—just peace and harmony.

...But in a moment, what was beautiful became desolation. Where there once was peace was now a battlefield where Adam and Eve had completely lost the battle and perhaps even the war with a single act of deception.

The day had started like any other—a gloriously beautiful and perfect day of God's grace. Adam and Eve were walking through the garden when Eve noticed something unusual in the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. There was a serpent slithering around in its branches, but what was even more remarkable was that the serpent spoke to Eve. Even at that time, animals typically did not speak, but this serpent engaged Eve in a conversation that would ruin her, her husband, every one of their descendants and the beautifully perfect creation around them.

The serpent fired the first shot. ***“Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’”*** (Genesis 3:1) He wanted to plant doubt in Eve and Adam's minds. He wanted them to doubt God's words, but Eve handled it well. ***“We may eat 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.’”*** (Genesis 3:2-3) She probably said a little more than the Lord had said, but her defensive maneuver was correct.

At that point, she should've left, but the serpent attacked once more in a way Eve did not expect. He attacked with a bold-faced lie that seemed like inviting friendliness and poured doubt right into their hearts. ***“You will not surely die...For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”*** (Genesis 3:4-5) At that point, the battle was lost. Eve looked at the fruit and wanted it for herself so she could be like God and then she gave some to her husband whose silence betrayed them both. ***“The eyes of both of them were opened...”*** and what they saw was no longer beautiful and holy, but desolation and death (Genesis 3:7a).

They no longer believed God's words and like an army with no training on the field of battle, Satan had routed them. Foolishly they tried to cover their shame with fig leaves and retreated into the bushes when they heard the almighty God come walking into the garden. They remembered what he said, ***“When you eat of it you will surely die.”*** Condemnation and the terrifying reality of death pursued them into hiding, so they turned on God.

They felt nothing but enmity—the opposite of peace. They shook their fists at God. They pointed accusing fingers at each other. They tried to pass the blame to Satan. They were quick to blame God for their circumstances. They were willing to throw each other under the bus if it would save their own skin. What had seemed like such inviting friendliness from Satan was now unmasked as a malicious trick to destroy them, and it worked. Ironically they had become unwitting allies of this serpent who hated them and wanted them doomed like himself. Inside and out, they felt the hatred that a holy God has for what they had become. It was sheer terror on that battlefield—a desolate place marred with the ruin of defeat.

...But then the Lord Almighty did the unexpected—one of those actions that always seems to snatch victory out of the gaping jaws of defeat. Rather than end the lives of his traitorous creation, the Lord turned to Satan and said, ***“I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”*** In that moment, the holy Lord of heaven and earth broke into our world and transformed that field of defeat into a glorious garden of promise.

¹ Some of the thoughts and language of this sermon were adapted from the 2014 Lenten sermon series—“From Garden to Glory”, produced by Northwestern Publishing House.

God himself would change things! God himself would completely reverse what had just taken place. The woman would no longer be an ally to the devil, because God would create enmity between her and the devil.

That means she and God would have to be reconciled, to be at peace with one another again. After all, to be an enemy of Satan, one has to be a friend of God. Yet this announcement of peace restored wasn't offered just to the woman, but to her husband and to all their descendants, even to you and me. Consider God's promise on that day of defeat, ***"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers."***

Notice how awe-inspiring our God is. He didn't advise Adam and Eve to regroup and prepare for a counterattack. He didn't command them to redirect their hatred against the serpent. God didn't even urge them to reach up to heaven with their prayers to invite the change. The truth is, when God gave them the opportunity to admit their defeat, they couldn't do it. They had absolutely no ability whatsoever to turn themselves around and live.

So God promised to do it for them. He promised to send a Savior, a Deliverer, a Champion, but who would this promised Champion be? He would be the offspring of the woman. He would be a true human being, but God also said this to the serpent, ***"He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."*** Satan would be crushed. The only One in the universe powerful enough to do that is God himself. So the Savior would also have to be God. The Savior would have to be both truly human and truly God.

Now in the process of crushing the serpent in eternal defeat and saving humanity, this promised Savior would have to suffer. The serpent would strike his heel. As a true human being, Jesus would step into our shoes. He would be our substitute. He would take on himself the blame for all sin from that first defeat at the very beginning to the daily defeats you and I suffer even now to every defeat until the end of time. Jesus would allow himself to be defeated by Satan and the sinful world. He would let death claim his life, but that victory would be short-lived. As true God, death couldn't possibly hold him in the tomb and once death lay in the dust defeated, the crushing defeat of Satan and the sinful world was guaranteed.

Now Jesus' victory over death is also your victory over death. You see, Jesus broke death's grip not just as God, but also as a human being. Since he's human just like you and me, he now shares his victory over death with you and me. His victory becomes your victory and mine as Jesus once said, ***"Because I live, you also will live"*** (John 14:19).

God said, ***"I will put enmity between you and the woman."*** With this simple promise, the Spirit of God lifted those two fallen creatures, Adam and Eve, up from the dust, restored their love for him, and rescued them. With these words, God forgave them, reconciled them to himself, and restored peace with them and enmity with Satan. Think about this! God intervened and repaired what was broken because of his great love for you and me and all people. He knew that you and I were certainly defeated and death and condemnation awaited us, but in his love, God did something about it.

To this very day the Spirit of God works the same way in you and me as he worked in Adam and Eve. He comes from heaven and makes it happen. Through his simple Gospel promises and through his Word connected to water and bread and wine, he forgives our sins. He lifts us up, restores our love for him, and rescues us for eternity, because he has promised to come to us in that way. We're saved not by our own will or efforts or compliance, but by God working through his Word and Sacraments in us. The Holy Spirit restores peace with us and God when he breathes faith in Christ into us and comforts us with God's assurance of salvation.

With that promise, our gracious God set the stage for the history of the entire world and the rest of the Bible. He set the stage for further battles to come, but he guaranteed victory through the One who would crush the serpent's head. With that promise, our God announced the coming of a Savior who would reconcile us with God. With that promise, he points us to the greatest battlefield of all where the promise would be fulfilled—the brow of a hill outside Jerusalem called Golgotha.

Looking back, you'd expect the Garden of Eden to be synonymous with desolation and defeat and death, but God transformed that field of defeat into a garden of promise. Through faith in that promise, our lives and the lives of countless others are saved, and eternal victory is ours. Amen.