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Genesis 2:4-14

Fifth Message

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# LIFE IN PARADISE

*SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS*

“Sometimes my soul will yearn to reach another land.”<sup>1</sup> This is summer when we all yearn to go to another place, to find our own paradise where we can enjoy a vacation. But where is Paradise?

Last month I visited our missionary Eli Fangidae in Timor, Indonesia. On my way both in and out I stayed overnight in Bali, a place many think of as Paradise. There are some beautiful places in Bali, but there is much that is unsavory about the place, at least for a Christian. Moslem fundamentalists found the main tourist resort of Kuta so distasteful that in 2002 they set off two powerful bombs that killed 200. Both bombs were triggered by suicide bombers who believed that by blowing up this so-called paradise they were themselves on the fast track to an eternal heavenly Paradise, there to receive 72 virgins. Paradise is in the eye, or better, the heart, of the beholder.

Last week, while cruising around in Google Earth identifying the places I had visited in Timor, I took a side trip to Thailand. I swung by the beach where I spent my holidays as a child. I could scarcely recognize it. Hua Hin with its “tranquil 5-km white sand beach” now bills itself as “Paradise City.” To me it looks more like hell, because I knew that beach before any hotels arrived.

Where is Paradise and what makes it Paradise? What happens when we find Paradise? Do we inevitably ruin it? Do we always turn the verdant garden into an ugly city?

The Bible tells us about Paradise, both at the beginning and the end. The Biblical story begins and ends in a garden, in Paradise. We turn today to earth’s first paradise, the garden which God planted in Eden. In this garden God settled the man and he made the woman as a helper suitable for him.

This narrative in Genesis 2 is so important that we’ll spend four weeks in it, looking at the garden itself (vv 4-14), at Adam’s role in it (v 15), at his choice between life and death (vv 16-17), and at the woman who helps alongside him (vv 18-25). What was life like in that first Paradise? What went wrong? Can we attain Paradise today? What will the future Paradise be? And what is this whole Paradise idea anyway?

## The Account of the Heavens and the Earth (2:4)

**This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when the LORD God made the earth and the heavens. (Gen 2:4 TNIV)**

Our text begins, “This is the account of...” (TNIV, NASB), or, “These are the generations of...” (KJV, NRSV, ESV). This heading occurs ten times in the book. The first five of these accounts cover primeval history (2:4–11:26), and are the subject of this series, “Our Story of Origins.” The “account of *x*” doesn’t tell us how “*x*” came to be, but what proceeded forth from “*x*.” The account of the heavens and the earth doesn’t tell us about their creation—that’s given in chapter 1—but about what came forth from them. This is the first

account of Genesis; it’s the beginning of the story-line. The poetic telling of the creation of the heavens and the earth stands outside this story-line as an artistic introduction to the whole Bible.

The narrative proper begins here in 2:4. This is the narrative given to Israel, a narrative that runs through the end of the Books of Kings—nine books in all.<sup>2</sup> It gave Israel an unbroken history of its world from the very beginning through its exile from the land. The story begins with the creation of the first human and of the land into which this first human was put.

The first half of the verse looks back. The second half of the verse looks ahead. Notice that God is described as the LORD God, a term that is used twenty times in chapters 2-3, but only one other time in the first five books. This shift from “God” to “LORD God” has led many scholars to rule that we have a different source, reflecting a different understanding of God—the J source over against the E source of chapter 1.

But we don’t need to resort to this radical idea. There is good reason why God is called “the LORD God” in these two chapters. The word “LORD” is in small caps. This indicates that the Hebrew word is Yahweh, the personal name of God. This means “He is,” not in the sense that he exists, but that he is present. It’s the name that God uses with his covenant people. The God who will form the man and build the woman is the LORD who is in relationship with them.

## The Initial State (2:5-6)

**Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth and no plant had yet sprung up, for the LORD God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground, but streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground. (2:5-6)**

After the heading, the story opens in a surprising manner: with a string of four negative clauses. The non-existence of two things is explained by the non-existence of two other things. It’s an odd way to begin! Verses 5-6 give us background information necessary to understand the subsequent action; TNIV indicates this with “Now” (v 5) and commences the action with “Then” (v 7).

Three different geographical terms are each used twice in vv 5-6: the field (which unfortunately TNIV does not even translate), the ground, and the earth. The non-existent shrub and the plant are specifically the shrub of the field and the plant of the field. The field will later be the open uncultivated countryside where livestock can graze on the shrubs of the field. Some of this vegetation will be brought into arable use as humans till the ground to yield plants of the field. The first pair of negatives tell us that there were not yet domesticated animals or plants. Archaeologists tell us that the domestication of plants and animals around 10,000 BC was a necessary precursor to civilization. Scholars are still uncertain quite how this happened. But the Biblical story of origins is quite different. The non-existence of

the vegetation of the field is explained by the non-existence of rain and of a human to work the ground. Each of these will subsequently happen, but only in response to sin. Adam will be expelled from the garden to work the ground (3:23). God will send rain in the days of Noah as judgment upon human sin (7:4).

So these four non-existences, these four negatives, are actually positives. There was no human working the ground, and contrary to what some say, it was not God's intention that he work the ground. There was no rain to sustain arable farming, and it was not God's intention that humanity be dependent upon the vagaries of the weather. The transition to farming, whether of livestock or crops, is a curse not a blessing.

Instead, the ground received its water from below not from above. Scholars and translators are uncertain what to do with the word here translated as "streams," but the general meaning is clear. Subterranean waters welled up upon the earth and watered the ground. These waters were constant and dependable. This then was the initial state.

### God's Garden (2:7-9)

**Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.**

**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. (2:7-9)**

The story-line commences with v 7. Here I have to take issue with the TNIV, which keeps v 7 with vv 5-6, then inserts a paragraph break and commences v 8 with "Now," suggesting that this verse is background prior to continuing the narrative in v 9. Verses 7-9 belong together as a paragraph with a string of verbs indicating sequential action. The LORD God formed and animated a man, planted a garden into which he placed the human, and caused fruit trees to grow.

Firstly the LORD God formed a man, or better, *the* man, from the ground. Man is *adam*; ground is *adamah*. God formed the *adam* from the *adamah*. We might say he formed the earthling from the earth. The verb "formed" is used of a potter shaping clay. The picture is of God stooping down, making some dust into clay, then shaping it into a human form. He then breathed into its nostrils the breath of life so that it became a living being. "It" became "he"; the inanimate form became an animated being. We are fearfully and wonderfully made. Physically our bodies don't amount to much, just some chemicals and minerals worth perhaps a dollar. When we die our bodies quickly decompose back into these elements. But there's more to us. We are animated; something makes us living. Our Biblical narrator attributes this to the breath of life which God himself breathes into us. This is true also of the animals, who are likewise described as living creatures in whom is the breath of life. Like animals we have a body made of physical stuff. Like animals we have life in us. Body and life together make us living beings. As evolutionists are fond of pointing out, there's not much to distinguish us physically from animals. But God intended the human for a very different destiny than the animals.

Where is this human to live? In chapter 1, God put the birds in the sky, the fish in the sea, and the animals on the land. The human

is created to rule over the creatures of all three realms. But in chapter 1 we were not told where the human himself is to live.

The LORD God next made a home for the human. In the east, in Eden, he planted a garden. There is no need to put this in past time, as does TNIV, perhaps reasoning that since vegetation was made on Day 3, the garden must have been planted on Day 3. Our narrator is purposeful: having formed the human, God makes him a home.

"The LORD God planted a garden." How that word "garden" fills us with delight. How much more appealing than a yard. A yard may be paved over with concrete and be sterile, but a garden is filled with plants and flowers and teems with living creatures.

The Hebrew word *gan*, translated "garden," denotes a place that is enclosed, protected. Maybe you know the book and movie, *The Secret Garden*, featuring a walled garden that is both a protected enclosure and a beautiful garden. That garden was a sanctuary.

God planted his garden in Eden, which means "delight." This garden is the first paradise, for that's how the term is translated into Greek. Our word "paradise" derives from an ancient Iranian word meaning a walled enclosure. It was used of the walled garden attached to the palace, and of the royal hunting preserve. The kings of Renaissance Europe had similar parks. Fontainebleu was the reserve of the French king at Versailles; Richmond Park was the reserve of the English king at Hampton Court Palace. This garden which God planted in Eden was his park. It was the earthly preserve of the heavenly King. This garden was God's sanctuary on earth. In chapter 3 we read of him strolling through this sanctuary at the time of day when the breeze blew.

Where did God want the human to live? Not out in the field, toiling in the ground to get some arable crops to grow. Not out in the field, trying to keep the sheep and the goats from straying too far. Though God made us from the ground, he didn't intend for that to be our destiny. He took Adam from the ground and put him elsewhere: in paradise, in his garden, in his sanctuary on earth. This was not Adam's garden, it was God's garden. Having placed the man in the garden, God filled the garden with fruit trees, causing every type of tree to sprout. These trees were all pleasing to the eye and good for food. The man had available to him all the nourishment he needed, and all without any toilsome labor. It was all provided by God. Of the many trees, two are specifically mentioned: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We'll look at those in two weeks' time.

### The Rivers (2:10-14)

**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 the 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 Ashur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates. (2:10-14)**

The narrative is interrupted with five verses about a river. These verses have puzzled many. Why should the narrator interrupt his story to tell us about this river in such great detail? From somewhere within Eden, the land of Delight, a river flowed forth in order to water the garden, ensuring the fruitfulness of the trees. This is the water of life. From God's sanctuary the river flowed out into the rest of the world, dividing into four as it brought life to the four corners

of the earth. We are given a surprising amount of information about these four rivers. The narrator seems deliberate. The four rivers are presented in two pairs, the first unknown, the second known. The first pair are described using 20 and 10 words; the second pair using 8 and 4. The narrator's detail is in inverse proportion to what we know about the rivers! The second pair is well-known: the Tigris and the Euphrates are the two great rivers of Mesopotamia. The Tigris indeed ran just east of Ashur, the city that gave Assyria its name. Of the former pair, the Pishon is unknown, and the Gihon is a tiny spring in Jerusalem. But probably we shouldn't be looking for rivers called these names, for Pishon means "Leaper" and Gihon "Gusher." The Pishon wound through Havilah, and the Gihon through Cush. Cush was a region of the upper Nile, centered on the meeting of the Blue and White Niles, in what is today the Sudan. Where is Havilah? The Table of Nations identifies Havilah as a son of Ham through Cush, and also as a son of Shem through Joktan. The Shemite Havilah had a brother named Ophir, from whose land Israel later got much of its gold. Shemite Havilah is usually identified with Yemen. Ophir is often located in the horn of Africa, opposite Yemen. I therefore understand the Pishon and Gihon to be the Blue and White Nile which meet to form the mighty Nile.

Can we use this information to locate the garden of Eden? The Euphrates and Tigris originate close together in Turkey, but the Blue and White Nile originate in East Africa, thousands of miles away. Some favor the Mesopotamian rivers and locate Eden in eastern Turkey, in the ancient kingdom of Urartu. Others say that the narrator must be looking upstream not downstream, pointing out that a river doesn't divide into branches as it flows downstream; citing evidence of an ancient river flowing east across northern Arabia they locate Eden at the head of the Arabian or Persian Gulf.

But, quite apart from the fact that the flood would presumably have obliterated pre-Flood geography, our narrator here is giving us not physical geography but spiritual geography. The Tigris and Euphrates are the two great rivers on which Mesopotamian civilization depended. The Blue and White Nile combine to form the Nile that nourished Egyptian civilization. But in the spiritual geography of Eden, these rivers themselves flow from God's sanctuary, for he is the source of life. Even godless and god-defying Mesopotamian and Egyptian kingdoms and empires derived their life from God, whether or not they acknowledged it.

What about the gold? Our narrator is particularly interested in the resources of Havilah: gold, onyx stones, and bdellium which is probably aromatic resin; moreover the gold is "good," what later in the OT will be called "fine gold." Why are we told this? Because Israel would later use these materials in God's sanctuary. Israel built the tabernacle using gold plundered from the Egyptians, whose main source of gold lay upstream on the Nile in Nubia, whose very name means gold. Israel built the temple using fine gold shipped in from Ophir, whose eponym the Table of Nations identifies as the brother of Havilah. The high priest carried on his shoulders two onyx stones in gold settings, inscribed with the names of the tribes of Israel. As the high priest ministered in God's presence, all Israel was symbolically present with him before the Lord. Here the narrator is preparing Israel for the building of the tabernacle. Whence come the gold and onyx stones? From a land watered by the river of life flowing from God's sanctuary. The overall picture is of the garden as a sparkling jewel in a setting of gold and onyx stones. The garden is a sanctuary which will be later recreated in the tabernacle and temple.

## Life with God in Paradise

Where does God want us to live? He didn't create humanity to work the ground. He did all the work, planting the garden and ensuring its fruitfulness. Here he settled the human to enjoy the abundance that he provided. God is the great workman. This is such an important theme that I'll devote next week to it, looking at just one verse, v 15.

God has created us for his presence. As Augustine put it in the opening paragraph of his *Confessions*, God has made us for himself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in him. God put the human in his sanctuary. What made it his sanctuary was that God himself was there. Here God and his people were to have fellowship.

But humanity ruined paradise, just as we ruin all the so-called paradises that we find. God expelled Adam and Eve from the garden, from his sanctuary. Henceforth Adam would have to toil in the ground for his sustenance. But God is not content that his image-bearers remain outside the sanctuary. He set to work both to restore his sanctuary to earth and to restore humanity to his sanctuary. He set about bringing humanity home.

God redeemed his people from Egypt so that they might worship him and that he might lead them to the land promised to Abraham. He gave them the awesome privilege of building him the tabernacle, a sanctuary in which he might dwell in their midst. He brought his people into the Promised Land—a land likened to the garden of the Lord. Here was the garden of Eden replanted on earth. It was a land flowing with milk and honey, where the people enjoyed rain at the right time and abundant provision—if they remained loyal to God. In the middle of this land the king on behalf of the people built a temple for God. Here God dwelt in the midst of his people. Around the temple was Jerusalem, the city of God's people. Jerusalem was a place in physical geography, but more important was its place in spiritual geography: God and his people dwelling together. Zion has always been a spiritual city: God's presence, God's people, and God's rule, all in the same place. This dwelling of God amidst his people is what the sons of Korah celebrated in our Scripture reading, Psalm 84.

How lovely is your dwelling place,  
 LORD Almighty!  
 My soul yearns, even faints,  
 for the courts of the LORD;  
 my heart and my flesh cry out  
 for the living God.  
 Even the sparrow has found a home,  
 and the swallow a nest for herself,  
 where she may have her young—  
 a place near your altar,  
 LORD Almighty, my King and my God...  
 Blessed are those who dwell in your house;  
 they are ever praising you.  
 Better is one day in your courts  
 than a thousand elsewhere;  
 I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God  
 than dwell in the tents of the wicked. (Ps 84:1-4, 10)

Do you have that sort of appetite for God? Do you long to be with God in his sanctuary?

Alas, Israel was as disobedient as Adam and was expelled from the land, from God's sanctuary. But the prophets saw a day coming

when God would make the barren wilderness like his garden, when the river of life would flow from his rebuilt sanctuary. The Jews were expecting this to happen in the physical land. But God has done an amazing thing in Christ. He has expanded his restorative work beyond any constraints of physical geography. Jesus traveled around the land dispensing life wherever he went to broken people in their barren wildernesses. Jesus was God's sanctuary through whom he was pouring his life-giving waters. Jesus himself said, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them" (John 7:37-38). Jesus was saying that not only was he God's sanctuary from whom living waters flow, but that his followers would be sanctuaries also—whoever they are and wherever they go!

The end of Revelation ties together the twin sanctuary themes of city and garden. John saw the new Jerusalem descending from heaven. The city is prepared as a bride, for she is the people of God, sanctified for his Son. The city is filled with God's glory for it is God's sanctuary. It is a city of gold, and its foundations are precious stones including onyx. It is the heavenly city come down to fill the whole earth. It is God and his people dwelling together, as God himself proclaims, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (Rev 21:3).

There, from the throne of God flows the river of the water of life, flowing down the middle of the city. On either side stands the tree of life. City and garden join together with no contradiction; both express the idea of sanctuary. It is the presence of God and the Lamb that makes this garden-city the sanctuary, that makes it Paradise. But God does not keep it for himself. He intends it as the home for his people. This has always been God's purpose.

There in the garden-city we will see the face of God (Rev 22:4). That will be our great reward: not the sensual delights of 72 virgins, but God himself.

What awaits us in Paradise? The same thing that was there in the first paradise. The same thing that it available to us now wherever we are if we are in Christ and God's Spirit is in us: fellowship with God. We can be in the most miserable rat hole, but if God is there with us it is Paradise. Conversely, if God is not with us, the most beautiful unspoiled place on earth will not satisfy our deepest longings.

We don't have to wait for the New Jerusalem to enjoy life in God's presence. When we finally admit that we are thirsty, toiling in a wilderness, God calls us to come to Christ. He fills us with his Spirit and takes up residence in us as his sanctuary.

The Book of Revelation ends with a wonderful invitation,

**The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let those who hear say, "Come!" Let those who are thirsty come; and let all who wish take the free gift of the water of life. (Rev 22:17)**

If you have not come, then I urge you to come out of your barren wilderness. If you have already come to Christ, then I urge you to examine your spiritual appetites. What paradise are you looking for? Do you long for God himself?

We'll close by singing three songs. "As the Deer" expresses the longing of Psalm 42:

**As the deer pants for streams of water,  
so my soul pants for you, my God.**

**My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.**

**When can I go and meet with God? (Ps 42:1-2)**

"Better is One Day" is drawn from our Scripture reading (Ps 84). Our final song closes with the lines, "I will glory in my Redeemer, who waits for me at gates of gold, and when he calls me it will be paradise: his face forever to behold."

God has made us for himself, to live with him in his sanctuary. May he intensify our appetite for himself, then deeply satisfy us in himself.

**The LORD bless you and keep you,  
the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;  
the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace. (Num  
6:24-26)**

1. P. A. Baggaley & I. D. Blythe, "How Lovely Is Your Dwelling Place," *City of Gold*. Sung as the offertory immediately prior to this sermon.

2. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings.

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