



Catalog No. 1568

Genesis 2:15

Sixth Message

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July 20, 2008

# WHOM TO SERVE IS PERFECT FREEDOM

*SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS*

At boarding school in England we started each day in the chapel with Morning Prayer, following the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*. At the time I had little regard for the Prayer Book, but I have steadily grown in my appreciation of it, especially of the Collects or prayers. Most of these were written by Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury in the turbulent days of Henry VIII and Edward VI in the mid-sixteenth century. Cranmer's work was not original; most of these collects are his felicitous renderings into English of Latin texts from the prayer books of the early church. The collects of the Prayer Book continue to give expression to the prayers of the church from 1500 years ago. For the past couple of months one particular prayer has been on my mind. Since it is in the liturgy for Morning Prayer it is said every day around the world. In the service of Morning Prayer, the Second Collect for Peace begins:

O God, who art the author of peace and lover of concord, in knowledge of whom standeth our eternal life, whose service is perfect freedom...

It is the phrase, "whose service is perfect freedom," that has been on my mind. Alongside it has been another phrase, drawn from a very different source: the US Declaration of Independence. The second paragraph of this Declaration begins,

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

In the context of 1776 these rights were being asserted against the tyranny of King George III as the colonies sought self-governance. But the right to "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" has been used to justify all manner of other agendas. Wherein lie life, liberty and happiness? These are the themes we'll explore over the next two weeks as we look at the mission that God gave Adam in the garden (Gen 2:15-18). Our text today is a single verse:

**The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. (Gen 2:15 TNIV)**

## The Ideal State in the Garden

We saw last week that the narrative of Genesis 2 begins with a fourfold negative statement. There was as yet no shrub of the field nor any plant of the field, because the Lord God had not yet sent rain and there was no man to work the ground (2:5). There was as yet no animal husbandry or agriculture. Instead, God planted a garden, filled it with fruit trees and ensured its abundant water supply. God formed the human from the dust of the ground but he did not make him to work the ground: the lack of a man to work the ground is a positive statement! God had a different destiny in mind for the human: life in his sanctuary. God took the man from the stuff of which he had been made and he put him elsewhere, in his garden.

His origin was the ground, but his destiny was the garden. Now in v 15 we learn his mission in this garden.

Verse 15 resumes the story-line from v 9 after the interlude about the fourfold river (vv 10-14). The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden. Here we have both the origin and destiny of the man. God took him from the realm in which he had been made, the dust of the ground. He put him in the realm for which he was destined, the garden. This is not a mere repetition of v 8 where the Lord God put the man in the garden. Though it is translated the same in most English versions, a different Hebrew verb is used here. Verse 8 uses the generic word for "put," but v 15 uses a more nuanced word, the causative form of the verb "rest." We might better say the Lord God settled the man in the garden. He transferred him from one realm to another, from the merely physical dust of the ground to God's own sanctuary. Here God settled the human; here the human had rest; here he belonged.

What is rest? We all long for it, but what is it? In scientific terms it is the absence of movement: true rest is achieved at absolute zero, the temperature at which all motion ceases. But life at zero K doesn't sound very attractive! Rest is not the absence of activity, but the condition under which that activity is performed. God rested on the seventh day, his sanctuary in time that bespoke eschatology. Adam rested in the garden, God's sanctuary in space. But just as God has been active on his eternal seventh day, so the human was given work to do in the garden.

God commissioned the man with two tasks: to work and to guard. Work precedes the Fall, though its nature has been radically altered by God's judgment upon human sin. What was Adam's work? It was clearly not to work the ground. The lack of a man to work the ground was reversed not by the settlement of the man in the garden, but by the expulsion of man from the garden. The man's work was not to provide for his own sustenance. God had settled him in his sanctuary, in which he, God, had supplied everything the man needed. God had filled this garden with fruit trees, all of them "pleasing to the eye and good for food" (2:9). Unlike grain which has to be harvested, threshed, winnowed, ground and baked, eating fruit requires no work. All the man had to do was reach out his hand and pick whatever he wanted. In the next verse God will tell the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden" (2:16); he uses an intensive construction to emphasize the abundant eating. One tree only is off-limits. It was God who has done all the work; Adam got to enjoy God's magnificent bounty.

The man's second task was to guard or keep. This implies that God has entrusted something into his care: the garden sanctuary. The man was to care for that which was precious to God. This entailed two tasks: to guard the sanctity of the sanctuary and to keep God's word, namely the commandment that he will give him in the next two verses.

Both verbs denote service. Indeed the word translated “work” is the usual verb for “serve.” The man is to serve his master, God. In the master–servant relationship, it is the master’s responsibility to ensure that the servant has everything he needs to do his will. The servant’s only responsibility is to be faithful and obedient. Herein lies his liberty. He does not have to provide for himself; that is his master’s responsibility. He does not have to anticipate the future; that is his master’s responsibility. All he has to do is to be faithful and obedient in the present. This requires that he have confidence in the word of his master.

To work and to guard, to serve and to keep; these are priestly tasks. In chapter 1 God commissioned the human to be a king, ruling over his creation on his behalf. In chapter 2 God commissions the human to be a priest, caring for his sanctuary on his behalf. In both respects he is under God, acting on God’s behalf. As ruler, he is God’s vice-regent (Lat. *rego*, rule); as priest, he is God’s vice-gerent (Lat. *gero*, manage). In all things he is to remember that he is vice-; that he is responsible to another. He must never take upon himself the responsibilities of the other. His responsibility is to be the servant, not the master. Herein lie his life, liberty and happiness.

What did it actually look like for the man to work and to guard, to serve and to keep? Unfortunately we don’t get to see the man functioning in this ideal environment, because he immediately fails. It’s hard for us to envisage because our concept of work is so tainted by toil. But we can learn from tracing this theme through Scripture.

### The Ruined State Outside the Garden

The man failed to guard the sanctuary from the serpent who mis-spoke God’s word, and he failed to keep God’s word. Satan had already rebelled against his position as a heavenly servant of God, grasping for self-governance. John Milton in *Paradise Lost* has Satan say this on his banishment to hell:

...Here at least  
We shall be free...  
Here we may reign secure; and, in my choice,  
To reign is worth ambition, though in Hell:  
Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven. (1.258-263)

“Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.” Better to reign in the gutter than serve in paradise. Therein lies the root of all sin. Therein lies so much of our pursuit of life, liberty and happiness.

The man and the woman were expelled from paradise. God banished the man “to work the ground from which he had been taken” (3:23). He forfeited his destiny and was sent back to his origin. Henceforth he would toil in the dirt, working the ground. In passing judgment upon the man (3:17-19), God cursed the ground so that it would not readily yield its produce. In its cursed state it would yield thorns and thistles, but through painful toil and the sweat of his brow the man would be able to wrestle food from it. Gone is the abundance of trees which he had not planted but was given to enjoy. Having expelled the humans, God placed the cherubim at the entrance to the garden as replacement guardians.

Matters went from bad to worse. After Cain killed his brother Abel, God cursed Cain from the ground: though he work the ground it would not yield him any crops (4:10-12). Consigned instead to be a restless wanderer, he went out from the Lord’s presence and dwelt “east of Eden” (4:16). Humanity continued to revel in its self-grasped freedom, doing what was right in its own eyes, taking what it saw to be good (6:2), until God intervened and sent rain for the first time

to wipe all life from the earth he had made (7:4). Noah alone was saved with his family, because “he did all that the Lord commanded him”; he kept God’s word.

Adam...Cain...the sons of God in the days of Noah: in just a few chapters humanity had used its freedom to bring pain, toil, misery, ruin and death upon the earth. Humanity has continued to live east of Eden. Life, liberty and happiness cannot lie in the direction of humanity doing what is right in its own eyes.

### Israel

Fortunately God did not leave mankind to its own devices. Beginning with Abraham he called out a people to be a new humanity, to be his servants. He commended Abraham for keeping his requirements (Gen 26:5). He delivered his people from harsh servitude in Egypt so that they might serve him. Repeatedly Moses brought the Lord’s word to Pharaoh: “Let my people go, so that they may worship me.” The word translated “work” or “serve” can also be translated “worship” when its object is God, or the false gods of the other nations. Herein lay Israel’s life, liberty and happiness. God delivered his people from one service into another: from harsh servitude to one who had set himself up as god in order to serve the one true God. The one service led to death; the other leads to life. As many of the psalms proclaim, serving the Lord brings gladness and joy. All Israel was called to serve the Lord and to keep his word. Serving him meant keeping his word; far from being oppressive this word was life, for it showed the people how to live.

It was God’s responsibility to make every provision for his servants. As he led them on pilgrimage through the wilderness he provided for them: water from the Rock, manna from heaven, ensuring their clothes didn’t wear out. The destiny of Israel’s pilgrimage was the land flowing with milk and honey, where God again provided for his people. If they served him and kept his word, he sent the rain at the right time and ensured bountiful crops. He provided everything for Israel to live in liberty and rest.

Within Israel, God gave one tribe the privilege of serving him in a special way. To the priests and Levites he entrusted the work of the tabernacle. Using the same two verbs used of Adam, together with their cognate nouns, in a way that is impossible to capture in English, the Lord instructed them to perform the duties and do the service of the tabernacle. They were to serve and to guard on behalf of all Israel. Unlike the other tribes, they had no inheritance, no land to work. Instead, God provided for their material needs by giving them the tithes and offerings of the people. This freed them to care for that which was precious to God, to be faithful and obedient in their service in the tabernacle. They were a picture in microcosm of what a restored life is about. Repeatedly God used the language of gift: he *gave* the service to the priests; he *gave* the Levites to the priests to assist them; he *gave* the Levites to all Israel; he *gave* the tithes and offerings to the priests and Levites.

The climax of Israel’s life of worship was the building of the temple. Here God dwelt with his people in his sanctuary. Here the priests and Levites served and guarded on behalf of all Israel. But no sooner was the temple finished than Solomon subjected his own people, God’s own people, to harsh servitude, the very thing from which the Lord had delivered them in Egypt. Why did Solomon do this? In pursuit of empire: to build his own palace and the three cities in which he stored his military hardware.

## Jesus

Throughout his ministry, Jesus was very clear that he was a faithful servant doing his Father's will. He did the work that the Father had given him to do (John 5:36; 17:4). The Father prepared all the work; Jesus' role was to be the faithful and obedient servant, succeeding where Adam and Israel had failed. Jesus did not act independently. "Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work" (John 14:10). In calling people to follow him, Jesus invited them to exchange one yoke for another, to exchange service leading to death for service leading to life:

**"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."** (Matt 11:28-30)

## The Church

This brings us to the church age. What does it mean to serve and to keep today?

The first thing is to recognize that we have been in servitude all our lives. Claiming to be free we have actually been in bondage, hostage to our wills and passions—the bondage of the will, as Luther called it. We will never truly come to freedom in Christ if we don't feel that bondage to an evil master. And we will never feel that except God's Spirit quicken us. And then, as we sang, "Out of my bondage, sorrow and night, Jesus I come." As our Scripture reading shows, God liberates us from our bondage as slaves to sin leading to death, so that we might be slaves to obedience, to righteousness and to God who gives life (Rom 6:15-23). We have exchanged service leading to death for service leading to life. We are liberated unto life, but it is a life lived in service. We are not liberated to do whatever we want. Rather, we are free to be whom God intends us to be. To serve and to keep means that we accept, nay we welcome, being conformed into God's image in Christ. As servants we submit to the Master's hand.

To serve God is a great privilege. To be called "the servant of the Lord" was the highest honor in the OT. God is the great workman. He could do everything himself, but he chooses to work through us. Since he is the Master, his role is to provide everything that is necessary for us to do his will. Since we are the servants, our role is simply faithful obedience. God does not expect us to do his job. This division of labor between master and servant has lots of ramifications, which I can only begin to explore here.

Firstly, it is God's responsibility to equip us. He puts his Spirit in us, renewing us so that we are able to do his will. More particularly, he gives each of us spiritual gifts so that we can serve him. Moreover, he ensures that the church, which is the body of Christ, has the right mix of gifts to function as a body. We don't all have the same gift, but every one of us has a gift if the Spirit is in us. In the OT God set aside the priests and Levites to a special role of service. But in the church age we affirm the priesthood of all believers; we are all servants and we are all gifted. Among these gifts, God gives gifts of leadership so that the body is shepherded; gifts of teaching and wisdom so that it is instructed; gifts of help and mercy so that it is comforted. It's his responsibility to ensure the right distribution. It is not our role to aspire after the gifts that others have, but to be faithful with the gifts that God has given each of us. This is liberating: we don't have to try to be someone that we're not; we can just accept and rejoice in whom God has made us to be and how he has equipped us through

his Spirit. We cannot overestimate the power of God filling us with his Spirit, without which we cannot serve him.

Next, it's God's responsibility to create the good works which he wants us to do. As Paul told the Ephesians, in the text that's on the bulletin cover,

**We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.** (Eph 2:10)

For our part as servants, we are called to offer ourselves to God as living sacrifices for this is our service or worship (Rom 12:1). We are his to do with, however he please. This requires trust, which we often find so very difficult. There's a hymn that begins, "Be still my soul, the Lord is on thy side." Do we really believe that? The faithful servant can trust that the master is on his side, for he is on his master's side. Do we really believe that God delights to work in and through us?

I am very grateful for growing up within the Overseas Missionary Fellowship, formerly China Inland Mission founded by Hudson Taylor. He labored under the burden of China's millions who had never heard the gospel. His burden lifted when he finally learnt in the depth of his heart this principle that he was simply the servant and God was the master who was pleased to work through him. He was transformed. The needs were still there, but he now rolled them all onto the Lord.

It was deeply felt from the first that not many men and not large means were the supreme necessity; but just "to get God's man, in God's place, doing God's work, in God's way, and for God's glory."<sup>1</sup>

He realized that "God's work, done in God's way, will never lack God's supplies."<sup>2</sup> He understood that "A little thing is a little thing, but faithfulness in little things is a great thing."<sup>3</sup> These became like mottoes within CIM and OMF. I'm very glad to have grown up in a community shaped by these truths.

God's man, in God's place, doing God's work, in God's way, and for God's glory. So often it is really our own plans that we pursue, the world's methods that we use, our own glory that we seek. Too much Christian work is really personal empire building by modern-day Solomons who subject people to harsh servitude.

The hymn "Be still my soul" continues, "Leave to thy God to order and provide." This, too, is very hard for us to do. We so easily think it all depends upon us. We take matters into our own hands. We try to make things happen, doing so in our own strength, according to our own natural abilities.

There are several ways in which we do not leave it to God to order and provide. We doubt that he is at work ordering and providing. Or we think that he has not yet ordered and provided, that he has not yet put us in the arena in which we can serve him. Or we think that he no longer has us in the arena in which we can serve him; the grass is greener elsewhere and it's time to move on; if only we can get somewhere else then we can serve him more fully. But the truth is that God knows exactly what he's doing in placing us. If we are being faithful to him we can be sure that he will put us exactly where he wants us to be and that he will order and provide for our lives. Our responsibility is not to second-guess him but just to be faithful and obedient where we are, doing what he has given us to do, walking into the opportunities he creates for us, using the spiritual gifts he has given us, and enjoying the provision he makes for us.



In these and so many other ways we fail to be faithful and obedient servants. Our first priority is to ensure that we faithfully serve the Lord where he has us right now. If we are God's man or woman, in God's place, doing God's work, in God's way, and for God's glory, then we will have life, liberty and happiness in abundance. We will find that our service of him is perfect freedom.

There are certain ways in which we try to put these principles into effect here at PBCC, ways in which we function differently than most churches. They flow out of an understanding of what we might call the exchanged life, that "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20). Christ, through his Spirit, is at work in and through us, both individually and corporately. We do not draw up an annual budget, because we expect God to be at work providing the resources for his work to be done in his way; we don't want to second-guess God or presume upon him. We do not hold elections for church office, because we expect God to be at work raising up new leaders. Instead, when the elders appoint a new elder they are giving formal recognition to what God has already done, raising up a leader who is already functioning as an elder. We do not advertise pastoral positions for the same reason. Instead we look to see what God is already doing. All of this comes from the conviction that Christ is the Head of the church, that God is at work to equip his church with all it needs to function. This frees us up to be faithful and obedient. This frees us up to not be God. It's tremendously liberating.

Some might object that this is an invitation to passivity or laziness. But learning to be faithful and obedient where God has us now is anything but passive. Ensuring that you are God's man or woman doing God's work is not passive. It has often been remarked that the problem with a living sacrifice is that it can get down off the altar. Probably the greater problem is that we get onto the wrong altar, mistaking our altar for God's altar.

Finally, this has implications for how I view my ministry here among you. I don't harangue you and give you a list of things to do. Rather, I seek to cultivate your affections for God and for Christ. With your desires aflame I expect to see God at work in and through you. Your own spiritual vitality will overflow into those around. Here I follow Augustine's marvellous dictum: *dilige et quod vis fac*, Love God and do what you want.<sup>4</sup> When you truly love God, then you can do whatever you want, for your deep desire will be to serve him and to guard that which is precious to him. Herein lies perfect freedom.

To serve God in his sanctuary is what he has made us for. It was Adam's calling at the beginning. It will be our destiny at the end in the New Jerusalem:

**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...And they will reign for ever and ever. (Rev 22:3, 5)**

We his servants shall serve him and we shall reign. This is oxymoronic to the world, but fundamental to the Biblical view of redeemed humanity. This is the paradox enshrined in the early Latin prayer upon which Cranmer based his collect:

*Deus, auctor pacis et amator, quem nosse vivere, cui servire regnare est...*

God, author and lover of peace, whom to know is to live, whom to serve is to reign...

We'll close by singing three songs. The first is "Make me a captive, Lord." It is by George Matheson, the beloved "Blind Preacher" of Scotland, best-known for his hymn, "O Love that will not let me go." American hymnals set this to the tune *Paradoxy*, which George Hustad wrote specifically for this hymn. He called it *Paradoxy* because of the paradoxes expressed in this hymn. Here are some of them:

Make me a captive, Lord, and then I shall be free.  
Force me to render up my sword, and I shall conqueror be.

My heart is weak and poor until it master find...  
It cannot freely move till Thou has wrought its chain;  
Enslave it with thy matchless love, and deathless it shall reign.

My power is faint and low till I have learned to serve...  
It cannot drive the world until itself be driven.

My will is not my own till Thou hast made it Thine;  
If it would reach a monarch's throne, it must its crown resign.

I close with the Collect for the Feast of Augustine of Hippo, August 28:

Lord God, the light of the minds that know you, the life of the souls that love you, and the strength of the hearts that serve you: Help us...so to know you that we may truly love you, and so to love you that we may fully serve you, whom to serve is perfect freedom; through Jesus Christ our Lord... Amen.

*Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Heb 13:20-21)*

1. M. Geraldine Guinness, *The Story of the China Inland Mission* (London: Morgan & Scott, 1894), 238.
2. Guinness, *Story*, 238.
3. Dr. & Mrs. Howard Taylor, *Hudson Taylor in Early Years: The Growth of a Soul* (London: Morgan & Scott, 1911), 100.
4. Augustine, *Ep. Io.* tr. 7.8 (*Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, Homily 7, para. 8; on 1 John 4:9).

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