

The Gardens of the Lord

Prepared by Angela

Sunday May 31st 2020



Good morning everyone and welcome to our Croftlands Community Church service. I hope you are all keeping well and knowing God's love and peace in the current situation. Let's begin with prayer:

Lord God,

We want to praise and bless your name today and thank you that you are faithful in all your ways. Though we are still under the restraints of lockdown, we thank you that we can meet together in spirit along with others from our own church family and, indeed, our Christian brothers and sisters around the world. Your word tells us that you will never leave us nor forsake us. You are with us in all our circumstances, the low days and the high days, as well as those somewhere in-between!

So as we read and sing your praises now, we ask that you will open our eyes to see Jesus afresh and that we might be encouraged on our journey with you.

We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.

Before we move into the talk, let's remember Kathleen and Eden today and wish them a **HAPPY BIRTHDAY!**

Birthday greetings today,
May God bless you we pray.
Live for Jesus, dear Eden & Kathleen,
May he guide you each day.



When I started to prepare the service for today, a line from a song kept coming into my head ***"They will live again in freedom in the Garden of the Lord....."***

Any guesses where it's from? It's the final epilogue from the musical "Les Miserables". It carries on with the words ***"We will walk behind the ploughshare, we will put away the sword."*** For those familiar with the Bible, it's very similar to words of ***Isaiah 2:4:***

***He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples.
They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning
hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train
for war anymore.***

But, unlike Les Mis, this scripture is prophetic of a time when Christ will return to reign as king and restore this earth to a perfect state. The true ***"Garden of the Lord"***.

Today I'm going to explore the concept of God the gardener and the significance of some of His gardens, which we read about in the Bible. First, let's sing together **10,000 Reasons**.

**Bless the Lord, O my soul, O my soul,
Worship His holy name
Sing like never before, O my soul,
I worship Your holy name.**

**The sun comes up; it's a new day dawning
It's time to sing Your song again
Whatever may pass and whatever lies before me
Let me be singing when the evening comes.**

chorus: Bless the Lord, O my soul.....

**You're rich in love and You're slow to anger
Your name is great and Your heart is kind
For all Your goodness, I will keep on singing
10,000 reasons for my heart to find.**

**And on that day when my strength is failing
The end draws near and my time has come
Still my soul will sing Your praise unending
10,000 years and then forever more.**

chorus: Bless the Lord, O my soul.....



As we know, lockdown due to Covid19, started at the end of March and has carried on to the present day, albeit with some easing up of a few restrictions over the last couple of weeks.

Despite the horrors of the rampaging pandemic, for most part I truly found a peace from God and an appreciation of having precious time to do some of the things that often get neglected in the usual busy schedule. Gardening was one of them and we were blessed with such beautiful weather throughout April & May, that I was able to potter more regularly than usual. I say "potter", because I'm not a great gardener but I enjoy the bits that I do.

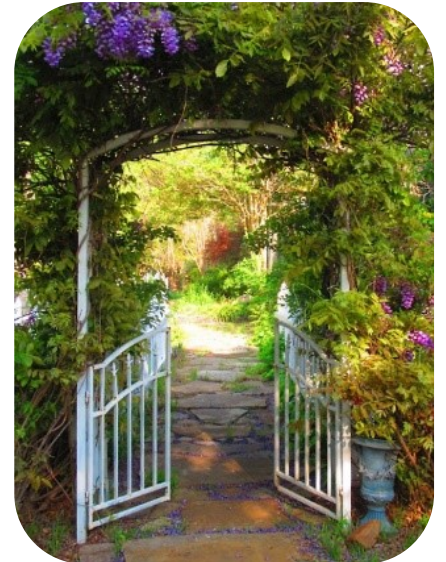
There are so many truths from God's word that spring to mind when I'm gardening; character building truths. The planting, nurturing side of things; having the right sort of soil to grow in; the patient waiting for new life to emerge; the flowering and fruitfulness. These themes occur so often in the word of God, as an illustration of how our lives should be. Then there's the reminder of the need to be equipped and on guard against spiritual attack. I think of that when there's an infestation of tiny bugs attempting to devour the plants, like those I spotted on my honeysuckle a few days ago. They seem to appear out of nowhere, causing havoc – not unlike the little foxes in the vineyard, another type of garden, referred to by Solomon:

***"Catch for us the foxes, the little foxes, that ruin the vineyards,
our vineyards that are in bloom" SoS 2:15***

These "**little foxes**" resemble the small, irritable things that can creep into our relationships with one another, and if left unattended can cause serious damage. Yet, like the bugs that I can wipe away quite easily once spotted, so, too, must we deal with those "**molehill**" issues before they become "**mountains**".

We need to keep on top of weeding, too, otherwise it can destroy all the goodness of the garden. The thing with weeds is that so many look pretty, but beneath the surface there are some strong roots and shoots to be dealt with. One of our favourite trees suffered dramatically as a consequence of this. It used to produce a beautiful deep pink flower in spring, and then a small fruit which looked like a cherry but tasted more like a plum. So we integrated the words and called it a “**chum**” tree. Sadly, our chum tree was attacked by ivy a couple of years ago & I didn’t spot it quickly enough. By the time I got rid of the ivy, the tree never recovered. No more leaves, flowers or fruit for the last 2 years, and the bark started to split. So last month we made the decision to get it cut down. I cried when it happened – but then, I cry very easily at all sort of things anyway, even when someone gets knocked out of Strictly Come Dancing each week, so that was no big surprise! But it also reminded me of how unfruitful we become when we allow those small things that bug us to fester away and become so deeply entrenched that we live lives of bitterness, anger, resentment and unforgiveness. What damage that does, to ourselves and others.

Unlike me, God doesn’t just potter in the garden. God is the most wonderful gardener. Let’s open the gate & take a walk in some of God’s beautiful gardens. There are so many lessons in each of these gardens, but I’ve tried to pick out just a couple of things that spoke to me, otherwise we’d be here all day!



The Garden of Eden: Garden of Delight

It’s always exciting to reflect on God’s immeasurable power as He spoke creation into being (**Genesis ch 1**). He **said**: “**Let there be...**” and as a result, “**it was so**”. This is the “*Big Picture*” of God’s creation, an overview, which ends a few verses into **ch 2**. The rest of the 2nd chapter gives more attention to the finer detail, including the creation of Adam & Eve. The first time we are introduced to God as a Gardener is in **Gen.2:8-14**: “**Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden**”.

So far God has **created** or **made**, but now He **plants**. The Hebrew word here (nata) means to strike firmly, put down, be firmly established. The word can be literal or figurative. Here we have a definite place where God met with Adam and Eve, but which is also figurative of a future garden, which we’ll look at later.

Garden (Hebrew gan) means enclosure. Eden means luxury, pleasure delight. God’s garden must have been idyllic – trees that were good for food, watered by four rivers (**v10-14**), with the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil planted in the middle. A lush, green delightful place. It is in this very garden that choices were made; when Adam & Eve made the wrong choice & disobeyed God’s instructions (**ch 3**). And it is here that we discover for the first time that there are consequences for sin, resulting in punishment.



Ultimately God expels Adam & Eve from the Garden of Eden, the garden of delight: **v24**. The good news is that God still cared for Adam & Eve. Having already introduced the concept of a future victor (**v15**), he clothes them with animal skins (pointing forward to the concept of sacrifice) and sends them out to fulfil the purpose He'd already assigned them in **ch 1:28-30**: ***“Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it...”***

What have I learned so far? In a nutshell, God delights in us and wants to give us good things; He “encloses” us or “hedges us around” with His protection and love; He desires us to choose His ways. When we don't, when we try to shift God's boundaries and pass the buck, shunning our responsibility, there are consequences. Yet God doesn't reject us. He still offers hope.

En Gedi: Garden of Refreshment

Imagine if you will a stretch of Judean desert wilderness; dry, arid, infertile. Then a limestone cliff area which has a series of tumbling waterfalls with smooth sided rock pools & a large pool of warm water at the bottom of the cliffs. Here is a green & fertile area of balsam trees, henna plants, date palms, ferns, gazelles & beautiful birds. This is En Gedi, meaning ***“fountain of young goats”***.

Here David & his men took refuge, fleeing from the furious King Saul (**1Sam 24**). David's character was tried & tested here, even with the opportunity to kill the king, knowing that he, David, had been told by God that he was going to become king instead of Saul (**1-7; 12-15**). In this garden David learnt patience & to trust in the revealed character of God, not relying on his own strength to give God a “helping hand” with regard to making him king! He didn't compromise his beliefs & give in due to the group peer pressure of his men, but used the time to meditate on God's character & promises.



En Gedi is a semi-tropical oasis of rich vegetation within a desert region. Henna is profuse there & associated with love (**SoS 1: 14**). David discovered God's love afresh in this **Garden of Refreshment**. For David, this part of the EnGedi desert was a ***“hiding place”*** (**Psalms 32:7**) a place of refuge that provided security, refreshment & beauty after the Judean wilderness. It was a place where pure spring water flowed down the cliff into a magnificent waterfall, satisfying his thirst physically and spiritually.

What does this garden suggest to me? It reminds me that whatever our situation and circumstances, whatever enemies we have to face, whether it be a pandemic or something else, we have a heavenly Father who knows and cares. We likewise need to regularly create our own spiritual En Gedi gardens, where we can experience God's love & reassurance by just soaking in His presence, meditating on his word & being refreshed. En Gedi was one of just two places in this area offering fresh, running water as opposed to salty pools. This brings to mind a wonderful picture of Jesus, who offers us life-giving water:

.....whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up into eternal life. John 4:13-14

It also reminds me that patience & waiting for God's perfect timing is character-building!

The Garden of Gethsemane: Garden of Suffering



Our next garden is situated at a **low spot**, in a valley at the foot of the Mount of Olives, not far from Jerusalem. Here Jesus went to pray prior to his trial & crucifixion. Here he cried out to His heavenly Father in anguish, sweating drops of blood. Here he was betrayed by Judas, one of his close companions. And here his disciples deserted him as he was arrested. This was surely a spiritual “**low spot**” in Christ’s earthly life. Gethsemane is made up of two words: “gat”, meaning a place for pressing oil or wine, and “shemanim”, meaning oils. The **oil press**. Imagine.....olives being crushed to pulp in an olive crusher; then heavy stone slabs are lowered over the pulp. This squeezes the pulp so that the oil runs out, reddish-brown initially, before turning the more familiar golden colour. It was collected in clay jars.

So much speaks to me here about Jesus’ sacrifice for us. As he prayed in this garden, he knew what was to come, as prophesied by Isaiah hundreds of years earlier:

But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. Isaiah 53:5&6

Yet he **pressed** on, choosing to obey his Father’s will. Why? So that we, too, can make a choice to believe in him, receive forgiveness for our sins and know new life in Christ ***“who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” Hebrews 12: 2b***.

Apparently, olive trees can live as long as 900 years old, but their roots and shoots can be much older! Even an olive tree that seems dead can have new shoots springing to life. This is reminiscent of a prophecy in ***Isaiah 11:1***. Do look it up! Christ speaks something similar when speaking about the need for a single kernel of wheat to fall to the ground and dying, which in turn brings many seeds: ***John 12:23***, pointing forward to his own death. This garden also reminds me that, as a Christian, there may well be times when we suffer in some way because of our faith.

Before the next garden, let’s take a few minutes to reflect on the cross and what Jesus did for us there. The song **How Great Thou Art** may help to focus your thoughts.

The Garden Tomb: Garden of Life

The tomb of Jesus is situated in a garden (**John 19:38-42**). Here are 3 things I love about this garden.

1, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, two secret followers of Jesus, made lavish use of spices in preparation for his burial. I love the fact that these 2 men made the decision to take Jesus' body and prepare it this way. They overcome their fear of their Jewish peers and stepped out in faith.



2, This is a new tomb (**Mtth 27:60**) from which would emerge new resurrection life (**John 11: 25-26**). The Lord Jesus himself, having overcome death and the grave!

3, And when Mary first sees Jesus, she thinks he is “***the gardener***”! (**John 20:13-16**) Actually, in the spiritual sense, ***he is***!!

Before moving on to the final garden of our journey, let's recap. So far we have briefly visited **four gardens which I've called Delight, Refreshment, Suffering and Life**. There's much we can learn in these gardens, though I've only highlighted a few things.

Interestingly, there is a theme running through each garden, that of **CHOICES**:

Adam & Eve had to choose whether or not to follow God's instructions about not eating from a certain tree.

David, knowing God said he'd be king one day, had to choose whether to take the matter into own hands by killing Saul, or whether to patiently wait for God's timing.

Jesus had to choose whether or not to fulfil his heavenly Father's will which would include much suffering and a horrific death.

Joseph and Nicodemus chose to overcome fear and step out in faith, even though it might upset their peers, choosing to remove Jesus' body and prepare it for burial.

We face making choices all our lives, but the biggest one that faces us is tied up with eternity – life and death.

Currently we are fighting a deadly virus. Coronavirus has swept through the earth and caused havoc in every nation. But it has also made many of us stop and think.....about our priorities, our choices when given a set of government guidelines, our family, friends and neighbours, our environment, about the future after COVID 19 and so on. Personally, I believe it's been a massive wake-up call from God. He has plans concerning this earth. Corona (as in Corona virus) comes from the Latin, meaning crown – this is currently a “king” in the virus world, part of the consequences of the fall and sin. But God has a different ruler in mind for His kingdom. He has clearly stated that the earth is His, that Jesus will return to reign as king, and that those who are his followers will reign with him.

This is where that important choice comes in. Although God's desire is that all mankind be saved (**2 Tim 2:4**), God gives us free will to choose to follow Jesus or not. It's a personal decision:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16)

And for those who may have made that choice at some point, but then drifted from the Lord, he gives yet another invitation:

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me (Revelation 3:20)

The Lord is calling us to wake up & make room for him in our lives while there is still time.

And so to our last garden. A garden which is still to come.

The Final Garden: The Garden of All Things New

God's word begins & ends with a garden, fashioned by Him, in which humans live. In God's first garden, Eden, there are 4 rivers watering it. Now in Revelation there is the river of life and the tree of life on each side, whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. Of this garden it says "***no longer will there be any curse***". A perfect & glorious place, where God dwells with us.



Rev 21:1-5; 22:1-3 (condensed)

***Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth.....Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them.....He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away....I am making everything new....Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal.... On each side of the river stood the tree of life.....And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.
No longer will there be any curse.***

Halleluia! What a wonderful prospect.

Our Garden walk has taken us from delight to fall in Eden, to restoration and refreshment at En Gedi, to trial & suffering at Gethsemane, to death & new life at the Garden Tomb, to immortality in the new heaven and earth. Praise be to the Gardener!

Let's pray together, then say the grace, before singing our final hymn, **There's a Place.**

Father God,

We thank you that we can share in this time of fellowship together with you.
Even though we are apart physically from others at the moment, it is a blessing
to know that we are together in spirit.

We thank you that, as a loving, caring gardener, we can trust you to prune us and
shape us to become more like your dear son, Jesus.
Help us to bear the fruit of the spirit each day, whatever that day may bring.

We ask you to bless and protect us, Lord, and keep us safe in your care.
Thank you in Jesus' name, Amen.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, And the love of God,
And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, Be with us now and evermore. Amen.

There's a place where the streets shine
With the glory of the Lamb.
There's a way, we can go there,
We can live there beyond time.
Because of You, because of You,
Because of Your love,
Because of Your blood.

No more pain, no more sadness,
No more suffering, no more tears.
No more sin, no more sickness,
No injustice, no more death.
Because of You, because of You,
Because of Your love,
Because of Your blood.

All our sins are washed away, and we can live forever,
Now we have this hope, because of You.
Oh, we'll see You face to face, and we will dance together
In the city of our God, because of You.

There is joy everlasting,
There is gladness, there is peace.
There is wine ever flowing,
There's a wedding, there's a feast.
Because of You, because of You.....

