

Genesis 3:20–24

“Cleansing the Garden-Temple”

May 10, 2020

<sup>20</sup> The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living.

<sup>21</sup> And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them.

<sup>22</sup> Then the LORD God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever--"

<sup>23</sup> therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken.

<sup>24</sup> He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.

When Adam and Eve rebelled against God, God did not judge them according to strict justice. Had he done so, he would have cast them both body and soul into hell (cf. Matt 8:28). God postponed the execution of his final judgment against sinners because he had purposed from all eternity to redeem the elect (Eph 1:4). God's plan of redemption, however, would not be accomplished immediately but in what Scripture calls "the fullness of time" (Eph 1:10). As Paul says, "when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law..." (Gal 4:4–5a). God would redeem his people in the fullness of time. At the appointed hour, he would send forth his Son to crush the head of the serpent (cf. Gen 3:15; 1 John 3:8).

Until then, however, God's people would live in the valley of the shadow of death, east of Eden (Psalm 23:4). They would live in exile, outside of the garden of God (Eze 28:13), separated from his presence, forbidden to draw near to him. They would be banished from God's holy mountain (Eze 28:14) and banned from even touching it on pain of death (cf. Ex 19:12). God cast out Adam and Eve from his holy mountain because they had profaned his sanctuary (Eze 28:16, 18). Adam and Eve and all who would descend from them by ordinary generation were defiled by sin and had to be banished from God's holy garden until they were cleansed from their uncleanness (cf. Eze 36:25). Nothing unclean can enter God's holy realm, and that's what the garden of Eden was (cf. Rev 21:27).

The garden of Eden was a sanctuary, a holy realm, where the presence of God dwelt in a unique way and where Adam and Eve could draw near to the throne of God and worship at his footstool (Psalm 99:5). That's what made the garden of Eden such a special place. It was different from every other place on earth because God dwelt there in a special way, and his presence consecrated it as holy ground. The garden of Eden was the original holy land from which Adam and Eve were exiled. Eden was holy because it was the place where heaven and earth met. It was the house of God, the gate of heaven (Gen 28:17). Eden was a visible earthly projection of the invisible heavenly temple-dwelling of God. It was a copy and shadow of God's original and permanent dwelling place, a microcosm of the heavenly realm. Eden was the vertical, cosmic axis linking heaven and earth. It's the place where heaven and earth met.

In the beginning, God's permanent dwelling place, his heavenly temple, had temporarily descended to the top of Mt Eden and consecrated it as his holy mountain (Eze 28:13–14). The summit of Eden was the footstool of God's heavenly throne. To enter the garden of Eden and ascend the mountain was to draw near to his throne. God was enthroned above the cherubim stationed at the summit of Mt Eden. And that was symbolically replicated in the tabernacle and temple that God would later have the Israelites build as his dwelling place (cf. Ex 25:22; Psalms 80:1; 99:1). The lid of the ark of the covenant in the holy of holies in the tabernacle/temple was the footstool of God's heavenly throne (1 Chr 28:2; Psalms 99:5; 132:7). On that lid, there were two golden cherubim whose wings were stretched out toward each other. Those golden angels were symbolic replicas of the true cherubim who are guardians or sentinels, guarding God's glorious throne in heaven (Rev 4:7–9). They are stationed at the footstool of God's throne, and God is enthroned above them (cf. Psalms 80:1; 99:1).

The tabernacle and temple in Israel were miniature replicas of the original cosmic palace that God built for himself in the beginning. "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1). God set his throne on high in heaven and placed his feet on the earth as his footstool (cf. Psalm 11:4; 103:19; Eze 43:7; Jer 17:12). "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool, says the LORD" (Isa 66:1). And in Genesis 2, God chose one place in particular on earth as his footstool, the top of Mt Eden. Originally, the summit of Eden was the footstool of God's heavenly throne. Later, it was Mt Sinai and then later Mt Zion, where the temple of God was built and where the Israelites would gather for worship.

When the Israelites came to the gate of the temple, they would say, "Who shall ascend the mountain of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place?" (Psalm 24:3). Zion, where the temple stood, was the mountain of the LORD; it was the holy place. It was the place where heaven and earth met, the house of God, the gate of heaven (Gen 28:17). And the Glory-Presence of God that dwelt in the holy of holies at the top of Mt Zion originally dwelt at the top of Mt Eden, enthroned above the guardian cherubim. And to enter the garden of Eden and ascend God's holy mountain was to draw near to his throne. But nothing unclean could enter God's holy realm (cf. Rev 21:27 22:15).

The prophet Isaiah understood that, and that's why he cried out in terror when God, in the Spirit, brought him into his heavenly sanctuary, before his throne. Isaiah 6:1–7, <sup>1</sup> In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. <sup>2</sup> Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. <sup>3</sup> And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" <sup>4</sup> And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. <sup>5</sup> And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" <sup>6</sup> Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. <sup>7</sup> And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

That's what needs to happen before God's people can enter the holy realm. Their guilt must be taken away; their sin must be atoned for; their uncleanness must be removed. In Gen 3:15, God promised that he could accomplish the removal of our sin and defilement by the champion seed of the woman, "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). The seed of the woman would appear "at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Heb 9:26), and his blood would cleanse "us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). Until then, however, God's people would live in the valley of the

shadow of death, east of Eden (Psalm 23:4). They would live in exile, outside of the garden of God (Eze 28:13), separated from his presence and forbidden to draw near to him. And that's what we see at the end of Genesis 3.

The LORD said, in Gen 3:22, "Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—." Notice that the sentence ends in mid-air; it's incomplete. The reader must supply the rest of the thought—something like this, "Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever, *let me remove him from the garden and close the way to the tree of life.*" That, of course, is what God does in the following verses. God prevents Adam and Eve from eating the fruit of the tree of life, which, had they eaten, they would have lived forever. Now, that saying, in verse 22 is frequently misinterpreted. It's often interpreted to mean that if Adam and Eve had eaten from the tree of life, they would have lived forever on the earth in a state of sin. And since God didn't want that to happen, he prevented them from eating its fruit. But that's not what "live forever" in verse 22 means. It does not mean live forever on the earth in a state of sin.

The kind of life that Adam and Eve would have received had they eaten from the tree of life is glorified, eternal life in heaven. By eating from the tree of life, they would have been glorified and translated from the realm of earth to the realm of heaven. They most certainly would not have continued to live forever on earth in a state of sin. That's absurd. They would have received the reward eternal life in heaven, which God promised Adam in the covenant of works on condition of his perfect obedience.

By their disobedience, they forfeited the promise of the covenant of works and became liable to the curse. Before they can receive the blessing of the covenant, they must be redeemed from the curse. And in the fullness of time, God would send forth his Son to redeem them from that curse (Gal 4:4–5). And by his perfect obedience "to the point of death, even death on a cross," he would merit for them the reward of eternal life (Phil 2:8). Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat from the tree of life—by which they would have received the reward of eternal life in heaven—because of their disobedience.

God had purposed that they would receive the gift of eternal life through the redemption accomplished by Christ and promised in Gen 3:15. But that redemption had not yet been procured. It had been planned and purposed and promised and prefigured, but it had not been procured. So Adam and Eve were driven out of the garden of Eden and prevented from eating from the tree of life. But when they left paradise, they did so bearing a symbol of their promised redemption. They were clothed in garments of skins, taken from animals, which had been sacrificed in their place and which prefigured the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world (Gen 3:21; John 1:29). "At the end of the ages," their Redeemer would appear "to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Heb 9:26), and his blood would cleanse "us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

And that, of course, is what the Lord Jesus Christ has done once and for all by his atoning death. Christ has borne the covenant curse in the place of covenant breakers and has fulfilled the demands of the covenant that we may receive the covenant blessing—glorified, eternal life in heaven of which the tree of life was a pledge and seal. And so it is only through the person and work of Jesus Christ, through his merit and mediation, that we have access to the tree of life. That's what God was teaching Adam and Eve by driving them out of the garden and blocking the way to the tree of life. God was showing them

that that way would only be opened when the seed of the woman comes and crushes the head of the serpent. Until then, God's people would live in exile, outside of the garden of God, separated from his presence, and forbidden to draw near him.

In Gen 3:24, the LORD "drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life." The sentinel cherubim, which had been stationed at the top of Mt Eden as guardians of the throne of God, were now stationed at the entrance of the garden "to guard the way to the tree of life." The garden was the holy realm into which nothing unclean could enter. Outside of the garden was the common realm, common in the sense of non-holy, non-sacred. It was not holy because God's Glory-Presence did not dwell there in a special way.

Adam and Eve were driven into exile, outside of the holy land. God cleansed his garden-temple by removing these unclean persons. God had promised to redeem them; he promised to cleanse them from sin through a redeemer, but that had not yet happened. Until then, they and their children were consigned to live east of Eden, under the shadow of death, in a profane and sin-cursed world. "Their removal from the garden openly marked the passage from the original state of beatitude under the Creator's favor the abnormal state of the world under the common curse which had resulted from man's rebellion against the covenant" (Kline).

Notice that the entrance to the garden of Eden was in the east. "At the east of the garden of Eden," God "placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life." The entrance of the garden of Eden faced east, just like the entrance of the tabernacle and the temple that the Israelites would later build. One would enter God's garden and ascend his holy mountain from the east, just like one would enter the temple and ascend Mt Zion. And to form an impenetrable barrier at the entrance of the garden, God "placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life" (Gen 3:24). To gain access to the tree of life, to receive the reward of glorified-eternal life, the blessing of the covenant of works, one had to pass under the flaming sword of God's judgment, which, of course, was the curse sanction of the covenant of works. And that's what the promised redeemer would do in the fullness of time. He would redeem from the curse by becoming a curse for us (Gal 3:13). And that's what our Lord Jesus Christ did when he died on the cross. "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us--for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'" (Gal 3:13).

That's the reason why the veil/curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom the instant that Christ died on the cross. Matthew 27:50-51a, "And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom." Remember what was depicted on that veil? Cherubim guarding the way to the tree of life, blocking access to the throne of God. The rending of the veil at the death of Jesus signals the end of our exile east of Eden. We are no longer banished from God's holy mountain but have come to Mt Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem and can draw near to the throne of God at the summit of his holy mountain with boldness (Heb 12:22; 10:19-22). The veil of the temple was torn from top to bottom because our guilt has been taken away, our sin atone for, and our uncleanness removed by the blood of Jesus Christ. His death on the cross reverses the event recorded in Gen 3:24. The rending of his flesh has opened the way for us to draw near to God. His torn flesh IS the way—the new and living way—by which we enter God's holy sanctuary. Cf. Hebrews 10:19-22.