

## STUDY 4

# The Word of God and the Purpose of God: ‘Edenising’ the World

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### INTRODUCTION

Edenising the world . . . that’s God’s plan!<sup>1</sup>

So God created Man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.<sup>28</sup> And God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth’ (Gen. 1:27–28, RSV).<sup>2</sup>

This task of procreation and fruitful vocation was designed to commence in Eden:

And the LORD God planted a garden in *Eden*, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed (Gen. 2:8).

A river flows out of *Eden* to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches (Gen. 2:10).

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of *Eden* to till it and keep it (Gen. 2:15).

As we consider that the Lord God ‘put’ man in *Eden*, with the mandate to ‘fill the earth and subdue it’, we must keep in mind that fruitfulness pertains not only to having kids, and the shaping up of creation towards the purposive goal, but also to the expansion of Eden—from this pristine garden (in an arid land)—to move outwards to encompass God’s entire universe, filling all things with God’s Sabbath rest, his holiness (Gen. 2:3) and sheer delight.<sup>3</sup> It seems a longing for Eden resonates in us all:

- Why does a garden evoke praise, wonder, peace and delight?
- Why can problematic students be transformed by work-time on a hobby farm?
- Planting a non-garden ministry, germinates hope: *World Vision Kid’s Hope*.
- Nanna’s Eden was cooking, teaching and raising nine children, in Jesus Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 1:28–30; Revelation 22:1–5; John 7:38.

<sup>2</sup> Most other Scripture quotations in this study are from the New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 1:23; 1 Corinthians 15:28; Job 38:4–7.

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- A New Zealand community was renewed in purpose by a ‘free range’ piggery.
- Why might a musty historic church, where worship has ceased, feel *creepy*?

### WHAT OF EDEN NOW?

Then the LORD God said, ‘See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever’—therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of *Eden*, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of *Eden* he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life (Gen. 3:22–24).

How are we to think of Eden, now? As a paradise, now lost, a painful lament?<sup>4</sup> The scholars have gathered up the biblical data, to help us to hear God’s Word. Gordon Wenham suggests Eden is the name of the area ‘east of the Land of Israel’, locating it somewhere in Mesopotamia or Arabia.<sup>5</sup> Homonyms for Eden are: ‘pleasure, delight’:

Whenever Eden is mentioned in Scripture it is pictured as a fertile area, a well-watered oasis with large trees growing (cf. Isa. 51:3; Ezek. 31:9; 16, 18; 36:35, etc.), a very attractive prospect in the arid East. (For confirmation of this interpretation, cf. the newly discovered old Aramaic root ‘*dn*, ‘enrich’ . . .). This lush fecundity was a sign of God’s presence in and blessing on Eden. E. Haag . . . suggests ‘in the east’ evokes the same ideas. For in the east the sun rises, and light is a favorite biblical metaphor for divine revelation (Isa. 2:2–4; Ps. 36:10). So it seems likely that this description of ‘the garden in Eden in the east’ is symbolic of a place where God dwells. Indeed, there are many other features of the garden that suggest it is seen as an archetypal sanctuary, prefiguring the later tabernacle and temples. But the mention of rivers and their location in vv 10–14 suggests that the final editor of Gen. 2 thought of Eden also as a real place, even if it is beyond the wit of modern writers to locate.<sup>6</sup>

W. J. Dumbrell says Eden is ‘a special sanctuary, quite unlike the rest of the world’:

The Garden of Eden is best seen as a special sanctuary, quite unlike the rest of the world. In the Old Testament Canaan, which is specifically identified as a divine sanctuary in Exodus 15:17 and Psalm 78:54, and Eden are paralleled (Isa. 51:3; Ezek. 36:35), quite apart from the significance of the presence of God in the restricted space of Genesis 2–3. Moreover, Eden (itself necessarily evaluated as the source of the world river system) was clearly conceived of as a mountain sanctuary (Ezek. 28:13–14), which is important since such mountains in the ancient world were deemed basic points of contact between heaven and earth. Eden was the garden of God, the earth center where God was

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<sup>4</sup> Eden is a place—a place in which God, the gardener, plants a garden; it is a place with a river. It is also the place where the created man Adam, was subsequently ‘put’. It is located ‘in the east’. While the sanctified imagination of a redeemed person can now think in new and transformed biblical ways, the ongoing matter of indwelling sin in this age prevents us from ever fully recovering a perfect appreciation of the delights of God, of humanity and of creation. Job 38:4–7 hints at the sheer joy of it all, pre-fall. Life in the garden, prior to our tragic, irrational rebellion—sin—necessarily involved innocence and freedom (though untested), and a crystal clear conscience. For Adam and Eve, it most surely was a stunningly beautiful state of being, of communion and of life in God’s presence. All this was prior to sin making its dark intrusion into the world; prior to sin finding a place within Adam’s heart and in the heart of Eve, the woman; Man’s irrational acts of disobedience, sin and rebellion have far-reaching consequences. The man and woman were both expelled. The Lord God sent them from the Garden of Eden. Access to the garden and its river, and access to the tree of life within that garden was prevented, guarded, denied. But God’s mandate, and his plan for the Edenising of creation, remained. (Though evil grows: . . . Then Cain went away from the presence of the LORD, and settled in the land of Nod, east of *Eden* [Genesis 4:16]). The Proto-evangel (Gen. 3:15) highlighted ‘the battle’ and prophesied ‘Christ’s crushing victory’.

<sup>5</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary, Word Books, Waco, 1987, p. 61.

<sup>6</sup> Wenham, pp. 61–62.

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to be found (Isa. 51:3). (In Ezek. 36:33–36 the Garden of Eden is the symbol of fertility, a fitting analogy for the land of Palestine about to be restored. Also in Ezekiel, the divine garden is used in reference to Zion and the temple [47:1–12; Wallace 1985, 85–86].) In the garden of Genesis 2, the sanctuary of the divine, the man is cast in a priestly role. Consider the correspondence between the precious stones set in the breastplate of the high priest in Exodus 28:17–20 and the adornments of the king of Tyre, who is likened to the original inhabitant of the garden, in Ezekiel 28:13. By implication, the original inhabitant of the garden, Adam, is a decidedly priestly/kingly character. If Genesis 1 emphasizes humankind's kingship, Genesis 2 presents Adam as God's priest.<sup>7</sup>

Eden is certainly the place where God dwells, the divine sanctuary. From Israel, God required 'a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among them' (Exod. 25:8; 29:45). Isaiah envisages the Edenising of Israel once again—and the Word going out beyond that to the nations of the world:

Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for he was but one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him many. For the LORD will comfort Zion; **he will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden**, her desert like the garden of the LORD; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song. Listen to me, my people, and give heed to me, my nation; for a teaching will go out from me, and my justice for a **light to the peoples** (Isa. 51:2–4).

- The creational mandate given to Adam was never revoked (Noah failed too).
- Nations to be blessed in Abraham's seed, Christ, wherever faith would arise.
- The blessings of Eden were to be extended to the world.
- The hallowed day Sabbath rest (Gen. 2:1–3; Matt. 11:28–30; Heb. 3:7–4:14).
- Seventh Day of rest is 'the only thing—let alone day—which is sanctified throughout creation'.<sup>8</sup> Sanctifying of things or persons coming into appropriate contact (Matt. 23:19; Exod. 29:37; cf. Uzzah, in 2 Sam. 6:7).

The role of Edenising the world was not fulfilled by Israel. Their sin and rebellion hindered them, and the promised Messiah, the Second Adam (Rom. 5:14), was the only way of that ever happening. Jesus Christ came according to the Word. He was given to and through Israel (Rom. 9:4–5)—as the fulfillment of all that had been promised. The following elements have been identified as the key features of Eden:<sup>9</sup>

- The Garden (John 15:1–11; 20:15; Rev. 22:2), the Tree of Life.
- The City—Holy (Rev. 21:2), a place of community (cf. Babylon—evil).
- The River of God<sup>10</sup> (Jer. 2:13; Ps. 46:4–5; Ezek. 47:1–12; John 4; 7:37–39).
- The Sanctuary—now, church new temple (1 Cor. 3:16); later God and Lamb.
- The Place of the Throne—Man: Vice-Regent (Gen. 1:28); Psalm 2; Rev. 4–5.
- The Place of Marriage (Hosea 1; Ezek. 16; Isa. 54, Rev. 21:2). J. Edwards.<sup>11</sup>
- The Place of Man—Adam and Eve: failure. Jesus Christ: the most fruitful life.

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<sup>7</sup> W. J. Dumbrell, *The Search for Order: Biblical Eschatology in Focus*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 1994, p. 25.

<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *Christ and The Triune Glory*, NCPI, Blackwood, 2001, p. 199.

<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *Christ and The Triune Glory*, pp. 201–11.

<sup>10</sup> See also Geoffrey Bingham, *The River of God*, NCPI, Blackwood, 2001.

<sup>11</sup> Paraphrased quote: 'The reason God created the world was to obtain a Bride for His Son'.

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## THE WORD OF GOD AT WORK

The mandate given to humanity to ‘fill the earth’ means, ‘*Fill it with all that is Eden. Expand Eden. Edenise all the creation presently outside of Eden.*’<sup>12</sup> Surprisingly few theological books say this.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, this assertion can be made because the Word of God has come to us in Jesus Christ, confronting and transforming our minds, to know God and his plan. By the power of his Holy Spirit, God in Christ has revealed his plan and purpose to us.<sup>14</sup> We gladly yield to this new, strange logic we find in Scripture: ‘For in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him’ (Col. 1:16).

1. It is essential in ministry to continually rediscover the dynamic of the Word of God: God *spoke* creation into being (Gen. 1:3; Heb. 11:3).
2. God *spoke* his blessing upon the first man and woman, his mandate of fruitful activity and vast responsibility within the creation (Gen. 1:28).
3. God *spoke* great promises to Abraham concerning his role among the nations within the plan and purpose of God (Gen. 12:1–3; Acts 7:2).
4. God also *spoke* to Israel as a nation, concerning their ministry (Exod. 19:4–6), blessed them with fruitfulness (Exod. 1:7), brought them out of Egypt and gave them a *veritable Eden*<sup>15</sup>, a land flowing with milk and honey (Exod. 3:8; Deut. 27:3), and purposed to *speak* anew to the world through them (Isa. 42:6; 49:6).
5. God *spoke* through the prophets, to both Israel and to the nations (Jer. 12:14–17) concerning the plan of God, and the need for, and hope of nations to be participants in that plan (Isa. 2:3; Zech. 8:22–23; Micah 4:1–4).
6. Now, in the coming of the Messiah, *God has spoken* to us by a Son (Heb. 1:1), Jesus—the Eternal Son of God. This Word is of the definitive work God has accomplished, and is completing now through the Risen Christ Jesus.
7. The Apostles—who had seen and met the Risen Christ Jesus—*spoke* God’s Word firstly to Israel, beginning in Jerusalem, and then to the nations of the world (Acts 1:8; 2:1; 8:5; 10:45). It continues.
8. God’s Word to us today, in his Son Jesus Christ, confronts us with a whole new way of thinking and of understanding God’s plan for creation. We believe therefore *we speak* (2 Cor. 4:13), and so share in what God’s Word is doing with and within the world—namely Edenising it.

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<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *Christ and The Triune Glory*, p. 198.

<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption*, vol. 1 (Banner of Truth [1834], 1990), pp. 533–619 gives detailed attention to many of the biblical themes mentioned, but never says: ‘Edenising the world’.

<sup>14</sup> The Apostles were to make God’s plan fully known: ‘the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints’ (Col. 1:26; cf. Eph. 1:10; 3:9; Acts 2:23; 4:28).

<sup>15</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *Searching For God*, Redeemer Baptist Press, Castle Hill, 2000, p. 110.