

# High Priests in Gods Temple

Genesis 2.4-24

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The Creation story in the bible is often the cause for fierce debates. Do you take the first chapters of the Bible literally or what? Some people believe that God made our world 6000 years ago, in 6 times 24 hours.

Just as others swallow scientific viewpoints tooth and nail and think our world came into existence by sheer luck.

Last week we looked at Genesis 1, and we avoided the Scilla of Creationism and the Charibdis of evolutionism. We tried to envision what the Creation story meant for the listener 3000 years ago.

Today we look at Genesis 2 - the story of the Garden of Eden, the Two Trees in the Middle, and Man, put into this Garden.

## 1. The Garden

Let us begin with the Garden of Eden. God creates this beautiful place for people to live in. Truly what we call paradise.

When we try to imagine this, today, we probably envision the opposite of our city-life, don't we. We see gorgeous nature, untouched by humans, a perfect holiday destination. Pure nature. Wild.

But what would the people who heard this story 3000 years ago, have imagined?

Temples in the Ancient Near East often had a carefully landscaped garden, right beside the temple.

These gardens were a symbol of the fertility created by the gods who lived inside the temples. These gardens were cultured landscapes, and highly symbolic. A bit like the gardens of the French kings, or of English nobility.

And to symbolise fertility, there would often be ponds and canals, just as Eden was surrounded by rivers.



You see references to this link between Paradise and Temple in the Bible. For instance in Ezekiel 47. Ezekiel speaks of a river flowing from under the Temple, giving life to the trees that lined the river and these trees were healing for the people. For the nations.



Those gardens in the Ancient Near East were to provide food for the gods in the temple. But from the outset, we learn in the Bible that God create this garden with food for us. He serves us. He gives to us.

This is God's character. He wants to bless mankind with what it needs. He did not create mankind as an army of his humble servants - but He made us to shower his blessings on us.

And we see then how God 'walks' in this Garden of Eden. He does not hide in his temple. He is approachable for all people.

This 'walking' of God is, obviously, what we call an anthropomorphism. It speaks of God in human terms. We know God does not literally go for a walk in a garden.

Until quite recently the church was never much bothered with the historical realities of the story. They were much more preoccupied with the meaning of it.

By the way, this divine stroll in the garden of Eden is expressed with the same Hebrew word that is also used to describe God's presence in the tabernacle in Leviticus 26:12 ('and I will walk among you') and Deuteronomy 23:14 ('the Lord your God walks in the midst of your camp').

This further indicates the close link between Creation, the Garden of Eden and the tabernacle or the Temple of Solomon. Our world was made as the place where God resides. God has made all things, and he resides, he rests in his world.

What the Bible is teaching here is that man was created to be happy, to enjoy the life and goodness which flow from God, and this was possible because we humans could related freely to God. This is the essence of paradise. Being connected with the Creator of Heaven and Earth, in an environment of life and abundance. That is what God wants for us.

## 2. The Trees

The Garden of Eden was sacred space - in an even more intense way than this whole universal temple we live it. Eden was like the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle and the Temple of Solomon. It was where God was especially to be found.

If the whole universe was God's temple, then the garden of Eden was the Holy of Holies. When Adam and Eve were evicted from the Garden of Eden - next week we look into this.

Question: How did God prevent that Adam and Eve could return to the Garden?

Because two angels guarded Eden. Just as in the Temple of Solomon two giant angels guarded the Holy of Holies - embroidered on the veil that made access to the Holy of Holies impossible for mere mortals.



The cherubim on the veil that blocked anyone from entering into the Holy of holies, are a close parallel to the cherubim that blocked access to the Garden of Eden for Adam and Eve.

The angels specifically ensured that mankind could no longer access the tree of life. Next week I hope to speak a bit more about the tree of knowledge of good and evil. What that means. But today - what is this tree of life?

Whether you believe that this tree of life literally grew in a specific location, or you take it as figurative, the message is the same: Life is possessed by God, and is made available to us as long as we are in relationship with him.

This brings up an interesting question. If Adam and Eve, even in Paradise, in order to have eternal life, needed access to that tree, what does this then tell us of the human nature of Adam and Eve?

I think it suggests that mankind was created as mortal beings. Paul says, in 1 Timothy 6.16, that God "alone has immortality."

God is pure life, but nothing that he created is immortal. Even the furthest stars die after a few billion years. Mankind was created mortal, but by obeying God, by loving God, by relating to God, man was kept alive by God.

I think this is stressed in Genesis by the description of man's creation. He was made from dust. And if not sustained by the fruits of the tree of life, Adam and Eve were to also return to dust.

We all die, except if God keeps us alive.

For us the Cross of Christ has become the tree of life. In the Greek Orthodox liturgy during Lent, the followings words are sung, and I summarise:

I died through a tree, but have found a Tree of life in thee, O Cross of Christ!

Of old, our parents [...] were banished from the tree of life, and from the sweetness of Paradise!

Therefore, faithful, let us [...] acquire life from the divine Cross, and return [...] to our initial home, receiving great mercy from Christ our God!

Come, let us drink living waters flowing from the Tree of Life, as we behold before us the holy Cross, the fountain of blessings, the spring of blood and water, flowing from the life-giving side of the Master. *The Lenten Triodion*

Through the Cross of Christ, we have access to God, to eternal life, to paradise.

In our Eucharist, we celebrate this. The time of celebrating Holy Eucharist is really Sacred Space and Sacred Time.

We have access to God; what was messed up by Adam, has been made right by the Second Adam, Jesus Christ our Lord.

But back to Genesis :)

### 3. The Man

Man was made from dust, sure, but we are also much more than just a bit of rubble. God himself blew life into us. What makes man different from the animals is the fact that he receives his life from God.

A materialistic view of humans is totally wrong. You are more than the sum of your chemical substances.

The soul has its origin in the breath of God and did not come from matter.

God is, in Genesis 2, portrayed as a potter who very personally modelled mankind, and who then blew the spirit of life in us. Never forget your value!

Only man is given the breath of life, and this is what makes us essentially different from animals: you have a form of life given to you directly by God.

And it is this divine life-breath that makes you unique and that enables you to converse with God and to have real communion with other human beings.

This principle of life received from God gives us great dignity. You are very valuable, as God's handiwork, and as you are made into the image and likeness of God. God has put something of himself in you.

Basil the Great (379 AD), wrote that

because he was created in the image of the Creator, he is honored above the heavens, above the sun, above the choirs of stars. For which of the heavenly bodies was said to be an image of the most high God?

Genesis portrays mankind as almost divine. Adam had to give names to all things. That was in the Ancient Near East seen as the job of the gods. Just as God called that thing in sky Sun, and just as God called the day Day and the night Night, as we saw in Genesis 1.



In many of the creation stories in the Middle East, the giving of names to things was done by the gods, and it was seen as an aspect of how those gods created the world. Or rather, how they ordered the world, how they changed the primordial chaos into a world that was inhabitable. Giving names to things classifies, it orders.

In our story, Adam plays this role. This really suggests that mankind was made to maintain order in our world as part of God's work of creation. Everything you do to develop this world, is part of your creative task given by God.

All you do is of importance for God, because you personally are important and because all things do build up or break down what God has made. The choice is ours. Do we make this world better, or do we make it worse?

This role we have is truly a priestly role. We are all priests in God's world. When Adam is told to work the Garden of Eden, "to work it and to take care of it", the words used were not about gardening.

They were terms for the work of priests in the tabernacle, and the Temple of Solomon. When the words for 'work it and take care of it' are used together in the bible, as a word group, they always refer to work in the tabernacle, by the priests. One example from Numbers 3:7-8.

[The priests] are to perform [...] the work of the tabernacle. They are to take care of all the furnishings of the tent of meeting.

Adam was a High Priest in the Temple of Creation. Next week we will focus on how he messed up, and how mankind squandered its priestly role. But Jesus Christ came and became the perfect High Priest. He restored our relationship with God. He repaired what Adam damaged.

So that with him, we are all made priests again. We are a nation of priests, to serve God in his world. Not because He needs our service, but so that we keep our world going, and make it a better place for us.

## **Conclusion**

So in Eucharist, in a few minutes, we celebrate that God gave us access again to the Tree of Life. You have eternal life, thanks to Jesus Christ.

But having eternal life, what next is our task in the world of God? Surely, we live for him, thankful, full of praise, full of love for him.

But our work is really to develop our world, to live to the full, to work, to enjoy, to love people, to make this world a better place.

When you receive bread and wine, when you receive Jesus Christ, he commissions you. Love God, and serve him in this world. There is enough to do.

**Amen.**