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GETTING BACK TO THE GARDEN

*Now the LORD God had planted a garden . . . in Eden;
and there he put the man he had formed.*

—Genesis 2:8



Coming from a family of former farmers, I loved reading in Genesis 2 that one of the first things God planted was a garden. Surely it wasn't because after creating the entire world He needed one more thing to do. Rather, the Garden of Eden was planted with a purpose. It was the perfect environment for enjoying rest, reflection, and relationship—a beautiful and bountiful place that provided everything Adam and Eve needed for health and happiness. Most important, it was hallowed ground where God walked in the cool of the day, seeking spiritual communion with His creation.

If ever rest came easily, it was in the Garden of Eden. This makes me believe that the garden was an important part of God's plan. Otherwise, He might just as easily have placed man in a garage.

That's not to say that Adam didn't have anything else to do. According to Genesis 2:15, "The LORD God took the man and

put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.” At that point, though, I like to imagine that Adam found his work simple and satisfying. It didn’t yet involve the thorny issues that he and we less-than-delighted descendants would eventually have to hack through. Only after that infamous and unfortunate forbidden fruit incident did our tasks become toilsome.

To me, the garden represents a place where God’s presence was a given, where after the heat of the day Adam could count on feeling the cool, thirst-quenching breath of God on his dry and dusty soul. Albeit brief, it was the only time in human history when absolutely nothing came between people and their Maker. “Adam and his wife were both naked,” Genesis 2:25 tells us, “and they felt no shame.”

Imagine romping randomly through the rainforest—without the rompers. This was true transparency—physically, emotionally and spiritually—and there was no disgrace in it. Even Adam’s relationship with Eve and the animals was one of complete compatibility. What a concept!

Why then did it so soon become not enough? We can only assume that Adam and Eve took a great deal for granted. Even in that amazing environment, the first created couple quickly became complacent, curiously seeking companionship elsewhere. It was then that a soiree with a certain snake convinced them they might fare better figuring things out for themselves. Satan, who will do anything he can to separate us from God, had already slithered his way in between man and his Maker. This rebellion of far-reaching consequences resulted in their—and our—removal from that place of rest and relationship, both immediate and eternal, physical and spiritual.

Goodbye garden. Hello garage.

“How tragic,” we’re now prone to pontificate, “that our illustrious ancestors didn’t realize until too late how good they

had it!” Of course, one-hundred-percent hindsight makes it easy for us to point the finger of blame. But put that pointer back in its holster, partner. In their defense, they had no frame of reference.

We do.

Yet it seems we’ve learned very little from their mistake. Otherwise, why would we stay just as busy today striving for what got us all into trouble in the first place? Higher knowledge, worldly wisdom, material accumulation—the constant, curious quest for so many things that inevitably come between us and God, too often causing us to neglect, even reject, His gracious offer of time spent together.

The good news for them and for us is this: despite their sin, God still came seeking. Here’s how Genesis 3:8-10 records it:

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, “Where are you?”

He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.”

Imagine God’s disappointment upon discovering His darlings in such a shameful, stressful state. Of course, being omnipotent, He undoubtedly already knew. Still, it’s something that we who harbor high hopes for our own snake-bitten offspring find devastatingly identifiable.

Perhaps it will help us all to understand something important here. Nakedness was not Adam’s and Eve’s sin. Their fatal faux pas was the newly acquired forbidden knowledge that, rather than giving them the glorious insight they had anticipated, only made their vulnerability more visible. This created in them the inclination to hide their disobedience rather than embrace a restored relationship with their Creator.

Sad to say, we haven't gotten any smarter over the centuries. Whether we sin small or blow it big-time makes no difference. It's that same naked guilt that still at times has some of us lunging for the first big leaf. Even if it's nothing more than the guilt of our ongoing absence, avoiding God simply seems easier (or at least less embarrassing) than confronting our true condition and being shamefully exposed—as if avoidance were an actual possibility.

Now for some happier headlines: even before the fall, God had a plan in place for restoring spiritual relationship. “You see,” states Romans 5:6, “at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.” Eventually per divine providence God would send His own Son to crush that seductive serpent's head and bridge the eternal gap sin created. Today, because of Christ, we have the paid-in-full privilege to stand once more in unashamed nakedness before God—nothing to hinder, nothing to hide. In this way, God's amazing love continues to overcome our ostracism.

So why don't we? After all, it is with Him alone we find forgiveness and full acceptance. Because He made us, He knows us best and—miracle of miracles—still loves us most. Consequently, it's in those times together that He gives us the courage to face our fears and offers the forgiveness that effaces our failures. If only we can grasp this glorious, grace-filled concept, surely we'll experience a renewed desire to spend time in His peaceful presence.

To illustrate, allow me to share a little personal perspective. As already mentioned, I come from a long line of dirt-diggers. Thus, every spring something in my dad's DNA inevitably found him plowing up a wide portion of our elongated backyard and planting seeds in the freshly turned furrows. Though each season he vowed the garden would be smaller, it never was. Once

he got in there, some soil-driven stirring took over until soon every available inch was sprouting.

Tending it, of course, required a great deal of ongoing discipline. Consequently, each spring and summer evening, after a long day's work at a local aircraft plant, he headed for what he called the "back forty." I know there were days when he felt way too weary to make the effort. But common to so many of his post-WWII generation, Dad's well-watered work ethic kicked in, and soon he was out there humming and hoeing. It wasn't hard to observe how quickly, along with the weeds, he began to work out some personal woes and weariness.

Truth be known, he had faced a lot of "hard rows to hoe" throughout his lifetime. The oldest of six children born to a poor itinerant farmer, he left school in the eighth grade to help support the family. Because of this, he always felt educationally inferior and anxious about his ability to be an adequate provider. In reality, my dad was one of the savviest guys I know when it came to taking care of business, both financial and spiritual.

There were, however, a few years in early adulthood when, despite the prayers and petitions of a godly mother, he sowed some wild oats and reaped a harvest of hurt, some in his closest relationships. Thankfully, by the time I came along he had recommitted his life to Christ and put down deep spiritual roots. Consequently, one of my fondest and most enduring memories is that of my work-weary father bathed in the light of a living room lamp reading his Bible every night before bedtime. As much as he enjoyed working the natural soil, tending his inner garden had long taken top priority. The result was a lifelong supply of spiritual wisdom and daily devotion to his church, family, and friends, making him my most inspiring earthly example.

Here's one last garden lesson we can glean. Undoubtedly going to the garden is always easier during the productive sum-

mer seasons. It's when the ground is frozen and fallow that we may forget and neglect it. Yet, as any avid gardener knows, a winter garden also harbors hidden life. Unseen, something is always stirring beneath the soil in anticipation of the next growing season. It's then, without leaves or blooms to sap their strength, that roots dig deep.

Likewise during the dark and dormant times of our lives we may approach our spiritual gardens grudgingly, if at all. *What can possibly be produced there*, we may wonder, *in such a cold and weary season?* With so many voices vying for our attention, we are not comfortable with the frozen silence. Yet there's a latent reward for lingering, waiting in the soul's winter seasons for the din to dissipate so that we can hear God's voice alone. If nothing else, we may find ourselves simply sitting in silent contemplation until we feel the stirrings of hope and promise for a better and more productive season ahead. In God's garden there is never an off season.

Again this brings me back in memory to my father and one of his favorite hymns. Titled "In the Garden," the first verse and chorus go like this:

*I come to the garden alone,
While the dew is still on the roses;
And the voice I hear,
Falling on my ear,
The Son of God discloses.

And He walks with me,
And He talks with me,
And He tells me I am His own;
And the joy we share as we tarry there,
None other has ever known.*

—C. Austin Miles

Perhaps it was a similar thought that caused garden aficionado Minnie Aumonier to write, “When the world wearies and society ceases to satisfy, there is always the garden.” Though she spoke of a physical garden, how much truer it is in a spiritual sense.

In the heat of life, God’s garden is a place where He nourishes, refreshes, and restores. In colder seasons it’s a place of protection and patient preparation. Either way, it’s there we’ll inevitably find ourselves falling into an amazing reproductive cycle where, as my friend Judy Rachels describes it, “healthy things grow, growing things change, change brings challenge, challenge leads to health, healthy things grow.” And so it continues, season after season.

So here we are, centuries removed from Creation. And God still calls, *Where are you?* Think of it. Naked, scratched, and sin-smudged—maneuvering through our own snake-infested society—the Creator of the universe still desires to draw us into time spent together. Despite our shortcomings, He wants to keep the lines of communication open. So He seeks us out, offering a place of not only rest and relationship but also reconciliation and refreshing. Despite our faults and failings, He beckons, *Stop, embrace, and enjoy my glorious circle of shade and solitude.* Again, how beautifully this illustrates God’s unconditional love and everlasting desire for fellowship with His creation!

Could it be possible, then, that a step back to that ancient garden is our first step toward “sabbatitude”? It is—if we can come to a couple of important understandings. From the very beginning, God was the one who initiated time together. Still today He offers us a place of both physical rest and spiritual relationship. How different life might look if we approach these times not out of a grudging sense of interruption and obligation

but in eager anticipation, imagining how patiently He waits to meet us.

Still wondering when you'll ever find the time? Consider this: according to an old familiar adage, "Time began in a garden."