

## WHAT IS THE BIBLICAL PARADISE?

A study of the derivation of the word paradise reveals that it was often used in reference to a park, orchard, or garden. Hence in biblical terms: the Garden of Eden, as we read in Revelation 2:7: "...To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God." Elsewhere we read that the Garden of Eden is also called the "Garden of God" (Ezek. 31,8,9). Why? Because God **dwells** in a garden!

The temple of Solomon was where God dwelled with ancient Israel. Inside and out its walls of cedar had carvings of trees and flowers to depict a garden (I Kgs. 6:18,29,32,35). Now let's understand, God, who is spirit, does not live in a material garden, but rather in a heavenly one that humans cannot perceive. We read where the archangel Lucifer had access to God in His spiritual "Eden, the garden of God" (Ezek. 28:11-14). But following his rebellion, he was cast out of the garden (vs15,16).

The apostle Paul wrote how he was taken in vision, not literally, to the "third heaven," which he called "paradise" (II Cor. 12:1-4). Again, let's understand, "heaven" is not a place, but rather it is a state of being, since it is where God, who lives outside of time and space, dwells. But the point is God lives in some kind of spirit garden, one that is perfect in beauty, harmony, and peace.

So it follows, that when God created man, He planted a garden where He placed Adam and Eve, and where they could have **access to Him** (Gen. 2:8-10; 3:8,9). Now, try to imagine as many have God's earthly garden, a paradise on earth. There would have been unimaginable beauty, perfect climate, a river to water the garden, plenty of delectable fruits and vegetables, no sickness or death, enjoyable and satisfying work, no danger from or among animals, and so much more!

But sadly, we know the rest of the story. Satan entered, Adam and Eve disobeyed God, and they were driven from the garden. At the entrance to the garden on the east angels stood guard with flaming swords to bar any re-entrance (Gen. 3:24), and most importantly, any direct access to God. At some point an altar for sacrifice was constructed outside the entrance to the garden, for we read that Cain and Abel brought offerings to God (Gen. 4:1-4). Even that did not work out well, since Cain, in a jealous rage over his brother's offering, murdered him and was banished from the area. But even worse, all mankind since has lived outside the garden, because "all [have] sinned" (Rom. 5:12), and it is our sins which separate us from God (Isa. 59:1,2).

Man's struggles ever since could be summed up in a desire to get back to the Garden of Eden. One of the greatest epic poems in the English language, *Paradise lost* by John Milton, tells the story of Adam and Eve's exile from the garden. Joni Mitchell's iconic song *Woodstock* ends its refrain with the words: "We've got to get ourselves back to the garden." But How?

Long ago God instructed Moses and later king David on how to build symbolic replicas of the Garden of Eden as it was following man's exile. They were the tabernacle in the wilderness and the Solomonic temple respectively. Both faced east like the garden. Outside the entrance was an altar for sacrifice, again like the garden. A veil guarded access to the first room called the holy place. In it were a candelabra, a table with showbread, and an altar of incense. The candelabra was an oil lamp with seven stems, all of pure gold and molded to resemble a flowering almond tree (Ex. 25:31-40). Many commentators believe that this symbolized the tree of life in the Garden of Eden.

A second veil guarded access to another room called the holy of holies, in which were the ark of the covenant and the two angels overshadowing the mercy seat (Heb. 9:1-9). This is where God dwelled as evidenced by the “cloud” (Ex. 40:34; Num. 9:15,16). The two angels can be seen as guarding access like the ones at the entrance to the Garden of Eden.

Hebrews 9:9 says the tabernacle “was symbolic for the present time.” What does that mean? The Israelites were not allowed in the tabernacle or temple, just like Adam and Eve were barred from the garden. Therefore, the tabernacle and temple both symbolized man’s **lack of access to God** because of sin, just as access was barred to the Garden of Eden.

Now we must ask: Is there a way back to the garden? The Bible tells us that as Jesus hung on the cross, two thieves were also crucified flanking him. Luke records that minutes before Jesus’ death, a remarkable conversation took place among the three men (Lk. 23:39-43). We see that one thief “blasphemed” Jesus, while the other repented and confessed his sin. Jesus’ response to the second thief was so awesome and unexpected as to defy comprehension. He invited the man to “Paradise,” to come back to the garden, that very day!

How are we to interpret Jesus’ astonishing words? Most would say that since the thief was about to die, then he would shortly go to heaven. In fact, most Christians are taught and believe that the faithful go to heaven following death. Did you know that the Bible teaches no such thing? Rather, the Bible tells us that deceased faithful Christians lie asleep, figuratively, in their graves, awaiting a resurrection to immortality at Jesus’ return. (For a further in-depth discussion of this topic read my article “What is Biblical Heaven?”)

So we must look for an answer elsewhere. Both Matthew and Mark tell us that at the moment of Jesus’ death the second “veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom” (Mtt. 27:51; Mk. 15:38). Remember, this veil to the holy of holies symbolized that man was denied direct access to God. So what did this miracle portend? Hebrews 10:19,20 answers the question plainly: “Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which he consecrated for us, **through the veil**, that is, his flesh.” The blood of Jesus washes away our sins, that which separated us from God. His torn flesh on our behalf caused the veil which denied us access to God to be opened.

Through faith in Jesus’ blood, the repentant thief and likewise all Christians are invited back to the garden, the heavenly Paradise of God! You wonder: how can that be since we are still flesh living on this earth? This can be a hard concept for us to capture, so let’s look at several passages that speak of this invitation. First, we read, “...We have a high priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the majesty in the heavens, a minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle which the Lord erected, and not man”(Heb. 8:1,2). “This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the presence behind the veil, where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus, having become high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedec” (Heb. 6:19,20). Our hope in God allows us to follow Jesus through the veil into the “presence” of God.

Think about these words: “[God has] raised us up together, and made us sit together in **heavenly places** in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:6). Through our minds joined with the Holy Spirit, Christians think, perceive, and live on a higher spiritual plain of existence—a heavenly one—wherein is the garden of God! That is why we are admonished: “If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your **mind** on things above, not on things on the earth” (Col. 3:1,2). No doubt these words inspired Oatman to composed the old-time favorite “Higher Ground.”

The New Testament ascribes to the Christian nation the names “twelve tribes” and the “Israel of God,” because we are the restored Israel of the prophets. Among the many descriptions prophesied for this new Israel, some prophesy a return to the garden. Isaiah wrote: “For the Lord will comfort Zion... He will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the LORD...” (51:3). Like the river of Eden watered the garden, so the living waters of the Holy Spirit quench the parched souls of the faithful. As we read at the top of this article, Christian overcomers may eat of the tree of life. We are told that in the Garden of Eden all animals were herbivores, they did not eat each other, and were no danger to man or each other (Gen. 1:30). And so it follows that in the spiritual garden in which restored Israel dwells, there are, figuratively speaking, no dangerous animals:

“The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the goat, the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox, the nursing child shall play by the cobra’s hole, and the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper’s den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain...” (Isa, 11:6-9; 65:25).

So what is the biblical Paradise? It was the Garden of Eden in which Adam and Eve lived, and from which they were barred. It is also the spiritual dwelling place for Christians, a Paradise of the Spirit-led mind. It is a higher life lived with Jesus beyond the veil before the throne God. And further, it is the Garden of God, His dwelling place in heaven, where the faithful will one day join Him in immortality. Will you accept God’s invitation to come back to the garden?