

TOO LATE TO REGRET: BEYOND FIXING

Fifth in a series by Dr. Rick Perrin on *Let's Look at God* from Genesis 2:15-17 and 3:1-24
“The Lord God commanded the man, saying, ‘From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die.’” Genesis 2:16-17

Lisa Nowak was a success by all the usual standards. She was valedictorian of her high school class. She graduated from the Naval Academy, married the handsome Richard Nowak, and soon became the mother of a son who’s now a teenager, and then five years ago, of two beautiful twin daughters. Lisa became a test pilot in the Navy and then was accepted into NASA’s astronaut program. After ten years of hard work she was rewarded with a space mission, and last July she blasted into the blue aboard the space shuttle. At 43 her career was on an upward trajectory. She seemed happy, seemed to be balancing career and family life, and people seemed to like her.

But somewhere along the line Lisa started fantasizing about Bill Ofeleine, the divorced captain of her space shuttle crew. A few weeks ago her husband Rich took the kids and moved out. And last week, in a bizarre it-could-only-happen-in-the-movies kind of tale, she put on a diaper so she wouldn’t have to stop to use the rest room, and drove 900 miles from Houston to Orlando. There she apparently tried to kidnap and murder Colleen Shipman, an Air Force astronaut whom Lisa considered a rival for the affections of Ofeleine. Now Lisa Nowak is charged with attempted murder. She’s suspended from her NASA duties. She’s the object of national ridicule. She’s lost everything and there’s no way to retrieve it. Hers is one life that’s beyond fixing.

For several weeks we’ve been taking a fresh look at God. Two weeks ago we talked about the kindness of God, and how God created man to have a relationship with him. We saw how God patiently taught Adam the things he needed to know about the world and about life. And we saw how God provided Adam with a woman who would be his counterpart and companion. Now, today, I want us to observe the goodness of God by looking at God’s intention for his human creation; but then we must consider why things have gone wrong—for the beautiful relationship between God and man that we see at the creation has certainly been lost. We humans are estranged from God, and life has become hard and packed with sorrow; and sometimes, it seems, beyond fixing.

The first thing I want us to see is **God’s care for the man he created**. Please turn to Genesis 2, verse 8. “*The Lord God planted a garden toward the east, in Eden; and there He placed the man whom He had created.*” When we think of a garden we picture a cultivated place, a place where rows of flowers and vegetables grow. My grandfather had a garden like that. One section was full of glads and daffodils, irises and daisies which he cut and my grandmother placed in vases on the screened back porch. In another section lettuce grew, and cabbage and beans and tomatoes and squash—and rhubarb! My grandmother stewed rhubarb or baked it in the most delicious pies. But this isn’t like the garden God planted. We should think in terms of a vast preserve. At the center of it was a mountain, for verse 10 tells us that four rivers flowed out of Eden.

You and I have been in many beautiful places across the earth that might remind us in some limited way of what Eden must have been like. Perhaps you have cruised to the wilds of Alaska. Many of us marveled at the rugged terrain of New Zealand as we watched the *Lord of the Rings* movies. Austria, with its mountains and deep valleys is one of the most beautiful spots on earth. Or maybe you've visited the green land of Ireland, or the yellow-specked hills and heather-hazed moors of Scotland. Barb and I were awed by a game preserve in the bush country of South Africa. Maybe you've seen the stunning rock formations of the Garden of the Gods in Colorado, or the blossom-strewn paradise of Hawaii, or camped beneath the snowy peaks of the Grand Tetons. Or, if you like, there's the Garden State of New Jersey—named not for its dirty urban landscape, but for the once abundant truck farms that fed America.

Verse 9 says, "*Out of the ground God caused to grow every tree that is pleasing to the sight and good for food.*" So, picture the flowering trees—the Japanese Cherries in Washington DC, the dogwoods and lilacs and magnolias that bloom in the Spring, the majestic elms and weeping willows and red maples. Or consider the fruit trees—apples and oranges and persimmons; the pears and bananas and pomegranates; the walnuts and pecans and almonds; the acacias with their long thorns, the spruces and pines with their cones, the birches with their white bark.

The name Eden probably means *pleasure* or *delight*, and what a delightful place Eden must have been! It was a place planted especially for man. And the fact that it was in the East—in Biblical symbolism, the East represents life, the place from which the Sun rises—the fact that Eden was in the East prefigures eternal life. All of this was what God intended for man. What a good God he must be!

The second thing to see in the description of the garden is how **God used Eden to teach man about his immortal soul and his moral character.** Verse 9 says, "*The tree of life [was] also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.*" The tree of life represents life in its highest potency, its highest level. Often you will hear someone exclaim, "You haven't lived until you've...." You fill in the blank. James Kennedy said something like that to me one time over breakfast after he had gone skiing for the first time in Colorado. He was about fifty-five at the time and had lived in Florida all his life. There's not a lot of skiing in Florida. So flying down hill with the snow billowing out behind him was one of the wonders of life. When I was in college, Timothy Leary began boasting about the new level of consciousness he experienced by using psychedelic drugs. "You haven't lived until you've taken a trip on LSD," he'd say, and he kicked off a destructive revolution. When I was in India twenty years ago I visited a palace built by the Shah Jahan five or six hundred years ago. The walls were marble and had originally been decorated with imbedded semiprecious stones and gold leaf. A marble pool in the form of a lotus blossom fed a river of life that flowed through the palace. We saw the great throne room where the Peacock Throne had once sat, and we strolled through the apartments where the harem girls lived. It was a way of life and luxury greater than most mortals ever experienced. But God created Eden for every man and woman. The tree of life spoke of an eternal life with glory beyond any imagining.

Also growing in the garden of Eden was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Its name suggests a compound of opposites: Unlimited knowledge, but the pathway to it must go through God who alone knows everything. It may not be grasped apart from him. Now skip to verse 15. God placed the man in his marvelous garden but also gave him a commission. The man was to cultivate the garden and maintain it. So the pleasure and delight of life in Eden was not found in idleness and self-indulgence—the lifestyle of the rich and famous, if you will—but it is realized through work that is significant and by creative and constructive enterprise. You make something. You build something using your unique, God-given gifts and talents and interests; and enjoy the fruits of your labor.

Then in verses 16-17 God presents the man with a choice. *“The Lord God commanded the man, saying, ‘From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die.’”* You’ll notice that nothing is said here about the tree of life. God intended that man should eat from the tree of life. But life that never ends, life in all its fullness, comes by obeying God. Back in chapter 1, verse 28 Adam and Eve are told to be fruitful and multiply. The implication here is that Adam, by obeying God and not eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, was given the opportunity to secure eternal life not only for himself and his wife, but for his children and all future members of the human race. Again, we marvel at what a good God our Creator is!

But notice here, there is also appended a curse and a judgment if Adam fails to keep this command. That is, if he eats from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil he will bring upon himself and all his offspring forever, guilt and corruption, and the penalty of death. It is essential that we understand the significance of this. God sets for Adam and Eve a period of probation. From then until whatever time God set, the condition applied. Adam is made what we call, the federal head of the human race. He will act for all of us as our representative.

Let me explain to you what this means. Last Sunday the Bears and the Colts played in Superbowl 41. The city of Chicago understood that the Bears represented them. If the Bears won, Chicago won. If the Bears lost, Chicago lost. Downtown buildings lit their windows to spell out their solidarity. “BEAR DOWN BEARS,” said one. “SUPER BEARS,” said another. Television news people wore Bears colors, which included hideous orange ties. And when the Bears lost, the citizens of Chicago personally felt the sting of defeat. “We lost!” they moaned. Or go to Washington DC. We elect representatives to Congress. If they pass a bill that becomes law, all of us are bound by it. We might wonder how “they” could be so stupid up there, but nevertheless, “they” are “us.” Or again, “We,” meaning the United States, are fighting a war in Iraq. What happens to our soldiers there happens to us. If they win, we win. If they lose, we all lose. One wonders how some white-flag politicians fail to appreciate that fact. I for one don’t like to lose! In each case we have an individual or a group acting on our behalf, and what they do or don’t do affects all of us. So it was with Adam. As we observe this drama taking place in the garden of Eden, you and I ought to be on tiptoe, breathlessly waiting to see what happens. Our eternal destiny is hanging in the balance!

The third thing to see is **the drama of the Fall**. It plays out in Genesis 3 in painstaking slowness. The serpent, Satan incarnate, slithers into the garden and slides up to Eve, catching her alone. Verse 1 describes him as *crafty*. He is full of guile and manipulative words to confuse her. He wears her down until at last verse 6 tells us, “*The woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise....[S]he took from its fruit and ate.*” Eve falls—but wait! There is still hope. There’s still Adam! All our attention now turns to him. What will he do? Verse 6 continues. “*And she gave also to her husband with her.*” Come on Adam! Throw it down! Save yourself! Save your wife! For God’s sake, save your children! Save us! But verse 6 says—three words: “*And—he—ate.*”

Perhaps you think you could have done better. You say, “I don’t like anyone acting for me. I want to stand or fall on my own!” Well, consider this: God made Adam perfect. Are you better than that? And Adam possessed a free will. He had no inclination to sin. He was truly neutral. He could choose either way. You and I on the other hand do not have a free will. We have free moral agency, but that is not the same thing. We are responsible for our own actions. We choose to do any number of things. But each of us, since the Fall, are encumbered with what theologians call *Original Sin*. It means that each of us is born with guilt and corruption, and we come into the world with a tendency to sin. The proof of that is that every one of us does in fact sin. I was introduced to my new grandson over the telephone a few hours after he was born. I was talking to his father. But in the background I heard this wailing cry. It was an angry sound. Jonathan was complaining because he had somehow lost the nipple that supplied him with milk, and he didn’t like it, not one bit. He is very self-centered. He didn’t care that his mom wanted desperately to sleep after bringing him into the world. “*I’m hungry!*” That’s all he cared about. And of course, at his age we smile and think it’s cute. But he possesses the tendency to sin that is the evidence of Original Sin.

Do you think you could do better than Adam? Consider how motivated Adam was, the stakes for which he was playing. On one hand, if he failed, he would bring guilt and judgment and death upon himself and upon everyone in the human race. That’s a lot of responsibility weighing on him. If he failed, he’d lose Eden for us all. On the other hand, if he succeeded in obeying God’s command, he’d secure God’s blessings and perfect, happy, glorious eternal life for himself and for each one of us. Would you die to save your wife, your husband, your children if they were in danger? I think most of us would without any hesitation whatever. And so would have Adam. He didn’t battle selfishness like we do. And yet he fell. No, my friends, you would not do as well as Adam did.

In any case, now it was too late. Look at verse 7, the commentary on what happened immediately after Adam ate the forbidden fruit. “*Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings.*” Everything is changed. They are embarrassed. They are ashamed. They feel the need to hide from the scrutiny even of each other, to escape the criticism, the ridicule, the penetrating gazes, the accusations, the blaming. Some years ago I visited a young couple just an hour or so after their six-year-old son had

drowned. He'd been right beside his daddy. His dad turned to greet a friend, and just that fast the little boy slipped beneath the water. It wasn't the father's fault. He'd been watching. But as I left their home that sad afternoon, he pulled me aside and said, "I'm so afraid that Judy will blame me and will come to hate me." She didn't, but that was the feeling Adam and Eve now experienced. Then to make matters worse, in verse 8 God arrives for a visit. So they run in panic to hide among the trees in the garden. Estranged from each other. Estranged from God. Needing to hide. That is what sin does.

But sure enough, God finds them and confronts them and convicts them. Already they are shriveled inside. Already the cells of their bodies that once were so bursting with life, have begun to decay. Bit by bit the wrinkles and creases will form and no amount of Botox can hide them forever. Over the weekend I received two phone calls telling me of the deaths of the fathers of two members of our congregation. One of the men was 85. The other was 91. Death takes a while but it comes to us all.

Now the final sentence: Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden. The cherubim, dressed in black law enforcement uniforms, badges flashing, weapons bristling, march up to the weeping convicts and snap on the handcuffs. Adam and Eve are escorted out of the garden of delight, out of paradise, into the prison of the barren, thorn-choked world outside. And the great gate clangs shut, the sound ringing across the hills and the plains. You can still hear the echoes of it. Cherubic guards take their posts. Verse 24 says, "*So He drove the man out; and at the east of the garden of Eden He stationed the cherubim, and the flaming sword which turned every direction, to guard the way to the tree of life.*" Oh, no! This can't be happening! Is there no other way? Then the anger sets in. Has God no mercy? Can he be so cruel? I swear, I'll get even with him!

But there's no going back. It's too late to regret. There's no way to fix this. Adam and Eve and I are ruined. This is why God seems so far away. This is why life is so hard. This is why we don't get along. If we are honest we know there is no fault with God. We ourselves bear the blame. We have seen the evidence that God is a good God and wished for us the very best. We have destroyed ourselves! Dear friends, grieve over your sins. Don't excuse them. Own them, confess them, repudiate them. The first step toward hope is to get honest, face reality, and repent.

Deep inside the temple in Jerusalem 2000 years ago, was the most holy place the intended repository of the ark of the covenant. Once each year on the Day of Atonement the high priest alone entered to offer the sacrifice for forgiveness of sin. Every other day the Most Holy Place was blocked off from the rest of the temple and from the people waiting outside by a curtain thick as a man's hand. Embroidered on the curtain were cherubim. The entrance to eternal life was under guard, as it had been since the day Adam and Eve walked out of Eden. But here's the amazing thing: At the moment Jesus died on the cross, that curtain tore from top to bottom. God has reopened the door to eternal life. Next week we'll see how you and I may reenter Eden. Please bring a friend.

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