

Made to serve God

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[0 : 0 0] let's ask God again for his help. Heavenly Father, you say that your word makes simple the wise, or makes wise the simple.

And so Father, we just pray, Lord, that you would enlighten us, give us understanding, soften our hearts, help us to receive from you, help us to understand what you have to say to us.

And we pray that, through that, that your spirit would shine his light into our hearts, so that we might be motivated to do what you want us to do. We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ.

Amen. Do you want to make the world a better place? Tim Smith does. Tim was a fairly successful music producer, but he wasn't happy with what he was doing.

And so he quit, and eventually he founded something called the Eden Project in Cornwall, England. You might have heard of it. It was a filming location in a James Bond film.

[1 : 0 3] And basically, the Eden Project is a huge botanical garden made up of adjoining domes that houses thousands of different plants from different climates.

So there might be a rainforest climate in one dome, a Mediterranean climate in another one, that kind of thing. But what is especially impressive is that it is built on what was once a contaminated and disused clay pit.

Basically, it was just a massive hole in the ground. But Tim had a vision. Others saw a crater. He saw a perfect spot for nature.

Others saw an abandoned space. He saw a promising place. In an interview, this is how he put it. I've put the quote on your handout. In the beginning, the idea was very simple.

Let's take a place of utter dereliction and create life in it. Let's demonstrate how clever homo sapiens, that's human beings, are. And that whenever we might be, life can be created.

[2 : 1 4] And that's what he did. To borrow another phrase he used, he turned a frog into a princess. That's why he founded the Eden Project and why his current plan is to plan future Edens around the UK and internationally.

And as I read that quote this week, I was struck by how it almost perfectly describes what is happening in our passage this morning. You see, in our passage today, we will find God seeking to turn the world into a place of life.

Just as Tim, Smith, and Vision. And we'll also find God seeking to use humans wherever they are to bring life.

Just as Tim, Smith, and Vision. That's how it was all designed to be right at the beginning. God intends to bring fullness of life and make the world a better place.

But while that quote is almost perfect, it misses the mark in one key respect. And so today, we'll also see how the original Eden project of Genesis 2 differs from Tim Smith's vision and why that difference is critical.

[3 : 44] So let us begin and I ask for your patience as I try to take you through the passage bit by bit because you might not see how all the details fit together at first.

But I hope that by the end, the big picture will emerge and we'll be able to appreciate what Genesis 2 has to say to us today. So let me first of all look at verses 4 and 5 to try to set up the passage as a whole.

Verse 4 begins this way. This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created. And that phrase, this is the account, is basically your big clue we are starting a new section.

All throughout the book of Genesis, we find this phrase a total of 10 times and each time it is marking the beginning of a new episode.

Whether that is the story of Abraham, of Jacob, or of Joseph. So that means we know that today's passage is no longer episode 1.

[4 : 57] That's Genesis 1 verse 1 to 2 verse 3. No, we are in episode 2 from Genesis 2 verse 4 all the way to at least the end of Genesis 3.

But how does episode 1 and episode 2 relate to one another? It might seem a bit confusing at first if we read Genesis 1 and 2 simply as if it is a strict linear chronology.

you know, this happened and then this happened and then this happened. But it is better to think of Genesis 1 and 2 as two episodes that complement one another.

They are looking at God's creation account from different angles. One angle is zoom out. So think of Google Earth when you type in earth.google.com you find a cosmic view of the earth.

That's Genesis 1. God is giving us a cosmic view of his creation. But if you zoom in you will now get a different view.

[6 : 13] It is more localized. That's Google Street and that is Genesis 2. Genesis 2 is basically God double-clicking on the creation account of man and saying let's zoom in on this part so that you can better understand my design for you.

So let us zoom in and as we do so verse 5 we find ourselves in a place where there are no shrubs and no plants.

Again if we read Genesis 1 and 2 in a strictly linear chronological way this might confuse us. You know wait a minute I thought God already put plants on this world back in Genesis 1 so how God suddenly got no plants?

Is this contradictory? I guess we can throw out the Bible now it's so unreliable. But of course if we remain humble and patient before God's word we'll see there is no contradiction.

For a start look at the word earth in verse 5. notice notice if you are looking at the NIV that it has a footnote and it tells you that that word can be translated land which in fact is how it is translated in some of the other English translations such as the ESV and when we say land here we mean a region or a plot of land in other words we are now talking about a specific location not the whole earth and in this specific location it is like that clay pit of the Cornwall Eden project there is no lush greenery there is only barren desert why is that verse 5 tells us because there is no rain and no man and so here we have a potential problem and by drawing our attention to this

[8 : 30] Genesis 2 verse 4 to 5 is basically mirroring Genesis 1 verse 1 to 2 do you remember how in Genesis 1 things were formless and empty at first that's the potential problem and the implied question was what's God gonna do about it and it's the same here there is no rain and no man so what's God gonna do about it well in Genesis 1 God did do something about it he began forming and filling and now in Genesis 2 God will once again do something about it he supplies the water and provides the humans that's exactly how the rest of the passage unfolds notice the basic structure again is on your handout in verse 6 he talks about the waters and then in verses 7 to 9 he talks about the forming of the man and something about trees especially two particular trees then in verses 10 to 14 we get more talk about water in the form of rivers and then in verses 15 to 17 we are back once again to talk about man and trees so that is the dual focus of the passage and that dual focus will help us understand the key points

Genesis 2 wants to make and here is the first key point Genesis 2 is going to tell us firstly God designed a place full of life for us notice how that is one of the emphasis of the passage in verse 6 God begins his task of transforming this particular location he sends streams or perhaps it's rain you can ask me why I think that later on if you're interested to water this ground and from this ground verse 9 all kinds of trees begin to grow can you see the connection God waters and trees bloom where previously there were no plants in other words God is bringing life to this place and of course the trees themselves are the very image of life bursting forth trees after all bare fruit and dispense seed in fact so much life blooms in this place that what we have is not just one tree here and one tree there but verse 8 a garden in

Eden and this garden isn't your average Malaysian backyard in the ancient world when people heard the word garden what comes to mind is not your little potted plants in your little corner but the big national parks after all back then it was only kings who had gardens so no surprise if those gardens were a little bit more like bako or gunong garden and nothing shows that this place is filled with life more than the fact that right in the middle of this garden we have something called the of life and whatever that tree might be at the very least we can say its existence and placement reinforces the point that life is blossoming in this place so God waters this garden so that it might be full of life but did you notice that

God doesn't stop with this garden look at the picture painted for us in verses 10 to 14 let's follow its pathway slowly we have eden which for many years I thought was exclusively referring to the garden but notice how verse 10 is worded a river watering the garden flows from eden so verse 10 distinguishes eden from the garden eden isn't just the garden in itself but it's actually the wider region where the garden happens to be and eden actually is on a mountain or at the very least an elevated area why do I say that well one reason is because in ezekiel chapter 28 verse 13 to 14 in the space of two verses eden is described as both the garden and the mountain of god similarly isaiah 51 verse 3 also associates eden with mountains in that case mount zion so there is eden and the river flows downward from it through the garden that's verse 10 but the river doesn't terminate in the garden of eden no verses 11 to 14 it flows from the garden onwards to all the various places where the nations live in other words god wants to water not just eden but the whole earth and that is significant because as we've already seen water brings forth life it is an image repeated time and time again in the bible for example in ezekiel chapter 47 the prophet has a vision of a rather unique temple and in this awe inducing temple a river flows from below the threshold of the temple with trees on the banks of both sides the waters of this river makes the seawater fresh that's ezekiel 47 verse 8 it gives life to creatures that's verse 9 and it causes leaves of healing to blossom on the trees of its bank that's verse 12 it is very much a picture of

God giving life and that is the picture God is also painting for us here he provides water for the garden in itself so that it becomes a place full of life and from there the water flows to the lands all around so that they too will be places full of life these lands are rich and full of potential look at the land of Havilah in verses 11 and 12 for example it has gold and precious metals but just like the garden of Eden at the beginning of this section what that land needs is water and man and God here is supplying the water he's saying he is the source of life not just in Eden but outside

[16 : 39] Eden as well that is the first key point our passage wants us to see today God is designing a place full of life that place initially is the garden of Eden but what God really wants is for the whole earth to eventually become Eden just as the Cornwall Eden project wants to plant other Eden projects around the country and beyond so God wants to plant and expand Eden so that the whole world will be a place of life and when I say a place full of life I don't just mean a place where things can exist did you notice that God didn't make a purely functional creation look at verse 9 God didn't make just one kind of tree he didn't simply make ugly trees no he made trees that were pleasing to the eye as well as good for food and that is because as we have said in previous weeks

God never created out of need God creates out of delight in fact did you know that's what the word Eden literally means it means delight and so God wants to provide not just a place which can sustain life but a place where we can enjoy life a life where nature is beautiful and the food is delicious and the water is refreshing and the aroma is pleasing that's what he designed Eden to be and that is what he wants the whole earth to be like you know if today you are tempted to doubt God's goodness think about this his original design for us was to give us a place full of life and delight you are free to eat good food from thousands of trees he says and that is why the psalmist later on praises

God with these words they might appear on the screen they that's God's people feast on the abundance of your house you give them drink from your river of delights and that word delight is literally the word Eden for with you is the fountain of life in your light we see light now what great news that is isn't it from the very beginning God wanted the very best for us but of course that is only half the story you remember the potential problem at the beginning of this passage don't you there is no life because there is no rain and no man and we've seen God sort out the water part but what about the man what part does he play so we come to the second key point Genesis 2 wants to make

God designed us to be people who bring life wherever we are now come back with me to verse 7 once again notice how keen the writer is to show us that God brings life God takes the dust of this lifeless ground and forms a living being a man out of it and more than that he gives the man his breath of life later on in verse 19 we discover that animals and birds are also formed from the ground but only the man gets God's breath of life this is a warm and personal act as the commentator Derek Kipner says this breathing has the face to face intimacy of a kiss so just as

God provided the waters he now provides the man both are animated with life and he provides the man to work the ground so he can keep bringing forth life as he cultivates it and subdues it and plants and nurtures and mines the minerals from which he can make more things and as man feels the earth as he supposed to do he can work the ground all over the earth that's how God designed it to be in Hebrew man is Adam and the ground is Adamah which is a kind of word play and the point is the man and the ground belong together humans are made from the earth for the earth and if that is true here is one important implication that results from this observation work is a good thing right here in

[22 : 31] Genesis 2 we are made to work of course thanks to sin as we'll see in a few weeks time work is now often painful and difficult but the problem is not work in itself work itself is part of God's design for us in Genesis 2 it is sin that has spoiled things as Christians we often warn against idolizing work and making it our entire identity as we should but Genesis 2 also tells us that work does form an aspect of our identity God has created us as workers to fulfill his purposes and for his glory so work is a good thing and it is good in part because God designed work as the way this creation can continue to be a place of life one writer suggests this thought experiment he writes imagine that everyone quits working right now what happens civilized life quickly melts away food vanishes from the shelves petrol dries up at the pumps streets are no longer petroled and fires burn themselves out communication and transportation services end utilities go dead those who survive at all are soon huddled around campfires sleeping in caves clothed in raw animal hides the difference between a wilderness and culture is simply work so when we work to

God's glory we are helping to make the place where we live less like a clay pit and a little more like Eden so even when a simple farm girl is going about her task she is doing the Lord's work for as Martin Luther once preached God milks the cows through the vocation of the milk mates that is part of how God wants to make our world a place of life God dignifies our work no matter how simple it might be by turning it into something done for him and it seems like we could just stop here after all remember the problem there is no rain and no man but now God has supplied the water and

God has provided the humans so it seems like problem solved right and if the question we are asking today is how can we make the world a better place the answer seems simple I guess it's as long as we work hard as long as we pursue our vocation with excellence we think whether that be as a lawyer or as a doctor as an educator as an artist whatever it might be that is enough to turn our world into a genesis 2 world we can regain eden simply by the work of our hands now that is a tempting solution because it sounds so agreeable and that's what quite a few people believe sometimes this solution has a name it's called the social gospel and the danger of the social gospel is that it is almost true work is good we should work well we do want to make the world a better place all that is true in and of itself but remember what I said about the structure of the passage earlier we said there is talk about water we said there is talk about man and we also said there is talk about trees and actually there is talk especially about two trees the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you notice it gets mentioned at the end of verse 9 and again at the end of verse 17 and don't you think it's puzzling that they get mentioned if you take away that detail and you leave the rest untouched the passage would still flow smoothly in fact those two trees don't seem to have any relevance to the problem that we stated or the solution so why is it there where does it fit that in itself should drive us back to the

Bible to see if there's anything that we've missed anything we've misunderstood so we need to keep digging a bit more and work out a few more details and now I'm going to show you something that might be a little surprising and I don't blame you if you missed it at first but the key thing to remember is that the first readers of Genesis definitely wouldn't have missed it now remember who the first readers of Genesis are it is Israel in the wilderness and as they read the opening chapters of Genesis there is no way they wouldn't have begun noticing something very interesting about the Garden of Eden they would have noticed it actually very much resembled the tabernacle they already had for instance the entrance to Eden is located to the east and guarded by cherubim just like their tabernacle the tree of life that stands in the middle of the garden wait a minute doesn't that what the lambs stand in their tabernacle look like when God walks back and forth later in the garden in Genesis 3 it is the same language that is used to describe

God's presence in the tabernacle in Deuteronomy later generations of Israelites would have noticed even more parallels they would have noticed the river flowing out of Eden and immediately thought of the river flowing out of the temple in Ezekiel's vision which I mentioned earlier they would have looked at the garden and realised it had parallels with their temple which had many carvings of garden like things like cedars and pomegranates and there are actually even more parallels which if you are interested you can go and read up on quite a number of scholars have noticed these things and perhaps the person who has done the most work on this kind of stuff is someone called Greg Bill but here is the point the original readers of Genesis would have understood Eden is pictured as a kind of garden temple there are too many parallels for it to be coincidental and where there are temples there are priests in fact

[30 : 54] Genesis 2 verse 15 leaves us in no doubt Adam is to be thought of in priestly terms let me read that verse for you the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and take care of it now that phrase work it and take care of it is literally to serve and to guard and every other time that phrase is used as a pair in the Pentateuch without exception it describes the work of the priest in the sanctuary that's what Moses wants to convey to us in the garden temple of Eden Adam has been placed there not just as a worker but as a priest and what is the essence of the priestly task it is to serve yes but also to guard

Eden is not just Adam's luxury residence it is the place of God's presence it is a holy place it is a temple and so Adam has to guard against any pollution and corruption which threatens to defile any part of this temple as a worshipper of God he has to make sure he guards against personal defilement he has to maintain purity he has to discern between what is holy clean and unclean and the most important way a priest keeps guard over the temple is simply by obeying God's commands Adam works out God's priestly purposes through obedience to the word that's how the pentate describes it and that is why the trees are mentioned you see what is the tree of life if

I can keep it simple it represents God's kind of life God wants us to have fullness life a Genesis 2 kind of life a life lived in eternal relationship and rest with him as we saw last week but this kind of life is only possible if we put God the giver of life at the center and so the tree of life is not something magical but kind of a stand in symbol for God himself if you have access to the tree of life to God you have access to Eden you can live in this garden temple but how do we maintain ongoing access to this tree of life God himself tells us verse 17 you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil for when you eat from it you will certainly die in other words you must never come to a point where you define good and evil for yourself apart from

God you must never play God or replace him rather you must keep listening and trusting and obeying the one who can define good and evil God is putting a choice before Adam will he be obedient to God's word or not will he be a righteous priest or not and that is key because where there is no obedience we cannot be in that place of life and we cannot bring life to others remember God wants to make the whole world like Eden and human beings have a part to play in that as they are fruitful and multiply and fill the earth toward the earth for God's glory but if the whole earth is to be like

Eden then it must be free of any uncleanness and unholiness too it is God's temple after all and it must be filled with righteous priests if not how can the world be a better place how can the world be Eden you can work the ground as hard as you like and be the best human rights lawyer the most diligent educator the most inspiring artist but if it is not done in service and obedience to God then the world will never truly be Eden that is where the social gospel fails so God designed us to be people who bring life wherever we are not just by serving as workers but as priests who obey him that is

[36 : 41] Adam's task God but here is the tragedy Adam failed he did not guard against uncleanness and corruption he did not stop Eve when she listened to the serpent but instead joined with her he wanted to decide what is good and evil for himself do you remember how I said at the beginning of this sermon that Tim Smith's vision was almost the same but not quite how is it different well Smith said that he created the Eden project because he wanted to demonstrate how clever human beings are but here's the thing that's exactly what Adam tried to do he tried to show himself to be cleverer than God and as a result he lost access to the place of life both

Adam and Eve are banished from Eden so what now will God continue his mission of extending Eden so that it fills the entire earth and will he do it through us still now here's the good news he does because the rest of the Bible tells us that God rescued us to be God's people in God's place under God's will and blessing through the tree of life in 2 Samuel 7 God tells David that he intends to plant a people in a place where there will be rest much like how he planted Adam in the garden and he tells David that he intends to do it through someone from his line and when we turn to Isaiah chapter 11 which tells us about this

Davidic Messiah from David's line well notice how he's described Isaiah 11 verse 1 to 3 a shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse from his roots a branch will bear fruit the spirit of the Lord will rest on him the spirit of wisdom and of understanding the spirit of counsel and of might the spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord and he will delight in the fear of the Lord now did you notice this Messiah is described using the imagery of a stump he is a branch that will bear fruit and notice this tree is one who will fear the Lord he will obey the Lord and as we scroll down Isaiah 11 we come across verses 8 and 9 the infant will play near the cobra stand and the young child will put his hand into the viper's nest they will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the

Lord as the waters cover the sea notice what this Messiah will bring in he will bring in a place with so much life that a little child can be among snakes and not be harmed and this place is described as a mountain a holy mountain so all this is meant to make you think of Eden but more than that notice will bring about he will ensure that the whole earth will come to know God that's language that's also echoed in the other prophets in other words he will ensure that the mission of Genesis 2 for Eden to expand and cover the whole earth will come to be fulfilled and that's exactly what happens when Jesus comes he continues to use plant imagery I am the vine he declares and if we abide in him as the branches we'll bear fruit and to accomplish that he goes to the cross or as

Paul and some of the other disciples in Acts will phrase it he is hung on a tree that's how Galatians 3 verse 13 puts it for example for Jesus to die on the cross is the same as being hung on a tree where he takes the punishment we deserve so that that same cross will now become a tree of life to us and so if we are in Christ we have access to that place of life all over again as Revelation chapter 2 verse 7 puts it to the one who is victorious that's referring to those who trust in Christ I will give the right to eat from the tree of life which is in the paradise of God so God has rescued us to be God's people in

[42 : 10] God's place under God's rule and blessing through the tree of life but the question remains if all this is true how can we make the world a better place today well having regained access to Eden Jesus now recommissions us to carry out the mission of Genesis 2 all over again but how exactly now come with me to John chapter 20 for a second and notice what the risen Jesus does let me read John 20 verses 21 and 22 again Jesus said peace be with you as the father has sent me I am sending you and with that he breathed on them and said receive the Holy Spirit so notice what Jesus does he breathes on his disciples just like

God breathed in Adam the breath of life and then he sends them to make the world like Eden all over again but this time he sends them as his disciples who will proclaim the gospel and live in light of it you see how can we make the world become a place of life there's only one answer we need to introduce people to the one who has turned the cross into a tree of life we need to introduce people to the one who alone can make us priests who can obey and serve the Lord that is the commission Jesus sends us on to proclaim the gospel and to live it out and we need to zealously guard against impurity against the corrupting of God's word of the gospel and all that sounds ordinary and unspectacular but this is what

God says will change the world this is what God says will result in the world becoming Eden brothers and sisters we make the world a better place not primarily through political power or social activism we do so primarily when we daily choose to live holy lives to find opportunities to tell people about Jesus and yes when we work in every area of our lives not to serve ourselves but to serve God and if we daily make that choice God says that will have more impact on the world in the long run than anything else so do you want to make the world a better place that my brothers and sisters participate in the true

Eden project participate by serving God as priest in his cosmic temple so that the whole world may be filled with the knowledge and the glory of God that's what Genesis 2 verse 4 to 17 is all about and we can only do that by being people who testify to our good God daily with our lips and with our actions and aren't you excited that you don't have to be someone who is highly educated or really rich or in an exalted position of some sort to make a difference to this world you just have to be a Christian you just have to be a priest who obeys God shall we make that choice today let's pray father i pray that your word has been heard by all of us i pray that i've spoken with sufficient clarity but lord even clarity itself is not enough your spirit has to take that word and plant it deep into our hearts so i pray that you would do so help us to be people who cling to the tree of life and who will be like those fresh trees that the psalmist talks about in psalm 1 who depend on your word who obey your word and through that may we make a difference to this world may we look forward to our garden city in the future we pray all this in the name of

Jesus Christ Amen