

Returning to the Garden

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Intro

We're going to trace a single thread through the entire Bible today. It's the story of a garden, a mountain, and the long journey home.

Most of us picture Eden as a flat garden somewhere in Mesopotamia. But the biblical text gives us clues that Eden was more than that. It was a sacred place, elevated, where heaven and earth met. When Adam and Eve were cast out, they lost access to that meeting point. And the rest of Scripture is the story of people trying to get back up the mountain and God working to bring us home.

This isn't just ancient history. It's the shape of the gospel itself.

1. Eden as Sacred, Liminal Place (Genesis 2–3)

Let's start where the Bible starts: in the beginning.

Genesis 2:8–10 says:

Genesis 2:8–10 ESV

⁸ And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed.

⁹ And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

¹⁰ A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers.

Notice the language here. A river flows *out of* Eden to water the garden. That means Eden is the source. It's elevated. Water doesn't flow uphill. The garden is on a mountain or at least on high ground. Ezekiel also speaks on this

Ezekiel 28:13–14 ESV

¹³ You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone was your covering, sardius, topaz, and diamond, beryl, onyx, and jasper, sapphire, emerald, and carbuncle; and crafted in gold were your settings and your engravings. On the day that you were created they were prepared.

¹⁴ You were an anointed guardian cherub. I placed you; you were on the holy mountain of God; in the midst of the stones

of fire you walked.

This matches how ancient people thought about sacred space. Mountains were the places where gods lived, where heaven touched earth. Eden wasn't just a nice park. It was the threshold between two worlds.

God walked there. He met with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day. They had work to do, good work: to till and keep the garden (Genesis 2:15). Their job was to extend Eden's life and order outward into the world. They were priests and gardeners, mediating between God and creation.

But then came the fall.

Genesis 3:22–24 ESV

²² Then the LORD God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—”

²³ therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken.

²⁴ He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.

Exile. The way back is blocked. The sword flashes. Access is

lost.

Humanity is no longer between heaven and earth. We're outside, looking up, longing to return.

2. Human Attempts to Ascend: Babel and the High Places (Genesis 11; OT Background)

So what do people do when they've been cast out of the sacred place?

They try to build their way back in.

Genesis 11:1-4 ESV

¹ Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.

² And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.

³ And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar.

⁴ Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a

tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.”

A tower with its top in the heavens. They're building a mountain. They're trying to force their way back into the presence of God.

But notice the motive: "Let us make a name for ourselves." This isn't about communion with God. It's about human glory, human power, human control.

God comes down and confuses their language. Babel fails. You can't storm heaven. You can't manufacture access to God.

But the impulse doesn't die.

Throughout the Old Testament, you see "high places" pop up again and again. These were shrines built on hilltops where people tried to reach the divine. Sometimes Israelites worshiped God there. More often, they worshiped other gods. But the pattern is the same: human beings trying to climb up to the sacred on their own terms.

Let me give you a few examples of how destructive this became.

Solomon and the High Places

Even Solomon, the wisest king, fell into this trap.

1 Kings 11:4-8 ESV

⁴ For when Solomon was old his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not wholly true to the LORD his God, as was the heart of David his father.

⁵ For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites.

⁶ So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and did not wholly follow the LORD, as David his father had done.

⁷ Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and for Molech the abomination of the Ammonites, on the mountain east of Jerusalem.

⁸ And so he did for all his foreign wives, who made offerings and sacrificed to their gods.

Solomon built high places for false gods. He chose intimacy with foreign wives over faithfulness to God. These weren't innocent worship sites. Chemosh and Molech demanded

child sacrifice. The high places became altars of death, not life. Solomon tried to blend worship of the true God with worship of idols, and it poisoned his kingdom.

Jeroboam's Golden Calves

After the kingdom split, the northern king Jeroboam set up his own high places to keep people from going to Jerusalem.

1 Kings 12:28–30 ESV

²⁸ So the king took counsel and made two calves of gold. And he said to the people, “You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.”

²⁹ And he set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan.

³⁰ Then this thing became a sin, for the people went as far as Dan to be before one.

Jeroboam didn't want his people going to the temple in Jerusalem, where God had chosen to put his name. So he built counterfeit worship sites, complete with golden calves. He said, "This is too hard. Let's make our own way to God." And the people bought it. This became the defining sin of the northern kingdom. Almost every king after Jeroboam is condemned with the phrase, "He walked in the way of

Jeroboam."

The high places became substitutes for true worship. They were convenient. They were local. But they weren't what God wanted.

The Constant Temptation

Even the good kings struggled to remove the high places.

2 Kings 12:2–3 (about King Joash):

2 Kings 12:2–3 **ESV**

² And Jehoash did what was right in the eyes of the LORD all his days, because Jehoiada the priest instructed him.

³ Nevertheless, the high places were not taken away; the people continued to sacrifice and make offerings on the high places.

2 Kings 15:34–35 (about King Jotham):

2 Kings 15:34–35 **ESV**

³⁴ And he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, according to all that his father Uzziah had done.

³⁵ Nevertheless, the high places were not removed. The people still sacrificed and made offerings on the high places. He built the upper gate of the house of the LORD.

Again and again: "Nevertheless, the high places were not taken away." Even when kings tried to be faithful, the people clung to these hilltop shrines. They wanted to worship on their own terms, in their own places, mixing the worship of God with whatever else felt right.

The high places weren't just about location. They represented a deeper problem: the refusal to come to God the way he invited them. God had chosen the temple in Jerusalem as the place where he would meet his people. But the high places said, "We'll do it our way."

And that's the heart of the issue. Whether it's Babel or a hilltop shrine or a golden calf, the high places represent human attempts to control access to God. We want to set the terms. We want to make the climb on our own.

Read through Kings and Chronicles, and you'll see this phrase over and over: "The high places were not taken away." It's a refrain of failure. People keep trying to ascend, and it keeps going wrong.

We do the same thing today. We build towers of achievement, spirituality, morality, trying to make a name, trying to reach God by our own effort. We create our own high places: our careers, our reputations, our causes. And God keeps saying, "That's not the way back."

3. God's Initiative: Meeting on Mountains (Abraham, Sinai, Elijah)

Here's the turn in the story. God doesn't wait for us to climb up. He comes down to meet us.

And when he does, he often meets us on mountains. But these aren't human-built towers. They're places where God chooses to reveal himself.

Abraham on Mount Moriah

Genesis 22:1-2 ESV

¹ After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."

² He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."

God calls Abraham up the mountain for a test. It's agonizing. But at the end, God provides a ram. Abraham calls the place "The Lord will provide" (Genesis 22:14). On the mountain,

God meets his people and makes a way.

Moses at Mount Sinai

Exodus 19:16–20 ESV

¹⁶ On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled.

¹⁷ Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain.

¹⁸ Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly.

¹⁹ And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder.

²⁰ The LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain. And the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.

God descends in fire and smoke. He gives the law. He makes a covenant. The mountain becomes the meeting point again. God is bringing his people back into relationship,

back into covenant, back toward Eden.

Elijah at Mount Horeb

1 Kings 19:11-13 ESV

¹¹ And he said, “Go out and stand on the mount before the LORD.” And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake.

¹² And after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper.

¹³ And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him and said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

Elijah is running for his life. He's discouraged, alone, ready to quit. And God meets him on the mountain. Not in power and noise, but in a whisper. God renews him. God recommissions him.

Do you see the pattern? Babel is humans trying to ascend. Sinai is God descending to meet us. Babel is pride. Sinai is grace.

We can't climb our way back to Eden. But God is willing to meet us on the mountain.

4. Jesus: The True Ascent and the Gardener (Mountain Teachings, Gethsemane, Garden Tomb)

Now we come to Jesus. And in Jesus, all these themes come together.

Jesus is constantly going up mountains. He teaches on a mountain (the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5–7). He's transfigured on a mountain (Matthew 17). He ascends from a mountain after his resurrection (Acts 1).

But Jesus also enters gardens.

The Garden of Gethsemane

John 18:1 ESV

¹ When Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the brook Kidron, where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered.

Gethsemane is a garden. And there, Jesus faces what Adam faced: a test of obedience. Adam failed in a garden. Jesus succeeds in one.

Where Adam grasped, Jesus surrendered. Where Adam hid, Jesus stepped forward to be arrested. The second Adam undoes the first Adam's failure in a garden.

The Hill of the Skull

Then Jesus is led up to Golgotha, "the place of a skull" (Matthew 27:33). It's a hill. Some have called it a mountain. And there, on that elevation, Jesus is lifted up on a cross.

He ascends, but not in pride. He ascends in humility, in sacrifice, in love. He goes up the mountain not to make a name for himself, but to bear our shame. He doesn't storm heaven. He opens the way by his blood.

The Garden Tomb

John 19:41–42 ESV

⁴¹ Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid.

⁴² So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, since the

tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there.

Jesus is buried in a garden. And on the third day, he rises in a garden.

John 20:14–16 ESV

¹⁴ Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

¹⁵ Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher).

Mary mistakes Jesus for the gardener. And in a sense, she's right. Jesus *is* the gardener. He's the one who comes to restore the garden, to plant life again, to open the way back to Eden.

In Jesus, God meets us on the mountain and brings us back into the garden. The flaming sword is removed. The way is open. Access is restored.

5. Eschatological Consummation: The Garden Returns (Revelation 21–22)

And now the story comes full circle.

Revelation 21:1-3 ESV

¹ Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.

God's dwelling place is with man. Heaven and earth are reunited. The separation is over.

Revelation 22:1-2 ESV

¹ Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb

² through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

The river. The tree of life. The garden imagery is back. But now it's not just a garden. It's a city. It's a garden-city, a temple-city, where God dwells with his people forever.

Revelation 22:3–5 ESV

³ No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him.

⁴ They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.

⁵ And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

We see his face. The curse is gone. The exile is over. We're home.

Closing Synthesis

So here's the shape of the whole Bible in one movement:

- **Exile:** We were cast out of the garden, cut off from the place where heaven and earth met.
- **Human ascent:** We tried to build our way back, to make a name for ourselves, to climb the tower. We failed.

- **God's descent:** God came down to meet us on mountains. He made covenants. He revealed himself. He initiated restoration.
- **Christ's work:** In Jesus, God didn't just meet us on a mountain. He became one of us, entered our gardens, climbed our hills, died our death, and rose as the new gardener. He opened the way home.
- **Final restoration:** In Revelation, the garden returns. But it's bigger, fuller, richer. It's not just Eden restored. It's Eden fulfilled. The whole creation becomes the meeting place of heaven and earth.

What does this mean for us today?

It means our longings are not wrong. We *should* want to go back to the garden. We *should* ache for the place where God walks with his people.

But we can't build our way there. We can't Babel our way back. We have to come through Christ. He's the way, the truth, and the life. He's the one who ascended and descended. He's the one who plants us back in the garden by his grace.