



SERVICE LEAD BY REVD TONY HALEY

Call To Worship

O God, you are my God, I seek you,
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no
water.
So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.

Because your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise you.
So I will bless you as long as I live;
I will lift up my hands and call on your name.
My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,
and my mouth praises you with joyful lips

Song: Come now is the time to worship

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=USQn4IUms20>

Come, now is the time to worship
Come, now is the time
To give your heart
Come, just as you are to worship
Come, just as you are
Before your God
Come

One day every
Tongue will confess
You are God
One day every knee will bow
Still the greatest treasure
Remains for those
Who gladly choose You now

Come, now is the time to worship
Come, now is the time

To give your heart
Come, just as you are to worship
Come, just as you are
Before your God
Come

One day every
Tongue will confess
You are God
One day every knee will bow
Still the greatest treasure
Remains for those
Who gladly choose You now

Prayers

Worship is the doorstep of heaven
where the children speak to their Father,
the poor sit at table with their Saviour
and the weak are empowered by God's Spirit.
This is where love and mercy meet,
love and obedience hold hands,
and where love bids us welcome:

for this is the doorstep of heaven.
Loving God,
let it be this and more for us today,
for Jesus' sake
AMEN

Song: His love endures forever

www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGTZq3uCPm0

Give thanks to the Lord our God and King
His love endures forever
For He is good, He is above all things
His love endures forever

Sing praise, sing praise
With a mighty hand and outstretched arm
His love endures forever
For the life that's been reborn
His love endures forever
Sing praise, sing praise
Sing praise (Hallelujah)
Sing Praise (Hallelujah)

Forever God is faithful
Forever God is strong
Forever God is with us
Forever, Forever

From the rising to the setting sun
His love endures forever
By the grace of God we will carry on
His love endures forever
Sing praise, sing praise
Sing praise (Hallelujah)
Sing Praise (Hallelujah)

Forever God is faithful
Forever God is strong
Forever God is with us
Forever, Forever
Forever God is faithful
Forever God is strong
Forever God is with us
Forever, Forever

Give thanks to the Lord for he is good
Give thanks to the Lord for he is good
His love endures forever
His love endures forever
His love endures forever
Sing praise, sing praise
Sing praise (Hallelujah)
Sing Praise (Hallelujah)

Forever You are faithful
Forever You are strong
Forever You are with us
Forever, Forever (x3)

Prayers

Pray for our world – think about what you have heard about what is happening in the world. Bring one particular story the front of your mind. And pray for that situation.

End that time by saying:

Your kingdom come, O Lord Your will be done.

Pray for our country – for healthcare workers, those others who work on the frontline, our leaders and those have to implement decisions.

Your kingdom come, O Lord Your will be done.

Pray for ourselves, the people we know and care for – spend sometime praying for who you know. Then say the Lord's prayer

Your kingdom come, O Lord Your will be done.

Prayer—The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, which art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy Name.
Thy Kingdom come.
Thy will be done in earth, As it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive them that trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
The power, and the glory,
For ever and ever. Amen.

Song: Cornerstone

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a3HH__-1Zbs

My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness
I dare not trust the sweetest frame
But holly trust is Jesus' name

My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness
I dare not trust the sweetest frame
But holly trust is Jesus' name

Christ alone, Cornerstone
Weak made strong in the Savior's love
Through the storm
He is Lord
Lord of all

When darkness seems to hide His face
I rest on His unchanging grace
In every high and stormy gale
My anchor holds within the veil
My anchor holds within the veil

Christ alone, Cornerstone
Weak made strong in the Savior's love
Through the storm
He is Lord
Lord of all
He is Lord
Lord of all, Christ alone

Christ alone, Cornerstone
Weak made strong in the Savior's love
Through the storm
He is Lord
Lord of all

Christ alone, Cornerstone
Weak made strong in the Savior's love
Through the storm
He is Lord
Lord of all

When he shall come with trumpet sound
Oh, may I then in Him be found
Dressed in His righteousness alone
Faultless, stand before the throne

Cornerstone
Oh, yeah, in the Savior's love
He is Lord
Lord of all

Christ alone, Cornerstone
Weak made strong in the Savior's love
Through the storm
He is Lord
Lord of all

A Garden – A Better Place (Gen 2:4-25)

My title, A garden - A Better Place? acknowledges the fact that the place we are currently in, the situation brought about by Covid19, isn't a very pleasant place. In fact, many of us are really struggling. We feel like we are in a desert place – a wasteland. We have all found the imposed restrictions difficult to cope with, and many of us are very frightened. Frightened to the extent that we struggle to function. Some of us even have to battle to simply leave our homes.

In the lock down many of us, who are fortunate enough to have our own garden, have found that time spent in the garden has been helpful to our wellbeing. Fresh air and sunshine really are good for us. Gardens are good for our physical health. Gardens are also good for our mental health. Time in the garden reduces stress levels and connects us to the idea of growth.

An article in Psychology Today reckons that time spent in the garden is actually life giving. Studies confirm that being in the green of a garden, or even being able to look out upon a green landscape, actually improves recovery from illness.

Gardens are also good for our spiritual health. Here's a picture I took of the garden at Melbourne Hall in Derbyshire. It's not full of wonderful brightly coloured flowers, but the water and the green trees lend it a peaceful quality. The bench invites us to sit, to pause for a while and to be still before God.

Many people claim to be closer to God in the garden. Perhaps that's something you have experienced, and you can readily agree with the poet Dorothy Frances Gurney

Kiss of the sun for pardon.

Song of the birds for mirth.

You're closer to God's heart in a garden

Than any place on earth.

Country and Western singer, Johnny Cash was moved to write a song about meeting God in a garden. The song was featured in the movie The Apostle and you might know it.

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
He speaks and the sound of His voice
Is so sweet the birds hush their singing
And the melody that He gave to me
Within my heart is ringing
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
I'd stay in the garden with Him
'Tho the night around me be falling
But He bids me go; through the voice of woe
His voice to me is calling
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

Poets, writers, singers, preachers and penitents have all experienced something of God in a garden. Gardens do seem to be a better place. I want to open the scriptures so that we may explore why that is.

Let's read from the Book of Genesis. Chapter 2 vs 4-25. NIV

This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when the Lord God made the earth and the heavens. Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth and no plant had yet sprung up, for the Lord God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground, but streams[came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground.

Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold. (The gold of that land is good; aromatic resin and onyx are also there.)

The name of the second river is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Cush. The name of the third river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Ashur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the Lord God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die."

The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So, the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals.

But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man."

That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

Whenever we read this book of Genesis, we have to decide how to read it. Some wish to approach it as a science book; others see it as history. I like the way theologian Walter Brueggemann describes Genesis as a proclamation of God's decisive dealing with the creation of the Earth and man's place upon it.

I think today's reading from Genesis goes a long way toward answering my own question of why we feel closer to God in a garden. The Genesis story shows us that God created a garden in Eden. Then God created man who was to live in the garden in the likeness of God.

God's gift of life in Eden is the source of all life beyond Eden. We see this by looking at the significance of water. According to chapter 1 the first thing God created in the world appears to have been water. Then by his creative Word, God separated the waters, and then separated the dry land from the water on the earth.

Here in chapter 2, water is a principle of life, of growth, of refreshment. You gardeners know that water is needed for life to develop. And in Eden there is plenty of water!

There is enough water to cultivate the Garden, and its huge overflow forms into four large rivers, which nourish the earth and nourish man. The vitality of God's Garden is the source of nourishment for everything else in the world. A garden is an enclosed place usually entered via a gate. A garden is a managed space and it is a safe space. This Garden of Eden is also a special place because it is a place that God created, and like any gardener God delights to visit his garden and walk in it. Without God in our lives, our lives are empty, superficial and dry.

The word Eden is interesting. In Hebrew it means delight, or paradise. Eden must have been a truly beautiful place to delight the senses. There are some things which are good, just because they are beautiful, yet to our human and very rational eye may seem to have no usefulness.

Perhaps like me, you grew up amongst the functional, but brutalist, city architecture of the 1960s and you know full well the negative impact of man's progressive building efforts on the quality of life. Thankfully much of these cityscapes are now being softened with green spaces.

In God's pattern for his world, human beings need an environment which is not just functional but, as it says here in v9, is pleasing to the eye. We need beauty to lift our spirits.

The variety of trees in Eden with their different shades of green would have been wonderful to behold. The birds would have been making melody in the tree branches, and the sound of the waters would have been music for the ears. Even now, who doesn't delight in hearing a distant lark above or the song of a blackbird? Who doesn't feel refreshed at simply hearing the sounds of a babbling brook?

Lying just beneath the ground of Eden were precious stones and gold which, upon excavation, would catch the eye in the rays of the morning sun. And, what about the smell of the pine trees caught on the breeze? Beauty is an inbuilt part of God's good creation. My words do it poor justice, but Eden would have been a delight to the senses: a true paradise.

Having created this paradise, God went on to create a man out of the dust from the ground of that paradise, and God then breathed life into him. It's astounding that God created a paradise for man to make his home in, and a place where God could walk alongside us in the cool of the day. You and I were designed to live in that paradise. Little wonder that we verge on depression as we live fearfully repressed under the threateningly dark cloud of Covid19. We were carefully designed and destined for a better place.

We were set in the garden with a role to play. That means God doesn't expect us to laze around in our hammocks all day sipping wine from the grapes of paradise. God has a purpose for us.
Gen 2:15

Then the LORD God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it.

The Garden of Eden is really a park of trees, and the man is the park keeper. He is God's estate manager. His first job was to name the animals which means man is set above the animals. Man is the supreme work of God's creation.

Man may have dominion over creation, but he is subject to his creator, and man's main task is to cultivate and protect God's creation: to work it and take care of it. Work is part of the responsibility laid on human beings right here at the very outset, even before things go wrong in the garden.

God chose us to work along with Him in to fulfil God's purposes for His wonderful creation. What a great privilege we have in being the hands and feet of the Living God.

If that's not amazing enough, God gave us permission to enjoy the garden as well as work in it. Man was free to eat any of the produce of the garden. No one has been able to settle the precise location of Eden, but it would have been somewhere along the fertile crescent of the Middle East. Figs, dates, grapes, pomegranates, citrus fruits and many other fruits are all available in that region. So, God's Garden of Eden would have provided a rich bounty for man. Fruit enough, food enough, water enough to satisfy anyone.

But God also gave a prohibition. Gen 2:16-17

And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

The fables, the illustrations and the paintings of this tree being an apple tree are just works of the imagination. Given all the other available fruits, I'm not sure that many of us would have surrendered everything for a Golden Delicious. It matters not what the forbidden fruit was. What matters most is the significance of the tree in our relationship with God.

So, what was the temptation for Adam and Eve in light of the abundance of the garden and the "surely die" threat of the one forbidden tree?

Simply this: The temptation to eat from "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" was to seek wisdom without reference to God. It was to seek autonomy. When Adam and Eve took the fruit and ate, it wasn't the fruit that poisoned their relationship with God. Their eating the forbidden fruit was an act of moral independence—deciding for themselves what was right without reference to God's revealed will.

Adam and Eve desired wisdom, but they sought it outside of the word and will of God. They usurped God's role in determining what is right and wrong. So here we get to the very heart of original sin. It was to sidestep God and his word and will. Figurately they thumbed their noses at God in order to become wise. In attempting to be wise they were foolish. Autonomy from God brings death. "I did it my way" is the self-sufficient dirge of death. How ironic that the song is the number one choice at funerals!

The penalty for Adam and Eve in disobeying this command is death: 'in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die' (2:17). We know that from the events of Genesis 3, that this tree is a test of Adam and Eve's loyalty to God through obedience to His one command of prohibition. Together they fail the test. The end result is death, first spiritual and then physical. Here's how their future, and yours, was cast in Genesis 3:22-24 (NIV)

He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat and live forever." So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.

After they have disobeyed His command, God prohibits Adam and Eve from eating from the tree of life. The implication is that they would have been allowed to eat from the tree of life if they obeyed the prohibition. They failed the test. They wanted to be independent of God in their decisions and let the god of self make the choices of what's right and what's wrong.

Actions have consequences, so Adam and his descendants became subject to death; condemned to live out a broken relationship with God. Our Old Testament scriptures portray the continued roller coaster of God seeking to build a covenant relationship with man only to have mankind break that relationship.

Instead of living in a garden, we are living in dark days. It matters not, whether Covid19 sprang from a Chinese Laboratory, or from a Chinese market in wild animals forbidden to man as food. Covid19 is a sign of how far this broken world has fallen from the Garden of Eden. Things look bleak and many around us have little hope for the future. The talk we hear around us is "Things will never be the same again".

Yet, in our hearts, despite the dark place we are in and with no sign of the chaos ending, we know that we are shaped for something better. Some folk see rays of light. Some folk have glimpses of Eden. Some folk have glimpses of that better place. Here's a song written by Glen Campbell in the dark and early stages of dementia a few years before he died.

A Better Place - Lyrics by Glen Campbell

I've tried and I have failed, Lord
I've won and I have lost
I've lived and I have loved, Lord
Sometimes at such a cost

One thing I know
The world's been good to me
A better place
Awaits you'll see

Some days I'm so confused, Lord
My past gets in my way
I need the ones I love, Lord
More and more each day

One thing I know
The world's been good to me
A better place
Which you'll see, ooh
A better place

Gen Campbell caught glimpses of a better place. Visions of a better place. Someone else had visions of a better place and was directed by God to write down what he saw. The result is the book of Revelation at the back of our bibles. Visions and dreams are not always easy to understand, but the picture painted in John's Revelation is of a future and beautiful garden city. A better place indeed.

The light in that better place overcomes any darkness because the light is the glory of God. Everything in that place sparkles and shines like rare jewels. The high walls that protect this garden city are made of jasper, and its gates are made of the most exquisite pearl. The streets are without a trace of dust and they shine like glass.

Just like the Garden of Eden, there is plenty of water. But this river of water flows from the throne of God Himself who is at the epicentre. This crystal-clear river flowing through the middle of the garden city nourishes the trees on either side of the riverbanks.

They are very special trees – they are trees of life just like the ones God planted in Eden. Once forbidden to man, the leaves of the trees now bring healing to the nations. So, wars are no more, and brokenness is healed.

Just as in the Garden of Eden, God will walk amongst those trees alongside his chosen people. He will gently wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death and disease will be no more. The pains of this life will be gone. So, there will be no room in that garden city for mourning, or crying, or fear.

This is paradise. Truly a better place. In these dark days where the things around us seem daily to go from bad to worse, it's good to be reminded of the possibilities of a better place. But we also are reminded that God barred re-entry to the paradise of the Garden of Eden. How can we sinful and broken people gain entry to the paradise of this new garden city?

The access key to this better place, is found in a different garden. This garden is located at the western edge of the Middle Eastern fertile crescent. The Garden of Gethsemane.

The word gethsemane means oil press. The Garden of Gethsemane was an olive grove at the foot of the Mount of Olives. It was a quiet place where Jesus would often rest and pray with His disciples. That's why the betrayer Judas knew Jesus could be found and arrested there.

It was on that night of betrayal that Jesus went alone into the heart of the garden. He was entering into a difficult time and Luke's Gospel (22:44 ESV) describes Jesus as being in great agony. This is the only place in the whole of scripture that we find this word agony.

It wasn't just fear of death or torture that agonized the Lord. His agony was over the fate that His Father had prepared for Him: bearing in his body the sins of the world and in consequence being separated from his heavenly Father.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was wrestling to yield Himself to God's will. As perfect Man, He felt the awful black burden of sin, and His holy soul was repelled by it. Jesus was about to experience being made sin and a curse for mankind by being hung on a cross at Golgotha. (2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 3:13)

Jesus agonized alone in the shadows of the Gethsemane olive trees so that he might willingly drink the cup His Father had prepared for Him. In choosing to drink the cup Jesus made it possible for us to enter the better place which God has prepared for those who love Him.

Scriptures we should know only too well, reveal how to make certain this better place is your own personal destiny. There is only one way that you will ever enter into the better place that God has for you. God really wants to place you in his new Eden

John 3:16:

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

John 14:6

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Acts 2:38

Peter replied, "Each of you must repent of your sins and turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Once we are renewed or reborn, our destiny is made certain. But we have to recognize that, just like Adam and Eve in the first paradise, we aren't meant to be sitting around waiting to be caught up by God and wafted into the new paradise. We have to work with God in the here and now to build his Kingdom wherever He has put us.

Just as in the Garden of Eden, our human action is meant to reflect something of God's action. The primary actions of God are all about the establishing of his kingdom under the rule of Christ. This is the centre of God's activity. So, we born again Christians must be at work to reflect our new focus on the kingdom of God. It's God who holds his world in being, but just like Adam and Eve in Eden we are his estate managers.

Did you notice in the scripture we read earlier, that God isn't in the Garden? His pattern was to drop in for a stroll round in the cool of the day. Most of the time all that man has to go on is God's word.

This is what faith is about: living by God's word, when God is absent from the Garden. Learning to trust even when we do not see and do not fully understand. Learning to find where God is working and joining in that kingdom work. Remade by God in His image, we need to creatively engage with the world in building His Kingdom. Empowered by His Holy Spirit and working together we can undertake the task of turning this present wasteland into God's garden.

As God's church in this place, we need to work at being God's hands. Some us should be ploughing. Some us should be sowing. Some of us should be feeding. What does that look like here? Are you working at the business of being a kingdom church?

Some of us need to be the feet of the church here. Folk who go out and natter and gossip about the good things of God. There are those of us who easily befriend others and are able to bring the light and hope of Christ in the wasteland.

Some of us aren't quite as mobile as we would perhaps wish but you could be the one who waters the labours of others with committed prayers.

Wasteland Story

Don't be overcome by the difficulties of these strange times. Let's see these present obstacles as opportunities for the sharing the hope of the gospel. The gospel is still the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.

Believers have a better place to look forward to. We don't have to succumb to the darkness of these days. It's my prayer that knowing your destiny will enthuse you, empower you, and enable you, to engage with God in transforming this present temporary wasteland into a better place.

Song: How Lovely on the Mountains

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_IHBEIWZ9k4

1 How lovely on the mountains
Are the feet of him
Who brings good news, good news
Announcing peace, proclaiming
News of happiness.
Our God reigns; our God reigns!

Chorus:

Our God reigns!
Our God reigns!
Our God reigns!
Our God reigns!

2 He had no stately form;
He had no majesty,
That we should be
drawn to Him.
He was despised,
and we took no account of Him,
Yet now He reigns
With the Most High. [Chorus]

3 Out of the tomb He came
With grace and majesty;
He is alive, He is alive.
God loves us so see here His hands,
His feet, His side.
Yes, we know
He is alive. [Chorus]