

GENESIS 3:22-24
THE STORY OF OUR LONGING

The fifth-grade girl wrote to the newspaper,

“I think in the 21st century there will be no polluting. People will save more. There will be no more fights. People will be nice to one another. Houses will have maids. Everybody will be rich and cars will run on water. Schools will be better. There will be a cure for diabetes...

“People in shelters will have jobs and homes in the 21st century. Children will have a better future...Families will be nicer to each other...In the future, people will never get killed. There are no robbers and no bad people...People are not selfish...

“In school, teachers are nice. That’s why children are not mean. People’s houses are in the sky. The roads are going across back and forth but the cars are in the sky still. Airplanes aren’t in use anymore. Flowers grow.”

Will her dreams come true?

This morning, we finish the second of five scenes in the story of our God, our world, and our lives. This scene has declared and described the tragedy of this life. In these final few words, we discover the heart of our struggle.

Author Aldous Huxley once wrote, “If most of us remain ignorant of ourselves, it is because self-knowledge is painful and we prefer the pleasures of illusion.” We want to ignore the hard realities of ourselves and our lives, but we must not do this. These words reveal two real longings of our hearts, as we live in the real world of this world.

Here is the first longing we discover here: **WE WILL LONG FOR LIFE.** As we re-enter *THE MAN’S STORY*, we again discover the reality of death.

God says, “The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil.” We know from the rest of the Bible that the Son and the Spirit are there, so the Father must be speaking to them. These words remind us that when Satan tempted the woman, he told her that if she ate, she would be “like God, knowing good and evil.” But because the man and woman now know evil, they do evil, and they will die.

What would it have been like, if this scene had gone differently? God says, “He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.” If the man had obeyed, he would have had a precious privilege and a beautiful blessing. He would have received life forever in a place of delight. But now that opportunity is gone.

“So,” we then read, “the Lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden.” The tree of life is there, but he will no longer be there. He will work and live, but he will do this work and live this life outside the garden. God makes sure of this, with the cherubim (angels who surround the throne of God) and the flaming sword (a fearsome weapon to enforce this mandate).

What a strange scene! We do not see this today. Somehow, at some point, God made sure we would not see this garden, these cherubim, and this sword. But the picture here describes reality for us, for it speaks not just to the man’s story, but to *OUR STORY*.

What do we see about our story here? We are reminded of the universality and inevitability of death. Death is universal - we all face it. Death is inevitable - we cannot avoid it. Death is the deepest horror, and the greatest enemy - the hideous adversary we will never defeat in this season of human history. Why is it so awful?

* *Because of the pain of the process.* We think of facing death. We think of confronting the events that will lead to death. We realize we may need to walk through a horrendous and extended process of dying. Maybe you try to shove that away from your mind, but the thoughts invade again and again. Maybe you feel great today, but someday your healthy body will be broken and broken down. Maybe you feel lousy today, and you realize it is only a taste of the process that will end in your death.

It has now been over twenty years since the fall of the Berlin Wall - the monstrosity that separated free West Berlin from communist East Berlin. To keep people from fleeing communism for freedom in the west, the communists guarded the wall and other borders with high electric fence, barbed wire, and soldiers with machine guns. But these barriers did not just affect people. They influenced animals. A particular species of deer lives in wooded mountains along the former border between free West Germany and communist Czechoslovakia. To this day, those deer will not cross that border, even though the electric fences, barbed wire and guards are long gone. One German says, "The wall in the head is still there."

The pain of the process of death is a wall in our heads. It is always there, lurking around all the blessings of this life. Most of us have seen the process of death, but if you have not, you will. It is the terrible breakdown and shutdown of human life. Yes, we can keep people comfortable. Yes, we can pull out phrases like "death with dignity." But death is real, and death is ugly, and we dread the pain of the process. Death is also awful...

* *Because of the pain of the permanence.* Death is a horrible reality, because we realize that when the one we love dies, we will never see that person again on this earth. We can wish. We can dream. We can remember. We can laugh and we can cry. But this is the truth that shakes the soul and sickens the heart: because of death, that person is gone. Gone. Gone.

I have never forgotten the story of a woman named Debbie, as told by author Philip Jenkins. Debbie had a friend named Belva, who perished during a hurricane in Louisiana in 1957. Debbie said, "I'm forever having dreams about being on vacation somewhere and seeing Belva on the side of the road or in a crowd in a mall. She's just there. In my dream, Belva's been hit on the head and she has amnesia. She doesn't know who she is. When I find her, she doesn't know who she is, and she doesn't know who I am. I go running to her and hug her and hug her."

It is only a dream. Here is reality: Belva was not just hit on the head. She died. She was taken from this life. Debbie will never see her again in this place. Never. Ever. Nevermore.

It is sickening. It is consuming. It is even paralyzing. Some of you have told me that even decades after the death of a parent or another loved one, the pain is still there, and even if it has been lessened by time, it is still real. You wonder, "What could have been?" You wish, "Why could this not have been?" You worry, "Whom will death strike next?"

Do you remember reading stories as child, or do you now read stories to your children or grandchildren? The story always has a happy ending. Everyone lives happily ever after. But in this world of death, no story has a happy ending, for this life ends with death. We can get out a big paintbrush and whitewash this over our hearts and our minds, but we cannot remove the ugly reality. We will long for life, because we live in a world of death.

These words also reveal a second longing. We will long for life, and **WE WILL LONG FOR LOVE.** Let's begin again by returning to *THE MAN'S STORY*.

God says, "The man has now become like one of us." As we learned in the first scene of creation, the man and the woman are both like God, and unlike God. But it is not good that man and woman are now like God in this way - in knowing good and evil. Because man will now know evil and do evil, he cannot be in the same relationship with God. Because God is perfectly holy - unspeakably great and utterly good - he will be repulsed by the corruption of the man and woman. The man's sin will separate him from God.

"So," we read again, "the Lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden." Here, the Lord God has walked in the cool of the day, and he has related to the man and woman he has made. But no more. The man cannot enter this place. The cherubim and the flaming sword will be on the east side of the garden. When you read about the "east side" of something in the Bible, you are often reading about exile. The man was once a resident. Now he is an alien. Once he made his home there. Now he will have to make a new home - away from the place where he had direct communion with the God who created him. He is banished from this place he knows, and he enters the unknown.

Once again, we do not see this garden anymore, but these words reveal reality not just for the man's story, but for *OUR STORY*. We are like the man and his wife. We are made to relate to our Creator. We are also made to relate to each other, but human relationships are rooted in our first relationship: our relationship with God. We need this the most. We long for this the most. But this first relationship is now broken, and we cannot fix it.

Do you know this? I wonder. We live in a culture of amusement and amazement. All that seems real is what we can program into our electronics or produce with our imaginations. We are so busy with what we like to do, that we forget who we are. But deep in our souls, I believe we know better. We know that real joy, real peace, and real love are not ours because of what we have, or even because of what we do. We realize that the first and best blessing of God is himself, and we know no amazement or amusement will satisfy that longing.

Author and philosopher Henry David Thoreau once said, "Many men go fishing all of their lives without knowing that it is not fish they are after." Or, if you prefer, remember the words of a woman named Hannah Borno, who once held the position of "spirituality director" at that spiritually insightful magazine, *Cosmopolitan*. She said, "I've come to the painful realization that men and shoes are not enough to make me happy."

We fish, we catch, and whether it is men or shoes or anything else, we keep longing for love in our souls. The love we long for is the love of God, and it is a love that seems lost when God banishes the man from the garden. That is his story, and that is our story.

And that is why we need the rest of the story. Remember: God has made a promise. Even in the aftermath of the fall of man into rebellion, God has promised a child of the woman who will defeat the serpent whose temptation led to the loss of this life and this love. The fulfillment of this promise is Jesus Christ. He came to give the life and love we long to have.

In his death, we live. Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." He died for the sins that bring death, so that while we live in a world of death, we have the hope of a day of new life. In Jesus Christ, death is not final. While the process may still be painful, we rejoice in the defeat of death and the promise of eternal life.

In his death we live, and in his love, we love again. Jesus prayed to his Father, "I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them." The Father loves the Son. When we know the love of the Son, we again know the love of the Father. We are no longer separated from him. We are again one with him - as we were made to be.

We long for life, and we long for love. Only Jesus provides this. Have you genuinely received what he provides? If so, your story will never be the same. As we think on these themes of life and love, we realize that Jesus changes everything about the scenes of our story. Here are two examples.

First, the life-giving Jesus means *we can bravely live our lives*. The writer to the Hebrews declared, "Since the children have flesh and blood, he (Jesus) too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death - that is, the devil - and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death." Paul wrote to the Philippians, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."

We live in a culture that fears death and flees death. But in Jesus Christ, death is a defeated enemy. The process may indeed be painful, but death is no longer permanent. If you are united to Jesus Christ in his death and in his new life, you live with the hope of a day of no more death. You long for the life of the new heavens and the new earth, with a hope that is strong and secure.

Do you know what that means for each day? It does not mean you are foolish. But it does mean you can be fearless. You do not fear death, because you know what will happen after death. With this fearlessness, you can travel to distant and even dangerous places to minister in the name of Jesus. With this fearlessness, you can face the doctor or the hospital with a strong heart and a strong spirit. With this fearlessness, you can mourn with hope, as you lose for only a little while, the ones you love who love Jesus.

Pastor Steve Brown describes the day he had a heart attack. He went to one hospital, where he was

encouraged by the receptionist with the words of Romans 8:28: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” Then he was put in an ambulance and sent to another hospital.

He writes, “Do you know what I was doing when they rolled me into the examination room at the hospital? My wife was worried (for which I’m glad - you don’t want your wife to rejoice over your heart attack). The nurses were preparing me for the doctor’s visit (that’s what nurses do). The doctor was very serious and concerned (you don’t want a doctor who makes jokes when you’ve just had a heart attack).

“...I was reading a novel...And not only that, I was more interested in the novel than in all the things going on in and around me. I remember stopping and thinking, *Hey! This is what Paul talked about. I can hardly believe it. I’m content and I am really trusting God.*”

We can bravely live our lives. Is this how you are able to live? Or do you live paralyzed by the fear that Jesus died and rose to remove? Will you hold his grace and promise in your heart, so that you may live bravely all of your days?

But Jesus’ entry into the rest of the story also means this: *we can boldly love our God*. In Matthew 22, Jesus declares that the first great commandment is to love the Lord. But this is not just a command. This is a blessing. In Jesus Christ, we again possess the blessing of living in the presence and power of God. He is not just an abstract idea. He is not just something somewhere who might help you someday. He is a real person, with whom you have a real relationship. You gain all from him, so you give all to him.

I once read the words of a man named Paul. His brother Henri had died. Henri had known God, and as Paul sat at Henri’s funeral, he heard people describe how God had changed and blessed Henri’s life. Paul said, “Compared to Henri, I have nothing. And as I sat there listening, the difference became clear. Henri had God. That made all the difference.”

It makes all the difference. Yes, you love people - but people will hurt you in life and leave you in death. You may love your things, your accomplishments, your status, or your pleasures, but they never satisfy. But to know the love of God and live in the love of God - you were made for it, and you gain joy and peace, only when his love is the heartbeat of your life.

Oh, God, for us to have a heart for you! You have loved us in Jesus who gave us life, and in his life, we find your love again. As the wind stirs the waters on a lake, may your Spirit stir our hearts, so that we may love you better and live for you more. This is more than a duty. This is a delight - a delight as glorious as the first delight of living in the Garden of Eden.

With this love, I will worship from the heart. With this love, I will stand for you. With this love, I will forgive. With this love, I will sacrifice my time and energy and strength for others. With this love, I will humbly tell of you, and all that you have done for me. With this love, I will go where you would have me go, and do what you would have me do - trusting in your love to carry me through, even if it should cost me my life.

“If most of us remain ignorant of ourselves, it is because self-knowledge is painful and we prefer the pleasures of illusion.” We think we want to live in a dream world. But we really long for life, and for love. In Jesus, we live and love again.