

“In the Garden,” Genesis 2:4-17 (Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 17, 2017)

“⁴These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens.

“⁵When no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground, ⁶and a mist was going up from the land and was watering the whole face of the ground—⁷then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature. ⁸And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹And 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.

“¹⁰A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers. ¹¹The name of the first is the Pishon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. ¹²And the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. ¹³The name of the second river is the Gihon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Cush. ¹⁴And the name of the third river is the Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

“¹⁵The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. ¹⁶And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, ¹⁷but 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.”

PRAY

In one of my favorite movies, certainly my favorite movie adapted from anything Stephen King wrote, *The Shawshank Redemption*, there’s the scene where Andy Dufresne, played by Tim Robbins, is talking to Red, played by Morgan Freeman. Andy is planning to break out of Shawshank prison that night, and he says to Red, “I guess it comes down to a simple choice: get busy living, or get busy dying.”

And that’s a powerful scene, because everyone wants that. We all want to get busy living. But the problem is we don’t know what it means to really live.

This passage tells us. Three points: first, these verses expose counterfeit living. Second, they reveal for us real living. Third, they show us what it means to die. *Counterfeit living, real living, and dying.*

First, counterfeit living. “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.”

“The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. ¹⁶And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, ¹⁷but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat ...” Genesis 2:9, 15-17a.

These verses describe the Garden of Eden. And naturally when we think of the Garden of Eden we immediately in our minds go to how wonderful everything is there because the Garden was, after all, paradise. Literally, the Hebrew word for “garden” is *paradaiism*.

In paradise, man had food, he had “every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food.” It was an orchard of all the best fruits ever to grow on the earth. But he didn’t just have food – the garden wasn’t just man’s personal grocery store. It was also beautiful. This was a garden in the sense of being a landscaped park, where everything was arranged in a pleasing way.

Man wasn’t bored because he had a job in the garden. He was to work the garden and keep it. But none of us has ever gardened the way he gardened – you know why? Because he did not know what thorns, thistles, and weeds were. There were no frustrations to his work; only the satisfying results of a job well done. The garden just gave itself to the man and did what he wanted it to do.

The temperature in the garden had to have been very comfortable because man walked around naked. I like to think it was always 82 degrees and never had high humidity – the Garden, therefore, could not have been in Mississippi.

Finally, man had a perfect, close, relationship with God. We read in Genesis 3 how God would come to the garden and walk with the man in the cool of the day. Don’t you wish you could have been in on those conversations? I don’t know what your prayer life is like but I bet that no matter how powerful it might be you still are at least a little envious of the kind of talking with God the man got to do.

The garden was paradise – man had everything you could possibly want, especially once woman came along (as we will study next week). He had food to eat, work to do, a relationship with his Creator, no worries, no fears, no guilt, no shame. Paradise. That’s really living.

Our mistake comes, however, when we think that’s what it’s going to take for us to really live as well. We believe the only way we can really live is if we can arrange our lives in such a way so that they can be our own personal paradise. Right? We can’t really live, we can’t really be happy, until the world around us is more like the paradise we imagine in our heads. But then, oh boy, *we’ll be living!*

When you’re a kid, you think all the problems of the world will be solved if your parents get you this new toy. That will be paradise. Kids do that, right? But I’m not just picking on kids. College age students and adults are worse, because it will cost a lot more money and take a lot more effort for our paradises to appear. We think we will be in our paradise if we get into this college, this Greek organization, this relationship, and graduate with these honors.

Then as adults we think it's going to be this new job, or this new house, or this vacation, or new town to live in, a new car, new clothes, new friends, or a new spouse and then we'll be in paradise.

And here's the thing: at a certain age, certainly by the time we are in our thirties, if not before, *we all know it's not true*. We know we can get exactly what we want: marriage, kids, job, house, a certain salary, whatever, and still we won't have our paradise.

We know it from experience because some of us have gotten exactly what we thought would make our paradise and it hasn't. And we know it because there are myriads of people who have it all, who if it is possible to create for yourselves a paradise they've done it, and still they aren't satisfied. I know a lot of you have seen the *60 Minutes* interview with Tom Brady. It was first broadcast in 2005, after he has already won three Super Bowls. He's rich, he's famous, he's as successful as you can be in his field. And he says to Steve Kroft, "Maybe a lot of people would say, 'Hey, man, this is what it is [all about], I've reached my goal.' Me, I think, [gosh], it's got to be more than this."

He gave that interview when he was 27. Ten years later, 2015, the New York Times interviewed Brady, and the reporter read that quote back to him. Now mind you that since the *60 Minutes* interview Brady had married his supermodel wife and had two children by her, and he was two weeks away from his fourth Super Bowl win. He had a lot more life experience, and when he hears that quote read back to him Brady laughed and said, "I got a litany of Bible sent to me after that. When I think back on that, what a narrow perspective I had. I'm 27. I don't know [anything]." But then Brady says this. "Not that I know [anything] at 37."

See, Brady knows how foolish he sounded at 27 admitting his paradise wasn't enough. He's embarrassed by all the Bibles that people sent him (he's not a Christian, by the way – he says, "I don't know what I believe. I think there's a belief system, I'm just not sure what it is"). He knows he's got to be more savvy than that now, but he still admits it – his personal paradise isn't enough.

We all know it's not true that we can arrange our lives into a paradise, but it doesn't mean we stop trying. And if you want to identify how you're succumbing to the temptation to create of a paradise for yourself, then know that one of the main ways it shows up in our lives is through fear of missing out – FOMO for short. And this is especially true for our kids. It's not so much that our kids have FOMO, but we have FOMO for them. We may know we can't make a paradise for us, but we are tempted to think we can for our kids.

A few years ago Annie Oeth wrote an article for *The Clarion Ledger* called "How Much Is Too Much?" In it she said, "The road to you know where is paved with good intentions. In no area is that more true than in choosing activities for your children. They're all wonderful additions to your child's day, but add them all in, good intentions included, and your child won't have time to sleep. Mom and Dad will only see each other passing in the hallway. Family dinners may become a thing of the past.

“Over-commitment is a danger. It will suck the fun right out of a childhood and make family life into a rat race ... When it comes to activities, how much is too much?”

“Read the following questions. If you answer “yes” to one or more, you might want to reconsider your activity schedule this year. Do you lose count of how many sports your children play or lessons they take? Are you hard-pressed to get the entire family at the dinner table for even a few meals a week? Are your children’s grades affected by their extracurricular activities? Are you always in a rush? Are you driving so much you feel like a taxi service? Do your children have to change from one set of sports gear to another at the McDonald’s restroom or even in the back of the minivan?”

Do you find the weekend's gone and you haven't spent any quality time with your significant other? If so, do you find that it doesn't bother you? Are your only friends the parents of other kids in the same activities? Are you reliving your childhood [through these activities], moms and dads? Is your family schedule so full that there is no room for free time?”

Maybe all the activities are creating a paradise for our kids (though I doubt it), but I know it turns into a purgatory for the parents. The bottom line is we can't create paradise for ourselves or anyone we love on earth. Our first parents were kicked out of the only paradise this side of heaven – read ahead a little bit in Genesis to chapter three and you can learn for yourselves.

So what does it mean to really live? Second, what this passage tells us about real living. Genesis 2:16-17: “And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, ¹⁷but 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.”

I have a meeting every Tuesday with several guys and we go over the passage before it is preached the following Sunday. And in that meeting the consensus question was: “Why did God put that tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden if man wasn't supposed to eat of it? What was the point God was trying to make?”

A lot of people think the tree is a symbol of the sadism of God, how he gets jollies watching us squirm. How God loves to give us good things and then tell us we can't have them. Just last week *The New Yorker* magazine ran a Garden of Eden cartoon. You'll find the Garden is a popular theme for one-frame cartoonists. You see Adam and Eve in the Garden next to this beautiful tree, clearly the forbidden tree. And they are looking down at this pathetic little bush. And up in the sky you see the God-character looking down on them and he's saying, “But feel free to eat of the shrub of delusion.” And that's how so many people view Christianity. It's a religion where you can't enjoy any of the fun stuff on earth and instead you have to just drink the Kool-Aid of superstition.

Nonsense – if anything, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is proof that God is no harsh master. God sets man in paradise and later gives him a wife and tells them both, “You can do anything you want! Anything at all! It is virtually impossible to sin! There's just one thing I command: do not eat that tree.” God gives man a billion “yes's” and one single “no.” Now only

a very frustrated group of people could walk away from that calling God sadistic.

Still, why is the tree there? *The tree is the first expression of God's law in the universe.* The man in the garden had no Bible, no church, no sacraments, no rules. All he had was the tree. But the tree was a supremely important reminder from God to man saying, "Even here in paradise, you need me. You need me because I built you for a relationship with me. It won't work any other way. *You won't work any other way.*"

Up in verses 5-7 we read how God made man: "When no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground, ⁶and a mist was going up from the land and was watering the whole face of the ground— ⁷then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature." Genesis 2:5-7. I don't know of any more poignant picture of the absolute dependence of man upon God for life in all the Scriptures than that one.

But our dependence on God doesn't stop once we are created – we still cannot live apart from him and his law. Leviticus 18:4b-5 says, "I am the Lord your God. ⁵You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the Lord."

We tend to read those verses as either a redundancy, as if God is saying, "If a person keeps my statutes and rules, he will do them." That's a redundancy, it's not worth saying. Or we read them like a threat, as if God is saying, "You shall therefore keep my statutes, or I will get you, saith the Lord."

However, Leviticus 18 is neither a redundancy or a threat. God is actually saying, "The only way to really live is according to my law. My law, you see, is your owner's manual." Human beings have an owner's manual, which is the law of God.

What happens if you operate your car in violation of your owners' manual? If you refuse to change the oil in your car, what's going to happen? Is a policeman going to pull you over and give you a ticket? No – in violating the owner's manual you will be punishing yourself. You don't change the oil in your car, sooner or later you will burn up the engine and the car will be ruined.

It's the same with God's law – you try to live contrary to God's law or try to live without depending on God, God doesn't have to punish you – you'll be punishing yourself.

To prove it, let me give you just a sampling of God's law: "Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. ²⁶"In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, ²⁷ and do not give the devil a foothold. ²⁸ He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need. ²⁹ Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹ Get rid

of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. ³² Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

“Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children ² and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Ephesians 4:25-5:2. That’s God’s law. Just suppose that you were able to keep it and abide by the owner’s manual. Does anyone really dispute that you’d live a happier, more fulfilled life if you did? Does anyone really argue that ignoring this law would lead to making your life worse?

Now, it takes practice, it is hard to keep God’s law, you must be disciplined to keep God’s law and no one does it naturally, but it is worth it. *Then you’ll really be living.* Mimi and I sat down and few months ago and watched *La La Land* (which won this year’s Oscar for Best Picture), and when we got through watching that movie we looked at each other and said, “Wow – I wish I could dance like that.” It just looked like a lot of fun.

We knew, though, that all the dancers in the movie weren’t born able to dance. They only got their ability to really dance through years and years of discipline: of learning steps and routines and exercises and practice, practice, practice. It was hard, I’m sure, it took a lot of effort, but now they have a freedom to move with their bodies that I can only dream of. Don’t you see? The law of God is not something oppressive. Freedom always comes hand in hand with discipline.

But really living doesn’t mean only the discipline to act a certain way. If you really want to live, you can’t just look at the law of God and say, “OK, I’ll do it.” That won’t work. You’ll never keep the law that way. You know why? *You’ve already burned up the engine.* You’ve already broken God’s law countless times. You’ve already violated the owner’s manual. We are sinners. It’s too late to try and live that way. We’ve already wrecked our lives.

If we try to keep the law now, we won’t find freedom. Some of you know what it’s like to just try and “be good” and keep the law. Did it feel like really living? No, it didn’t. It felt like dying every day. You can’t do it.

So you must know something else first before you can go to the law and find freedom to really live. What is it? Third, what it means to die. “And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, ‘You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, ¹⁷but 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.’” Genesis 2:16-17.

One of the questions people often ask about Genesis 1-3 is: “If the man in the garden had not sinned, would he have died?” I think the best answer is “no.” Not that he would have lived forever in the garden as he did at first, but he would have “skipped” the process of death and gone straight to the glory presence of God. The Scriptures tell us that two men – Enoch and Elijah – were both able to skip death in such a way.

But now, because of the man ate from the tree, we must pass through death. Death is the curse we earn for our disobedience. We’ve all sinned, we’ve all violated the owner’s manual, and as a result we will all die.

It's not just physical death we've earned with our sins. There's also hell. Jesus says some very hard things on this point. Matthew 10:28: "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." In Mark 9 we read hell is "the unquenchable fire" and the place "where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched."

If you're here today and you're not a Christian, maybe you wonder, "Why do Christians always talk about hell? It makes you sound so narrow-minded." If that's you, I want you to know it's not because we like talking about it. We struggle with it. We hate it. We get upset about it. We don't like thinking about it. In fact, it's so horrible I don't think anyone can really understand what it means to be in hell.

But we believe hell is a real place and there are people who are going there then how cowardly and unloving and would it be of us never to talk about it?

I also hate thinking about hell because I know I deserve to go there, I know everyone I love deserves to go there, and *I know there is nothing I can do about it*. I am powerless in the face of death and hell.

But the good news is Jesus is not. Do you know the gospel of Jesus Christ? It's the good news that even though you have violated the owner's manual and wrecked your life with your sins, still God loved you enough to send his Son to live the life you should have lived, and on the cross he died the death you should have died, and if you believe you don't have to bear the curse of hell for your sins. Instead, you go from being God's enemy to being God's child.

Friends, if you really want to live you must have a laser-like focus on the gospel. "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. ²³For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. ²⁴For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. ²⁵But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty [or freedom], and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing." James 1:22-25.

The perfect law that gives freedom is the gospel. Do you realize what those verses are saying? They are saying that most people who call themselves Christians, to the extent they think about the gospel, do this: they say, "Oh, yes, the gospel – Jesus died for my sins. I know that, I get that," they glance at the gospel, and then immediately forget it and go back to thinking about ourselves and all our problems. If we think we're overweight, we glance at the gospel, and then we stare at our bodies and are unhappy. If we think we don't have enough money, we glance at the gospel and stare at our bank statements. If we think we aren't getting the respect we deserve, we glance at the gospel and we stare off into the distance and get angry. We meditate and stew over all the things we think are wrong with our lives, and it makes us miserable.

James says, "Don't do that – it's a foolish way to live. Look intently, stare, at the perfect law that gives freedom. The gospel says you are a mess – you are a sinner, you're way worse than you know, and you don't really deserve anything good at all. But God loves you far more than

you could ever understand, and he promises that from now on until forever you will have everything you need. Everything. No matter what is currently going wrong in your life right now God is, somehow, using it for good. And you don't have to earn anything at all, nor do you have to be selfish, or greedy, or fearful, because God will give you everything as a gift. Meditate on that, James says.

Yes, death will come for you one day, and yes it will also come for everyone you care about. But while it will be sad, in the gospel death won't break you. Why? *Because death now has no sting.* Jesus took the curse of death for you on the cross. He endured hell for you. Now all death can do is take you to where Enoch and Elijah are. All death can do is usher you into the glory presence of God. All death can do is make you perfect. When you believe that then you can start obeying the owner's manual, and it won't feel like dying anymore. It will make sense. It will bring life, it will bring freedom, and you will be really living.

A few years ago someone I know wrote the obituary after his mother died. He is a character, and apparently his mother was, too. In the obituary she is referred to as a "loyal Waffle House customer," and it's mentioned that every year she received multiple anonymous Mother's Day cards, which caused the son and his sister to suspect there were other siblings out there running around unverified. He wrote that his mother "had the ability with family pets to usher them toward heaven at an unrivaled pace," and that "her favorite activity was sipping hot tea on her back porch with friends seated around her porch ensemble from Dollar General." But he obviously loved his mother, and at the end of the obituary he said, "On a last but serious note, the woman who loved life and taught her children to 'laugh at the days to come' is now safely in the arms of Jesus and dancing at the wedding feast of the Lamb. She will be missed as a mother, friend and grandmother. Anyone wearing black will not be admitted to the memorial. She is not dead. She is alive." Obituary of Antonia Larroux.

Do you know what the gospel says to you, the perfect law that gives freedom? It says, "Every day, every hour, your deliverance from all the things that trouble you and frustrate you is getting closer. Every hour, your salvation from all the sins that beset you and keep you from perfect freedom is drawing near, and then *you will really live.*" "Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. ¹² The night is far gone; the day is at hand." Romans 14:11-12a. If you want to get busy living instead of dying, focus on the gospel, because Jesus has paid it all. PRAY