

The Three Gardens

By Dr. Charles S. Price

Some years ago I was entertained in a very beautiful home in Rochester, New York. One member of the charming family was a pretty little girl about six years of age. She was about as inquisitive a little miss as I have ever met. One day she approached me and said, "Dr. Price, where do you get your sermons?"

I looked at her and smiled. An older person would probably not have dared to ask such a question. It would have been embarrassing. I knew in my heart where far too many of our sermons are born. A little from this book--a little from that—something this preacher said—what that commentator declares--add to that a trifle of originality, and we have a sermon. Yes, I have been guilty too. But that is not where I like to get them!

Not long ago the telephone bell rang. The printing department called me up and told me they would need another short message for the current issue of *Golden Grain*. Before I retired, I prayed that the Lord--according to His promise--would put some message on my heart. At four o'clock I was awakened by the Spirit and this little sermonette is what came to me in the early morning watches--before the day dawned. It is all about gardens.

The First Garden

In the Spirit I could see the first garden, the beautiful Garden of Eden. With what delightful language would the writer describe the beauty and glory of that sinless vale. The trees were laden with fruit, the flowers grew in beautiful and colorful profusion, the birds sang, the river laughed, and all was so harmonious and exquisite that the earth must have seemed like a mirror reflecting some of the beauty and the glory of that happy land where angels live beyond the blue.

Glorious indeed had been the majesty of God's creation, but the forming of the first man and woman was the most beautiful act of all. They were sinless people! With the return of each dawn, the sun smiled upon sinless perfection and holiness; and then when that golden orb commenced to disappear beneath the saucer of the horizon, God Himself walked and talked with sinless humanity in the beautiful Garden of Eden.

Then came the fall.

Out of the garden of happiness and contentment Adam and Eve were driven. A curse was upon the earth. They were sinners. From this time on they were to

endure heat and cold, sickness as well as health, and dark shadows of sorrow as well as the brief moments of seeming happiness. By the sweat of his brow man was to earn his daily bread and the story of the first garden ended in tragedy. But the story of the last garden will end in victory!

The Hunger Beneath

Is it not true that deep down beneath the superficialities of life we have been hungering for a return to that garden? You do not have to be a saint to see the terrible consequences of sin. More than one poor sinner despises the sin in his heart. More than one suffering soul, bound by the chains of habit, longs for and dreams of the moment of deliverance.

Some time ago, when I took in my hands the thin, emaciated hands of an addict to morphine, the Spirit of the Lord put on my heart such compassion that I wept in sorrow for my fallen brother. He wept too.

"I hate it just as much as you do," he said. Then he wistfully added, "I would give the remaining years of my life if I could only live for six months as I used to live when I was a happy boy in my old-fashioned, country home."

Yes, mankind has lost the "garden." God has made so much that is beautiful, but man continues to live in the midst of the ugly. We know all about the pure, but yet we continue in the sordid and the unclean. We know the beauty of love, and yet the heart is filled with hate and malice and greed. We have lost the garden!

I know that underneath all of the rough exterior of our natures there is a desire to walk once again in a beautiful garden where sin is overcome and the terror of death is no more. We want to walk along the flower-strewn paths where we can hear the voice of God speaking to us as a friend. There is such a garden, and I am going to take you there. By the way--strange to say--it leads through another garden.

The Second Garden

So, as the Spirit spoke to my heart in the early morning watches, He led me to another little gate, on which was the word, "Gethsemane." "But I did not ask for this!" I cried. "I asked for life and happiness and the singing of birds and the scent of beautiful flowers."

Then I saw a great truth! The way to the garden in which I *wanted* to walk and commune with my Lord always led through the same little narrow gate that marked the entrance to "Gethsemane." I saw my blessed Master praying beneath the sheltering arms of the olive trees. There was no human breast upon which He could lay His weary head. Sleeping men were in that garden, it is true, but they were dead to the opportunity that heaven had put before them that day. So, alone, my Master prayed by the side of a cold, inanimate rock. The path He had walked was one of

sacrifice, and it had led to the place of complete self-renouncement. It was the lonely corner of complete surrender, and the crucifixion of every self desire.

Have you been in that garden, my friend? Have you not discovered in life that if ever you would return to some of the beauty and glory and the purity and holiness of Eden, you must travel by the way of the Garden of Gethsemane first. You may not think it is a garden, but such it is. I know it may not possess the exquisite beauty of the garden of your dreams, but it is a “garden” just the same.

One thing is sure: when you pray in the sequestered nook of complete surrender, you are not likely to be disturbed. Very few people pass that way. Very few human hands are ever placed upon the latch of the gate marked “Gethsemane.” If their hearts do tell them to enter, they probably will hear the blatant music that sounds from the nearby hills of worldliness and sin, and turn their backs on the place where man can come face to face with God. So, in the early morning watches, as I communed in the Spirit, I said, “Father, help me to pray, ‘Thy will--not mine--be done.’ ” Can you pray that prayer? Can your heart offer that supplication before the Lord?

The Third Garden

Then in my heart I heard the whisper of the Spirit. I saw another garden. Across its very entrance fell the long shadow of three empty crosses. In spirit I followed a woman--Mary Magdalene--into that garden, just as the sun commenced to rise over the hills of the east.

“And what is this garden?” I asked.

“It is the garden of death,” was the reply.

As I saw the center cross--no longer occupied by the bleeding form of the man who had hung there a few days before--I knew it was the garden of the tomb, even as I had been told that it was the garden of death.

Is it any wonder Mary wept that day? There is after all nothing beautiful about death. It is so cruel and so ugly. It separates and divides. It drives the sword of sorrow deep into the human heart. It laughs at the scalding tears and mocks at our vain attempt to hold the ones we love and cherish. There is nothing beautiful about death.

Well, that is not to be the concluding part of my story. The Bible calls death an enemy. The Scriptures declare that death is something to be overcome. Every once in a while some vibrant, prophetic utterance will pulsate with the story of our being victorious over death.

Is this not passing strange? We started with Eden--the beautiful fields of Eden--we thought of its rivers and its trees, its happiness, its beauty and bliss; and we asked our God to take us back to the Eden man had lost. We wanted to have our sins forgiven. We wanted to walk with God in the cool of the evening once again. We

wanted Jesus to call us His friends, and we wanted to tell Him that we were sick and weary of our sin.

We wanted to be His disciples. We were tired of the brambles and thistles on a world upon which the curse had been placed. We wanted to drink of the waters of life that flowed in the river which comes from beneath the throne. We wanted to walk amid beautiful flowers in the paths of redeeming grace. We wanted to eat again of that celestial fruit which grows on the tree of a Father's love. Yes, we cried for that garden, and what did we find? We were led to the gate marked "Gethsemane," and through it we came past the empty cross to the garden of the tomb.

Why is it that we pray for the mountain and God answers by leading us into the valley? We ask Him for the sunshine and He sends us the rain. We ask Him for health and sometimes we feel the pains of sickness. We ask Him for the shining of summer's sun and we shiver beneath the icy blasts of winter. What? Have you not discovered! Have you not found out? There is a great secret wrapped up in the providential guidance of our eternal God. It is something so wonderful and yet so mysterious that the uncircumcised mind can never understand it.

So the Spirit led me in the early morning watches into the garden of what I thought was death. Then I saw Jesus come from the shade beneath the trees. Mary saw Him on that first glorious Easter morning. Perhaps you have been like her--you did not recognize Him, when you first saw Him.

She thought He was the gardener--and so He was! Those hands, now scarred by nail-prints, were the ones which had fashioned the eternal hills. Every little Easter lily that laughed and sang that happy day was there because He had created it. The green grass beneath His feet was the carpet of His own weaving. The trees, beneath which He walked, were there because He had placed them there, to let breezes which blew from heaven touch their leafy hands and make them clap for joy.

Then a voice spoke which was sweeter by far than the singing of the birds. It was the voice of God speaking in the garden once again to man. Years before--in another garden--God's voice had called "Adam." Now in this garden, His voice spoke "Mary."

The miracle had happened! God was walking once again in a garden, on terms of friendship, with man. Those were not tears of sorrow that poured like a fountain from the eyes of Mary. They were tears of joy--happy tears--tears of gladness, not of sadness, that welled up from her very heart that happy day.

We thought this was the garden of death, but it proved to be the garden of the resurrection morning. Though the devil stopped us by the gate and told us that it was the garden of the tomb; the angels laughed and pointed to the stone which had been rolled away, and said it was the garden of everlasting life!

Is it not strange that every little blade of grass, every tree, and every flower knew that it was not the garden of death? Only Mary thought that. Only Mary--and I--and you! Even the stone which had been rolled away must have been happy

because death had been swallowed up in victory!

So, we stand in the Garden of the Resurrection, and listen to the music of the choir. The little bell-shaped lilies nod their snowy white heads and peal forth the glorious refrain, "He is risen." The blue bells ring with the happy tones of the resurrection day. The leaves on the trees clap their hands in tune with the kiss of the morning breeze, and seem to sing for joy, "He is not dead; He is risen."

Even the mouth of the open tomb speaks a message to our astonished heart. "You thought this was the garden of death, Pilgrim; but it is the Garden of Life--of Eternal Life--through Him who was dead, but who is alive forevermore."

Then, if you will listen closely, methinks you can hear--that is, if you have the ear of the Spirit--the beautiful strains of the angelic choirs, as they sing triumphantly around the Throne of God, "He is risen. Death has been overcome. The Prince of Glory is victorious. He is alive--alive forevermore!"

From beneath the outstretched arms of the trees He comes to walk with redeemed, blood-washed mankind--just as He did in the days of long ago--and tenderly and lovingly takes us by the hand and whispers in our ears, as we look on His hallowed face with our adoring eyes, "Because I live, ye shall live also."

This, then, is the message of the three gardens, which the Spirit breathed into my heart in the watches of the early morning!