



# Even Better Than Eden

**Nine Ways the Bible's  
Story Changes Everything  
about Your Story**

**NANCY GUTHRIE**

“Nancy Guthrie is one of the best teachers of Scripture I’ve ever heard or read. Her style—even in writing—is conversational. It’s like you’re sharing a cup of coffee while tracing the central motifs of the biblical story from Genesis to Revelation. Eden was great, but the new creation will be greater than the first—not because this world will be no more, but because it will be so much more. It’s not only the end of sin and death, but the kind of righteousness and life that we just can’t wrap our brain around right now. But we do get glimpses—and no better ones than those that Guthrie brings out with such warmth, excitement, and skill.”

**Michael Horton**, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California; Cohost, *White Horse Inn*; author, *Core Christianity*

“*Even Better than Eden* weaves a glorious tapestry of variegated scriptural threads. Nancy Guthrie traces nine magnificent threads from creation to consummation that provide an accessible primer on the biblical metanarrative. Each thread, when unraveled, reveals the beauty and splendor of Jesus. The pages of this book fill me with an eager anticipation of the day when we will get to our home that will be even better than Eden and the completed work of art will be unveiled in all its glory.”

**Karen Hodge**, Women’s Ministry Coordinator, Presbyterian Church in America

“One of the weaknesses of much popular Christian teaching on the Bible is the tendency to read the story of the Bible in a circular manner, as if Jesus Christ came into the world to bring us back to Eden. Nancy Guthrie charts a better course in her book. In a manner that is profoundly biblical and deeply practical, she traces nine biblical themes along a common trajectory, from their beginning in God’s good creation, through their destruction and devastation by Adam’s sin, to the ways Christ perfects, consummates, and crowns each theme by means of his suffering and glory. Let Guthrie take you by the hand and lead you through the Bible to Jesus Christ, in whom we find a better provision, a better life, a better identity, a better rest, a better wardrobe, a better spouse, a better savior, a better sanctuary, and a better city than this world in its present state could or would afford.”

**Scott Swain**, President and James Woodrow Hassell Professor of Systematic Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

“As a pastor, I have discovered that Christians need help learning to tell their own story in ways that rightly connect it to what God has preserved for us in his Word. With *Even Better than Eden*, Nancy Guthrie does just that. Here is a book that will train you to speak more winsomely to others about why and how Jesus matters.”

**David Helm**, Pastor, Holy Trinity Church, Chicago; author, *The Big Picture Story Bible*

“This delightful book will help you see—through new eyes—the beautiful threads in the rich tapestry of the Bible’s story. I will be recommending this insightful and informative book to many.”

**Jonathan Gibson**, Assistant Professor of Old Testament, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

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**Nancy Guthrie**

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*Personal Bible study questions for each chapter and a leader's guide that includes possible answers to the personal Bible study and discussion guide questions are available for download at <http://www.nancyguthrie.com/even-better-than-edem>.*

# Contents

Introduction .....	11
1 The Story of the Wilderness .....	15
2 The Story of the Tree .....	29
3 The Story of His Image .....	45
4 The Story of Clothing .....	61
5 The Story of the Bridegroom .....	75
6 The Story of Sabbath .....	93
7 The Story of Offspring .....	109
8 The Story of a Dwelling Place .....	125
9 The Story of the City .....	143
Conclusion .....	159
Discussion Guide .....	163
Notes .....	173
Bibliography .....	185
General Index .....	191
Scripture Index .....	197



# Introduction

If I were to tell you my story, I'd probably tell you about where my life began: in Kansas City, Missouri; about my parents: Claude and Ella Dee; and about my husband, David, and children, Matt, Hope, and Gabriel. I might tell you about significant events in my life: where I grew up, where I went to college and began my career, how I met and married David, how my life changed when my son Matt was born, and then changed even more when my children Hope and Gabriel died. I'd tell you where I live—in Nashville—and what I do there day to day: write and teach, avoid the grocery store and the gym, walk in the park with my friends, do the laundry, answer emails, edit my podcast, go to church, make dinner, watch more TV than I'd care to admit, and go to bed. All those things would tell you true things about me and my story. But they simply wouldn't be the most significant aspects of my story. They simply wouldn't be the most profound realities that have shaped my past, my present, or my future.

There's another story, a story that is found in the pages of the Bible—from the book of Genesis through the book of Revelation—that shapes and defines where I came from, why I am the way I am, what my life is like day to day, and what is ahead for me in the future. It is this story that explains my deepest joys as well as the empty places where contentment can be elusive. It is this story that explains my drive to be somebody and my sensitivity to feeling like a nobody. It explains what makes me cry and why I can laugh. This story explains my desire to look good, my craving for the good life, my longing for home and security, and much more.

And whether you know it or not, this same grand story—the story found in the sixty-six books of the Bible—shapes the world you live in, who you are, and what you want too. That’s why you and I need to know this story. It is where we find the answers to our questions about what really matters now and into eternity. This story has the power to change everything about our stories.

## **Eden: Where Your Story Begins**

The story of the Bible begins in Genesis 1 with God creating the heavens and the earth and putting Adam and Eve in a garden called Eden. Eden was bright and beautiful, and we tend to think of it in perfect and even ultimate terms. We often talk about our desires for the future as the restoration of Eden or returning to Eden. But the reality is, the Eden we read about in Genesis 1 and 2 wasn’t yet everything God intended for his creation. It was unsullied but incomplete. It was bursting with potential, but it wasn’t yet all that God intended for the home he would share with his people. From the very beginning Eden was not meant to be static; it was headed somewhere.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, Adam and Eve were not yet all that God intended for his people to be. They were sinless but not yet glorious, at least not as glorious as God intended them to become. Something better was held out to Adam and Eve if they obeyed God’s Word to them.

But the sad story of Eden is that Adam and Eve did not obey. Everything in Eden went terribly wrong. This is the part of the Bible’s story that explains why so much goes so terribly wrong in our stories. This is the part of the story that provides the most profound answer to our *why* questions in the hurts and hardships in our lives.

Fortunately, however, the story that began in Eden did not end there. God’s plan for his world and his people could not be thwarted by human sin. God is, even now, working out his plan to do far more than simply restore his creation to the state of integrity that was Eden. Christ came to accomplish what was necessary to open the way for us, not just back into the garden of Eden, but into a home that will be even better than Eden and a life that will be even better than the life Adam and Eve enjoyed there.

How will it be better? That's what this book is all about. Every chapter will trace a theme that runs from Genesis to Revelation and that reveals an aspect of the excellencies and superiorities of the new heaven and the new earth (which we could also call Eden 2.0, or the new Eden, or the new creation, or the city to come, or the New Jerusalem)—superior not only to life in this sin-affected world we live in now, but superior even to what Adam and Eve experienced in the original Eden.

But this book is not focused solely on what is to come when Christ returns and establishes the new heaven and the new earth, because the glory, the life, the intimacy, the security, and the newness of that future is not solely reserved for the future. We aren't yet experiencing it in the full and complete way we one day will, but it is breaking into the here and now. Think of the way Mark begins his Gospel by telling us the good news that Jesus began to tell at the start of his ministry. Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is at hand." With Christ's incarnation, the newness that comes only from him began breaking into this world. Then, in his resurrection, this newness began flooding into the world. And it is still flooding into the world as the gospel goes out and is embraced by people from every nation. The power of the gospel still brings life where there is death, hope where there is despair, beauty where there is brokenness.

As the gospel goes out and people take hold of the risen Christ by faith, the new creation continues to transform this world. This is what Paul was talking about when he wrote: "If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Cor. 5:17 NIV). In other words, to be joined to the risen Christ is to have the newness and glory and life of the greater Eden breaking into your life in the here and now. Taking hold of the glory of the future transforms your sense of shame now. A settled sense of the security of the future soothes your fear of death now. A growing sense of identity as a citizen of heaven changes how you see yourself now. Truly taking in the love relationship we're going to enjoy forever warms our hearts toward Christ now.

## *Introduction*

Paul wrote that we are those “on whom the end of the ages has come” (1 Cor. 10:11). And if that is true, we want to understand more about the end of the ages. We want to see what the original garden has to show us about the more secure, more satisfying, and more glorious garden we’re destined to live in forever, which will be even better than Eden.

## The Story of the Wilderness



I promise you: I am the last person in the world who should attempt to teach you a word in another language. I took two years of German in high school and two semesters of it in college, and all I can remember is *ich bin*, which means, “I am.” I can’t even remember enough German to make a complete sentence out of those words. Once after I spoke in a women’s prison in Colombia, South America, I wanted to be able to greet each woman as she picked up the small gift we had for her and to say, “The Lord loves you,” in Spanish. But I just couldn’t keep it straight. My husband, David, had to stand behind me and repeat the Spanish phrase over and over because I kept getting off track. Who knows what I said to those women?

But there is a Hebrew phrase I want to teach you because it adds such dimension to the story the Bible tells, beginning with the first



sentence in the Bible. And besides, it's kind of fun to say. Ready? Here it is: *tohu wabohu* (תהו ובהו).

It's there, in the opening sentences of the Bible. Our English Bible reads, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep" (Gen. 1:1–2). The Bible begins by saying that God created the heavens and the earth and that it was, in Hebrew, *tohu wabohu*. It was "without form and void" or "formless and empty" (NIV). *Tohu* means "unformed, chaotic wilderness," and *bohu* means "empty." So Genesis 1:2 tells us that when God created the heavens and the earth, it was initially an uninhabitable wasteland, a barren wilderness. There was no shape or form to it. No life could live in it.

I suppose I've always thought that when God created the earth, he spoke it into existence as it is. But evidently what God spoke into being was initially a mass of unformed matter in which nothing and no one could live. It was the raw materials to which God would give shape and form. In fact, there were three significant problems with the earth as God initially created it, according to Genesis 1:2. It was formless, empty, and dark. But it was not without hope. Why? Because "the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters" (Gen 1:2).

The Spirit of God was there hovering—or fluttering—over the deep darkness of the unformed earth like a hen hovering over an unhatched cosmos.<sup>1</sup> Something was about to happen. God, by his Spirit, through his Word, was about to illumine and order and fill his creation.

So right there in the first chapter of the Bible we discover that *tohu wabohu* is not a problem for God. As his word, "Let there be," goes out, and as the Spirit's creative energy hovers, what was dark was flooded with light, what was chaotic came to order, and what was empty was filled with life and beauty and purpose.

This is really good news. Because, although you may have been unfamiliar with the term *tohu wabohu*, the reality of it may be achingly familiar. Perhaps you sense that the deepest, most honest place inside you is *tohu wabohu*—a dark and brooding emptiness. Perhaps it is an emptiness brought about by loss. There was once something or someone that filled up that space in your life, but now your heart

aches with longing for what once was. Now there is an empty place at the table or an empty room in the house, or you sleep in an empty bed. Instead of having plans and a sense of purpose, an empty schedule and future loom before you. Or perhaps the emptiness in your life is punctuated not by what once was but by what has never been. There has never been a ring on your finger or a child in your womb or a title by your name. The dreams you have often sought to downplay for fear that saying them out loud would somehow serve to crush them, and thereby crush you, seem to be out of range or the realm of possibility. Or perhaps you can't pinpoint exactly why you have this sense of emptiness. You realize that in comparison to so many others around you, you have it good. Yet your soul harbors a nagging sense of disappointment and discontentment. It sometimes seems as if the lives of nearly everyone around you are full of purpose and meaning, life and love, fun times and future plans, which serve to punctuate the empty place in your life.

Sometimes your sense of emptiness haunts you as a nagging ache. At other times it overwhelms you as a relentless agony. Perhaps you have come to see your emptiness as your biggest problem. I have to tell you: that's not how God sees it. God sees the emptiness in your life as his greatest opportunity, because God does his best work with *empty* as he fills it with himself.

## **Discontentment in the Garden**

Adam and Eve had no reason to feel a sense of emptiness. Their world was filled with so much goodness. Everywhere they looked, they encountered what God had spoken into being and declared to be good and even very good. He put them in a garden paradise where he had planted every kind of tree that was good for food. God simply spoke, "Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, on the earth" (Gen. 1:11). And it was so. And God saw that it was good.

Anyone who has struggled to get a tree or shrub to take root in resistant ground or spent a day pulling weeds in the garden, only to see them choking out your sweet strawberries, or anyone who

has tried to chase the moles to the next-door neighbor's yard (who would do such a thing?) can hardly imagine what this must have been like. Nothing turned brown and wilted away or dried up in Eden. The prick of a thorn never sent Adam looking for a Band-Aid. Adam and Eve were given the work of filling the earth, subduing it, and exercising dominion over it. In the same way that God brought order to the initial chaos of his creation, Adam was to extend the order of Eden. Together, Adam and Eve were to be fruitful and multiply so that their progeny would extend the boundaries of Eden, filling it with men and women who, like Adam and Eve, bore the image of their Creator so that "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2:14).

There was no lack in Adam and Eve's lives; they had every reason to be perfectly content. Yet when the Serpent suggested to Eve that there was something she didn't have, something she really needed to be happy, namely, the wisdom that would come from eating from the forbidden tree and the taste experience of eating its delicious fruit, Eve allowed the perspective of the Serpent to shape her perspective. Rather than being content with all the goodness showered on her and surrounding her, Eve began to see an empty place in her life, in her diet, in her knowledge, in her experience. Her desire for something more, something other than God's provision, combined with her growing doubts about God's goodness, led her to reach out for what she thought would make her happy, fulfilled, and satisfied.

Oh, how that bite must have turned sour in her stomach as the reality of what she had done worked its way through her. Oh, how that grab for wisdom must have seemed so foolish on the other side of it. When God turned from cursing the Serpent toward telling Eve and Adam how this curse was going to affect them, it must have become clear that what she had seen as a delight was actually a disaster. The very things that were supposed to bring them so much joy and satisfaction would now bring pain and frustration. Giving birth to children and raising children in the now sin-infected world would be painful. Her one-flesh marriage to Adam would now be filled with friction. Adam's work would be frustrating instead of fulfilling. Adam

was meant to till the soil. But now it would become painful toil. The ground would grow fruit, but it would also grow thorns, thorns that would penetrate Adam's flesh.

That flicker of discontentment that Eve had entertained in the garden must have become a raging fire after she and Adam were exiled into the unsubdued wilderness that surrounded it.<sup>2</sup> But the chronic discontentment that now dogged her also proved to be a grace. It proved to be a constant reminder that complete and lasting contentment exists only in the life that was promised to them had they obeyed, had they been able to feast forever on the fruit of the tree of life. But how would they get it now? Angels were there on watch, guarding the way back into the garden.

God himself would make a way for his people to enter into a garden even better than Eden. He began by calling to himself one man living in Ur—Abraham—to live in the land God would give him. There was no angel guarding the entrance to that land when Abraham entered it, but, interestingly, when his grandson Jacob later left that land to get a wife, he wrestled with an angel on his way back in. By the end of Jacob's life, his sons were not living in the land but were enslaved in Egypt. So God sent a deliverer who announced to God's people that he had "come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (Ex. 3:8). Kind of sounds like a new Eden, doesn't it?

## **Discontentment in the Wilderness**

Unfortunately, the pathway to this edenic land took a forty-year detour in the wilderness. It was there that the discontentment inherent to life in the wilderness raised its ugly head. We read about it in the book we call Numbers but which was originally titled, "In the Wilderness." Moses tells us:

Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving. And the people of Israel also wept again and said, "Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost

nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.” (Num. 11:4–6)

It’s not that they had nothing to eat. It’s that they wanted something else to eat besides the manna God rained down on them every day. Their stomachs, in reality, were not empty. But they felt a sense of emptiness nonetheless. And it sounds a little familiar, doesn’t it? Like Adam and Eve, who were free to eat of every tree in the garden except for one—yet they felt deprived? (And like me when I order Diet Coke, and the waiter says, “Will Diet Pepsi be all right?”)

Forty years after the Israelites first allowed their appetites to give way to grumbling, as their children prepared to emerge from the wilderness into the land God had promised to give to them, Moses explained why God had let them experience empty stomachs in the first place: “He humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, *that he might make you know* that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” (Deut. 8:3).

He “let you hunger.” He allowed them to feel their emptiness. Why? So that their hunger pangs, their discontentment, would cause them to consider carefully what would deeply satisfy them, what would fill them up. It wasn’t merely spicy food. It was a divine word, a divine presence, a divine promise, a divine power for living with less than everything they might want in the wilderness of this world.

Have you ever thought about the emptiness you feel in this light? Do you think, perhaps, that God has let you hunger for whatever it is you are so hungry for so that you might become more desperate for him, more convinced that he is the source of what will fill you up? Do you think he might want to retrain your appetites, redirecting them away from this world, this life, even this age, so that your anticipation of the age to come might begin to shape your perspective on whatever it is you lack?

As they prepared to enter the land, Moses passed along this promise from God to his people:

If you will indeed obey my commandments that I command you today, to love the LORD your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, that you may gather in your grain and your wine and your oil. And he will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you shall eat and be full. Take care lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them; then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you, and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain, and the land will yield no fruit, and you will perish quickly off the good land that the LORD is giving you. (Deut. 11:13–17)

Oh, how we wish that they had learned the lessons they were meant to learn during those forty years in the wilderness. Evidently they didn't. Rather than living by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord, they consumed everything served up to them by the Canaanites living in the land. What Moses had warned them would happen if they refused to obey God became their harsh reality. God used the Babylonian army to bring judgment on his people. In the wake of their destruction, the land of milk and honey became a wilderness. The prophet Jeremiah described what Israel was like after the armies of Babylon descended on it:

I looked on the earth, and behold, it was *without form and void*;  
and to the heavens, and they had no light. . . .  
I looked, and behold, the fruitful land was a desert,  
and all its cities were laid in ruins  
before the LORD, before his fierce anger. (Jer. 4:23, 26)

Did you see our new Hebrew phrase, *tohu wabohu*, in there? Jeremiah borrows language from Genesis 1:2 to describe the condition of Judah under the devastating destruction of the Babylonian army. The land had once again become “without form and void”—*tohu wabohu*. They'd been given a land of milk and honey, and it had become a barren wasteland. Empty of beauty. Empty of life. Empty of joy.

But this was not the end of the story. Jeremiah was also given a vision of what was to come when God's people would leave behind their wilderness existence in Babylon to come home. Jeremiah prophesied, "They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall be *like a watered garden*, and they shall languish no more" (Jer. 31:12).

A "watered garden"? How would this happen? When would this happen?

### **Contentment in the Wilderness**

Real restoration began centuries later with the sound of a single voice, the voice of the messenger, John the Baptist:

The voice of one crying in the wilderness:  
"Prepare the way of the Lord;  
make his paths straight." (Matt. 3:3)

Just as the Spirit hovered and the Word went out and the dark emptiness was filled with light and life at creation, so, at the dawn of the new creation, the same Spirit hovered over the dark emptiness of a virgin's womb. Mary was told: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). Once again the Word went out, but this time instead of going out in creative power, it went out in human form. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). God flooded the world with his goodness by entering into it in the person of Jesus Christ.

Jesus, the second Adam, the true Israel, left the heavenly land of milk and honey and entered into the wilderness of this world with all of its thorns and thistles. We're meant to see it at the very beginning of his ministry: "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil" (Matt. 4:1). Just as Satan had entered the garden to tempt Adam and Eve, so the Devil entered into the wilderness to tempt Jesus. Just as Satan had twisted God's word,

stoking the fires of discontentment with God's provision of food and suggesting that Adam and Eve could reach out and grab for themselves the glory God had promised rather than trusting God to give it to them, so Satan twisted God's word toward his own evil ends, suggesting that Jesus use his power to feed himself rather than trust in God's provision of food. He tempted Jesus to grab hold of glory by indulging himself rather than waiting for the glory that would come by submitting to the cross. But instead of falling prey to what the Tempter said, Jesus responded by quoting the words God had spoken through Moses to his people in the wilderness: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4; cf. Deut. 8:3).

Matthew tells us that after Jesus passed the test of temptation in the wilderness, "angels came and were ministering to him" (Matt. 4:11). Such a different experience than that of the first Adam. The angels had stood against the first Adam as adversaries, preventing his return from the wilderness to the garden. And such a different result than the first Adam brought about. Because of the first Adam's failure to obey in a garden, all of humanity was plunged into the wilderness. But because of the second Adam's willingness to obey in the wilderness, the way back into a garden even better than Eden has been opened to us.

Jesus began assuring those who put their faith in him of this reality even as he hung on the cross, saying to the thief hanging beside him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). There, on the cross, Jesus entered into the ultimate wasteland of death—the ultimate *tohu wabohu*—in our place, so that we might enter into the abundant life that God has promised.

We get a sense of new-garden life breaking into the wilderness of the world immediately upon the resurrection of Jesus. John tells us, "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" (John 19:41). He continues, "Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and



one at the feet” (John 20:11–12). It seems that this empty tomb had become the entryway into the new garden. Two angels were there to welcome in those who were willing to identify with Jesus in his death and resurrection. We read that Mary “turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?’ Supposing him to be the gardener . . .” (John 20:14–15).

“Supposing him to be the gardener . . .” And of course, he was—he is—the Gardener! This was the dawn of the new creation. The Gardener was up at the crack of this dawn doing the work the first Adam failed to do—extending the boundaries of paradise into the wilderness of this world.<sup>3</sup> Even now the new creation is breaking into the wilderness of our lives in this world. It happens when we identify with Jesus, when we become joined to Jesus in his death and resurrection. This is what Paul means when he says, “If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come” (2 Cor. 5:17 NIV). It breaks into our lives and changes us from spiritually dead people into spiritually alive people, people who begin experiencing—in part now and in fullness forever—the unending, abundant, all-satisfying life that Adam and Eve would have enjoyed had they passed the probationary test of the tree in Eden.<sup>4</sup>

But even as I say that, perhaps you’re thinking, “Yes, that sounds good, but my life is still marked in many ways by wilderness, disappointment, discontentment, emptiness.” I get that. Mine is too. This reality makes us wonder if it is really possible to live in the wilderness of this world with any real sense of the new creation breaking in to our here and now. The apostle Paul’s experience of both the thorns of the wilderness and the contentment of the garden to come would suggest it is.

Paul’s way of expressing the pain in his life was, “I was given a thorn in my flesh” (2 Cor. 12:7 NIV). What was this thorn? We don’t know. What we do know is that it was far more than a slight discomfort. The Greek word he used for *thorn* refers to a stake—a sharpened wooden shaft used to impale someone. So whatever this thorn was, Paul felt impaled, pinned down, by it. He recounts his repeated plead-

ing with God to take it away. Clearly, whatever it was, it brought unrelenting agony.

Most of us, when we suffer, ask why. But Paul didn't ask why. He seemed to know exactly why the thorn in the flesh had been given to him and from where or—more precisely—from whom it came. Paul had been given a guided tour of paradise, the place where God dwells. Getting an advance glimpse of paradise is the kind of experience that could cause a person's head to swell with spiritual pride. "So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7). When Paul looked at the thorn, he saw the hand of God at work in his life, protecting him from using his incredible spiritual experience to make himself look good. But clearly that's not all Paul saw in the thorn.

He also described the thorn in his flesh as "a messenger of Satan, to torment me" (NIV). Satan tormented Paul with the temptation to resent God for allowing the thorn to pierce his already pain-ridden life. He tormented Paul with the temptation to blame God and grow resentful. But it was clear to Paul that Satan was not ultimately in charge of the thorn. God, in his sovereign power, was at work using what Satan meant for evil for his own good purpose. Paul understood that God intended to use the thorn for a sanctifying purpose in his life.

But he still begged for the thorn to be removed, for the pain to stop. And I appreciate that. Even when we can see that God is using the hurts in our lives to accomplish something good in us, we still want the pain to stop. Paul begged God to take it away. And then he begged again. And then he begged again. And then he heard Jesus himself speak to him: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9).

Jesus's answer to Paul's righteous, rigorous, repeated prayer was not to take the thorn away but rather to provide Paul with enough grace to enable him to endure living with the thorn. Paul would experience divine power, not in the thorn being removed, but in its being redeemed. "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me," Paul wrote

(2 Cor. 12:9). Evidently this promise of “the power of Christ”—the same power that enabled Jesus to endure the cross, the same power that raised Jesus from the dead—coming to rest on him changed Paul’s perspective about the thorn that was to continue to be a reality in his life day by day. This new perspective enabled him to say, “For the sake of Christ, then, I am *content* with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:10). Contentment in the wilderness. Contentment for now in a land where thorns produce pain.

Does this sound possible to you? Does it seem possible that you could be content even if your circumstances don’t change? Does it seem possible that you could open up to receiving divine power that would change how you think about the empty places in your life?

My friend, if you are weak—worn out from work, worn down by criticism, weary of constant demands or disappointments—if you have come to the end of yourself, if you’ve been emptied of your delusions of strength, you’re at just the right place to be filled with the goodness of God. You’re finally fillable. You’re fully dependent. There is room for the power of Christ to rest on you in such a way that it will give you the strength to be content even as you continue to live your life in the wilderness of this world.

“When I am weak, then I am strong.” This was the reality that shaped Paul’s life. But really Paul’s life was just being conformed to the pattern of Christ’s life. Jesus, the craftsman who made the world, entered into the wilderness of his world in weakness as an embryo in his mother’s womb. “He was despised and rejected by men; / a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isa. 53:3). Jesus was insulted. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46). Jesus experienced hardships. “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Luke 9:58). Jesus faced persecution. “Then they spit in his face and struck him. And some slapped him” (Matt. 26:67). Jesus experienced calamities. “[Herod] sent and had John beheaded in the prison. . . . Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself” (Matt. 14:10, 13).

You see, Jesus not only entered into the wilderness of this world; the wilderness of this world entered into him. Jesus had a thorn in the flesh—many thorns pressed into his tender flesh. And if Jesus experienced a thorn in the flesh, and we've said that it is our desire for our lives to be conformed to his, joined to his, why are we so surprised and even resentful when we feel the pain of a thorn in our flesh, when we experience the agonies of life lived in a world of wilderness?

People are so hungry for supernatural experiences—miracles of healing, visions and dreams, a personal word from God. Here is the supernatural experience that God has promised: the power of Christ coming down to rest on you, to fill you up, so that you can trust him when the worst thing you can imagine happens to you, so that you can be genuinely, if not yet perfectly, content even if he does not fill up the empty place in the way that you have longed for. At least not yet.

### **Contentment in the New Garden**

You see, this is where the story of the Bible changes everything about your story, including the emptiness and discontentment in your story. The day is coming when thorns and thistles that are a tangible sign of the impact of the curse on this world, an ever-present part of living in the wilderness of this world, will be a thing of the past. Paul writes in Romans:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. (Rom. 8:19–21)

The apostle John was allowed to see a vision of what the world will be like when creation is set free from its bondage to corruption, when it experiences the same resurrection and renewal our bodies will experience when Christ returns and raises us from our graves with bodies fit for living in the new earth. In the very last chapter of the Bible, which describes the first chapter of life in the new garden

that we'll be welcomed into, John tells us, "No longer will there be anything accursed" (Rev. 22:3). No more curse. No more thorns that bring pain. No more *tohu wabohu*. The goodness and glory of a garden even better than Eden will extend to every corner of the earth. And the goodness of God will fill up every part of you. No more disappointment. No more discontentment. All the empty places will be filled up, all your deepest longings fulfilled.

Until then we can sing:

Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,  
Pilgrim through this barren land.  
I am weak, but thou art mighty;  
Hold me with thy powerful hand.  
Bread of heaven, bread of heaven,  
Feed me till I want no more.  
Feed me till I want no more.<sup>5</sup>



“

He will wipe  
away every  
tear from their  
eyes, and death  
shall be no more,  
neither shall there be  
mourning, nor crying,  
nor pain anymore, for  
the former things  
have passed  
away.”

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**REVELATION 21:4**

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY