

*God's
Garden*

Growing in faith and fruitfulness

Index

Let my teaching fall on you like rain;
let my speech settle like dew.
Let my words fall like rain on tender grass,
like gentle showers on young plants.
Deuteronomy 32:2 (NLT)

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God creates a Garden

Jay and Mia made themselves comfortable, eagerly wanting to find out all about God's garden. But this was more than a story, for what they were about to hear had actually happened. As the thick book was opened at the very beginning, Mia closed her eyes to listen.

Before they knew it, they seemed to be right there—before time began. It was dark and they saw what looked like a mud ball in the distance.

For a long time, nothing happened.

But God had been working on a magnificent plan. And now everything was ready. The time had come for God to show His awesome power and His unchanging love.

Heaven stood breathless, waiting to see God form

a garden from the shapeless blob, then watch as He filled the garden with life.

God looked at the earth—a colorless lump floating silently in space. Then He spoke!

“Let there be light,” He said. And as the dazzling brightness raced through endless space, it pushed aside all gloomy darkness.

Then God stretched out the sky and wrapped it around the world. His powerful voice gathered the water into the sea so that dry land appeared.

God spoke again and all kinds of shapes appeared. Round berries, spiky grass, oval seeds and jagged leaves.

At God's command, the sun, moon, and stars shone from their places and paths, and the first moments of time passed by. As the sun made its way from east to west, its warm glow lit up the countryside. Invisible rays reflected the richest of colors, while dappled shadows moved slowly along the ground.

Genesis 1

As God spoke again, delicate sounds of life rippled across the earth. A hiss, a buzz, a squeak, and a grunt. Creatures of all kinds started to swim and crawl, hop and run, climb and fly.

Jay and Mia looked wide-eyed at everything around them. Then they looked at each other. What is this amazing place? Where are we, they wondered.

There was no one else around—just the two of them. Yet there seemed to be someone close by. They held their breath as their hearts filled with a powerful feeling—a feeling without words.

Was this even real? As they stood looking at each other, they became aware of a sound in the distance. "I'm going to see what it is," Jay said.

Mia was so caught up with the beauty around her, she could have stayed there forever. But when she turned and saw Jay disappearing between the trees, she quickly ran after him. "Wait, I'm coming!" she shouted.

They made their way through the thick undergrowth, stepping over plants and ducking for

branches. Mia, who was usually terrified of spiders and critters, apologized to the scurrying creatures as if they were friends. Suddenly, Jay stopped.

"Wow!" he gasped. There it was. A glistening, gushing river more beautiful than anything they had ever seen. Mia's mouth hung open.

For a long time, Jay stood staring at the river. Finally he said, "I remember reading about a river that flowed from the Garden of Eden. Perhaps we're right there."

The crystal pure water looked inviting, but they dared not go near it, believing that if they touched the water, their special moment would end. So they sat down on the riverbank and gazed at God's creation. It was like being in the front row seats of an enormous theatre.

The light slowly dimmed as the glowing sun slid behind the jagged horizon. And as they looked into what seemed to be eternity, they felt a peace and joy like never before.

Genesis 2:10

The Perfect Garden

Having discovered how the earth came to be, Jay and Mia counted the days since the first day of creation. Today was the sixth day, and the garden that the Lord had been working on looked perfect. Yet, it seemed as though He wasn't finished.

What else could God add to make it better, Mia wondered. As they read on, she held her breath.

God bent down. He gathered some dust from the ground and shaped it like a man. Then He breathed His breath of life into the man... and the man became a living person.

The man was very different from the animals, for God had placed a *forever-seed* in his heart and made the man like *He* was.

The man's name was Adam, and God put him in the

Genesis 2:4-25, Ecclesiastes 3:11 (NIV)

most beautiful part of the garden.

For a while, God watched Adam, and He noticed that Adam needed a friend and helper. So God let him fall into a deep sleep. Then He took a rib from Adam's side and made a woman from the rib. God closed up his side again and brought the woman to Adam to be his wife. Adam was very pleased to have someone just like him, and he called his wife Eve.

By the end of the sixth day God had finished creating His garden. On the seventh day, God rested from His work and as He looked at His creation, He saw how perfect it was. God blessed the seventh day and made it special—a day to be kept for Him.

The whole world was as beautiful as you can imagine, and even more spectacular was the paradise in which Adam and Eve found themselves. This was the Garden of Eden.

God put Adam in charge of the garden and allowed him to enjoy everything in it. Adam and Eve were given the freedom to think and do whatever they

wanted to. They could decide *what* they wanted to do and *how* they wanted to do it. However, this freedom meant that they could even decide whether or not to obey God.

At that time, God told Adam that there was one thing he must never do. "You must not eat from the tree in the middle of the garden," God warned. "If you eat its fruit, you are sure to die."

If Adam did eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, it would show his disobedience to God. It meant that he would become like a god who decides what is right and what is wrong.

But for now, everything was good and beautiful and perfect. The story of God's garden had just begun and everything was working out as God had planned.

Trouble in the Garden

Jay and Mia were chatting about the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. "What kind of fruit do you think it was?" Jay asked.

"An apple, of course," Mia answered.

But when Jay checked his Bible, he noticed that it didn't actually say what fruit it was. "All it says here is that the fruit looked delicious," Jay pointed out, and that got them talking about their favorite fruit.

Meanwhile, it was another beautiful day in Eden. Adam and Eve were walking near the middle of the garden where the forbidden tree was planted.

Mia wanted to shout to them, "Get away from there! Remember what God said!" But her words got stuck inside, and she nervously watched them stop and look at the tree.

Adam stood there for a moment. He seemed nervous. Eve, who was with him, seemed a little more daring and walked towards the tree.

Gazing at the fruit, she slowly moved closer and closer. Then, a little unsure, Eve thought about God's warning not to eat the fruit.

As she stood there, a strange voice from somewhere said, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from *any* tree in the Garden'?" It was the voice of a serpent. Yet Eve didn't seem surprised, for the serpent was more cunning and clever than any other wild animal.

Eve said to the serpent, "Of course we may eat fruit from the trees in the garden. It's only the tree here in the middle of the garden... God said that we must not eat from *this* tree, or we will die."

"You won't die," the serpent assured her. "God knows that if you eat this fruit, you will become like Him, for you will know what good is *and* what evil is."

Genesis 3:1-19

So Eve picked the fruit and gave some to Adam, and they ate it. Immediately, they knew things they had never known before.

Until that moment, Adam didn't know what sin was, for his thoughts had only been good. But now, the seed of sin had fallen into his heart.

There it was, right at the center of his *forever-heart*, and he could do nothing about it.

Later that day, Adam and Eve heard God walking in the garden. They were afraid and quickly tried to hide because they knew they had done wrong.

But no one can hide from God.

The Lord God called to Adam; "Where are you?"

Adam came out, embarrassed and ashamed. "I was hiding because I was naked," he answered.

"Have you eaten from the tree I told you not to eat from?" God asked.

Adam knew he couldn't say 'no.' So he blamed Eve for giving him the fruit; and Eve blamed the serpent for tricking her. But each one had done wrong, and each one would be punished.

God told Adam that he would have to work hard to make things grow. Weeds would come up and make his life difficult.

He told Eve that having a baby would be painful for her, and that from now on her husband would take charge of their relationship.

As for the serpent, God cursed him and said, "You will slither on your belly for the rest of your life. The woman's seed* will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."

Then God sent Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden. He placed an angel at the gate to guard it, for in the garden was another special tree—the Tree of Life. God made sure that no one would be able to go back and eat from the Tree of Life, and so live forever.

* *A descendant of Eve*

Romans 16:20, Genesis 3:22-24

The Garden of the Heart

Mia stared at the book and sighed. Her sad face showed a deep-felt disappointment: "The story of God's Garden had just begun, and it had been messed up already!"

Next to her, Jay sat daydreaming. Fascinated by reptiles, he was trying to picture the frustration of the serpent as he struggled along without legs.

"I think we should start another book," Mia said, "... a book with a happy ending."

But Jay wasn't quitting. "I'm sure the story will get better," he insisted. "Let's just carry on."

And so they did.

Little did they know that they would find out about another garden—an invisible garden growing inside every person.

When God breathed life into Adam, his heart was as perfect as the paradise he was in.

Then God put Adam in charge of the garden. Adam was free to think and do whatever he wanted to, which meant that he was in charge of his heart too.

Being in charge was an important job. Adam had to look after the garden around him while also caring for the garden inside.

But when Adam chose to disobey God, sin started growing in his *forever-heart*, just like the weeds that were coming up around him.

Adam's heart didn't feel the way it used to. His sin made him feel guilty and messy inside. This was what God had meant when He said, "The day you eat from this tree, you will die."

Adam's *forever-heart* had died, and there was nothing he could do to make things right again.

From then on, Adam would have to work hard to keep things growing. Except weeds. They came up

easily and spread all over.

In the same way, the seeds of sin grew in Adam's heart and spread to every person born after him. And so, as time passed by, sin spread around the whole world.

Yet because God loves us, He made a promise. He promised that He would not allow the devil to take over and destroy the whole garden.

God would send a mighty Conqueror to crush His enemy's power, which means, the devil would never be able to take over our hearts by force either. Instead, God will save everyone who believes in the mighty conqueror.

Jay was deep in thought. What he'd heard about Adam's heart made him think of his own disobedience. He knew that he was far from perfect, and he really wanted to be good.

Mia, too, wished she could be different by being

Genesis 3:17-19, 1 Corinthians 15:21-26, Isaiah 9:6

helpful and saying only what is kind and true. Now there was hope. She knew that God had promised to send someone whose goodness overpowers evil; and that meant, *He* could make her good inside.

Mia was determined to search all over the garden until she found God's Conqueror—the Prince of Peace.

The Hard Soil

For the first time, Jay realized why weeds kept coming up in their garden. "It's all Adam's fault," he complained.

Jay's mom had asked him to pull out some weeds in the garden. It was the one thing he really disliked because it wasn't long before they'd come up again. On garden days, Mia's task was to cut back the dead flowers. As she did so, she held up a wilted flower and saw how Adam's disobedience had caused its beauty to die. Nothing in nature was lasting.

Late that afternoon, Jay and Mia were drawn back into their book, and they imagined themselves walking down a path. In the blurry distance, they saw a farmer sowing seed.

When they got there, Mia noticed that some seed had fallen on the footpath. A few birds fluttered about, pecking at the seeds on the ground.

Mia was puzzled, but as they read on, she found out what the story meant.

"The seed is the Word of God," Jesus said. The path is like a person who hears the Word, but his heart is hard. When the seeds of truth fall on his heart, the devil comes to snatch away the seeds. And so, the words of Life that come from God cannot sprout in his *forever-heart*.

That's what happened to Adam's heart. While everything was still perfect on earth, God would come and spent time with Adam in the garden. As God talked to him, the seeds of truth fell on his heart.

But when Adam chose to believe the devil's lies instead, his heart became as hard as a footpath.

If Adam had obeyed God, his faith would have grown. But instead, the devil snatched away God's seeds of Truth.

Mia's eyes lit up. "Now I get it," she said. "By doing what God says, we keep our hearts soft. That way,

Luke 8:4-5, Luke 8:11-12

the words of Eternal Life can grow in our hearts."

She was right.

But Jay, who was no longer sitting next to her, missed what Mia had said. Fascinated by the birds in the story, he had run off to find some seed to feed them.

The door of the garden shed clanked open and Jay stooped to the shelf where the seeds were kept. He carefully searched through each packet and tub for wheat seeds. Nothing.

Disappointed, Jay banged the door shut and almost bumped into Mia, who had come to help him. "Can't find any seed," he said.

Mia thought for a moment. "I have an idea. Let's use some of the wheat seeds from the bread rolls mom bought."

"Brilliant!" Jay exclaimed. They ran inside, flipped open the bread bin and scraped together a handful of seeds. Then they hurried out to the brick driveway and scattered the seeds.

For a while, nothing happened. Jay and Mia patiently watched from a distance. They waited and waited.

Then, just as Mia suggested they go back inside, a sparrow fluttered down and hopped over to the seed. Within minutes, there was another bird. And another. The birds busily pecked at the seed until the very last kernel had disappeared.

The Rocky Soil

Jay and Mia had wandered off into a very special part of the garden. The place was called the *Garden of the Heart*. Unlike a real garden, this garden showed what happens inside the heart of a person.

As they read their book, the path next to the field seemed to draw them along it and Mia was keen to find out where it would lead.

They hadn't gone far when they came to a place where the farmer's young plants looked weak and wilted.

Jay was quick to figure out what the problem was. The seeds had landed between some rocks and the small plants struggled to put their roots down.

As the scorching sun rose high in the sky, it baked the shallow soil and caused the tender plants to wilt.

Jesus said that the rocky soil is like a person who gladly hears the Word of God.

In his excitement, his roots of faith start to grow, but they don't go down deep. So when it becomes harder to follow God's ways, this person's enthusiasm shrivels up and he no longer wants to do what is right.

That's what happened to Cain.

Adam and Eve had two children, Cain and Abel. As they grew up, they both believed in God. One day, they wanted to make an offering to God—a gift from the daily work they did. God looked with favor on Abel and was pleased with his offering, but He was not pleased with Cain's offering. This made Cain angry.

The Lord saw what was happening in Cain's heart and said to him, "Why are you so angry? Do what is right and you will be accepted." But instead of doing what God said, Cain allowed his anger to grow.

Later, when the two brothers were in the field alone,

Luke 8:6, Luke 8:13, Genesis 4:3-8

Cain attacked Abel and killed him. He didn't realize that God, who is in heaven above, saw everything.

Cain had been a farmer who plowed the soil and grew crops for food. But because of what he had done to his brother, the Lord said to him, "From now on, when you try to farm the land, nothing will grow in the soil. You will be a homeless wanderer for the rest of your life."

Because Cain let rocks of jealousy and anger fill his heart, the land he once farmed—and his heart—became like a desert where nothing would grow.

The Weedy Soil

Mia had taken the lead because Jay was busy looking for bugs and other creepy things along the way. As they walked, the path they were on became narrower. Tall weeds on either side made the going difficult.

"Ouch!" Mia exclaimed as the thorns scratched her legs. "Why has the farmer let the weeds get out of hand like this?"

Jay stopped and looked around. "Maybe he's too busy to clear all this land for growing crops."

But then Mia leaned over to look more closely. "Come see, Jay! There are lots of small plants trying to grow between the thorn bushes. Surely the farmer sowed the good seed here."

As they continued to read about the sower and the seed, they discovered how the thorns got to grow up

around the plants.

"The ground with thorns is like a person who hears the Word of God," Jesus explained. "But the worries, riches, and pleasures of life choke the faith that has started to grow."

Selfish thoughts slowly spread and force out the good thoughts that God has planted in the heart. That means, people with weedy hearts can't grow strong in their faith.

Jay and Mia were walking in a part of the garden that shows what it is like inside a person's heart. As Mia thought about the weeds of sin, she remembered hearing about people living in the days of Noah.

The people at that time did not obey God. Instead, they did every wrong and evil thing they could think of.

God was sorry He had created people. It broke His

Luke 8:7, Luke 8:14

heart that they had ruined His wonderful plan for them. But God's love for mankind was so great that He couldn't allow things to get worse and worse. So He decided to clear His Garden of sin and start over.

However, God planned to make a way to save all those who believed in Him.

At that time, there was one good man who believed in God. His name was Noah. God told him to build a huge boat—an ark big enough for lots of animals. The ark would keep Noah and his family safe as God washed away the rottenness on earth with a flood.

When Noah had finished building the ark, God brought pairs of each kind of animal to be kept safe in the ark. Then God told Noah and his family to go inside too. God waited seven more days in case someone else believed and wanted to join them. But no one did.

Then God shut the door.

It started to rain, and it rained for forty days and nights until the water covered the highest moun-

Genesis 6:5-7, Genesis 7:1-12, 2 Peter 2:5

tains. Meanwhile, Noah and his family and the animals were safe inside the floating ark.

After many days, God stopped the rain, and slowly the flood water started going down again. Finally, the day came when the earth was dry and it was safe for Noah to open the door and go outside.

Everything seemed so beautiful and new. All the ugliness was gone! For a while, life on earth was almost as perfect as it was in the Garden of Eden.

But sadly, as the years passed, the sinful thoughts that lay buried in the hearts of people began to grow again. And wherever sin was allowed to grow, it choked out goodness, peace, and joy.

James 1:14-15

The Good Soil

As Jay and Mia trudged down the dusty path, their discouragement had become obvious. The book was meant to be about God's beautiful garden. Now it seemed as though all hope of enjoying it had faded.

Mia stopped. She sighed and looked around. "I wonder if this is still part of God's garden. Maybe we're lost."

But Jay, who wasn't one to give up easily, shaded his eyes from the glaring sun and stared into the distance. "I think I can see a signpost over there!" he said with a note of excitement.

Mia's face lit up with hope. Tired as she was, she started to run, and although Jay was usually faster, Mia got to the sign first. The writing on the sign had faded and they could barely read what it said. Still panting, they slowly spelled out the words: *The path to Good Soil.*

"So there is still good soil somewhere!" Mia yelled excitedly. "We must carry on till we find it—that's where God's perfect garden is!"

So, on they walked... a lot more cheerful and hopeful.

They had hiked quite a distance when they came to a big tree and decided to rest there. In its welcome shade, they found a wooden bench and an old carved signpost showing the map of Canaan.

"Maybe that's where the good soil is!" Jay said trying to reassure his sister.

Mia thought for a while. Then she said, "Remember, Jay, the soil in Jesus' story is not about a place—it's about a person's heart."

As she said that, it all started making sense to her. "That means, the *good* soil is the heart of a person who believes in God!"

Mia was right.

Abram had a fertile heart like that. He had faith in God, and so the words that God spoke to him grew in his heart.

Yet, Jay was right about the good soil too. The land that God had promised Abram had become very fertile.

It all started when Abram and his nephew Lot lived close together with their flocks of sheep and herds of cattle. As time went by, there wasn't enough grassy land for all their animals, and their herdsman started to quarrel.

Then Abram said to Lot, "There's plenty of land out there. Let's go our separate ways. If you go to the left, I'll go to the right. If you choose the land on the right, I'll take the land on the left."

When Lot saw that the well-watered Jordan valley was as green as the garden of the Lord, he chose the whole valley for himself.

So Lot went to live near Sodom, while Abram went

Luke 8:8, Luke 8:15, Genesis 13:5-17

to live in the land of Canaan.

Abram **trusted** God and, because of his faith, God blessed the land of Canaan and changed ordinary soil to good soil. Canaan later became known as the *Promised Land* because God promised to give it to Abram. All the land he could see would be a never-ending gift to him and to those who would come after him.

Abram also **obeyed** God and, because of his obedience, God promised that the goodness in his heart would grow and multiply. God said, "Through your seed, all the nations of the earth shall be blessed."

Like the good soil in the story Jesus told, Abram's seed would bring about a harvest of goodness many times more than was sown.

Some time after God had made this promise to Abram, He said, "I am changing your name to Abraham, for you will be the father of many nations."

Genesis 22:17-18, Galatians 3:29, Romans 4:16

One day, when we are in heaven, we will see that God kept His promise to Abraham. For there will be a large crowd; people from every nation and tribe standing in front of God's throne. All those who, like Abraham, believed God and obeyed Him.

For as the soil makes the sprout come up
and a garden causes seeds to grow,
so the Sovereign LORD will make
righteousness and praise
spring up before all nations.

Isaiah 61:11

Revelation 7:9

Which way?

Mia wanted her heart to be good, like the good soil Jesus spoke of. So she tried to please everyone and think only good thoughts. But as hard as she tried, she would mess up before the day was done. Jay, too, was struggling. It was often hard for him to forgive and not become angry.

As they walked along, they came to a crossroads. There were two ways to go and they needed to choose the one or the other.

A sign pointing toward a small gate read: "*The road that leads to Life.*" Beyond the gate, a narrow path stretched into the distance.

The road going the other way, however, seemed easier and wider, and Mia was attracted by its sign, which simply read: "*The way to a better you.*"

Matthew 7:13-14

That's exactly what she wanted. So Mia confidently headed down the wide path, persuading Jay that they most likely didn't have far to go.

Colorful flowers lined the pathway, and even Jay was convinced that this was the right way to God's Garden. But as he walked along, he remembered how Abram let Lot choose the lush green land, while he took the dry land. Jay admired Abram's faith—faith that God could bring about beauty and blessing from nothing.

Somehow, the path they were on was so wide and so easy that walking along it needed no faith at all. It seemed too charming to be real, and Jay wondered whether they may be going the wrong way. Yet Mia's confident stride urged him on.

As they continued, the flowers seemed to thin out and ugly weeds grew between them. With the crossroads sign way back in the distance, a new sign up ahead was a welcome sight. This sign, however, wasn't one bit helpful. It was a warning notice with all sorts of rules and instructions—a list of things they had to do, and things they were forbidden to

Proverbs 14:12

do.

Yet Mia believed that if she kept all these rules, she'd be good enough to enter God's Garden.

So they plodded along, feeling more and more worn out from keeping the list of pointless rules on the seemingly endless path. It felt as though they were carrying an enormous load—a load that was getting heavier with each step.

"We have to go back!" Jay said. "We're on the wrong path."

Those few words were enough to convince Mia. "You're right, she said. "This is a path to nowhere! Let's get back to the crossroads and take the narrow road instead."

So they turned around and slowly headed back.



The Land of Plenty

Jay and Mia had taken a wrong turn. But realizing their mistake, they were soon back on track, reading from the book that had taught them so much about God.

Having made their way back to the crossroads, they entered through the small gate and headed along the narrow path that leads to Life.

As they followed the path, the land around them became more and more like a desert. It was hot, dry and dusty. Both Mia and Jay wondered whether they had made another mistake, but neither of them dared to share their thoughts. So on they walked.

With the scorching sun beating down on the pale brown sand, this was far from the cool garden they'd expected.

"I'd be quite happy to quit right now," Jay said. "I

don't even know why we're doing this."

But Mia's faith made her determined to keep going. "Well, *I'm* not giving up... and neither are you. We're in this together." And that settled the matter from then on.

After what seemed an age, they heard a faint sound, like the sound of a large crowd. Jay's enthusiasm quickly returned as he realized that the path they were on was leading toward the distant hum.

Suddenly, as if they'd leapt forward in time, Jay and Mia stood on the ridge of a small hill. What they saw made their mouths hang open. There were people—thousands of people—people and tents as far as the eye could see.

"What are all these people doing here?" Jay muttered, not expecting an answer.

They soon found out. These were Israelites camping at a place called Kadesh. At least *they* were in the shade of a cloud that God was using to guide them through the desert.

Numbers 13

Over the years, Abraham's family had become a great nation. They were called the Israelites. In a miraculous way, God had rescued them from slavery in Egypt and opened a path for them through the Red Sea.

Now—as God had promised Abraham—they were on their way to Canaan. God wanted the Israelites to live in a part of the garden He had specially prepared for them.

Mia sensed that they were on the right track at last. So they followed Moses, step by step, page by page, through their book. It wasn't long before Mia imagined her brother leading her by the hand to the front of the crowd.

As they stood there, Moses—the leader of the Israelites—got ready to speak.

Once the crowd had quieted down, Moses said to the people; "God wants us to choose men to go into the Promised Land to see what it is like."

Mia looked at Jay to make sure she had heard right.

"This means we're almost there!" she whispered. Excitement filled the air and Mia clenched her fists.

Twelve brave leaders were chosen from among the Israelites—one from every tribe. After Moses had given them instructions, the twelve men set off on their expedition to Canaan.

They were away for forty long days, but for Mia and Jay it seemed like only a few minutes. Both were anxiously waiting to find out what the men would say about the land.

When the twelve explorers got back, everybody crowded around them, eager to hear what they had seen there.

"The land is beautiful—a place where milk and honey flows," they said. "Look, here is some of the fruit we picked." They showed the people a bunch of grapes so big that it took two men to carry it on a pole between them.

Jay smiled as he saw Mia rubbing her hands with excitement.

But, there was bad news.

"The people who live there are powerful and their cities have huge walls around them," the explorers said. However, two of the men, Joshua and Caleb, said, "Let's go at once to take the land. We can certainly conquer it, for the Lord will lead us into the land."

Sadly though, the people listened to the other men who said they'd never be able to live there. And so, instead of trusting God, they all started to complain and moan, and some even wanted to go all the way back to Egypt.

God was disappointed and angry that his people didn't believe He could help them. He had saved them from the Egyptians and had cared for them in the desert. Now that they were almost there, they doubted that God was able to give them the land.

So God said to them, "Because you didn't believe, you will stay in the desert for the rest of your lives. Only your children will go into the land I promised to give you."

Numbers 14:1-12, Numbers 14:30-35

The Promised Garden

As time passed, Jay and Mia got to the part in their Book where God said to the Israelites, "The time has come for you to go live in the land I have given you."

For forty long years, the people had wandered around in the dusty desert. Finally, the day had come for them to enter the fruitful land of Canaan.

But there was a problem. To get to Canaan, they'd have to cross a wide river. The Jordan River, which was in flood, flowed from way up in the north right down to the dead sea in the south.

Jay and Mia wondered how thousands of families with all their animals would get to the other side.

While everyone was waiting, Jay's thoughts drifted to a fishing trip he'd been on. It was a river, just like this.

Joshua 1:1-5

His attention snapped back as he heard the crowd cheering. Twelve men were slowly heading toward the river carrying a beautifully crafted box. Jay later found out that they were priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant.

The crowd grew quiet. As the feet of the priests touched the river's edge, the water stopped flowing. Further upstream, God had made the water pile up at a town called Adam. The priests continued to walk. Then they stood still in the middle of the Jordan.

Amazed, and perhaps a little nervous, thousands of people started making their way across the dry riverbed. Mia held her breath until the last of the Israelites had crossed over.

Then twelve men—one from each tribe—were chosen. Each of them was to take a large stone from the middle of the riverbed and carry it to the place where they would camp. The twelve stones were placed in a heap to remind the Israelites of what God had done for them.

Joshua 3:7-17, Numbers 33:51-55

Finally, the priests, who were still standing in the middle of the Jordan, also crossed over. The moment they reached the riverbank of Canaan, the river came gushing down in full flood, as it had done before.

Mia looked around and, to her great excitement, realized that she and Jay were on the other side too. They had made it into the Promised Land—the new garden that God had prepared for His people!

Everyone was overjoyed. Now they'd have their very own places to live. They'd be able to grow their own herbs, and wheat, and vegetables, and fruit.

But there was another problem. They would have to face a strong enemy and drive them out of the land. The people there did not believe in God. Instead, they had chosen to worship heathen gods.

God did not want the weeds of sin in the land to spread to the hearts of His people. So He promised to help them clear the land of the ungodly, together with their many idols.

Perhaps, then, one place on earth would be a bit like His kingdom in heaven.

The Green Tree

Jay was completely caught up by all the action around him. He heard exciting stories as Joshua, Caleb, Gideon and others led the Israelites into battle with the Canaanite armies. The Lord God did mighty miracles through the brave men and women who trusted Him. But not everyone was committed to God.

After a while, the disobedience of some started to spread and they no longer followed God's ways. And so their hearts became hard.

As the years came and went, the Israelites didn't do a very good job of driving the godless people from the land. In fact, the Israelites even started to worship heathen gods instead of staying true to the only God—the Creator of heaven and earth.

And so, although the Garden of Promise was beautiful, it wasn't quite as perfect as Mia had imagined. Still, the garden had trees and wild flowers and

wheat fields, unlike the desert they had come from. But, there were also patches of weeds, rocks, and hard ground where nothing would grow.

A gentle breeze swayed the branches of nearby trees where a flock of birds chirped and fluttered about. It felt so peaceful that Jay and Mia would have stayed there all day had they not felt the urge to keep going.

Jay looked around and caught sight of a footpath that must have just appeared, for he hadn't noticed it before. "Let's see where that path takes us!" he suggested.

Mia jumped up, ready for the challenge. "Well, what are you waiting for?" she said with a cheeky smile.

They set off on the path that zigzagged up a steep slope. Up and up and up they went. "Watch out for loose stones," Jay cautioned. "We don't want you tumbling down to the bottom."

Mia rolled her eyes and thought, 'Really? Just because I'm younger than you.' She put her hands on her hips and confidently replied, "The Lord

Psalm 18:32-33

has given me feet like a deer, so you don't need to worry!"

Jay would have teased her about her 'deer' feet, but he admired her faith in God, and said, "You're right, you sure have feet like that!"

From the top of the hill, the pile of stones the Israelites had made looked rather small; and although they would leave it behind, Jay and Mia would never forget God's faithfulness.

On the other side of the hill, the footpath led down to a valley where green trees lined the banks of a lazy river. Halfway down the hill, Jay shouted, "We can take a break under the trees down there."

"Good idea!" Mia shouted back. "Wait for me to catch up!"

But once Jay realized that the trees were laden with fruit, it was hard for him to hold back. So he started to run and didn't stop until he'd reached the nearest tree.

Mia, not far behind, had slowed to a walk. She flicked the hair from her face and wiped her brow.

When she got to the trees, Jay was munching an apple. "Delicious!" he said as the juice ran down his chin. He picked another and said, "Here. Catch!"

She missed.

Mia was more interested in the red ribbon that hung loosely around a tree trunk. She walked around to the other side and discovered a shiny, gold sign that had been fastened to the tree.

She leaned forward to see the engraved writing, then slowly read the words aloud...

Blessed and happy are those who do
not listen to wicked people,
or go where they go.

Instead, they delight in obeying God
and thinking about all He has said.

They are like a tree planted
close to a stream.

They bear fruit at the right time
and always have green leaves.
Everything they do thrives.

Psalm 1:1-3

Sour Grapes

After a short break, Jay slowly got up and stretched this way and that. Mia hastily gathered some fruit for their journey, and they set off along the narrow path once again. Mia sang as she skipped along in the dappled shade of the trees. By late afternoon they came to a vineyard set on a hillside.

"I *love* grapes!" Mia exclaimed. "I hope they're ripe."

"I guess so," Jay said. "They're in season at the moment. Imagine if we came across huge bunches like those the spies found here in Canaan."

Mia's eyes lit up. "Do you really think so, Jay? Let's go see."

The farmer had obviously done a lot of work to clear away the stones and prepare the soil. Yet somehow the vineyard looked neglected—as if something bad had happened. The walls were broken down and tall weeds were taking over.

As they walked through the rows of vines, they heard singing. It sounded like a sad song, and Mia slowly tip-toed closer to hear the words.

It was a song about the owner of the vineyard. He had chosen this special place with fertile ground. After clearing it and digging it up, he planted the very best vines. Then he built a lookout tower, and a winepress to use at harvest time.

The music changed as the song told of the owner waiting patiently for the harvest. He was expecting a wonderful crop of grapes. So when the grapes were ready, he excitedly went out to try them... but they tasted terrible—every single grape was bad!

The sad song faded, and then there was silence.

Although the song was sung in an unknown language—perhaps a heavenly language—Mia recognized the words in her heart, and tears rolled down her cheeks. She listened for a long time, hoping to hear the heavenly music again, but there was nothing.

Isaiah 5:1-7

"What's wrong, Mia?" Jay asked.

"It's so sad," Mia replied quietly. "I just don't understand it."

"What, Mia? What don't you understand?"

"Why the Israelites didn't love God."

"What do you mean? What does this vineyard have to do with the Israelites?"

"Everything, Jay! This song is about them. *They* are the vines. The Lord chose the perfect place for them to live. He cleared the land of everything that would keep them from growing in their faith. He even gave them leaders to watch over them and protect them.

"But the people let their hearts become hard and ugly, and the things they did were bad—bad like the grapes in the vineyard.

"And this is the really sad part, Jay. Because the Israelites weren't showing good fruit like kindness,

2 Kings 25:10-12

purity, and honesty, God allowed their walls to be broken down and has let the vineyard go to ruin."

The Owner's Son

As Jay and Mia read about the disobedient hearts of the people, Mia realized that they were steadily destroying God's second garden.

She looked concerned. "If their sin keeps spreading," she said, "there won't be a single place in the garden where goodness can grow. What then?"

"That's why God sent prophets to warn His people," Jay said. "They told the people to turn from their sinful ways or else they'd be forced to leave their garden, and their land would go to ruin."

But the people didn't listen to the prophets. So God let an enemy break down their city wall and take them as slaves to a far-away country. There, in Babylon, the Israelites had to serve their enemies for seventy long years.

Yet, God did not forget His people. He showed His

Nehemiah 6:15-16, Ezra 6:15, Luke 20:9-13

love and mercy by giving them another chance to follow His ways.

After the seventy years, God allowed the Israelites to go back to their land—a land which still lay in rubble and ruins. However, God had a plan. He chose Nehemiah and Ezra to help the people rebuild the city wall and the Temple.

As time went by, the people settled comfortably in their houses, and everything seemed as it was before. But the people's hearts hadn't changed. Instead of faith, there was pride. Many thought only of themselves while some were cruel and treated the poor unfairly.

Jay sighed. There seemed to be no hope of the Promised Land flourishing with goodness. "Maybe we should skip ahead in the book to see if God had another plan," he said.

He turned to the second half of the book and flipped through the pages. Mia suddenly stopped him. "Let's read this part over here," she said, pointing to the heading of a chapter.

"Sure," Jay agreed. Mia sat back and closed her eyes, and as she listened to the story she let her thoughts carry her away.

Their shortcut led them to another vineyard a little further along the way. "There's the entrance!" Mia said. Jay was about to push open the heavy gate when they heard voices on the other side of the wall.

A man—the owner of the vineyard—told some workers that he was going away for a time and asked them to look after the vineyard for him. "As payment," said the owner, "you can sell the grapes and keep the money."

Then the owner left the vineyard. Although Jay and Mia were standing right there at the entrance, he didn't seem to notice them and headed down the road.

The months passed by in moments, and the grapes had turned dark and sweet. So the owner sent a servant to ask the renters for some of the grapes.

Luke 20:9-15

Jay and Mia watched the servant go in through the gate. As the two of them crept closer to listen, they were shocked by what they heard.

The loud scuffle and shouting scared Mia, for it seemed like someone was being beaten up. Then the men threw the servant out and chased him away with nothing to take back.

Some time later, another servant came, and the same thing happened to him. After that, a third servant came to ask for some grapes, but they beat him up too.

"What's going on?" Mia asked.

"The only way we'll find out is if we follow the servant," Jay replied. So they slowly followed the battered servant back to the owner's house.

When the owner heard what had happened, he sighed and said, "What am I going to do?" He thought and thought. Then he said, "I know what! I will send my son—the one I love so much. They will surely respect him!"

But when the owner's son got to the vineyard, the workers said to each other, "This is the owner's son. The vineyard will be his one day. Let's get rid of him; then the vineyard will be ours." So they took him outside the vineyard and killed him.

Mia sat quietly, wondering what this story could mean. Everything about it seemed wrong. Stories shouldn't end that way!

Jay noticed her frown. He wanted to help her, but he didn't fully understand the story either. He read on a bit and said, "It almost seems as if Jesus was telling this story about Himself."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Well, if Jesus is the owner's son," he said, "God would be the owner of the vineyard."

"But, God doesn't just own a vineyard," Mia said. "He owns the *whole* world!"

As she said it, her frown eased. Suddenly, it made sense.

She looked at Jay and said in quiet astonishment,
"God sent His Son into the world—to sinful people
... and we killed Him."

I don't want to die

Mia finally realized that God sent His Son to earth because He loved us too much to give up on us. What she didn't understand, though, was why Jesus was beaten and killed. 'Surely,' she thought, 'with God there is a reason for everything that happens. Did something go wrong?'

This troubled Mia, and as Jay led the way, she kept looking for a clue—something that could help her figure out why Jesus had died.

Mia was so deep in thought that she almost walked into a man—a gardener—planting some seed.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she said. "I must have been day-dreaming."

"You seem to have something important on your mind," the gardener said. "What could be troubling you?"

"Oh, nothing really. It's just that I can't stop thinking about something bad that happened at the vineyard back there."

"Something *really* bad!" Jay added.

"Oh," said the gardener. "Yes, I know about that. I know what happened."

"You do?" Mia exclaimed.

"Let me help you understand," the gardener said as he held out his hand and showed them a seed.

"This kernel of wheat is all dried out and dead. But a miracle happens when it is buried in the ground. Although the outer part of the seed dies, the heart of the seed comes to life and produces many new kernels—almost like a harvest of new lives.

"In the same way, Jesus, who was sinless, had to die and be buried, so that His new life could bring a harvest of goodness in those who follow Him."

"So does that mean *I* can be made good on the

John 12:24

inside?" Mia asked. "That's what I've been wanting since I started this journey."

"Then you'll need to die too," the gardener replied.

"Oh, I don't think I'm ready to die yet," Mia said reluctantly.

The gardener smiled. "What I'm talking about is the sinful part inside of you—the part that makes you want to do wrong things.

"When that old, sinful nature you were born with dies, the new life that Jesus gives can start to grow."

The gardener paused and seemed to look right inside Mia. "For the seed of Truth to take root and grow in you, it needs water. But not this kind of water," he said, pointing to a water pit.

"Your heart needs water that cannot be seen. Only Jesus can give you this water—the Holy Spirit who is the spring of eternal life. He will make your *forever-heart* perfect so that it becomes a beautiful place for Him to live."

John 3:5, John 4:13-14

After the mysterious gardener had said this, he vanished; and for a moment, the garden felt unspoiled and almost heavenly.

Mia looked up and realized she'd been daydreaming. She turned to Jay and said, "I'm slowly starting to get it... you know, about being made new on the inside. The problem is, I still don't know how!"

"I'm not sure either," he replied. "But I know the answer will be here somewhere."

Romans 8:10, Ephesians 3:17

Flowers and Birds

Jay was lying in the shade of a tree when Mia came skipping along. She was clutching the book that had become very precious to her.

As she sat down to read it, the tree they were under became part of a cool forest. Birds chirped overhead, and Mia imagined seeing a deer peering at her from behind a bush. Just then, the path they'd been on opened up through the trees.

"Come on Jay, let's get going!" Mia said eagerly.

Jay opened one eye. "I'm so comfortable; can't we just stay here?"

"No, lazybones! We've got to keep going."

Jay slowly got up and stretched. "Oh, all right. But this time, you lead the way."

"Not a problem," she said as she skipped down the path into an open field.

Wild flowers spread across the countryside like a wavy quilt and Mia wandered off the path to go pick one. But it wouldn't be the only one, for flowers were her thing; and lost in the moment, her treasured collection of color grew and grew. Then she stopped. She slowly knelt down to gaze at the most delicate flower she had ever seen. The colors of the jagged-edged petals blended as softly as the colors of a rainbow.

"Jay, you've got to see this!" Mia called.

To her surprise, even Jay was impressed. "Now that's what I call amazing!" he said. "I wonder if someone planted it here."

"Don't be silly! These are wild flowers. Lilies of the field grow wherever they want to."

"It would be nice to add it to your bunch of flowers," Jay suggested.

"Oh, I could never pick it. It's just too beautiful. If I pick it, it will die."

Matthew 6:25-33

"It's going to die anyway," Jay replied. "In a day or two it will be as dead as the grass over there."

So Mia reached down and carefully nipped off the lily. "No one except God could make something as beautiful as this." Then, looking up at the sky, she said, "I wonder why He would take time to grow a lily in a place where no one sees it?"

"Well, we saw this one," Jay replied.

"If God thinks it's important to make this lily so beautiful," Mia said, "Imagine how much time He has spent on us!"

"That's true," Jay said, "But what amazes me are all those birds in that tree. God feeds them with berries and seeds and bugs. They don't even need to work because God looks after them every day."

"You're so right," Mia said. "I've never thought about it that way. I often worry about things. But being here helps me feel close to the Lord, and now I realize just how much He cares about me."

Times and Seasons

The weather had turned cold. A few red leaves still clung to spiky branches and a golden brown carpet of leaves lay scattered on the ground.

Jay and Mia hadn't gardened for some time. It's not that they had lost interest, but a chill in the air had announced the coming of winter and everything in the garden had slowed down.

The sun was struggling to break through the morning mist as Jay knocked on Mia's bedroom door, and called, "Get up, Mia! It's morning."

"I'm cold. I just want to snuggle under the blankets and stay here all winter."

"You can't... you're not a bear," Jay replied.

Realizing that this wasn't going to happen, Jay went to fetch the book so Mia could stay under the covers a few more minutes."

The sudden cold got Jay wondering whether their book said anything about times and seasons.

He paged around for a while. "Ah, here's something," he said. "It says; 'There is a season for everything, and a time for every activity under heaven. A time to be born and a time to die. A time to plant and a time to harvest.'"

Jay wasn't sure that Mia was actually awake, and said to her, "Did you know that when it is harvest time here, people in other parts of the world are already planting?"

Jay carried on talking but his dull voice faded as Mia headed down a dreamy path.

"Hurry up, Jay!" she called back to him. "We need to find ... oops!" Mia was so wrapped up in her world, that she almost walked into a man carrying a basket of melons.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-2

"You seem to be lost in thought, young lady," the man said with a smile.

"I'm sorry, I didn't see you."

"That's okay." The man put down his basket, wiped his forehead, and looked at Mia. "Somehow that frown tells me you have something on your mind."

"Oh, it's nothing really," Mia said. "I was just trying to figure out how it can be winter in one part of the world and summer in another."

The old man bent down and lifted a round melon from the basket. He held up the melon and said, "Maybe this could help..."

"Imagine that this melon is the world. And let's pretend your face is the sun. Where the sun shines on this half of the melon it is daytime. On the back half, it is nighttime. The earth turns slowly like this to give everyone a turn in the sun.

"But you want to know about seasons. Now I'll tilt the melon a bit because the earth is slightly skew.

"As the earth travels around the sun like this, the top half is warmer because it gets more sun. The bottom half, which has less sun, is cold and wintry.

"Oh! I think I get it.

"Umm... so where do *I* live?" Mia asked.

"I think you are right about here," the man said pointing to a tiny speck on the melon.

"That's amazing!" exclaimed Mia.

"What is amazing, too," the gardener said, "is that God is all over at the same time, day and night, summer and winter—watching over us."

"I wish it weren't so cold, though," Mia exclaimed with a sigh. "I'd like the weather to be perfect all the time."

"Plants and trees need to rest too," the man said. "Winter is their time to rest because they work hard all summer to produce leaves and flowers and fruit.

Genesis 8:22

"In fact, long ago, God made a promise to Noah after the flood. He said, 'As long as the world exists, there will be a time for planting and a time for harvest. There will always be cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night.'"

Jay closed the book.

For a moment it was quiet as Mia sat staring into the blurry distance.

"What are you thinking, Mia?" Jay asked.

Mia looked around. "Umm... nothing." Somewhat confused, she got up and hurried to the kitchen. She picked up a melon from the rack and looked for the speck on it.

"Mia! Why are you looking at the melon like that?" Jay asked.

"Oh, never mind," she replied sheepishly. "I was just wondering where I was."

The Kingdom Tree

It had been a hectic day for Mia, which kept her busy for longer than usual. When she was finally done, she went to look for Jay.

"Mom, do you know where Jay is?"

"I think he went outside," her mom replied.

Mia seemed a touch annoyed as she headed out the back door and found Jay sitting on the bench, soaking up the warmth of the mid-afternoon sun.

"Why didn't you wait for me?" she said. "I don't want to get left behind."

"Don't worry, I was sitting here waiting for you. I've been looking for the place we met the gardener the other day. It was somewhere around here. So if you're ready we can get going."

"I am so ready!"

As they made their way down the path, there were plants and shrubs on either side. Mia let her fingers brush the tips of the overhanging leaves as they walked. "I wonder what we're supposed to learn from this part of the garden."

"Not sure," Jay replied, though rather interested in a huge tree a little way off the path. "Come let's cut through here and go look at that tree."

"It's just a tree." Mia said. "We should stick to the path. Besides, we already know the lesson about the green tree... remember, the one growing next to the river?"

"Yes, but there's no river here, Jay replied, "and I'm sure we can learn something from it." And without giving it another thought, he stepped between the plants and made his way toward the tree.

Mia was reluctant to follow. But she did anyway. After the first few steps, she discovered a row of heart-shaped stepping stones between the plants, and that cheered her on. She also noticed a wooden marker pointing toward the tree. It had a cross

carved on it, and she thought, 'I must remember that.'

When they approached the tree, the friendly gardener was there—almost as though he'd been waiting for them. "What do you think about this tree?" he asked.

"It's huge!" Mia exclaimed.

"A tree has many uses," the gardener said. "Can you think of a few?"

"Well, I guess a tree gives shade," Jay suggested.

"And what about fruit that grows on trees," Mia added.

Then Jay looked up at the tree and said, "I think a tree this size would also work well for a swing, or even a tree house."

"You are both right," the gardener said. "This tree is also a home for birds and other creatures. What's more, a tree's roots keep the soil from being washed

Matthew 13:31-32

away when there's a storm, and its leaves keep the air clean."

"Wow! We should plant another tree in our garden," Mia said.

"Good idea," the gardener replied, "that's exactly what I did. Many, many years ago I planted this tree here. It started off as a small mustard seed—the size of a pebble. Yet, look at it now! It has stood firm in the fiercest of storms.

"What makes this tree special is that it is like the kingdom of God. I planted it, watered it and protected it. Some people have tried to destroy it, but no one could."

"Oh!" said Mia. "But what is the kingdom of God, sir, and what does it have to do with this tree?"

"As you may know, a kingdom is the land where a king rules."

Jay's thoughts ran ahead. "That means, the earth is God's kingdom because He owns it."

Psalm 24:1-2, John 18:36

"True," the gardener replied. "But God's real kingdom is a heavenly kingdom; not an earthly one. His kingdom reaches from heaven above to the youngest hearts of those who honor Him as King.

"Wherever God's will is done—in heaven and on earth—He rules with power and love."

Looking up at the tree, Mia asked, "How then did God's kingdom grow from a tiny seed into a big tree like this?"

"Well," the gardener explained, "when Jesus came to earth, He brought the Seed of Purity to a sinful world. Jesus was the first and only One who lived on earth and never sinned.

"He chose a small group of disciples and changed their lives forever. He made them good with *His* goodness, and that's how the seed started to grow. Since then, many, many more have believed in Jesus, and that's how the tree has grown as big as this.

Mia was deep in thought. "This is an important

Luke 8:1

tree," she said. "We must give it a name. I think it should be called the *Kingdom Tree*."

"Yes, that's a good name," the gardener said. "And remember, Mia; unlike these plants, which come and go, this tree will keep on growing, just as the kingdom of God grows each time one more person believes in Jesus."

Treasure in the Field

The gardener that Jay and Mia had met under the tree invited them back, for there was something else he wanted to tell them—something about the kingdom belonging to them.

Mia was super excited, and early the next morning she was ready to continue where they'd left off.

She couldn't stop thinking about the kingdom of God, and in her heart, she longed to be a part of it. 'Maybe we'll read more about it today,' she thought.

Jay opened their book where he had left a bookmark and moved his finger down the page. Mia immediately recognized the familiar surrounding, and sure enough, there was the gardener waiting for them.

Mia was bursting with questions about the kingdom, but now that she could ask about any-

Luke 18:16

thing, she didn't know what to say. It was as though seeing the gardener made her questions seem unimportant.

"I'm glad you came back," the gardener said. "Sometimes one needs to do a lot of digging till you find what you're looking for."

He knelt down and looked Mia in the eyes. "I'd like to tell you a story, and you would do well to remember it," he said quietly as if he were sharing a secret.

"There was a man digging in a field. While he was busy, he came across something unusual. As he stooped to take a closer look, he discovered a treasure. With great excitement, he buried the treasure again so no one would see it. Then he went and sold everything he owned. With the money he had, he went and bought the field, and the treasure became his.

"The kingdom of heaven is like that hidden treasure."

There was a moment of silence.

Matthew 13:44

"What would *you* be willing to give up for that treasure?"

The gardener's voice sounded like Jay's voice, which made Mia's drifting thoughts snap back. She looked around the room. "That's strange," she mumbled.

"What's strange?"

"Nothing. It just seemed so real."

Jay understood, for at times his imagination had made the book come alive too. In fact, he also wanted to find the treasure. So he paged further in the book.

Moments later, they found themselves hurrying down a dirt road toward the city of Jerusalem.

They went in through the city gates to find out if anyone had seen the gardener. But the sun had already set, and darkness fell quickly. The last few people on the streets disappeared down murky

alleys and into their dimly lit houses.

Mia turned to caution Jay. But he wasn't there!

Her heart began to pound as she looked around helplessly. She wanted to run, but that would get her lost. A shiver of goosebumps ran through her body, but it wasn't the chilly air: she sensed that something bad was about to happen.

Mia jumped as a squeak echoed down the deserted street. Someone shut the front door of a house and a group of men shuffled down the street. One of them had a sword.

Something inside Mia told her to follow the men. Nervous as she was, she sneaked along the shadows, keeping her distance.

"Mia!" said a voice behind her.

She froze.

"Mia it's me! I've been looking all over for you!" Jay whispered.

John 18:1

"Where have you been? I'm so scared!"

"I'll tell you later. But we have to follow those men. They are disciples, and Jesus is with them. I heard that they're on their way to the olive garden."

"A garden!" she said. "At this time of night? Wait!... Do you think Jesus is the gardener?"

"I don't know, Mia. All I know is that something's not right."

The Olive Tree Garden

It was almost midnight. Jay and Mia followed the group of men along a path which led down into a valley. Mia was shivering as she stumbled along behind Jay. Although Jay sensed that this was a bad idea, he felt strangely safe, for he knew that Jesus was nearby.

On the other side of the valley was a garden of olive trees. The air hung damp in the garden and the starlit sky cast eerie shadows on the ground.

The men came to a part of the garden that seemed to be their usual meeting place. They talked quietly for a while, then they huddled down among the trees while Jesus went to pray on His own.

"Let's sit here," Jay whispered. The ground under the trees crackled and crunched as they snuck into the

John 18:1, Matthew 26:36-38, 47-56

shadows. Their heavy breathing seemed loud in the stillness of the night.

After some time, the mumbling of the disciples' voices grew silent as one after another fell asleep.

Mia tried to pray, but it was late, and within moments, she too drifted off to sleep.

"Mia! Wake up!" Jay whispered as he clutched her arm.

"Why? What's going on?"

"Look over there. Men with lights. They're coming nearer, and it looks like they're carrying weapons."

"Is that Jesus standing there?" Mia whispered.

"I think so. ...What! Oh no! The disciples are scattering in all directions. We should get out of here too!"

As Mia stood up, she screamed. A spider web hung from her face, and she froze.

One of the guards took a few steps toward them. He stared in their direction and held up his lantern. After a few moments, he spat on the ground and turned to join the men who had arrested Jesus.

"Let's go!" Jay whispered. They slowly tip-toed a few steps. Then they scurried through the orchard and down the slope to the valley, where they stopped to catch their breath.

The sudden silence made Mia sit up and look around. Her startled face suggested she'd had a nightmare. Yet as she turned and saw Jay sitting with the book, she knew that what they had read was real. It had actually happened!

What really troubled Mia about Jesus' arrest, was why anyone would want to harm Him. All He had ever done was help people.

"Perhaps we should carry on tomorrow," Jay said. He

yawned as he slowly got up.

"But we *have* to find out what happens," Mia insisted.

"Alright then," Jay said as he sat down again.

So much happened in the hours that followed. And so, to save time, Jay decided to skip ahead to the part where Jesus stood before Pilate, the governor of Judea. Pilate declared that Jesus had done no wrong, but the crowd shouted for Jesus to be crucified. So Pilate ordered Jesus to be beaten and handed Him over to the soldiers.

The soldiers took Jesus to a hill outside the city and nailed Him to a wooden cross. At midday, the whole earth became dark, and a few hours later, Jesus died. Just then, there was an earthquake that split rocks apart; and the curtain in the Temple was torn from top to bottom.

Late that afternoon, two friends of Jesus asked for permission to take His body down from the cross. They buried Jesus in a tomb—a small cave that had

Matthew 27:35, 45, 50-66

been carved out of a rock.

Tears welled up in Mia's eyes as she imagined herself standing next to the women who had followed Jesus. Together, they watched the men roll a huge stone across the entrance and saw the guards seal the tomb. Then the sun set.

The Garden Tomb

It was Sunday morning and Jay was the first one up. He flopped onto the bed next to Mia and opened the Bible where the bookmark's red ribbon stuck out.

Mia rubbed the sleep from her eyes and blinked a few times. She was about to turn over and go back to sleep when she remembered that Jesus had been buried in a tomb.

"I'm awake ... carry on reading," she said.

The night before, Jay had thought a lot about the vineyard owner's son who was killed—how wrong and how unfair that was.

Mia, had fallen asleep wondering what she would have done if *she* were at the tomb. Maybe she would have picked some flowers and placed them in front of the big, round stone.

John 20:10-18

Jay began to read and Mia felt the cool morning air touch her face.

The sun had just risen and the birds were starting to chirp as though it were just another day. The garden where Jesus was buried seemed strangely peaceful. In the dim light, Mia noticed that the soldiers were no longer guarding the tomb. And from where she was, it looked as though the big stone had been moved from the entrance. But, just before Mia could get closer to make sure, she heard someone coming through the trees. She quickly ducked behind a bush and peeped through the leaves.

A man came running to the tomb and stooped to look inside. Just then, another man came running and went right inside the tomb. Mia heard that the two men were disciples of Jesus. Peter, who had gone into the tomb, saw the folded burial cloth and some strips of linen. Then John also went inside, and when he saw that the tomb was empty, he believed.

Matthew 28:1, John 20:10-18

A while later, Mary Magdalene returned to the tomb, all out of breath. She had been the first one there that morning and had gone to tell Peter and John that the tomb was open.

The two disciples didn't stay long and decided to go back, but Mary stayed near the tomb crying. As Mia watched her, she so wanted to go give her a hug and let her know what had happened—that Jesus had risen!

Just then, Mary slowly made her way toward the entrance of the tomb and looked inside.

"Why are you crying?" an angel asked.

Mary gasped. Two angels were sitting where the body of Jesus had been.

She paused, trying to make sense of what she saw. "They have taken my Lord's body," she answered timidly, "and I don't know where they have put Him."

Something made Mary turn around, and as she did,

she saw the gardener standing there. Perhaps *He* could explain what had happened. But before she could say anything, he asked, "Why are you crying? Who are you looking for?"

With tear-filled eyes she answered, "Sir, if you have taken His body away, tell me where you have put Him."

"Mary," Jesus said in a familiar tone.

"Teacher!" Mary cried out.

Mary's eyes were opened and she realized that the gardener was actually Jesus.

Mia finally got it too. Her thoughts went back to the time they'd met the gardener at the *Kingdom Tree* and seen the wooden pointer with a cross on it.

She took a deep breath. Knowing now that Jesus was alive filled her with hope—an expectation that she would meet Him again.

A Branch of the Olive Tree

From the time Mia heard about the olive garden, she wanted to find out all she could about olive trees. They fascinated her. The one thing she had figured out was that olive oil comes from crushed olives.

"Just imagine, Jay; one can get oil from a tree. How amazing is that!"

"Pretty amazing, Mia. But right now, you need to get to bed. You've got an early start tomorrow."

"But I want to find out all I can about olive trees. Will you help me?" Mia asked.

"Tomorrow, Mia. Maybe tomorrow," Jay said as he got up to fetch a glass of water.

That night, Jay had a strange dream. He dreamt that his arms were covered with olive leaves, like

branches of a tree.

At breakfast, he told Mia the dream he'd had, and she burst out laughing. "Imagine if you had olives growing on your fingers," she giggled. "You could have eaten them from your hands!"

"That's not funny! It was *your* thing about olive trees that made me have that stupid dream."

While Jay was busy with his studies that afternoon, the Bible on his desk reminded him of what Mia had asked him to do. Her interest in olive trees came from her love for gardening, and that made him determined to find something—anything—about the trees.

So Jay went to fetch a special study Bible and discovered something interesting. It seemed that his dream hadn't been so silly after all. In fact, it made a whole lot of sense.

"Mia, come here!" he shouted across the house. "I

Romans 11:17-24

found something that will make your day."

As Mia came barging through the doorway, Jay said, "It's about olive trees. I've just read here that we are like shoots from a *wild* tree grafted into a *good* tree by faith. Once we believe, we become part of the good tree."

"Oh wow," she said with a rather puzzled look.

"And you know what, Mia; I realized that I have been joined to that tree."

"What do you mean, Jay?"

"I should have told you earlier, but I was still figuring things out. The other day when I read about Jesus dying for me, I prayed to Him. Now I'm a child of God."

"And you didn't tell me? You know I've been trying to find my way to God!"

Mia's shoulders drooped. "Now tell me what I must do to get *my* life right."

"It's not what *you* have to do, Mia. Jesus already made a way to God when He died for our sins. So when we ask Him to forgive us, He takes away our sin and makes our hearts good with *His* goodness."

Then Jay told her what he had prayed.

"I want to pray that prayer too," she said.

"You can pray in your own words, Mia, like when you talk to your best friend."

"Oh, okay," she responded and bowed her head.

After a moment she prayed;

"Forgive me, Lord, for allowing the weeds of sin to grow in my heart.

From now on, I want You to be the Gardener of my life.

Make me beautiful inside, like the Garden of Eden.

Then You can come and live in me; and one day, I will go live with You in heaven.

I love You, Lord!

Amen."

Cutting back

Having a new heart now, Mia supposed it would be easy to be good. 'All I have to do is follow my heart,' she thought. But that morning, when Mia's mother asked her what the matter was, she realized that her face was showing what she felt inside.

It all started the day before. Jay was allowed to visit his friends all afternoon while Mia had to stay home to help her mom. It seemed so unfair to Mia that she thought it perfectly reasonable to feel a little annoyed—perhaps even a bit jealous.

Although Mia wanted her heart to be good, she found out that her old sin-nature was still around.

"Come children, it's time for our devotions!" her mom said.

The kettle was just starting to boil in the kitchen,

and the sandwiches were packed. While they were waiting for Jay, Mia's mom told her that it's always helpful to be aware of one's attitude. "When our emotions tell us that something is wrong, we need to work on fixing whatever caused those feelings. If we don't, those feelings may grow and cause us to say or do something that will make things worse."

The heading of their reading that day was '*The Vine and the Branches.*'

"Looks like we're at a vineyard again," Jay commented as he peered over his mom's shoulder and took a seat.

"I really want to meet the gardener again," Mia said staring out of the window.

The chapter began with the words: "I am the true Vine, and my Father is the Gardener.

"He cuts off every branch in Me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit He prunes so that it will be even more fruitful."

"What does that even mean?" Mia asked.

Although she didn't recognize the Gardener working in the vineyard that day, there was something familiar about Him—a kindness in His eyes.

"If you come and stand here," He said, "I'll show you what I'm doing."

Mia watched curiously as the Gardener carefully cut back some of the branches.

"Surely, the more branches there are, the more grapes will grow on the vine," she finally said.

"This vine is part of who I am," the Gardener said. "The roots go deep down and draw up Life-giving water. If the branches grow in any and every direction, the grapes will be small and sour. But if I cut back all that wild growth, the vine produces good fruit."

"Oh," said Mia, a little confused about what the Gardener meant.

As she looked at the large, spreading vine, a voice

behind her said, "Remain in Me, and I will remain in you." Mia recognized the friendly voice, but when she turned to look, there was no one. She was about to ask the Gardener if He knew who had spoken to her, but even He had disappeared. All Mia could see was the beautiful vine; and on the ground, some dead branches.

In the distance, Mia heard her mom's voice. As the muffled words became louder, she heard her say, "God often uses the unpleasant things in life to prune our character. He can even use our failures to trim off pride and selfishness that spoil the fruit in our lives."

Mia was silent for a while. Then she said, "I realize now how much God cares, because He patiently prunes away my bad habits... and that means I am slowly becoming more like Him."

For the rest of the day, Mia kept hearing the words that were spoken to her—'Remain in Me and I will remain in you.' As she thought about the vine, she suddenly grasped the truth: 'I am like a little branch that is joined to the vine. I am in Jesus and He lives in me!'

Romans 8:28, John 14:20

Fruit for all to see

Everyone had overslept and the rush was on. Jay hurried to the bathroom and banged on the door.

"Just wait, I'm busy," came Mia's agitated voice from inside.

"Well, make it snappy!" Jay retorted, "You're always hogging the bathroom."

And that's how their day started.

But by the afternoon, things had calmed down and Jay went to sit in his comfy chair with their Bible. He called Mia, who always loved to listen while he read.

After a few verses, they came to a part that touched Mia's heart. "Would you read that again," she asked.

Galatians 5:22-23

Jay moved his finger up the page and read the verses again: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law."

Jay blushed a little as he looked at Mia, and said, "Sorry about this morning. I wasn't very patient, was I?"

"It's okay. I should have been more considerate... I knew we were running late."

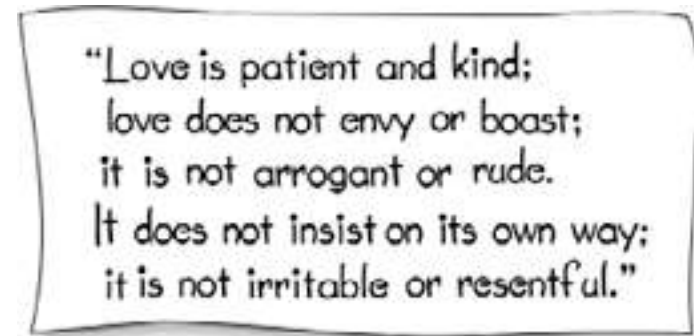
"Never mind," Jay said, "you're forgiven." Then he added, "I do think it's a little unfair, though."

"What, Jay?"

"I think that it's easier for girls to show the fruit of the Spirit. You are naturally gentle, and patient, and kind."

"I'm not so sure," Mia replied. "Sometimes I really struggle to show self-control or be joyful. But what has really helped me is this verse about love."

1 Corinthians 13:4-5



"Love is patient and kind;
love does not envy or boast;
it is not arrogant or rude.
It does not insist on its own way;
it is not irritable or resentful."

"Wow, when did you learn that?"

"Oh, I wrote it on a note and stuck it on the mirror in my room. So, when I start feeling annoyed or jealous, I imagine how a heart filled with love would act."

"Wow, Mia, you're pretty sharp. It makes perfect sense. Love is the most important commandment. ... And it's also at the top of the list of fruits. So, without *God's* love in our hearts there can never be fruit."

As they carried on talking about the fruit in their lives, Mia said something else that amazed Jay; "Do you know what I've learned?" she said. "Trees don't struggle to bear fruit—all they do is soak up the sunshine with their leaves, and water with their

roots."

Then she helped Jay connect the dots. "All *we* need to do is soak up God's love by living in His Light. And our roots of faith need to soak up the Living Water of the Spirit."

As the afternoon sun rays fell on Mia's face she closed her eyes and tried to imagine being a fruit tree in God's garden. Within minutes she dozed off, and she dreamt a muddled dream—a dream with apples of love, peaches of kindness, gentle pears, and the joy of cherries.

Romans 5:5

The Heavenly Garden

Having read piles of books, Jay knew the importance of how the story ends. But the Bible is no ordinary book, and he believed in his heart that this book is a true story of God's love for man.

Jay was tempted to take a peek at the last bit to see how things will end... or not end. So he turned to the book of Revelation.

Some parts were hard for him to understand, but he kept going. Being the last book in the Bible, Jay wasn't surprised to read about the end of the world. But this didn't worry him because he knew that, as believers, we have the hope of a beautiful place specially prepared for us.

On the second last page, he found a part that describes some of the beautiful colors we will see there.

John 14:1-3

'I've got to show this to Mia,' he said to himself.
'She's always asking about heaven.'

He walked across to Mia's room, keeping his finger where he'd been reading. "Listen to this, Mia.

"When we get to heaven, there will be this beautiful city. It says:

"The city wall is made of jasper, and the city is made of pure gold, as pure as glass.

"The foundations of the city walls will be layers of jasper, sapphire, agate, emerald, onyx, ruby, chrysolite, beryl, topaz, turquoise, jacinth, and amethyst.

"Each of the twelve gates will be made of a single pearl, and the great street of the city will be pure gold, as pure as transparent glass."

"I can't begin to imagine what that will look like," Mia said.

Revelation 21:18-23, Revelation 22:1-5

"And with *your* imagination, that is saying something.

"It also says here that the city won't need the sun or the moon, because the Glory of God will give it light, and Jesus the Lamb will be its lamp."

There was just so much to take in, that Jay decided to skip to the last chapter.

"There will be a crystal clear river flowing with the Water of Life, and on each side of the river will be the Tree of Life."

"Hey, wait!" Mia interrupted. "Wasn't there a Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden?"

Jay thought for a moment. "You're right, there was! It was called the Tree of Life because anyone who ate from it would live forever."

Mia looked puzzled. "Wouldn't that be a good thing?"

"Not really. The problem was that Adam and Eve

1 Corinthians 2:9, Genesis 3:22

had sinned, and if they'd lived forever on earth, they would have been trapped in their sinful bodies."

"Oh," Mia said thoughtfully. "That would have been terrible." And with a look of relief, she stated, "But, because Jesus has made our hearts new, when our sinful bodies die, we can live forever in heaven."

"Exactly!" Jay said.

Mia tilted her head a fraction. "But I still don't get the tree part. If I already have eternal life, what will happen if I eat lots of fruit from the Tree of Life?"

"Well, then you'll live forever and ever and ever," Jay said.

"That makes no sense," she giggled. "Forever *is* forever!"

And with a sparkle in her eyes, she added, "I'm so excited—I hope forever comes soon."

Revelation 22:20

Jesus said,
"The Kingdom of God is like a farmer
who scatters seed on the ground.

Night and day,
while he's asleep or awake,
the seed sprouts and grows,
but he does not understand
how it happens."

Mark 4:26-27 (NLT)

