

Genesis 1-3

Faith & Flourishing in Politics: A Vision of Flourishing

Rev. Jonathan M. Romig / October 3rd, 2021

If you were to describe our nation's political landscape, how would you depict it? Would you describe amber waves of grain and a fruited plain like *America the Beautiful* sings? Or maybe more likely, you would describe a barren desert with a tumbleweed blowing by, a snake slithering under a rock, and a lone cactus. I imagine most of us today feel politics are more like a desert than a field of wheat.

But what if, as you were looking at that political desert, you spotted a small, wiry tree breaking through the hard desert sand? Would that, could that, inspire you? What if you could slowly, with lots and lots of work, transform a small patch of that desert into a garden? Would you do it?

For one retired couple in northern China, that's not a rhetorical question. A husband and wife have spent fifteen years slowly transforming the desert into a forest again by planting and watering drought-resistant saxaul trees.¹ Saxaul trees look like big scrubby bushes, but they can grow large enough to provide shade and life to the desert. This couple has spent fifteen years planting trees and watering them. It has cost them hundreds of thousands of dollars, and the desert winds have blown over many trees. But despite hardship and setbacks, this couple has transformed 165 acres of desert into a forest.² When they looked at the desert, they had a vision of a garden forest, and it changed everything.

When I go on social media, click on my favorite websites, or listen to the news, I sometimes feel like it's a desert. It seems like everyone is arguing and fighting, and nothing good is growing. But what if we as Christians could envision a flourishing garden? What if God calls Christians to do the hard, slow, painstaking labor of trying to transform our world from a desert into an oasis?

That would be incredibly difficult and might not succeed. That couple lost many trees. But maybe, just maybe, we could transform a small corner of our desert, 100 acres, into something greener. Did you know the Bible starts in a garden? And it's actually in the garden that God introduces government. Before any city or society, God introduced the concept of rule, ordering our world, of politics.

God created politics to help creation flourish.

Do you think politics are a bad joke? "What do you get when you mix religion and politics?... Politics."³ Or maybe you think of politics like nuclear energy. Can be great, but didn't we use it to invent the atomic bomb? Did you know that God actually invented politics, and he only invents things with creation's good in mind? In Genesis one, God took a chaotic and formless void and created the planets, the stars, the oceans, fish, land animals, the sky, and birds. It was like God took a barren desert and made a flourishing garden. And then, you know what he did? He invited a man and a woman to come and tend the garden with him.

Genesis 1:26-28 (ESV)

26 Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

27 So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

28 And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

When God made men and women in his “image” (v26-27), he granted them his divine authority to care for creation. To be made in God’s image meant you could rule creation like God, bringing order to the chaos. In fact, God gave humankind “dominion” (v26, 28) over the whole world. But “dominion” isn’t “exploitative lordship” but “stewardship.”⁴ We were supposed to take the messy goodness of creation and play with it and order it and bring out even more goodness.

That word for “fruitful” (v28) means “flourish.”⁵ To not just milk everything you can out of creation, but to cultivate creation, society, culture, and government to reach its highest and best potential. That’s what we today might call the “common good,” or the Bible calls “shalom.” We’ll review both of those ideas more later in this series. To steward creation, to make it flourish, is to take what God made and bring out its best.

I drove up to the White Mountains this summer and hiked in Crawford Notch State Park. In 1771, there was nothing there but beautiful mountains, forests, boulders, rivers, and a notch, like a pass. But a hunter named Timothy Nash envisioned a road there. He’d heard about a “route through the mountains mentioned in Native American lore” and set out to make it a reality.⁶ Governor John Wentworth made him a deal to grant Timothy Nash some land to live on and build the road through the pass if he could get his horse through it first. So that’s what he did. He found the tamest farm horse he could find and hauled him through. Sometimes they even needed ropes to lower him down boulders.

But now, 250 years later, it’s clear that Timothy Nash’s vision of bringing order to the chaos has become a reality. Now you can drive a beautiful winding highway, hike Mt. Willard, Mt. Avalon, and other trails, ride the cog railway to the top of Mt. Washington and stay at the Mount Washington Hotel. People took what God made and cultivated it so we could enjoy it even more, and that’s what God intends for politics. *God created politics to help creation flourish.*

So, what the heck happened? Why is politics a joke? Why have politics gone nuclear? Why are we living in a political desert? Politics don’t feel ordered today but chaotic. What went wrong?

Human selfishness corrupted the good of politics.

When God called Adam and Eve to guard and steward the garden, he gave them just one command. Don’t eat from the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Genesis 2:17). But really, it was a question, “Do you want to do this with me, or on your own?” God wanted to know if they would rule his way, according to his laws, or if they would do it their own way. Isn’t that the question we’ve all been answering? Do I want to live God’s way or my way? It doesn’t take long gazing at the world or ourselves to see what we chose.

Adam and Eve chose to do the garden their way, and in so doing, they created a desert wasteland for all humankind. The serpent Satan tempted them not to trust God, question God’s motives, and believe they could create beauty and order apart from God. They gave in to the temptation. They thought they could go it alone, which is why we do too. They ate, and this happened:

Genesis 3:7 (ESV)

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

When humanity chose self over God, it corrupted everything, and Adam and Eve, the first and best of humankind, felt naked shame. Now instead of loving God and loving each other, people curse God and hurt

each other. Instead of living in complete trust, we felt fear and mistrust and acted in our own interests. When we take God's authority and use it for our own good instead of the good of all, we get naked shame.

Since then, politics have been marred by selfishness, by "us" vs. "them," and by trying to get my group ahead at the expense of others. The political wasteland has become, "Their side is evil, and my side is good." That's how we think. That side is the problem, the liberals, the conservatives! But doesn't the pain and evil of Genesis 3 run through all of us? One of my favorite authors, Skye Jethani, uses this illustration:

Václav Havel, the former president of the Czech Republic, was imprisoned for resisting the Communists in the 1970s and '80s. When he was released and elected president, Havel surprised many by being noticeably forgiving toward his political enemies. Some criticized him for this stance and misinterpreted it as weakness. But Havel reminded the Czech people that "the line between good and evil did not run clearly between 'them' and 'us,' but through each person."⁷

Human selfishness (my selfishness) corrupted the good of politics. I want to confess that the way I've thought about politics has been about me. My side is right, and their side is wrong. But doesn't the wrongness of Genesis 3 run through all of us? It's so easy to spot the evil on the other side of the political aisle, but that same fallenness runs through each of us.

A pastor-friend told me this joke. "A pastor was out for a walk and noticed one of his parishioners tending his garden. The pastor said to the man, 'That's a fine garden you and the Lord have together.' The man replied, 'Thank you, but you should have seen it when the Lord had it by himself.'"⁸

Politics are caught between flourishing and fallenness.

God created politics to help creation flourish, but when Adam and Eve sinned, politics lost their full potential for good and still fall short today. We see politics' fallenness when God cursed humankind:

Genesis 3:16 (ESV)

To the woman he said,

"I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing;
in pain you shall bring forth children.
Your desire shall be contrary to your husband,
but he shall rule over you."

Instead of men and women planting trees in the desert together, men and women vie for power over each other. The fall distorts family, social relationships, and work, too, even political work. God curses man:

Genesis 3:17b-19 (ESV)

17 ... cursed is the ground because of you;
in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
18 thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.
19 By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread,
till you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
for you are dust,
and to dust you shall return."

All work, gardening, teaching, business, politics, no matter how inherently good, is corrupted and marred by sin. And yet, the goodness of work, even political work, remains in part. In Genesis 1, God gave government

and politics to humanity to benefit all creation. But by Genesis 3, humanity misused that authority and politics fell. *Now, politics are caught between flourishing and fallenness.*

Monica created a garden from scratch this summer.⁹ We had this little plot of dirt where barely anything grew. It was almost desert-like, but she envisioned a flourishing garden there. So she laid down a base, built a cinder-block wall, formed a wire-mesh cover, and installed a greenhouse tarp. That land used to give us dirt and weeds, and now we get kale, swiss chard, radishes, peas, beets, carrots, and basil. Basil! But it has been challenging. Critters have gotten into the garden and eaten the plants. Bugs and some sort of fungus is growing on our tomato bush, so I try not to eat very much from it. This summer was rainy, but other summers have been dry. We envision a fertile abundant, fruitful garden, and in many ways, it has produced, but our garden has also fallen short of what it could be. That's our world—that's politics.

Politics live somewhere between what is and what ought to be. We can hope for the best yet be realistic about our expectations. It can be very good to vote, run for office, and work as a public servant, but at the same time, we have to guard our hearts against putting too much faith in what they can accomplish. If you notice your heart getting overwhelmed with politics, take a step back and remember Genesis 1-3. The world gets angry and worked up over politics because that's the hope they have, but that's not us.

Believers should strive for justice and change but also expect setbacks and difficulties. Until Christ's return and final restoration, Christians can participate in politics neither crippled by fear or overly expectant of what they can accomplish but hopeful and confident that God can and will work through them however he chooses. *Politics are caught between flourishing and fallenness.* But here's our ultimate hope:

Jesus can redeem all things, even politics, for good.

We don't just live between Genesis 1 and Genesis 3. We live after Acts, after the events of the New Testament when Christ came to transform our fallenness into flourishing. God promised he would do this all along. Just before God cursed Adam and Eve, God cursed the serpent by telling him about a garden rescuer:

Genesis 3:15 (ESV)

I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring;
he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel.”

God promises to send one of Eve's offspring, one of her great-great-grandchildren, to defeat the serpent and restore what Adam and Eve lost. The garden rescuer will restore the paradise through his own bruising, suffering, and death. That's what happened to Jesus. Although he was innocent, he suffered and died to rescue Adam and Eve and all of creation. But then God raised him from the dead. Mary Magdalene was the first person to see him. Do you know who she mistook him for? A gardener (John 20:15). Jesus is our garden rescuer, come to restore flourishing to the desert, and he wants to do that good work with us.

True and ultimate flourishing is only possible through a relationship with God, which comes by believing in and partnering with Jesus Christ. It's challenging to do a teaching series on *Faith & Flourishing in Politics* because politics, apart from God, can only take you so far. God calls us to seek the good of our communities and work towards the world's flourishing, both through healthy civic engagement and by sharing the message of Christ's death and resurrection with those around us.

That doesn't mean we should try to force God back into politics, but rather, walk with God in the garden, till the soil, seek the flourishing of all creation. This is the question this sermon series is trying to answer. How do we do that? How do we garden our world with Jesus? How do we transform a desert into a flourishing garden, even when it's challenging, complicated, and hard?

I was listening to another pastor preach on politics, and he reminded me of someone I knew but had slipped my mind, William Wilberforce.¹⁰ I read his book, *Real Christianity*, many years ago, which he wrote to help end the slave trade in England.¹¹ Wilberforce was elected to the House of Commons in 1780 and became an evangelical Christian several years later.¹² His childhood pastor and mentor as an adult was John Newton, a onetime slaver who came to Christ and wrote the song *Amazing Grace*.

Wilberforce founded the “Anti-Slavery Society” in 1787 and introduced legislation time and time again to end slavery. He was planting trees in the desert, watering them, seeing growth, then the wind came and blew down his progress. He was living between the flourishing and fallenness of Genesis 1 and Genesis 3, and I imagine he was praying that the garden rescuer would come and redeem his broken world for the good of the enslaved and the good of England.

It wasn't until 1807 that slavery ended, but even then, only for new slaves, not those still caught in slavery. It wasn't until 1833 that the Slavery Abolition Act passed. William Wilberforce died three days later. It had been 46 years since Wilberforce started working to end slavery in England. It takes work to turn a desert into an oasis, but with Christ, all things are possible. *Jesus can redeem all things, even politics, for good.*

Benediction - Numbers 6:24-26 (ESV)

24 The Lord bless you and keep you;

25 the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;

26 the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this sermon at Cornerstone Congregational Church as part of his Doctor of Ministry (D.Min) research study through Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Spiritual Exercises

Dear Church,

Thank you for listening to my first sermon from my *Faith & Flourishing in Politics* series, *A Vision of Flourishing*. Next Sunday, I'm looking forward to our first follow-up teaching and discussion during our 8:30 to 9:30 AM adult Christian education hour on Zoom or in the church sanctuary. I hope you can join us. Until then, I have three spiritual exercises for all who want to dive deeper into this series:

1. **Reflect:** Take time to journal and reflect on your understanding of faith and politics. How does the Bible inform your view of politics? Where does the biblical concept of “flourishing,” “shalom,” and “the common good” fit into your political ideas? Is this new or not new? If so, how do you feel about it? What excites you about this teaching or makes you nervous?
2. **Listen:** Listen to *Lecture on the Early Church & Politics* by Tim Mackie of *The Bible Project* (92 minutes - August 15, 2017). YouTube: <https://youtu.be/wXcSJW8rg4>. While we will not review this sermon directly in our Christian Education hour, we will discuss many of the same ideas and concepts Mackie presents, enriching our understanding and our follow-up conversation. This message is, perhaps, the best sermon I have ever heard on faith and politics.
3. **Pray:** Take time to pray for the flourishing of your town, our state, our nation, and the world. Ask God to help you seek the flourishing of each as he gives you the opportunity. Pray that he would help you become an instrument of his flourishing wherever he has you.

Thank you, and may God bless you with a vision of the kind of flourishing only he can bring.

In Christ,
Pastor Jonathan Romig

Sermon Slides

See sermon slides through the website posting.

Copyright

© 2021 by Jonathan M. Romig.

All rights reserved. No portion of this sermon series may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means— electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, scanning, or other—except for brief quotations in critical reviews or articles, without the prior written permission of Jonathan M. Romig.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Endnotes

-
1. New China TV, “Desert turns into oasis: Man plants 50,000 trees in 15 years in N China,” YouTube, published August 29, 2017, accessed September 27, 2021 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YM2SZ8NS8EM>.
 2. According to Google, 1 hectare equals about 2.471 acres, so 67 hectares equals about 165 acres.
 3. Keith Giles, *Jesus Untangled: Crucifying Our Politics to Pledge Allegiance to the Lamb* (Orange, CA: Quoir, 2017) 19, Kindle.
 4. Robert Barron, *Renewing Our Hope: Essays for the New Evangelization* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2020.) 197. Kindle.
 5. Kohlenberger/Mounce *Concise Hebrew-Aramaic Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. John R. Kohlenberger III and William D. Mounce, Accordance Bible Software, s.v. “פ,” paragraph 14541, https://accordance.bible/link/read/KM_Hebrew_Dictionary#14541.
 6. “Crawford Notch History” Parks & Recreation New Hampshire, <https://www.nhstateparks.org/getmedia/cb5e412f-8c0a-45b8-b0ff-362cea4e52e7/Crawford-Notch-History-and-the-Willey-Family-Story.pdf>. All notes on this from here.
 7. Václav Havel quoted in Timothy Garton Ash, “The Truth about Dictatorship,” *New York Times Review of Books*, February 19, 1998, 36–37, quoted in Skye Jethani, *With: Reimagining the Way you Relate to God* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2011) 43, 197, Kindle.
 8. Thank you Pastor Alex Burgess for telling me this joke on 9/28/21 at Bradford Christian Academy.
 9. Tim Mackie uses a similar illustration in his sermon on politics. See *Spiritual Exercises* for sermon.
 10. “The Controversial Jesus - Jesus and Politics - Jon Tyson,” YouTube, published May 28, 2018, accessed October 2, 2021 <https://youtu.be/1En37ldKvIU>.
 11. See book description on Amazon.
 12. Britannica, T., Editors of Encyclopedia, “William Wilberforce,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, August 20, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Wilberforce>. All Wilberforce facts from this site.