

John Kelman

The Garden and the Cross

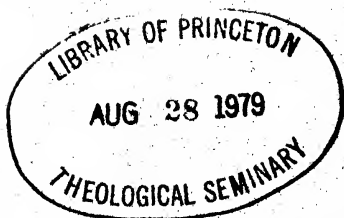
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A SERMON

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By the Pastor, the
REV. JOHN KELMAN
D.D.

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The Garden and the Cross

By REV. JOHN KELMAN, D.D.

The Garden and the Cross—Matthew 59-60: John 19: 41

VERY little is known about Joseph of Arimathea. He was a counsellor, both rich and influential, and either he had settled in Jerusalem, emigrating from the village of Arimathea, or perhaps he may have retained his Arimathean home, while he had purchased for himself a city garden in which he had made his tomb. In any case he seems to have been a man of refined and gentle tastes, to whom a garden was a precious thing. He had been impressed by Jesus, but it was characteristic of his disposition that he had not come out into the open, but had lived as a secret disciple and supporter of the Master. We read that he had not consented unto the deed of the others, and very probably he had been absent from the trial where all seem to have been at one in their verdict of condemnation. After Jesus had died he came forward with those tender ministries which culminated in the burial described in the text.

Curiously he appears as a great figure in the later Arthurian romances. We read of him in stories of the Holy Grail, connected with an establishment at Glastonbury, and in the year 63 A. D. we find him building the first British oratory with twisted twigs on an island in the River Brue. These legends show how deeply he had impressed the imagination of our fathers and how much he had endeared himself to their hearts.

1. First of all let us tell to ourselves again the beautiful story. It begins with Joseph and his garden. The garden is a characteristic feature of the Holy Land. "Many a sweet vista in Palestine is seen framed in trellised vines, or in passion-flower swinging over a roofed fountain or a garden house." Men planted orchards and enclosed them with a wall or a thorn hedge. They irrigated them artificially, or diverted streams towards them, so that those who approached along the dusty highway were refreshed even in passing with the sound of falling or of running water. Some of these gardens have become famous from their magnificence and their beauty. Such were the King's Gardens near the Pool of Siloam, wonderful gardens of roses and of spices. But many a private man had his little plot of land where he spent his leisure time among flowers of his own cultivating, and shady trees under which he found retirement and solitude. When Titus was besieging Jerusalem it was among garden trenches outside the walls that on one occasion he was nearly captured by the Jews.

These garden solitudes meant much to Israel. The life of Palestine was all lived in the open, and the publicity of it must sometimes have been very wearing to the nerves and trying to the strength of men. Houses were built so as to give the appearance of aggressive ruinousness, and past the blind walls of these the screaming streets zigzagged through cities and villages. But the apparent ruin was often a very gorgeous little palace, opening with all its windows upon a garden, where nature's voice might be heard continually calling, *Come unto me and I will give you rest*. The reason for this curious habit

of architecture has of late centuries been largely the rapacity of the tax-collector. But it has deeper roots than that, and somehow fits exactly with the Oriental nature. There is something which makes a secret place congenial to the Eastern. The *genii* of the desert derived their name from the same root as the word for garden, and the garden city of *Jenin* obviously bears the same origin. The violent contrast between these sweet retreats and the noise and bustle of life outside their walls made them veritable paradises to the imagination of men and women. They were the favorite spots for meditation and for prayer. In them the family held its gatherings. Lights were swung in the darkness among the green branches of the trees and the sound of music and laughter was wafted out from such secluded places to arouse a wistful moment of envy in the heart of those who passed by. Thus religion and romance combined in the idea of the *hortus conclusus* (the garden enclosed), so sweetly sung in the Song of Solomon. It is significant that the *Paradise*, alike of Jews, Mohammedans and Christians, has always been conceived of as a garden.

So far then, one might naturally think of Joseph as being "a good easy man," a man somewhat luxurious in his tastes, and bent upon enjoying the full beauty of life. There was, however, a tomb in Joseph's garden. This might give the impression that we had been mistaken in conceiving the garden as a voluptuous thing, and might lead us to imagine that it was but an enclosure with which a melancholy person, prone to thinking upon death, had surrounded his tomb. As a matter of fact, while the presence of the tomb does indeed show us Joseph to have been

a serious and thoughtful man, it by no means takes away the sense of luxuriousness from the garden. Indeed the tomb is the last word of luxury in such a case, and the mystic dreaming which centers around a man's own grave may become to an imaginative nature an extremely voluptuous experience. It is in this way that a cultivated mind may bid defiance to mortality and make even death the minister of his pleasures. The tomb is sombre but there is no necessary harshness in its presence here. He will play with the spectre for a little time now and then and find the sun shining all the brighter when he returns to the world, with the comfortable assurance that, after all, he is not dead yet.

Little did Joseph think, while he planned and walked in his garden under the sweet and fragrant shade of trees, of the strange shadow that would one day fall across it. For many a day and year he had watched his plants growing, until the saplings cast longer and heavier shadows, dappling the lily-sprinkled ground. But one day there arose upon the hill just beyond his wall, a savage, strange, and uncouth thing, shapeless, horrible, and suggestive, that changed everything. The garden could never be the same again, nor could Joseph. We ask ourselves how much he knew of Calvary, and it is probable enough that he knew everything, and that in despair of any help he had absented himself from the scene of the trial. Yet when the cross actually arose and its shadow was flung upon his pleasance, not only was the garden changed: the touch of the cross upon it changed Joseph also. It shamed him out of all his associations and cut him off from everything he had held dear. It turned for him the glory of the

Jewish world to ashes, and it made of him a new man, definitely and heroically Christian.

That wheeling shadow did more than touch the garden with its magic spell. The cross stood like the index of some ghastly dial, and we see from Calvary its black image sweeping round the world. Ah, that mighty cross! What power it has to change all that it touches! Its power was felt by the guilty Jewish world and the faded world of the Greek. It penetrated below the surface prejudices of the nations and quenched the evil lights that lit their treacherous depths. Joseph was not the only dreamer whom that day brought to face reality. In richer and more tragic meaning the shadow of the cross fell upon all earth's gardens, swept round the world of man's ambitions and his sins, and quenched the very flames of hell within innumerable souls.

Think of Joseph walking on that day in his garden—that hideous day. He hears all that is transacted on the hill above him, the noise and tumult and the strident cries of men whose throats are dry with the dust of the execution-ground. He hears the hammering of nails and all that follows it, to the very death-cry of Jesus that rends the air. Then, when all is over, the garden is so changed for Joseph that there is but one possible use for it. While Jesus was alive Joseph had hung back from Him, feeling perhaps that He had power enough to defend Himself. But now, when He has been left to the mercy of men and has not exercised His power, the responsibility for all that is left of Him falls upon His friend. Criminals were buried at sunset, their bodies thrown into the pit beside the cross: there shall be no sunset malefactor's pit for Jesus. The new

tomb and its use are obvious. He must come here. So Jesus came to Joseph, dead—Jesus, who might have come to him living, had Joseph willed it so. A strange guest indeed, coming to the garden tomb; though the cross had touched it and the ground was sprinkled now with sweet spices of burial before its time. *There laid they Jesus*, and this was His homecoming from His enemies to His friends. This was Jesus' way of entering Joseph's garden. Did Joseph himself, we wonder, lie afterwards in that tomb, sharing with Jesus the dreadful realism of the grave? We cannot tell. At least on that day Jesus was his guest.

Rest weary Son of God; Thy work is done
And all Thy burdens borne;
Rest on that stone, till the third sun has brought
Thine everlasting morn.

Touched by that shadow of the cross, Joseph's garden blossomed into flowers in the spring-time. But there were new and strange flowers growing there now beyond all the beauty of former days. In that new tomb there was planted the seed of human immortality and eternal life. Among those flower-beds there sprang up the plant of a love that death cannot kill, whose seedlings have been transplanted far and wide and are now growing in every land. Thus, when next we read of it, there are angels in the garden, and a woman longing for a departed friend. Finding Jesus, she falls upon the ground and clasps His feet, giving herself to Him in tenderest abandonment. "Mary." "Rabboni." It is the shortest dialogue recorded upon earth, and in it is the utter self-surrender of mankind and the eternal acceptance of God. We are told that she had sup-

posed Him to be the gardener, and she was not wrong in that supposition: for He is the Lord of that garden and all others—Lord of the garden of the souls of men and women, Who henceforth shall plant in them the seeds of all good things. And with His entrance the secluding gates were broken and flung aside forever. The garden that had been so secret became now a hospitable place, free for the entrance of the glory of heaven and the outgoing of human love so long as time shall last.

2. Now let us see what all this means for our own life and its experience. It is an old and very beautiful story, but like other such tales it is strangely "applicable yet." All through the ages men and women have found that "a garden is a lovesome thing, God wot," and the garden idea is worth considering in this connection. English literature is singularly rich in it and many of our most beautiful essays and poems show what it has meant to our shy and reticent race. "God Almighty first planted a garden," says Bacon, "and indeed it is the greatest refreshment to the spirits of men; without which buildings and palaces are but gross handiworks." Robert Louis Stevenson in a well-known sentence has reminded us that "it is a shaggy world, and yet studded with gardens; where the salt and tumbling sea receives rivers running from among reeds and lilies." No reference of them all, perhaps, is more satisfying than Mrs. Florence McCunn's words in which she tells us, "Time, which makes our politics obsolete, only makes our gardens old-fashioned." Through all the centuries the literature of gardens has been a thing by itself, and with all its great beauty

it has stood for a selfish element in art and letters. The aristocratic spirit, that delights in exquisite things, wards off the vulgar crowd and retires to its cultivated retreat with a fastidious relief. From that secluded garden of the *Decameron*, sleeping among its cypresses at Fiesole, down to those dainty enclosures which still breathe the fragrance of by-gone ages in the precincts of great houses in England and in France, the garden has been the most deliberate of luxuries. It has stood for a private place in which the spirit lingers among the things it loves most dearly. It is an enclosure beautiful and fresh, a place set apart from the daily toil, relaxed from strenuousness of any kind. Labor should know its limits, and this is luxury that lies beyond them.

Much as we admire and delight in this sweet and pleasant heritage that comes to us from the poetic and luxurious past, conscience cannot be content with it, as a final ideal for the pleasures of life. The garden can no longer be regarded as an insignificant place of mere rest and refreshment. It is a more important factor in man's spiritual development than either the battlefield or the market-place. It may be a place of secret idolatry, corrupting the very souls of those that walk in it. It may be a place of mere self-indulgence, hindering the spirit of man and detaining it on its arduous way—a standing temptation to its lingerers to stay too long aloof from the toilsome and painful world outside. But a change has come of late years upon the idea of the garden. In former times it was a thing possible only to the rich. Today all the world is preparing gardens for the poor. Nothing is more typical of the swiveling round of conscience from one set of virtues and vices to

another, than the change in all nations which has made the old complacency no longer possible. Whenever men today begin to shut themselves in exclusively for the purpose of enjoying the good things of this life, the insistent cry of the world's poverty and misery condemns them in the consciences of all worthy citizens. Indeed that cry penetrates to their own conscience, and will not let them rest. The social battle has, as Mr. Benjamin Kidd has told us, been won in the consciences of the wealthy and the powerful, and it is there that it will always gain its victories. The garden of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is no longer a possible ideal. It has been supplanted by the cottage garden of the country, and the children's play-gardens which are now an institution even in the poorest slums of the city.

There is no more patent and significant testimony to the power of the cross than this. The shadow of the cross has changed the gardens of the world. The sense of the world's pain and suffering has abolished the old and created the new social conscience: and, in the main issues of our social life, the victory of the cross is already won in the consciences of the powerful.

The garden idea is also applicable to our individual lives. We all know many beautiful spirits, the most charming of all our friends, who give us the sense of a race of aristocrats of the soul. They inhabit withdrawn and secret places. Theirs is the *garden enclosed, the fountain sealed*, and they linger where the dew of herbs is laden with fragrance under morning and evening light. Theirs is the garden of thought. Their mind dwells among choice books whose literary beauties never wither, though the

roots of those trees of knowledge may have been planted centuries ago. Theirs too is the garden of the heart, and they are delicately sensitive to the finest shades and possibilities of emotion. All these are secret and reticent things, flying sentiments that shrink from the touch of any but initiated fingertips. They are the Diana of the garden, continually eluding the huntsman in thickets of the glade. Others there are whose garden is that of the home, shutting in a little company of dearest friends. Few guests are there, for the gates are jealously guarded and the general public passes on its way, left to mind its own business, and to express its joy and heal its sorrow for itself. Within the sacred pale of home there is the tender luxury of motherhood and fatherhood, the joy in children and the children's joy in life and love. But it is an essentially exclusive precinct, apt to grudge any share that the homeless may beg of it. There is also the garden of our sorrows, where each new tomb is hewn out of the living rock of life. When grief comes to us we shrink back from all consolations of friends. We shall not admit even our dearest to share our tears with us. Our sorrow is our own and let men keep their hands from it: as though the touch of any communication seemed to profane the austere luxury of grief.

So there are many singers and mourners upon garden-seats, who still for one reason or another stay aloof from the general, shut themselves in and let the world go by. These are sweet places of imagination and of dream, of desire and regret, and to a certain extent they are excellently good places. They keep our finest heritage of the inner life from profane and common handling. They tell us of the

infinite value of reticence as a preserver of tender and elusive things. We may well thank God for those gardens enclosed, and for every cool retreat in a world whose literature and whose life alike are grown so vociferous and so promiscuous as those of today.

Yet upon even our sweetest gardens there must inevitably fall one day the shadow of the cross. Sooner or later, but quite surely sometime, it will invade them. I do not mean merely that the dreamer of delicate dreams will have to include in his imagination the pathetic yet half-pleasant tomb, saying to himself, *I shall die*. I mean that the shadow of the real cross will come upon them, grim, and gaunt, and searching.

Thy straight long beam lies steady on the cross.
Ah me!

What secret would thy radiant finger show?
Of thy bright mastership is this the key?
Is this thy secret then and is it woe?

Even so, oh cross! thine is the victory:
Thy roots are fast within our fairest fields.
Brightness may emanate in heaven from thee:
Here thy dread symbol only shadow yields.

In horror we watch the shades of death taking possession of our garden, and imparting to our lives the peculiar quality of pain and sacrifice. We think that all is over with the sweet fragrance of olden days, that never more again shall we know the fascinating charm of the earth. It may be so. To some extent it is so, doubtless. Yet the change is surely for the better. The touch of some great sorrow or sacrifice which life has demanded of us may change the sheltered coward into a brave man

who bears his heart exposed and unprotected in the open. It may change also the world of a man's ideals until he will be henceforth ashamed of mere selfish delight, however artistic, and will be constrained to respond to the demand for assuagement of the world's sorrow and pain. Christ comes to all our gardens thus, invading and claiming them. He brings love, and the open generous heart that tears down the gates of their exclusiveness and insists that we shall share our best with the disinherited. His coming is like the change that we have seen from the gardens of the rich to the gardens of the poor, which has abolished the complacency of ancient days and established the social conscience in society. So for us, each one according to his experience, shall Christ replace our demand for selfish enjoyment with His greater ideals of sacrifice and redemption. We shall still have our secret places, nor will His presence banish any of the fairest elements of life; but we shall no longer take up an attitude of spiritual selfishness towards any part of the outer world, seeking rather to share whatever gifts the garden may have brought us, with those whose poverty of spirit needs such gifts.

Further, there is still the new tomb in the garden. As we have seen, from the moment when the shadow of the cross had touched the garden of Joseph, there was nothing for it but to let Jesus in, dead or living. So when His cross has touched our lives and we have felt, either in the understanding of His suffering or in the experience of our own, something of the divine meaning of sorrow and of pain, Christ comes to our gardens. We must let Him in. And after this coming of His, the place will never be

the same again. For us as for Joseph it is the shadow of the cross that brings light and changes the tomb that once was there into the promise and portal of a glorious life. In all the gardens of our thought and feeling there is indeed the inevitable tomb, and our sense of death is naturally chill and dread. That is but human nature. But now the tomb is changed from the shadow of death to the resting-place of Jesus, and the ground of His resurrection. In the ideal of sacrifice and the willing acceptance of the cross many of us have taken the dead Christ into our garden; and lo, a miracle! The living Christ is walking with us there. He has not only brought love for the dead and the perfume of sweet spices rendering an ancient memory fragrant. Not only has He transformed the sacrifices of life into a new revelation of love. He has filled our hearts with hope and promise for the future day. Our shadowed secret places, from which the old selfish luxuriousness has departed at the entrance of sorrow or of death—these may become for us also scenes of resurrection. We have taken the dead Christ to our hearts and shall find Him living. We have revered His tomb and we shall see His rising.

Thus all the beauty of art and the tenderness of love need to be touched with the shadow of the cross before they can perfectly fulfill themselves. But touched with that shadow the garden of the soul becomes a place of resurrection where Christ will walk henceforward in all the transfigured beauty of His eternal life. We do not suppose Him to be the Gardener of our souls. We know Him to be the Master of the garden. He shall command and en-

hance its freshness and its growth. When the night falls and we enter into our own new tomb we shall find it sweet with the fragrance of His spices. Then when we awake it shall be in the fields of the blessed, the eternal gardens of the Lord. There we shall see Him once again, walking in the sunlight, and He shall call us by our name, and we shall answer as we did on earth, "My Master."





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