

INTRODUCTION

Kairos Letters began as a series of four letters of faith and encouragement written for a retreat held in November of 2009 by Kairos Prison Ministry International at the Pine Lodge Corrections Center for Women in Medical Lake, Washington. Volunteers from local churches provided letters of support, plates of cookies, and posters of encouragement for the twenty-four women who signed up, and trained volunteers went into the prison for four days to conduct the retreat. When the announcement was made in my church, I felt a strong prompting to write letters. During each day of the retreat, one of the letters was given to an inmate.

The study I did of the gardens in the Bible for these letters blessed me so powerfully that I prayed to the Lord that they would be disseminated to many other women in prisons. Within about a month of the retreat, Pine Lodge became a local headline news story, as word got out that the governor had decided to close it down and move the women who were there to other facilities around the state. I don't know who got the original handwritten letters, but the story made me believe that the Lord heard my prayer.

After this, I began editing the drafts of the letters I kept and thinking about how to include images of some of the world's great gardens. While working on this, I heard a sermon on the radio that brought to my mind a garden from the Bible that I left out of the original letters, so I added a fifth letter on the garden

tomb. I also wrote the final letter to share my personal witness of the resurrected Lord and suggestions for application.

Kairos is a Greek word for “time,” which does not mean the ordinary flow or passage of time but rather a moment in time in which there is a crossroads, a decision, a window of opportunity that changes what follows. In each of the gardens in these letters, God takes hold of a special moment in time to demonstrate his amazing love for us in an amazing way. The original idea came a few years ago when I did a Bible study on the word *paradise*. The Greek word *paradeisos* comes from *pairidaeza*, a word from the Kurdish region of old Persia for a park. The prefix *para-* suggests that it is enclosed and protected as by a wall. In medieval Europe, it was popular to make a garden area in front of the entrance to a church and to surround it with a high wall and gate. This entrance area was called “the paradise.”

As I have thought about the different gardens in the Bible, I have come to realize that paradises come in different sizes and shapes and we sometimes find them in unexpected places. Prison also has a high wall, a locked gate, and powerful guards. Perhaps there is some sense in which we can view a correctional facility as a paradise, an enclosed place where the Lord can plant a garden within our hearts. This is my prayer for you.

These letters are intimate and personal. I hope you will read them as you would read love letters written by your dear friend in the Lord who is unable to come to you personally. I realize that this study has some value for all believers, but from start to finish, I know that I have been writing to women inmates specifically. I have felt the Spirit of the Lord helping me—his great compassion for and desire to reach the women who will read this. I have enjoyed him so much during this project that I feel some reluctance to bring it to conclusion. I don’t know where it will end up, but I am trusting in the Lord to use it in some way to be a blessing to you, his beloved.



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My dear friend in Jesus,

When I heard that you would be doing a special retreat this week, I earnestly desired to be one of those chosen to write letters of encouragement and faith. I have been married and divorced twice and have three adult daughters, one adult son who is mentally retarded, and four grandchildren: two girls and two boys. I live with my life's losses. I was in a cult for twenty-five years and when I left it, my wife, children, and former community considered me dead or worse. I remarried but lost my second wife of ten years after a woman accused me of an act I did not commit that resulted in my professional livelihood being stripped from me. I am still on probation and have had to find a new way to make a living with a record as a potential threat to the public. The real perpetrator was never discovered. I just happened to be in the right place at the right time to become the bearer of another man's shame.

I say the *right* place, because now I realize how much God has done for me by taking away everything that made me

proud of myself and my own accomplishments. The injustice I experienced was a blessing from God, who has given me a new heart and a new life in which I have pride in Jesus's goodness and his accomplishments instead of my own. I am so grateful he came not just for "people" but for me personally. How I love him for bearing my sins and shame! I was compelled to do it, but he didn't have to. Out of a love I can't understand, he volunteered.¹ This same love is now in my heart, so I want to show his love to you by taking time to write these letters.

I decided I would write each of these letters about one of the gardens found in the Bible. The garden I'm writing about today was not like any other garden in the world because God himself planted it to make a home for Adam and Eve. Nobody even knows what the world was like back then. Scientists tell us the oceans were probably shallow and warm and there was lush vegetation even in the far north and far south. It never rained in those days until the flood of Noah came.² Adam and Eve were naked and thought nothing of it. It was warm and pleasant for them. Eden was where the first marriage between a man and woman took place.³ The Lord provided everything for them and, based on Genesis 3:8, we surmise that they walked and talked with him "in the cool of the day" every day. The Bible calls Eden "the garden of God"⁴ but never calls it *Paradise*. That name is reserved for the place where the redeemed will be after they die.⁵

Paradise literally means an enclosure without a roof, a private garden with a wall. In the old world, gardens were not just places to grow flowers or food. They were private retreats created for enjoying peace and meditation alone or for intimacy with a loved one, a protected place where love might grow without any other distractions. Only a lord—a landowner with a considerable fortune—could afford the expense of having one. A garden of some magnitude might be found next to a

castle or mansion with a high wall for privacy; a fountain of fresh water for watering the plants; every kind of fruit-bearing tree and perfume-producing herb or flower inside; and hedges, nooks, and lovely places to walk or sit and rest from the cares of life. Unlike these gardens, Eden did not have a wall; for in the beginning, everything God had made was "very good."⁶

They were innocent—how peaceful that would feel—but this condition did not last. Satan came into the garden disguised as *Snake* and before long, Adam and Eve were cast out of Eden into a world where there was jealousy, murder, pain, grief, and old age. There is a place inside each of us that feels deeply offended by this. We seem to know that it should not be this way. God should be near and visible, not far away and mysterious. We yearn for Eden. It makes us restless and unsatisfied with our lives no matter how much or little we have, as if there was a hole in us that we can't seem to fill up with anything less. We even make up our own gods to fill the void. Faced with a life that never quite delivers the real thing, it is no wonder that some of us become hard, angry, and bitter.

Snake comes to each of us in one form or another to take advantage of our hunger and outrage, offering something enticing in exchange for our rebellion. To Eve he offered the prospect of godhood: "you will be like God."⁷ For many of us, our agreement with Satan was the defining moment when our life stories really began—our first *kairos*. I had one, and so did you. Our life stories are individually different but in one way or another, we all share a similar experience with Adam and Eve. What approach did *Snake* use when he came to you? I wonder if you thought (as I did) that God must be a monster for making a world like this and then just leaving us here to fend for ourselves. Keep on with this kind of thinking and soon *Snake's* lies make more sense than God's truth does.

I remember a day when an enemy challenged me to a fight on the playground. I was in fifth grade and small for my age. I didn't want to fight him—he was an oversized sixth-grader—but a ring of boys surrounded us, and they wanted to see us fight. I was ringed in and could not run, and then there was my pride. How could I run away in front of all those boys? They started chanting “Fight, fight, fight...” They just kept saying it, and the ring of observers grew thicker and thicker as others ran up to see what was happening.

I remembered what my father taught me about fighting. He said, “You have to disable your enemy with the first blow because you might not get a second chance to hit him.” I took my best shot and tried to break the bigger boy’s nose with the first punch. His nose bled. I hurt him just enough to make him go berserk but not enough to stop him. After that, the blows fell like rain on my little body. I had the breath knocked out of me and couldn’t breathe. With nowhere to run, I curled up on the ground into a ball to protect my face, stomach, and crotch. He kicked me again and again in the ribs, in the hips, and in the head until I passed out. He kept going until the bell rang and his anger was all spent. Then everyone ran for their classrooms. I think I retreated into a place inside myself where I would not feel the pain anymore, someplace a child should never have to go, way, way inside my mind somewhere.

When I woke up, the playground was deserted. The physical pain was bad, but I got over that soon. It was the shame that I couldn’t shake. It clung to me for decades. As I limped back toward the school building, I let *Snake* into my heart. I made a vow: *This will never happen to me again.* If I couldn’t make myself bigger and stronger than him, I would make myself smarter than him, smarter than *all of them*. I galvanized myself with this. Anger made me feel powerful, like I could do anything if I wanted it enough. I raised my grade point average to 4.0 in sev-

enth and eighth grade. I went to the library during recess and lunch to hide from the bullies. I fantasized that I was a secret agent on an important mission that I couldn’t tell anyone. I made sure I knew where the other boys were and always had an escape plan. During the summer I read a book a day, hardly going outside where I might encounter a neighborhood bully. I was on a mission to be smarter and better than anyone who might threaten me in any way. Then I joined a religious cult. It was perfect for me: It had all the answers, an explanation for every mystery, and even secrets. They promised us real power, and so I fell for the same lie that *Snake* used on Eve. Someday, they taught, I would be *a god*. I became a Pharisee, one of those know-it-all, self-righteous people Jesus argued with all the time, one of those people he called a “son of hell.”²⁸

Why does God put Adam and Eve in a beautiful garden and then allow his enemy to tempt them? Why does he allow them to choose sin? Why does he let us fall, each in our own way? Why are there pain and sickness, crime and abuse, war and death? I don’t have all the answers anymore, but I do know that God has a plan for us that we can’t see, and that plan is good. He is the one who can take the bad things from life and use them for good.⁹ He is preparing each of us to become citizens of a kingdom so wonderful we can’t even imagine it; and that preparation requires that we become broken first so he can heal us, that we die to our old life that we hated anyway so he can give us a different kind of life, life with him inside of us, life that matters.

Dear friend in Jesus, I hope and pray that these letters encourage you. Every one of us is wounded, bleeding on the battlefield, about to die. Then we meet Jesus and it changes everything. Even the injustice in our lives can be transformed into something good; making us glad we were born after all, born twice. Maybe not today, but down the road, our stories

will start to make sense. Bear in mind that Eden is only chapter one, the setup for a great story yet to unfold. There are more chapters to this story, and each one is set in a different garden. As a believer in Jesus, you can know without seeing that your story has a happy ending, a glorious ending, a surprise-happy-glorious ending as all great stories do.

May the love of the Father who made you, the Son he sent to rescue you, and the Holy Spirit he gives to live within you give you peace and take away your shame.

STUDY QUESTIONS

There is no right answer for any of these. They are here to help you to have a discussion with other believers who have read the letters or for you to deepen your private study of Bible passages we have touched on. I have chosen questions that ask you to look into your own heart and experiences and to put them next to the Word of God. This kind of study is a habit of life that can deepen our relationship and walk with Jesus. Another way to deepen your understanding is to go through the endnotes for each letter and write down your thoughts about them in a journal. A third way to work through the letters is for you to write a reply letter to each one. I would be happy to read those if you do.

Discuss a difficult situation in your life and how God has blessed you through it.

How do the following verses speak to the question of God's motive in allowing us to experience loss?

Genesis 50:20

Romans 5:3–5

James 1:2–4

What was different for Adam and Eve in Eden than for every person who came after them?

What behaviors do people use to fill the emptiness we each feel in our hearts?

Was there a specific time in your life when you let Satan influence you? What disguise did he use?

Below are a few of Satan's lies. What is God's truth about them?

I must meet certain goals in order to feel good about myself (John 6:28–29).

I must be approved by certain others in order to feel good about myself (Romans 14:4).

Those who fail are unworthy of love and deserve to be punished, blamed, or condemned (1 John 4:10).

I am what I am. I cannot change. I am hopeless (2 Corinthians 5:17).

KAIROS LETTERS

What does the Father say about fighting? (Matthew 5: 39)

Is there a behavior you have used to protect yourself that you would like to change?
