

Paradise in Tension

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[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.! For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

! Now, the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made.

He said to the woman, did God actually say you shall not eat of any tree in the garden?

And the woman said to the serpent, we may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, you shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it lest you die.

But the serpent said to the woman, you will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.

[1 : 37] So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food and it was a delight to the eyes and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate.

She also gave some to her husband who was with her and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened and they knew that they were naked and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

May God bless the preaching and the hearing of his word. In 1989, Pete Rose, formerly one of the most dominant baseball players and current coach of the Cincinnati Reds, was banned from baseball for gambling.

Two years later, the Baseball Hall of Fame voted to officially ban him from ever being accepted. Rose was accused of gambling on games in which he played and coached for over his 26-year career.

Rose, after these bans, repeatedly denied the accusations, claiming that he did not gamble on games in which he participated.

[3 : 05] However, 14 years later, Rose released his autobiography entitled, My Prison Without Bars.

And for the first time, he admitted to gambling while playing and managing the Reds. He finally confessed on the front page of the Sports Illustrated.

He said, There hasn't been a day in my life where I didn't regret making those bets. I wish I could take it all back, but I can't.

What's done is done. I'm sure that I'm supposed to act all sorry or sad or guilty now, but I've accepted I've done something wrong.

But you see, I'm not built that way. Let's leave it like this. I'm sorry it happened. I'm sorry for all the people, fans, and family that it hurt.

[4 : 07] Let's move on. Now, while it is good that Rose confessed, his confession falls short of reckoning with the seriousness of what he did.

He just says, I'm sorry. I'm sure I'm supposed to act all sad. I'm just sorry it happened. Almost like it took over him, and he couldn't do anything about it.

He falls short of reckoning with and acknowledging the seriousness of what he did. And this morning, we come to a passage urging us to reckon with the seriousness of what we've done.

To reckon with the seriousness of sin. One of the main purpose of the past several chapters is to set up this chapter. Sin and its consequences establish the plot line of the Bible.

Sin is the problem God came to resolve from Genesis 3 all the way to Revelation 22. Sin is, in one way or another, the subject of every chapter of the Bible.

[5 : 12] So it's imperative that we understand and reckon with the seriousness of sin. Far too often, we think of sin as little more than a misstep, a mistake, a missing of the mark.

Or we discuss it in categories popular in our culture, a brokenness, weakness, failure, or psychological categories. So much so that our confessions are a little better than Mr. Rose's.

I'm sorry it happened. Try that one out on your wife. She's not going to like it. All of these categories are not necessarily wrong, but they can be helpful in understanding some things.

But they run the risk of muting the lethal seriousness of sin. J.C. Ryle, in his book Holiness, says, The plain truth is that a right knowledge of sin is at the root of saving Christianity.

So if you don't understand saving Christianity, a right knowledge of sin is at the root of it. Now we would think, is it not a right knowledge of Christ that's at the root of all saving Christianity?

[6 : 25] But what he says, no, no, no. A right knowledge of sin is important first and foremost. Now this doesn't mean we speak of sin by itself. We don't stop with sin.

We don't forget the resolve of God to rescue sinners. To speak of sin by itself is to forget that the center of our faith is not sin but a Savior. But we also must not speak of grace by itself.

To speak of grace without looking squarely at sin and its effect is to cut the nerve of the gospel. It's to cheapen the grace of God into little more than unconditional love.

It's to make the cross unnecessary, the gospel uninteresting, the Christian life uninviting and unappealing. And so what we need in order to live the Christian life rightly is a right knowledge of sin.

And quite obviously a right knowledge of our Savior. Chris Lungard in his book The Enemy Within says it this way, The grace of God in Christ and the law of sin are the two fountains of all your holiness and sin, joy and trouble, refreshment and sorrow.

[7 : 43] If you are to work with God and glorify him in this world, you need to master both. So in a word where we're going is watch out.

Your main enemy is not the world, the devil or your neighbor. It's your own sin. Watch out. Your main enemy is not the world, the devil or your neighbor.

It's your own sin. We're just going to break out this dialogue. A couple of verses at a time under the heading first of the serpent. The serpent.

Genesis 3 begins by introducing another creature that the Lord God has made. The serpent. Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made.

Similar to all the other creatures under heaven, the serpent, the snake. The serpent is a creature made by God, absolutely dependent upon God.

[8 : 48] The serpent though is crafty. More crafty than any other beast. Now we think crafty kind of has these negative connotations. It doesn't necessarily mean negative connotation.

It's crafty because the serpent is a beast of the field. That's a way of saying the serpent is a wild animal, an unbroken animal that roams the earth. And so these wild animals are crafty because they must fend for themselves and fight for their food.

They have to watch out for predators lest they become prey. These wild animals are a threat to mankind as they still are today. And this serpent is more crafty than all the others.

While craftiness does not immediately have negative connotations, the overall heading of this leaves an ominous feel already.

Now this verse doesn't tell us the serpent's name. But the New Testament and Revelation 12 and 20 and other places identifies him as the devil.

[9 : 53] He is the devil.

And the devil is the devil. How did he become the devil? How did he fall from light? How did he turn evil? And if everything were good up to this point in the scripture, where did evil come from?

Well these verses do not answer our questions. They do not focus on evil invading our world. They focus on the evil one tempting those in the world.

And for that reason, the focus of these verses is on the devil's words. Not his origin. Not his background. Not his identity.

But his words. The passage continues. Look down there. He says to the woman, did God actually say you shall not eat of any tree in the garden? Now we know from several weeks ago, God said you may not eat of only one tree.

[11 : 19] Tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But the devil begins his conversation by a slight exaggeration of God's word. Did God say you may not eat of any tree?

You know, immediately we often think of spiritual warfare as the devil alluring us, enticing us to wickedness. But though one of the consistent tactics of the devil throughout scripture is twisting God's word.

That's what we see here. That's what we see in the temptation of Jesus Christ. The devil disguises himself as an angel of light and disguises himself by twisting God's word.

His temptations often are less like Las Vegas. And more like, did God really say he works all things for good?

What about this? So the devil begins with a small exaggeration, carefully leading the woman into conversation and into temptation.

[12 : 28] The exaggeration, did God really say you may not eat of any tree, is meant to undermine God's goodness. It's striking to me that the devil does not begin by questioning the justice of God, which is where we often begin in apologetics.

He doesn't begin by questioning the holiness of God or the problem of evil. The devil does not even begin his temptation by laying out the joys of sinful pleasure. The devil begins by calling God little more than a big party pooper.

The devil begins by sowing the thought that God might not be as good as you think he is. The woman responds.

She says to the serpent, we may eat of the trees in the garden. But God said, you shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.

She begins fairly well. She corrects him. He said, did God say you may not eat of any trees? She says, we may eat of the trees of the garden.

[13 : 37] But she quickly stumbles. And at least two ways, she minimizes what God has provided. The word of the Lord is responsible for everything.

She sees the day and night, the moon and stars, the rainbows and flowers, marriage and companions, and so much more. And if you look back, look at verse 2, 16.

God said, you may surely eat of every tree of the garden. But in the temptation with the devil, she just says, we may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden.

She's beginning to agree with the devil that God is not really as good as she once thought. She minimizes what God has provided and she adds to what God has prohibited.

Look down there. You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.

[14 : 35] She magnifies God's strictness. She makes him appear harsh and cruel. All you have to do is reach out your hand and touch the tree and zap.

You're gone. One little slip. And it's over. We do the same thing. A father says to his daughter, you and Katie are being too loud.

It's time for her to go home. The daughter runs to her mother and says, dad said I can't have Katie over ever again. If you're a parent, you know at that moment, boss says to the employee, you have been late a number of times lately.

I think it's something you should really give attention to. Employee says, you know what that lame-o just said in his office to me? If I'm late again, I'm fired. I'm history. We naturally, sons and daughters of Eve, naturally magnify strictness.

But the combination of these two things is dangerous. She minimizes what God has provided, making him appear stingy. She exaggerates what God has prohibited, making him appear petty and harsh.

[15 : 44] In Charles Dickens' famous book, Oliver Twist, an orphan boy named Oliver runs away and is taken into a household of boys by a pickpocket and trained to steal.

In this little training school, they don't eat well. Child as he was, he's desperate with hunger and very miserable.

One night after being fed a small amount of soup, he rose. This is Dickens. He said he rose from the table and advancing to the master, basin and spoon in hand, said, somewhat alarmed at his own boldness, Please, sir, I want some more.

The master was a fat, healthy man, but he turned very pale. He was astonished. What? Please, sir, I want some more.

The master aimed at Oliver Twist to be young.

[16 : 55] The devil sows doubt to the point that the God of heaven and earth appears little more than a fat master like that. It's the Lord who made the earth and everything in it.

It's the Lord who causes the rain and fruitful season. It's the Lord God who gives food and drink, satisfying us with gladness. It's the Lord who's to give up every good and perfect gift.

Eve should have responded, Are you out of your mind? Take a look around. This is paradise.

God made everything. He made me. He loves me. I love him. He's given me all things to enjoy. Plants and food, sun and stars. More than that, he's given me a husband.

I love him. And he loves me. How can I possibly question his goodness, his wisdom and love after all this? He knows best. How could I doubt him?

[17 : 58] Are you out of your mind, serpent? But she doesn't. Point to the lie. The lie.

The serpent continues to tempt the woman and tells the lie. Look in verse 4.

Serpent said to the woman, You will not surely die. Literally, it says, No!

You will surely die. No way. The development of this conversation is clear. First, the devil gets the woman to doubt the word.

Then the devil explicitly contradicts the word. The devil says, Nothing bad is going to happen to you. You won't die.

[19 : 00] It's just a scare tactic. It's just a petty boss in the heavens trying to get you to stay in line. God is a liar. God is not to be trusted.

It's now explicit. It's the devil's words against God's words. But the devil continues.

Look in verse 4. For God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.

God is not just a liar. God is selfish. God is self-absorbed and self-centered.

God is only out for himself. Sure, he's given you some things to enjoy, but he's kept the really good things for himself. God's got little man syndrome.

[20 : 02] Controlling everything around him. The devil is saying God's words are not to be trusted. But most importantly, God's character is not to be trusted.

Sinclair Ferguson helpfully says, The lie, this lie, the lie, was an assault on both God's generosity and his integrity. Neither his character nor his words were to be trusted.

This, in fact, is the lie that sinners have believed ever since. The lie of the not to be trusted because he does not love me false father.

Sowing this doubt. Now, you have to imagine, before this serpent comes along, doubt has never entered her heart. No uneasiness.

No insecurity. No anxiety. No uncertainty about whether God is good or God is kind. But from then on, it's this lie.

[21 : 10] It's most destructive in our hearts. We know that God is God, yet struggle to believe God is good. We know that God loves us, yet struggle to believe God likes us and wants us to be happy.

It's not cancer or death or job loss or disappointment that breaks us. It's this lie that those things are just the dropping of the shoes of a God who doesn't like us.

God's word and character are not to be trusted, but what exactly is this temptation?

The devil says, you'll be like God. You'll know good and evil. Later on, as we'll see next week, it says, they did suddenly know good and evil.

In some ways, we're like God. So what exactly is this temptation? The devil is telling her, God knows that if you eat of this tree, you'll be like God. You'll be free.

[22 : 31] You won't need God anymore. You will know good and evil for yourself. It's a very enticing temptation.

I remember as a teenager, my parents went to church, and so I went to church and just plowed into me all throughout my upbringing was the wickedness of premarital sex.

But at school, I remember overhearing friends talk about sex, bragging of their exploits. I remember envying them.

I wanted to know what they knew. I wanted to know what they knew. I wanted to know what they knew. I wanted to know what they knew. I wanted to taste what they knew. The devil, this temptation, the devil's tempting the woman in a very similar way.

God has already declared what is good. God has already given them what is good. God has already told them how to love what is good and how to hate what is evil. But the devil is saying, you don't need God.

[23 : 45] You should decide for yourself. God has already given them what is good and how to hate what is good. There's no more alluring temptation, no more intoxicating promise. I read recently that among unbelievers, one of the most common songs played at a funeral is, I did it my way.

The verse goes, and now the end is here. So I face that final curtain. My friend, I'll make it clear. I'll state my case of which I'm certain.

I lived a life that's full. I traveled each and every highway and much more, much more. I did it. I did it my way. One funeral director even says that the funeral communion was done with that as the background music.

Could there be a more damning song? It's the serpent's lie. It's the alluring temptation.

It's the intoxicating promise. But it's helping us to see the DNA of sin. You know, we look at this chapter like, what is this fairy tale where the whole world spins out of control because of the eating of an apple?

[25 : 00] Well, it's not the eating of the apple that's the problem. It's the rejection of the rule of God. D.A. Carson helpfully says, we should not think that the serpent's temptation is nothing more than an invitation to break a rule, arbitrary or otherwise.

That's what it seems, arbitrary. One random tree, don't eat that. That is what a lot of people think that sin is, just breaking a rule. But what's at stake here is something deeper, bigger, sadder, uglier, and more heinous.

It is a revolution. It makes me God and thus de-God's God. Sin is not a misstep, mistake, or missing of the mark.

It's not the brokenness, weakness, or failure that come along with being human. It's our tendency to make everything about ourselves. It's the incessant angling of every conversation to try to leave people thinking about you.

If salvation is God putting himself in place of man, sin is trying to put ourselves in place of God. Sin is the unceasing attempt to make ourselves the center of the universe.

[26 : 15] And if we keep digging for the sin under the sin under the sin under the sin, it is this, the sinful human heart that insists that it wants what it wants.

The imperial human heart that says, I want what I want, regardless of what God thinks.

It's not a list of do's and don'ts. It's open rebellion.

And if we're going to change and grow, we must continually reckon with the seriousness of sin. We must see our ingrained self-centeredness as the heart of the seriousness of sin.

What's wrong with the world? The devil? Worldliness? Cultural Marxism? The far left?

[27 : 27] Toxic masculinity? Power people? Powerful people oppressing the weak? In the early 1900s, a London newspaper ran a column asking, what's wrong with the world?

A number of authors were invited to weigh in. Influential authors were invited to weigh in on what is wrong with the world. Pontificate in the times of England what was wrong.

Many wrote long essays along that way. One author wrote, Dear sirs, what's wrong with the world? I am. Sincerely, G.K. Chesterton.

Armed with this understanding. What's wrong with the world? I am. I am. I cannot stop insisting on what I want. I cannot stop angling and working for what I want.

I cannot stop putting a spin on things to what I want. And you know what? You can't either. You can't. What's wrong with the world?

[28 : 28] You know what? My hands are full with my own heart. I don't have time to worry. Everything in the world, my hands are full with my own heart and yours should be too.

If you come to grips with this fact, your main problem is not the devil or your controlling boss or your nagging wife or your needy mother-in-law or what happened to you when you were six, you'll be changed.

I was reading recently about J.I. Packer. So we've quoted him a number of times over the years. Just a tremendous theologian in the 1900s, early 2000s.

When he became a Christian, he was part of a popular understanding of theology back in those days of this idea that if the Spirit filled you up enough, you'd be completely free from all willful sin.

It's kind of articulated in different ways, but it was very much an idea of, well, you just cry out to the Lord and you just surrender everything and he'll set you free. You just let go, surrender, keep surrendering, and you'll be completely set free.

[29 : 41] And as a young man struggling with young men stuff, it didn't work. He tried to surrender but never found peace.

He kept struggling. He kept battling the lust in his heart. He tells the story of a preacher that donated his library, a preacher that died donated his library to the college.

And he went in there and pulled out a volume by John Owen called *Of Mortification of Sin and Believers*. I know it's a great title, you know, something you might want to read this afternoon.

Of the Mortification of Sin and Believers. He said, he opened it up, said it was God's chemo for my cancered soul. It addressed the cancer.

We swim in a world of false answers. God is trying to address the cancer. There is a cancer. There is a problem.

[30 : 50] You've alerted. You found something right. There's a problem. But the labels of this world are not right. J.I. Packer summing up those moments. He said, reaching across those three centuries from Owen to Packer, Owen showed me my inside, my heart, as no one had ever done before.

Sin, he told me, is a blind, anti-God. Now this is very classic Packer way to put it. Anti-God, egocentric energy in the fallen human spiritual system, ever fomenting, self-centered, and self-deceiving desires, ambitions, purposes, plans, attitudes, and behavior.

Is that the way you understand your heart? This anti-God, egocentric energy, always fomenting, always creating, always spouting out self-centered, self-deceiving desires, ambitions, purposes, plans, attitudes, and behaviors.

This morning, God wants to show you the inside. God wants to show you your heart. God wants to show you this ingrained self-centeredness.

God wants to show you it so you can master it. I mean, in many ways, the doctrine of sin is like a light. It is a light to many deep darknesses.

[32 : 23] It uncovers the root of bitterness, the source of all conflict, the spring of all discontentment. It forces you to stop looking around. It gives you an answer. Most importantly, it leads you to the solution.

Point three, the sin. The sin. The text continues and tells us the woman and the man's sin. Verse 6a, when the woman saw the tree was good for food, and it was a delight to the eyes, and the tree was desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate.

Suddenly, the serpent is nowhere in view. We're left alone with the woman's thoughts. The serpent has baited the hook.

Suddenly, this tree is not just attractive because of the potential to be free or something like that, but it's appealing to her. It's good for food. It's physically appealing to look at, you know?

I mean, we read in this an apple. We don't know there's an apple. It never says there's an apple. But, you know, a delicious fruit. It's physically appealing.

[33 : 38] A delight to the eyes. I mean, it makes you salivate like watermelon in July. Desired to make you wise. Okay, this is what I need to shore me up, to make me wise.

This is the bait. The serpent presents the bait, but hides the hook. It goes without saying, if the devil ever presents the hook, we would never take the bait.

And Moses tells how sin entered the world. She took it, and she ate. So undramatic.

Almost natural. The sin that ruined the world, presented with no shock whatsoever.

I wonder if we're not meant to see ourselves in this undramatic scene. That sin is so undramatic, so normal in our lives, that it's almost natural.

[34 : 54] Ray Ortlund helpfully says, sin is as unchosen as hunger, as comfortable as sleep, as inevitable as gravity, as lethal as poison.

She took it. She ate. She gave some to her husband and ate. Now immediately, you should be thinking, wait, who's this guy?

You know, where's he been? We don't know when he arrived or whether he was there the whole time, but it seems that he knew the conversation with the serpent was taking place and didn't do anything about it.

In fact, the shocker of this verse is not that the woman ate. The shocker is that the man stood by and didn't do anything. He's commanded to guard the garden.

Nevertheless, he takes the fruit and rejects God's rule alongside her. Immediately, they're overcome with guilt and shame. Their eyes are opened.

[36 : 01] They know they're naked. They thought this was the thing that was going to set them free to give them joy and satisfaction, but they're suddenly overcome with guilt.

I remember before I became a Christian in high school, I got in a fight. Now, based on the look of me, I didn't get in many fights because I'd lose a lot, but I remember rallying up to go fight these boys in town that we had issues with.

Probably stupid issues, foolish issues. And I remember punching this kid numerous times, as hard as I could, in the face.

Thinking, this will feel great. Bumping out to some music on the way home. All my friends are kind of partying and celebrating.

I felt so robbed. I felt defrauded. It took a long time before I understood what was going on in my heart.

[37 : 13] I don't want that at all. Not that I hurt the kid, but that's what's going on.

It's Adam and Eve that's got egg on their face. They aren't just guilty. Look at what it says next. They sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

They're ashamed. Suddenly, they know something's wrong with them. They run for cover.

They grab fig leaves to sew together to cover themselves. They can't rid themselves of shame.

We're the same way. try anything we can. Get our hands on to make us feel okay. Chase good looks, status, career, family, friendship, sex, influence, anything.

[38 : 34] But it's all sand between the fingers. It's all empty. Beloved, you have to see how far they've fallen.

They were created. God delivered, or God performed the first marriage and delivered Eve to her husband, to Adam, and they were naked and unashamed.

But after this, they're suddenly naked and ashamed. Naked and broken, running, hiding, cowering, and covering themselves from the one who made them.

The one who loves them. The one who planted them in paradise. And the world will never be the same. The word of God brings life and order, but the word of the serpent brings chaos and death.

Watch out. Your main enemy is not the world, the devil, or your neighbor, or God himself even. It's your own sin. In conclusion, God wants to call you out of hiding.

[39 : 40] Wonderfully, firstly, God wants to call you out of hiding by showing you another tree. The story of the trees does not end with these two, but with another tree.

The tree on the hill called Calvary. George Herbert, British poet, British poet, said it well, Oh, all ye who pass by, behold and see.

Man stole the fruit, but I must climb the tree. The tree of life to all, but only me. Was ever there a grief like mine?

The story of the Bible is a story of two Adams. The first Adam and the last. The first historical Adam who fell in the garden.

The last Adam, Jesus Christ, who conquered where Adam failed, who was tested similarly, but succeeded and most shockingly bore the sin that Adam deserved.

[40 : 55] Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree. Cursed is everyone who sins against the Lord. The reality of the Bible is a story of God's judgment first and foremost.

God waking, trying to wake us up to our sin against him. As Martin Lloyd-Jones once said, you cannot become a Christian until your mouth has been shut. Until your mouth has been shut, you stop blaming, you stop pointing, you stop making excuses, but you realize you have to answer for your own sin.

Because of the mercy of God found in Jesus Christ, we can answer for our own sin by pleading the blood of Jesus Christ. God wants to call you to call you out of hiding by delivering you from the lie.

We said, the lie that we're most tempted to believe is that God is not to be trusted because he does not love me, false father. Sinclair Ferguson says it like this, the gospel is designed to deliver us from this lie for it reveals that behind and manifested in the coming of Christ and his death for us is the love of father who gives us everything he has.

First his son to die for us and then his spirit to live within us. The wonder of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is not that God does not love you because Christ died for you.

[42 : 36] Christ died for you because God loves you. The generosity that was minimized in the garden is magnified in the cross of Jesus Christ when he gave the whole world and everything in it and we rejected that to try to rule ourselves, God gave his son.

And so it's meant to draw us to marvel at the heart of God. Let us pray. Father in heaven, we humble ourselves before you.

God, sitting under your word, we know and your word is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing the division of soul and spirit, joint and marrow, able to discern the thoughts and intentions of the heart from afar.

So we might see that no creature is hidden from his sight but all are naked and exposed to him with whom they have to do. We humble ourselves before you, ask that you would come and work in us that which is pleasing in our sight.

Amen. dethers calls us in a wonderful way to be people that no longer shift blame, dethers that hold fast to these two realities, the law of sin and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[44 : 26] We pray for help unto that end. We thank you. In Jesus' name, amen. You've been listening to a message given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.

For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at trinitygraceathens.com. Thank you.