



# **CHRISTIAN CRUSADERS**

**7401 UNIVERSITY AVE., CEDAR FALLS, IOWA 50613**

**(319) 277-0924**

**[INFO@CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG](mailto:INFO@CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG)**

**[WWW.CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG](http://WWW.CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG)**

## God Is: Just and Gracious

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Rev. Steve Kramer

TEXT: Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 (ESV)

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

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." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that 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, and 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.

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Dear friends,

Uh-oh, there's trouble in paradise. Things had been very good, the first two chapters of Genesis tell us that. Man and woman, living in a loving relationship with God and with

one another. And life in the Garden of Eden, which means “delight,” was delightful, perfect; and now it's come apart, the wheels have come off. Genesis 3 tells us how that happened: the serpent, the tempting, the rebellion against God, the shame, the hiding, the judgment, the expulsion, separation, a broken relationship with God... It's a tragic story. There's trouble in paradise.

But we learned a couple of important things about ourselves and our world in this story, as well as two important things about God that I'd like to share with you today. First, we see that we've got a problem. The couple had one commandment to keep: don't eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The serpent, representing the devil, tempts Eve, telling her that if she has some of that fruit, she'll be just like God, knowing good and evil. That was just too tempting. So, the next thing you know, she's taken a bite of the fruit and gives some to Adam as well. And they've rebelled against God's authority. Suddenly everything shifted. Everything was wrong in the universe. They now knew evil. Now they were ashamed and ran and hid from God. The relationship is broken. So, we've got a problem: sin. We see something about what sin is in this story, it's rebellious disobedience against God. It's taking a step of independence away from Him to be our own gods, which is actually idolatry. It's running our own lives as we see fit, deciding for ourselves what's good and what's evil. And since the fall, all of us have this as a condition. It's in our DNA, we're just naturally selfish and prideful and arrogant and rebellious towards God.

And this is a scenario from Genesis three gets played out every day in our world. And we see consequences, the consequences we have to live with because of sin, because of this disobedient act, the whole creation was, eventually, by the end of Genesis 11, shattered. Broken relationships, pain, murder, killing, suffering, toil, and death enters the picture. “From dust you came, to dust, you shall return,” God said. The relationship is broken and we can't go back and fix it, we can't get back to the garden, to God. We're helplessly lost. So we also discover in this story not only our greatest problem, sin, but our greatest need: we need someone to save us from our predicament.

Enough about us, though. The important lesson that I would like to focus on also today is what we're being taught about God. We're doing this series, “God Is.” Today, we learn two things about God: God is just and God is gracious. First, we see that God takes sin seriously. He cannot tolerate it. He pronounces His judgment upon the sinful Adam and Eve because He's holy and He is just. He does not turn a blind eye to being

defied. This is a side of God that many people are uncomfortable with, I know. We prefer a teddy bear-type of God who just gives out warm fuzzies to us no matter what. But that's just not God. This story gives us a picture of God as He is. He loves His creation, but He hates sin and He punishes the sinner who rebels against Him. We see it in this story with Adam and Eve's expulsion from the garden, don't we? And God's pronouncement of all the negative things to come. And we'll see it again and again throughout our Bible. He says in Exodus, through Moses, "I'll by no means clear the guilty."

But there is also something else here that I don't want you to miss about God: He's gracious. He exercises Grace towards Adam and Eve, which is unmerited favor and love towards them. We see that He's the God who does not wipe out rebels. Before His judgment upon them, God shows us that He's gracious. Did you see it? We see it at work as he's looking for Adam and Eve and He's calling out, "Where are you?" Of course He knows where they are and what they've done, He's God, right? Yet God approaches this new situation with a relational question: where are you? They've rebelled, but He's coming after them nonetheless. The relationship matters. He hasn't written them off or turned his back on them. It's really quite gracious on His part, don't you think? I can't help but be reminded of a parable that Jesus told the religious experts who were questioning His ministry with tax collectors and other sinners about a shepherd who had 100 sheep and lost one of them. And he left the 99 and went looking for the one that got lost and scoured the countryside looking for that sheep until he found him. And when he found him, he rejoiced and carried him home and threw a party. And Jesus said, "That's what your Heavenly Father is like. He's looking for the lost. And when the lost gets found and returned home, He rejoices."

Now during His judgment as well, we see God's grace. First, in His curse upon the serpent, He said, "I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and her offspring. He shall bruise your head (or crush your head), and you shall bruise his heel." This is the first bit of gospel talk about the one to come, who would crush the head of Satan: Jesus. He'd do battle with Satan at the cross and defeat him. We also see His grace in the sparing of Adam, whom He told would die if he ate from the tree. And as Adam steeled himself to hear the curse pronounced upon him, God cursed the ground instead. "Cursed be the ground because of you," He deflects the curse so that it falls on the ground and not on Adam directly. The man and the woman would live with the effect of the curse, experiencing frustration and toil and drought

and pain and disease and death. But God is just and the curse must go somewhere so God finds a way to direct the curse away from the man and the woman, and that's grace. And think about this: looking into the future at the right time, God would send His son and direct the curse upon Him for our sin, and punish Him at the cross. He became a curse for us. Grace! And finally we see God's graciousness after the words of judgment. We see them in His provision for Adam and Eve. He provides garments of skins for them to wear, though they had sinned against Him. God graciously covered their nakedness and shame with a garment of animal skins, thus requiring the death of an animal to cover their nakedness and guilt and shame. Many people can see a parallel here related to the sacrificial system to atone for sin, later on instituted by God through Moses, and then even later on in the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross as an atonement for our sin.

So we learn today not only that we got a problem called sin, and we need someone to save us. We learn a great lesson about God. God is just, He hates sin. God is gracious. So what does this mean for you and me? Well, we get a perspective, first of all, on why God's perfect world is like it is. I mean, have you ever watched the world news and thought to yourself, "What's wrong with this world?" Or maybe you've heard someone else say it? Well, now you know: sin. At the beginning of the 20th century, when the editors of the Times of London asked several eminent writers to contribute a piece under the theme of "What's Wrong with the World," Christian writer G.K. Chesterton responded, "Dear sirs, I am. Sincerely, G.K. Chesterton." And we know now that God is just and He hates sin and punishes us. He doesn't take sin lightly and neither should we, we shouldn't be trying to ignore it or cover it up. What happened in the Garden of Eden wasn't simply about rule-keeping. It was a revolution against God's authority with deadly consequences, making us people that need to be saved, leaving us with the question, "Who's going to fix this terrible predicament we're in?" And that's what the rest of the Bible plotline reveals to us. The Bible is a rescue story. Only God can fix this mess and rescue us from sin and death and the power of the devil. And He did. Grace!

You have to wonder why – why would He do that? Because, you see, even in all of this, we have a God that's gracious. He didn't wipe out the rebels, He deflected the curse away from Adam, and even announced a promise to crush the head of the evil one. God kept His word. Christ has done battle for us with Satan at the cross and defeated him. And on the last day, Satan and evil will be destroyed once and for all. He cannot hold the believer in Christ captive. And we had that lovely picture of God clothing them

with garments made of skins to cover their shame and guilt. He's provided garments for you and me as well. Robes of righteousness, making us clean this side. The Bible tells us that we stand before our holy God and even our best actions are nothing more than filthy rags in His sight. We're sinners, but God loves us. He cannot allow our sin into His Heaven and into His presence because of His holiness and justice. So He did something about it for us at the cross. Jesus died a sacrificial death for our sins. He took upon Himself our sinfulness, our sinful rags bearing the curse, the punishment for us. He paid for it with His innocent blood and God raised him up again. And those who trust in Him receive Christ's robe of righteousness. A great exchange takes place. He takes our filthy rags. We get His robe of righteousness and stand before God forgiven, children of God. That's Grace.

So here is a life and death question I need to ask you today, it's the same question God was asking in our story: Where are you? Are you walking with God, living in a restored relationship with him by grace, through faith in his son, Jesus Christ? Gosh, I hope so. And if so, then give thanks to God today for His grace towards you. Or are you hiding from Him? People try to do that, still... they try to fix life, try to live life on their own terms as their own god, or try to fix their lives and their relationship with God in their own way. Adam and Eve, you know, they hid, didn't they? Not only behind the trees in the garden, but after they came out and stood before God, they continued to hide and justify themselves by putting the blame on someone else. "We're really innocent," or "It's Eve's fault," or Eve said "It's the serpent's fault." We refuse to own it, just like them, or take responsibility for our disobedience. We pretend we're really OK, but not one of us is OK. Not one of us is innocent before God. All of us have fallen short of His glory and we can't make it right on our own. I want you to consider these life-restoring words from 1 John: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth isn't in us. But if we confess our sins, He's faithful and just to forgive our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." I appeal to you today, stop your hiding, come out, come out wherever you are.

And this study of Genesis 3 reminds me of another story that Jesus told about a rebellious son who was tired of taking orders from his dad. So one day he left his father and his home and he took with him his part of the will. And he went to the city to run his own life. And he squandered away everything he had. He became destitute and wound up feeding pigs. And that's about as low as you can go. He came to his senses and thought, "This can't go on. I could perish of hunger." So he headed home with a

rehearsed speech about working for his dad as a servant, since he'd blown it as a son. But as he approached the house, he was shocked to see his father running towards him, eyes filled with love, arms wide open. And he puts the best robe upon the son and a signet ring upon his finger, declaring him his son. That's what happens when a lost son or daughter comes home to the Heavenly Father. He's waiting for you. You might be thinking, "Oh, how I wish it were true." It is. God is just, He punishes sin, but God is also gracious. He's provided a way back. I encourage you place your trust in Christ and join the host of others who have come home and received grace and are now singing "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me."

Amen.