

# **“The Friendly Joke”**

## **Genesis 3:1-3**

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on January 31, 2016

### **INTRODUCTION**

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Please open your Bibles to Genesis 3.
- In this new series we are asking the question, **“What is wrong with the world?”** This question matters because you cannot fix something unless you know what’s wrong with it. Our world is a mess and our personal lives are a mess. So what’s wrong with the world?
  - In this series I am trying to show you that the Bible has an intellectually credible and emotionally satisfying answer to this question.
- Here in Genesis 3 we are going back to the moment when everything went wrong. If you want to discover how a river became polluted you have to follow the pollution back to its source. The Bible presents Genesis 3 as ground zero in a catastrophic event that spiritually polluted God’s good creation.
  - In one sense this chapter is the historical account of the serpent’s temptation that led Adam and Eve to turn away from God and pollute the world with sin. In this sense it was their temptation, not ours.
  - In another sense though this is the archetypal temptation. An archetype is an original from which everything else is a copy. In other words, every temptation we face today is but a copy of this original temptation.
    - So if we can understand what went wrong with Adam and Eve, we can understand what’s wrong with us. More importantly though if we can understand what is wrong then there is hope that things can be made right.
- In Genesis 3 we see that the serpent’s temptation came in two parts for he speaks twice. I call his first words, “The friendly joke” and his second, “The beautiful lie.” Today we will look at the friendly joke though I will briefly touch on the beautiful lie.
  - We will see that the *only* reason we believe the beautiful lie is because we *first* join in with the friendly joke.
    - So here is my simple outline: First, the friend. Second, the joke. Third, the punch line.

### **THE FRIEND**

- Let’s begin then with **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** the friend.
  - Here’s the main thing I want to show you: **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** in temptation Satan always presents himself as a helpful friend who is only looking out for our best interests.
    - Look with me at verse 1. **READ 1** – *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’?”*
- Notice how Satan does *not* present himself. He doesn’t violently explode into the garden with flames of fire like some sort of terrifying Hollywood demon.

- No, he comes quietly. He comes peacefully.
- Moreover, he doesn't show himself to be an enemy of God. If you were reading this for the first time you would not know what to make of this serpent.
  - Since everything in Genesis 1-2 has been defined as good we assume this serpent must also be good. Although the serpent is said to be "crafty" this just means he is very prudent and shrewd; a trait that can be used for good or evil.
    - Moreover, we do not find out until much later in the Bible that this is the enemy of God named Satan.
- Furthermore, he doesn't attack directly. He doesn't give six arguments for why God does not actually exist. That would be too obvious.<sup>1</sup> He doesn't say, "*Eve, let's get drunk, listen to death metal, play with a Ouija board, and plan how to kill your husband.*"
  - No, the serpent comes as a friend. He just wants to have a pleasant theological discussion: "*Eve, there's something that has been bothering me. I'm concerned about you. Can you just clarify for me what God said about the whole not eating from the tree rule because it seems strange to me that God would restrict your freedom and happiness like this?*"
    - In temptation Satan always presents himself as a helpful friend who is only looking out for our best interests.<sup>2</sup>

## THE JOKE

- Let's turn to part 2 now, which I am calling (**SHOW SLIDE 4**) the joke.
  - Let's look more closely at the serpent's question. **READ 1b** – *He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?"* The serpent comes across like he is surprised. There's a bit of lighthearted laughter here. "*Eve, I've heard about this rule but I must have heard wrong. Did God actually say that?*"
    - I want to show you that there is an entire universe of rebellion in this tiny question. I want to show you that it is this question that is at the heart of all that is wrong with the world and all that is wrong in your life and mine.
- This is not a question at all. It's a statement. It's like when I was a teenager and my parents said my curfew was 10:30pm. Some friends had the same curfew as me but others could stay out later. So when, at 10:20pm, some of these friends said, "*Let's go rent a movie*" I would have to head home.

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<sup>1</sup> Even today, his primary tactic is not to disprove the existence of God for the vast majority of people in the world believe in the existence of God.

<sup>2</sup> In 2 Corinthians 11 the apostle Paul expressed his fear that the Corinthian Christians might be led astray from Christ "just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning." Eve was deceived because of the way the serpent presented himself as a friend. That is why Paul goes on to say, "Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light."

- Someone would then ask me this question: ***“did your parent’s actually say you have to be home at 10:30pm?”*** And then those later curfew friends would chuckle at how ridiculous they thought this was.
  - Now that’s not really a question is it? It is a statement disguised a question. It’s a statement that says, ***“Your parents and their rules are a joke.”***
- That short question has tremendous power. It does at least five things to me.
  - First, it narrows my focus to this one rule and ignores everything else about my parents, especially the good things they do for me.
  - Second, it suggests that my parents are unfair and do not have my best interests in mind.
  - Third, it implies that I know better than my parents what is good for me.
  - Fourth, it invites me to stand in judgement over them and their rule.
  - Finally, it provides me with the opportunity to make a choice. The choice now looks like this: I can follow my strict parents and their overly harsh rules or I can pursue true happiness and freedom by doing what I want.
    - All of this is hidden within the serpent’s question. He narrows her focus to the one rule God gave. He suggests that God is being unfair. He implies that she knows better what is good for her. He invites her to stand in judgment over God and break away from God to pursue her own happiness.
- Let’s contrast the serpent’s words with what God actually said in 2:16. **READ 2:16** - ***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.”***
  - God began by emphasizing that they were “surely/freely” to eat. The serpent begins by emphasizing how God has restricted what they can eat.
    - God emphasizes that they could eat from “every” tree in the garden with the one restriction. The serpent wants Eve to focus on the restriction and so he exaggerates God’s rule. ***“Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’”***
- Do you see what is really going on here then? Do you see how he attacks? The serpent is not making an argument; he is creating an atmosphere – an atmosphere that is suspicious of God’s true motives. He is not trying to debate facts; he is trying to create an attitude – an attitude that doubts God’s good intentions.
  - ***“Eve, if God is making such strict rules then perhaps he doesn’t really have your best interests in mind. Maybe he is not as good as you were originally led to believe.”***
    - The serpent isn’t attacking God’s existence; he’s attacking God’s character. This is character assassination. But let’s be crystal clear here – what part of God’s character is he attacking? Is he not attacking God’s goodness? This one question is designed to make Eve doubt that God is truly good.
- Let’s drill down deeper. This becomes even clearer in the fact that the serpent avoids using God’s name and simply refers to him with the generic title “God.”

- Look at verse 1. Who is it who made the animals? Does it say God? No, it says, **“the LORD God.”** When you see LORD capitalized it is the name of God. It is “YAHWEH God.” God’s name, YAHWEH speaks of his self-existing nature. But it is speaks of his personal covenant nature with his people. YAHWEH means, **“The God who is with us and for us.”** His very name speaks of his goodness.
  - But how does Satan refer to him? He simply says, “God” which is the generic term for the Supreme Being. That is not totally wrong for it stresses God’s power. However, it is more impersonal.
- I want to show you that Satan avoided God’s name because he wanted to depersonalize God – to make God appear distant and indifferent.
  - How do we know this? Because of the contrast between Genesis 1 and Genesis 2-3. Genesis 1 always, without exception, uses the title “God.” It does so to stress God’s creative power. But from 2:4 to the end of chapter 3 there is a radical shift. It is never just God. It is always “YAHWEH God.” Why the complete shift?
    - Because Genesis 2 zooms in on God’s relationship with humanity. The shift is to emphasize God’s personal covenant relationship with humanity and his care for us.
- In Genesis 2 it is the “the God who is with us and for us” who plants the garden. It is the “the God who is with us and for us” who fills the garden with trees to eat from. It is the “the God who is with us and for us” who gives Adam life. It is the “the God who is with us and for us” who creates a wife so perfect for Adam that he breaks out in poetry.
  - Chapter 3 begins by again emphasizing “the God who is with us and for us” but when the serpent speaks there is a sudden and jarring break from this. He avoids using God’s name like he avoids talking about the abundance of other trees Eve is allowed to eat from.
    - All he wants Eve to see is a powerful but distant God who imposes restrictions on her.
- Evidently his strategy of getting Eve to doubt the goodness of God worked. Look at Eve’s response. **READ 2-3 – 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.’ ”** Three things in her responses show that she is beginning to doubt.
  - First, she copies the serpent in referring simply to “God,” not “YAHWEH God.” Listen carefully: God is referred to 25 times from 2:4 to the end of chapter 3. Every single time it is “YAHWEH God” except for the three times the serpent speaks of him and the one time Eve copies the serpent.
    - This is supposed to jar you. Moses, the author of Genesis, is showing us that something is drastically wrong here.
  - Second, Eve *does* correct the serpent’s exaggeration and say they are allowed to eat from the other trees but she does not emphasize how generous God is. She does not speak of how they were to “surely/freely” eat from “every” tree.

- Third, she adds that they were not even allowed to “touch” the tree. Did God say that? No. Eve is overstating the rule. It seems that she has already begun to believe that God is being overly harsh. Her confidence in the goodness of God is wavering.
- Let’s bring this all together then and say this: **(SHOW SLIDE 5)** The starting point of every temptation occurs when we doubt the goodness of God. When God’s rules seem like a bit of a joke we become skeptical that God actually has our best interests in mind.
  - Once you bite down on this worm, the hook is already in your mouth. Once you begin to doubt that God has your best interests in mind, it is a quick step to believing the beautiful lie – the lie in verses 4-5 that says, ***“The way to find happiness is to break away from this God who is holding you back and live for yourself.”***
    - But listen, the only reason why we ever believe the beautiful lie is because we have first grown suspicious of the character of God.

## HOW WE DOUBT THE GOODNESS OF GOD

- Let’s flesh out how we do this in real life. It is easy to see when you start with atheism. Atheists do not just doubt that God is good, they claim to *know* that God is not good.
  - All the modern atheists rage against God. They go to great lengths to condemn and denounce God as an “evil monster.”<sup>3</sup> The late Christopher Hitchens said he couldn’t believe in God because, if God exists, it would be like living in a celestial North Korea.<sup>4</sup> Do you see it? In choosing to use the image of North Korea, Hitchens is equating God to a cosmic dictator whose harsh and ridiculous rules destroy human freedom and joy.
    - That is why Douglas Wilson, a pastor and friend of Hitchens, concluded part of a debate with him by saying atheism is founded on two fundamental tenets: ***“First, there is no God. Second, I hate him.”***<sup>5</sup>
- When people reject Christianity it is rarely because they have studied and studied and come to a conclusion based on logic and reason. Why do they reject it? For moral reasons that are often sexual in nature. Here is what I have seen.
  - A young woman raised in a Christian home goes to University. She knows God’s rules about not marrying a non-Christian but this just seems overly strict when she meets John. They start dating. She says she is a Christian and so won’t have sex before marriage but before long they’re sleeping together and soon living together. She justifies it for a while with silly things like saying they are married in the eyes of God.
    - She stops going to church and reading her Bible. Gradually she starts to make arguments against the validity of Christianity and eventually rejects the faith.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008), 282.

<sup>4</sup> <http://genius.com/Christopher-hitchens-on-gay-marriage-and-christianity-annotated/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://thedailyhatch.org/2012/01/16/christopher-hitchens-debate-with-douglas-wilson-part-12/>

- What happened here? It was not well-reasoned arguments that led her to reject the faith. It all began when she doubted the goodness of God because God's rules just seem too restrictive. As soon this attitude of suspicion set in it was only one short step to deciding for herself what was good and evil.
- Why does a person commit adultery? Because at the very bottom they do not believe that true happiness can be found in following God's rules.
  - A person only commits adultery when they have first believed that God's rules are a hindrance to their fulfillment.
- Why is this generation of men and women consuming pornography at unparalleled rates?
  - Because we have first been polluted with the idea that God's rules on sexuality are holding us back from true fulfillment. At its root pornographic use is a failure to believe that God is good.
- Why does anxiety over finances absolutely overwhelm you at times? Didn't Jesus say to seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and the good Father, who cares for even the sparrows, will provide for you?
  - This should produce peace amidst turmoil. Yet our stress reveals that we do not really trust that God has our best interests in mind.
- When life falls apart and we are suffering why is it our first instinct to blame God, to be angry with God, to pull away from God, and even to reject God?
  - Answer: we do not really believe that God is good.
- So there you have it. The serpent's greatest strategy in his war against humanity is to launch a full out assault on the goodness of God. He bends all of his will and all of his efforts on getting you and I to become suspicious of God.
  - For when you doubt the goodness of God you are only one short step away from believing the beautiful lie that life would be better if you broke away from God and made up your own rules.

## THE PUNCHLINE

- So that is the friend and that is the joke. We come now in the final place to **(SHOW SLIDE 6)** the punch line.
  - The serpent may have tried to make God and his rules out to be a joke but it is God who delivers the punch line. It is God who indisputably shows that the question in Genesis 3:1 came from a forked tongue – that the serpent is a liar and the father of lies.
    - In this point my goal, by the grace of God and the power of the Spirit, is to depollute our hearts of this doubting suspicion. Like a bird caught in an oil spill needs to be washed in order to fly again, I aim to wash away the oil of our doubts that we might fly.
- There are at least three things that should depollute our hearts from our doubts regarding the goodness of God. **(SHOW SLIDE 7)** First, creation proves that God is good.
  - Genesis 1 is all about how God has created a world that is designed for human life and existence. After every day of creation God looks upon his

- creation and says it is good. After the sixth day **“God saw all that he had made it was very good.”**
- Then look at Genesis 2 and how YHWH God, the God who is with us and for us, creates Adam, gives him a wife, gives them a garden filled with good food that they allowed to eat liberally from.
    - Within the context of Genesis 1-2 it is utterly laughable to believe that God is harsh. God’s goodness in giving us this planet and our lives should begin to depollute our hearts of the toxic idea that God does not really have our best interests in mind.
  - **(SHOW SLIDE 8)** Second, the consequences of believing the serpent prove he lied about God’s goodness.
    - If the serpent was really a friend who was only seeking Adam and Eve’s best interest then it follows that in disobeying God they would have found greater joy, more fullness of life, and better harmony with each other. Is that what happened? Quite the contrary.
      - When they ate they immediately felt shame and hid themselves. This quickly turned into their first marital conflict as Adam blamed Eve. God then drove them out of paradise where working the ground was difficult and childbirth became painful. Gen 4-11 then go on to prove this as Cain murders Abel and the earth is filled with violence.<sup>6</sup>
    - Do you see my point? The terrible consequences that resulted from believing the serpent prove that God was misrepresented.
  - **(SHOW SLIDE 9)** Third, Jesus indisputably proves that God is good.
    - Do you know what Jesus’ name means? It means **“YAHWEH saves.”** His very name means, **“The God who is with us and for us has come to save us.”** Jesus is the greatest proof that God is good.
      - Would a God who did not really care about humanity send his only Son to ripped apart on the cross so that serpent believing rebels might be restored back to God? If God did not spare his most precious Son, but gave him to be slaughtered for us, how can we not believe that he will give us all good things?
        - What more can God do to prove that he has our best interests in mind? What more can God do to prove he is good?
  - The great Puritan John Owen put it this way: **“The greatest sorrow and burden you can lay on the Father, the greatest unkindness you can do to him is...”**
    - What do you think it is? **“...not to believe that he loves you.”**<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Genesis 4-11 drive home one big point, namely, that the serpent lied. What is the first story after Genesis 3? In Genesis 4 Cain kills Abel and the bloodthirsty Lamech takes vengeance. What is Genesis 5? A long genealogy. It is unique among the genealogies for after every person’s name it says, “and he died, and he died, and he died.” What is Genesis 6? It is the prelude to the flood because “the earth was corrupt in God’s sight and was full of violence.”

<sup>7</sup> I have updated the original 17<sup>th</sup> century wording, which says, “Yea, as your great trouble is about the Father’s love, so you can no way more trouble or burden him, than by your unkindness in not believing of it.” John Owen, *Of Communion With God The Father, Son And Holy Ghost* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 3:1.3.

## WHEN SATAN COMES CALLING

- There was once a miner who, though a strong Christian, was injured at a young age. He became an invalid. Over the years he watched through a window near his bed as life passed him by. He watched fellow workers marry, raise families, and have grandchildren. He watched the company he had served thrive without attempting to make adequate provision for his loss. He watched as his body withered, his house crumbled, and hope for better things in this life died.
  - Then, one day when the bedridden miner was quite old, a younger man came to visit him. ***“I hear that you believe in God and claim that he loves you,”*** said the young man. ***“How can you believe such things after all that has happened to you?”*** The old man hesitated and then smiled. He said, ***“Yes, there are days of doubt. Sometimes Satan comes calling on me in this fallen-down old house of mine. He sits right there by my bed, where you are sitting now. He points out my window to the men I once worked with whose bodies are still strong, and Satan asks, ‘Does Jesus love you?’ Then, Satan makes me look at my tattered room as he points to the fine homes of my friends and asks again, ‘Does Jesus love you?’ Finally, Satan points to the grandchild of a friend of mine — a man who has everything I do not—and Satan waits for the tear in my eye before he whispers in my ear, ‘Does Jesus really love you?’”***
    - Startled by the candor of the old man’s responses, the younger man asked, ***“And what do you say when Satan speaks to you that way?”*** Said the old miner, ***“I take Satan by the hand, and I lead him to a hill far away called Calvary. There I point to the nail-pierced hands, the thorn-torn brow, and the spear-pierced side. Then I say to Satan, ‘Oh how Jesus loves me!’”***<sup>8</sup>
- How can we doubt the goodness of God in light of the cross? If we do it is proof that we have been tricked. We have been conned. A Deceptive Power has used the old magician’s trick of misdirection. He has focused our attention on restrictions and difficulties so that we cannot see the greatest proof of God’s love which is the cross.
  - Look to the cross and depollute your heart from the toxic suspicion that doubts the goodness of God.

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<sup>8</sup> Bryan Chapell, *The Hardest Sermons You'll Ever Have to Preach: Help from Trusted Preachers for Tragic Times* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), Kindle Edition, Location 127.