

James 1 – "The Testing of Our Faith"

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Introduction

Life is a testing ground, a time of probation. The tests, trials, and challenges come in many forms and from many sources. Some are easily recognized because they are so painful. Others may be difficult to recognize because they are not only painless, but they offer reward and/or produce pleasure.

We read no further than the second verse of the epistle of James before we learn that it is addressed to God's people who are being tested and tried. Anyone who has lived as a Christian very long can readily identify with the experiences described and addressed in James 1; the tests to our faith seem to come quite frequently. In fact, one who strives to live faithfully will find that life is almost one temptation, test, trial, and tribulation after another, **because one is a Christian.**

Preliminary Definitions

Between verses 2 and 14 of James 1 the English word *tempt* in various forms is found seven times.¹ Each of these is translated from some form of the Greek verb *peirazo*. This word is capable of various connotations, depending on context. Vine points out that it "signifies to try, attempt, assay...; to test, try, prove in a good sense...; [or] in a bad sense, to tempt or attempt to ensnare...; of temptations to sin...; of trying or challenging God...."² He further says concerning the noun form, *temptation* (*peirasmos*): "used of trials with a beneficial purpose and effect, of trials or temptations, Divinely permitted or sent...; with a good or neutral significance...; of trials of a varied character.... Of trials definitely designed to lead to wrong doing...; of trying or challenging God, by men...."³

The specific connotations of *peirazo* must be determined by the context in which it occurs, for the most part. At least two of its major distinctive shades of meaning are observable in James 1:

First, some trials are "neutral" relative to enticement or seduction to sin. These occur because we are physical creatures, we live among and are affected by other physical creatures, and we live in a world bound by blind physical laws. These trials attack us from the outside. Men sometimes bring such trials on themselves by their own behavior (e.g., consequences of personal sin, carelessness, foolhardiness, etc.). Men suffer other trials of this sort randomly, apart from personal cause or fault, as "part of life" (e.g., terminal illnesses, automobile accidents, financial losses, personal/property damage from storm or fire, grief,

etc.). Some trials are peculiar to Christians (persecution for righteousness' sake), which are allowed by God to test and strengthen our faith. All such trials may make one either spiritually stronger or weaker, depending on the way one reacts to them. In none of these trials is there an actual enticement or encouragement to sin. However, our reaction to trial and persecution can cause us to sin (e.g., denying Christ to avoid persecution). Context suggests that James uses *temptation* in verses 2 and 12 in the sense of testing and trials, which, if we pass, renders us approved.

Second, some challenges and trials involve temptation to sin. These occurrences contain the elements of enticement, solicitation, and seduction—they attack from within the person. These testings are events pertaining to our lives which Satan uses and through which he appeals to fleshly desires in an effort to cause us to either neglect or transgress the law of God. This is definitely the sense in which James uses *tempted* and *tempteth* in verses 13 and 14.

James 1 also contains two other words related to his discussion of temptation and trial. The words *proving* (*trying*, KJV) (v. 3) and *approved* (*tried*, KJV) (v. 12) are from *dokimazo*, meaning “[a test] primarily, of metals..., to prove,... more frequently to prove with a view to approval.... A test, a proof,... the means by which a man is tested and proved...”⁴

We now turn our attention to the challenging tests of life discussed in James 1, of which there are two of major significance: (1) trials created by persecution and (2) temptations, through which Satan entices men to sin.

The Test of Persecution—James 1:2–4, 12

The Fact of Persecution

The first test of life discussed in James 1 is in verses 2–4: “Count it all joy, my brethren, when ye fall into manifold temptations; knowing that the proving of your faith worketh patience. And let patience have its perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, lacking in nothing.” It is apparent that the saints James addressed (i.e., “the twelve tribes which are of the Dispersion,” 1:1) were undergoing some sort of challenging experiences of many and varied kinds (“manifold temptations”). While the word *temptations* appears in both ASV and KJV to describe what they were experiencing (v. 2), an ASV footnote suggests *trials* as the possible meaning (see comments below on 1 Pet. 1:6, a parallel to Jam. 1:2). This footnote has merit. There is no indication in verses 2–4 that they were being enticed or seduced to be unfaithful. Rather, whatever they were experiencing was serving to prove or test (with a view to being approved) their faith (v. 3). The same is also true of verse 12, in which James connects

temptations with the process of approval. It therefore seems most likely that James was referring to the testing of their faith through persecution, with which the first century saints were well acquainted.

The persecution of the righteous began in the shadow of the Garden of Eden as righteous Abel was slain by his jealous brother, Cain (Gen. 4:3–8); it continued throughout Old Testament history. The prophets of God were treated in especially brutal and shameful ways as they fulfilled their God-given tasks. They were made to suffer...

...trial of mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: they were stoned, they were sawn asunder, they were tempted, they were slain with the sword: they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves, and the holes of the earth (Heb. 11:37).

The Lord acknowledged such in His brief “beatitudes” statement: “For so persecuted they the prophets that were before you” (Mat. 5:12b). He reminded the scribes and Pharisees in Jerusalem of the blood of the prophets which their fathers had shed; He accused His contemporaries of being just like them (Mat. 23:29–32). Then He wept as he further pointed out Jerusalem’s long history of murdering God’s spokesmen, knowing that they would soon do the same to Him (v. 37).

The Lord had promised and warned that all of His disciples could expect to be tested through persecution. His final “beatitude” relates to persecution and the persecuted: “Blessed are they that have been persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mat. 5:10). He followed these words by telling the disciples: “Blessed are ye when men shall reproach you, and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake” (v. 11). This is the only beatitude upon which Jesus elaborated, giving it special emphasis with two full verses of commentary. Surely this fact is a signal that the Lord recognized the great danger that testing by persecution would hold for His followers. Just after Peter’s confession of His Deity near Caesarea the Lord issued a universal challenge: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me” (Luke 9:23). The verses in the immediate context (21–22, 24–26) imply that the “cross” each disciple is called upon to bear daily, if necessary, is suffering brought about by being faithful to Him—persecution, whereby one’s faith is tested.

Such testing began even while the Lord was still on earth. In their jealousy of Jesus and His rising popularity, the Jewish leaders struck such fear into the hearts of the people that they would not even discuss Him openly (John 7:13). They further decreed that anyone who

confessed Him as the Christ should be discharged from the synagogue, which happened to some (9:22, 34–35).

The Lord plainly and repeatedly warned the apostles of the persecutions they would suffer:

But beware of men: for they will deliver you up to councils, and in their synagogues they will scourge you; yea and before governors and kings shall ye be brought for my sake, for a testimony to them and to the Gentiles.... And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake (Mat. 10:17–18, 22a).

But before all these things, they shall lay their hands on you, and shall persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, bringing you before kings and governors for my name's sake (Luke 21:12).

Remember the word that I said unto you, A servant is not greater than his lord. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.... But all these things they will do unto you for my name's sake, because they know not him that sent me (John 15:20–21).

The apostles most certainly saw the Lord's warnings pertaining to them fulfilled, as they variously suffered arrest, court trials, extended imprisonments, beatings, stonings, mob violence, being chased from town to town, manifold indignities, the threat of death, and even death itself (Acts 4:1–22; 5:17–40; 9:23–30; 12:1–5; 13:50; 14:2–6, 19; 2 Cor. 11:23–27, 32–33; et al.)

In the early days of the Jerusalem Church, the blood of martyrs soon began to fertilize the seed of the kingdom as Stephen, the fiery evangelist, was stoned to death (Acts 7:54–60). This atrocity became the springboard for a wave of stringent, organized opposition by Jewish officials to the church in Jerusalem under the relentless leadership of Saul of Tarsus (8:1–3). When Paul wrote the Thessalonians he reminded them that they had “received the word in much affliction” and had afterward experienced suffering, persecution and affliction (1 The. 1:6; 2:14; 3:3–4; 2 The. 1:4–7). The recipients of the Hebrews epistle were reminded that they had “endured a great conflict of sufferings; partly, being made a gazingstock both by reproaches and afflictions; and partly, becoming partakers with them that were so used...and took joyfully the spoiling of your possessions” (Heb. 10:32–34). And so it went with the saints in Philippi (Phi. 1:29–30), Galatia (Gal. 3:4), and other areas as well.

The brethren to whom Peter wrote had been “put to grief in manifold trials” which were “fiery” and which involved being reproached and made to suffer because they were Christians (1 Pet. 1:6–7; 4:12–19).⁵ Peter quite obviously referred to persecution in 1 Pet. 1:6–7, and since his terminology is almost identical to that of James 1:2, the implication is strong that outward persecution is what James was describing. To the warnings Christ gave about the sufferings that a wicked world would heap upon His followers, Paul added his inspired promise

that reaches down to our time: “Yea, and all that would live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution” (2 Tim. 3:12). Many a disciple has experienced exactly what Paul and Barnabas warned the brethren of: “that through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).

The Varieties of Persecution

Persecution has taken many forms and variations in different times and places, some of which have already been summarized. The Hebrew saints were “made a gazingstock and suffered the “spoiling of...possessions” (Heb. 10:33–34). The injury inflicted may be (1) emotional (loss of friends or family, vilification, ridicule, humiliation, threat, anonymous phone calls or letters), (2) economic (loss of job or promotion, destruction of property), or (3) actual bodily harm due to violence (assault, torture, imprisonment, kidnap, even death). A combination of all three of these have been employed at various times. In some areas of the world today (e.g., Islamic nations, Communist China) organized official (sometimes violent) oppression of Christians and the Gospel still prevails.

While there is some real persecution of the Lord’s people in America, except for occasional isolated incidents, it is not violent. It is at present perpetrated by wicked individuals rather than as a matter of government policy. However, if the new paganism embodied in the philosophies of the New Age and Postmodern movements and fueled by the forces of atheistic humanism and liberalism (political, theological, and moral) entrenched in positions of great power continue to gain ascendancy, the next generation of saints may well live to see calculated, legislated, violent testing of their faith as in bygone ages. Some government regulations already in place have been so applied as to limit the discussion of the Gospel with one’s co-workers on the job and to prevent private religious meetings in homes. The restrictions in public schools relating to anything related to the Bible are well-known (although witchcraft, pagan mysticism, Islam, et al., appear to have free expression).

The so-called “politically correct” speech and thinking that have been forced upon almost every facet of our culture and society are almost altogether anti-Bible and anti-Christian. It should not be surprising—its sources are the powerful rabid humanistic and liberal forces already mentioned. When it is a more shameful in the minds of many to cry out against the abomination of homosexuality than it is to commit the act, the forecast of worse trouble for God’s people is evident. When our fellow-citizens count it more reprehensible to display posters showing the graphic results of the abortion industry in protest of the practice than to commit the murderous act itself, then the signs are ominous for what may lie ahead. It does not require the wisdom of Solomon to see that if the militant homosexual and feminist forces

continue to gain power we will soon be faced with federal legislation ordering us to install them as preachers, elders, deacons, and teachers or face crippling fines, seizure of property, and/or imprisonment.

The Sources of Persecution

Persecution may come from a variety of sources. As indicated earlier, government has often proved a cruel source of oppression. Employers, supervisors, or teachers in public schools or universities can bring tremendous emotional and/or economic pressure upon those under their authority, even without legislative authority for their cruel work. Family members and dear friends are sometimes sources of sore persecution and trial.

Perhaps one of the most insidious sources of oppression and suffering for righteousness' sake is that which is inflicted by one's brethren. While it is never enjoyable to be persecuted from any source, it is not difficult to understand why various forces in the world hate us. In fact, such is to be expected because of the diametrical contradiction between their values and ours. It is especially painful when those who are doing their very best to be faithful to the Lord in every way are made to suffer by the very ones who should be applauding and encouraging them. Alas, the experience of many proves that Satan does not release his hold on the elect, including elders of the church, without a fight—and he far too often wins the struggle. Elders have been ostracized and hounded from office because they dared be true to God and His Word and stand against any innovation in the church. Many Gospel preachers (and their families) have been shamefully treated by elders because one or two loud-mouthed men or women in the church (with deep pockets or some other fulcrum with one or more of the elders) did not appreciate the Truth he dared preach. Many times such oppression causes not only intense emotional suffering for him and his family, but economic hardship as well. Apparently, Paul was acquainted with some such experiences which he described as “perils among false brethren” (2 Cor. 11:26). He knew agony of having Demas, a friend and brother, forsake him in an hour of severe need and trial (2 Tim. 4:10).

There is a sense in which God may be said to be the source of our testing and proving through trials and persecution. He **allowed** Job to be severely tried through persecution (Job 1:6–12; 2:1–8). He “chastens” His children through trial, affliction, and persecution, which He allows them to undergo in order to strengthen their character (Heb. 12:4–11). He “proved” and “tried” Abraham in commanding him to offer Isaac as a burnt offering (Gen. 22:1; Heb. 11:17 [*peirazamenos*]). However, in none of the trials and tests which God allows does He ever attempt to entice men to sin (Jam. 1:13), which fact I will subsequently discuss in some detail.

Our Reaction to Persecution

First, we can learn from the manner in which others have reacted to persecution. The Lord was persecuted almost daily while He did His work on earth, yet He never let the incessant opposition deter Him from His work. When He was subjected to every form of indignity and ignominy in His trials and was then cruelly and unjustly nailed to a cross by His tormentors, He meekly submitted, although He could have destroyed them all by calling upon the angelic hosts (Mat. 26:53). When the apostles were arrested in Jerusalem they were beaten and warned not to preach the doctrine of Christ any further. Upon their release they departed, “rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the Name”—and they promptly resumed preaching Christ to the people (Acts. 5:40–42). On the second great evangelistic thrust led by Paul, he and Silas were beaten, imprisoned, and fastened in stocks in Philippi, in response to which they prayed and sang hymns (16:22–25). Paul had suffered some great loss (perhaps including family and career, certainly friends and reputation among the Jewish rulers) in becoming a Christian, but he considered all of these expendable in exchange for Christ (Phi. 3:7–8). Although Paul was a prisoner in Rome at the time he wrote to the Philippians, he could still “rejoice in the Lord greatly” (4:10). From the same imprisonment Paul told the Colossians, “I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and fill up on my part that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh...” (Col. 1:24).

There is no cowardice or intimidation seen in these men when persecution, even the threat of death, was heaped upon them. The threats and beating the apostles suffered at the hands of the council in Jerusalem actually caused them to preach more boldly (Acts 4:17–21; 23–31; 5:40–42). When Paul almost died from being stoned in Lystra and was dragged out of the city, instead of slinking away to Derbe under cover of darkness, he got back up, went back into Lystra where he had just been brutally assaulted by a mob, waiting till the next day to depart (14:19–20). Rather than drowning in tears of self-pity and cowering in silent terror upon being arrested, having their clothes stripped off, being beaten with rods, placed in maximum security, and fastened in stocks, Paul and Silas openly prayed and sang hymns in the Philippian jail (Acts 16:22–25).

It is also notable that none of the above ever sought personal revenge against those who mistreated them. The Lord lived and died by His own doctrine: “Love your enemies, and pray for them that persecute you” (Mat. 5:44). Among His words uttered from the cross was the prayer for His murderers, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). Stephen followed both the teaching and the example of His Lord as wicked men hurled killer stones against him. As his life was slipping away he prayed, “Lay not this sin to their charge”

(Acts 7:60). In light of Jesus' teaching and example and of his own teaching against personal vengeance (Rom. 12:17–19), it is likely that the prayers of Paul and Silas in the prison at Philippi included blessings upon their tormentors.

In summary, none of these men soaked themselves with tears of self-pity (“Why me, Lord?”), but accepted their mistreatment with a meek and unvengeful spirit. Rather than being intimidated and silenced, their sufferings moved them to greater boldness. The reactions to persecution on the part of these great men serve as a model for all who are oppressed by ungodly men, whatever form of persecution one may suffer.

Second, we should consider persecution to be normal. Wicked and godless people (whether in the world or in the church) do not appreciate being rebuked and held accountable to an inflexible standard. Righteous living is “strange” to them and when we refuse to participate in their ungodliness and cry out against it, they speak evil of us (1 Pet. 4:4). This being so, we should not consider it to be a strange occurrence when we are made to undergo fiery trials (v. 12). God's faithful people represent His standard by the very lives we live as well as by the message we speak, which is why Paul said that the Lord's **godly** people can expect to be persecuted. Remember: Persecution of the righteous is normal. (If we are never made to suffer for the Lord's sake it may suggest that we are not living a godly life or that we are “closet” Christians, hiding our light from the world.)

Third, we should not count ourselves “too good” or too honorable to suffer persecution. Our Lord, the only perfect human specimen and the most honorable of all, was not “too good” to suffer it. As earlier quoted, He said, “A servant is not greater than his lord. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20). As Christ left us the example of suffering for us, even so should we be willing to suffer for Him (1 Pet. 2:21), and as we are persecuted we are to rejoice that we “are partakers of Christ's sufferings” (4:13). The attitude Peter enjoined in this passage is exactly that which he and his fellow-apostles evinced when the Jewish forbade them to preach any more in Jerusalem and had them beaten: they rejoiced “that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the Name” (Acts 5:41). Paul tried to help the Philippian saints to view their sufferings in the proper light: “To you it hath been granted in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer in his behalf” (Phi. 1:29).

Fourth, James tells us to “count it all joy” when we suffer trials (1:2). Peter's admonition to the brethren who were undergoing a “fiery trial” was to “rejoice” because to be reproached for the name of Christ was a source or blessing or happiness (1 Pet. 4:12–14). Admittedly, this injunction may seem somewhat difficult to obey at first reading. However, these inspired men are not urging the aberrant philosophy of sadism in which one derives pleasure from pain: “All

chastening seemeth for the present to be not joyous but grievous” (Heb. 12:11). A closer reading of the passages reveals that the source of the joy is not the suffering, opposition, and pain themselves, but rather (1) the recognition of the opportunity for spiritual growth and maturity and (2) the anticipation of the eternal reward for successfully passing the test.

Concerning the first source of our joy mentioned above, notice the way James moves from citing the joy we should have in trials to stating **why** we should rejoice in them: “knowing that the proving of your faith worketh patience. and let patience have its perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, lacking in nothing” (Jam. 1:3–4; cf. Heb. 12:11b). Paul elaborates even further on this principle: “We also rejoice in our tribulations: knowing that tribulation worketh stedfastness; and stedfastness, approvedness; and approvedness, hope” (Rom. 5:3–4). Peter expressed a similar idea, comparing the Christian’s faith to gold that, when tested by trial of fire, may be refined to produce praise, glory, and honor to Christ (1 Pet. 1:7). Those who have emerged as stalwart defenders and promoters of the Truth in any generation have not done so accidentally or miraculously. Their faith, steadfastness, convictions, and courage were forged in the furnace of trial and testing, of persecution and opposition. The testing and opposition are painful and traumatic at the time, but once having survived them, our faith is stronger, our determination to serve the Lord more intense, and our longing for Heaven deeper. With the perspective of the passing of some years one looks back at earlier trials and sees that, when successfully met, they were the preparation ground for facing even worse foes and more formidable challenges. Young Gospel preachers should especially give attention to this principle. Knowing that even persecution is an opportunity for spiritual growth, let us rejoice in this fact.

But we should also rejoice in trials and persecution in view of the eternal rewards for the victors. Only through the tests and trials that God allows His people to experience can He (and we) know that we are fully devoted to Him. Anyone can give lip service to believing in God and His Word when the skies are blue, the sun is bright, and the wind is at our backs. The true servants of God are revealed when the storms of reproach, ridicule, humiliation, character assassination, loss of income, rejection, or even physical assault come because one dares to be true to Christ. “Rejoicing” and “persecution” are made companions in the Lord’s commentary on the “Persecution Beatitude”: “Rejoice [upon being persecuted], and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven...” (Mat. 5:12). The motivation of the reward that awaited the Christ produced in Him joy and the strength to endure the ordeal of the cross: “For the joy that was set before him [he] endured the cross, despising the shame, and hath sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:2). Those who are faithful under fire can

rejoice, knowing that “the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed to us-ward” (Rom. 8:18). Coming from Paul, who knew fully what it meant to suffer for Christ, his words take on even greater meaning. But he says more: “For our light affliction, which is for the moment, worketh for us more and more exceedingly an eternal weight of glory” (2 Cor. 4:17).

The Test of Temptation—James 1:13–15

The Fact of Temptation

There is a “plan of salvation” to rescue us from the guilt and eternal consequences of sin. There is also a “plan of damnation” by which men become guilty of sin and under eternal condemnation. James sets the latter plan before us in the text under consideration—temptation is the beginning point. As already defined, temptation is that process by which an appeal is made to one or more of our natural desires in such a manner as to entice us to transgress or fall short of the will of God. This began early in the lives of the race’s initial pair (Gen. 3:1–6) and will not cease till the last trump of God heralds the coming of the Lord and the end of time. In the very nature of his constitution and his relationship to God and His Word, no accountable human being can escape temptation. Not even the Lord could: He was “in all points tempted like as we are...” (Heb. 4:15b; cf. 2:17–18).

The Source of Temptation

James emphatically tells us that **God is not the source of temptation**. **First**, he uses a universal, unqualified prohibition to deny that God is the tempter—“Let no man say...I am tempted of God.” A footnote in the ASV suggests the alternate reading, “tempted **from** God” (emph. DM), which makes the assertion even stronger: When man is tempted, it never emanates **from**, is never set forth **by**, God. The effect of James’ statement is that any person who dares to credit God with any enticement, solicitation, or seduction to sin is a liar. **Second**, James makes a definitive, declarative, positive statement of the case: “He [God] himself tempteth no man.” **Third**, this fact is just as certain as (and proceeds from) the fact that “God cannot be tempted with evil.”⁶ The very perfect and holy nature of God precludes the possibility of His even being tempted, much less sinning. Moses’ beautiful song in Deuteronomy 32 eloquently expresses the incapability of Deity to sin: “Ascribe ye greatness unto our God. The Rock, his work is perfect; for all his ways are justice: a God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and right is he” (vv. 3–4; cf. Tit. 1:2; Heb. 6:18). In this very fact lies the warranty and security of all Truth, moral law, and righteousness.

Satan is the fountainhead of temptation and has been from the beginning. Moses identifies “the serpent” as the one who approached and tempted Eve (Gen. 3:1–5). He told her

a lie (“Ye shall not surely die,” v. 4) by which he “beguiled” her (v. 13; cf. 2 Cor. 11:3; 1 Tim. 2:14). John identified him as “the old serpent [as old as Eden, DM!], he that is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world...” (Rev. 12:9; cf. 20:2). No wonder the Lord called him “a liar, and the father thereof” (John 8:44b)!

Jesus was “tempted of the devil” (Mat. 4:1; cf. Luke 4:2, 13) or “Satan” (Mark 1:13). On one occasion when Jesus prophesied His death and Peter argued that such would never happen, the Lord figuratively cast him in the role of Satan, the tempter: “Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art a stumbling-block unto me” (Mat. 16:23). The arch-enemy of God and man lurks around every corner and in every shadow, as a ravenous beast, stalking his prey and bent on devouring it if possible (1 Pet. 5:8). Satan is so universally recognized as the source of all temptation that Paul thought it superfluous to even name him when he referred to “the tempter” (1 The. 3:5).

Although Satan is the father and source of temptation, he uses many agents in his work. He employs both men and women to deceive and entice others to sin. As part of his lying nature, he is the father of every false and damnable doctrine. “The man of sin... the son of perdition...the lawless one” Paul described would come “according to the working of Satan...” (2 The. 2:3–9). Satan would use this terrible one to deceive men with his doctrinal error so that they would believe them and be lost eternally (vv. 9–12). Thus just as Satan is able to present himself as an “angel of light,” “his ministers, also fashion themselves as ministers of righteousness...” (2 Cor. 11:14–15).

Satan appeals to men and women to gratify their sexual desires (normal and wholesome in God’s framework of marriage, 1 Cor. 7:2–5; Heb. 13:4) in forbidden ways. He employs beautiful women to seduce and allure men to sin. Dozens of verses in the book of Proverbs warn of these dangerous agents of Satan (2:16; 5:3–8; 6:24–29; 7:5–27; 9:13–18). The Lord must have had this very source of temptation in mind to some extent when He warned men against looking with lustful eyes at a woman (Mat. 5:28). Satan has also used men to seduce women to engage in sexual sins.

The Avenues of Temptation

Satan is clever, as indicated by Paul’s reference to “the wiles of the devil” (Eph. 6:11). He calculates and employs tactics and we dare not be ignorant of these “devices” (2 Cor. 2:11). His three-point strategic plan is outlined as “the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the vainglory of life” (1 John 2:16).

The Bible records the details of Satan's abominable work in two well-known and pivotal occasions of temptation—those of Eve in Eden and of the Lord in the wilderness. Notice the way Eve was snared by all three of these avenues:

1. "The lust of the flesh"—the physical appetite of hunger: she "saw that the tree was good for food" (Gen. 3:6a)
2. "The lust of the eyes"—the appetite for that which is beautiful and attractive: the tree was "a delight to the eyes" (v. 6b)
3. "The vainglory of life"—the lust of the ego, the appetite for the fame and acclaim of men: "the tree was to be desired to make one wise" (v. 6c) and in order to "be as Gods, knowing good and evil" (v. 5)

Satan approached our Lord through these same three channels:

1. "The lust of the flesh"—the desire of hunger: Jesus had fasted forty day and nights and was famished when the Devil tempted Him to make bread out of the stones on the ground (Mat. 4:2–3)
2. "The lust of the eyes"—the appetite for that which is beautiful and attractive: Satan showed Him all of the kingdoms of the world and their glories and offered them to Christ in exchange for His allegiance (vv. 8–9)
3. "The vainglory of life"—the lust of the ego, the desire for the fame and acclaim of men: Satan tempted Him to cast himself off of the pinnacle of the temple (vv. 5–7)

There actually are no other avenues through which Satan may tempt us, but he has so mastered the use of these as to lead the vast majority of mankind astray.

He does not directly—in person—tempt us as he did Eve and the Lord, but he nonetheless tirelessly (and effectively) goes about his work through a vast army of henchmen and agents. He uses money and other material things to lure men away from God. One of the most insidious appeals to this fleshly lust and greed is the almost universal state-sponsored lottery that ensnares many and separates many a fool (including some brethren) from his or her honest income. Jesus therefore warns us against piling up earthly treasures and serving "mammon" (money) instead of God (Mat. 6:19–24) and tells us of the "deceitfulness of riches" (Mat. 13:22). Paul warns those who lust for wealth that they will "fall into a temptation and a snare and many foolish and hurtful lusts... [and may be] led astray from the faith" (1 Tim. 6:9–10). He uses the advertising industry to appeal to the lust of the eyes, prompting even the elect to lavish luxuries on themselves while billions are still without the Gospel.

He uses the print, film, and television media to produce and sell the most explicit forms of sexual perversion. Such temptations, coupled with added encouragement from immoral sex educators in the public schools, has produced an epidemic of childhood sexual activity in the last quarter century. This epidemic has spawned its own twin tragedies: the murder of millions

of the unwanted resultant babies on the one hand or children giving birth to children on the other. Pornography is also a frontal attack on the stability of the home and family, tempting many through the lust of the eyes to fulfill the lust of the flesh, whereby they desert their pledged spouses and honorable marriage beds for the favors of others.

He has perfected the use of vainglory and pride in tempting men to sin and then holding him there. Many are they who sell their souls to the devil in a willing sacrifice of Truth, righteousness, family, and friends in order to snatch the gold ring of “success,” reputation, and fame as they ride life’s carousel. How vain is all such glory! Perhaps even a sadder sight is to see those who were once enlightened and obeyed the Gospel become involved in sin and then, because of pride and vainglory, will refuse to confess and repent of their mistake. Indeed, Satan has honed his craft of temptation so well through the centuries that his avenues almost appear as Interstate highways!

While freely admitting that Satan is the ultimate source of temptation, this does not relieve man of his culpability when he succumbs to temptation and sins. God created him with the power to choose his own course of life (whether good or evil) and has supplied him with both the information and motivation to equip him for resisting temptation. Man is therefore “without excuse” (Rom. 1:20) and must without fail eventually give account of himself to God at the final Judgment which He will administer through His Son (Acts 17:31; Rom. 2:6; 14:10–12; 2 Cor. 5:10).

The Associates of Temptation

James 1:14–15 reveals that temptation has several associates and “companions in crime”:

Drawn away is from *exelko*, which means “to draw out...to lure forth.” “The metaphor is taken from hunting and fishing: as game is lure from its covert, so man by lust is allured from the safety of self-restraint to sin.”⁷ Even before one is enticed to actually commit sin, he often cooperates with the devil in allowing himself to be lured to the place or circumstance of enticement. How important it thus becomes for us to avoid such situations, places, and associates that we know would subject us to unnecessary allurements. “Evil companionships [whether of persons, places, circumstances, or things (TV, books, magazines, et al.)] corrupt good morals” (1 Cor. 15:33) is a never-ending truism. There are some associations with evil that saints cannot avoid in spite of our best efforts because we live in a wicked world (1 Cor. 5:10). However, one who unnecessarily, and by choice, subjects himself to an environment of evil allurements is playing with fire that more often than not will burn him, perhaps forever.

Lust (epithumia) “denotes strong desire of any kind...”⁸ It is a neutral term, the connotation of which must be determined by context. Clearly, James uses it here in reference to an evil desire to fulfill a fleshly appetite in an unlawful way, thus eventuating in sin and death (v. 15). The phrase, *by his own lust*, emphasizes man’s personal responsibility for controlling his fleshly desires and for his personal culpability when he fails to do so. As previously noticed, it is through such lusts that Satan approaches us. Temptation takes its toll when one has a strong desire to unlawfully fulfill a fleshly appetite and he allows himself to be drawn away by an agent of the devil to do so. Paul knew the importance of controlling the lusts of the flesh: “I buffet my body, and bring it into bondage: lest by any means, after that I have preached to others, I myself should be rejected” (1 Cor. 9:27).

Enticed (dealeazo) is another term relating to catching fish or animals, only this one goes farther, meaning not only “to bait,” but also to “catch by a bait...to beguile by blandishments, allure, entice, deceive.”⁹ First, the fish or animal is lured from its lair (“drawn away”), then it is hooked or caught in the trap (“enticed”). Thus temptation provides the allurement (bait) by which one is drawn away from Truth and righteousness through its appeal to fleshly lusts. Then follows the enticement and actual gratification of the lust through which one has been allured. Well did Peter plead: “Beloved, I beseech you as sojourners and pilgrims, to abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul” (1 Pet. 2:11).

Peter changes his figure of speech from hunting and fishing to the conception-birth-maturation process. Lust is personified and is said to “conceive” from its union with the seed of temptation. This union and conception produce and give birth to a new entity called “sin,” which, if allowed to grow to maturity, unchecked and unforgiven, will result in death. Such is the biography of sin, the devil’s “plan of damnation.” *Death* here is not physical death—“it is appointed unto men once to die,” for saint and sinner alike (Heb. 9:27). Rather, this death is eternal separation from God in Hell: “For the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23).

The warning should be evident to all: That which may seem to be a small and insignificant flirtation or temptation may lead to the very bowels of eternal Hell!

The Means of Avoiding and Preventing Temptation

Since temptation provides such a challenging test in the life of each Christian, it behooves us to find and apply whatever preventive and combative means are available to us.

In an hour of extreme dread and emotional agony for Himself, the Lord urged a two-fold safeguard against temptation upon Peter, James, and John in Gethsemane: “Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mat. 26:41;

cf. Luke 22:46—“rise and pray”). While Jesus’ admonition was apparently a mild rebuke for their inability to resist the temptation to sleep in His hour of crisis, His advice is appropriate for avoidance of temptation of every kind. One who is concerned about obeying God and keeping oneself “unspotted from the world” (Jam. 1:27) will be vigilant concerning the places he goes, the company he keeps, and the things he allows to enter his mind (Phi. 4:8). He will be on constant alert for the first sign of any allurements that would appeal to the “fleshly lusts, which war against the soul” (1 Pet. 2:11). Remember that Peter, who was warned of the Lord to “watch” concerning temptation, also warned us to “be watchful” concerning Satan’s attempts to destroy us (5:8; cf. 1 The. 5:6).

While vigilance is necessary in preempting temptation, it must be combined with prayer. When the Lord taught us the way to pray, His model prayer included the petition: “And bring us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” (Mat. 6:13). These words cannot be understood as an implication that God might actually place enticements to sin before His children, for He “tempteth no man” (Jam. 1:13b). Rather, we are to pray that God, in His gracious providence, will help us to avoid temptation and thereby help us escape the soul-destructive work of Satan. It is encouraging to remember as we pray: “The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptation” (2 Pet. 2:9). One who frequently prays about temptation is much more likely to be conscious of the ever-present danger of it, and thus more watchful for it. Let us then “pray without ceasing” (1 The. 5:17) and “continue stedfastly in prayer, watching therein with thanksgiving” (Col. 4:2). Surely, if we would pray more we would faint less (Luke 18:1); fervent, constant prayer will help us avoid temptation.

Incessant study and application of the Word of God will help us avoid temptation: “Thy word have I laid up in my heart, that I might not sin against thee” (Psa. 119:11). The entire panoply of the Christian soldier, whether defensive or offensive, has the Word of God as its source (Eph. 6:13–18). By its use we “may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil” and “quench all the fiery darts of the evil one” (vv. 11, 16). Paul commanded, “Walk by the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh” (Gal. 5:16). To “walk by the Spirit” is parallel to being baptized “by one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13, KJV). The Spirit is the one Who instructs us so that we know how to walk and how to be baptized, respectively. He delivered this instruction originally to inspired men (1 Cor. 2:10, 13), who produced the written Word to spiritually instruct and edify all mankind (Acts 20:32; 1 Cor. 14:37; 2 Tim. 3:16–17; 1 Pet. 1:22–25; 2 Pet. 1:20–21). The number of saints who seem to be dedicated to maintaining their abysmal ignorance of the “rudiments of the first principles of the oracles of God” (Heb. 5:12) is legion. They will not even come to a Bible class prepared for their instruction and edification on Sunday morning or

Wednesday night. It is impossible to picture such careless and indifferent folk as **daily** students of the Word. Given this observation, is it any wonder so many blunder into and succumb to the most obvious temptations, sometimes defending their “right” to do so (e.g., “social” drinking, dancing, displaying their near-nude bodies in public, attending Sunday morning worship only, et al.)? There is no defense against temptation for the Christian who will not earnestly and faithfully study and personally apply God’s Word. Many have never learned: “Through thy precepts I get understanding: therefore I hate every false way” (Psa. 119:104).

The Means of *Overcoming* Temptation

Even when the most stalwart saint does his best to avoid temptation, Satan is so crafty and persistent that he will still find ways to make forbidden things appear attractive. How shall we deal with temptation when it inadvertently confronts us?

In some circumstances we should stand and fight, as James exhorted: “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (4:7). Peter echoes the same thought: “whom [the devil] withstand stedfast in your faith...” (1 Pet. 5:9). However, one must carefully equip himself if he would successfully battle the prince of darkness: “Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil” (Eph. 6:11).

In other circumstances the danger is so great and acute that the wiser course is flight rather than trying to fight. Paul commanded Timothy to “flee youthful lusts” (2 Tim. 2:22). This seems to be particularly the best course regarding sexual temptations, perhaps because the sexual appetite is one of the most powerful ones God has given to mankind, especially to men. It is likely for this cause that Paul warned the Corinthians to “flee fornication” (1 Cor. 6:18). When he commanded them also to “flee idolatry” (10:14) one of the primary reasons may have been due to the employment of the hundreds of “priestess-prostitutes” in the Corinthian temple of Aphrodite overshadowing the city. This temptation of Satan was most clever and strong—the worshiper could engage in fornication and be made to feel religious by doing so! Joseph argued with and avoided Mrs. Potiphar’s advances as long as she would let him. However, when she laid hold on him to fulfill her licentious lust, he wisely did not fight, but “left his garment in her hand, and fled, and got him out” (Gen. 39:12).

I have already discussed prayer as one of the effective preventive measures regarding temptation, but it is also a weapon we should use when we are confronted by it. It appears from the descriptions of Matthew, Mark, and Luke of the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane that the Lord’s ultimate struggle with temptation may have occurred there. Here seemed to be His last chance to change His mind about going to the cross. Surely none would doubt that it was a temptation to Him in His humanity to avoid the dreadful and agonizing trials and death

that He knew lay ahead. He confessed to the intimate three, “My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death...” (Mat. 26:38a). How did He face and overcome this rigorous temptation? He prayed: “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass away from me: nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt” (v. 39b). He did this not once or twice, but three times (vv. 42, 44). It is perhaps not too much to conclude that, as He would win the victory for us the following day over sin and death, He won the victory for Himself over His last great temptation through His fervent prayers in quietness of Gethsemane. The hymn-writer, Mary A. Kidder, certainly wrote from a Scriptural perspective when she penned the following verse:

When you met with great temptation,
Did you think to pray?
In the name of Christ, the Savior,
Did you sue for loving favor,
At the gates of day?
Oh, how praying rests the weary,
Prayer can change the night to day.
So when life seems dark and dreary,
Don't forget to pray.

Conclusion

It is a part of the very warp and woof of life for every human being that trials and temptations will come. This is even more the case for the Christian. Satan cannot stand to see one “delivered...out of the power of darkness, and translated...into the kingdom of the Son of his love” (Col. 1:13). Accordingly, he will arouse every sort of trial, persecution, test, challenge, and temptation against the elect that he possibly can. It is comforting to remember concerning all such things, Paul’s inspired promise: “There hath no temptation taken you but such as man can bear: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation make a way also to escape, that ye may be able to endure it” (1 Cor. 10:13). God will provide the escape, but we must want to find it—and when found, use it!

Endnotes

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1. All references to and quotations from Scripture are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.
 2. W.E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co, 1966 reprint), s.v., “tempt,” 4:116.
 3. *Ibid.*, 4:117.
 4. *Ibid.*, s.v., “approve, approved,” 1:71; “proof,” 3:220.
 5. The following note is germane: James 1:2 in the ASV has “manifold temptations” with a footnote on “temptations” suggesting “trials.” However, the ASV in 1 Pet. 1:6 has “manifold trials” with a footnote on “trials” suggesting “temptations.” The phrases in the two passages are identical in the Greek

(*peirasmois poikilois*). It is unfortunate that the translators failed to notice their inconsistency. How helpful to the understanding of James I it would have been had they rendered verses 2 and 12 as *trials* and *trial*, respectively, thus helping distinguish the subject matter of these verses from that of verses 13–15, where temptation is actually discussed.

6. This statement, of course, must be understood of the Godhead in spirit form only, including the pre-incarnate Word (John 1:1–3, 14). It obviously does not include the incarnate state of Deity in the person of the Christ, Who, though still possessed of Godhood, nonetheless was “made in the likeness of men,” “found in fashion as a man,” and had “flesh and bones” (Phi. 2:7–8; Luke 24:39). In this fleshly state it was incumbent upon Him to undergo temptation because He was human. Thus, the observation concerning His human form: “Wherefore it behooved him in all things to be made like unto his brethren.... For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succor them that are tempted” (Heb. 2:17–18). Admittedly, numerous passages speak of man’s “tempting” God (Exo. 17:7; Num. 14:22; Deu. 6:16; Psa. 78:56; et al.). However, in each case these are to be understood in the sense of making trial of Him, of pushing His longsuffering to the limit. This is borne out in the ASV by its rendering of *peirazo* with the word *trial* in the NT passages that quote or refer to the OT passages in which God is said to be “tempted” (e.g., Mat. 4:7; 1 Cor. 10:9; Heb. 3:8; cf. Acts 15:10). In none of the passages in which man is depicted as “tempting” God is there any implication that men are trying to coax Him to sin or that He is capable of being thus enticed.
7. Joseph Henry Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1974 rep.), p. 222.
8. Vine, s.v., “lust,” 3:25.
9. Thayer, p. 128.

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