

TWISTED TEMPTATIONS-Part One

James 1:13-16

(CSB) "No one undergoing a trial should say, 'I am being tempted by God,' since God is not tempted by evil, and He himself doesn't tempt anyone. ¹⁴ But each person is tempted when he is drawn away and enticed by his own evil desire. ¹⁵ Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and when sin is fully grown, it gives birth to death. ¹⁶ Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters."

INTRODUCTION

Many of us recall the long-running TV show, *Hee Haw*, which aired for 25 years, 1969-1993. In one episode, Doc Campbell is confronted by a patient who says he broke his arm in two places. Doc Campbell replies, "Well then, stay out of them places!" Does the Bible urge us to take the good Dr.'s advice, to "stay out of them places" where temptations abound? Yes. God's main command to us, when we have a choice of being exposed to temptation or not, is not to "fight" it but to [what?] "flee" it, as in "Flee from sexual immorality" (**I Corinthians 6:18**, NIV). The paraphrased Bible, *The Message*, expresses **I Timothy 6:10-11** like this: "Lust for money brings trouble and nothing but trouble. Going down that path, some lose their footing in the faith completely and live to regret it bitterly ever after. But you, Timothy, man of God: *Run for your life* from all this" (based on the Greek word for "flee," italics added).

Our pride gives us foolhardy confidence of handling temptation or of getting away with giving in to it, despite what God says. A young man took a girl back to her home at the end of their first date. He smiled, leaned his hand against the wall, and asked sweetly, "Darlin', how 'bout a good night kiss?" Blushing, she told him she'd promised her parents not to kiss on a first date, and asked, "What if they see us?" He said, "Who's gonna see us at this hour?" "No, please," she pleaded. "I'd just die of embarrassment if someone saw us." "But there's nobody around," he insisted. "They're all sleeping." The girl shook her head, "No, it's just too risky." "Oh please, please," he said, "I like you so much!" "No. I like you too, but I just can't." Suddenly, the porch light snapped on and the girl's sister came out in her pajamas with her hair disheveled. Her sister said sleepily, "Dad says to go ahead and give him a kiss. Or I can do it. Or if need be, he'll come down himself and do it. But for crying out loud, tell him to take his hand off the intercom button!"

This is the first of several messages on the subject of temptation. Our two Outline points are Fateful Responses to Temptation and Faithful Responses to Temptation.

I. FATEFUL RESPONSES TO TEMPTATION

"Fateful" doesn't mean our responses are "determined by fate." "Fateful" here means "fatal, deadly, or disastrous." We respond fatefully to temptation when we view the temptation and God through the Devil's eyes, instead of viewing the temptation and the Devil through God's eyes. Fateful responses include underestimating the enemy, overestimating ourselves, and misestimating God.

A. Underestimating the Enemy

II Corinthians 2:11 warns us to honor Christ's teachings in our treatment of other believers, "so that no advantage would be taken of us by Satan, for we are not ignorant of his schemes." "Satan" is from a Hebrew word meaning "adversary." "Schemes" translates a word revealing Satan has "designs" on us; taking "advantage" of our ignorance of his tactics to oppose God's will in our lives. **I Peter 5:8** gives a similar warning: "Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." "Be of sober spirit" means we are to be "free from influence of intoxication" and "morally alert." To "be on the alert" is "to be watchful to prevent being suddenly overtaken by a destructive calamity." If we accept as fact that the Devil, whose name means "false accuser" (who falsely accuses God and God's people), is our sworn enemy ("adversary") seeking opportunity to ravage ("devour") us to ruin our lives every way possible, are we not foolish if we don't take seriously Satan's threats to us?

A reporter interviewed a man on his 100th birthday. "What are you most proud of after living 100 years?" "Well," said the man, "I don't have an enemy in the world." "What a beautiful thought!" gushed the reporter. "How inspirational!" "Yep," added the old man, "I outlived every last one of them."

We should not count upon outliving the Devil. He will be the sworn, scheming enemy of all followers of **Jesus** until the day we die. We cannot outlive him, outthink him, or outfight him. The Apostle Paul, despite being such a man of God that demons and diseases were driven from those who touched even his handkerchiefs, and the dead were raised through his prayers (**Acts 19:11-12; 20:7-12**); even Paul admitted sometimes "Satan hindered us" ("placed obstacles in his path") and kept him from carrying out God's will (**I Thessalonians 2:17-18**). There are 15 references to "Satan" or the "Devil" in Paul's writings. He cannot be accused of seeing the Devil *everywhere* he looked, but he also learned to recognize *where* he saw the Devil at work. In **Ephesians 4:27** (NASB), he cautioned all Christians, "Do not give the devil an opportunity." The Greek word for "opportunity" means Paul urged us, "Don't give the devil any *place* in your lives," or "don't give the devil any opening to attack you." The Apostle Paul knew never to underestimate Satan's hostility toward all who are loyal to **Jesus Christ**. This is why he advised us in **Ephesians 6:11-12** (NLT): "A final word. Be strong with the Lord's mighty power. Put on all of God's armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies and tricks of the Devil. For we are not fighting against people made of flesh and blood, but against the evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against those mighty powers of darkness who rule this world, and against wicked spirits in the heavenly realms."

B. Overestimating Ourselves

We underestimate our Satanic adversary to our peril. We also respond fatefully to temptation if we overestimate our ability to handle Satan or temptation. We need to remind ourselves Satan's chief strategy is to for us to resist sinful temptations or to fight against the Devil on his terms. He can beat us every time. When Japan invaded Manchuria in 1931, Chinese troops were ill-prepared to stand against a modern, mechanized army. Japanese tanks were invincible to anything the Chinese had available to go up against them and Chinese forces were swept from the battlefield time and again. Then the Chinese came up with a new strategy. Multiple snipers were strategically placed ahead of these advancing tanks. Every few yards, a different sniper would squeeze off a shot; never the same one often enough to be detected. The bullets pinged but bounced harmlessly off the tank's armor. All the tank crew had to do was to ignore the sniper fire and continue their invincible advance. But after a time, some of the tank crews were driven nuts by the repeated and annoying pinging of the sniper fire. Their tank would suddenly stop, the lid would fly open, and one or more heads of the tank crew would emerge trying to locate the pestering snipers. This was the snipers' dream come true. A few well-placed shots and the Japanese tank became a Chinese tank.

When **Jesus** walked this earth, Satan's forces fled before Him (**Matthew 8:16, 28-32**). When the first Christians walked this earth in **Jesus'** Name and Spirit, Satan's forces fled before them (**Luke 10:17-19**). **Jesus** promised them (and us), "Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing will injure you" (**Luke 10:19**, NASB). If we advance against the forces of Hell in the "tank" of our Savior's might, Satan's forces cannot defeat us. But can Satan pester, annoy, and deceive us into fighting him by our strategy and strength? Yes! Our victory over the Devil and his demons is always in **Jesus'** name and power, not ours. We should not overestimate our ability to take on Satan. A hymn popular in the 1970s aptly reminds us, "In the name of Jesus, In the name of Jesus, We have the victory. In the name of Jesus, In the name of Jesus, Demons will have to flee. When we stand on the name of Jesus, Tell me who can stand before? In the name of Jesus, Jesus, We have the victory."

Let's return to our text: "No one undergoing a trial should say, 'I am being tempted by God,' since God is not tempted by evil, and He himself doesn't tempt anyone.¹⁴ But each person is tempted when he is drawn away and enticed by his own evil desire.¹⁵ Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and when sin is fully grown, it gives birth to death.¹⁶ Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters." James

is reminding us that when we struggle with failures caused by giving in to various temptations, our tendency as sinful human beings is to blame everyone but ourselves for our failures; even God. We come by this tendency honestly, having inherited it from our first ancestors. When God confronted Adam about giving in to the temptation of eating from the only tree in the Garden of Eden He'd made off limits to Adam and Eve, to test their love and devotion to Him as God, how did Adam react? **Genesis 3:12** (NCV) records he told the Lord, "You gave this woman to me and she gave me fruit from the tree, so I ate it." What was Adam really telling God? "It's not my fault this happened. It's Eve's fault. And it's Your fault too, God, for who gave her to me?" Eve then quickly replied, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate" (**Genesis 3:14**). She claimed, in other words, "I was tricked into sinning; I didn't know what I was doing." Did God accept Adam or Eve's alibis? No. They paid world-shattering penalties for yielding to temptation!

James opened his letter with guidelines on how to cooperate with our Lord when we face challenging temptations and trials. He urged us in **James 1:2-4** (CSB) to keep uppermost in mind God has *constructive* purposes for these difficult tests, not *destructive* purposes: "Consider it a great joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you experience various trials, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. ⁴ And let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing." In **James 1:2**, the Greek word for "trials" has two meanings. A "trial" can be designed by God for *Divine* purposes, "a situation that tests us to prove or to improve our abilities." If your workout program never involved lifting anything heavier than a tub of cottage cheese, what good would that do you? The proper term for lifting a weighted barbell over your head, when done rightly, is "military press." Someone on the *Martial Arts Planet* web site recently asked, "What kind of press is it when you lift a barbell with weights (say 200 pounds, 100 on each side) from the ground to your waist, then up and over your head?" One person posted the reply, "A hernia." Just so, Satan is eager to exploit our trials for *Devilish* purposes.

In **James 1:13-16**, "tempted" is the verb form of the noun translated "trial" in **James 1:2**. The second meaning of the Greek word for "trial" is "temptation": "an enticement to do what God knows can harm us." If we are "drawn away and enticed by [our] own evil desire," as were Adam and Eve, and allow Satan to deceive us into reacting wrongly and selfishly to the trials God designs for our good, Satan knows a "trial" can sour into a "temptation" that may ruin us in various ways. In **Matthew 6:13** (NIV), **Jesus** directs us to pray, "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." **Jesus** is urging us to pray, "And don't let us yield to temptation, but rescue us from the evil one," as the NLT reads. If we underestimate our sworn enemy, Satan, or overestimate our ability to handle trials that God allows us to experience to prove or to improve our abilities as Christians, the Devil may eat us for lunch. In other words, we can be *molded* by our trials to become better servants of Christ or we can be *folded* by our trials and fall away from **Jesus**.

Scottish pastor and educator Andrew Fairbairn (1838-1912) helps identify crucial differences between God-given trials and Satan-driven temptations: A "temptation" is a "seduction to evil," a "solicitation to [do] wrong." Is God ever responsible if we give in to sinful temptations because we can claim God should never have allowed us to be faced with circumstances that made these temptations seem appealing? Not according to **James 1:13-16**. Fairbairn continues, a "trial tests" and seeks to develop our "moral qualities or character; but [a] temptation persuades [us] to [do] evil"; it deceives us so "that it may ruin" us. A trial aims "to undeceive" us about our circumstances and limitations, to help us "discover" more God-given abilities than we'd realized we possessed. Temptation seeks "to deceive" us about our circumstances and limitations, making us think either the temptation is unavoidable or the consequences of giving in are avoidable. A poor Negro man, who was a helpless slave to drink, tried again and again to get free. Others tried to help him, but he could not get rid of his drunkenness. Finally, he turned his life over to **Jesus**. Such a wondrous change came over him that someone said to him, "So you have got the mastery of the devil at last." "No," he said, "but I have got the Master of the devil." Fairbairn adds, a trial promotes our "good" by unmasking our need of Christ and driving us into His arms. Temptation masks our need of Christ and drives us away from the Lord into Satan's arms. In brief, "God tries" us; "Satan tempts" us.

We've barely touched upon James' main point: the most fateful response to temptation is not *underestimating* the enemy or *overestimating* ourselves but *misestimating God*; misjudging His character or actions. Such fateful responses to temptation are "fatal or disastrous" for both Christians and non-Christians.

CONCLUSION

In April of 2011, I first told you of Ronald "Rusty" Woomer. God led me to retell his story today. He movingly illustrates the devastating impact upon our lives of yielding to Satan's attempts to lure us to our personal and spiritual ruin. He also illustrates the divine impact upon our lives of yielding to God's attempt to woo us to our personal and spiritual restoration.

Rusty was born in 1954 to an alcoholic and physically abusive Dad. He made life for Rusty's family a recurring nightmare of fear, hunger, and poverty. A country church was the one place Rusty felt warm and welcomed. But as a teenager, he began seeking a happier life in all the wrong places. Marijuana use soon led to shooting liquefied amphetamines into his veins. He hung around with older boys who'd already quit school, and when he was in the ninth grade, he quit as well. He also left home. Cycles of drugs, drinking, and theft landed him in correctional institutions and prison. By age 24, Rusty longed to stay high on drugs and alcohol and to find an accepting father figure. An ex-con named Eugene Skaar befriended him. On February 22, 1979, he led Rusty on a spree of robbery, rape, and kidnapping in which Rusty murdered four and severely disfigured a fifth shooting victim. This landed Rusty Woomer on death row.

Jesus led Bob McAlister, a relatively new Christian convert, into a prison ministry. He found Rusty in October 1985 sitting on the floor in a cell; a filthy, burned out shell of a man at age 31. Garbage littered the floor, the stench was awful, and dozens of cockroaches were crawling all over the cell and all over him.

McAlister had a bone-chilling conviction that Satan possessed Rusty. In **Jesus'** name, he cast out the Devil and death from the cell. He began urging Rusty to call upon **Jesus**. Awareness slowly returned to Rusty's eyes and he began to whisper, "Jesus. Jesus." Bob gently appealed, "Jesus can give you something better. Don't you want to pray to give your life to Him instead?" Rusty nodded; his eyes streamed with his first tears in 15 years. He bowed and prayed. "Jesus, I've hurt a lot of people. Ain't no way that I deserve You to hear me. But I'm tired and I'm sick and I'm lonely. Please forgive me, Jesus, for everything I've done. I don't know much about You, but I'm willing to learn, and I thank You for listenin' to me."

The Lord **Jesus Christ** then transformed Rusty Woomer from one of the most wretched, scabby, and Satanically degraded human beings imaginable into one of the most noble and uplifting men on earth. When Bob McAlister returned to the prison three days later, he found Rusty beaming at him from a spotlessly scrubbed cell. As Bob began to disciple him, Rusty gained such an inner peace and became such a witness to the life-enhancing power of the Son of God that he inspired everyone who came in contact with him. Many in the prison were drawn to Christ because they'd never witnessed such an awesome demonstration of who **Jesus** is! As Rusty approached his execution, all of his concern was for others. He stated, "I would die one hundred times over if it would put one breath of life back into them [his victims]. I have prayed for the families over and over again, and my last prayer before I die tonight will be for them."

When asked what his thoughts would be when strapped into the electric chair, he replied, "The human side of me is scared to sit down and be electrocuted. They tell me that I won't feel nothin'. But I've stuck my finger in the light socket and it hurt plenty. So even if it hurts for a millionth-of-a-second, that's frightening. But I'm gonna be holdin' Jesus' hand. Long as He's my partner, what can I say? After all, there's no way I'm gonna lose. If they execute me, the next thing I'll know is that I'll be resurrected and taken to heaven. If they don't, I'll be the same. He's made it impossible for me not to praise and love Him and tell people about what He's done." On April 26, 1991, the day of his execution, did his hopes die? No. Ronald "Rusty" Woomer was already aglow with **Jesus** long before the electrocution switch was thrown!