

TWISTED TEMPTATIONS

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

Have you ever noticed we often don't take seriously God's offers to help us avoid the harmful effects of a temptation until *after* we are faced with the consequences of our poor choices? Then we may suddenly want to rely upon the Lord's help very much. One Sunday in a Midwest city, a five-year-old kept acting up during the morning service. His parents did their best to maintain some order in the pew but were losing the battle. Finally, the father picked up the little fellow and walked sternly up the aisle. Just before they reached the exit doors, the boy called out loudly to the congregation, "Pray for me! Pray for me!"

Many temptations are double-barreled: they seek to make actions seem irresistibly good even if God warns us they are destructive, or bitter circumstances may tempt us with distorted and unworthy ideas about God. Philip Yancey's book, *Reaching for the Invisible God*, describes how God is often blamed for harm caused by yielding to temptation. Princess Diana died suddenly in an automobile accident on August 31, 1997. A minister was interviewed and asked, "How can God allow such a terrible tragedy?" He replied, "Could it have had something to do with a drunk driver going ninety miles an hour in a narrow tunnel? Just how, exactly, was God involved?" A young woman wrote in anguish to Christian psychologist Dr. James Dobson, "Four years ago, I was dating a man and became pregnant. I was devastated. I asked God, 'Why have you allowed this to happen to me?'" Was God's negligence responsible for these unwelcomed results? Or are they examples of our most incredible gift from our Creator, human free will, being exercised on a fallen planet? Just how far under sin's warping influence have we fallen as human beings? Fallen enough to lash out at the only perfectly good and fully loving being we know, who is described in **Isaiah 9:6** (KJV21) as "Wonderful, Counselor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace."

This is the second 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

As mentioned two weeks ago, "Fateful" doesn't mean our responses are determined by fate. "Fateful" means "fatal, deadly, or disastrous." We respond fatefully to temptation when we view the temptation or God through the Devil's eyes. After two marriages were shredded and two families shattered by the fallout of adultery, an adulteress wife asked this question of her pastor, "How could something that seemed to be so beautiful and wonderful turn out to be so very ugly and wrong?" How would you answer this woman? "Your adultery was never beautiful and wonderful. Satan tricked you. You viewed this temptation through his eyes. Satan always knew this affair would destroy your marriages and ruin your lives."

A. Underestimating the Enemy

We set ourselves up for Fateful, ruinous responses to temptation by underestimating the enemy. Paul refers 15 times to "Satan" or the "Devil" in his letters to early churches that still guide us today in becoming mature Christians. **II Corinthians 2:11** warns us that Satan is busy preparing careful "schemes" to take "advantage" of our spiritual immaturity; as individuals or as a church. Paul cannot be accused of seeing the Devil *everywhere* he looked, but he also learned to recognize *where* he saw the Devil at work. Despite the wondrous miracles Paul experienced in answer to his prayers, Paul admitted sometimes "Satan hindered" him ("placed obstacles in his path") and kept him from achieving God's will (**I Thessalonians 2:17-18**).

Paul, therefore, knew better than to underestimate Satan (whose name means "adversary") in his ability to block us as we seek to follow God's will. In **Ephesians 6:11-12**, Paul described our struggle to overthrow Satan's assaults upon us as a hand-to-hand wrestling match. Peter used language even stronger than Paul's to warn us of Satanic dangers: "Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (**I Peter 5:8**). "Be on the alert" means "to be cautious and watchful to prevent being suddenly overtaken by some destructive enemy or calamity."

How motivated do you think we'd be to escape the Devil's designs on us if we took him more seriously? A huge nut tree grew by the cemetery fence outside a small town. One day, two boys gathered a bucketful of nuts. They sat down by the tree inside the cemetery, and out of sight, to divide them. "One for you, one for me; one for you, one for me," said one boy. The bucket was so full, several nuts rolled up to the fence. A third boy happened to cycle past. He thought he heard voices from inside the cemetery and slowed down to investigate. Sure enough, "One for you, one for me; one for you. . . ." "Oh my!" the boy shuddered, "It's Satan and St. Peter dividing the cemetery souls!" He rode away fast and saw an old man hobbling along with a cane. "Come quick! You won't believe what I just heard. Satan and St. Peter are at the cemetery dividing the souls." The old man thought him a prankster. But the boy's persistence finally made the man curious. He hobbled as best he could to the cemetery. Sure enough, he heard, "One for you, one for me; one for you, one for me." He whispered, "Boy, you've been tellin' the truth! Let's see if we sneak a peek at the Devil." Shivering with fear, they edged toward the fence. They didn't see anything. But they heard these words: "One for you, one for me; and one last one for you. That's all. Let's go get those nuts by the fence, and we'll be done." They say the old guy made it to town 10 minutes before the boy on the bicycle!

B. Overestimating Ourselves

A second fateful response to temptation is related to Underestimating the Enemy. We overestimate ourselves when we overestimate our ability to handle Satan or temptation. We'll survive much better as Christians if we continually remind ourselves Satan's chief strategy when confronting us with temptation is to have us fight him or to fight against sinful temptations on his terms, because he can beat us every time.

About a thousand years before **Jesus'** birth, the Lord tapped a godly young shepherd boy to become Israel's next king. Many of our favorite Bible verses are from songs David wrote, like **Psalms 23**. We're encouraged by David's honest testimony of wrestling with many of the difficulties and heartaches we experience, and yet gaining victory by demonstrating courageous faith in the Lord's loving and powerful protection. For most of his life, David knew better than to overestimate himself concerning temptation. The words of **Psalms 19:12-14** must have been often upon his lips as a heartfelt prayer (NLT): "How can I know all the sins lurking in my heart? Cleanse me from these hidden faults. Keep me from deliberate sins! Don't let them control me. Then I will be free of guilt and innocent of great sin. May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart be pleasing to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer."

At the pinnacle of his power and success, David became overconfident. He assumed he could keep the evil impulses of his heart under control. Solomon, his son, may have written **Proverbs 16:18** (NKJV) with him in mind: "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." David coveted Bathsheba, wife to one of his noblest warriors, clutched her in adultery, and murdered her husband, Uriah, in a desperate attempt to conceal his guilt. After he heartrendingly repented of his ghastly actions, the consequences of his sin plagued him and thousands of his citizens for decades (**II Samuel 11:1-20:26**)! Our old nature never gets converted; never falls in love with God. This is why we're urged in **Romans 12:2** (Good News), "Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind. Then you will be able to know the will of God—what is good and is pleasing to Him and is perfect." Day-by-day, sometimes moment-by-moment, we choose whether to bring our thoughts and heart impulses to **Jesus** to be transformed by His standards, or we can deceive ourselves that our standards must be okay because something "seems right" or "feels good" to us.

We respond fatefully (fatally, disastrously) to any temptation by looking at the temptation or at God through the Devil's eyes. **Revelation 12:9-10** (CSB) clearly reveals Satan's identity and tactics: "This great dragon—the ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, the one deceiving the whole world—was thrown down to the earth with all his angels. ¹⁰ Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say, . . . the accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been thrown down." Satan's most common New Testament name, "the Devil," means "false accuser." The Devil never tires of falsely accusing us of failing God, ourselves, or others, and the Devil relentlessly seeks to poison our minds against God by falsely accusing God of failing us. Instead of viewing any temptation or God through the Devil's deceiving tactics of Underestimating the Enemy or of Overestimating Ourselves, our best hope of escaping harm by falling for the traps Satan sets for us is to view any temptation or the Devil through God's eyes. This is most crucial concerning a third fateful response to temptation: Misestimating God.

C. Misestimating God

"Misestimate" means to "estimate wrongly" or "judge incorrectly." On March 23, 2007, *USA Today* reported a pipefitter paid \$2.00 at a Nashville yard sale for a tattered, discolored replica of the Declaration of Independence. He wanted something unusual to hang in his garage. But most copies of the Declaration are made to appear to be much older than they are, so he didn't take seriously this one might *really* be old. After he married, his new wife insisted on downsizing their belongings so they could all fit conveniently into one home. She donated his garage curiosity to Goodwill. A man spotted it, purchased it for \$2.48, and had it tested. It proved to be a rare copy of the Declaration made in 1823. He auctioned it for \$477,650!

What blessings do we miss out upon, or what treasures do we carelessly toss aside, by misestimating God—who He is, what He gives to us, or His priceless wisdom that guides us to a glorious future? We sometimes compound our faults by claiming our failures are due to God's unloving or negligent actions toward us. When James cautions us in **vs. 13**, "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," he reminds us God has no capacity to act improperly toward us. How often does the thought cross His mind to toy with us for His own amusement, to take advantage of His vastly superior power over us, or to selfishly demand something from us without concern over how the loss might cost us great pain? Never! How often does the emotion stir His heart to punish us unfairly, to seek revenge for our moral failings, or to close His heart toward us in cold indifference to our hopes and our needs? Never! If we ever believe God is guilty of evil or negligence toward us, this evil exists only [where?] in our own minds. A cartoon in *The New Yorker* magazine shows some pigs feeding at a trough. As the farmer fills the trough with food, one hog asks the others, "Have you ever wondered why he's so good to us?" When Satan tempts us, he's like the farmer fattening up pigs for the slaughter. Satan does everything in his deceitful power to make temptations look appealing to us, but it's merely a "scheme" to drag his victims into misery, bondage, and heartbreak. "The LORD," in stark contrast, "is compassionate and merciful, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love," as **Psalms 103:8-14** (NLT) assures us. ⁹ He will not constantly accuse us, nor remain angry forever. ¹⁰ He does not punish us for all our sins; He does not deal harshly with us, as we deserve. ¹¹ For His unfailing love toward those who fear Him is as great as the height of the heavens above the earth. ¹² He has removed our sins as far from us as the east is from the west. ¹³ The LORD is like a father to His children, tender and compassionate to those who fear Him. ¹⁴ For He knows how weak we are; He remembers we are only dust."

James opens his letter with guidelines on how to cooperate with our Lord when we face challenging temptations and trials. He urges 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." The Greek word for "trials" in **James 1:2** refers to outward trying circumstances God designs for our good, "to test us to prove or to improve our abilities." This is why James encouraged us to "Consider it a great

joy . . . when you encounter various trials"; not because we're pleased with the trial, but because we're pleased with the efforts of our fully loving and wise Heavenly Father to develop us into mature, Christlike followers of His Son **Jesus**. But every trial can also be a temptation. In **James 1:13-16**, "tempt" is the verb form of the noun "trial" in **James 1:2**. "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." When we are "drawn away [from God] and enticed by [our] own evil desire," we allow Satan and our own sin-warped thoughts to trick us into reacting wrongly to a God-given trial. We then allow this trial to sour into a "temptation" that ruins us in various ways. In other words, we can be *molded* by our trials to become better servants of Christ or we can be *folded* by our trials by believing Satan's lies, and fall away from **Jesus**. This is why James urges us, "Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren." Next week, we'll contrast these three Fateful Responses to Temptation with three Faithful Responses to Temptation: Flight When You Can, Faith When You Can't, and Fidelity All You Can.

CONCLUSION

The Zulus of South Africa, perhaps the most powerful race of warriors Africa ever produced, often use a centuries-old tale to warn their people of the dangers of greed. Certain monkeys are so smart and nimble they prove most difficult to catch by direct measures. But they can often be tricked to entrap themselves. A large gourd is used that has a narrow neck. A small hole is made in the base, to secure the base with a rope. The top of the gourd is cut off and a piece of fruit the monkeys like or something shiny is put inside. If a monkey reaches inside to grab the bait, the Zulus can often walk up and capture it. Why? Can't the monkey get away easily by releasing the bait and withdrawing its hand? Yes. But if the monkey insists on clutching the bait, as many do, its fist cannot be withdrawn from the narrow-necked gourd. The monkey's refusal to release the bait is what entraps it. What bait of Satan do we refuse to release that entraps us as foolishly into some enslaving temptation?