

“I’m being tempted by God!” Well, that’s one response to a series of trials. James’ readers had endured much, and some were cracking under the intensity. What does he say they should do?

James counseled his readers to reign in their thoughts—God’s isn’t tempting you. From where do temptations come? From within. According to James, we’re our own worst enemy.

James 1:13-18

The Garden of Eden was heaven on earth. It was good with every need supplied. God granted Adam and Eve unbounded freedom to fill the earth, to preside over, and to enjoy it. Their only restriction concerned a single tree in all the earth—the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The Lord instructed them not to eat of its fruit, but believing a lie, they disobeyed and ate it anyways (Gen 2:15-16, 3:1-7).

Adam hid in shame from the Lord and became defensive. He protested, “The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” *It’s my wife’s fault, God! And it’s Your fault for creating her!* When the Lord spoke with Eve, she replied, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” As Adam blamed Eve, so Eve blamed Satan.

The first couple considered themselves victims, helpless to take any other course of action. They had to sin... or so they thought. Adam blamed God, and Eve blamed the devil, but neither could say, “It’s my own fault. I’m to blame for my actions.”

“THE FAULT, DEAR BRUTUS, IS NOT IN OUR STARS, BUT IN OURSELVES.”

— SHAKESPEARE.

God was sovereign over Adam and Eve’s circumstances, just as He was sovereign over Job’s trials or over the trials of James’ readers. Yet, His will is never to set anyone up for failure or to needlessly harm. Scripture says many times that God brings trials and has a good purpose in them (Dan 4:29-37; Jonah 1-4; Heb 12:7-8). He matures His people, changes them, and conforms them to be more like Him (Rom 5:3-5; Jas 1:2-12). It’s faith to hold onto anything like this when life hurts.

James wanted his readers to know that God is good even in the midst of their hardships (Jas 1:17). Both the sunshine and rain, both happiness and sorrow come from the Lord. As Job says, “Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive disaster?” (Job 2:10).

Right thinking about God’s is the starting point for any believer in the midst of hardship. Job’s wife rejected this and flooded her mind with wrong thoughts about the Lord: “Curse God and die!” (Job 2:9). She was tempted and succumbed. According to James, trials come from the Lord for our eternal good; the temptation to sin comes from within us. We’re our own worst enemy.

WHO’S TO BLAME?

(JAMES 1:13)

With every trial we’re tempted in some way. Perhaps you’ve poured yourself into a piece of legislation only to watch it die in committee? Maybe you expected an easy road to reelection, and yet, a significant opponent arose? Whether you’re white collar or blue, elected, appointed, or hired, in the public sector or private, there are trails. And whatever trial you’re experiencing at this moment, you have the choice either to glorify God or to sin against Him.

James 1:13—“Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil, and He Himself tempts no one.”

The buck stops with God, doesn’t it? In the case of Job, it’s true that the devil stretched out his hand to afflict, but let’s not forget that the Lord approved it. Job didn’t question God’s motives, and neither did Job’s friends. In fact, “Job did not sin or charge God with wrong” (Job 1:22). He knew that God was at work in the midst of an awful situation though he had no idea why or how.

James and his readers were Jewish Christians. They were persecuted by the Romans for being Jewish and by Jews for being Christians. How easy it would’ve been to blame God, and apparently some did. James did not. He reminded his readers that God isn’t evil and isn’t even tempted to do evil. He is sovereign and in control. All He does is good (Jas 1:13, 18).

The Enemy Within

God harms that He might heal. Isn't that how a surgeon operates? He takes no joy in cutting open any patient—it is his joy to bring healing. Consider that the patient can trust in his doctor's skill and goodness and choose to submit, or he can reject it all and look for an escape. Life can be so much better than it is, not by having the perfect circumstances but by trusting that in all things God is good.

“FOR ALL WARS ARE SPRUNG FROM ONE SOURCE, DESIRE, THE DESIRE FOR MONEY OR GLORY OR PLEASURE. THESE IT IS THAT BRING DISASTER TO THE HUMAN RACE”

— PHILO.

Temptations come from within. We want something—comfort, money, power, etc.—and trials stand in the way. Trials are like roadblocks that prevent us from getting what we want. Temptation is the desire to find any way around the roadblock rather than trust God.

OUT OF THE HEART... (JAMES 1:14-15)

Desires influence our choices, don't they? What we want comes to light in our words and action. The connection between our heart and our words or actions is inseparable. This is why Jesus said “out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander...” (Matt 15:19). It's in the heart that desire is born and that temptation is stirred.

James likens it to a fish being “lured” or an animal being “enticed” by the bait (Jas 1:14). In both cases, desire led them to their death. He also uses an analogy from childbirth. When wrong desires are allowed to conceive in the heart, they give birth to sin... “and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death” (Jas 1:15). Cultivate ungodly desires, and pain is inevitable.

Prov 4:23—“Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.”

Little could be more important than cultivating godly desires. Why? As James' explained: Wrong desires give birth to sin, and sin is death—both literally and figuratively. Sin ends in eternal death, but even in this life, it destroys. Sin kills the joy that God intends for His people. It strangles their desire to worship Him or to even be with other believers. Peace is

undermined as sin enslaves, cripples with guilt, and blinds from seeing rightly. Sin takes from heavenly reward, and it devastates all that is truly good in this world. And again, from where does such destruction come? The heart.

FIRSTFRUITS

(JAMES 1:16-18)

God had said after the Exodus that His people were to give Him the firstfruits of their harvests (Ex 23:16). The firstfruits were the first and very best of their crops. Why did God want this? So His people would learn to trust Him. He promised to provide more if they would trust Him to do so.

With this in mind, James said the Lord uses trials “that [His people] should be a kind of firstfruits” (Jas 1:18). Believers are a kind of firstfruit. What God has done in their lives is a kind of promise that He intends to do far more at a later time.

God's work in His people is to conform them back to the original image they once displayed (Gen 1:26). He does that in the fire of trials. It's a transformative work, a small picture of the transformation yet to come throughout creation. Throughout creation? God intends to transform creation with a new heaven and new earth (Rev 21-22).

James reminded that what God does today is with tomorrow in mind. This means that when His people hurt, He isn't being capricious or sadistic. He harms that life and eternal joy should result.

God only gives good gifts, and He gives them liberally by showering His goodness upon His people (Psa 31:19; Jas 1:17). The problem is that what we consider good isn't what God sees as good. What's ultimately good may be painful and unpleasant for a time. James doesn't make light of this, but calls his readers to remember God's character.

It may be a trial as devastating as the death of a loved one. God gives and God takes away, does He not? How can that be good? Because in Christ, death isn't the end of anything. It's a painful separation, but one that leads to an unending reunion.

It was only through an eternal lens that James could see his trials in this way and rejoice. He kept believing in God's goodness no matter how bad life seemed. May we not be succumb to temptation in our trials, but hold fast to God's character in those times and trust Him.