

God's Sovereignty and Human Temptation

Scripture: James 1

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Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. (1:13–17)

As explained in chapter 2 of this volume, *peirasmos* (the noun form of the verb translated *tempted*) has the basic meaning of trying, testing, assaying, or proving and can have negative or positive connotations, depending on the context. In 1:12, the word is used in the sense of trials, or testings. But in the present text (vv. 13–14), the idea is clearly that of temptation, of solicitation to evil. James is here dealing with an entirely different concept.

The same word (in noun or verb form) is used for both ideas because the primary difference is not in the *peirasmos* itself but in a person's response to it. If a believer responds in faithful obedience to God's Word, he successfully endures a trial; if he succumbs to it in the flesh, doubting God and disobeying, **he is tempted** to sin. Right response leads to spiritual endurance, righteousness, wisdom, and other blessings (vv. 2–12). Wrong response leads to sin and death (v. 15).

In his first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul makes clear that temptation is “common to man” (1 Cor. 10:13). No person, including the most spiritual Christian, can escape temptation. Even the Lord in His humanity, who was without sinful flesh, was “tempted by the devil” (Matt. 4:1). An ancient writer quipped that a Christian's baptism does not drown the flesh.

Just as it is common to man to be tempted, it is also common for him to blame someone or something else, not only for his being **tempted** but also for his succumbing to it. From the beginning, one of the chief characteristics of sin has been the propensity to pass off blame, and every parent knows that children are born with that very evident propensity.

When God confronted Adam with his sin in the Garden of Eden, Adam's reply was, "The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate" (Gen. 3:12). When the Lord then asked Eve, "What is this you have done?" she replied, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate" (v. 13). Eve blamed Satan; much worse, Adam blamed God.

James clearly has no patience with a foolish fatalism by which a poor man blames his poverty for turning him into a thief and therefore justifies his stealing, or by which a drunk blames business or domestic problems and pressures for driving him to drink and therefore to the reckless driving that seriously injures or kills someone. Nor does he allow for the notion that "the devil made me do it."

Even more vehemently, James opposes the intolerable idea of blaming God, declaring, **Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God."** **Let no one say** translates a present active imperative form of the verb *lego* (**Let ... say**), coupled with the negative imperative *medeis* (**no man**). The idea is, "Let no person say to himself," that is, rationalize to himself, "that, **when he is tempted**, he is **being tempted by God**." The very idea is anathema.

By translates the preposition *apo*, which is sometimes rendered "of," or "from," and carries the connotations of remoteness, distance, and indirection. Another preposition (*hupo*), which is often translated with those same English words (by, of, from), denotes direct agency. What James is saying, therefore, is that no one should say that God is even *indirectly* responsible for temptation to evil. He is in no way and to no degree responsible, directly or indirectly, for our **being tempted**.

Robert Burns, the noted Scottish poet, wrote, "Thou knowest Thou hast formed me with passions wild and strong, and listening to their witching voice has often led me wrong." He claimed that he was "By passion driven: But yet the light that led astray was light from heaven." Some ancient rabbis taught what was called *yetzher ha'ra*, which means "evil impulse," and was considered to be part of man's original created nature. One rabbinical saying was, "God said, 'It repents me that I created the evil tendency in man; for had I not done so, he would not have rebelled against me. I created the evil tendency; I created the law as a means of healing.' If you occupy yourself with the law, you will not fall into the power of it. God placed the good tendency on a man's right hand, and the evil on his left." Another ancient Jewish writer, the philosopher Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of Christ, had much better understanding. He perceptively wrote, "When the mind has sinned and removed itself far from virtue, it lays the blame on divine causes." He reflected the truth of Solomon, who said, "The foolishness of man subverts his way, and his heart rages against the Lord" (Prov. 19:3).

In his fierce opposition to the ungodly rationalization of blaming God for sending enticement to evil, James gives four strong proofs that He is not responsible for our temptations and even less responsible, if that were possible, for our succumbing to them in sin. He does so by explaining the nature of evil (1:13*b*), the nature of man (v. 14), the nature of lust (vv. 15–16), and the nature of God (v. 17). In verse 18, he gives a fifth proof, the nature of regeneration, which will be discussed separately in chapter 5 of this commentary.

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