

Testing or Temptation

James 1:12-15

Gen. 22:1 Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham, and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” 2 Then He said, “Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.”

So God tested Abraham. God tested his faith. As we read in, Heb. 11:17 “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son.”

But now look at our text today,
v.13

The New King James translation helps us out a little bit, using our English word “tempted.” Yet it is the same Greek word as I just read from Hebrews 11, “When he was tested.” So which is true? “God tested Abraham.” Or, in an apparent contradiction, “Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone.”

Which is true? Both, of course, with no contradiction, for though one Greek word is used in both places, it is used with two very distinct, yet related, meanings, well captured by those two difference English words, testing and tempting. And this is a very important distinction for you to understand and appreciate. For each of you will undoubtedly experience both of those things in your lives, both the testing of your faith and the temptation to sin. That is our subject today.

This whole first chapter of James addresses the subject of trials, as we have already studied,

v.2 “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.”

And guess what the Greek word is for trials? The same word used in verse 12, “Blessed is the man who endures temptation.” It is the noun form of the very same word translated as the verb “tempted” in verses 13 and 14. So let’s begin with that blessing. Or, I should say, with,

I. THE TESTING OF YOUR FAITH.

I want you to look again closely at this text. That word “approved” in verse 12 is actually the same Greek word translated “testing” in verse 3. And the word for “endures” in verse 12 is the same as the word for “patience” in verse 3. So all of that is to say that verse 12 picks up on the point so vivid in verse 3.

So, consider it all joy, my brethren, when your faith is tested by God. For that test is a blessing!

A. A blessing from God.

That is the word Jesus uses in the beattitudes,

Mat. 5:3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

The end of that list of the beattitudes is extremely similar to what James writes us,

Mat. 5:10 “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 “Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. 12 “Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

It is a blessing to endure trials and suffering! It is the occasion for happiness, the deep satisfaction of the soul. James repeats this theme in,

James 5:10 “My brethren, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering and patience. 11 Indeed we count them blessed who endure. You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord--that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful.”

Likewise Peter.

1 Peter 3:14 “But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you are blessed. “And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled.”

1 Peter 4:14 “If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified.”

But why? Why is it a blessing? How can it be a blessing? What makes it a blessing, and in that sense, how is this blessed test something very different from the temptation to sin. The answer to all those questions really is found by defining the goal of the test. And that goal is obvious here,

B. The goal of approval.

The goal of the test is approval! Herein is the fundamental distinction from temptation to sin. The goal of temptation is failure! The goal of this testing of God is approval. To be tested is to be approved! The idea here is not of those who fail, but of those who succeed.

I hope you can clearly see the good benefit of testing, just as a good teacher will always have for his students. The goal of testing is to be proven and approved. It is the testing that is used of fine metals, silver and gold, the testing of fire that melts away

all impurities and imperfections. So Peter writes,

1 Peter 1:6 “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, 7 that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, 8 whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, 9 receiving the end of your faith--the salvation of your souls.”

Testing for approval! That’s why testing is such a blessing. It is designed for approval. That’s why we require licenses in order to be able to drive a car, testing for approval. That’s why doctors must be licensed, and a host of other professionals in our society, including preachers. A testing intended to produce the perfect and complete work of endurance.

Indeed, the very form of approval is the very definition of the blessing, namely endurance, as we studied several weeks ago again from,

v.3 “knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.”

Too often, we don’t appreciate or even acknowledge the blessing of the testing of trials. Some people are unable to see the good hand of God in those tests, for as is often stated, today we want things instantly. We don’t want to learn patience, we simply want it to be given to us. We don’t want to learn endurance through suffering, we want to do away with suffering and make ourselves happy and satisfied all the time.

We want what we want instantly. Without hard work or diligent effort, and certainly without having to wait through a period of trials and tests.

Therefore, steadfast and patient endurance is not esteemed highly as a mark of godliness. But it ought to be. For that is the goal. Patient endurance, steadfastness. The spirit and the ability that enables you to bear up under any circumstances, though not simply with resignation as if submitting to your fate, but with a blazing hope. Even the hope of glory.

And that hope is what puts all of this into perspective, and James specifies that great hope very clearly. He calls it the crown of life.

v.12

So the result of the testing of your faith is,

C. The result of eternal reward.

What a great expression, the crown of life. Turn with me to Revelation 2, to the message to the church at Smyrna, the only church receiving no criticism in this section.

Rev. 2:8 “And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, ‘These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life: 9 “I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 “Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. 11 “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.”

What greater reward could you possibly imagine that being crowned with the glory of eternal life! Jesus, of course, wears the king’s crown. Yet he shares with us the glory of life, and blesses us with that life as a reward for faithfulness and endurance.

Don’t miss this connection, that the result of eternal reward comes to those who learn to endure the sufferings and trials of life. And don’t get wrapped up into some works-salvation, as if your good works of perseverance and endurance will get you into heaven. That crown of life is still given by God as a gift. Eternal life is always to be seen as a gift. A gift of grace. As James puts it in verse 12, “which the Lord has promised.”

So you receive the gift according to God’s own promise. Yet it is the anticipation of receiving that reward that provides the motivation to pass the test, to show yourself approved. And James is so marvelous here, using the word “love” to fully describe that responsibility to endure.

v.12 “Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.”

So beloved, consider that eternal glory that has been promised to you in Christ. Now,

Rom. 8:18 “...I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.”

And with that great hope,

v.2 “...count it all joy when you fall into various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. 4 But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.”

And that is the great blessing which God attaches to the testing of your faith. However, in the midst of that process, you will discover something else going on in your life. Namely, the battle with sin. Never will you be free from,

II. THE TEMPTATION TO SIN.

So now James has something important to teach you. This temptation to sin does not come from God. Stated very clearly and plainly,
v.13

A. God is not the source or the author of temptation.

Keep in mind the distinction I just tried to explain. Testing, in the positive sense, has the goal of your approval, approval by testing, approval as the consequence of qualifications being met and satisfied. You are prepared and equipped to succeed. That's the sense of testing. And God does that. But tempting has the opposite goal, the goal of causing you to stumble. And the simple straightforward evaluation of that is evil. It is evil to cause someone to stumble. Even for us!

Mark 9:42 "But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea. 43 If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched— 44 where Their worm does not die And the fire is not quenched."

That is as serious as it gets. As Matthew adds,

Mat. 18:7 "Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!"

Causing temptation is evil, and it is characteristic not of God but of Satan himself, whose name means "accuser." He has been the one who seeks to cause man to stumble ever since his first encounter with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Gen. 3:1 "Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the

woman, "Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden'?"

That's what Satan does, not God. God is not tempted by evil, we read in verse 13. He is not vulnerable to evil. He is not evil! He is good, by the very definition of his essence. Therefore, verse 13, he does not tempt anyone to sin. Period.

Even Jesus, in his humanity, would reflect nothing but goodness to God the father.

Mat. 19:17 "So He said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God."

Ps. 34:8 "Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good; Blessed is the man who trusts in Him!"

So we cannot begin to think of God in any context other than his essential goodness, for if he weren't good, he wouldn't be God. And the confidence in that goodness and even the subjective experience of it is vital to our faith. "Taste and see that the LORD is good!"

This might be something of a problem, or a question needing to be answered, since we understand and believe that the Bible teaches God's sovereignty, the Bible refers to God's eternal will and purpose. We read in Ephesians 1 that everything comes to pass,

Eph. 1:11 "...according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will."

Also the language of our Shorter Catechism, speaking of God's eternal decree as, "his eternal purpose, according to the counsel of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass."

So foreordained? Yes. Does the secret foreordained will of God, by which all things come to pass, include human sin? Yes. God “works all things according to the counsel of His will.” But that is very different from tempting someone to sin. In God’s infinite, eternal and unchangeable wisdom, he has determined and decreed the certainty of everything that comes to pass. Yet he also uses means, leaving us as human being responsible for our own sins. We sin because we want to! God’s eternal decree doesn’t tempt us to sin, even though it establishes the certainty that we will sin in the eternal mind and purpose of God. But even though it is certain to come to pass, according to God’s eternal purpose, still the source of your sin is not outside of you at all. God is not the author of sin. Rather, that source of sin is your own heart.

B. The source of your temptation is within your own heart.

James says that pretty clearly, doesn’t he.
v.14

So you can never blame God for your sin, not even for your temptation. The responsibility is yours, thus the blame is yours. Why are you tempted to sin? Why are you tempted to evil? Because your natural heart is evil! Even as Christians, with a new heart, there is that old man, that flesh, that still wages war within your own heart!

So where does your sin come from? What is the source even of temptation? Your heart.

Mat. 12:33 “Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or else make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for a tree is known by its fruit. 34 Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. 35 A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth

good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things.”

Mat. 15:16 “So Jesus said, “Are you also still without understanding? 17 Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? 18 But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. 19 For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. 20 These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man.”

Thus God’s evaluation prior to the universal destruction of the flood,

Gen. 6:5 “Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. 6 And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart.”

James continues to express and explain the consequences of such temptations from the heart, those temptations which are not resisted or restrained by the work of God’s grace in the lives of true believers. And, like the temptation itself,

C. The consequences of your sin are your own responsibility.

v.15

Sadly, but truly, temptation that is indulged becomes deadly. Because the natural, human heart is dead in sin.

Jer. 17:9 “The heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked; Who can know it? 10 I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, Even to give every man according to his ways, According to the fruit of his doings.”

There is no cure for the human heart, other than the saving work of God through faith in Jesus. There is no human medicine available, no human counsel or wisdom is sufficient.

Eccles. 9:3 “This is an evil in all that is done under the sun: that one thing happens to all. Truly the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead.”

The wages of sin is death, as we read in Romans 6:23. Even more descriptively,

Rom. 3:10 “As it is written: “There is none righteous, no, not one; 11 There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God. 12 They have all turned aside; They have together become unprofitable; There is none who does good, no, not one.” 13 “Their throat is an open tomb; With their tongues they have practiced deceit”; “The poison of asps is under their lips”; 14 “Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness.” 15 “Their feet are swift to shed blood; 16 Destruction and misery are in their ways; 17 And the way of peace they have not known.” 18 “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

And for that reason, the consequences of your sin are your responsibility. It is not God who tempted you. Quite to the contrary, it is God alone, the goodness of God, by which you can be changed, your heart changed. And that is what it is to be a Christian. That is what it is to be saved, or born again, whichever biblical word you use. God makes you alive, by the power of his spirit to give you a new heart, to make you a new creation.

So, when it comes to temptation, there is only one hope to avoid death, and that is to trust in what Jesus Christ has done for you upon the cross and offers to you in the gospel. We are saved by grace, through faith, and faith alone.

And when it comes to the exercise of that faith, God will test you, that you might be approved, that you might “receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.” There is the greatest blessing of all.

v.12 “Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.”