

Temptations

How many of God's people have endured unthinkable trials? Today we live in the most peaceful nation on earth. But many brethren in times past endured terrible suffering and death: "And others endured *the* trial of *cruel* mockings and scourgings; yes, and moreover, of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawed in two, they were *brutally* interrogated, *and* slaughtered by *the* sword. They went about in sheepskins *and* in goatskins, being destitute, oppressed, *and* ill-treated" (Heb. 11:36-37).

No one can imagine horrors such as these. Paul lists some of the trials they endured, including temptations. What is the difference between trials and temptations? Trials are afflictions of fear, pain, suffering, loss, neediness, weakness, aloneness, rejection, betrayal, and doubt. Temptations, however, are *tests* of character and obedience. (In the Bible, *temptation* can often be rendered as *testing*.) They require us to make a choice whether or not to put God first, even if it is hurtful to us. The primary distinction is that a trial is an affliction, while a temptation or test involves a situation where we must make a choice. Temptations expose what's in our hearts and measure our faith. When a temptation or test comes upon us, we must make a choice: we can turn to God, or away from God.

Abraham was *tested* when God commanded him to sacrifice Isaac. When Abraham *chose* to obey, it was then that God said "**now I know that you fear God**, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me" (Gen. 22:12). Tests also show *us* what is in our hearts. For example, courage can only be demonstrated under conditions that produce fear; likewise, obedience to God can only be demonstrated when we are tested or tempted to turn away from Him. "**Blessed is the man who endures trials** because, after he has been proved, he shall receive a crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. Do not let anyone who is tempted say, 'I am being tempted by God' because God is not tempted by evil, and He Himself tempts no one *with evil*. **But each one is tempted when he is drawn away and is enticed by his own lust. And after lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin**; and sin, when it is completely finished, brings forth death" (James 1:12-15).

God never tempts us with evil. But God does test our obedience. It is Satan who tempts us by appealing to our lusts, which is why he is called the "tempter." Notice the distinction: God *tests* us and Satan *tempts* us. The Greek word for both is the same, so the proper rendering is determined by the context.

"For this reason, when I could not wait any longer, I sent *Timothy*, in order to know your faith, lest perhaps **the tempter** had **tempted** you, and our labor might be in vain" (I Thess. 3:5).

Let us be clear: *tests* from God are not evil brought against us, but are designed to *prove* (test) our obedience—just as with Abraham. But lustful temptations are of Satan. *Lust is the desire for that which God has defined as sin*. If there is no lust in us, we cannot be tempted with evil. If we succumb to temptation, it becomes sin. This is why Jesus is our perfect High Priest: He overcame all of the evil temptations of Satan. Jesus was tested when He willingly suffered as our Passover. All of us are tested by God, and all of us are tempted by Satan.

Certainly, we should always pray when tests come upon us as they are our only protection against temptation: "Watch and pray, so that you **do not enter into temptation**; the spirit indeed *is* willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matt. 26:41). Jesus overcame temptation by spending *much* time in prayer to God. Likewise, if God is not first in our lives we cannot resist Satan's temptations (James 4:7). In the parable of the sower, it is *temptation* causes some to fall away: "And those *that fell* upon the rock *are* the ones who, when they hear, receive the Word

with joy; but these do not have any root, who believe *only* for a while, **and in time of trial fall away**” (Luke 8:13).

Temptation can also come in the form of *judging others* for their weaknesses. If we do, we may find ourselves likewise tempted; instead, we must love others by helping them: “Brethren, even if a man be overtaken in some offense, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of meekness, **considering yourself, lest you also be tempted**” (Gal. 6:1).

It is through choosing obedience to God that we are able to bear the temptations and tests in this life. Unlike trials, God promises a way to *escape* temptations that become unbearable. “Therefore, let the one who thinks he stands take heed, lest he fall. No temptation has come upon you except what is common to mankind. For **God, Who is faithful, will not permit you to be tempted beyond what you are able to bear; but with the temptation, He will make a way of escape** [literally, an exit], so that you may be able to bear *it*. Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry” (I Cor. 10:12-14).

Many have applied this verse to trials of testing, but it is specific to *temptations* that come upon us. Notice Paul does *not* say that we will be entirely freed from a temptation, but that God will deliver us from that which becomes unbearable. This usually comes *after* we determine to turn to God and resist Satan. This is the importance of verse 14, which says to flee idolatry. “Therefore” implies that God’s help is conditional. We have two choices: flee from idolatry or run after it. If we resist Satan, then God will help us bear the temptation. In other words, God *limits* Satan’s evil.

So why do James and Peter tell us to count it *joy* when we are tested? Because we are choosing God and denying Satan. We know that we are truly the children of God if He tests us, or allows Satan to tempt us, because God wants to *prove* His children. “**In this you yourselves greatly rejoice [be full of joy]; though for the present, if it is necessary, you are in distress for a little while by various trials [tests];** in order that the proving of your faith, which is much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is being tested by fire, **may be found unto praise and honor and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ**” (I Pet. 1:6-7).

All temptations and tests are to prove whether we are worthy of eternity with God. What greater hope is there? If we choose obedience to God when tested and flee temptations, we are actually praising, honoring, and glorifying God.

Temptation and tests produce patience as we wait on God for deliverance: “Consider *it* all joy, my brethren, when you are beset by various trials, knowing that **the testing** [for genuineness, as with gold or silver] **of your faith produces endurance**” (James 1:2-3).

Finally, God promises to keep us from the *temptation* that is to come upon the whole world—if we obey and patiently endure. “Because you have kept the word of My patience, **I also will keep you from the time of temptation which is about to come upon the whole world to try those who dwell on the earth**” (Rev. 3:10). The temptation here is that of the *Beast*. Those who choose to follow him will receive his mark and end up in the lake of fire.

God tests all His children to see if we are truly seeking to please Him. He allows Satan to tempt us so that our obedience is manifested under duress. These things tell us much about ourselves and increase our faith and show us weaknesses that must be overcome. “**Pray unceasingly. Give thanks in everything**, for this *is the* will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you. **Quench not the Spirit**.... Prove all things. Hold fast *to that which* is good. Abstain from every form of wickedness. Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you wholly; and may your entire spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful *is He* Who calls you, Who will also perform *it*” (I Thess. 5:17-19; 21-24).