

Steadfast Joy: The Book of James

The Basics of Temptation

James 1:13-15

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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. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death (James 1:13–15).

Through our study of James, we've learned about the idea of steadfast joy. We have aimed to discover how the Bible calls Christians to a life of hope-filled, spiritual endurance as we faithfully follow Jesus. James writes to a group of Christians who are trying to figure out what obedience looks like when life is hard.

I'm sure you resonate with the challenge as well. For example:

- Perhaps you've felt the internal tension of holding your tongue when someone said something or posted something online.
- Maybe you've struggled with generosity while your job or the economy feels uncertain.
- Due to your physical or emotional exhaustion, you have to work hard to sort through what is right-thinking versus what is wrong-thinking.

Suffering and hardship create a spiritual pressure-cooker. Last week, we learned one of our goals in suffering is to "remain steadfast" and to "stand the test." Trials create opportunities to clarify what we actually believe. Further, 1 Corinthians 11:19 told us that controversies show us who we really are.

But there's one particular response that can be very common when pressure, struggle, and pain become part of the mix. In our frustration, it can be easy to look for someone to blame. Maybe you are the kind of person who tends to automatically believe that if something is wrong, it must be someone's fault.

You could think of it this way: **pain creates blame.**

Turn on the news, jump on social media, and you'll see it everywhere. In fact, with a culture steeped in identity politics, we are not only assigning blame; we are assuming blame. Our frustration causes us to rush toward the security of blame.

What happens to your soul if pain causes you to blame God? What if a trial in your life creates a temptation to sin? How do you think about that especially if you find yourself frustrated, angry, or blaming God?

James writes on the heels of talking about remaining faithful under the test, and he attempts to help us understand the nature of temptation so that we can live faithfully. James offers us two admonitions: a caution and an explanation.

Understanding this not only helps us to slow down when we are upset and in pain; but, it also helps us understand what is happening in temptation so that we can fight it with steadfast joy.

Caution: Don't Blame God

The first admonition James provides here is what we should *not* do: don't blame God for your temptations. However, there are some layers that we need to consider. This command from James is clear. But it's not simple. It requires some nuance.

There are some big questions for us to consider:

Where do trials come from? Are some from God, but not others? Are they from God at all? If not, how can we say he rules the universe? Are all trials from God and therefore his goodness is compromised?¹ These are just a few important questions that we need to consider.

James begins with a strong command: "Let no one say..." Like other statements from James, this a present-active imperative. James offers a strong caution, not just about our words but, more importantly, our judgment. The words are problematic, James isn't just concerned about the words we say; he's burdened about the mindset behind the words.

What is the nature of his concern? He doesn't want Christians concluding that God is the one tempting them in their trial. This is where things get a little complicated.

The word "tempt" has a broad range of meanings. The Greek word "periazō" can be used for either a trial or a temptation depending on the context. For example, it's translated as "trial" in James 1:2 and 12. There are instances in which the Bible describes God as "testing" his people. A few examples:

- God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, his only son: *After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Take 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"* (Gen. 22:1-2).
- In Judges, God does not remove all the nations around Israel as means of testing: *I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died, in order to test Israel by them, whether they will take care to walk in the way of the Lord as their fathers did, or not* (Judges 2:21–22).
- God left Hezekiah to his own devices regarding a visit with Babylonian envoys: *And so in the matter of the envoys of the princes of Babylon, who had been sent to him to inquire about the sign that had*

¹ Kurt A. Richardson, [James](#), vol. 36, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), 78.

been done in the land, God left him to himself, in order to test him and to know all that was in his heart (2 Chron.32:31).

Therefore, we need to acknowledge that God allows and ordains trials in our lives. We can't take the position that God is standing distant from the bad things that happen. Rather, as Doug Moo says, "The Old Testament makes clear that God does test his people, in the sense that he brings them into situations where their willingness to obey him is tested."²

There's an important distinction to be made here. God's design is for trials to prove and strengthen our faith. "God never seeks to induce sin and destroy [our] faith."³ God uses trials for his good purposes. He ordains difficulties to strengthen and prove our genuineness. And, it's important to recognize that our struggle to obey doesn't come from God.

James makes that explicitly clear for two reasons. First, God cannot be tempted with evil. There is no inclination within himself to tempt people to sin. He has no temptation toward sinning, no desire for it in you or the world. There's nothing in him that makes him desire to see you fail.

Secondly, James simply and clear says that God doesn't tempt anyone. Not only is God immune from temptation, but he is also not involved in any resulting temptation. That's the result of the devil and, as we'll see in a moment, our desires.

However, some of you might be thinking that if hard situations create the possibility of temptation or sin, isn't God to blame? It's a tempting thought to consider, because you could then lay the blame of your sinful response at the feet of God. But the possibility of two choices is critical for any kind of testing to truly be a test. In other words, tests lose their value if there's only one choice.

You'd never know how smart you are if the only option on a test was the correct one. You'd never know if your basketball team was good if there was no competition or if there was no possibility of losing. Having to make a choice is vital to any test. Understanding this and embracing it, without blame, is central to maturity.

Imagine, for instance, a young man who is learning to play basketball. He learns to shoot the ball, but he is frustrated because he misses. The coach attempts to give him instruction but the young player says, "The hoop's too small. They need to make it bigger!" Imagine a game in which a team is losing by a few points when someone in the huddle says, "Who decided to schedule this team, anyway?" Or, imagine a player failing to dribble the ball correctly and he says, "I don't know why that's a rule anyway?" If that was your kid on the court, I'm sure you'd have a conversation with him on the ride home. Blaming the size of the hoop, the game scheduler, or the rules of the game is a sign of immaturity. It misses the point since the game requires all these things. The fact that it's hard doesn't require the design of the game to be cause for blame.

² Douglas J. Moo, [*James: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, Second edition, vol. 16, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2015), 98.

³ Ibid.

This point is concerning to James when it comes to how we think about temptations. In the pressure of hardship, it can be tempting to blame God. We can allow the challenges to cause unbelief to rise in our hearts. We can begin to doubt God's goodness and kindness.

James cautions us: don't blame God for your temptations.

Explanation: Consider Your Desires

Instead of blaming God for our temptations, James wants us to take a look inside of ourselves. He calls us to consider our desires and how they play a vital role in the process of temptation. By pointing us in this direction, James not only attempts to help us identify the source; but, he's also attempting to give us some hope in fighting temptation.

How does temptation happen? James identifies that it begins with being "lured and enticed by his own desire" (1:14).

Notice that James doesn't blame God. But he also doesn't blame the devil. Although the devil is certainly behind our temptations at some level. Remember that Jesus was tempted directly by the devil in Matthew 4:1-11. Jesus referred to the devil desiring to sift Peter like wheat in Luke 22:31-34. And Peter warns us that the devil is like a roaring lion seeking people to devour (1 Pet. 5:8). So, the devil is certainly at work.

But James puts the focus on the internal battle—being lured and enticed by our own desires. Let's start by looking at the word "desire." Like so many things in the Bible, desires are not necessarily bad but they can be. In a good sense, Jesus desired to eat the Passover with his disciples (Luke 22:15). The writer of Hebrews said that he desired for the followers of Jesus to show the same earnestness of full assurance (Heb. 6:11). Desire can be very positive and righteous when it is set upon the right object.

But desires can also be misplaced, wicked, and destructive. A few examples:

- *For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do (Gal. 5:17).*
- *Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did (1 Cor. 10:6)*
- *...but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful (Mark 4:19).*

Behind the actions of the flesh and the wrong things that we do are evil desires. And temptation is the opportunity to fulfill those evil desires. Or to put it another way, temptation would be pointless unless there wasn't a desire associated with it. Desire and temptation are linked together.

James also connects two other words with desire: enticed and lured. To be enticed is the offering of bait. It's something you would desire, something attractive, or appealing. It's what you think will give you what you want. It's the thing that fulfills your desire.

To be lured is to chase after the enticing thing. It means to draw someone away or to pull you down a particular path. This word seems to have more action associated with it. I'm not a hunter, but you could think of this as the action of an animal when it hears the "call" designed to pique its interest. It moves toward the sound.

What happens next? James lays out the steps. He uses a birth metaphor to make his point clear. Human desires allowed to be enticed and lured create sin. And this image is designed to demonstrate something that has taken on a life of its own.

Notice the language that describes something that moves toward being fully grown. Isn't that the problem with sin? It's never static. It grows and takes over. It dominates and controls. Ultimately, it brings death. And it would seem that James wants us to see that it takes the life of the one who conceived it. He wants us to feel the weight and the horror of what sin does.

Rather than blaming God, James is warning us about the process of temptation that leads to our self-destruction. His concern doesn't seem to be so much a defense of God as it is a dire warning for self-reflection. James wants us to think about the nature of temptation at the level of desire.

He'll pick up this theme later in chapter 4:

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask (James 4:1–2).

Suffering and hardship intensify blame-shifting. How many times have you seen this play out? It's all over the media. An election year is only going to make it worse. We tend to blame our enemy first and then find a way to justify it. You've probably seen this play out in your home, at work, in the church, and in your relationships. It's so easy to say and do things when you don't consider the role of your desires.

Now, this doesn't negate the real challenges that can be present at home, at work, in the church, or in the world. Life and relationships can be hard. But the issue in this text relates to where temptation comes from. How do we move from a hard life to sinful actions?

James cautions us to not blame God, but to take a careful look at our desires.

Making This Work

With the caution and explanation in mind from James, let me give you four practical steps to consider as you deal with temptation:

- 1. Be aware of how temptation happens** – Simply listening to this message is going to be helpful to many of you this week because you are going to be more aware of the desire-battle. Instead of blaming God, the devil, or other people you'll be able to take more ownership of what is happening inside of you. Perhaps this will lead you to be sure you are facilitating the right desires and praying with the Psalmist, "...unite my heart to fear your name" (Psalm 86:11).

- 2. Ask yourself what you want** – In the middle of the temptation-battle and once you realize the danger of your desires, consider asking yourself what it is that you want. Examine your wants. Before you speak, look, like, post, share, or act, ask yourself what you want. If you are mad or sad because of circumstances, ask yourself what you are trying to get. “I want to be liked. I want to be loved. I want to feel safe. I don’t want to be afraid. I want to feel secure. I want to be treated fairly. I want....” Just asking the question helps to surface the lines of battle.
- 3. Affirm God’s ability to help you** - Part of the blame-trap is that it makes us act as if we are powerless. And yet the Bible offers us amazing promises. For example:

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it (1 Cor. 10:13).

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh (Gal. 5:16).

Therefore, God calls us to live by the power of the Spirit and to believe the promises of the Word.

- 4. Act in faith** – The Bible calls us to take steps of faith based upon what we believe to be true. Paul said, “The life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20). Therefore, we take steps to walk by faith. We match our beliefs with our actions. We take tangible steps. We choose our words carefully, shut down the computer, put down the phone, wait a day before responding, pour out your heart in prayer, read your Bible, be generous with your money, respond in kindness, and countless other ways.

James calls believers to action by understanding what lies underneath our temptations. Hardship and suffering create pressure and pain. And sometimes we can allow that pain to lead us to blame.

But freedom comes as we wrestle with our broken desires and bring them to Jesus.

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