

What's So Great About Temptation?

James 1:1-18

Slide 1

Christians have always suffered with Peter Pan Syndrome, meaning they detest the idea of maturing. In fact, most believers never make it to the maturity level of Peter Pan in their Christian lives.

It might be more accurate to describe this problem as Permanent Nursery Status.

Churches today, more than ever, are plagued with long-term baby Christians who require high maintenance and low spirituality.

In fact, much of the quarreling and in-fighting in churches is usually a direct result of the lack of spiritual maturity on the part of church members.

Unless the church acts to clean up the mess, there's no telling what kind of situation our children will face if Jesus tarries too long.

This is why it's important for believers to grow in their faith and be transformed from whimpering babes to bold ambassadors for Christ.

2 Corinthians 5:20, *"We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God."*

James, the half-brother of Jesus and patriarch of the Jerusalem church, knew well the kind of immaturity we're facing today.

The book of Acts shows us the problems the first church faced in vivid detail.

We know that the Jews persecuted the Christians in Jerusalem to the extent that believers were forced to flee the city and live in the surrounding areas.

While this may have been good for the cause of Christ, it had questionable effects on these new believers. It's because of their need for maturity that James wrote this book.

Slide 2

It's interesting to note that the first object of James' instruction was the subject of temptation.

James understood that temptation was a problem. In fact, even today, each of us has had a problem with some type of temptation, from struggles to eat less to not spending more time in God's Word.

There are a thousand different challenges that assail us on a daily basis. James recognized this and addressed it in the first two verses.

James 1:2-3, *"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance."*

Josephus tells us that that's how James was in his relations with believers.

He said that James was the kind of person who lived a life of such personal holiness that he commanded great respect among believers, especially Jewish believers.

He commented on James' habit of prayer, interceding daily in the temple in Jerusalem. It was only by a political fluke that James' life ended prematurely.

It seems that Annas the Younger, High Priest in the temple at that time, took advantage of an interim period between Roman governors to do away with several of his opponents.

Josephus recorded that James was stoned to death in 62AD, along with several other key Jewish leaders. His holy lifestyle and brutal honesty brought an untimely end to one of early Christianity's great leaders.

But what of James' words on temptation? It strikes me as odd that he would begin by saying in verse 2, *"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds."*

"Joy" and *"trials"* do not fit together well in my vocabulary, let alone in the same sentence. Being tempted isn't an easy thing to deal with, let alone finding joy in it.

Though Paul said in Philippians 4:4, *"Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I say: Rejoice."* The tough question, though, is why?

Well, James sets about answering this question in the verses which follow. As we study these verses, we'll come to understand three things about temptation.

- There are products or results of our facing temptation.
- The origins of our temptation.
- The help for temptation.

Slide 3

The four products or results of temptation are listed in verses three through twelve. They include maturity (perfection), sincerity, equality, and longevity.

These twelve verses may appear to function as several disjointed thoughts, but in reality, they fit together to produce a conclusive whole.

The first product or result of temptation is maturity. By undergoing assaults on our faith, believers reach new levels of understanding and discernment.

James 1:4, *“Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”*

Other translations read like this: *“But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.”* (NKJV)

I use this illustration to show that in the NIV the word “*perfect*” is translated “*mature*.”

“Perfection” is used interchangeably with “maturity” throughout the New Testament. Even Paul referred to maturity often, most notably in Ephesians and Philippians.

Ephesians 4:13, *“Until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become **mature**, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”*

Philippians 3:15, *“All of us, then, who are **mature** should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you.”*

Almost every appearance of the word “perfect” or “mature” in the New Testament refers to either Christ or the believer’s position in Christ.

Because of this Romans 8:28 becomes more than a hollow voice of encouragement in tough times. It lends new credence to the saying that *“God is working all things together for our good and His glory.”*

The second result of temptation is sincerity, described in verses five through eight. To make these verses a little clearer, I’ve paraphrased them.

James 1:5-8, *“If you lack wisdom, ask God for it, because He stands willing to give it to those who ask. Remember, though, that your responsibility to God is to have right motives and a pure heart. Otherwise, you’re only wasting your time.”*

Even Jesus Himself said it was impossible to inherit God’s kingdom without the sincerity of childlike faith.

Luke 18:17, *“Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”*

Another outgrowth of temptation is equality. James says in verses nine through eleven that temptations come to the poor as well as the rich.

James 1:9-11, *“Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. But the rich should take pride in their humiliation—since they will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business.”*

It appears that he has less to say to the poor man than to the rich. It may be because the rich have more at stake.

Think about this, Adam and Eve had everything in the Garden except access to the tree of knowledge. Yet, with all those riches, it was this one thing which led to the Fall.

In the same way, Balaam had the gift of prophecy as a man outside the covenant family of Israel. His sin came not in using his gift against the Israelites, God wouldn’t allow that, but that he took Balak’s gifts and lied to him.

Even though it may seem like the less we have, the less likely we're to be tempted, the fact remains that temptation reduces everyone to the same level.

Then there's longevity. Longevity is probably the best product of temptation.

James 1:12, *"Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him."*

It's important to note that James says that a person must endure temptation in order to be found worthy to receive the crown of life. This crown is not for a person who simply experiences temptation.

I'm reminded of the hymn, *"Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus,"* which says, *"To him who overcometh / a crown of life shall be / he, with the King of Glory / shall reign eternally."*

I'm not certain, when this hymn was written, if George Duffield, the author, was thinking more of Christ's promises in Revelation or James' words recorded here, but I believe the truth of the hymn is accurate and in line with the Bible.

We must not simply let temptation wash over us as if we were the sands of the sea. We must endure the tides of temptation like the Rock of Gibraltar which stands firm, not yielding to the pounding of the waves!

That's the kind of endurance that receives the crown of life. That's the kind of endurance put forth by those who truly love God.

These products of temptation should be the results of our experiences with temptation. They represent the character-building Christians need to prepare them for eternity. No one ever said it would be easy.

Slide 4

In fact, other New Testament writers agree with James on the necessity of temptation.

Peter says that the greatest product of temptation is our standing with Christ when He returns. Faith that's tested is faith that's free of impurities and excess baggage.

1 Peter 1:5-7, "Who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed."

This reminds me of Isaac Watts' words: *"Must I be carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease, while others fought to win the prize, and sailed through bloody seas? Are there no foes for me to face? Must I not stem the flood? Is this vile world a friend to grace, to help me on to God? Sure I must fight if I would reign; increase my courage, Lord! I'll bear the toil, endure the pain, supported by Thy Word."*

This is why, in order to see the products of our temptation, we must endure temptation to the full. But one thing to remember is that God doesn't cause temptation.

James 1:13-16, "When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters."

James says that God, in His holiness, cannot experience temptation, and furthermore, He doesn't dole it out to His children.

God never tempts us for either good purposes or evil ones. He's not "out to get us" and He has no intentions of enticing us to do anything.

God is simply who He is, and that doesn't include being the source of temptation.

Which leads us to the question of the origin of temptation. Our human lusts are the sources of our temptations. We are weakest in the area of that which we do not possess.

God proved this in the giving of the Ten Commandments. Every commandment deals with an area of desire that God saw as unhealthy, both in our relationship to Him and our relationship to other human beings.

James makes a strong case for lust being the source of our temptation. He even describes lust's involvement in the downward spiral.

We often fail to associate lust with its ultimate outcome, but Romans 3:23 reminds us, "*For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*" This is naturally followed by Romans 6:23a, "*The wages of sin is death.*"

The progression of Romans 3:23 to 6:23 moves toward a logical ending, which is death. The only determining variant being the salvation afforded to believers through Jesus Christ.

The only way we can overcome the temptations brought on by our lusts is through Christ. Galatians 2:20 and Romans 6:6 remind us of the need to put to death our flesh and its lusts, that we might be made alive in Christ.

It's not enough to simply acknowledge the source, though. That would be the same thing as calling a plumber and having him tell us we have a burst pipe and not allowing him to fix it. We must deal with the source of our temptations directly and daily.

Slide 5

That's why the help for temptation is so brilliant. Two of the richest verses in the New Testament are the seventeenth and eighteenth verses.

James 1:17-18, *"Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created."*

Where James speaks of God's ability to give good gifts in verse 17, there are a couple of details worth mentioning.

First, if a gift is truly good and truly perfect, then it must come from God.

We may say at Christmas or on a birthday that someone received "the perfect gift," but the truth is that only God really gives perfect gifts.

Secondly, I believe when James calls God *"The Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows"* that he intended to literally enlighten us on the person of God.

In fact, John's description of God in 1 John 1:5 matches what James wrote, *"God is light; in him is no darkness at all."*

Even Genesis 1 tells us of the lights God created to rule over the day and the night. He's the one who created the sun and the moon and the stars. If it's light, God made it.

To look on the appearance of God is to look on perfect light. When He turns to one side or the other, there is no shadow to see. God has no dark side. His nature won't permit Him to do bad things.

As I stated earlier, God is not "out to get us." As the Father of lights, God can only give gifts that bring light to our lives.

Slide 6

But what kind of gift has God given us for dealing with temptation. James 1:18, *"He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created."*

God does nothing that's not according to His will. When I speak of God's will, I'm not speaking of some capricious, decision process whereby God decides moment-by-moment what He'll do in a given situation.

God, by the sheer fact of His omnipresence, is in the present at every moment in history, as well as being in the future and the past. This is why Jesus could say in John 8:58, *"Before Abraham was, I AM."*

It stands to reason that God determined His plan from the very beginning. He knows what He will do. Before he placed Adam and Eve in the Garden, God had set in motion His plan for our salvation.

Although I can't fully explain or comprehend it, I know that God's will is one of the greatest things in Creation.

Secondly, in verse 18 the phrase *"give us birth"* is rich in meaning, implying that we're born of God. This refers to our salvation, with the *"word of truth"* representing the Gospel of Christ.

What James says here is that we, who're facing temptation, are the ones who have been born as spiritual children of God through the perfect means of God's plan of redemption.

Finally, the eighteenth verse concludes with the description of what we have become: the *“firstfruits of all he created.”*

There are two implications of the idea of firstfruits. First, believers are the pinnacle of the created order, the best of the new heavens and the new earth predicted by John in Revelation.

The second sense of the firstfruit is in the Old Testament usage, where the first and best products of the harvest were offered as a part of a ritual feast of the Jews.

In this sense, believers represent the best of God’s handiwork in the created order, the redeemed things of the fallen era of history.

So, what’s the help for temptation? It’s that we have received salvation by God through Christ Jesus. It’s the best and most perfect gift ever given, in that it came from God, Who is light.

Our salvation has raised us to the level of spiritual sonship with God, making us the greatest and best parts of this world and the world to come.

Even in our weak and sinful state, God has chosen to help us by giving us a way to overcome temptation through His perfect gift of salvation through Jesus Christ.

Slide 7

Conclusion

The original question was, “What’s so great about temptation?” These verses from James have shown us the products of temptation, the source of our temptation, and the help for temptation.

It's important to realize that enduring temptation, not merely experiencing it, brings us to the place where we're fit for the glories of heaven.

If you're not experiencing temptation in some form, get ready. Your moment is coming.

C.S. Lewis wrote:

"A silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means. This is an obvious lie. Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is. After all, you find out the strength of an army by fighting against it, not by giving in. You find out the strength of the wind by trying to walk against it, not by lying down. A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later. That is why bad people, in one sense, know very little about badness. They have lived a sheltered life by always giving in. We never find out the strength of the evil impulse inside us until we try to fight it; and Christ, because He was the only man who never yielded to temptation, is also the only man who knows to the full what temptation means. He is the only complete realist."

As sure as there is life, there will be temptation, so count it all joy, when temptation comes your way.