

Standing Up to Temptation

"Faith Works" Series, June 29 & 30, 2024 | James 1:12-18

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Have you ever put God on trial?

I love the idea of a courtroom.

I don't mean that I want to end up in court under indictment or on the stand.

But at one point in my life, I wanted to be a lawyer. I wanted to argue cases in court.

To this day, I love courtroom dramas and probably still harbor dreams of objecting to something with a judge and making a closing argument before a jury.

C.S. Lewis once argued that sometimes we figuratively put God on trial.

God in the Dock is a collection of letters and essays by the great 20th century theologian.

Most of these essays address the culture; they are basically arguing for the Christian faith in the face of a culture that was becoming increasingly secular.

One essay was on the difficulty of presenting the Christian message to non-believers. It bears the same title as the book, "God in the Dock." To be "in the dock" means to be the defendant.

In the essay, Lewis explores the difficulties we have in presenting the Gospel to non-Christians. He talks about casual spirituality and the changing language.

What he wrote last is shocking. "The ancient man approached God ... as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock." - C. S. Lewis C.S. Lewis is saying that we have put God on trial!

I'm afraid James would agree with Lewis on that point. We sometimes put God on trial.

In the passage we are studying today, James reiterates that we will face tests and trials in life.

To face a test or a trial is to face difficult circumstances that stretch our lives and our faith.

James reminds us that tests and trials may have great value for us.

At the same time, he is honest about the fact that God allows these tests and trials to come.

None of that is putting God in the dock or on trial.

As we face tests and trials, do we sometimes put God on trial?

When we face tests and trials, we sometimes demand that God answer the question, "Why?"

Sometimes we accuse God of letting us down or failing us.

Sometimes we even accuse God of being downright wrong. Even evil.

James apparently heard some people say or imply that God was actually tempting them.

It's an accusation, really. To say that God is tempting someone is to imply that God is putting an evil thought or a sinful possibility in front of someone to see if they will give in to it.

If God puts evil thoughts in front of us, is that not accusing God of actually being evil?

To think of putting God on trial is kind of shocking. But then you realize that people do it all the time. Maybe we ourselves even do it. At least occasionally.

Temptation is the issue. How does our faith work with temptation?

We all face temptation. In fact, temptation is a test.

There are ways we can succumb to temptation.

And if we think wrongly about temptation, we are more likely to fall to temptation more often.

James corrects our thinking about temptation. To do so, he tells us about God and about ourselves. He shows us that faith works even when we are tempted.

We endure tests.

James reminds us again that tests and trials are certain in James 1:12:

Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.

Tests and trials are certain, but will we endure them?

That was the question in James 1:2-4. Will we remain strong under them? Will we endure?

That's still the question here. When we face tests and trails, will we endure them?

Of course, James wants us to endure when we face tests and trials.

But the stark reality is that we do not always endure when we face tests and trials.

Sometimes we give up. Sometimes we give in.

Tests are certain, but will we love God through them?

To love God implies that we have a certain kind of affection for him. Will we keep our affection for God when life is difficult?

To love God also means that we stay relationally connected with him. Will we keep connecting with him, keep drawing strength from him, and keep trusting him during tests and trials?

But to love God also means to obey God. Will we remain steadfast and endure when we face tests and trials? Will we love God even when life gets difficult?

Tests are certain, but God has made promises to those who love him.

When we looked at James 1:2-4 a few weeks ago, we saw that remaining steadfast or enduring during tests and trials leads to our faith being shaped. It is made faith made perfect, complete, and lacking in nothing. That means that if we endure tests and trials, we walk away with faith that has everything we need for today and for eternity.

Here James says that God has made other promises.

God promises that the one who endures tests and trials will be "blessed." To be blessed isn't necessarily to be happy. To be blessed means to be filled with divine grace and the life of God.

What does that mean? When we face tests and trials, and when we endure them, we find that God is with us in ever deepening kinds of ways. James adds that God has promised still more.

Tests are certain, but God promises that those who endure will receive the crown of life.

In the first century, crowns were more like wreaths.

They would be given to victorious generals, soldiers, and athletes.

It's a symbol of victory and an honor, like a gold medal at the Olympics or a Medal of Honor.

Frequently, they were made of plants and would last only for a short time.

Paul is referring to them when he wrote in **1 Corinthians 9:25**:

Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath

...

But Paul knew that if we endure tests and trials successfully, if we cross the finish line, we get a wreath, but one that is different. He continues in **1 Corinthians 9:25**:

Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.

That's what James is saying. If we endure tests and trials, God has promised us crowns when we cross the finish line. The crown of life he has promised us is nothing less than eternal life itself.

Tests and trials are certain, but God has promised us faith that is complete, blessedness, and the crown of life when we cross the finish line.

We tempt ourselves.

James helps us understand ourselves in James 1:13-15:

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.

This can be a little confusing since there is just one word in the original Greek language.

In our Bibles we see three words: tests, trials, and temptation.

These three words can mean slightly different things to us, but they are all one word in Greek with multiple senses.

Sometimes the one Greek word implies external circumstances; those are tests and trials.

Other times the one Greek word connotes internal desires; that's temptation.

God allows or permits external circumstances that test, prove, and improve our faith.

Where do temptations start, grow, and reach maturity? Does GOD send temptations?

We are not tempted by God.

James makes that abundantly clear, right out of the gate.

When we are tempted, we feel a pull toward evil—evil thoughts, evil words, and evil actions.

God cannot be pulled toward evil, so God will not pull anyone toward evil.

We are tempted, but our temptation doesn't come from God. The source is elsewhere.

We are tempted by an internal mental and spiritual process.

Temptation doesn't fundamentally come from outside of us. It comes from inside of us.

Temptation starts with our own desires. After the Fall, we hunger for, lust for, and long for evil. Naturally. It's easy.

James describes the spiritual and mental process that temptation goes through, once desire is kindled inside of us, as being like the conception, birth and growth of a child.

In desire, we conceive of temptation inside our minds and spirits.

Then the temptation grows inside of us, like a baby, until it is ready to be born.

Then we give birth to the temptation by actually sinning. But the act of sin is not the end!

That temptation that has been born into the world as sin keeps on growing.

James says that the temptation given birth as sin grows up into death.

We give birth to sin that grows up to spew death, like an environmental disaster.

Sin is like the Deepwater Horizon oil spill of 2010.

The Deepwater Horizon was an exploratory drilling platform working in the Gulf of Mexico.

In April of 2010, the well sent a surge of natural gas back through the lines. When it reached the rig, it exploded, killing eleven workers. The Deepwater Horizon capsized and sank.

Meanwhile, oil flooded into the Gulf of Mexico; 60,000 barrels of oil per day gushed into the Gulf.¹ The leak lasted nearly three months before it was capped.

Some of the oil collected on the seafloor. Some rose to the surface and was pushed by the winds toward shore. Eventually 1,300 miles of shoreline were impacted.²

Shorelines were ruined. Animals died. The economy suffered. Everything was coated.

Sin is like that. We think of sin as being an act at a point in time.

But sin is something that gets set loose in the world, in creation. It grows up to be death. But to say that it is death is too simple. Sin grown up "brings forth" death. It spews death, like a natural disaster. It covers everything. It damages and kills, and it keeps damaging and killing.

And it's our creation, not God's. We tempt ourselves.

God is the unmixed and unchanging source of all good gifts.

James helps us to understand God in James 1:17-18:

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

God is the source of good gifts—all of them.

We don't typically think of gifts and of God in that way.

We like to hand out credit for the good things in life to multiple sources.

Some good things in life just are. Like the sun rising or there being food around.

Then some good things we provide for ourselves, like clothes we buy with income we earn.

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/event/Deepwater-Horizon-oil-spill>

² <https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/education/tutorial-coastal/oil-spills/os04-sub-01.html>

Then there are good things we think are the responsibility of others, like medicine and government. We don't mind giving God credit for really big things. We'll give God credit for the spiritual things, like forgiveness and eternal life. We'll also give God credit for miraculous things, like healing us without the intervention of medicine or sending rain after a drought.

But James is reminding us that all of these good gifts are from God.

God gives us the miracles and the spiritual blessings.

God gives us some good things through others—like medicine and government.

God gives us some good things by our own efforts—like clothing and income.

And God gives us some good things by maintaining a creation that is far, far better than we have any right or reason to expect, given the way that we have spread sin in the world.

All of it comes from God. Every good gift and every perfect gift comes to us from God.

God is unchanging and unmixed in his nature and in his goodness.

James wants us to know that God is ALWAYS good; he doesn't change. In no sense is God one way today and another way tomorrow.

Plus, God is ALL good, not some good and some bad; he is not mixed. There is no shadow in God. No combination of light and darkness, good and evil.

God is unchanging and unmixed in his nature and in his goodness.

God "brought us forth" by the "word of truth."

James uses two words here that are also used of Jesus.

In **John 1:1** we read:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

That's Jesus. It's the same word.

In **John 14:6** Jesus said:

... "I am the way, and the truth, and the life."

Again, it's the same word.

Jesus is Word and Truth. He is the "word of truth."

The Bible tells us that God created us by Jesus, the Word of Truth.

Then we are recreated, given new life, and born again by Jesus, the Word of Truth.

1 Peter 1:3 says:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead ...

He gave us life, then he gave us new life!

God made us the firstfruits of the new creation.

In the beginning, God created. He made the heaven and the earth and us.

In the end, God will make a new creation. There will be a new heaven and a new earth. We will live with God forever, and creation will be made new. All the effects of sin will be wiped away including death, suffering, tears, and mourning. Doesn't that sound amazing?

Creation is longing for that day. We are all longing for that day!

When Jesus was resurrected from the dead, that was the first act of new creation. He is like a down-payment and a proof of concept. **1 Corinthians 15:20** says,

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

Jesus is the firstfruits that shows us Christians what a new creation looks like.

Now, James says, resurrection is springing up inside of us. Our bodies have not been resurrected, but our spirits have been given new life in Christ. We have been born again. The transformation is beginning, and we are already living with one foot in the new creation.

James calls us Christians the firstfruits, showing all creation what new creation looks like.

Do not be deceived!

Back in James 1:16, James told us not to be deceived, because we are easily deceived:

Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers.

We have been confusing the courtroom scene since the Fall in Genesis. Back in Genesis, chapter three, human beings sinned for the first time. God asked us what happened. We blamed everyone but ourselves. The man blamed the woman for his sin. The woman blamed the serpent for her sin. We are so easily deceived about what's really going on.

In our deception, it's so easy to question God. Is he good? Really good? All the time? Really?

And in our deception, it's easy to put God on trial and to try to sit in judgment of him.

James reminded us of who God is.

James reminded us that God is good; he is the source of life, new life, eternal life, every good gift, every perfect gift, blessedness, and the crown of life.

He is the Father of Light, and there is no shadow or changing in him.

God does not tempt us.

But neither does God belong in the dock or on trial.

God is the judge, and we stand before him.

James reminded us of who we are.

We are the ones whose minds pull us toward temptation.

We are the ones in whose minds temptation is conceived and gives birth to sin.

We are the ones whose sin grows to maturity and spews death, like an oil slick, on creation.

We are the ones who are guilty, and we are the ones on trial.

But is this all bad news? Is James just beating us up and robbing us of hope? No! Indeed not!

James really reminds us that what we need is an advocate.

Yes, we stand before our unmixed and unchangeably good God. Yes, he is our Judge.

Yes, we are on trial. Yes, we are the source of temptation, sin, and death. Yes, we are guilty.

But the news is good, not bad, for we have an advocate and a Savior—Jesus Christ!

Jesus has died to pay the price for our sin. Jesus now stands as our defense attorney and as the chief witness, and he is the one who declares us innocent by his blood.

We have an advocate and a Savior!

But do not be deceived.

God does not tempt us. We tempt ourselves.

But temptation can become a test, a trial. Will we understand it and see it for what it really is? Will we stand against it? Will we stand up under it? Will we remain steadfast and endure?

We can! And when we do, we are blessed. We receive the crown of life. Our faith is shaped and becomes perfect, complete, and lacking in nothing.

So that's how we face temptation—with understanding, with the conviction that we can endure, and with hope that when we do so, we are blessed. James is right. Faith works.