

June 22-26, 2020 Edition

The "Big Story" Of The Bible

Finding Jesus In The Old Testament

Part 4: The Fall: How Does Temptation Work?

By: Ed &/or Judy Gardner

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Opportunity
may knock
only once,
but temptation
leans on the
doorbell.

When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well yuo knew the rest ;D) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday:

God blesses those who patiently endure testing and temptation. Afterward they will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. And remember, when you are being tempted, do not say, "God is tempting me." God is never tempted to do wrong, and he never tempts anyone else. Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away. These desires give birth to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death. So don't be misled, my dear brothers and sisters. Whatever is good and perfect is a gift coming down to us from God our Father. James 1:12-17 (NLT)

Reflection: This week we will be looking at the concept of temptation- mankind's oldest problem. It goes back to the very beginning and has been tripping us humans up ever since. Oscar Wilde once said, "I can withstand everything except temptation." Pretty deep, huh? Temptation is tough but James says we can handle it whenever it comes our way. How? By understanding it. By recognizing its patterns and learning how to deal with those patterns. Ok... this is all part of one big section that we've been going over for the last four weekends. This section is focusing on "trials" and "temptations". In week one James talked about trials and said not to be surprised by them... in fact... he said consider it an opportunity for joy when trials come our way. Now here in this passage James tells us how to handle temptations. Two different concepts, right? Trials and temptations are two separate events, aren't they? Turns out, nope. In fact it's the same word in the original Greek language that the Bible was written in. The word in James 1:2 which is translated as "trials" in most versions of the Bible is the exact same word in James 1:14 which is almost universally translated as "temptation". What's the deal? I think the deal is that they are inseparable. In every trial there is a temptation and in every temptation there is a trial. They only differ based on the direction from which they come. Trials generally come from without and temptations generally come from within. James seems to not care much about the difference between these two concepts... he just wants to make sure we're prepared for them.

One more thing I want to make sure and point out... in verse 12 James says if we endure then we will receive the "crown of life". The word there literally means, "life itself". It's the concept of abundant or glorious living that Jesus says He came to lead us into. It's not just a promise for the after life... it's a promise that Jesus wants us to walk in here and now on this earth as we head toward the eternal life we will share with Him in Heaven. James also says that if we don't endure temptation then the result is death. Not necessarily death as in our hearts ceasing to beat but a kind of walking death that too many of us end up settling for here on this earth. James wants us to understand these two ways of living and is hoping we will choose life. So this week we're going to look at a temptation/trial battle plan because if there's one thing I know about temptations it's that all of us will go through them and they will never stop.

Tuesday:

Now the snake was the most clever of all the wild animals the Lord God had made. One day the snake said to the woman, "Did God really say that you must not eat fruit from any tree in the garden?" The woman answered the snake, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden. But God told us, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden. You must not even touch it, or you will die.'" But the snake said to the woman, "You will not die. God knows

that if you eat the fruit from that tree, you will learn about good and evil and you will be like God!" The woman saw that the tree was beautiful, that its fruit was good to eat, and that it would make her wise. So she took some of its fruit and ate it. She also gave some of the fruit to her husband who was with her, and he ate it. Then, it was as if their eyes were opened. They realized they were naked, so they sewed fig leaves together and made something to cover themselves. Genesis 3:1-6 (NLT)

Reflection: Today we will be looking at the first original temptation, the temptation of self-improvement. When the serpent tempted Eve to eat the fruit, he crafted his argument in the way that would be most enticing to Eve. If temptation is the desire to do something that goes against God's values (or laws), then the serpent needed to describe the fruit in a way that would make Eve want it. When we give in to temptation we choose to act in a way that goes against God's will, but in order to do that there must be something in it for us. We need to see the act as beneficial to us despite God's directions. For Adam and Eve there was only one rule: Don't eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God warned His children that the fruit would bring them death. The serpent begins his conversation with Eve misquoting God. "Did God say you couldn't eat from any of the trees in the garden?" Already he is planting the seed that God is somehow withholding or stingy. When Eve informs him that it's only the one tree they aren't allowed to eat from, the serpent offers an explanation as to why God doesn't want them to eat it. He paints a picture of a God that can't be trusted with Eve's best interests. He calls into question God's generosity and care, and Eve believes him.

The only way Eve could judge for herself was to eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. "Eat the fruit and you'll be like God," tempts the serpent. And doesn't that sound good, right even- to be more like God? How could a generous God disapprove of us being more like Him? The only possible explanation is that God doesn't want to share His wisdom and power, right? What tempted Eve was the hope of being better, all on her own, independent of God. If she could be like God then she could know for herself what was best, sparing her the discomfort of feeling dependent on God, less than God. At its heart, temptation is an illusion, but usually one that sounds better to us than our current reality. The illusion woven for Eve was that life would be better if she could judge for herself. So she ate. She chose to go against God's teachings because that path appeared to have greater benefits for her. We still face this same temptation today. There are many times that we don't know which path God is wanting us to take, but the temptation of self-improvement occurs when we do know what God would tell us but want it anyways. God warns us that something is bad for us (overindulgence, deceit, harming self or others) but we think that we know better what will work out best for us. Any time we find ourselves thinking that the ends justify the means, we are trying to find a way to do something that God has told us not to do. Essentially the self-improvement temptation encourages us to trust our own judgement above God's. Victory over this kind of temptation requires us to choose to have faith in God's goodness and generosity despite how it looks to us.

Wednesday:

Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see. Hebrews 11:1 (NLT)

Reflection: The second temptation that we read about in Genesis is Adam's. He was standing right there while Eve was being tempted but didn't jump in and help her out. You know, it's funny. Eve gets most of the blame for that original sin but at least she took some convincing. It took the serpent a while to get her to eat the forbidden fruit. But when Adam is handed the fruit he doesn't even think twice... "oh, for me? You shouldn't have... crunch!" I'm guessing Adam would not have been tempted to eat the fruit if Eve had dropped dead on the spot, but she didn't. She didn't even look sick. She just looked like someone who had something he didn't have, and it looked good. Adam didn't need a convincing argument from the serpent. He saw the fruit, it looked good, so he ate it. Adam's temptation was simply the desire for pleasure or gratification. Many of us find it hard to believe that God doesn't think we should have everything we want. If it looks good to us, it must be good, right? If it looks good to us, and we want it, then not being allowed to have something seems a terrible hardship. That's why James reminds us that temptations come from our own desires. We want. We crave. Stuff looks good to us. And if God says that we can't have it, then we begin to wonder if God knows what's good. Having unfulfilled appetites is its own kind of suffering. The wanting doesn't go away when the object of our desire is right there in front of us. Allowing us to want things that aren't good for us seems mean or unfair, like God is tempting us. But God doesn't play that game. He doesn't enjoy our temptations, but He recognizes that temptation must exist for free will to be real.

A lot of research has been done on temptation and self-control. One particularly "mean" study puts a small child in a room with a marshmallow that he or she is told not to eat. Resist the marshmallow while the scientist leaves the room for five minutes and you will be rewarded with two marshmallows! Oh cruel world! Scientists have discovered that resistance to temptation takes a toll on us. Exercising self-control, even if we are successful, leaves us worn out and less likely to perform well on simple tests. More complex studies give kid's tokens that can be used to buy prizes at the end of the test. Children are allowed to see the prizes so that they have an incentive to save their tokens. They are then released (as a group) into a play land where their tokens can buy games and treats. The games and snacks are loud and enticing and everywhere they look. All around others are giving in and purchasing things at inflated prices that will prevent them from having the funds later to get their prize. The small few who make it out with enough tokens to have what they most want talk about actively using coping strategies to compete with the temptations they faces. The successful ones focus their minds on the prize ahead, and work not to focus on the most tempting things around them. I think James would be proud... that's the key to defeating temptation in our lives. Tomorrow we'll look more closely at the pattern temptation follows and then follow that up with a look at coping mechanisms to defeat temptation in our lives on Friday.

Thursday:

Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away. These desires give birth to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death. So don't be misled. James 1:14-16 (NLT)

Satan will not outsmart us. For we are familiar with his evil schemes. 2 Corinthians 2:11 (NLT)

Reflection: When it comes to temptation there are four steps that James wants us to be aware of. These steps are progressive... temptation starts small and then matures into

something we can no longer manage. That's sort of how satan works... before you do something "wrong" he whispers, "it's no big deal... everybody does it... why not? God will forgive you, right?" Then after we've given in to temptation he's all, "Whoa! That's the most horrible thing I've ever seen. Nobody is as bad as you are! There is no possible way God could ever accept you again." Both of those statements are lies and until we understand how temptation works we will be more likely to give in. James says there are four steps:

1. Desire. It all begins with what's already inside of us. The things we want. There's nothing wrong with desires... they are actually a gift from God. What gets us in trouble is when these desires morph into something that isn't healthy. In fact, James doesn't just use the ordinary word here for desires... he uses a word that basically means, "hyper-desires". Sometimes it's translated "lust" and sometimes "evil desires" but neither of those translations gets at the heart of what I think James is trying to say here.

A hyper-desire isn't usually a desire for something bad. Those temptations are usually a little easier to see coming, right? If I get a thought that maybe I should kill Judy I can be pretty sure that temptation isn't coming from God. But a hyper-desire occurs not because I want to do a bad thing, but because I want a good thing too badly, does that make sense? Love is always a good thing. God planted the desire to love and be loved within each of us. Love is never bad. However, sometimes we can fall for temptation because we think we need a certain kind of love with a specific person on our own timeline. In the past people have manipulated, pressured and coerced others in the name of love and done a lot of damage in the process. Does that mean that love is bad? No... it means that somebody believed they needed love so badly that they would do whatever they had to in order to secure the love they believed they needed. It happens all the time. It's those hyper-desires that are the most dangerous for most of us. The devil knows what they are and will use them in the next phase.

2. Deception- James says temptation begins from within with our hyper-desires, but that's when the devil attacks on a second front- from without. James says we are "enticed" and "dragged away". Every avid outdoorsman will understand this concept. The word translated as "enticed" here is literally the word "bait" and the word translated as "dragged away" is literally the word for "snare". Turns out the devil knows that the temptation is a trap and that we (like wild animals) would never (well... almost never) plunge ourselves knowingly into a trap and so the snare must be covered up by bait that will entice us to be lured. Every animal has its own specific weakness... so do you... so do I. And you can bet the devil knows that weakness. What bait do you suppose the devil uses on you? He is very good at this... often times we don't even realize it's bait... that's why it's important to know how temptation works.

Remember... in the immortal words of the Elephant Man, "I AM NOT AN ANIMAL!!!!" Animals can't help themselves, but we can. We love to excuse our behavior by spreading the blame around. The devil made me do it. I wouldn't have had to do what I did if someone (and I don't want to use any names here) would have done what they were supposed to do. It's all part of the trap/bait cycle. These first two steps aren't optional. You can't get through this life without being tempted... I don't even think you can get through this world without the hyper-desires that James talks about. But you absolutely can withstand any temptation that comes your way. The next step is optional.

3. Sinful Actions- it isn't a sin to be tempted. It's a sin to sin (I know... duh Pastor Ed... everybody knows that!). I think it's important to point out that temptation is not a sin... it's only what we do that brings sin into this world. And that's exactly what we do. James paints a picture of giving birth. When we give in to temptation we bring a spiritual baby (sin) into this world. Sin doesn't enter the world as a fully mature monster... it starts out as a little baby but if we nurture and feed that baby it will eventually grow up and have babies of its own which leads to the final stage of temptation:

4. Death- James says that the sin which is conceived through our actions is fully grown it gives birth (your spiritual grandchild) to death. Not generally a physical, stop breathing and fall over dead kind of death but a spiritual walk dead kind of thing. James starts out this section saying that if we endure temptation then the reward is a glorious life and ends it by telling what the ultimate consequence of giving in to temptation is.

So from what I can tell, steps 1 & 2 of the temptation process are not optional, but 3 & 4 absolutely are. The question then arises- how do I keep myself from falling for the deception so that sin and death are not unleashed in my life? Well, nobody's perfect. We will all fall prey to the deception of temptation over and over in our lives. But we can mitigate the damage. We can reduce the amount of sin and death that are unleashed in our lives by doing two fairly simple yet profound things. Tomorrow we'll look at those things but for today spend some time thinking about what kind of bait the devil uses to deceive you. What might your "hyper-desire" be that you need to be aware of?

Friday:

*Whatever is good and perfect is a gift coming down to us from God our Father.
James 1:17 (NLT)*

*I pray that you will begin to understand how incredibly great his power is to help those who believe him. It is that same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead.
Ephesians 1:19-20 (TLB)*

Reflection: Ok... so today we're going to talk about what to do when temptation comes your way. I'll tell you this right now, if you just try to say, "no", you won't get far. Whatever you resist, persists. The thing you focus on is what you eventually will end up giving in to. How often have you heard someone say, "I will NEVER be like (fill in the blank... mom, dad, teacher, sibling, friend...)" and then watch as they become eerily similar in many ways to the very person they despise the most. It happens all the time. Why? Because while their intention may be good and right, their focus needs to change. In verse 17 James seems to forget what he's talking about. He spends 15 verses talking about handling trials and temptations and then suddenly he veers off on this wild tangent about the goodness of God. He must have ADD, right? Wrong. I think James knows exactly what he's doing. He's explaining how to defeat trials and temptations in our lives. Don't focus on the trials and temptations... instead change what you're looking at. Ask the Giver of good gifts for help. If you focus on the temptation or the tempter you will eventually fall prey to his schemes. But if you turn away and focus on Jesus you will find the power and the guidance you need to get out of every temptation that comes along (in fact... if anyone was ever perfect at this then they'd never sin again... unfortunately none of us is

perfect... so if you fail at this then join the club and don't let it get you so down that you won't turn your focus back to the only One Who can help get you back on the right path... how's that for a run-on sentence, huh? I'm tempted to go on but I think instead I'll turn the focus back on Jesus now ;o)

Did you read the scripture for today from Ephesians? Paul says the same power that raised Christ from the dead is available to... who? To everyone? Not exactly. It's available to those who trust Him. The Bible's definition of "belief" isn't agreement... it's trust. I spent a fairly good sized chunk of my life agreeing that Jesus was the Son of God and that He lived the life I should have lived and died the death I should have died and was resurrected and ascended to the right hand of God but it didn't change how I lived. I didn't trust Him with my life. But once I did... KABOOM! I was witness to the truth of Ephesians 1:19-20. I had tried multiple times to get rid of the sin my actions had given birth to and the death that my fully matured sin had in turn given birth to. Nothing worked for me. Until I asked Jesus for help and trusted Him with my life. It didn't take long after that to start seeing the power of God unleashed in my life. The power of God to change my life in ways I never dreamed were possible. To lead me to become someone I never dreamed I could become. To find peace and meaning and joy and love and... Temptations can be compelling, I know. But let me tell you, there's nothing as compelling or addictive as seeing the power of the resurrection unleashed in your life. Nothing. So stop fighting temptation and the tempter with your own power. You will never win a battle with Satan on your own. Stop looking at the temptation/tempter and turn your focus on Jesus.

So give yourselves humbly to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. And when you draw close to God, God will draw close to you. James 4:7-8 (TLB)

What are the steps to defeating temptation in your life?

1. Give yourself humbly to God. Trust Him with your life. Give up control.
2. Turn away from the devil. Stop looking at the temptation. Stop resisting with your own power and let Jesus do the heavy lifting.
3. Draw near to God- Stop looking at the temptation and start looking at Jesus. Open your Bible and do some reading. Listen to some Christian music. Read a book about Jesus. Call someone to talk about Jesus. Do anything that focuses your attention on Him and the temptation will lose it's power. I always picture what happens to the Pacman when he gets hit by a ghost in the video game- byew-byew-byew-byew. So long temptation.

Saturday:

Long before He laid down earth's foundations, He had us in mind, and settled on us as the focus of His love, to be made whole and holy by His love. Ephesians 1:4 (MES)

You saw me before I was born and scheduled each day of my life before I began to breathe. Every day was recorded in your book! Psalm 139:16 (NCV)

For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible...everything got started in Him and finds its purpose in Him. Colossians 1:16 (MES)

It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for... part of the overall purpose He is working out in everything and everyone. Ephesians 1:11 (MES)

Reflection: Our desires and our faith in our judgments both create temptations for us, but there is another source of temptation - the world. Sometimes our biggest problem is that we're constantly being told that it's a problem that we don't have more or do more. We blame our discontent on what we lack rather than on the illusion that life is not okay the way it is. We feel inadequate because we're told that we are not enough as we are. We're pitched the idea that these problems can all be solved if we just know what to purchase. Ariel (from The Little Mermaid) put it this way, "I just don't see how a world that makes such beautiful things can be bad." Not everything that looks good is bad for us, but billions of dollars are spent trying to convince us that we need things that we just don't need. Paul tells us not to get swept up in the patterns of this world. For us those patterns include: image over quality, competition rather than compassion, worry, addiction and insatiability. Advertisers feed our cravings, all the while telling us that we're too smart to be easily tempted.

Psychologists describe a modern phenomenon called the hedonistic treadmill. As we get new stuff, it feels good at first, but after a while we adjust to our recent gains. Discontent sets in until we take the next step and acquire the next thing on our list. We talked about this when we discussed the dangers of prosperity. The more we have, the more we want. There's an illusion being sold to us that happiness and satisfaction can be purchased. We know it's not true, that ultimately things aren't enough to satisfy us, but we can't quite manage to believe it. We fall under the collective spell that what we're needing to feel ok is just a purchase or two away. We want more and more each time the high wears off from our latest acquisition. The result of unbalanced consumption is stress, pressure and worry. We fear what will happen if we can't buy what we need. Our appetites get stimulated by these fears, and soon we are purchasing things to soothe ourselves and escape the mounting pressures. And it's not just buying things... sometimes it's accomplishing enough or being important enough. Even though it's all tied up together in the culture of this society it's a little different. Don't have a career or an ethic that fits in with our busy, rushed, get things done culture? Prepare to be judged. And that judgment will lead to the temptation to do more and be more than you feel called to do/be. It's a constant battle for anyone who would hear Jesus' voice urging us to slow down, to rest, to take better care of ourselves.

The reality is that setting limits with ourselves goes against all the conditioning of our culture. We can't trust our own auto pilot because so often it's been set not by God but by our insatiable society. And if we try to make different choices the crowd isn't terribly pleased. Why are you rocking the boat? Don't you understand how life works? Stop making us feel bad and get with the program. But God has a different message for you.

Did you read the scriptures for today's reflection? What did they tell you? Do you want to know what I hear when I read them? You're enough. I planned you. The same God who made mountains and oceans thought the world needed one of you in it. You cannot do anything that would make me love you any more or any less. I love you just the way you are... I just love you too much to let you stay that way. Slow down, rest, reset your life. Then when the time is right we will move forward into the life you were designed to live. I love you my dear child.