

God is Faithful in Temptation

I Corinthians 10:13

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. – I Corinthians 10:13, ESV

Temptation and Testing

Certain things just shouldn't be said among certain groups of people, unless you're intentionally trying to start an argument. "Them's fightin' words" you might say – like discussing religion or politics at a family gathering or bringing up the negative side-effects of plastic surgery at a meeting of the Kardashian fan club.

Well, among Christian leaders, Bible teachers, and theologians, you probably don't want to say, "God will never give you more than you can handle." This is an old platitude that's been around for who knows how long, and those who say it and believe it probably think it comes from I Corinthians 10:13. Some translations of this verse say that God will not allow you to be "tried" or "tested" beyond what you're able to handle.

Many Bible teachers will respond to this by pointing out that I Corinthians 10:13 is talking about temptation not trials. They say that the promise is very narrowly focused on the issue of temptation to sin. The problem with that categorical statement is that the word Paul uses in I Corinthians 10:13 is tricky.

πειρασμός **peirasmós**, pi-ras-mos' can be narrowly translated as temptation, but it also more broadly means a testing or a trial.

So, Jesus teaches us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation" and later says to His disciples, "Watch and pray, that you may not enter into temptation," and the word there means "temptation" as in "temptation to sin" and not just a "trial." But in Acts 20:19, Paul speaks of the *trials* that happened to him because of the plots of the Jews against him, and it's the same word, *peirasmos*. And James 1:2 says, "*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds,*" So, this word is tricky. What does it mean here in I Corinthians?

To understand Paul's use of this word and why it can be translated in these different ways, we have to understand a simple truth, and I was reminded of this by John Piper in my studies this week: Every trial can become a source of temptation, and every temptation is a trial.

Think about it: Every time you go through trials, your faith in God and your loyal obedience of Him is being tested, and every time you face temptation, especially temptation that comes upon you from external circumstances, you are being tested. So, it's really just two different ways of looking at the same events or circumstances: You are being tempted to evil, to betray the Lord and abandon faith and disobey His word, and your faith in Him is being tested and perhaps even strengthened and purified.

Another way to say it is that we all must undergo testing and trials in order to prove, purify, and strengthen our faith, but those tests and trials can become occasion for temptation, for sin and unbelief to rear their ugly head. And it is faith that is the real issue in all of it: For just as trials can become temptation, and temptations are trials, so also all unbelief in sin and all sin is, in some sense, caused by unbelief.

Holding those things together in our minds can help us properly understand and benefit from the precious promise and practical advice contained in this powerful verse.

I. Temptation Common to All People

The first thing Paul wants us to see here in verse 13 is that whatever testing or temptation we are facing, it is common to the human condition. In fact, the word translated "common to man" in the ESV is really just the word for "human" in the Greek. So, Paul is literally saying, "*No temptation has overtaken you that is not human.*" – that is, common to the human experience, shared by all humanity.

The Bible describes the common patterns of human temptation very clearly and well for us, if we pay attention: All human temptation falls into one or more of three categories, and God gives us these categories explicitly in 1 John 2:15-16:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life —is not from the Father but is from the world. — I John 2:15-16, ESV

“The desires of the flesh” – or “the lust of the flesh” – are the carnal temptations and carnal sins, the sins of appetite – gluttony, lust, sexual immorality

“The desires of the eyes” – or “the lust of the eyes” – are the covetous temptation, various forms of materialism and possessiveness – coveting, hoarding, desiring to own and possess – serving wealth or possessions

The “pride of life” is the boasting in the achievements, abilities, and assets of the self; thinking too highly of ourselves or focused only on how to achieve more or promote ourselves more

All temptation to sin and all sin itself falls into one or more of these three kinds. The external appearance may change over time with new technologies, but the heart remains the same – pleasure, possession, and pride drive us in temptation and sin.

Look back at the original temptation in the Garden of Eden, and you’ll see that it was a singular temptation that had all three of these elements in it. You’ll also see that it was, at its heart, a test of faith:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made.

He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’”² And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden,³ but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’”⁴ But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die.⁵ For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”⁶ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate,

and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. – Genesis 3:1-6, ESV

*So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food (**the desire of the flesh**), and that it was a delight to the eyes (**the desire of the eyes**), and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise (**the pride of life**), she took of its fruit and ate*

Now, think about what the Apostle Paul had just been talking about here in I Corinthians 10, the temptations and sin the Exodus generation of the Israelites faced in their wilderness wanderings: They craved the food they had in Egypt and engaged in sexual immorality with the Midianite women (lust of the flesh). They worshipped a Golden Calf, desiring that form of worship over the faith to trust in the unseen God on the Mountain (lust of the eyes), and they complained about God being unfair to them and not treating them as they deserved (pride of life). These things caused them to doubt God's goodness and His presence with them and provision for them. They were carnal, covetous, and cocky – driven by pleasure, possessiveness, and pride – by their appetites, their avarice, and their arrogance. And these caused them to fail the test because they failed to have faith in God.

Now, consider what Hebrews 4:15 says to us about Jesus: *“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.”* (ESV) How is it that Jesus was tempted in every respect as we are and so is able to sympathize with our weaknesses?

Well, look at the temptations Jesus faced after His 40-day fast in the desert wilderness of Judea:

1. Satan tempted Him to turn a stone into bread. Imagine how hungry He must have been after fasting for 40 days. This is a temptation to satisfy to the lust of the flesh, the carnal appetite, by eating to satisfy His hunger before the end of His fast.
2. Satan showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and all their riches and told Him that all of these would be His if He would but bow down and worship Satan. That's a temptation to the lust of the eyes – the desire for possessions,

avarice, greed, covetousness.

3. Satan then took Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple and told Him to throw Himself down from the top, in sight of everyone, because God had promised to protect Him. Satan even quotes Scripture here, from Psalm 91 –

he took him to Jerusalem and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰ for it is written,

*“He will command his angels concerning you,
to guard you,’*

and

*“On their hands they will bear you up,
lest you strike your foot against a stone.” – Luke 4:9-10, ESV*

This was a temptation for Jesus to show off, to demonstrate before the watching Jewish multitude that He was definitely their Messiah. It was an appeal to pride, to arrogance.

And how did Jesus respond to these temptations from Satan, which covered all the ways we are tested and tempted, too? He responded with the Word of God in a way that clearly demonstrated that this clearly a trial of faith above all else, and that He was choosing to trust in His heavenly Father:

To the first temptation to turn a stone into bread, *“Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone.’” – Luke 4:4, ESV*

To the second temptation to receive all the kingdoms of the world and all their wealth for worshiping Satan, *“Jesus answered him, “It is written,*

*“You shall worship the Lord your God,
and him only shall you serve.” – Luke 4:8, ESV*

And to the third temptation, to throw Himself down from the pinnacle of the Temple, so the angels would come and bear Him up in front of everyone, “*Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’”* – Luke 4:12, ESV

Then, Luke 4:13 says, “*And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time.*” (ESV) “The devil had ended every temptation.” That’s telling us more than we might catch at first glance. Jesus had, in fact, been tempted in every way, just as we are, and at a point of extreme weakness. And He emerged sinless, victorious. Even more importantly, He did so FOR US.

Being able to identify the kind of testing we’re enduring and the kind of temptation we’re facing is important. These three basic kinds of temptations happen to everyone.

II. God is Faithful

The second thing, and the most important thing, Paul wants the Corinthians to see is that God is faithful. Our hope in times of testing and temptation cannot be found in Satan being willing to go easy on us, because he feels sorry for us. It cannot be found in our own experience, strength, or determination. Our hope rests on the faithfulness of God.

God’s faithfulness tells us two key things about Him: He never changes, and His promises never fail. Specifically, God’s faithfulness brings two things to light about our times of testing and temptation:

1. God sets limits on how much we will be tested or tempted.
2. God provides a way of escape in the face of temptation.

III. Limits to Temptation

“God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability”

What is our ability? How should we think of this? Should we think that God knows how much we can handle in our own strength, and so He will not give us more than

that? No, we should not think of this as our own unaided ability, our natural strength found in ourselves.

In 2 Corinthians 1:8, Paul writes something which seems to be a pretty clear answer to the glib interpretation of 1 Cor. 10:13 that says “God will never give you more than you can handle.” Here, Paul writes:

For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. ⁹ Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. ¹⁰ He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. – 2 Cor. 1:8-10, ESV

So, Paul says that he and his companions experienced such affliction that “we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.” Sure sounds like God gave the Apostle Paul more than he could handle – in his own strength. Remember what Paul wrote later in 2 Corinthians about his thorn in the flesh, in chapter 12, “*a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.*” – 2 Cor. 12:7-9, ESV

Whether this “*thorn in the flesh*” is a reference to the same afflictions that made them despair of life itself is not totally certain, but it does seem likely that they’re connected. What we can see clearly, whether these two passages refer to two different afflictions or the same one, is that God intentionally allowed Paul to be tested and afflicted far beyond the limits of his natural strength. He despaired of life itself. He pleaded with the Lord three times to remove the thorn in his flesh.

And why would God do this? So that Paul would not rely on his own strength but on God who raises the dead, and so that he would realize that the grace of God alone is sufficient in his weakness. Paul needed to learn to set his hope in God alone. He needed to learn to boast in his weakness, so that the power of Christ would rest on him.

So, the limits God sets on how much He will test us or allow us to be tempted are not set by our own natural strength. We can't just roll up our sleeves and toughen up, knowing God will never give us more than we can handle. No, we need to find our ability in Christ, because God will not allow us to be tempted beyond our ability in Christ. But have we learned to depend on that ability? Have we learned to trust not in ourselves but in His strength? If we haven't learned to do that, then our testing and tempting will be far beyond our ability, and it will drive us to Christ.

IV. The Way of Escape

The second way God shows Himself to be faithful in our temptations is by providing a way of escape: "*with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.*"

It's interesting that God provides a way to escape the temptation so that we may be able to endure it. And here is where I think the double-meaning or the double-shaded meaning of *peirasmos* comes into sharper focus. Are we supposed to escape the *peirosmos* or are we supposed to endure it? And the answer is, clearly, yes. We are to escape the temptation but endure the testing.

The Bible never encourages us to enter into and endure in temptations to sin. Remember, Jesus told His disciples to watch and pray, so that they would not enter into temptation. The Bible urges us to flee from temptation.

Earlier, in 1 Corinthians 6:14 Paul had urged the Corinthians to "*Flee sexual immorality.*" – Flee lust of the flesh.

In the very next verse after this verse, 1 Cor 10:14, Paul says, "*Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.*" – I think for the Corinthians idolatry was a pride issue; they thought they could handle it, that they would be fine. So, flee from foolish pride that would put you in spiritual danger.

In 1 Timothy 6:10-12, Paul writes, "*For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced*

themselves with many pangs. But as for you, O man of God, flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called.” So, flee the lust of the eyes, materialism, covetousness.

One word for all three kinds of temptation: FLEE

And one final one, 2 Timothy 2:22, in Paul’s last letter, he wrote: *“So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.”*

Notice both times he speaks to Timothy, about materialism and about youthful lusts, he urges Timothy not only to FLEE from the temptation but also to pursue with intent focus the fruit of the Spirit instead – righteousness, faith, love, peace, gentleness. It’s a fight, the most important fight, to flee from temptation and pursue the fruit of the Spirit instead.

So, the way of escape God provides allows us to flee from the temptation present in the trial or testing we are called to endure. We are to rejoice when we face trials, for they have a God-appointed work for good in our lives, but we are to flee the temptation present to our souls in the trial, which may be toward lust of the flesh, or it may be toward lust of the eyes, or it may be toward pride – but in essence it is a faith challenge, a temptation to see to be satisfied in or to trust in something else besides God.

In our trials, we may seek to be self-indulgent and seek refuge in the desires of our flesh. Or, in our testing, we may become extra covetous and think that we need more money or more material possessions to have greater security or comfort. Or, perhaps, in our trial, we may think we’re being slighted and we’re being cheated and we deserve better and we may seek control and self-exaltation. What’s common in all of these things? We’re not fleeing to Christ; we’re not seeking to trust more deeply in the Lord.

So, what is the way of escape? It is to run to Jesus, to worship Him, to seek to trust Him, to cry out to Him for help. For what we need is not pleasure, profit, or power. It is the Lord.

Does It Really Matter?

But, really, in the end, does it even matter? All of this fleeing temptation and fighting the good fight and looking for the way of escape in our temptations. I mean, it all sounds kind of hard and tiring, and what difference does it make anyway? We're saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, and once we're saved we're safe and don't need to worry anymore, right? So, if we're not saved by works, and if those who belong to Jesus can't be lost, then why bother with all of this?

Simply put because the difference between saving faith and callous presumption is the difference between heaven and hell forever. Saving faith trusts in Jesus, clings to Jesus, loves Jesus, and desires to live for Jesus for all of life and eternity. Presumption is a hollow shell of faith, looking the same on the outside but lacking the heart. It's the difference between the wheat and the chaff, and the wheat will be gathered into the barns while the chaff will be burned.

If you give yourself to your lust or your covetousness or your pride, you will show that these, in the end, are your true gods, and they cannot save you.

Only Jesus saves, in this life and for eternity, and we must be strong with His strength and run to Him in our trials and temptations. He is our strength and our refuge and our way of escape from real spiritual danger. So, flee temptation and run to Jesus. God is faithful, and if your strength and hope are in Christ, He will not fail to provide you with the way of escape and to bring you safely through the trials with a deeper dependence on Christ through it all.