

October 13 // James 1:13-18

This guide is meant to kickstart biblical exegesis for weekly study by Journey Group Leaders and other students of God's Word. Here we provide historical-cultural background and literary context information in a concise format to help you in Step 1 of the Interpretive Journey—discovering what the text meant to its original audience.

Note: This guide is meant as a kickstart to the FIRST step to exegesis, NOT as a complete interpretation of the meaning of the passage. (The rest of Step 1 and the subsequent four steps are meant to be completed in your personal time with the Lord and in your Journey Group discussion.)

For a thorough discussion of the background of the book of James, see the October 6 / James 1:1-12 Exegetical Kickstart.

In 1:13-18, James operates under the assumption that all humans will be tempted at some point in their lives. “*When* tempted,” he says in verse 13, not “*if* tempted.” But he makes an important distinction: though every one of us will surely experience temptation, the source of that temptation is *not* our loving Heavenly Father, but our “own evil desire” (1:14).

James is drawing upon an important theme in Jewish theology (which his Jewish Christian audience would have recognized), that people in tight places tend to turn and challenge God, even blaming Him for their failure in the test, and they ought never to do so. This concept is presented as early as Deuteronomy—“You shall not put the Lord your God to the test” (6:16)—and appears repeatedly in Jewish literature from that time on. When James (or his audience) hears someone start to accuse God, his mind flashes back to Israel in the wilderness.¹ He reminds the scattered Jewish Christians of the timeless truth that God is not to

¹P.H. Davids, [The Epistle of James: a commentary on the Greek text](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 83.

blame for their failures. What makes a situation a test or temptation in the first place is not that God intends to break us but that we are willing to disobey Him.²

The key to the difference lies in the motivation or purpose. There is a vast difference between the “trials of many kinds,” i.e., the “testing of your faith” James discussed in the previous passage and this “tempting” discussed in v. 13-15. But the difference lies within the one experiencing it. When tested, the purpose accomplished is perseverance produced within us, which leads to our maturity and wholeness. When tempted, the purpose accomplished is our enticement to evil, which drags us away and leads to our destruction.³

James swiftly reminds his Jewish Christian audience that although God may allow them to be tested, He will never place inducements before them to lead them into destruction, or allow temptations greater than they can bear (see also 1 Cor. 10:13).⁴ Seeking for them to fall instead of to persevere, testing for the purpose of breaking people... neither of these are from our loving Heavenly Father.

Interestingly, James focuses not on the tempter without (our enemy Satan), but on the traitor within (1:14). The first audience would have recognized his language as seductive; here he personifies internal evil impulse as a seductress who is quite successful in her pursuit, to the point where she actually conceives an offspring from the affair.⁵ Her descendent is death, and herein lies a vivid metaphor of what happens when we succumb to the seductress of evil impulse within. Sin is not the end of temptation. James reminds his scattered church to follow

² Ibid., 81.

³ John Walton and Craig Keener, *NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 2167.

⁴ Spiros Zodhiates, Th.D., *Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible* (AMG International, Inc., 1996), 28.

⁵ P.H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: a commentary on the Greek text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 84.

the temptation narrative to the end of the story, all the way to the complete development or fulfillment of the seductress's plan and hope. The offspring of sin is death. (See Romans 7:7-12 for a similar progression.)

In contrast, our loving Heavenly Father gives “every good and perfect gift” (1:17). James uses the Greek word “dorema,” which is translated “gift,” referring to a gift that is uniquely and abundantly free. “Dorema” gifts are gifts that are over and above what is necessary or expected. The word chosen by the biblical author emphasizes the gracious character and free nature of the gift, as opposed to other Greek words for gifts that would simply communicate expected gifts, or gifts given to honor someone, or gifts that are common.⁶ Indeed, the greatest “over and above” gift our Father has given us is new birth in Him (1:18)—a contrasting conception, birth, and offspring story—whereby we have a life-giving relationship with Him and can stand up under every single temptation/test He allows (1 Cor. 10:13). This is the God who “gives generously to all without finding fault” (1:5).

While we all experience this testing intended to break us, which we call “temptation,” God is the author of everything good. While we all have evil desires that when enticed are conceived and give birth to sin, God has immovable goodness.⁷ Our fate does not depend on the stars. Our lives rest in the hands of the Creator of the stars, our loving Heavenly Father who chose to give birth to us through the word of truth and who sends “over and above” good gifts, and only “over and above” good gifts.

⁶ Spiros Zodhiates, Th.D., *Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible* (AMG International, Inc., 1996, 1613).

⁷ John Walton and Craig Keener, *NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 2167.

