

# Beyond Temptation

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## Our First Temptation

By Peter Eng

The Temptation of Adam and Eve by Michelangelo



### Introduction

We live in the spiritual twilight zone. We live between pure light where God is enthroned, and the dark of evil from where we came. Jesus Christ has redeemed us from darkness, but our journey to the light is stalled by temptations we are not able to overcome. We then resign ourselves to the twilight zone of neither spiritual defeat nor victory. That is the sad commentary for too many of us.

Overcoming temptation. Victory over sin in our lives is an essential component of being a Christian. Soon after I became a Christian, spiritual mentors equipped me with an important verse in the Bible to guide me so I can overcome temptation:

*"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 a way of escape, that you may be able to endure it" (1 Cor 10:13)*

The promises here are excellent. The verse suggests to me (1) my temptations are not unique to me; (2) God will limit the temptations I face so I will succeed in overcoming them; (3) alternatively, he will provide an escape.

The problem is that after decades as a Christian, I find myself failing in more temptations than I dare to admit. All temptations are overcomable-supposedly. Yet I fail to overcome them. My invariable conclusion is that I am miserable, weaker than others, and a spiritual aberration of failure.

Eventually, I resign myself to spinning my spiritual wheels somewhere on the road that leads from darkness to light. Not the devotee given to self-flagellation, I internalize my spiritual failures and just heap on self-scorn and dejection. It is good to know there is no condemnation in Christ Jesus ([Rom 8:1](#)), but I was not experiencing it.

*"My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations" (James 1:2, KJV).*

This verse makes no sense to me. When I fall into temptation, I am anything but joyful. And do I not pray, "Lead us not into temptation?" If I ask God not to lead me into temptation, why would I rejoice when I fall into temptation?

### What is going on?

An opportunity. Whenever there is a puzzle,

or what seems to be some inscrutable tension in God's word, there is an opportunity to discover some valuable spiritual truth. I went back to the drawing board and found a trove of spiritual treasure. Studying James 1:1-18 has been that life transforming experience for me.

To find out what it means to fall into temptation, begin by comparing three translations:

*"My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations" (James 1:2, KJV).*

*"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds" (James 1:2, ESV)*

*"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds" (James 1:2, NIV)*

The KJV renders the original Greek word (*periptō*) as "fall." It can mean "fall," but the word has the sense of coming across something unexpectedly. It is like when we say we stumble across something. The word "stumble" can mean fall, but the sense of it is more of a chance encounter.<sup>1</sup> So the literal rendering of the KJV is misleading in translating it as "fall into divers temptations" giving the impression that it is a joyful thing to sin.

The preferred translation would be *"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you encounter different temptations."*

This removes the misunderstanding we can have when we read this verse. But it does not remove all the tension. That is, "How can I rejoice when I encounter temptations?" The reality is that temptations trip me up more often than not. We will hold that thought.

The temptation to assume the meaning of temptation is great. When we compare different versions or do a word study, it becomes apparent that the same Greek word is sometimes translated "temptation" and sometimes translated "trial."

<sup>1</sup> Luke 10:30 uses the same word in describing the Samaritan *encountering* some robbers.

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There is more to this than meets the eye!

### Story

George Washington was a healthy 67 year old when he contracted what seemed to be a simple infection of the epiglottis. That night, his epiglottis became inflamed to the point when he had difficulty breathing. The doctors were summoned. The junior physician Elisha Dick suggested a tracheotomy to by-pass the inflamed epiglottis. This was new and untested. The senior physician James Craik decided against this radical solution. Instead he bled Washington—repeatedly. In 12 hours, the doctor bled 80 oz (2.4 liters) of his blood. That is about 35% of all the blood in his body. Most people today agree that hastened his death.

At some point, bleeding people must have produced results. That is to say, there was an apparent cause and effect. People were bled and they recovered, leading to the conclusion that bleeding bad blood leads to healing. In most instances, the people recovered in spite of, not because of, the bleeding. The wrong assumption was made and we don't know how many people died because of that assumption.

Assuming the meaning of temptation turns out to be a big mistake in my own spiritual life. Perhaps you can learn from my mistake. I went back to the Bible, and I am amazed at how wrong I have been in my understanding concerning temptation. By the mercy of God, and through the convicting work of the Holy Spirit, I am now placed on the right track.

### One Word

The Greek word used in the NT for "temptation" (noun) is *peirasmos*, and "to tempt" (verb) is *peirazō*. *Peirasmos* is used for both temptations and trials. This is why James 1:2 is translated both ways. When we apply this fact to known passages of Scripture,

we begin to see the problem with our assumptions:

We pray, "Lead us not into temptation." But why don't we pray "Lead us not into trials?" How would the meaning of 1 Corinthians 10:13 change when we use "trial" in place of "temptation?"

*"No trial 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 trial he will also provide a way of escape, that you may be able to endure it" (1 Cor 10:13).*

In view of the mention of "way of escape" and "able to endure it," perhaps trial might be the more appropriate translation!

I realized my assumptions were hurting me. There is something I need to set right.

If I am driving on the wrong road, I need to make corrections to get to my destination. In my own spiritual life, I am not seeing the expected landmarks. Sometimes, the longest way round is the shortest way home. This looks like such an occasion.

Those aspects of language that contribute to our misunderstanding are:

1. There is a disparity between the older use of the term "temptation" and the modern day use. That is to say, the Elizabethan English in the KJV uses the term "temptation" differently from our use.

2. Every word has several nuances. The Greek word (*peirasmos*) from which we translate "temptation" and "trial" has nuances quite different from our use of "temptation." This is apparent from the fact that we don't use "temptation" and "trial" interchangeably whereas Greek uses one word for both. Something is not connecting here!

### Why One Word?

Temptation is usually associated with pleasure, and trial is associated with pain. Pleasure and pain are opposites. Are the ancient people so bereft of vocabulary that they cannot create two different words?

Perhaps they look at things differently, and the use of one word for both temptation and trial is deliberate. Let's try to capture their perspective.

The word *peirasmos* for both pleasure and pain, captures the aspect of motivation. *There is hardly any action in the ordinary course of life that is not motivated by either pain or pleasure.*

The pain of crawling out of bed each morning to start a new day of work is accepted as part of life because the alternative is the far greater agony of privation and hunger. The pain of work beyond our necessities is motivated by the pleasure of rewards we wish to enjoy. Alternatively, we work because it brings us pleasure.

*"Nature has placed mankind under the government of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure – they govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think." (Jeremy Bentham).*

Pain and pleasure are the two powerful motivations in our creatureliness. In our flesh and blood, and devoid of higher motivations, we are naturally driven by either the avoidance of pain or the pursuit of pleasure. By using the same word (*peirasmos*) for temptation and trial, the ancient people recognize the motivating aspect of our behavior. We can be motivated by pain or by pleasure. They provide the push and pull motivations of life.

The Greek language prioritizes the *motivation* of pleasure and pain in temptation and trial. By using different words for pleasure and pain in temptation and trial, the English prioritizes the *immediate physical impulse* over the motivation of these impulses.

One helpful observation on why pain-temptation and pleasure-temptation are two sides of the same coin is explained by Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who chose pain by opposing Hitler:

*"Temptation to desire always includes the renunciation of the desire, that is to say, suffering. Temptation to suffering*

always includes the longing for freedom from suffering, that is to say, for desire. Thus the temptation of the flesh through desire and through suffering is at bottom one and the same." (*Creation and Fall; Temptation*, 134)

This observation is practical and sublime. We know from experience that when we seize pleasure that is improper, we will enjoy the pleasure but suffer the pain in the consequences. Conversely, when we accept the privation of not yielding to sinful pleasure, the result is true pleasure. Yielding to sinful pleasure produces pain; and embracing righteous pain produces pleasure. The very real cause and effect of pleasure and pain or vice-versa is seen in the biblical use of one word for both experiences.

It is useful for us to note that all true pleasure is from God. There is nothing wrong with pleasure. The devil perverts the pleasures that God gives us for our proper enjoyment. The devil corrupts pleasure into something selfish and excessive, in such a way that the pleasure becomes sinful and harmful.

This is easily observable. Food is good, but food in excess is sinful towards God and harmful towards us. Rest is good, but laziness is a repudiation of the productivity God expects of us, and such indolence is harmful to us. Work is good, but when work defines our value and we become workaholics, we depart from God's purpose for work and we harm ourselves and our loved ones. Temptation as sinful pleasure is a perversion of God's blessing of pleasure.

When we look at other parts of Scripture to see if pleasure and pain, temptation and trial, are depicted as two sides of the same coin, we find an unambiguous affirmation in Proverbs.

The Book of Proverbs, (esp. 1-9), tells us there are two ways, personified by two women: Wisdom and the Adulteress. The way of Wisdom is knowledge and discipline, and that way leads to great pleasure and reward. The way of the Adulterous is enticing and pleasurable, but it leads to suffering and death.

The rest of Proverbs elaborates wise and foolish living. This is not the speculative wisdom seen in philosophy, but the practical and biblical wisdom of skill in godly living. To be wise is to be skillful in godly living. In other words, the wise person is skillful in overcoming temptation.

James follows through his initial exhortation on temptation by saying, "*If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach*" (*James 1:5*).

When we see that sinful pleasure and the sinful avoidance of pain naturally result in the exact opposite result, we begin to appreciate the true nature of temptation. To yield to immediate sinful pleasure is to choose eventual and long-term pain.

When the Bible uses one word (*peirasmos*) for both temptation and trial, we see two nuances driving the meaning of the word. First, we become aware of the motivation for our actions as being driven by pleasure and pain. Next we see the cause and effect of pleasure and pain. This sensitizes us to what happens after the temptation/trial event. I think we are used to thinking only of the temptation/trial event. But the biblical use looks at what comes before the event (i.e. the motivation) and what comes after (the effect of the event).

### Wrong thinking

Our findings challenge popular thinking about temptation and trial. An example of such popular but wrong thinking is expressed for us:

What is temptation? Seduction to evil, solicitation to wrong. It stands distinguished from trial thus: trial tests, seeks to discover the man's moral qualities or character; but temptation persuades to evil, deludes, that it may ruin. The one means to undeceive, the other to deceive. The one aims at the man's good, making him conscious of his true moral self; but the other at his evil, leading him more or less unconsciously into sin. God tries; Satan

tempts. (Fairbain, quoted in, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, J.D. Pentecost, p. 99.)

This popular thinking makes no effort to understand the biblical use of *peirasmos* as both temptation and trial; instead, it creates a false dichotomy when it should seek a unity of thought. It is misleading by calling us to welcome trials but shun temptation when there is one word for both! Instead we should be looking at how we welcome both and overcome both the pleasure-temptation and the pain-temptation.

### Sin

Webster's dictionary defines "tempt" as:

(1) to entice or allure to do something often regarded as unwise, wrong, or immoral. (2) to attract, appeal strongly to, or invite: *The offer tempts me.* (3) to render strongly disposed to do something: *The book tempted me to read more on the subject.* (4) to put someone to the test in a venturesome way; to provoke: to tempt one's fate. (5) Obs. To try or test.

The examples in italics (not mine), demonstrate the point. In English, "temptation" can refer to something innocuous, something that is inviting, venturesome, or simply to render something desirable. When we can say, "That chocolate cake is tempting," we suggest that it is desirable without suggesting that it is a sin to eat chocolate cakes. "Temptation" in English can mean no more than what is pleasurable without necessarily implying that it is sinful (though it may be). So when we yield to temptation (in the English sense of the word) it is not necessarily a sin! But in the biblical sense of the word, yielding to temptation is always sin.

### Desire and opportunity

In English, "temptation" (noun) means:

(1) enticement; the act of influencing by exciting hope or desire; (2) something that seduces or has the quality to seduce; (3) the desire to have or to do something that you know you should avoid. (Adapted from

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The idea of *desire* is inherent in the English meaning of temptation. It is an oxymoron to suggest an undesirable temptation. The desire is always for an object (tangible or not). There is no sense of a desire to avoid an object, namely pain.

A conspicuous absence in the English meaning is opportunity. We may say a man is tempted by that sexy coworker at his place of work, without suggesting that she is offering him an opportunity to act out his desires. When we have desire without opportunity, we still call it "temptation." But when the Bible talks about desire that is sinful, the correct term is "lust." The English use of temptation overlaps with the biblical use of lust. In our example above, it would be more accurate to say, the man lusts after his sexy coworker.

The use of *peirasmos* in the Bible consistently suggests a choice of some sort. And choice presumes opportunity.

In the Bible, there is no indication that temptation involves a *desire* to sin. Instead, there is clear evidence that temptation involves *opportunity* to sin. Jesus explains to us that a man lusting after a woman has already sinned by committing adultery in his heart. She might have done nothing to entice him. Yet out of the desires of his heart, he lusts after her. This situation is not represented as temptation to sin but sin itself. (Matt 5:27-28).

The opposite situation can be seen between Joseph and Potiphar's wife. There is no indication that he lusted after her, but she enticed him and gave him opportunity for sin. That is a truer representation of temptation in the biblical sense. (Gen 39:7-12).

In most instances, lust seeks opportunities; and when that opportunity is created, the act is done and sin is committed. What happens is that lust and temptation are connected into a continuous sequence. But we also need to recognize that lust does not always present itself with an opportunity, and opportunity is not always prefaced by lust.

Temptation is not sin because it is opportunity without lust necessarily being present. Lust is sin regardless of opportunity. I wish to suggest what may amount to a correction of a misconception. Most of us think of temptation as a *desire for sinful pleasure*. I like to suggest that the biblical nuance is *opportunity for sinful pleasure*.

Temptation as opportunity for sinful pleasure coheres well with *peirasmos* as opportunity for the sinful avoidance of pain. There is a natural desire to avoid pain. There is no sin in the desire to avoid pain. Jesus at the Garden of Gethsamane asked if the bitter cup could be taken away, but he was clear that he was willing to go through suffering and death.

We want to avoid pain. That is our desire. And there is no indication that this desire is sinful. Sometimes, we have no option in suffering. And there are not many noble souls who prefer suffering to ease. Pain-temptation comes about when there is an *opportunity* for the sinful avoidance of pain, not the mere *desire* for avoidance of pain.

For instance, pain may motivate a person to desire suicide. That is a sinful desire to avoid pain. But there are also times when that desire cannot be realized. A person kept alive under torture does not have an option to die. He is suffering, but he is not being tempted to suicide because he has no such opportunity.

*Peirasmos* as opportunity to sin also coheres with the result of yielding to temptation. In the case of temptation to sinful pleasure, yielding to temptation is always sin. In the case of yielding to the sinful avoidance of pain, it is always sin.

Desire needs to be uncoupled from temptation or trial. The desire for pleasure or to avoid pain can be sinful, but does not need to be so. Embracing pleasure (from God) and avoiding pain (not assigned by God) is what we ought to do. Conversely, indulging in pleasure (that is a perversion of God's intention), and avoiding pain (that is God's intention for us), are both sinful.

I like to suggest the English use of "temptation" has two corrosive effects on our

spiritual character. (1) It is connected to pleasure even when there is no sin involved. So we wink at temptation. When it is sin, we regard them as *peccadilloes* because we have been winking at them. (2) It confuses lust with temptation. By this confusion, we pat ourselves on the back when we lust after evil but not do the act. When that happens, we have already sinned in our hearts. We fail to exercise ourselves in the transformation of the heart and content ourselves with restraint in our actions.

### My Story

We all know the meaning of evil desire. But what does temptation look like when there is no desire? Allow me a personal event to illustrate temptation as opportunity.

I first came to America in 1983 to study in the Seminary. I was living in a small-town in the Midwest; and before long, discovered the town bookstore. Bookstores are about the only stores I would enter and without persuasion from my wife. What can be more delightful than a few moments in a bookstore?

So, I browsed the shelves laid along the wall of the long narrow store, pausing now and then to examine a book or magazine of interest. Then I arrived at the "Adult Section." In front of me were Playboy and other magazines of like character.

I came from Singapore where there was, and is, a censorship on pornography. This incident happened in the 80s when the ubiquitous internet porn did not exist. So for the first time in my life, I was presented a choice. I was not tempted to buy porn in Singapore because it was not available (at least not readily available). I had no intention to buy porn when I entered the store. So neither motive nor desire was there. I had money, and the product was available. That constitutes opportunity. That should rightly be considered a temptation to indulge in pornography.

I don't think it was virtue that made me move on. I think it was a combination of surprise, and a certain sense of embarrassment. Asians were a rarity in the Midwest in the 80s, and I

was probably too embarrassed to be identified, so I hurried on.

In this event, I see that I chose to forego sinful pleasure because the pain of embarrassment was greater. I wish I can say I moved on because of virtue.

That incident occupied only a fraction of time. But it was very significant to me. It was from that incident that I realized America is the land of opportunity for both good and evil. A new dimension of my faith had opened up. Whereas in the past I did not have to make a decision on pornography, suddenly I had to make a decision. The nanny state was gone. Personal choice was there. When I had no opportunity, lust was present but opportunity was not. When I lived in Singapore, I could not say I was tempted to buy porn because the opportunity did not exist. When I stood at the adult section, I could say I was tempted to buy porn because the opportunity was there.

Access to porn has changed since then. It is now accessible online anywhere in the world. The opportunity is there for everyone. It is done in anonymity, so there is no pain of embarrassment to act as a restraint. Today, Christian men face the temptation of pornography much more powerfully. We can indulge in this secret sin and retain a veneer of spirituality, thus removing social pressure from the activity.

The duality of sinful pleasure and resulting pain is inescapable. Pornography poisons the soul; it enfeebles our spiritual character; it creates fantasies and expectations that erode marriages. That is a lot of pain for a little pleasure.

### Enticement

Another aspect of temptation that is common to both the English and the biblical idea is that of enticement.

Enticement to sin is different from desire to sin. Enticement is external. It is something or someone dangling an opportunity in front of us, encouraging us to seize it.

Wisdom calls out to us in Proverbs, "My son, when sinners entice you, do not give in to them." With wisdom we are enlightened and empowered to overcome temptations. Wisdom calls on us to reject sinful enticements. That is, temptations.

### A Biblical Definition

Based on the biblical used of *peirasmos* which we will approximately translate as "temptation," I'll like to incorporate the following aspects into our definition: (a) enticement; (b) opportunity, (c) sin, (d) both pleasure and pain.

*Temptation is an enticement to, and opportunity for, the sinful indulgence of pleasure or the sinful avoidance of pain.*

### CONCLUSION

*"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" (Heb 4:15).*

This verse gives me problems if we understand temptation in the English sense because temptation includes lust. It is a blasphemy to suggest that Jesus lusted after sin. It is also absurd to say that lust is not sin.

Our definition of temptation as enticement and opportunity coheres with Hebrews 4:15. The author is not saying that Jesus lusted, but that Jesus had every opportunity to sin. This is why Jesus was tempted but had no sin—because he did not yield to these sinful opportunities.

We have falsely equated lust with temptation to an extraordinary degree. The result is disastrous in our personal lives. By equating temptation and lust, we allow lust to reside in our passions as though it were not sin; and only the act constitutes sin.

With temptation as desire, we can even nurse a lust, or fantasize about the sinful pleasures, and remain quite contented that we have not yielded to temptation. The reality is that we

have already sinned in our hearts, and if the desire has no opportunity, we have sinned without even being tempted!

Our understanding of temptation also coheres with James 1:13. *Let no one say when he is tempted* (enticed and given the opportunity to sin), *"I am being tempted by God,"* (that God has enticed to sin, or created this opportunity for sin), *for God cannot be tempted with evil* (there is no enticement or opportunity for sin with reference to God), *and he himself tempts no one* (God does not entice or create opportunities for us to sin).

We can summarize our study into the meaning of temptation thus:

The divergences in the nuances of the Greek *peirasmos* and the English meaning of "temptation" significantly and materially affected how we handle temptations.

The Greek term for temptation is the proper perspective to take because it brings us back to what temptation means, it resolves theological difficulties, and it gives clarity to our personal struggle with temptation.

We will employ the archaic use of the word "temptation" as a translation from the Greek word *peirasmos*. This is because the term "trial" is not able to capture the nuance of sinful pleasure; but the term "temptation" can still be understood today as temptation to avoid pain.

In our Christian life, we face both the temptation to sinful pleasure and the sinful avoidance of pain. This is the critical starting point in our study on temptation.

Both pain and pleasure are two aspects of the same experience in temptation. One leads to the other as the unintended but inevitable consequence. Pain and pleasure are two driving motivations in life and our ability to handle them is vital to handling temptations.

Our first temptation in examining temptation is to assume we know the meaning of temptation from the English use of the word. But that assumption would be detrimental to all our subsequent effort. We avoid the

temptation to be lazy and assume the meaning of temptation. Now we set the stage to reap the reward of victory over temptation.

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**Rev. Peter Eng** is an ordained minister from the Reformed Tradition, but he is truly global in perspective. He served the Lord in various capacities starting from his teenage years in the 70s. His undergrad studies were done in Singapore, his grad studies in the USA, and post-grad studies in the United Kingdom, with additional post-grad research in Germany.