

James 1:13-18, The devil made me do it, or did he?

An interesting bit of biblical trivia is that when we see our English translation in the Bible of “testing” (James 1:3), or of “tempting” (James 1:13), the original Greek used the same Greek word for both testing and tempting—peirasmos. The context determines which sense is meant and how it should be translated. Clearly, in James 1:3, the author is referring to tests of faith by the trials of life, but in James 1:13, he is speaking of solicitations to evil. You could compare the testing to external difficulties, and the temptations to internal appeals to our natural desires. If we are not careful, the testing on the outside may become temptations on the inside as we are tempted to develop evil solutions to problems that are testing us. An example of this that we are all aware of is marital infidelity. If our marriage has problems because of various issues that we are not properly dealing with, we may be tempted to hook up with an attractive member of the opposite sex. James made the point that the natural thing to do is deny personal responsibility, and blame it on your spouse, or to even say, “Why did God make me like this- susceptible to temptations?”, or like the comedian yells, “The devil made me do it!”. All of these are attempts to deflect responsibility, just as the human race has been doing from the beginning. When God asked Adam if he had disobeyed and eaten the fruit, Adam said, “The woman whom YOU gave me, she gave it to me.” My personal favorite is Aaron in Exodus 32:24, when he took up the gold collection to make the idol of the golden calf. When Moses questioned him, he said it was not his fault, “They gave me the gold, and I threw it in the fire, and out came this calf!” Nevertheless, James established in his epistle that when we are tempted to evil, we cannot blame our failures on anyone but ourselves. If we fall to temptation, it is because of our own lust, and we especially can’t blame it on God because God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone.”

1 Corinthians 10:13

In Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, he also makes it clear that God does not tempt anyone to evil, but even sovereignly places limits upon the extent of our testing/temptations. Many of us have memorized this passage because it gives us such comfort and assurance that we can overcome the trials and temptations in life. Paul wrote, “No temptation (or test) has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation (test) will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it.” Therefore we can be assured that whatever test or temptation that comes our way, God will enable us to endure it and overcome it if we entrust it to Him.

Four Proofs that God is not Responsible for Evil

In James 1:13-18, the author gives four proofs that God does not tempt anyone to evil. In v.13, God has no vulnerability to evil nor could He lead anyone else astray. Mankind, on the other hand, is by nature full of desires which can carry them away when the opportunity presents itself. In v.14, James says this happens when we are “carried away” or drawn away. The Greek phrase used here means to bait a trap. No fish bites an empty hook, there is always bait that appeals to our inner desires. In Genesis 13:10, when Lot had to decide between going east to Sodom or west to Canaan, his desire for land and wealth could only see the “green plains of Jordan”. That turned out to be a fatal decision for his family. The third proof concerns the nature of lust. In James 1:15, lust is depicted as a mother conceiving and bearing a child, which is sin, whose ultimate destiny is death (separation from God). This is an excellent image because desire is not necessarily wrong, just as eating, drinking, sex, and money are not wrong; but when lust hooks up with these, sin is conceived and gives birth to evil actions that can separate us from God. Eating is not bad, but gluttony is. Drinking is not wrong, but drunkenness is. Sex is good, but adultery is bad. We must take full responsibility because it is our lust combined with opportunity then acted upon by our volition which causes the problem. The fourth proof that God does not tempt anyone to evil is the nature of God. God is perfectly righteous and just. He can have no part in sin. God is only responsible for every perfect gift and good thing that comes down from heaven (James 1:17). God is pictured as the Father of lights which come down into this dark depraved world. In verse 18 we are reminded of God’s grace which has been bestowed on us. The language is birth language that God “brought us forth” so that we might be His children. There is nothing in this world that is truly good that doesn’t come from God. James is talking to believers telling them that their spiritual birth has come from God, and the church is the first fruits or the beginning of the future resurrection. Therefore, evil is entirely our responsibility as compared to the loving grace and mercy of God available to all who would receive it.

Conclusion

God is not responsible for our temptations or resultant sin. The proof comes from the nature of our regeneration. The new life that the Lord gives us is holy and Christ-like. It is the life of God in the soul of man. Before our salvation, our conduct was dictated by the worldly system in which we live and our fallen human nature that responded to it. Our problem was internal, in our heart, so the solution must be internal. No external ritual, no ceremony, and no religious action of my own can change my heart. Man needs a new heart, and God is responsible for that regeneration.

The great theologian Augustine was quite the “player” before his conversion, but after he believed and God changed his heart, he was walking down the street and a prostitute called out to him. He did not answer, so she yelled out “Augustine it is I” to which he replied, “I know, but it is no longer I”. In a sense, two men live in our hearts, Adam and Jesus. When temptation knocks at the door, somebody has to answer. Our new nature in Christ needs to be constantly fed the Word of God to be strong so that we can always let Jesus answer that door!

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