

# James 1:13-15

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*The steps to failure in the life of a believer start with evil desire and end in death.*

James next explains the sequence that occurs when we encounter a circumstantial trial, but instead of rejoicing, acting in wisdom and obedience to the ways of God, we follow the inner desires of our flesh, and make choices contrary to the will of God. James begins by establishing the fact that God is not the source of our temptation, or our sin.

In understanding the book of James, it is important to remember that James is addressing those who believe. Therefore, as he discusses temptation and death, we must appreciate the fact that he is speaking of believers, and the consequences of their decisions. When someone becomes a child of God, they now have a vast adventure in front of them. However, it remains to be seen whether or not any believer will embrace all God has for them, and receive the unthinkable reward of becoming a royal servant-king in His coming administration (Revelation 3:21).

James tells us a form of death can come to the Christian who does not endure trials but embraces the lust that leads to death. Death means separation, as when a spirit separates from a body, in physical death. When we as believers make bad choices, those choices separate us from many things, including the great blessing of enduring circumstantial trials with joy and wisdom (James 1:12).

James asserts, *Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone.*

*God cannot be tempted by evil*, which means that there is nothing in His nature that would consider or be attracted to evil. In James's argument, God cannot be the source of our temptation because He has no means of doing evil. Since He does not do evil, *He Himself does not tempt anyone.*

Of course, tempting someone to do evil is evil itself, which leads many to see a contrast with Satan as the source of our temptation. While Satan is certainly the source of many temptations (Genesis 3:1-7; Luke 4:2), James tells us that it is our own evil desire (*lust*) that is the source of our sinning. James asserts that *each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust*. In verses 2-11, James showed us that all circumstances are trials. At the same time, all circumstances are also opportunities to rejoice. It depends on what perspective we adopt about those circumstances.

Similarly, it is not the circumstance that tempts. Rather, it is the perspective we choose about that circumstance, as well as what action we take as a result of the circumstance. The temptation comes from within us. We are *enticed by our own lust*. We can choose to adopt a perspective that leads us to rejoice in difficulty. We can also choose to adopt a perspective that leads us to be *enticed by our lust*, when we believe the lie that following our *lust* will lead to our benefit.

James is using a chain of events as both an explanation and warning to the believer. The chain moves from desire, then to sin, then to death: *Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.* This chain is a matter of cause-effect. Our choice leads to a consequence. If we choose to rejoice in all circumstances, and walk in faith, trusting God's promise to reward us, then we are blessed. Instead, if we choose a perspective that views a circumstance as an opportunity to gain the rewards of fleshly pleasure, and seek the rewards of the world, then we will get the fruit of the world, which is death (Romans 6:23).

By pointing to death as the end result, the natural consequence of following *lust*, we can see the priority is to deal with the beginning, which is one's own desire for evil. That is where our power of choice is most impactful. James desires for us to be blessed and gain the great reward/consequence of life (James 1:12). The alternative is to seek sensual pleasures, which provides a reward/consequence of death (James 1:15).

The picture James paints is that of a pregnancy (*lust has conceived*), birth (*gives birth to sin*) and the resulting life of a child (*when sin is accomplished*). Our own desires can be either good (Hebrews 13:18) or evil (Romans 3:23; 1 John 1:8). In this case James is dealing with a choice to seek sin, based on our own *lust*. Our choice of sin is described as conceiving a child, and that child is sin. Conceiving a child is initially invisible to onlookers. The pregnant woman can feel the difference. But if they desire, they can conceal their pregnancy from onlookers for some time. In a similar way, when initially conceived, sin might only be known within ourselves.

James then pictures this pregnancy being carried to term, and the child is born. It is an ugly baby, so to speak. The "baby" is *sin*. In this case, it is our choice to indulge evil that leads to sin being born from us. At some point, sin can no longer be hidden. It is now birthed, and in the open.

Sin itself is then pictured as growing up. The child becomes an adult; *sin is accomplished*. And the consequence of sin "growing up" is that *it brings forth death*. The grown up consequence of sin is death/separation.

It is a genealogy of evil; desire (lust) begets sin, and sin begets death. But what is sin and what is death? In James's epistle, sin is the action or the motivation that is not consistent with the righteous will of God, as shown in the following verses:

"Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin."  
(James 4:17)

"You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures."  
(James 4:3)

Death means separation. So this death could involve any number of separations. It could be the destruction of a relationship that might be the consequence of adultery. It could be the loss of ministry as a consequence of a tarnished reputation. It could be the squandering of the opportunity to be a good steward. It can also involve physical death.

The progression of God's wrath against sin depicted by Paul in Romans 1 involves a progressive separation:

1. We are separated from walking faithfully, and begin to walk in lust (Romans 1:24).
2. If we persist, we then regress to being separated from freedom, and become slaves of our lust (we might call this addiction) (Romans 1:26).
3. If we still persist, we are separated from sound reasoning, and our minds become debased (Romans 1:28).

We would expect that any such path would also separate us from gaining rewards of approval when we stand before Christ at the judgement. We are not at risk of losing our relationship with God as His child. But we might be "saved, yet so as through fire" (1 Corinthians 3:15). If so, we "get in" but without the greatest of rewards God desires for us.

The unwise path is a deadly path as the book of Proverbs makes abundantly clear. James at least has this in mind when he writes, "...let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins." (James 5:20). The word "soul" in James 5:20 is the Greek word "psyche" which is translated "life" about half the time, and refers to the essence of who we are as people. As we can see from Romans 1, choosing sin ultimately leads to a loss of experiencing life as our true self, which is the new creation God made us to be (2 Corinthians 5:17).

James now has set before us two roads, a road of life and a road of death. To choose life is to choose to adopt a perspective that all circumstances are trials, and are therefore opportunities to grow our faith, and receive the greatest blessings of God. To choose death is to choose to follow our own desires, seeking the rewards of our own pleasures and of the world. That leads to a loss of the great opportunity we have been given, and leads to many forms of death (not the least of which is the end of becoming all God has made us to be). This binary choice between life and death would also have been familiar to the Jewish audience; it is a common illustration in scripture (Deuteronomy 30:15-18).

This will be a theme of James' letter, that believers will reap spiritual rewards of life or death. This makes the consequences of embracing lust to birth sin all the more deadly. If we see true reality, we will view following our own lusts as a path to death, which causes the temptation to lose much of its appeal. In James 2:14, we will look at the relationship between a believer's faith and works, where James also displays his concern for a believer's spiritual rewards or death in his summary verse for that section (James 2:26).

### **Biblical Text**

**<sup>13</sup> Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. <sup>14</sup> But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. <sup>15</sup> Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.**