

Lyfe guide to temptation

What is temptation?

Temptation has somehow got itself a good enough reputation to make it an appealing name for boxed chocolates, creamy yogurts, perfume, shower gel... go on, give in! In common usage, temptation has come to mean *the desire to do something, especially something wrong or unwise*. And who would want to resist such a desire if it would be fun to do so?

In the Bible, temptation has a broader significance. It refers to any kind of test or trial, which of course includes the desire to do wrong, which is hard to fight. The first account of temptation we have is when Eve was offered forbidden fruit by the serpent in the garden of Eden, and we all know how that went down.

Why are we tempted?

We face temptation because we have been given the ability to choose by a God who has no desire to coerce us into relationship with him. Tests and trials are not doled out by a stern deity who needs us to prove our mettle; they are a consequence of living in a free universe and as humanity that has collectively embraced rebellion as a natural stance. Doing the right thing can be terribly counter-intuitive and costly- we are kind of wired to be bad.

How can we withstand it?

Writing to the young church leader Timothy, Paul says, "Run from temptations that capture young people. Always do the right thing. Be faithful, loving and easy to get along with. Worship with people whose hearts are pure." (2 Timothy 2:22) Jesus teaches his followers to pray, "lead us not into temptation," because he knows we are weak and our faith can't stand up to much pressure. So the first rule of withstanding temptation is to avoid it if you possibly can; better: *run* from it. And seek out the company of those who are running in the same direction, because that will help.

The second rule is that when you can't avoid temptations or tests, see them as an opportunity to develop some spiritual muscles, and train yourself to make godly choices. Romans 5:3-5 says, "suffering helps us to endure. And endurance builds character, which gives us a hope that will never disappoint us." While tests and trials are not God's ideal way of dealing with us, he is able to use them for good, to discipline us, strengthen our faith, and to demonstrate his power in and through our weakness.

What happens when we succumb?

This is an important question, because the only human to have ever come through all trials and temptations without sinning is Jesus. Fortunately, because Jesus was perfect, he was qualified to stand in our place of judgement before God, and take on the penalty for our failure: "Jesus understands every weakness of ours, because he was tempted in every way that we are. But he did not sin! So whenever we are in need, we should come bravely before the throne of our merciful God. There we will be treated with undeserved kindness, and we will find help." (Hebrews 4:15,16)