

Lesson 16: Temptations and Trials (part 1)

Objective: The student will explore how temptations and trials affect our efforts to live in a healthy manner.

Amy opened the door and left for the market. She was getting an early start to the day, and the sun was just beginning to rise. She was planning to buy some fresh fruit and maybe some local snacks that her team had come to enjoy. Today was the first day of a two-day retreat for her team. She was the team leader, and they had been in country for six months. A couple of weeks ago they had decided to set aside two days from their regular schedule to reflect on their first six months and to praise the Lord. Amy reflected on their time and felt that it had been very positive. The team had gone through some struggles, but it had made them stronger and closer. The Lord had placed it on her heart to have the team explore their current trials and temptations. Yesterday, her thoughts had come together, and she had written them in her journal. As she reflected on her notes, she found it interesting how closely temptations and trials were related and yet how different their effects were. Her primary verses for temptations were:

James 1:13-15

When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.
and

1 Corinthians 10:13 No temptation 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 will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.

It was easy to see how temptations had devastating effects. If Jesus would have given in to temptations, there would be no salvation through Him. How amazing it is that He was sinless and persevered through His temptations. Amy planned to spend part of the retreat with the team focused on Jesus and His battle through temptations; they would first have a time of study and observation followed with a time of praise. In Mathew 4, she saw how Satan tempted Jesus’ hungers, first with Jesus’ food hunger when he encouraged Jesus to turn the stone into bread; next tempting His worth hunger, telling Jesus to throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple so that He could prove that He was Jesus and the angels would save Him; and last, Satan tempted Jesus’ desire hungers, if He would ‘only’ worship Satan He could own the world and all the things in the world.

Amy laughed at herself. She liked her analogy, but it also reflected that she hadn’t eaten breakfast yet and was hungry herself. Satan had used scripture in deceptive

ways to tempt Jesus. The same happened in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve. Satan spoke to Eve about the tree of life, and for the first time, she saw the tree with desire in her heart. The tree itself wasn't a temptation until Satan twisted God's words and added some of his own. Then the forbidden fruit became a powerful temptation. Jesus had used scripture to straighten out the deceptions within the examples of scripture that Satan had used against him. "I wonder if all temptations work this way? Are they all distortions of truths from God?" "I think I will share this question with the team to see what they think. The work of dealing with temptations would then be to bring truths to battle deceptions. It seems that some of those battles start in my mind but most seem to occur in my heart, resulting in evil desires when I am losing the battle. It was easy to see the truth of James 1:13-15. Eve was carried away by her desires, which led to sin and then death." Amy was approaching the fruit vendors, and she thought: "It is interesting how something that seems so small can lead to such tragedy: a piece of fruit or a loaf of bread. I usually think of 'big' sins; things like adultery or murder as the things that will bring devastation. It seems here that God shows how basic, simple things can be part of our destruction. Through these examples, he seems to emphasize not the object but the heart.

Amy had made her purchases and was heading home again. She began to think about trials. James spoke of trials as something to be joyful about and that the trial with perseverance would build up a person.

James 1:2-4

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

This was very different from temptations that only resulted in destruction. So what was a trial? She thought of her time here in this country. She had faced many difficulties and obstacles. As she worked through them, she grew in knowledge and resolve. So is a trial an obstacle in our path that we must work through? This made sense to her. She noticed that as she faced many of these trials, she had been tempted to take an easier path that would take her around the obstacle instead of working through it. She remembered when she first came to this country, just getting food was a trial. She didn't know the language very well and felt embarrassed trying to speak it. The food vendors had a difficult time understanding her. As team leader, she could have asked one of the other team members to do the task of purchasing the food. That was the temptation. She had decided to endure the struggle, and now six months later, she had just gone out and made the food purchases for the retreat without even thinking about the process of buying it. Her perseverance worked just as it was stated in James; she was more complete to do the work God had called her to do. A wave of joy came over her as she realized how God had taken her through the trial and it had matured her. Now if she could only remember this and have the joy at the start of the trial, this was more difficult; it required the faith that God would bring the work to completion. This would be another good question for the team. How do you develop joy at the start of a trial? She had returned to the apartment, and it was time to make the final preparations for the retreat. The rest of the team would be arriving soon.

The team had started the day with a couple of hours of casual sharing and relaxing. They followed this with a time of prayer, inviting God into their presence and praising Him. After an introduction and brief discussion about temptations and trials, Amy asked the team to study a person in the Bible while thinking about trials and temptations. She asked them to take notes so they could share with the rest of the team their findings.

Fran and Sue had chosen Esther. They found that Esther had had many temptations. They discussed how easy it would have been to be captivated by all the luxuries she was surrounded by. They decided that Esther would have been tempted to hide her lineage to protect herself and was tempted to keep herself safe by not approaching the king for the Jews. It was easy to think that these were mild temptations because they knew the ending of the story how God worked to save the Jews. How different it would have seemed to be in the moment not knowing what would happen but knowing that her action was supposed to result in her death. Fran asked Sue if she felt she could make that same decision Esther made. Sue wasn't sure but hoped she could. Fran agreed with her. Next, they discussed the trials that Esther went through. Faith, family, and truth were the three main trials they saw Esther go through. To face death while doing what was right for her people and depending on God's grace were strengthened through her trials. How exciting it would have been to endure the trials with the result of being the tool that God used to save His people.

Lily and Amy chose Ruth. As they studied, they determined that her primary temptation was to go back to her own people. How difficult would it be to stay with a foreign people after your spouse died? Her choice was to return home to your own people and culture or stay with your poor mother-in-law with little hope of a pleasant future. It wouldn't have been wrong to choose to go home and leave Naomi; it was the easier path. How often are we tempted to take an easier path, especially when it is not a sin to take that path? How many character growth opportunities do we miss through this behavior? In another six months, their team would complete a year of being in this country and would need to decide if they were going to stay or return to China. Would they be taking the easy path to return? Would they miss out on what the Lord wanted to do in their life through continuing to stay in this country? Amy and Lily discussed these questions at the end of their study. It was interesting how something written so long ago could speak so directly to their lives. Lily recorded their findings in the small notebook Amy had purchased in the market to record their thoughts, insights, and feelings during the retreat.

The team came together to report their findings and were encouraged through the sharing of scriptural examples of women facing temptations and trials. Amy now

encouraged them to spend time individually in prayer and to journal temptations they were currently facing.

Sue went for a walk. It was a beautiful day and she wanted to get out of the apartment. She prayed as she walked asking God to reveal to her the trials and temptations she struggled with. She knew that learning the language of this country was a real trial for her. She was farther behind than her sisters. It was frustrating to struggle so much. She would take many study breaks during her study time as the stress, boredom, and tedious activity made her antsy. Her temptations were easy to see in this area; anything that would take her away from her language studies became a temptation. She wanted to quit; that was another temptation. She did very well at her culture studies; she greatly enjoyed observing the local people. Studying people got her out of the small apartment. Maybe her greatest temptation was to do what she wanted rather than what she needed to do. Sue continued to think and pray about this. Maybe the real trial for her was humility, to humble herself to the task God had given her rather than look for ways to escape that were more enjoyable to her. This seemed right in her spirit; she would share it with the group and see what feedback they would have for her.

Fran went to the room she shared with Sue and began to pray about her life. She had noticed that she had been angry quite often. Some of her anger was toward her sisters but mostly toward the local people. She kept it inside herself but recognized the emotions were growing. She began to recognize some small rebellions toward the local culture. She didn't like the way women were treated here and felt it was unfair. So what were her temptations? She thought to herself it would feel good to yell at the men who thought that they were so much better than women. It was tempting to feed these emotions with thoughts, to analyze how they were wrong. She also recognized that these feelings affected her work here, even with the women she was trying to reach with the gospel. She could feel the frustration toward them as they submitted to their culture. She had not yet been carried away with these temptations, but through prayer, God revealed to her the need to let Him work in this area of her life. She journaled these thoughts. She also wrote about her trial which seemed to be the development of eyes like Jesus. He saw all that she did and more, and yet His response was love, compassion, and forgiveness. Fran thought that this was the trial that God had before her, so she would grow in her love for these people and see them as Jesus did. Fran spent a few minutes praising God for opening her eyes and asking Him to empower this direction in her life.

Lily knew, as soon as she heard the focus of the retreat, the area God would be directing her to focus on. She had been developing feelings for a Chinese man who was working in their city. He wasn't a believer, but he was a good man. He was friendly, kind, and humorous. Her temptations were obvious to her but also powerful. She was tempted to pursue the relationship even though he wasn't a believer. Being with him helped reduce her loneliness in this country. She had already given in to the

temptation to hide her feelings for him from the team. She had told them about him but had minimized and avoided telling them about the struggles she was experiencing. Recently, he had asked her out on a date. She again had given into part of the temptation by trying to think of a way she could conceal it from her sisters. She knew they wouldn't approve and would work to talk her out of it. The temptations were easy to identify, but what was the trial connected to them? The verse: "My grace is sufficient for you" came to mind; but how does that work? How does grace deal with loneliness and desire? She didn't have an answer. She was discouraged but wrote down her thoughts and decided she would let the others know of her struggles. She was tired of hiding this part of herself from them.

Amy spent her time in praise and worship. The idea of this retreat had come from her struggles a few weeks ago and what God had taught her through those struggles. One of her biggest temptations as team leader was to rely on her own strength to lead the team. There was something in her that desired to prove what a good leader she could be, and she worked hard to satisfy those desires. Last month, she seemed to reach the limits of her strength and began to struggle with even daily decisions. One evening she read James chapter 1, and the part about temptations and her current struggles seemed to go together. As she prayed, God revealed to her how she was relying on her own strength rather than His. She was motivated by other people's approval, and her temptation was to act on her own strength. It was also tempting to inform others of her progress, not as a means of communication but more for the recognition. As she acknowledged this before God, she began to see the trial connected to the temptation. Surrender. Surrender her control over her life, her perceived control. She smiled as she thought this. Scripture so often showed her that God was in control, not people, but she still needed to grow in this area, so God placed her in situations where she could find this truth in her own life and learn to surrender. Internal peace came with that realization. She began to lead the team from His strength and work to avoid controlling all the details. Another truth came as she began this work. If God was doing the work then there was nothing for her to take credit for. Now she hoped for and focused on God's leadership of the team. She still struggled. It was a new change, but she knew He was at work and this comforted her. She went to them and confessed her struggle to them and asked for their prayer.

As she reflected on what God had been doing in her life, she was excited to see Him work in the other team members. She closed her prayer time with a request for help and grace to stay focused on caring for her sisters rather than controlling them.

Small group discussion:

Look at David's life in two different time periods. The first to explore is his time with Bathsheba. The second is his time with Goliath. Identify from your feelings and thoughts the temptations you would experience if you were in David's position. Then identify the main trials that David was going through. What was God trying to develop in David through these trials?

Personal application:

Just as Amy and her team took time to explore the temptations in their life, take time to identify temptations currently in your life. Journal your findings and then focus on the trials connected with the temptations. What does God want to strengthen or develop in your life at this time? Remember, a temptation will lead to destruction while a trial leads to growth.