



INTRODUCING

THE GOSPEL

The source of temptation





Lesson 8: The source of temptation

Introduction

One of the important concepts in the Bible is the idea of sin. The basic principle is that sin leads to death. We've explored this in detail in Lesson 4 on Forgiveness and Salvation, if you need a refresher.

Understanding where sin comes from is a useful part of appreciating the wider Gospel message. It also helps in a practical sense to look at temptation; where it comes from, how it leads to sin, and how to resist it.

Sin is acting in a way which violates God's principle of right and wrong. We can sin by doing something wrong, and we can sin by failing to do something which is right. Every human being is not only tempted to sin, but gives into that temptation and commits sin.

The only exception to this is Jesus, who was tempted in exactly the same way as us, but never committed any sin.

In this chapter you will learn:

- Where temptation comes from
- What the Bible says about the devil and Satan
- The consequences of temptation



Where temptation comes from

Temptation is the desire to do something wrong or unwise. It is the thought which precedes sinful actions. This makes it a part of the process that leads to sin, and therefore death.

The Bible sets out this process in the letter of James:

“Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.”

James 1:13-15

The process here is explicit: temptation comes from our desires, and can lead to sin, which ultimately leads to death. The temptation to sin comes from our own minds; we have desires for things, and these desires lead us to break the moral principle laid down for us by God, and hence to commit sin.

“For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world.”

1 John 2:16

The things that produce sin fit broadly into three categories:

1. Things we desire because they satisfy our bodily desires
2. Things we desire because they look good
3. Things that satisfy our pride

All these, of course, are internal things - things that come from our own human nature. Jesus also confirms this picture:

“And he said, “What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.””

Mark 7:20-23



This passage gives a broad picture of sins, from envy and pride to adultery and murder. The point of them is that they all come from our innermost thoughts.

The important lesson to learn is that the things that lead us away from God are our own internal thoughts, desires, and intentions.

The devil

The devil is a Biblical concept, but perhaps not in the way you'd expect! The word appears in the Bible as a name for the human tendency to sin, which is what brings temptation to the human mind. The devil is the thing that tempts us, but as we've seen from other verses, we are tempted ourselves by our own thoughts.

Because Jesus was born as a human being, he was also tempted, like us:

"Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil"

Matthew 4:1

The process of temptation for Jesus was exactly the same as the process of temptation for everyone else:

"Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 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."

Hebrews 4:14-15

This passage draws a comparison between Jesus and the Jewish high priest, who was the head of the worship of God in the temple in Jerusalem, and who acted as a symbolic mediator between God and mankind. After his death, resurrection and ascension to heaven, Jesus now takes that role of high priest - or mediator - between us and God.

These verses also remind us that Jesus was tempted in exactly the same way as we are. He was tempted by the devil - the Greek word is simply *diabolos* - but like us, it was his own desires that tempted him. We can therefore conclude that the devil is the tendency towards sin that is present in our inner desires.



The difference between us and Jesus in this context is that Jesus successfully resisted temptation, and as a result, remained without sin. We fall to temptation and become sinners.

Quite simply, we can define the devil as that thing which tempts us. The Bible assures us that temptation comes from within us, and is a product of our humanity. As the thing that tempts us is called 'the devil', and the thing that tempts us is part of human nature, then logically the devil is just a part of human nature.

This means that there is no external devil. Many religious traditions claim that there is a supernatural entity outside humanity which tempts people to do bad things. But the Bible is very clear where temptation comes from, and therefore no such being can exist.

The Bible also emphasises that sin leads to death, as we've seen in Lesson 4:

"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Romans 6:23

"...the soul who sins shall die."

Ezekiel 18:4

These verses don't only include human beings; the idea of a 'soul' in Ezekiel applies to any living thing. Any being which sins must die. This means that there can be no immortal sinners.

A supernatural devil would be just this: immortal because it lives forever, and a sinner because it tempts people to oppose God, which is what sin is. As immortal sinners can't exist, a separate immortal devil can't exist either. Such a being would have to die, just as humans die.

Satan

Satan appears in both the Old and New Testaments. In the Hebrew of the Old Testament, the word 'satan' is simply an ordinary word which means opponent or adversary. The word is used for anyone, or any being, which is an opponent.

There is an example of this word in use in the account of Balaam in the book of Numbers:



“But God’s anger was kindled because he went, and the angel of the LORD took his stand in the way as his adversary.”

Numbers 22:22

Here, the word which is translated as adversary is the Hebrew word *satan*. It applies to the angel, who is clearly acting on behalf of God.

The same thing appears in an even clearer way in two parallel passages in 2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles:

“Again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, “Go, number Israel and Judah.” So the king said to Joab, the commander of the army, who was with him, “Go through all the tribes of Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, and number the people, that I may know the number of the people.””

2 Samuel 24:1-2

“Then Satan stood against Israel and incited David to number Israel. So David said to Joab and the commanders of the army, “Go, number Israel, from Beersheba to Dan, and bring me a report, that I may know their number.””

1 Chronicles 21:1-2

This is the same incident being reported in both accounts. Notice however, that in the Samuel account we are told it is God who incited David (the King of Israel at the time) to hold a census of Israel. In the other account, he is referred to as *satan*. The two words refer to the same being.

Quite clearly, the Lord God is not a being who tempts mankind to sin. If the word *satan* referred to a separate sinful being, then there is a problem. But if we follow the Biblical picture in which *satan* is simply an opponent, then the pair of passages make perfect sense.

Mankind has many opponents. From an opposing team in football to an argument with a friend, the word *satan* can be used to describe anyone standing against you at a particular time. Things or people that tempt us can also have the word ‘*satan*’ applied to them.

The New Testament is written in Greek. The problem for Greeks was that the language contained many different words for ‘opponent’, depending on the kind of opponent being talked about; the words are very specific.



The New Testament writers were looking for a word to describe opponents of the Gospel and of the members of the church. None of the words available covered this idea, so they took the Hebrew word and used that.

By looking at the way it is used, we can see that it doesn't apply to any supernatural opponent of God:

“But [Jesus] turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.””

Matthew 16:23

Here, Jesus had told Peter and the other disciples that he was going to be put to death in Jerusalem. Peter was trying to persuade Jesus that this didn't need to happen. Jesus then describes Peter as an opponent, and he uses the word *satan* to describe how Peter is standing in his way.

It is quite clear here that the word *satan* is applied to Peter, and not some other being. It describes his mind as being set on the things of **man**, not the things of God, and certainly not of some other being.

There are other examples of this in the New Testament. Consider this passage from one of the letters from the Apostle Paul to Timothy:

“...among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.”

1 Timothy 1:20

This talks about two people who have left the path of real Christianity, and who have been given over to some opponent to learn the correct way; in this case, to learn not to blaspheme - speak offensively about God. It would make no sense to deliver them over to an evil enemy of God in order to learn not to blaspheme!

Clearly, the word *satan* in both the Old and New Testaments is used simply to describe an adversary or opponent, and not a supernatural evil entity.



Consequences

The temptation to sin comes from within ourselves, not any supernatural being enticing us to do bad things. This has the consequence that we can't trust our own desires. When something seems very attractive and we wish to do it, it is important to decide whether this is really the right thing to do.

But temptation itself is not a sin; even Jesus was tempted. It is when we give into temptation and take an action that violates God's principle of right and wrong that we sin. Sin leads to death; Lessons 4 and 5 explore the state of sin in more detail.

Any desire that comes from our own minds must be suspected, and we need to evaluate it and decide whether it is right or wrong before we take action.

But there is hope for the future. Jesus died in order to destroy the lasting power of sin:

“Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.”

Hebrews 2:14-15

This means that we will not always be troubled with the tendency to sin. In the Kingdom of God, we will be free from temptation.

Lesson summary:

1. The temptation to sin comes from within ourselves. It is a part of human nature.
2. We need to think before we do things; our impulses come from our sinful human nature and may not always lead us to do the right thing.
3. Temptation can lead to sin, which results in death. This order of things will be overturned in the Kingdom.



Lesson 8 summary questions:

1:

- a) What is sin?
- b) What does the Bible mean when it refers to sinners?
- c) What happens as a consequence of sin? (Romans 6:23, Ezekiel 18:4)
- d) Can there be an immortal sinner?

2: What is the Biblical definition of the word 'devil'?

3: In **Numbers 22:21-25**, the prophet Balaam is diverted from the way he is going by an angel. In v22, this angel is described as an adversary to Balaam. This is a translation of the Hebrew word 'satan'.

- a) What does this tell us about the meaning of the word 'satan'?
- b) Does the word 'satan' always refer to someone who is opposed to God?
- c) Are there any other places in the Bible where the word 'satan' refers to someone acting on God's behalf?

4: Look at **2 Corinthians 12:5-7**.

- a) What would be the effect of the 'messenger of Satan' on the Apostle Paul, who wrote the letter?
- b) Is this effect producing a good or evil result?

Deeper dive questions

5: What does Bible teaching about the devil tell us about our inner impulses?

6: Look at **Hebrews 2:14-18**. Given the Bible's definitions elsewhere, what does this tell us about the devil?