

Gen 22, James 1, Mark 1 – Testing and Tempting

Our readings today at the beginning of lent all swirl around the theme of testing and tempting. There is a difference, even if subtle. I spent a decent amount of time this week in the lexicons and Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) to try and see if there was any regularity in usage between what we commonly translate “tempt” and “test,” and, long story short: not really. The Greek word *Peirazo*, means: to try a thing. I find myself picturing someone stepping cautiously out onto an icy pond. They are trying it out, to see if it will snap, or if it is hard and true.

And so we have God *peirazoing* Abraham in the Old Testament, and then we have James saying that God *peirazo's* no one. And we might think, well, the Old Testament was written in Hebrew, not Greek, so what about the Hebrew word used in Genesis 22?” Good question, its *Nissa*, and quite vaguely it also is used to mean to test, try, or prove 20 times and to tempt 12 times.

So what are we to make of this? Of the scriptures using the same word for testing and tempting. I think, first of all, that it means they are related in some way. But I do think there is a distinguishing factor, or else James in our text today couldn't make the distinction that God doesn't tempt. And the distinction is this: the outcome or intended goal matters. When the devil tempts he wants the outcome to

be sin, which as James warns us, fully grown leads to death. That's what the devil wants.

God on the other hand is quite clear in that he desires not the death, but repentance of a sinner. He is quite clear he wants all to be saved. It is quite obvious he did not make evil and does not actively desire it ever. Finally, he is quite clear his salvific work is for the world. And so we get to translate the same word as "test" when God is doing it, because we know he longs not for evil or sin, but for that person to hold up under the trial and to come out stronger and closer to him.

God will test and try the ice, that it may hold fast. The devil tries to plunge an axe into it to shatter it. That's the difference. And so God gets the benefit of the doubt in the text, because he is shown to be faithful. The evil one gets the doubt, because even his "very nice looking gifts" will always break to pieces like shattered ice.

Which is what James brings to our attention to today. Temptation, which, as we already defined, has a sinful outcome, and he teaches us that it is brought about by our own desires that are used to bring us out of the bounds of how those desires might be used faithfully. And to *want* to do that thing God forbids, is that not in itself sin? Yes it is. And so we confess we sin in thought word and deed.

Even worse we can get in a really dark spiral where we begin to, minds warped by sin, think "Well if *thinking* it is already as sin, I might as well *do* it and have the

fun!” Ah, but be careful, because now that sin in your mind comes out and harms your neighbor, and is one step closer to the full grown death.

And so our Lord is tempted by satan, the accuser, because satan wants the outcome to be sin. Jesus is not tempted in the sense that he *wanted* to do evil, but held back. No, he remains perfect, and impervious to temptation *or even a desire* to go against the Holy Law. James corroborates this as he says, “God cannot be tempted.” And so the devil who encounters Jesus in the wilderness when he is tired and hungry, with a hand tied behind his back, he encounters God and really he never stood a chance.

And so in the midst of our temptations may we seek to fight bravely against them using God’s word properly, because the devil will twist that as well, and in our failures may we run to the God who does what we cannot and withstands temptation that he might be the perfect sacrifice and payment for your sin.

And don’t miss that fact, Jesus was not tempted to only be a model to us of how to beat temptation. He was tempted because we so often fall into it. He does what we cannot, so he can take a death we deserve. When you are in temptation, or have failed it, go back to Jesus, the one who beat it for you.

Now, If I may move on from the peirazo of temptation, I think it only fitting to spend a little time on the peirazo of testing. Perhaps you might wonder as I have at

times, “Ok God, you don’t tempt, that’s comforting, but I must admit some of your tests I could rather do without.” And in our braver times we might even accuse God of being cruel. “Sacrifice your son, Abraham, whom you love.” What? That’s got to be emotionally manipulative at best, no?

Or can we trust God meant it for good? That might be hard to say. Must have been hard for Abraham and Sarah, indeed. How could God work it for their good? To take the promise away, to take their child away? I don’t think they knew how. But I do think they knew God had a good track record for keeping his promises to them thus far. So they were inclined to be a people of faith through it all. You see it in the text: Abraham says *we are going and we are BOTH coming back*. VERSE ____ . He didn’t know how, but he trusted God wanted good for him *and his child*. The author of Hebrews tells us of this great faith of Abraham, who was willing to sacrifice his son because he “reckoned that God”, and I dare add- God alone, “could give his son back from the dead.”

Have we seen and heard enough to trust that God works for the good in our trials, even when we can’t see it? Even with our children? You can shelter those kids all you want, it won’t save them. The ashes went on the foreheads of the kids too – they will die. Unless the Lord comes first, but then even if that happens, that still isn’t *you* saving them from death, it’s still God. So you might as well hand them over to him now. And trust he will work for their good better than you can. He will

still use you, for sure. But you might as well put them on the altar because nothing else, no education, no income, no health plan, no good works, no diet is saving them. God is. And has he shown he is faithful enough to work to do that? Even for our children who wander, has he not promised to seek after them?

And so in the tests and trials and crosses, lets not lose heart. Let God refine us, let him try the ice that it might be strong, let him bring us low, that he may raise us up. And if you can't see how there is good to be had and if you think God is cruel for piling on you, first of all, tell him that, he can handle it. Second of all, consider the Son given up as a sacrifice, not Isaac who was spared, but Jesus who was not spared. The Son that died forsaken that Abraham might have his son Isaac back, even after death. So you might have your children and your lives back, forever.

Is that enough skin in the game? His beloved Son for you? The sacrifice provided? Is his resurrection enough evidence of his power to bring good from evil? Is his promise to you enough to sustain you through the valley of the shadow of death? Yes. Yes it is. It may be hard to see, but when we see him face to face I guarantee we will shout, "God you are so good." Amen.