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## HOW TEMPTATION WORKS

Genesis 3:1-7

By

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Genesis Lesson 8

## How Temptation Works Genesis 3:1-7

A woman had been shopping and had bought a dress that she knew she couldn't afford. "Why did you do it?" her husband asked. "I just couldn't help it," she said. "The devil tempted me."

"Why didn't you say, 'Get thee behind me, Satan?'" the husband asked. "I did. But he just leaned over my shoulder and whispered, 'My dear, it fits you beautifully in the back.'"

Because of Adam and Eve's yielding to Satan's original temptation, the human race was plunged into sin. Since then every person has struggled with temptation. Becoming a Christian and even walking with God for many years does not eliminate or even minimize the dangers of temptation. "Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12). There is within us all a strong desire for the forbidden fruit. Someone astutely observed, "Most people want to be delivered from temptation, but they would like it to keep in touch."

As Christians who want to please God, we must understand how temptation works so that we can learn how to resist it. Our text is a classic case study of the process of temptation. My thesis is that ...

By understanding how temptation works we  
can devise a strategy for victory over it.

To be forewarned of Satan's strategy is to be forearmed. His pattern for tempting Eve is essentially the same approach he uses today. By studying and learning to recognize that pattern, we will not be ignorant of his schemes (2 Cor. 2:11), and thus can resist them.

### HOW TEMPTATION WORKS:

While Satan tempted Eve, we are led astray by our own lusts (James 1:14-15). Before the fall, Satan had to approach Eve from without. Since the fall, he usually leaves us to our own inward lusts

which respond to the temptations in the world. Only occasionally is there direct satanic influence. But since Satan is behind the original temptation, I'm going to refer to him in talking about how temptation works.

1. Satan is crafty and deceptive, not straightforward.

The chapter never positively identifies the serpent as Satan. Verse 15 does so in veiled terms. But the New Testament states it clearly (Rev. 12:9; 20:2) and just as clearly emphasizes that Satan's methods involve deceit, schemes, lies, and trickery (see John 8:44; 2 Cor. 11:3, 14, 15; 1 Tim. 2:14). The word "crafty" means shrewd and is used in a good sense of "prudent" in Proverbs (12:16, 23; 14:8, 15, 18; 22:3; 27:12). But Satan uses his shrewd knowledge about life to deceive and trap us.

Satan's deceptive tactics are seen initially in the form he takes. The serpent, before the fall, was different than the poisonous, repulsive reptile we know. Part of the curse was that it be more cursed than all other beasts and crawl on its belly (3:14). Apparently before that it was an attractive animal which did not cause Eve any fear or repulsion. Satan doesn't usually come to us as a dragon with red tail and horns, which would make us run the other way. He comes in an attractive form.

The implication is that Satan waited until Eve was alone. Adam came later and she gave the fruit to him. Satan knows just the right moment to hit. Temptation is most powerful when you're all alone. Perhaps you're away from home. "Who will know? Go ahead and try it; what harm will it do?" Later we will study the story of Joseph, a young man in a foreign country, alone in the house with Potiphar's wife who grabbed him and passionately said, "Lie with me!" Who else would know? Joseph resisted and fled that temptation because his focus was on God: "How then could I do this great evil and sin against God?" (Gen. 39:9). God would know! Live with a mind to please God even when you're alone and you can resist Satan's crafty appeals.

Temptation is usually deceptive. Satan makes it look like sin will get you where you want to go right now. It will meet your needs. Why deny yourself?

## 2. Satan challenges the authority of God's Word.

Satan did not begin by saying, "Listen, Eve, God is flat-out wrong!" Instead, he planted a suggestion in the form of a question, the first question in the Bible. "Is it really true that God said that you couldn't eat from any tree of the garden?" He's saying, "Let's talk about what God has said. There can't be any harm in discussing it, can there?" But, as Derek Kidner perceptively puts it, Satan's question "smuggles in the assumption that God's word is subject to our judgment" (*Genesis* [IVP], p. 67). If we swallow that assumption, we're on the enemy's turf!

At first Eve defends God by correcting Satan's extreme statement. Some commentators think that she erred by adding the words, "or touch it," thus making God's command more strict. Others say that she was simply keeping her proper distance from the tree. But then Satan counters by "reinterpreting" God's reason behind the command (3:4-5), smuggling in another dangerous assumption, that we don't need to obey God unless we understand His reason behind a command (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Associated Publishers], p. 32). Whenever people explain away or reinterpret God's clear commands as not applying to us, red lights should go off.

The fact that Satan came first to the woman, not to the man, also underscores his opposition to God's authority. By getting the woman to act in disobedience not only of God, but also of her husband, was to subvert the image of God in man as male and female, thus undermining God's authority (see my sermon on Gen. 1:26-31). This is implied in God's indictment of Adam, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife ..." (3:17).

Satan will tempt you by getting you to question the authority of God's Word. "C'mon, you don't believe all that outdated stuff about the headship of the husband, do you? You don't believe all that restrictive stuff about sexual immorality, do you? Surely you don't believe that this book of ancient Hebrew religious myths is binding on us today, do you? You can't take it as applying literally to us!" That's Satan's line. He tempts us by being deceptive and by challenging the authority of God's Word.

### 3. Satan impugns God's character.

He does this in several subtle ways. One method is that he refers to God as "Elohim," which emphasizes His power as Creator, but avoids the more personal covenant name "Yahweh." It's subtle, but Satan is trying to get Eve to think of God as impersonal. Eve falls for the bait and also uses Elohim, not Yahweh Elohim. But as soon as God comes seeking for the fallen couple in the garden, the name Yahweh Elohim is used again (3:1, 8, 9, 13, 14, 21, 22, 23).

Satan uses exaggeration to make God seem harsh. God had not said that Adam and Eve could not eat from *any* tree, but only from *one* tree. God had told them that they could *freely eat* from *every* tree but *one*, but Satan stretches it to sound like God was prohibiting everything. By overstating the case, Satan was drawing Eve into his trap. He wants us to focus on the negatives that God has given, instead of on His many positives. We end up thinking that God is a grouch who doesn't want us to enjoy life. But even God's prohibitions are for our good.

Notice how Eve is drawn into Satan's line of thinking. Her reply magnifies the strictness of God on the one hand, but softens His threat of judgment on the other. God had said, "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely" (2:16). Eve omits the words "any" and "freely" in her reply (3:2), and adds "or touch it" (3:3). God had said, "In the day that you eat from it you shall surely die." But Eve omits "surely" and doesn't say that judgment will happen on that day (3:3). She is falling into Satan's trap by changing the character of God to be more to her own liking. She's admitting that God (not "the Lord" God) is a bit strict for her taste. But at the same time she's minimizing His strictness by making His judgments out to be less than He said they would be.

Eve was already beginning to waver. The fall really took place before she ate the fruit, because her thinking about God was in error, and sin always begins in our thinking. It's happening in churches in our day. People don't like what they perceive to be God's strictness, so they modify His absolute holiness. And they excuse their sin by saying that we're under grace; God really wouldn't be so harsh as to judge my sin.

Satan moves from a subtle suggestion which plants doubt (3:1) to a flat lie which calls God a liar (3:4). God had said, "You shall surely die." Satan says, "You surely shall not die." If Satan had started with this statement, Eve probably would have said, "You're a liar!" But by beginning with a subtle question, then smuggling in the assumption that God's word is subject to our judgment, and then exaggerating God's strictness, he has Eve listening openly while he flatly calls God a liar. But he does it in an area where the results are in the future, so you can't disprove him empirically. Very tricky!

Then he goes on to say that God isn't really good. He's trying to hold something good back from you: "For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (3:5). Of course there is a smattering of truth in his words. After they ate the fruit God said, "the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil" (3:22). But the lie is that God is not good. Almost every temptation that confronts us contains the same lie. Satan wants us to doubt the goodness of God, because we won't trust a God who is not good, and unbelief is the root sin. Not trusting God, we will trust ourselves, thinking that we can become like God. Pride and disobedience follow quickly on the heels of unbelief.

That's why we need to be especially on guard when we're going through a time of suffering. Peter's warning to be on the alert because our adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour, is written to people who were suffering (1 Pet. 5:8-10). Peter assures them that God has not forgotten them; He is the God of all grace who will bring His promises to fulfillment. But they need to resist Satan by being firm in their faith. We must not impugn God's character by saying that He is not good, no matter what our current circumstances would make us think.

Thus Satan tempts us through deception; he challenges the authority of God's Word; and he impugns God's character.

4. Satan contradicts the certainty of God's judgment.

"You shall not die." Isn't it significant that the first doctrine Satan denies is God's judgment? Satan's lie is: "Sin isn't all that se-

rious. You can sin and get away with it." It's ironic that having just persuaded Eve that God is not totally good (or He would not have prohibited her eating this fruit), Satan now implies that God is too good to punish such a minor infraction as eating a piece of fruit with such a major penalty as death. Satan always moves God's absolute holiness and absolute justice toward the middle, so that He becomes neither totally holy nor totally just.

You may wonder, "What's the big deal about eating a little piece of fruit? Wasn't God overreacting to bring such severe punishment on such a minor infraction?" But the problem wasn't just food. The problem was unbelief, rebellion, disobedience, and pride. God had provided them with all they needed. He had clearly demonstrated His goodness and love. They had every reason to trust and obey God and no reason to listen to Satan's lies. By coming as a serpent, a creature made by God, it heightened man's disobedience, since they had been created to have dominion over the creatures. Adam and Eve were without excuse. Satan tempts us by contradicting the certainty of God's judgment. A final tactic:

5. Satan promises pleasure but doesn't mention the pain.

"You will be like God" (3:5). He doesn't elaborate, except to say, "knowing good and evil," but rather dangles it before Eve as an intriguing possibility. The unknown aspect of it aroused her curiosity. It was a mixture of truth and falsehood. The thing promised was true, but at the same time was far from the truth. It is like the freedom sin promises: It's true in part; but it's ultimately false, since sin enslaves us. Satan didn't bother to tell Eve the terrible consequences for her, her family, and the human race. He never does.

Satan displays his wares and then lets the attractiveness of the product lure Eve to her doom. Note the progression of verse 6, which may reflect Satan's sales pitch: Eve "saw that the tree was good for food." It was nutritional, not harmful or poisonous. And it tasted good; perhaps Satan sampled a bite in front of her. This corresponds to what John calls "the lust of the flesh" (1 John 2:16). The temptation looks as if it will meet a legitimate need, whether for food, sex, or comfort.

Next, Eve saw that the fruit "was a delight to the eyes." It was pleasant, not ugly. Satan doesn't tempt you with sleazy stuff; he

tempts you with attractive things. If he can't tempt you with a dirty, unattractive prostitute, he will bring along an understanding, attractive woman. This corresponds to what John calls "the lust of the eyes."

Then Eve saw that the fruit "was desirable to make one wise." This appealed to her need for intellectual stimulation and fulfillment. Wisdom is generally a good thing. God wants us to develop our minds. But wisdom apart from or in opposition to God's Word just feeds what John calls "the boastful pride of life." Derek Kidner states incisively: "Eve listened to a creature instead of the Creator, followed her impressions against her instructions, and made self-fulfillment her goal" (p. 68). At this point, Eve is rationalizing--making up reasons to justify what she has already decided to do. "It will help me nutritionally; it's pleasant to look at; and it will make me wise. How can it be wrong when it seems so right?"

The results seemed initially beneficial. She didn't physically die on the spot. Her eyes were opened, just as Satan said. Maybe God was wrong. But of course, death did set in at that moment: She died spiritually. Physical death began its course in her that very day. It was God's mercy which spared her and Adam from being struck dead physically on the spot. Sometimes we wrongly interpret God's merciful delay of judgment to be a denial of the certainty of judgment. But what God says, He always does.

Adam and Eve's sin led to guilt and shame (3:7), which led to alienation from one another and from God (3:8-13). Their first son murdered his own brother. The history of the human race from this point on is marred by the tragedy of sin. Satan's promises never come true. Wisdom isn't gained by disobeying God, but by fearing and obeying Him. God's judgment may be delayed, but it is always certain. It is true that sin usually gives initial pleasure; but it's always followed by lasting pain. Kidner crisply notes, "So simple the act, so hard its undoing" (p. 68).

#### A STRATEGY FOR VICTORY OVER TEMPTATION:

I've developed Satan's pattern for temptation sufficiently so that you can fill in an appropriate strategy for victory. But let me quickly name five corresponding steps:

1. We must beware of "new" twists of doctrine or practice.

Since Satan uses deception and lies, we need to be cautious about any “new” doctrine or practice. The world proclaims self-esteem and the church is glutted with books on how to accept and love yourself (even when your life is filled with sin). The world extols tolerance as the chief virtue, and the church is quick to tolerate every form of perversion under the banner of “grace.”

2. We must affirm the authority of God’s Word.

Satan always works to undermine the authority of God’s Word. If you take away the authority of the Word, you’re launched on a sea of moral relativism with no rudder. We must all submit to God’s Word, no matter how difficult or costly.

3. We must affirm God’s character as revealed in His Word.

Satan will try, through trials or disappointments, to get you to doubt either God’s goodness or sovereignty. It’s a short step from there to rebellion, because you can’t trust a God who is not good or is not in control. Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers and thrown in prison in Egypt because he resisted Potiphar’s wife. He could have easily doubted the goodness or sovereignty of God. But years later he told his brothers, “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” (Gen. 50:20). You may have to believe it in spite of your circumstances, but hang onto it by faith: God is good and sovereign (Ps. 119:75).

4. We must affirm the reality of God’s judgment.

You cannot get away with sin any more than you can take fire into your shirt and not be burned (Prov. 6:27-28). The fact that judgment is not immediate does not mean that it is not certain. Grace does not eliminate the principle of sowing and reaping, even for Christians. Paul wrote about sowing and reaping in the same letter he wrote about grace (Gal. 6:7-8).

5. We must remember that sin gives fleeting pleasure, but results in pain which far outweighs the pleasure.

It’s true, sin has its delights. It’s fun for the moment. But you pay an awful price. Not only you, but your children and grandchildren will suffer after you (Exod. 20:5). Sin is a lot like living extravagantly on credit. You can live like a king for a few months, but

the bills are going to come due. Then you have to pay up. The pleasures of sin are not worth the awful price.

### Conclusion

At a Christian summer camp for children the counselor was leading a discussion on the purpose God had for everything He had created. They talked about the good reasons for clouds, trees, rocks, rivers, animals, and just about everything else in nature. But then one of the kids broke in with the question, "If God had a good purpose for everything, why did He create poison ivy?"

The counselor gulped and was fumbling for an answer when one of the other children came to his rescue, saying, "The reason God made poison ivy is because He wanted us to know there are certain things we should keep our cotton-pickin' hands off!"

If you are defeated by temptation and sin, God in His mercy has provided the way of deliverance: "[Jesus Christ] Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls" (1 Pet. 2:24-25). If you will trust in Christ as your Savior and Lord, He will freely pardon your sins and give you the power to overcome temptation.

### Discussion Questions

1. Since deception is "tricky," how can we be on guard against it?
2. How can we wrestle with honest questions about the Bible and yet not undermine its authority?
3. How can a Christian who has suffered much affirm both the goodness and sovereignty of God?
4. Will a Christian suffer the temporal consequences of his sin the same as an unbeliever?

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