

Tempting God

Wade Stanley

Much of what Mark, Luke, and Matthew record about Jesus's life and ministry were eyewitness accounts. People saw Jesus transfigured, heard His gracious words on the mount, and ate bread and fish in the middle of nowhere. But no one observed a consequential moment in the desert, when the newly-anointed Christ confronted mankind's greatest foe. Three times Satan tempted Him; three times Jesus responded with Scripture; three times our Lord resisted. While this entire episode is helpful for a multitude of reasons, let's focus on temptation number two.

Satan challenges Jesus to cast Himself from the pinnacle of the temple to prove He is the Son of God and assures Him there is no danger by quoting a promise from **Psalm 91:11-12**. Jesus responds with His own quote from Scripture, "*You shall not tempt the Lord your God.*" Satan's temptation and Jesus's response have some bearing on our present circumstances.

In the early days of the Covid-19 crisis, all of us struggled to come to terms with how to properly perceive what was happening around us. We told each other to be filled with the Holy Spirit and not to be afraid. We reminded one another of God's exhortation to Joshua, "*Be strong and courageous and do not be afraid.*" We talked about the purpose of trials and how to endure times of testing. And some found consolation in **Psalm 91:5-6, 10-12**:

You shall not be afraid of the terror by night, Nor of the arrow that flies by day, [6] Nor of the pestilence that walks in darkness, Nor of the destruction that lays waste at noontide...[10] No evil shall befall you, Nor shall any plague come near your dwelling; [11] For He shall give His angels charge over you, To keep you in all your ways. [12] In their hands they shall bear you up, Lest you dash your foot against a stone.

Applying **Psalm 91** to our present circumstances is, admittedly, problematic for a number of reasons.

Can we be certain Psalm 91 promises protection from disease for the righteous?

If the Israelite nation listened to God's words, heeded His commands, yielded to His will, they could expect protection from the terrible diseases plaguing the surrounding nations according to the promises of **Deuteronomy 7:12-16**, especially **verse 15**, "*And the Lord will take away from you all sickness, and will afflict you with none of the terrible diseases of Egypt which you have known, but will lay them on all those who hate you.*" However, it must be noted that within the Law of Moses, God instructed His people about proper hygiene, quarantine, and sanitary practices to guard against the rapid spread of highly communicable diseases (e.g. leprosy in **Leviticus 13-14**). No distinction is made in those instructions — both the righteous and unrighteous were susceptible, therefore God urges prudence.

On the surface, these two passages seem at odds with one another. On the one hand, God promises to shield His people from diseases, while on the other He promotes cleanliness and caution to slow the spread of contagion.

The solution is found in the essence of **Deuteronomy 7:12-16** -- so long as *the nation* was faithful, she would be protected from the national calamities suffered by her enemies. The Old Testament records several examples of God using epidemics as a consequence for rebellious nations. Israel was only exempt if she was faithful (see **Leviticus 26**, specifically **verses 16 and 21**). Her faithfulness, however, did not spare Israel from disease spreading in communities, thus God's instructions concerning hygiene, quarantine, and proper sanitation.

When God judged the nation for their rebellion, the righteous suffered alongside the unrighteous. Jeremiah is one noteworthy example. His righteousness did not spare him from suffering alongside his countrymen.

Turning back to Psalm 91, the Psalmist talks of God blessing the one who *“dwells in the secret place of the Most High Shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty”* (verse 1). God assures such a person will be delivered from the various enemies identified by the Psalmist including pestilence or plagues. What, however, is the nature of God’s deliverance? Should the righteous expect God to spare them from contracting deadly diseases? Consider **Isaiah 57:1-2**:

The righteous perishes, And no man takes it to heart; Merciful men are taken away, While no one considers That the righteous is taken away from evil. [2] He shall enter into peace; They shall rest in their beds, Each one walking in his uprightness.

As Isaiah observes, the death of a righteous man spares him from experiencing future calamity. For the faithful, death by disease is a means of deliverance from future ravages of disease.

God does not promise to rescue us from the consequences of our decisions.

We tempt God when we act according to our own desires and expect God to rescue us from suffering the consequences. Had Jesus cast Himself from the pinnacle of the temple, all of creation may well have collapsed. Potential cataclysms aside, without question Jesus would have died had He given into temptation. Angels would not have rescued Him from His moment of weakness even though Scripture appears to suggest otherwise. Why? Because, in diving headlong into the temple complex, Jesus would be responding to His own desires rather than the will of God.

During His ministry, Jesus found Himself in a number of life-or-death situations. He walked away from danger until it was clearly God’s will for Him to suffer. Or, to put it another way, He walked into imminent danger when it was the only way for Him to fulfill God’s will. Only then did He accept the consequences.

If we believe our obedience to the will of God will shield us from contracting Covid-19, we tempt God. For example, some have suggested that God will protect His people from highly contagious diseases while we partake of the Lord’s Supper. They expect God’s protection in response to their obedience. On what basis can we make such an assertion? The covenant of Christ offers no assurance that God will protect the righteous from disease. To encourage one another to think otherwise is to encourage one another to make a decision based on feelings, not facts. However, this does not mean Christians don’t take risks by choosing to serve God. Rather, we should choose to serve God with the understanding our faithful obedience does not rule out suffering or death in the flesh.

Faith does not protect us from evil times. Faith enables us to endure evil times.

Paul exhorts us to *“take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand”* (**Ephesians 6:13**). Every piece of our spiritual armor is essential. We cannot hope to defend ourselves in evil times without truth or righteousness or the word of God. There is, however, one implement greater than the others: *“above all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one”* (verse 16). Faith is our greatest defense in times of testing.

But what does the armor of God protect? Our bodies? No, it protects something infinitely more precious; it protects the part of us fit to live for eternity. Faith will not protect our bodies from Covid-19. How could it when we have no assurance that God has given us any such promises in this world? But faith will give us the strength to endure the trial, come what may.

Until the last one hundred years in Western Civilization, human history has been shaped, in large measure, by famine, disease, and privation. Covid-19 is a reminder of the stark, brutal, merciless world of our forebears where horrific diseases ravaged entire continents. It is more than a cautionary tale; it is the pages of history coming alive before our eyes, admonishing us to recognize the limits of human ingenuity -- "The arm of flesh will fail you." And so we, like the countless generations who preceded us, must face this evil wisely, armed with the only implements that matter -- truth, righteousness, the gospel, the hope of salvation, the word of God, and, above all, faith.