



OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

The Trouble with Me Is ...

David Anguish

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the phrase “bait and switch” to describe “a sales tactic in which a customer is attracted by the advertisement of a low-priced item but is then encouraged to buy a higher-priced one” was first used in 1962 (“Bait,” Merriam-Webster.com). Of course, hunters and fishermen have known about the practice that gives rise to the expression for much longer. As he turned to the subject of temptation and personal responsibility in chapter 1.13-15, James used that general knowledge to describe what happens in the tragic steps from temptation to sin to death. He then shows how we can escape the trap and its deadly consequences.

Springing the Trap

As vividly translated in the NIV, temptation occurs “when [people] are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed” (v. 14). “Dragged away” (ESV – “lured”) translates ἐξέλκω (*exelkō*), used in classical Greek to mean “to draw out” and then metaphorically “to lure forth,” a figure taken from the practice in hunting and fishing of luring game from its hiding place (Thayer 2004, ¶ 1828). The imagery is reminiscent of the description of seduction by an adulteress in Proverbs 7.21-23:

²¹ With much seductive speech she persuades him;

with her smooth talk she compels him.
²² All at once he follows her,
 as an ox goes to the slaughter,
 or as a stag is caught fast
²³ till an arrow pierces its liver;
 as a bird rushes into a snare;
 he does not know that it will cost him his life.

The image reminds us of the reality that, while temptation is sometimes obvious, we are often unaware of the trap until it is too late (McCartney 2009, 107).

That is not to say, however, that temptation has no real allure or that we are without responsibility when we give in. James goes on to say that what lures and entices us when we are tempted is “desire.” “Desire” (ἐπιθυμία, *epithymia*) does not always have a negative connotation (cf. Luke 22.15; Phil 1.23), but the context demands it here. James uses the singular form of the word, adding to the force of the seduction metaphor. No one is exempt, nor can any of us legitimately shift the blame onto someone else; each of us, James says, is tempted by desire that is our “own” (ἴδιος, *idios*).

Verse 15 describes the next step in the process. Changing the metaphor from bait to birth, James says that once our desire has been seduced, it “conceives” (συλλαμβάνω, *syllambanō*) and “gives birth” (τίκτω, *tiktō*) to sin (ἁμαρτία, *harmartia*). The language describes the process from suggestion of sin to experimenting with sin.

Sin in turn, “when it is fully grown brings forth death.” “Fully grown” (ἀποτελέω, *apoteleō*) is another form of the word “perfect” (τέλειος, *teleios*), used in verses 3 and 4, and is used here of the opposite of the goal James envisions there. “Death” is the opposite of the life promised in verse 12.

Escaping the Trap

To escape the trap of temptation and its deadly outcome, we must be proactive. Using the present middle imperative form of πλανᾶω (*planaō*) with the negative particle μή (*mē*), James tells his readers not to “be deceived.” *Planaō*, which James will use again in 5.19, refers to wandering off a path and then by extension to holding a wrong view, being mistaken, or misled. A derivative form of the word, πλανητής (*planētēs*), appears in Jude 13 in his reference to the “wandering stars,” one of several metaphors used to describe the deceitful and destructive teachers who had infiltrated his readers’ community (Louw & Nida 1989, 186, 367). *Planaō* was also used in the LXX to refer to transgression of the law, especially idolatry (e.g., Isa 9.15; Jer 23.17; Ezek 33.10), and in later Jewish writings to refer to departures including Satanic influence and ethical deviation (Davids 1982, 198).

Verse 16 perfectly describes the opposite of the unwavering, single-minded steadfastness James urges in 1.2-8. *Planaō* illuminates the deceitful nature of temptation to promise what it can never deliver and prey on the hearts of people who are too easily misled (cf. Jer 17.9). Temptation's most insidious deception, however, is its ability to lead us away from what should be our primary concern of unwavering commitment to God. Every distraction may not be inherently evil, but all of them can lead to sin and death. (Compare, for example, James's reference to quarrels in 4.1-3. How many disputes that led to tragic consequences began over relatively insignificant matters that were not of themselves inherently evil?)

James thus calls on us to examine our desires in light of the goal of unwavering commitment to God. This is an examination no one can undertake for any of us. What tempts you may not tempt me; what tempts me may pose no threat to you. Instead of focusing on what others are doing—and perhaps even belittling them for doing it or being proud that I don't—I must pay attention to what will drag away and entice me.

Nor should this introspection overlook the so-called little things. “Many sinful actions begin in casual thoughts, but dwelling on them can turn minor temptations into major transgressions” (Blomberg & Kamell 2008, 72).

Conclusion

An often-repeated story tells that *The Times* in London once sent an inquiry to some famous authors, asking them, “What is wrong with the world?” G. K. Chesterton reportedly answered, “Dear Sir, I am. Yours, G. K. Chesterton.”¹

It is that story that prompted the title of this essay, and which now allows me to complete it. As James 1 shows, “the trouble with me is ... *me!*”

What can I do about that? James answers: be vigilant, knowing how easily I can be deceived. Stay close to God. Be born by and live in harmony with “the word of truth” (Jas 1.18).

Works Cited

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¹ <https://www.chesterton.org/wrong-with-world/>. Accessed August 9, 2023. This web site notes that, although this quote is generally attributed to Chesterton, is typical of his humility and wit, and fits well with the title of his 1910 book, *What's Wrong with the World?* no one has been known to document it in the pages of *The Times*.

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"Reprinted from David Anguish, 'Opening the Scriptures,' October 24, 2023"*

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