

The Difference Between Trials and Temptations

Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. **—James 1:13-14, NAS**

There is a difference between a trial and a temptation, although both come from the same Greek word—peirasmos. They are often used interchangeably, though. After all, temptation is a trial (of faith), and every trial is a temptation (to grumble). When the word appears in the New Testament the context helps us to see which interpretation is meant. There are therefore differences and similarities between trials and temptations. Although we must not push the distinctions too far, here are examples of the differences:

1. In their ultimate origin. Temptations come from the flesh; trials are sent from God. He allowed Satan to test Job (Job 1:6-12). Therefore when we speak of “trial” we see God’s fingerprints; when we see temptation, we see our own—or the devil’s.
2. In their immediate origin. Temptation comes from within; trials usually come from outside us. Job suffered physically, but inwardly—at least at first—there was no apparent struggle.
3. In their moral relevance. Temptation, when it is sexual in nature, has considerable moral relevance, but a trial may be what I would want to call morally neutral, such as illness or losing one’s keys.
4. With reference to what is tested. Temptation will usually attack a weak spot; trials test our strength as well as exposing a weakness we may have been unaware of—as with Job, who turned out to be so self-righteous.

Any trial that God sends—death of a loved one or friend, financial reverse, loss, illness, misunderstanding, losing your keys, failure, disappointment, betrayal, abuse, unemployment, depression, accident, loneliness, missing a train or plane, rejection, not getting that important invitation, or any physical pain—should be seen as having our Lord's handprints all over them.

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