

IX 9Marks

How Do I Fight Sin and Temptation?



**J. Garrett
Kell**

Church Questions

Endorsements for the Church Questions Series

“Christians are pressed by very real questions. How does Scripture structure a church, order worship, organize ministry, and define biblical leadership? Those are just examples of the questions that are answered clearly, carefully, and winsomely in this new series from 9Marks. I am so thankful for this ministry and for its incredibly healthy and hopeful influence in so many faithful churches. I eagerly commend this series.”

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“Where can we Christians find reliable answers to our common questions about life together at church—without having to plow through long, expensive books? The Church Questions booklets meet our need with answers that are biblical, thoughtful, and practical. For pastors, this series will prove a trustworthy resource for guiding church members toward deeper wisdom and stronger unity.”

Ray Ortlund, President, Renewal Ministries

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 **CROSSWAY**[®]
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

How Do I Fight Sin and Temptation?

© 2024 by 9Marks

Published by Crossway
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover image and design: Jordan Singer

First printing 2024

Printed in the United States of America

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Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-9178-5

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-9180-8

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-9179-2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kell, J. Garrett, author.

Title: How do I fight sin and temptation? / J. Garrett Kell.

Description: Wheaton, Illinois : Crossway, 2024. | Series: Church questions | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023019716 (print) | LCCN 2023019717 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433591785 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9781433591792 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433591808 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Sin—Biblical teaching. | Temptation—Biblical teaching. | Sin—Christianity.

Classification: LCC BT715 .K35 2024 (print) | LCC BT715 (ebook) | DDC 241/.3—dc23/eng/20230821

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023019716>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023019717>

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

BP	33	32	31	30	29	28	27	26	25	24				
15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

1 Corinthians 10:13



Greg was a gangster whose life was marked by nearly every evil imaginable. But God mercifully intervened and sent someone to share the gospel with him. After months of wrestling with what it means to follow Jesus, he surrendered to God, was baptized, and began his new life in Christ. He had been born again.

But giving his life to Jesus didn't make everything easier. Some parts of his life became harder.

When Greg was born again, it was as if he woke up in a world he didn't recognize. He had new feelings, strange convictions, and lingering

concerns about whether he was making good choices.

What Greg didn't understand was that he was on the front lines of a spiritual war. He was forgiven and loved by God, but now he had a prowling adversary who lurked in the shadows, scheming to destroy him (John 10:10; 2 Cor. 2:11; 1 Pet. 5:8). To follow Jesus over the long haul, Greg needed to learn how to fight sin and temptation.

This book is for people like Greg. It seeks to explain what sin and temptation are and how to combat them with God's grace. These pages serve as an introduction to this lifelong pursuit, and I pray God will help you apply these lessons faithfully.

The Good Life

Humanity's first home was a garden of delight. God designed it with brilliant colors, sweet smells, and delicious fruits. He created our first parents, Adam and Eve, with the capacity to enjoy the garden's pleasures and, even more, to enjoy him.

This life with God was “very good” (Gen. 1:31). There was no shame or sorrow. No regrets or guilt. No depression or death. Life was perfect. But enjoying this abundant life depended on one thing: obedience to God’s command. God invited them to “freely eat” of every tree in the garden except for one (Gen. 2:16 NASB).

But rather than obey God, they succumbed to temptation and sinned against him. Their rebellion not only brought death but also robbed them of all the good things God had for them. God cursed them and sent them out of the garden and away from his presence.

Today, we live in a world that abounds with evil. We live outside the garden and, like Greg, face an adversary who schemes to ensnare us in sin. Sin grieves God, harms others, and destroys our lives. Sounds scary, huh? Thankfully, we don’t have to navigate this minefield alone. Jesus came to save us from sin’s penalty, deliver us from sin’s power, and enable us to resist sin’s corrupting presence. In Christ, we have grace to oppose Satan’s attacks and walk in the abundant life.

If we want to resist sin and enjoy the good life God has for us in Christ, then we need to first talk about what sin is.

What Is Sin?

One catechism defines sin this way: “What is sin? Sin is rejecting or ignoring God in the world he created, not being or doing what he requires in his law.”¹ Or as artist Shai Linne says, “What is sin? Sin is the breaking of God’s law plus our condition, which means from birth we all got flaws.”²

Sin is in us and comes out of us. We are born with a sin nature, and even after we become Christians, we still battle with ongoing sin. Sin appears in our affections and our actions, in what we desire and what we do, in what we seek and what we say. It consists in doing what we shouldn’t (sins of commission) and in not doing things we should (sins of omission).

Sin Is Personal (Ps. 51:4)

Sin is also personal. During the Last Supper, Peter assured Jesus that he would die for him

(Luke 22:33). Jesus, however, knew that Peter would succumb to temptation and deny him three times. Over the next few hours, Peter did just that. While Jesus was being beaten and wrongly accused, Peter distanced himself from his master, and even said “I do not know him” (Luke 22:57). As soon as the rooster crowed, “the Lord turned and looked at Peter,” causing Peter to recognize his sin against a man he loved and had followed for three years (Luke 22:61). We then read that Peter “went out and wept bitterly” (Matt. 26:75; Luke 22:62).

In other words, sin doesn't merely break an arbitrary rule. It rejects God, who is personal. It effectively says to him, “I do not love you. I will not follow you. I will not obey you” (see Ps. 78:40; Isa. 43:24; Eph. 4:30). When Jesus looked into Peter's eyes, he suddenly felt the weight of his betrayal. He had denied the one who had only ever loved him.

Or think of that famous story about King David committing adultery with the wife of one of his soldiers and then arranging the man's murder. The Lord sent the prophet Nathan to

expose David (2 Sam.12), and David's subsequent prayer shows how personal sin is. He cries out to God, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight" (Ps. 51:4). Sin is always against God, and it's always personal.

Sin Is Painful (Prov. 22:5)

It's also painful. God designed life in this world to be lived in line with his law. This means that the world is "rigged"—rigged to work best by obeying God. Sinning, however, brings painful consequences. In Jesus's story of the prodigal son, for instance, a younger brother spends all his wealth on prostitutes, parties, and perversion. Maybe he has fun in the beginning, but soon enough the consequences catch up with him, and he finds himself sharing slop with swine (Luke 15:11–32).

I'm not saying that obedience always brings happiness and sin sadness. Yet the Bible teaches again and again that "the way of transgressors is hard" (Prov. 13:15 KJV)

and “thorns and snares are in the way of the crooked” (Prov. 22:5). As a pastor, I’ve sat with hundreds of people who compromised with sin and suffered the consequences. As a believer who struggles with my own sin, I’ve compromised countless times to my shame. Sin promises to be sweet, but its aftertaste is always bitter.

Sin Is Punishable (Rom. 6:23)

Sin is also punishable. My family was driving down a country road recently when one of my children exclaimed, “That’s a lot of tombstones!” As I looked, I saw an entire hillside lined with gravesites.

The picture of all the graves reminded me of God’s warning that sin would bring death. God had said to Adam, “In the day that you eat of [the forbidden tree] you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:17). Or as Paul later explained, “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23).

But physical death is merely the “first death.” The second death is far worse. The book of

Revelation contains a harrowing vision of the day of judgment, harrowing at least for those who do not know Jesus:

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. . . . Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (Rev. 20:11–15)

Sinning against God has great consequences. It separates us from relationship with him and incites his righteous, eternal wrath (Isa. 59:2; 2 Thess. 1:7–9).

Sin Is Pardonable (Isa. 55:7)

Gratefully, sin remains pardonable. Though our sin is great, God's grace is greater (Rom. 5:20). Punishment is his "strange" work (Isa. 28:21). He doesn't want to punish. He desires none to perish but for all to "turn, and live" (Ezek. 18:32; cf. 1 Tim. 2:4). God cried out through the prophet Isaiah,

Let the wicked forsake his way, . . .
let him return to the LORD, that He may
have compassion on him,
. . . for he will abundantly pardon.
(Isa. 55:7)

In pursuit of this pardon, God loved the world and sent his Son to die for our sins and then rise again so that we could be forgiven (John 3:16). The good news offered to us is that God will not only forgive us if we turn to Christ but also empower us to fight sin (Titus 2:12–13). This means that, if we are trusting in Christ, we don't have to be dominated by sin any longer. We can walk in freedom and joy (Gal. 5:16–17).

What Is Temptation?

In addition to understanding sin, we also need to understand temptation and how it relates to our sin. Maybe a few stories will help:

Sarah sighed as she glanced at her phone. It was another message from her coworker Brian. He was charming, funny, and dangerous—at least to her. She knew a date with him was off-limits because he showed little interest in Christianity. At the same time, she was tired of being overlooked by the single men at church. Brian, on the other hand, flirted with her and flattered her. This awakened something inside her that she enjoyed and wanted to pursue. But she knew she shouldn't.

With situations like this in mind, the apostle James vividly describes how sin and temptation work: “Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death” (James 1:14–15).

Sin acts as an angler who baits the hook with a deceptive lure. The lure then floats along in