

**Divine Influence**  
**A Series on the Practice of Sin: Part 4**

In prior articles of this series on the practice of sin, we have learned about the nature of desire and lust, how temptation is a test that reveals the desire of your heart, and how we tempt God. How or what is deceit, whether we deceive ourselves or others, and how is divine influence involved?

The conflict between divine influence and deceit is introduced in the very beginning in the Garden of Eden. God divinely influences Adam with a prohibition to eat the fruit of one tree out of all those available (Gen 2:16-17). However, Satan seduced Eve to ignore God's command with the idea that she could be like God.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, "Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden'?" The woman said to the serpent, "From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat from it or touch it, or you will die.'" **The serpent said to the woman, "You surely will not die! 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."** When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate. (Gen 3:1-6)

Satan caused Eve to believe something that was not true about the fruit: it was good for food, and it was a delight to the eyes. The portrayal of forbidden fruit as "good" enticed her to see the fruit as desirable to make one wise. Eve desired to be like God "knowing good and evil," ignorant of the fact that this moral standard was embedded in the very nature of God.

The apostle Paul presents the idea that there is a point where God no longer actively contends with deceit in recognition that the sinner, despite learning of the truth of God, has embraced a steadfast worldview denying Him and instead worshipping creation rather than the Creator.

Therefore God gave them over in the lusts (**epithymia**) of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. (Rom 1:24-25)

Just as in the Genesis account, people chose to believe a desire for something as good when in reality it was idolatrous, against God's word, and morally evil. The author of Hebrews indicates that Bible study trains one in discerning what is good and evil; however, only through a genuine devotion in study can divine influence have a significant impact. Righteousness is accorded to those who can discern what is good and modify their desires accordingly.

Concerning him we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil. (Heb 5:11-14)

A valid question to ask is, "how does divine influence work on those who do not know God's word (the Bible) or Jesus Christ?" In reality, most people are aware of Jesus Christ (John 12:31-36) and the Bible; however, they choose to believe something other than objective truth and historical reality. Deceit is pervasive; it is not limited at the personal level; it can be established and well entrenched in culture, institutions, and government.

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Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation." For when they maintain this, it escapes their notice that by the word of God the heavens existed long ago and the earth was formed out of water and by water, through which the world at that time was destroyed, being flooded with water. But by His word the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. **The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.** (2 Pet 3:3-9)

For those who never heard of God, questions about natural phenomenon (i.e. fundamental constants of the universe, etc) or existential questions of one's origin, meaning, morality or end are all divine influences that lead one to God.

The invisible God displays His real existence to engender obedience to His word, because God wants His "very good creation" (Gen 1:31) to "be holy as He is holy" (1 Pet 1:13-16). However, the insidious nature of deceit is seen in those instances when the Bible figuratively speaks of a person as having a "hard heart," an obstinate disobedience to God's word. God uses this description for those who test His love and, despite His response with signs and wonders, still disobey His word.

The first mention of a hard heart occurs in Pharaoh just before the freeing the nation of Israel from bondage, "I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go" (Ex 4:21-23). At first glance, it appears that Pharaoh's heart was divinely hardened, because God's purpose was to provide multiple demonstrations of His real existence through supernatural events so that all of Egypt (including Israel) would know that the God of Israel is real (Ex 7:3-5). But God did not make Pharaoh do anything, Pharaoh disobeyed on his own because of his obstinate heart:

But I know that the king of Egypt will not permit you to go, except under compulsion. So I will stretch out My hand and strike Egypt with all My miracles which I shall do in the midst of it; and after that he will let you go. (Ex 3:19-20)

God sought Pharaoh's recognition of His existence, sovereignty, and obedience; but, God's method pricked Pharaoh's pride in two ways, which resulted in Pharaoh choosing to harden his firm belief that he was the sovereign over Egypt, not Moses' God (Ex 5:1-2; 7:12-14).

1) God chose Moses as His messenger.

When the infant Moses was retrieved from the river, he became the step-grandson of Pharaoh (Ex 2:5-10, Josephus: Antiquities of the Jews, Book II, IX:7). When Moses' Egyptian mother married, there is circumstantial evidence that she desired Moses to be the heir of the kingdom after his step-father ascended (Josephus: Antiquities of the Jews, Book II, IX:7).

When the Bible records Moses' exile as fleeing "from the presence of Pharaoh" (Ex 2:15), Pharaoh was probably his step-father, and he was fleeing as a member of the palace (Acts 7:22). When Moses returns to free his people, the Pharaoh of the Exodus was his step-brother.

Challenged of his sovereign rule over Egypt by his exiled itinerant step-brother shepherd, Pharaoh is angry and responds with a harsher work environment for the Jewish slaves (Ex 5:4-9).

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2) God used Moses to make His demand of emancipation publicly.

Moses proclaimed God's word publicly with the nation of Israel (Ex 6:6-13).

Moses proclaimed God's word publicly with Pharaoh, his officials, and his servants, and God's supernatural signs and wonders universally affected all Egyptians.

The nation of Israel also tested / tempted God's love and, despite actually experiencing His supernatural blessings, still exhibited a hard heart and disobeyed.

“Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,  
As in the day of Massah in the wilderness,  
When your fathers tested Me,  
They tried Me, though they had seen My work.  
For forty years I loathed that generation,  
And said they are a people who err in their heart,  
And they do not know My ways.  
Therefore I swore in My anger,  
Truly they shall not enter into My rest.” (Ps 95:8-11)

It is apparent that God directly or indirectly influences events so that a person must make a choice of either obeying or disobeying God. The person who stiffens their denial of the real existence of God and His word, despite the evidence, and hardens their refusal to change their mind will ultimately face ruin (Prov 28:13-14; 29:1). And it should be noted that the consequences of testing / tempting God served as an example of what not to crave for (1 Cor 10:1-11).

Divine influence also includes God's direct action of tempting human beings limited to His people. The first example of this is the testing of Abraham (Gen 22); God's test was to determine if Abraham desired to obey Him. When Abraham's obedience is tested, he is faced with the temptation of disobeying God's word to save His son (Gen 22:1-14). Abraham had to weigh the love for God against the love for his son and make a choice.

Now it came about after these things, that **God tested Abraham**, and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.” (Gen 22:1-2)

Then the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, “By Myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, **because you have obeyed My voice.**” (Gen 22:15-18)

The choice tests whether you will obey, and it is in this light that God does not tempt a Believer to sin (Jas 1:13). And note that God did not allow Abraham to commit the act of murder and provided the appropriate sacrifice for the offering.

When Satan tempts, the temptation is based on deceit or distortion of God's word, to deceive you into thinking that it is perfectly fine to express your natural desires. Without a good grasp of God's word to guide one's desires, all choices lead to sin.

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In the Old Testament, there was a sense that when God tempted the nation of Israel, He was evaluating their commitment: are you reliable in keeping your side of the covenant?

All the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood at a distance. Then they said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we will die." Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for **God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin.**" So the people stood at a distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud where God was. (Ex 20:18-21)

For those under the Law, God tests His people to see if they desired to keep their end of the Mosaic covenant and obey His commands (Ex 16:4; Deut 8:1-6; Judg 2:20-23; 2 Chron 32:30-31).

God even allows His people to be exposed to false prophets to test if His covenant people desire to love Him "with all their heart and all their soul." Can His people discern a false prophet by evaluating the prophet's words against God's word?

"If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, 'Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them,' you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; **for the Lord your God is testing you to find out if you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.** (Deut 13:1-4)

Just as God tested His people if they had the desire to love Him, Jesus tested His disciples if they had the same desire.

Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was near. Therefore Jesus, lifting up His eyes and seeing that a large crowd was coming to Him, said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these may eat?" This He was saying to test him, for He Himself knew what He was intending to do. (John 6:4-6)

Just prior to the above test, Jesus spoke to Jewish religious authorities about who He was (John 5:19-47). In essence, the works Jesus did, which Philip saw as supernatural healing the sick, testified that Jesus was the Son of God, and any doubt indicated that they did not love God.

But the testimony which I have is greater than the testimony of John; for the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish—the very works that I do—testify about Me, that the Father has sent Me. And the Father who sent Me, He has testified of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time nor seen His form. **You do not have His word abiding in you, for you do not believe Him whom He sent.** You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life. I do not receive glory from men; **but I know you, that you do not have the love of God in yourselves.** (John 5:37-42)

Through the supernatural provision of food, a work that God gave Jesus to accomplish, Philip gains a better understanding of His Son the Messiah (John 6:14). As Jesus tests / tempts His disciples of their desire to love God, they learn more about Him and grow in faith.

The best outcome of temptation, when God or Jesus tests, is having one's faith approved by God. Note carefully that it is based on the accurate handling of God's word.

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth. (2 Tim 2:15)

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By faith Abraham, when he was tested (**peirazō**), offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; it was he to whom it was said, "In Isaac your descendants shall be called." He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type. (Heb 11:17-19)

It is in the context where God tempts / tests His people of their desire to love Him that Believers should understand temptation. When God is not tempting you to express the morally good desire of loving God, Satan is always tempting you to express morally evil desires to disobey God.

No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted (**peirazō**) beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it. Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. I speak as to wise men; you judge what I say. (1 Cor 10:13-14)

Paul indicates that obedience to God's word is how God provides the means to escape temptation, because it is the only means of changing your mind about the morality of your desires. In fleeing idolatry, the desire and worship of things other than God, one escapes temptation. James says the same thing adding that God does not tempt you to express evil desires.

Let no one say when he is tempted (**peirazō**), "I am being tempted (**peirazō**) by God"; for God cannot be tempted (**peirazō**) by evil, and He Himself does not tempt (**peirazō**) anyone. But each one is tempted (**peirazō**) when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death. (Jas 1:13-15)

When Jesus introduces the Lord's Prayer, it is a prayer of praise, provision, forgiveness, and against temptation that might cause one to fall away. There is an implied recognition that there is another kingdom where Satan is the tempter taking advantage of the evil desires already present in human beings.

Pray, then, in this way:

"Our Father who is in heaven,

Hallowed be Your name.

Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,

On earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. [For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.]" (Matt 6:9-13 / Luke 11:2-4)

The Lord's Prayer recognizes God's sovereignty in all the affairs of mankind including the experience of temptation as the account of Job indicates (Job 1:6-12). Jesus warns Peter accordingly with a view towards eschatology:

You are those who have stood by Me in My trials; and just as My Father has granted Me a kingdom, I grant you that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." But he said to Him, "Lord, with You I am ready to go both to prison and to death!" And He said, "I say to you, Peter, the rooster will not crow today until you have denied three times that you know Me." (Luke 22:28-34)

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God's divine influence desires that you be holy as He is holy; however, the commission of sin can only be avoided if one believes that He really exists, places a trust in His word, and behaves accordingly.

References:

1. Brown C, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 3, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, (1979).