

OVERCOMING TEMPTATION

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On the night of his betrayal, Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane. After he had Poured out his heart in prayer to God, he returned to his disciples and said, "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation." (Matt. 26:41). These words had a special appropriateness that night, because already Judas had succumbed to the temptation that led him to betray Christ and blast his own hopes of eternal life in heaven. Soon, the mob would overwhelm Peter so that he who had meant to be strong and firm in support of the Lord, would deny that he was a disciple. The rest of the disciples would soon be scattered as sheep without a shepherd. The words, "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation," had a special appropriateness then, but they are also universally appropriate, for all men constantly need to be warned against the danger of being overcome by temptation.

We might well ask, "What is temptation?" The root word carries the meaning of "test" or "try" or "tempt." *The Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious knowledge* defines temptation as "The most general expression for every motive that excites man, especially the Christian, to sin." Anything that tests, or tries, or encourages man toward sin is temptation. It is one of the commonest experiences of our lives.

Four Basic Facts About Temptation

When we turn to the Bible, we discover that there are four fundamental facts about temptation which stand out as unusually significant. I John 2:15-17 suggests the first. "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the vainglory of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth forever." Our first fact is simply this: Temptation is precipitated, or triggered, or initiated, by the world about us.

Next, let us notice James 1:13-15, which says, "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God; for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempteth no man: but each man is tempted when he is drawn away by his own lusts, and enticed. Then the lust, when it hath conceived, beareth sin: and the sin, when it is full grown, bringeth forth death." Our second fact is: Temptation is rooted in the desires of man's nature. While temptation is initiated by some incident, or person, or thing in the world about us, it is brought to full life by the basic nature of man. "Each man is tempted, when he is drawn away by his own lust."

The third key passage is I Cor. 7:5, which reads, "Defraud ye not one the other, except it be by consent for a season, that ye may give yourselves unto prayer, and may be together again, that Satan tempt you not because of your incontinency." A companion passage might be, "Be sober, be watchful: your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour." (I Peter 5:8). Both these passages emphasize our third fact: Temptation is a struggle between man and Satan. Temptations do not just happen; they are planned by Satan, who is always an active participant in them.

Finally, notice Gal. 6:7-8, which says, "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth unto his own flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth unto the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap eternal life." Our fourth fact is: The results of temptation are of tremendous significance. The after-effects of temptation are not confined to one place, or to one moment in time, or even to one person, but stretch out throughout much space and time and affect many people.

The Two Most Outstanding Examples of Temptation

When one considers the entire Bible, with its 1189 chapters and its thousands of different characters, the two most outstanding examples of temptation are the temptation of Eve and the temptation of Christ. Notice that both of these persons were unusually close to God and also that both had special God-given responsibilities. Satan was unusually concerned about Eve and Adam because they were God's first pair and they had the responsibility of populating the earth. He was unusually concerned about Christ because he was God's only begotten Son and he had the responsibility of saving the souls of all mankind. It seems reasonable to conclude that Satan is most interested in those who are nearest to God and those who have the greatest responsibilities in carrying on God's work. To say it more briefly, Satan is most concerned to tempt Christians. The better the Christian, the more active his work for the Lord, the heavier will be the fire from Satan.

Notice the account of Satan's temptation of Eve: "Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field which Jehovah God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of any tree of the garden? And the woman said unto the serpent, Of the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat: but of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die. And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: for God doth know that in the day that ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as God, knowing good and evil. And 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 to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat; and she gave also unto her husband with her, and he did eat.” (Gen. 3:1-6).

Notice also the account of Christ’s temptation: “Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he afterward hungered. And the tempter came and said unto him? If thou Art the Son of God, command that these stones become bread. But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God. Then the devil taketh him into the holy city; and he set him on the pinnacle of the temple, and saith unto him, If thou art the Son of God, cast thyself down, for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee; and, On their hands they shall bear thee up, lest haply thou dash thy foot against a stone. Jesus said unto him, Again it is written Thou shalt not make trial of the Lord thy God. Again, the devil taketh him unto an exceeding high mountain, and showeth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them: and he said unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan; for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve. Then the devil leaveth him; and behold, angels came And ministered unto him.” (Matt. 4:1-11).

Notice that in both of these major temptations the temptation was precipitated by the external world in which they lived. In Eve’s case it was fruit growing on a tree. In Christ’s case it was stones lying on the ground that suggested the size of small rolls or buns. In both cases also, notice that the external temptation immediately fitted into the nature of man. Eve immediately saw that the fruit was good for food, and that it also would contribute to her wisdom. It flattered her pride in suggesting that she could make a decision that would supercede God’s decision. In Christ’s temptation the suggestion of bread immediately appealed to his hunger which had been extended over a forty day period. The offer of the whole world simply for worshipping Satan immediately appealed to Christ’s purpose of coming to the earth, namely, to win the entire human race as his followers. The suggestion that he cast himself from the temple likewise appealed to Christ’s desire that he might immediately come to be known by all men and looked up to as unusual and worthy of being followed.

Still further, notice that in both temptations Satan was present and waged the battle personally. Finally, notice that in both temptations the results were infinitely important. Eve’s failure to stand brought sin, suffering, sickness and death to the whole human race for all time. On the other hand, Christ’s spiritual stamina in withstanding the temptations opened the doors of heaven for all mankind. Had he not met the temptations successfully, there would have been no hope of eternal salvation for anyone. These two temptations illustrate the above discussed four major factors concerning temptation.

Man Cannot Stand Alone

We live in a “Do-it-yourself” age, but in meeting temptations we must have Christ’s help. Let us notice our four basic facts about temptation again. First of all, temptation is precipitated by the world. This means that in order to overcome temptation man often needs to change his environment, his associations, and his work. There are certain occupations from which the Christian should withdraw immediately, lest he be overcome by wrong associations and wrong influences. Paul’s advice to Timothy is appropriate yet, “But thou, O man of God, flee these things ...” (I Tim. 6:11). It is not a sign of cowardice, but of spiritual wisdom to get out of a situation which constantly tempts the Christian. This can well be pondered when we choose colleges for our children; when we choose life partners; when we choose life works.

Our second basic fact was that temptation is rooted in the nature of man. Man is equipped with certain raw, natural tendencies, that must be trained and guided or they will cause him to live like an animal. By studying God’s word we learn to control these elemental human desires. The sex desire, the desire for food, the drive of ambition, and all the rest must be harnessed to the will of God, or they will destroy us. Through countless hours of reading and meditating upon God’s word, do we learn how to control all of these basic human drives and sublimate them to spiritual purposes. Then, we have prepared ourselves for the hour of emergency when temptation strikes. Notice that when temptation came to Christ, he met every temptation head-on by quoting from the scriptures.

Our third fact about temptation was that temptation is a struggle between man and Satan. It is wonderful to learn, however, that it need not be a dual match. We can call upon our Lord to join our side of the battle and to add his great strength to our meager force. The Hebrew writer says, “For we have not a high priest that cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but one that hath been in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore draw near with boldness unto the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy, and may find grace to help us in time of need.” (Heb. 4:15-16). Again, “For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succor them that are tempted.” (Heb. 2:18). Having met temptation throughout his life here on earth, our Lord is ideally suited to assist us when we are tempted.

Fredrick W. Robertson, the great English preacher, pointed out that Christ still had the nail holes in his hands after his resurrection. By this he meant simply that even the resurrected, glorified Lord still bore the signs of his earthly struggle. The old adage, “If I with broken bones fall into a surgeon’s hand give me one whose bones have also been broken,” suggests the value of one who has been over the road and knows our problems. In a limited kind of way we may think of Christ standing by us in time of need to give us strength, as somewhat like a member of Alcoholics Anonymous who has rebuilt his own life and now stands by a weaker friend, transferring some of his strength to the one in trouble.

I Peter 2:9 says, "The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptation." He is our help in every time of struggle. Christ lives to intercede for us in heaven. We also have the promise of the Holy Spirit within us, if we will open our lives to him. Further, we have the knowledge that the providence of God will work out all things for our good if we are truly lovers of God. (Rom. 8:28.) In this connection it is heartening to remember the words of the apostle Paul to the Corinthians, "There hath no temptation taken you but such as man can bear; but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation make also the way of escape, that ye may be able to endure it." (I Cor. 10:13.)

When Temptation Strikes

Temptation is tied to no single person, or place, or object, or time. Rather, sin comes through every object or avenue and at the time when man is weakest. Sometimes temptation comes just after graduation or after some other notable achievement, while man is enjoying his new triumph. At other times it comes when man has just faced failure or disappointment and capitalizes upon man's weakness and discouragement. Satan comes at moments of indecision, influencing the decision his way. He comes when one is surrounded by others, for he is often most effective in a crowd. He also comes when we are busy or in a hurry and have not time to think matters through. How obvious it is that we must be prepared all of the time, everywhere, and in every possible situation. Surely the words of Jesus are appropriate, "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation."