

Overcoming Temptation

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Introduction

In the drama of life, temptation is a real and ever-present factor for the Christian. Perhaps even those persons who have no conscience are sometimes tempted, if only to do something honorable and decent occasionally! Our Lord recognized the reality and danger of temptation because he was subjected to its rigors by the devil himself (Mat. 4:1-11). The Scriptures imply that He was tempted on other occasions as well: "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" (Heb. 4:15). Thus, in His concern for our spiritual safety, He taught us to pray, "And bring us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one" (Mat. 6:13).¹ As He prayed in Gethsemane He told His sleepy apostles, "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation" (26:41).

Our word *temptation* is from the Greek noun *peirasmos*, which is capable of various connotations, depending on context. Vine comments as follows concerning this noun: "used of trials with a beneficial purpose and effect, of trials or temptations, Divinely permitted or sent...; with a good or neutral significance...; of trials of a varied character... of trials definitely designed to lead to wrong doing...; of trying or challenging God, by men..."² Hence, depending on context, this word may refer to trials brought about by persecution or suffering for righteousness' sake, as those described by Peter: "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial [*peirasmos*, DM] among you, which cometh upon you to prove you, as though a strange thing happened unto you" (1 Pet. 4:12).

However, James uses this word to refer to those things which would seek to cause us to sin: "But each man is tempted, when he is drawn away by his own lust, and enticed" (Jam. 1:13-14). The temptation described here contains the elements of enticement, solicitation, and seduction – things which attack from within the person. They are events pertaining to our lives that Satan uses and through which he appeals to fleshly desires in an effort to cause us either to neglect or to transgress the law of God. We may summarize by saying that while all temptation may constitute a trial, not all trials constitute temptation.

There is a "plan of salvation" to rescue us from the guilt and eternal consequences of sin. There is also a "plan of damnation" by which men become guilty of sin and under eternal

condemnation. James sets the latter plan before us in the text under consideration. Temptation is the beginning point. As already defined, temptation is that process by which an appeal is made to one or more of man's natural desires in such a manner as to entice him to transgress or fall short of the will of God. This process began early in the lives of humanity's initial pair (Gen. 3:1-6) and will not cease till the last trump of God heralds the coming of the Lord and the end of time. In the very nature of his constitution and his relationship to God and His Word, no accountable human can escape temptation.

Sources of Temptation

To begin with, let us understand Who is **not** the source of temptation. James tells us emphatically that **God is not the source of temptation.**³ First, he uses a universal, unqualified prohibition to deny the thought that God is the tempter: "Let no man say...I am tempted of God." A footnote in the ASV suggests the alternate reading, "tempted **from** God" (emph. DM), which makes the claim even stronger: When man is tempted, that temptation never emanates **from**, is never set forth **by**, God. The effect of James' statement is that any person who dares to credit God with any enticement, solicitation, or seduction to sin is a liar. Second, James makes a definitive, declarative, positive statement of the case: "He [God] himself tempteth no man." Third, this fact is just as certain as (and proceeds from) the fact that "God cannot be tempted with evil."⁴ The very perfect and holy nature of God precludes the possibility of His even being tempted, much less sinning. Moses' beautiful song in Deuteronomy 32 eloquently expresses Deity's incapability of sinning: "Ascribe ye greatness unto our God. The Rock, his work is perfect; for all his ways are justice: a God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and right is he" (vv. 3-4; cf. Tit. 1:2; Heb. 6:18). In this very fact lies the warranty and security of all Truth, moral law, and righteousness.

The Primary Source of Temptation

Although James does not say so, the Scriptures generally and frequently recognize that Satan is the fountainhead of all temptation and that he has been from the beginning. Moses identifies "the serpent" as the one who approached and tempted Eve (Gen. 3:1-5). He told her a lie ("Ye shall not surely die," v. 4) by which he "beguiled" her (v. 13; cf. 2 Cor. 11:3). John identified him as "the old serpent [at least as old as Eden, DM!], he that is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world..." (Rev. 12:9; cf. 20:2). No wonder the Lord called him "a liar, and the father thereof" (John 8:44b)!

Jesus was “tempted of the devil” (Mat. 4:1; cf. Luke 4:2, 13) or “Satan” (Mark 1:13). On one occasion when Jesus prophesied His death and Peter argued that such would never happen, the Lord figuratively cast him in the role of Satan, the tempter: “Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art a stumbling-block unto me” (Mat. 16:23). The arch-enemy of God and man lurks around every corner and in every shadow, as a ravenous beast, stalking his prey and bent on devouring it if possible (1 Pet. 5:8). Satan is so universally recognized as the source of all temptation that Paul thought it superfluous even to name him when he referred to “the tempter” (1 The. 3:5).

Satan's Avenues of Temptation

Satan is a clever, calculating tactician, as indicated by Paul’s reference to “the wiles of the devil” (Eph. 6:11). We dare not be ignorant of these “devices” (2 Cor. 2:11). His three-point strategic plan is outlined as “the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the vainglory of life” (1 John 2:16).

The Bible records the details of Satan’s abominable work in two well-known and pivotal occasions of temptation – those of Eve in Eden and of the Lord in the wilderness. Notice how Eve was approached and snared by all three of these avenues:

1. “The lust of the flesh” – the physical appetite of hunger: she “saw that the tree was good for food” (Gen. 3:6a)
2. “The lust of the eyes” – the appetite for that which is beautiful and attractive: the tree was “a delight to the eyes” (v. 6b)
3. “The vainglory of life” – the appetite for the fame and acclaim of men: “the tree was to be desired to make one wise” (v. 6c) and in order to “be as Gods, knowing good and evil” (v. 5)

Satan approached our Lord through these same three channels:

1. “The lust of the flesh” – the desire of hunger: Jesus had fasted forty day and nights and was famished when the Devil tempted Him to make bread out of the stones on the ground (Mat. 4:2-3)
2. “The lust of the eyes” – the appetite for that which is beautiful and attractive: Satan showed Him all of the kingdoms of the world with their glories and offered them to Christ in exchange for His allegiance (vv. 8-9)
3. “The vainglory of life” – the desire for the fame and acclaim of men: Satan tempted the Lord to cast Himself off the pinnacle of the temple (vv. 5-7)

There actually are no other avenues through which Satan may tempt us, but he has so mastered the use of these as to lead the vast majority of mankind astray.

Satan's Agents of Temptation

He does not directly tempt us as he did Eve and the Lord, but he nonetheless tirelessly (and effectively) goes about his work through a vast army of henchmen, agents, and approaches. He uses the lust of the flesh for money and other material things to lure men away from God. One of the most insidious appeals to this fleshly lust and greed is the almost universal state-sponsored lottery that ensnares and separates many a fool (including some brethren) from his or her honest income. Jesus therefore warns us against piling up earthly treasures and serving "mammon" (money) instead of God (Mat. 6:19-24) and tells us of the "deceitfulness of riches" (Mat. 13:22). Paul warns those who lust for wealth that they will "fall into a temptation and a snare and many foolish and hurtful lusts...[and may be] led astray from the faith" (1 Tim. 6:9-10).

Satan uses the advertising industry to appeal to the lust of the eyes, prompting even the elect to lavish luxuries on themselves while billions are still without the Gospel. He uses the print, film, and television media to produce and sell the most explicit forms of sexual perversion. Such temptations, coupled with added encouragement from immoral sex educators in the public schools, have produced an epidemic of childhood sexual activity in the last quarter century. This epidemic has spawned its own twin tragedies: abortion of the unwanted resultant babies on the one hand or children giving birth to children on the other. Pornography is also a frontal attack on the stability of the home and family, tempting many through the lust of the eyes to fulfill the lust of the flesh, whereby they desert their pledged spouses and honorable marriage beds for the favors of others.

He has perfected the use of vainglory and pride in tempting men to sin and then holding them there. Many are they who sell their souls to the devil in a willing sacrifice of Truth, righteousness, family, and friends in order to snatch the gold ring of "success," reputation, and fame as they ride life's carousel. How vain is such glory! Perhaps an even sadder sight is that of those who were once enlightened and obeyed the Gospel becoming involved in sin and then, because of pride and vainglory, refusing to confess and repent of their mistake. Indeed, Satan has honed his craft of temptation so well through the centuries that his "avenues" almost appear as boulevards!

Secondary Sources of Temptation

Although Satan is the ultimate source of temptation, there are many secondary sources, factors, and approaches that can pose serious threats to our spiritual stability. Recognition of these will help us defend against them.

1. **Temptations from Our Surroundings:** In his discourse in Matthew 18:1–9 Jesus graphically described the deserved punishment of one who would cause another person to sin. However, we should not overlook the implication in His words that we are susceptible to temptation from surrounding persons and circumstances. Paul’s warning to the Corinthians should be engraved on our hearts: “Be not deceived: Evil companionships corrupt good morals” (1 Cor. 15:33). Rehoboam listened to his young and foolish advisers and made the decision that divided Israel (1 Kin. 11:10–11). Through the pagan Jezebel’s influence over Ahab, Israel’s king and her husband, he turned the nation to the worship of Baal, committed murder, and banned God’s prophets (1 Kin. 17–18). Because both Judah and Israel mingled and inter-married with the heathen nations, they both lapsed into idolatry, just as God had forewarned them. In the presence of certain people it is more difficult to do or say what is right.
2. **Temptation from Those We Love:** The Lord knew this sort of temptation. When the Lord appointed the apostles, some of His friends tried to take him home, thinking He was beside Himself in His words and deeds (Mark. 3:21). Peter engaged in this kind of temptation when He argued with the Christ that He would not be killed. He was so much a tempter in this instance that the Lord said to him, “Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art a stumbling-block unto me” (Mat. 16:23). Paul also felt the pull of loved ones, albeit well intentioned, not to do that which he believed he must do. When Agabus prophesied that Paul would be arrested if he went on to Jerusalem to deliver the contribution to the poor, the brethren begged him with tears not to go. Paul answered, “What do ye, weeping and breaking my heart? for I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 21:13). This must have provided a sore temptation to Paul because of his love for these brethren, including Luke and his other traveling companions.

In Alfred Tennyson’s “Idylls of the Kings,” he writes of Gareth, the youngest son left at home while his brothers have all gone off to serve King Arthur. His mother begs him to stay home, for she loves him dearly. She promises to plan a hunting trip and even provide a princess for his bride. Gareth replies: “Oh mother, how can you keep me tethered to you—shame. Man am I grown, and man’s work must I do. Follow the deer? Follow the Christ, the King. Live pure, speak true, right wrong, follow the King—else, wherefore born?”⁵ The love of his mother sorely tempted him to stay.

Many years ago I knew an elder and his family who had a dedicated, outstanding son who was just finishing high school and planning for college and his life’s work. The young man was considering preparation for a life of preaching, but his mother confided that she just could not bring herself to encourage her son to preach due to the sacrifices and trials she foresaw. Consequently, he studied medicine for awhile and at last word from them, ended up managing the family farm. The temptation of pleasing his mother was too great for him. This is not to imply that choosing to study to practice medicine or managing a farm, when compared with preaching, is sinful or even somehow dishonorable. However, this incident does illustrate the fact that the words, actions, and desires of loved ones are not easily resisted. If these temptations are to do what is wrong or to neglect what is right, the danger

is great. In some ways temptations from loved ones may be the most difficult ones to defend ourselves against.

3. **Temptations Relating to Reputation:** We sometimes call this “peer pressure,” and while it is often a pitfall for adults, it is a special area of danger for young people emerging from adolescence and trying desperately to “grow up.” It takes the form of an odd streak that makes one wish to appear worse than he or she really is, especially in certain crowds. Such do not want to appear holy, religious, pious, or narrow-minded.

Rather, they want to be thought of as suave, daring, swashbuckling, super-tolerant people of the world. In their desire for this sort of reputation they are sorely tempted to compromise Biblical standards of behavior and/or doctrine.

This appetite for acceptance explains much of the behavior of modern society, particularly that of its young people. This desire is the reason twelve-year-olds will swagger down the street blowing smoke and holding a cigarette as obviously as possible so everyone can see how sophisticated and “grown up” they are. Many have become involved in even more serious behavioral problems, including usage of alcohol and other kinds of illegal drugs, sexual activities, and even criminal acts. While some have not actually become involved in such acts, they may boast of doing them in order to avoid being ostracized or ridiculed by those whose favor they seek.

4. **Temptations from Within:** James warns us of the way temptation works internally on our lusts: “But each man is tempted, when he is drawn away by his own lust, and enticed” (Jam. 1:14). Every Christian has at least one weakness; most have many, and these vary widely among individuals. That which may be a sore temptation to one may not tempt someone else at all, and vice versa. One brother may not be tempted at all to drink alcohol in any form or to intentionally draw smoke into his lungs, but another might have a better chance at defeating an angry bear than these temptations. The story is old, but it still makes the point well. The devil was seeking the weakest area of a Christian’s life, so as to aim his “fiery darts” there. He found every frontal area well-protected, but he got around behind him and shot him in the pocketbook and felled him with one arrow. For this very reason Paul urges us to “Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil” (Eph. 6:11).

Ironically, temptation may overtake us at our point of strength. The greatest pitfall of an outstanding athletic team may be over-confidence in its strength or ability to win. Many castles have been broken through at their strongest point where it was thought no defenders were needed. One should be slow to boast of a sin into which another has fallen, “That is one thing I will never do!” We would do well to remember Paul’s admonition, “Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12). Few things give temptation an opportunity to seduce us as do pride, arrogance, and over-confidence.

While it is clear that Satan is the ultimate source of temptation, man is not thereby relieved of his culpability when he succumbs and sins. God created him with the power to choose his own course of life (whether good or evil) and has supplied him with both the information and

motivation to equip him for resisting temptation. Man is therefore “without excuse” (Rom. 1:20) and must without fail eventually give account of himself to God at the final Judgment to be administered by His Son (Acts 17:31; Rom. 2:6; 14:10–12; 2 Cor. 5:10).

The Operation and Result of Temptation

James 1:14–15 reveals the way in which temptation operates and the result of its successful operation in a person’s life:

1. There is a “drawing away” involved when one yields to temptation. “Drawn away” is from *exelko*, which means “to draw out...to lure forth.” “The metaphor is taken from hunting and fishing: as game is lured from its covert, so man by lust is allured from the safety of self restraint to sin.”⁶ Even before one is enticed to actually commit sin, he often cooperates with the devil in allowing himself to be lured to the place or circumstance of enticement. How important it thus becomes for us to avoid such situations, places, and associates that we know would subject us to unnecessary allurements. “Evil companionships [whether of persons, places, circumstances, or things (TV, books, magazines, etc.)] corrupt good morals” (1 Cor. 15:33) is a never-ending truism. There are some associations with evil that we cannot avoid in spite of our best efforts because we live in a wicked world (1 Cor. 5:10). However, one who unnecessarily, and by choice, subjects himself to an environment of evil allurements is playing with fire that more often than not will burn him, perhaps forever.
2. Temptation appeals to our fleshly lusts. “Lust” (*epithumia*) “denotes strong desire of any kind...”⁷ It is a neutral term, the connotation of which must be determined by context. Clearly, James uses it here in reference to an evil desire to fulfill a fleshly appetite in an unlawful way, thus eventuating in sin and death (v. 15). The phrase, *by his own lust*, emphasizes man’s personal responsibility for controlling his fleshly desires; he is personally culpable when he fails to do so. As previously noticed, it is through such lusts that Satan approaches us. Temptation takes its toll when one has a strong desire to fulfill a fleshly appetite unlawfully and allows himself to be drawn away by an agent of the devil to do so. Paul knew the importance of controlling the lusts of the flesh: “I buffet my body, and bring it into bondage: lest by any means, after that I have preached to others, I myself should be rejected” (1 Cor. 9:27).
3. When we yield to temptation we have been enticed. “Enticed” (*dealeazo*) is another term relating to catching fish or animals, only this one goes farther, meaning not only “to bait,” but also to “catch by a bait...to beguile by blandishments, allure, entice, deceive.”⁸ First the fish or animal is lured from its lair (“drawn away”), then it is hooked or caught in the trap (“enticed”). Thus, temptation provides the allurement (bait) by which one is drawn away from Truth and righteousness through its appeal to fleshly lusts. Then follows the enticement and actual gratification of the lust through which one has been allured. Well did Peter plead: “Beloved, I beseech you as sojourners and pilgrims, to abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul” (1 Pet. 2:11).

4. James changes his figure of speech from hunting and fishing to the conception- birth-maturation process. Lust is personified and is said to “conceive” from its union with the “seed” of temptation, giving birth to a new entity called “sin,” which, if allowed to grow to maturity unchecked and unforgiven, will result in death. Such is the biography of sin, the devil’s “plan of damnation.” “Death” here is not physical death—“it is appointed unto men once to die,” for saint and sinner alike (Heb. 9:27). Rather, this death is eternal separation from God in Hell: “For the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23).

The warning should be evident to all: That which may seem to be a small and insignificant flirtation or temptation may lead to the very bowels of eternal Hell!

Avoiding and Preventing Temptation

There is some defense against temptation in understanding what it is, how it operates, and the tragic results of yielding to it. However, there are other more specific weapons of which we need to be aware for this unceasing battle. Some of these are especially helpful in avoiding and preventing temptation, while others will be more helpful in dealing with temptation when it confronts us. Some will serve us well for both circumstances. Since temptation provides such a challenge to holy living for each Christian, it behooves us to find and apply whatever preventive and combative means are available to us.

In an hour of extreme dread and emotional agony for Himself, the Lord urged a two-fold safeguard against temptation upon Peter, James, and John in Gethsemane: “Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mat. 26:41; cf. Luke 22:46—“rise and pray”). While Jesus’ admonition was apparently a mild rebuke for their inability to resist the temptation to sleep in His hour of crisis, His advice is appropriate for avoidance of temptation of every kind. One who is concerned about obeying God and keeping oneself “unspotted from the world” (Jam. 1:27) will be vigilant concerning the places he goes (Gal. 5:16), the company he keeps (1 Cor. 15:33), and the things he allows to enter his mind (Phi. 4:8). He will be on constant alert for the first sign of any allurements that would appeal to the “fleshly lusts, which war against the soul” (1 Pet. 2:11). Remember that Peter, who was warned of the Lord to “watch” concerning temptation, also warned us to “be watchful” concerning Satan’s attempts to destroy us (5:8; cf. 1 The. 5:6).

While vigilance is necessary in preempting temptation, it must be combined with prayer. When the Lord taught us how to pray, His model prayer included the petition: “And bring us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one” (Mat. 6:13). These words cannot be understood as an implication that God might actually place enticements to sin before His

children, for He “tempteth no man” (Jam. 1:13b). Rather, we are to pray that God, in His gracious providence, will help us to avoid temptation and thereby help us escape the soul-destructive work of Satan. It is encouraging to remember as we pray: “The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptation” (2 Pet. 2:9). One who frequently prays about temptation is much more likely to be conscious of the ever-present danger of it, and thus more watchful for it. Let us then “pray without ceasing” and “continue stedfastly in prayer, watching therein with thanksgiving” (1 The. 5:17; Col. 4:2). Surely, if we would pray more we would faint less (Luke 18:1); fervent, constant prayer will help us avoid temptation.

Incessant study and application of the Word of God will help us avoid temptation: “Thy word have I laid up in my heart, that I might not sin against thee” (Psa. 119:11). The entire panoply of the Christian soldier, whether defensive or offensive, has the Word of God as its source (Eph. 6:13–18). By its use we “may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil” and “quench all the fiery darts of the evil one” (vv. 11, 16). Paul commanded, “Walk by the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh” (Gal. 5:16). To “walk by the Spirit” is parallel to being baptized “by one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13, KJV) in the sense that the Spirit is the one Who instructs us so that we know how to walk and how to be baptized, respectively. He delivered this instruction originally to inspired men (1 Cor. 2:10, 13), who produced the written Word to spiritually instruct and edify all mankind (Acts 20:32; 1 Cor. 14:37; 2 Tim. 3:16–17; 1 Pet. 1:22–25; 2 Pet. 1:20–21).

The number of saints who seem to be dedicated to maintaining their abysmal ignorance of the “rudiments of the first principles of the oracles of God” (Heb. 5:12) is legion. They will not even come to a Bible class prepared for them on Sunday morning or Wednesday night. It is impossible to picture such careless and indifferent folk as daily students of the Word. Given this observation, is it any wonder so many blunder into and succumb to the most obvious temptations, sometimes defending their “right” to do so (e.g., “social” drinking, dancing, displaying their near-nude bodies in public, attending Sunday morning worship only, et al.)?! There is no defense against temptation for the Christian who will not earnestly and faithfully study and personally apply the Word of God. Many have never learned: “Through thy precepts I get understanding: therefore I hate every false way” (Psa. 119:104).

Overcoming Temptation

Even when the most stalwart saint does his best to avoid temptation, Satan is so crafty and persistent that he will still find ways to make forbidden things appear attractive. How shall we deal with temptation when it unexpectedly confronts us? Some tactics may be thought of as

“psychological” (i.e., they have to do with our thought processes), while others are suggested by Scripture. The well-prepared saint will want to take advantage of both.

Psychological Weapons

1. **Self-Respect:** In the fifth century B.C., Nehemiah’s life was threatened by wicked men who sought to stop his efforts to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. It was suggested that he barricade himself in the temple till the danger was past. He replied: “Should such a man as I flee? and who is there, that, being such as I, would go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in” (Neh. 6:11). President Garfield was once urged to take a profitable, but dishonest, course of action on the ground that “no one will ever know.” He replied, “President Garfield will know, and I have to sleep with him.” When faced with temptation we need to ask ourselves, “Should such a one as I, a child of God, a follower of Christ, do such a thing as this?” We may hide a sinful act from most people, but we cannot hide it from ourselves or from God. Sins can be forgiven, but our memory of having committed them is difficult to escape.
2. **Reputation:** Just as seeking a certain reputation may cause us to be tempted to sin, reputation may also be turned into a source of strength against temptation. An individual who has earned a good name for himself should remember how easily and quickly it can be lost by yielding to temptation. Though quickly lost, it is only with much difficulty and time that it can be regained. This principle has to do with “group reputation” as well as with one’s personal reputation. A school that builds up a “winning tradition” in some sport puts pressure on the entire student body to uphold it. The good report of a family name, established and nurtured over several generations, cannot be taken lightly and produces a motivation to maintain it. Even one person who misbehaves can soil the reputation of the entire group. Pericles, the legendary Athenian statesman, before addressing the Athenian assembly, always whispered to himself, “Pericles, remember that you are an Athenian and that you go to speak to Athenians.”

The Scriptures urge this very motivation upon us. Paul exhorted the Ephesians: “I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beseech you to walk worthily of the calling wherewith ye were called” (Eph. 4:1). If we “take thought for things honorable in the sight of all men” (Rom. 12:17b), we are responding to the pressure of reputation. We have often wondered if it would not be a good idea to place a bumper sticker on every car belonging to Christians that reads: “I am a member of the church of Christ.” It is a sobering thought to realize that I may

destroy not only upon my own reputation by yielding to certain temptations, but even worse, I may seriously harm the good reputation of the Lord's church by so doing.

3. **Loved Ones:** As with reputation, so with loved ones – just as they can work against us, they may also fortify us against temptation. Doubtless, many a young man, though thousands of miles from home, has been kept from wrongdoing by knowing the hurt and pain such behavior would cause his godly parents. It should be a powerful motivation to a Father to know that his behavior will be imitated by a son who watches his every move and believes he can do no wrong. Surely, the reluctance to do anything that would inflict pain or shame on one's spouse has helped secure the marital bond of many husbands and wives. Many people would be persuaded to engage in certain sinful acts, but they are delivered from temptation because they cannot bear to think of the pain their behavior would cause those who love them.

The Scriptures testify that this motivation is both high and holy. Paul used it as follows: "Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?" (Rom. 2:4). It should be repugnant to us to even consider doing anything that might grieve the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30). It is most practical, when tempted, to ask, "What would my father or mother, husband or wife, children, best friends, the elders, or the preacher think of me if I yield to this temptation?"

4. **The Lord's Presence:** Would we behave differently or be stronger spiritually if the Lord rode with us everywhere we go in our cars, if He were beside us constantly at work, if He went with us on vacation, if He moved into our house and lived with us daily, or if He went with us in our recreational activities? Do we need reminding that a concept frequently repeated in the New Testament is that His presence **is** with everyone, saint and sinner, each minute, everywhere? Paul told the pagan residents of old Athens that "they should seek God ..., though he is not far from each one of us" (Acts 17:27). Hebrews 4:13 is even more specific: "And there is no creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and laid open before the eyes of him with whom we have to do." It should be a source of strength against temptation to remember that Christ understands our plight: "For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succor them that are tempted" (Heb. 2:18). His inescapable presence should move us to make all things about our lives fit for His holy eyes.

Scriptural Strategies

1. **Fight:** In some circumstances we should stand and fight, as James teaches: “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (4:7). Peter echoes the same thought: “whom [the devil] withstand steadfast in your faith...” (1 Pet. 5:9). However, one must carefully equip himself if he would successfully battle the Prince of Darkness: “Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil” (Eph. 6:11).
2. **Flight:** In other circumstances the danger is so great and acute that the wiser course is to flee rather than fight. Paul commanded Timothy to “flee youthful lusts” (2 Tim. 2:22). This course seems to be the best one particularly regarding sexual temptations. Perhaps this is so because the sexual appetite is one of the most powerful ones God has given to mankind, especially to males. It is likely for this cause that Paul warned the Corinthians to “flee fornication” (1 Cor. 6:18). When he commanded them also to “flee idolatry” (10:14) one of the primary reasons may have been due to the employment of the hundreds of “priestess-prostitutes” in the Corinthian temple of Aphrodite. This temptation of Satan was most clever and strong – the worshiper could engage in fornication and be made to feel religious by doing so! Joseph argued with and avoided Mrs. Potiphar’s advances as long as she would let him. However, when she laid hold on Joseph to fulfill her lust, he wisely did not fight, but “left his garment in her hand, and fled, and got him out” (Gen. 39:12).
3. **Prayer:** Prayer has already been discussed as one of the effective preventive measures regarding temptation; it is also a weapon we should use when we are confronted by it. It appears from the descriptions of Matthew, Mark, and Luke of the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane that the Lord’s ultimate struggle with temptation may have occurred there. Here seemed to be His last chance to change His mind about going to the cross. Surely none would doubt that it was a temptation to Him in His humanity to avoid the dreadful and agonizing trials and death that He knew lay ahead. He confessed to the intimate three, “My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death...” (Mat. 26:38a). How did He face and overcome this rigorous temptation? He prayed: “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass away from me: nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt” (v. 39b). He did this not only once or twice, but three times (vv. 42, 44). It is perhaps not too much to conclude that, as He would win the victory for us the following day over sin and death, He won the victory for Himself over His last great temptation through His fervent prayers in the

quietness of Gethsemane. The hymn-writer certainly wrote from a Scriptural perspective when he penned the following verse:

When you met with great temptation,
Did you think to pray?
In the name of Christ, the Savior,
Did you sue for loving favor,
At the gates of day?
Oh, how praying rests the weary,
Prayer can change the night to day.
So, when life seems dark and dreary,
Don't forget to pray.

Conclusion

It is a part of the very warp and woof of life for every human being that temptations will come. This is even more the case for the Christian. Satan cannot stand to see one "delivered...out of the power of darkness, and translated...into the kingdom of the Son of his love" (Col. 1:13). Accordingly, he will arouse every sort of temptation against the elect that he possibly can. It is comforting to remember, concerning all such things,

Paul's inspired promise: "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 a way also to escape, that ye may be able to endure it" (1 Cor. 10:13). God will provide the escape, but we must seek it and use it!

Endnotes

1. All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.
2. W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1966 reprint), s.v., "temptation," 4:117.
3. Some of the material in this section has appeared in a slightly different form in *Meeting the Challenging Tests of Life*, ed. Bob McAnally (Lakeland, FL: Florida School of Preaching, 1998).
4. This statement, of course, must be understood of the Godhead in spirit form only, including the pre-incarnate Word (John 1:1-3, 14). It obviously does not include the incarnate state of Deity in the person of the Christ, Who, though still possessed of Godhood, nonetheless was "made in the likeness of men," "found in fashion as a man," and had "flesh and bones" (Phi. 2:7-8; Luke 24:39). In this fleshly state it was incumbent upon Him to undergo temptation because He was human. Thus, the observation concerning His human form: "Wherefore it behooved him in all things to be made like unto his brethren... For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succor them that are tempted" (Heb. 2:17-18). Admittedly, there are numerous passages that speak of man's "tempting" God (Exo. 17:7; Num. 14:22; Deu. 6:16; Psa. 78:56; et al.). However, in each case these are to be understood in the sense of making trial of Him, of pushing His longsuffering to the limit. This understanding is borne out in the ASV by its rendering of *peirazo* with the word *trial* in the NT passages that quote or refer to the OT passages in which man is said to "tempt" God (e.g., Mat. 4:7; 1

Cor. 10:9; Heb. 3:8; cf. Acts 15:10). In none of the passages in which man is depicted as “tempting” God is there any implication that men are trying to coax Him to sin or that He is capable of being thus enticed.

5. *Poetical Works of Tennyson*, ed. G. Robert Stang (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1974, Cambridge ed.), pp. 311–333.
6. Joseph Henry Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1974 rep.), p. 222.
7. Vine, s.v., “lust,” 3:25.
8. Thayer, p. 128.

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