

"The Philosophy of Temptation"

by
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"Lead us not into temptation."
Matthew 6:13

The Greek word which is commonly translated "temptation" in the New Testament has the old double meaning of that word, which we generally now express by two distinct words, "temptation" and "trial." The Latin word "*tento*" or "*tempto*," whence we derive our word "temptation," also had the double meaning. The root idea is "to try or prove" a thing, to test it so as to show its quality or value. But as such trial is often made in order to expose the faults of a thing, and is also made to show the worth and high value of a thing, the word came to be used with both meanings according to the object of the one "trying." If Satan tries us, he tries us in order to develop our wickedness. But if God tries us, it is to develop faith in Him. To the former we are now apt to confine our use of the word "temptation," and to the latter we assign the word "trial," but it was not so in King James' day; and hence we read in the translation of Scripture of that day "God tempted Abraham," where most certainly it is not intended that God endeavored to expose and increase the sin of Abraham. We are to keep these two applications of the word in mind as we read the sacred volume.

We have many examples in English of a word of neutral meaning gradually becoming so commonly used for one application as to lose almost altogether its use in the other. For example, the word "disappoint" is such a neutral word, meaning simply to fail in an appointment or expectation. But it is almost always used for such a failure as brings sorrow, whereas it might be used for such as brings joy. But in this latter case we now put the adverb "agreeably" before it, and say, "I was agreeably disappointed." Without the adverb it would mark a sorrow. So "temptation" may be a trial for our good or a trial for our harm, according to the intention of the one tempting or trying.

Still again, we may readily conceive that the same course of events may be used by Satan to tempt us to evil and by God to strengthen us in faith. The events then become a temptation to us in both senses. God permits Satan to tempt us to evil. In such a case God is tempting us too, but in the sense of trying us. Satan's purpose is our ruin. God's purpose is our welfare through renewed experience and strength.

Let us apply these principles to some of the texts of Scripture where the word occurs: "God did tempt Abraham" (Gen. 22:1); *i.e.*, God did put Abraham's faith to the test to strengthen it. "Wherefore do ye tempt the Lord?" (Exod.17:2); *i.e.*, "Wherefore do ye make trial of the Lord's patience as to when it must cease?" So Jesus says, "Why tempt ye me?" (Matt. 22:18); *i.e.*, "Why do ye test my ability by such a question?" "That Satan tempt you not" (1 Cor. 7: 5); *i.e.*, that Satan seduce you not into evil. "They that will be rich fall into temptation" (1 Tim. 6:9); *i.e.*, into allurements to evil. "Blessed is the man who endures temptation"; *i.e.*, who bears the trial, whether it come directly from God (as Abraham's did) or from Satan, permitted by God. "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God; for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempts He any man." Here it is evident and expressed, that the temptation is to sin, an inducement and allurements to commit iniquity.

With this explanation and illustration of the word, we are prepared to examine and understand the sixth petition of the Lord's prayer, "Lead us not into temptation." The Revision has the better verb in this passage, "*Bring us not* into temptation," since it is not a leader going before but simply a power exerted that is denoted. God is besought that His power may not be exerted toward our delivery to temptation. But how is God's power ever so used?

We have seen that it is so used in two ways. First, by direct order, as in the case of Abraham. And this would include the divine arrangement of life's circumstances (or, as the modern philosophers call it, our *environment*). And secondly, by permitting Satan to allure us to sin. This latter God may do to strengthen His own people through showing them their weakness, and that only in Him can they be safe. Or, [thirdly], He may do it when He finally gives over the sinner to sin and eternal death. Let us consider each case, and we will regard them in the inverse order.

1. The prayer cannot have relation to the final giving over of the sinner to Satan, for the sinner in such case would not wish to pray at all. The child who says "Our Father" has not a final giving over to Satan to fear. The two parts of the prayer could not be made to agree with such a meaning.

2. The second case is where God permits Satan to tempt the soul to evil. Why does God give such permission? Because (1) we need to know by experience our own weakness. We need to have a realizing sense of the fact that the powers of darkness have such allies in our own hearts that, if left to ourselves, we are completely at their mercy. This is not plaguing or tantalizing us. It is making us know the simple truth, which we ought to know. Unless we know the truth we cannot walk according to the truth. All forms of human pride in philosophy and conduct arise from ignorance of this great truth of human weakness before sin's allurements. Men fall into sin's snares and yet think that they have power to resist sin if they wish. They make good resolutions and then fall again. Then, instead of seeing that they must inevitably fall before the stronger power, they think that they made some mistake in their resolution and preparation, and that they will not be snared again. But when the temptation comes, again they fall. It will be always so until the soul discovers that it has absolutely *no* strength against sin.

Now God suffers Satan to tempt the soul to sin in order to teach this great lesson of human weakness. He suffers Satan to tempt His own redeemed children for the same purpose, for they too often forget how weak they are and need the same treatment with the unbeliever. Good Job had to be so taught, and Satan was allowed to tempt him so that Job fell into a wretched condition of proud talking and boasting and complaining, until his own development of folly before God opened his eyes and made him fall down and confess his abhorrence of himself and his sincere repentance. God did not here directly tempt Job to evil, for God cannot do that to any being. That would be collusion with evil. But God allowed Satan, who is always watching to do it, to tempt Job to evil, in order that Job might be led into the good and true path, by no longer relying on himself but only on God. Let no one say that this is the same thing as if God had directly tempted Job to the evil. There's a world-wide difference.

Is there no difference between your *urging* your child to meddle with the fire and your

letting him in his waywardness meddle with it under your parental oversight? You know the difference at once. The former would make you guilty of seeking his hurt. The latter shows you active in seeking his good. And *that* is just why God allows evil to tempt His children, so that He may be said to *bring* them into temptation, but not to lead them into it.

But (2) not only to have us know our own weakness does God do this, but also that through knowledge of our weakness we may go to Him for strength. We have self-reliance so deeply rooted in us that it takes a great deal of rough experience to root it out. We think (in spite of a correct logic) that we have *some* moral strength; and hence our acceptance of God, though perfectly honest and true so far as it goes, is but partial. We do not take Him for our *All in all*. Hence He wishes us to feel that our flesh and heart fail, that He may be the strength of our heart. The Psalmist's highest strains of devotion use the frequent note, "O Lord, my strength," and hence his joy and courage. "The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?"

To know our weakness and have no refuge, as is so often the case with the practical atheists of the world, is despair. But to know our weakness and to have God as our strength is the very top of joy. It is then [that] the Christian sings the paradox, "When I am weak, then am I strong." It is the response to that most gracious word of God, "My strength is *made perfect* in weakness." It is no little hint of security, but it is the *perfection* of strength which is given to the faithful heart. Luther, at Worms, is only a type of *every* Christian who is strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Is not such a consummation well worth the temptation of the devil, to which the Lord exposes us at times? If the road be foul, is not the goal exceeding fair? Would we have it otherwise if we could? The strong Christian is the weak one. The strongest Christian is he who in his heart of hearts knows and feels that he is of himself utterly powerless before evil powers. So long as he has a grain of trust in himself, his strength is marred and defeat is before him.

3. But the third case of our temptation is where God directly, by our constitution and environment, tries us. Here it is no allurement to sin which is permitted, but the behests of duty which call for action. Our relations in life to others call for self-denial, self-sacrifice, and positive aggressions in various directions. God has directly placed us in these relations which demand these duties. These duties are His commands. They are trials. They are of a thousand forms. They are given on purpose to cause us to exercise our highest powers as guided by the Holy Spirit. They demand the Divine strength, just as do the temptations of Satan. These trials are of the same nature as Abraham's trial in the command to offer up Isaac. They are calls upon us to give up something very dear, to do that which is directly counter to our natural tastes and desires. The daily little self-denials of life come legitimately under this head.

We would like to be rid of these annoyances. But what would we be if we had not been disciplined by them? To what a fearful size our selfishness would have grown if it had not been reduced by these repeated depletions! What are these but mercies in disguise, which yet produce in us so much fretfulness and impatience. Are they not knocking off rough angles and polishing the surface of character? Are they not the strokes of the divine artist forming us more and more into the likeness of Christ? We may see how in such direct trials from the Almighty, Satan sees his opportunity and presents his special temptation to sin; not now in the way of gross or positive vice, but in the way of a rebellious position toward duty. So the two ideas embraced in the word "temptation," and which we in modern

English generally distinguish by the two words "temptation" and "trial," are seen to be closely allied after all. In every case the Christian may see that God is behind all, seeking the soul's welfare; and hence the apostle James' remarkable saying, "My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations."

But now, if this be the philosophy of temptation, why should we pray, "Bring us not into temptation"? Should we not rather pray, "Keep us ever *in* temptation"? Have we not found temptation to be such a helper of grace that we cannot do without it, and hence cannot pray against it? Have we not reached a contradiction? Wait a moment. Is a medicine to be *always* taken as if it were a beverage? Because it has a health-giving power, must it take the place of ordinary food and drink? May we not by prudence in diet and mode of life lessen the necessity of taking medicine? Ah! Here is the cue to our petition, "Bring us not into temptation." Not that we do not wish to grow in grace, not that we do not wish to be strong and healthy Christians, but that we desire to be *so* strong and healthy as not to need the trial and temptation. We long to be so full of love to God and man that the severe discipline may be no longer needed.

And so this petition corresponds to all the others in the Lord's prayer. The whole prayer seeks the highest development of the Christian life. It asks for the fulness of God's kingdom upon earth and in our own hearts. The first three petitions--"Hallowed be Thy name," "Thy kingdom come," "Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven"--all look to the perfection of Christ's work in a pure and perfect church. The other four petitions--"Give us this day our daily bread" (not simply food for the body but the nourishment of our souls), "Forgive us our debts as we forgive *our* debtors," "Lead us not into temptation," and "Deliver us from the Evil One"--all look to the perfection of Christ's work in our own hearts, when, fully nourished by God's Word and Spirit, we have all love toward our fellows and will not need the teachings of trial and temptation to keep us close to God.

The petition then, which we have been considering, is not a cowardly cry to escape trial in every case, but a prayer for that higher holiness of heart which will diminish our need of trial. So long as we need trials, let us from a high standpoint of observation "count it all joy when we fall into divers temptations," humbly using the lesson of entire dependence on God, which is thus administered in a gracious though afflictive providence. But this does not militate against our prayer to God to bring us not into temptation and trial through our ready heed to former lessons and our closer life with God.

Let us then, dear brethren, keep our ears attentive unto the Lord's words and seek to do His holy will in all our daily conduct. Let us weigh everything in heavenly balances. Let us bring everything to the touchstone of Divine truth. Let us purify ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh. Let us live here on earth with our eyes fixed on the heavenly habitations. Let us be forever done with worldly compromises which disfigure our piety and disgrace us before the higher intelligences. And then we shall be able to offer up the petition of our text and its connected one with a profound meaning in the thought and a happy expectation of the divine answer, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the Evil One."

"The Philosophy of Temptation" by Howard Crosby in *Sermons*, (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph & Co., 1891. Note: The text has not been modified, except that punctuation has been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.