



Pilgrimage:

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PATTERNS OF TEMPTATION

Jesus' three-fold temptation in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry gives us the pattern for the temptations which we face in our lives. It is a pattern also to be found in the temptation of Eve in the Garden of Eden, and in the temptations of Israel in the wilderness during the exodus from Egypt.

Jesus' first temptation is to turn the stones into bread to satisfy his hunger, and to preserve His life. After his forty days' fast, his life is at stake. Bread is not a bad thing. God would not want Him to die in the wilderness. It seems reasonable to use His divine powers to provide for His need.

Yet it is a temptation -- to provide for self instead of trusting God. God knows of His need. He must leave it in God's hands, and not take it into his own. Thus His recourse to Deuteronomy 8:3 ("Man doth not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God."), affirming His trust in God's word over and above his own physical needs.

Israel in the wilderness had a hard time with this. They complained against God when they were but a few days into the desert and their provisions began to run low. God sent the miraculous manna, which fed them until they entered the promised land many years later. Even then, they murmured about the dullness of the diet and pined for the fleshpots of Egypt, the onions and the leeks. They revolted over the lack of water, and the lack of meat. They were consistently unfaithful, putting their physical needs before their trust in God.

Jesus' first temptation is also identical to man's temptation in the Garden: Eve was tempted to put aside the word of God in order to eat the forbidden fruit. She and Adam put their own desires, and what they think is their best interest, before the commandment of God. They attempt to live by bread rather than the word of God.

The temptation for us is to live for our gratification. Since so many of our desires appear as legitimate needs -- it doesn't make sense to starve ourselves -- we unthinkingly gratify them. Yet this leads to a life lived for self and not for God. If we never practice any self-denial, we end up as spoiled children, unable to pray, or resist temptation, or love anyone other than ourselves.

It is hard to avoid the habits of self-indulgence. How hard it is for us to lose those few extra pounds, or to stop smoking, or to get up when the alarm goes off. How hard it is not to complain when we are sick, or to resent the adversity which strikes by accident. We cannot expect to overcome our lifelong (if unconscious) habits of self-indulgence by ourselves. When we try to fight them and fail, we learn our weakness and our need for God. This is good, if humbling. We must ask His grace to bring some discipline to our lives. The Lenten fast is important to Christian life as the occasion when we ask God's help to discipline our fleshly desires, to live not by bread alone.

Self-indulgence is not just a matter of what we put into our mouths -- that is hard enough to deal with. But it is also a matter of what we put into our minds. Without even thinking, we watch things on television or look at magazines which have no real value. While they may not be sinful in themselves (like pornography, e.g.), there is nothing good in them, and we would be better off without putting such trash into our minds. The images serve only to arouse our passions -- anger, lust, indignation, greed, covetousness, envy. Once the passionate images are there, Satan can use them against us through our memory at the time of prayer. In short, we decide what to watch by our baser desires and not by the standard of what will help us to be better Christians.

Jesus' temptation to turn the stones into bread would have required Him to step out of His human nature for a moment to exercise His divine power. This makes the temptation serious, for His mission on earth is to redeem mankind by sharing all of our nature, even the effects of sin and death. When we are tempted to gratification, we are also tempted to reject the limitations of our nature. We act as though we should be greater than the fallen humans we really are -- not having such desires and having everything under control. Then we become frustrated, impatient, angry, bitter. Resisting the temptation requires that we accept being human, even those inconvenient and disorderly desires (such as hunger). Our goal is to accept God's grace to deal with them rather than pretend we ought not have them.

Jesus' second temptation (in Matthew's order) is to throw Himself down from the pinnacle of the temple, presuming that God's angels will catch Him before He is dashed on the stones beneath. Satan even uses Scripture (Psalm 91: "He shall give his angels charge over thee ...") to buttress his temptation. But Jesus sees that this is putting God to the test: not an act of faith but of unfaith. He renounces His claim on the ministry of the angels, and refuses to put God to the test.

Adam and Eve put God to the test. Is His commandment really true? Will they die? Satan denies it. Can God mean to put them in mortal danger in this paradise He has made for them? Surely this is not the work of a good Creator. He loves them, and will not let them hurt themselves. Punishment, especially death, cannot be compatible with His love. And with

such doubts they put Him to the test. They decide to find out for themselves instead of trusting His word.

Likewise Israel in the wilderness put God to the test time and again. They would not believe that He would care for them. So they murmured and rebelled when they lacked water or bread or meat or an easy entrance into the promised land or when they feared the coming battle. "Harden not your hearts as in the provocation, and as in the day of temptation in the wilderness; when your fathers tempted me, proved me, and saw my works." (Psalm 95:8-9) Murmuring implies the demand that God prove Himself to their satisfaction.

Following our ancestors, we put God to the test. We know that He forgives us, so we take sin lightly. We think it doesn't matter that much. Christ died for the sins of the whole world, so it's covered. He cares for me and has shown such love for me that He will keep me from really hurting myself. His grace is always greater than my sin, so I can go ahead, sin, and He'll forgive me.

How subtle the temptation is! There is an element of truth in all this -- just as in Psalm 91 which Satan quoted to Jesus. Yet it is half-truth. It matters profoundly whether we sin, not because we cannot be forgiven afterwards, but because it offends God. It cuts us off from Him, even if only a little. If He is our supreme love and concern, then we will not wish to indulge sin for a moment, or think lightly of it, because it offends the Beloved. When the love of God is central, we can see the temptation for what it is.

There is another form of this temptation: I'll run my life the way I see best, and God will pick up the pieces. Here we use God as the "fixer." We take control, and expect that He will make things all right at the end. We presume upon His love and good will, which is, after all, proclaimed in Scripture. We throw ourselves down from the pinnacle, and expect the angels to catch us.

Note that after an interval, angels did come to Jesus in the wilderness and minister to Him. Having renounced His demand upon their ministry, He receives it as God's gift. We will also find that when we are willing to renounce out of our trust and love for God, then we (at some point) will receive more than we dared desire.

Jesus' third temptation is to gain all worldly power in exchange for worshipping a false god. He is tempted to grasp at a means for doing good -- reordering the world's political systems would have eliminated much injustice and suffering. But it is not what God has sent Him to do. He would be accepting a lesser good in place of a greater -- and doing so at the enormous cost of false worship. He is tempted here to do things His own way, apart from God, even if it appears to be a good work which might be pleasing to God.

Satan promises Adam and Eve, "Ye shall be as gods." He plants in them the desire to be as God, which is to give up worshipping Him alone. They are not content with being humans, and worshipping God. Instead, they aspire to being worthy of worship themselves, co-gods with the one God. They don't want to settle for what is; they want what they might accomplish for themselves.

Their aspiration to divinity is bound up with their desire to do something independently of God. They want to know good and evil, of their own experience and not just on God's word. They want to run their lives on their own, and not according to what God has taught them. They think they can improve themselves by eating the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, perhaps even improve themselves for God's service. But they do it at the expense of obedience to His word.

Likewise Israel goes after false gods in the wilderness. They make the golden calf and claim that it is the God Yahweh who brought them out of Egypt. They are not content to wait for Moses to bring God's word to them; they go off on their own. Similarly, they often rebel against God's word, as when He tells them to attack and they refuse, and He tells them to forbear and they attack. (Numbers 14) When they conquer the Moabites, instead of putting all to death as God has instructed, they keep the women alive for spoils of war, and are led astray by them to worship the Moabite gods.

This is perhaps our most serious temptation: to run our own lives. Even when we cannot do so, we think we ought to, and resent our inability to do it successfully. We resent our failures. Thus we show that we pretend to be gods. We think we **ought** to be able to run things, even that God expects us to run things. Even if we want to run things for the sake of doing things for God, or accomplishing good things in the world, it is still our pride and false divinity which operates. To be human (rather than pretending to be divine) means to be dependent on God, and to worship Him alone, and not self.

So often we live as though we were contract agents of God and not His servants or sons. The son is subject to the father, and gives service out of his devotion and love. But the contract agent feels that there are obligations on both sides -- that while he may owe God something, God also owes him. This is a sore temptation, because it seems to offer a greater life than that of a mere servant. But it does so only at the expense of worship of the true God. We cannot do it our way. Only God's way is good; all else is temptation.

Adam was tempted; the chosen people were tempted; Jesus was tempted. So will we be tempted. There is no shame in that. It is the way we grow up, by making moral choices, and learning to live for God and not for self. Temptations are unpleasant, particularly the subtle ones where it is not clear which is the right choice -- as when Satan uses Scripture to his own purpose. When we fail in temptation, we are humiliated.

But we also take comfort that Jesus has already been through temptation for us. He knows what it is like, and has suffered its blandishments more than we have, for He has resisted to the end. We can share our temptations freely with Him. He knows what we are going through. And in the subtle ones, the only way we can hope to resist is by His power at work in us. He alone can infallibly discern what is the temptation and what is the right. In giving ourselves into His hands, we give ourselves a chance of triumphing. We also practice that correct relationship with God, that loving dependence which is both our goal in life and the means of reaching it.