



# Pilgrimage:

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## TEMPTATION

Temptation is the common lot of man. Adam was tempted. Eve was tempted. Even Jesus was tempted. We are tempted as well, from time to time. If we are to progress in the spiritual life, we must understand how temptation works. It can be an occasion for sin, or it can be an occasion for spiritual growth. When we are tempted, we can give in to our selfishness and be led away from God. Or by perseverance in the time of temptation we can grow in our dependence on God and draw nearer to Him.

Temptation is not the same as sin. Temptation is the allure of sin, our contemplation of some act that is wrong along with the desire to do it. The ideas of particular sins occur to us unprovoked, and uncontrolled by us. It just happens. What we do with the temptation determines whether temptation leads to sin or to growth.

Temptation is itself often unpleasant, especially for one trying to resist it. It was no doubt unpleasant and difficult for Jesus to resist the offer of the whole world which Satan made Him (think of the good He could have done with that power!), or to resist the taunts of the crowd, "Come down from the cross, and then we will believe you." Because it is unpleasant, temptation is sometimes confused with sin. People think that because they are having a lot of temptation, they must be doing something wrong. Things do not feel quite right. If they were living right, all would be peaceful, right?

Actually, no. The story is told of a Desert Father named John the Dwarf (one of the early monks of the Church, living in the desert in Egypt in the fourth century), who prayed that he might be delivered from his temptations so that he could live in peace. He told an older monk, "I find myself in peace without an enemy." He got an unexpected reply: "Go and beseech God to stir up warfare so that you may regain the affliction and humility that you used to have, for it is by warfare that the soul makes progress." John took his advice to heart and asked it of God. When the conflict came, he no longer prayed that it might be taken away, but that he might receive strength for the fight.

In His wondrous approach to our redemption, God has taken the instrument of our downfall -- temptation -- and made it into a means of our redemption. The potential for destruction is still there: we can still fall prey to temptation and commit sin. But it is also an opportunity, a chance for us to grow in our faith.

So having a lot of temptation may be a sign of progress in the spiritual life, though it may feel more like failure. Temptations are a sign that Satan is afraid of your progress, and is working that much harder to deter you. The battle is always an opportunity for growth -- but it also carries with it the risk of failure.

The same was true for Eve. While her temptation was the occasion for her fall, it could have been the chance for growth. What happened to her is typical of all temptations, so it is worth looking closely at the account of her temptation in Genesis 3.

First off, Satan tries to exaggerate the prohibition that God has made: "Is it true that God has forbidden you to eat of the fruit of any of the trees in the Garden?" He tries to make the prohibition seem unreasonable and unattainable.

To us, he would say, "God is not unreasonable. He would not expect you to do what is beyond your power. So He couldn't actually require that you do that."

Eve, however, shows that she understands the command perfectly well. "God has forbidden us only the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. All else we may eat. But if we eat that, we shall die." She has not yet experienced death, so she doesn't really know (from experience) what will happen. But she knows what God has told her. A small child may not understand the pain that will result from touching the hot toaster, but he knows that Mommy has forbidden him to touch it. He understands the command, even without completely fathoming the reason for it.

Satan continues the conversation with a typical half truth. "You shall not die." Eve, having never experienced death, is not in a position to argue with Satan, who speaks from his own experience,

or at least seems to. Satan tempts her by saying that the consequence of the forbidden action is not as God says it is. Eve cannot really argue with him -- she must trust the word of either Satan or God.

"You'll never know what it feels like until you try it. Certainly God wants you to experience everything in human life, so try it."

Satan tells her that it isn't really bad: "You will be as gods, knowing good and evil." He makes the bad seem good, by first minimizing the consequences that God has warned about, and then making the act itself seem good. Eve is lured away from her trust in God's statement into trying to evaluate it herself. She cannot do this very well, since she lacks the perspective that God has. Satan has succeeded so far as to get her to try to judge God's command instead of simply obeying it.

"Just think about it for a moment: that can't hurt anything, can it?"

Eve, having been turned so far from the command already, now gives her attention entirely to the forbidden fruit. She has dismissed the command from her mind. Satan has gotten her to try to judge the decision solely on the merits of the fruit. She no longer thinks of the consequences. She no longer has God in mind at all, only the fruit. She sees that it is pleasing to the eye and good to eat. Her vision has narrowed: from God and His love and His law and all the trees of the Garden, down to this one fruit. And so she eats.

Immediately the spell of the fruit is broken. In an instant of diabolical clarity, she realizes what she has done. She realizes that she cannot undo her sin. She hides from God because she has driven Him away, preferring to fill herself with the fruit. When He confronts her, she refuses to take responsibility for her actions. She blames temptation.

After the Fall, Satan finds some new ploys for tempting us. One of the most common is the "You've done it so much before, why bother resisting? You know you'll give in" ploy. As with his statement to Eve about death, it is a lie -- but only half a lie. Left to our own devices, we are doomed to fall. Eve fell because she tried to fight it out on her own. She tried to consider the matter herself, and let her desires fight it out within her. She tried to do it without God.

Without His aid, we, too, will fall. If we try to judge each desire we have solely on the basis of its object, without reference to God and what He has taught us of right and wrong, we will fall to temptation. For the contemplation of the object only increases the

desire. If we give ourselves over to the object mentally, we make it so much harder to resist giving ourselves over materially.

Better if we can avoid getting that far. Better if we can head off the temptation earlier on. When it first arises, we should be ready to dismiss the thought of the object of desire, before it is firmly established in the mind, and turn our attention instead to God's grace, to the wonderful things He has done for us, to His power, to His love for us.

It is only by His power -- not ours -- that we can resist temptation successfully. That is something that is very hard to learn. When we succeed in resisting some particular temptation we are only too ready to claim credit for the victory. If we do, our pride will have led us away from God. It will have led us to think that we do not need Him any more. It is a pride that prepares us for a much greater fall.

This is why we must have so much temptation. It is our opportunity to learn to live out of God's strength rather than out of our own. For by falling -- and just by being tempted -- we learn how much we need God. We learn that we cannot resist even in little things without Him. Our pride tells us that we ought to be able to resist the snack and stay on our diet. But we find that we cannot. When we attempt to do it on our own, failure is inevitable. Temptation tells us, "That's a little thing, the diet -- you can do it on your own. Don't bother God about something so trivial."

The point is that we cannot do even little things on our own -- nor should we wish to. If we are God's, we must be entirely His, not just His in the big things. Eve could not even resist a single fruit on her own, and look what that did!

It is only because we are sure of God's love for us that we can face our need for Him. Without the strength that comes from God, we could never face our sin or our temptations. But Satan tries to use even that love in tempting us. "God loves you and forgives your sins: so why bother about this one? Go ahead: He will forgive you afterward."

God's love is not of course meant to be an occasion for sin. It is meant to lead us to a new life, a life of love and joy in Him. That is something that Satan will never understand, because he is consumed in selfishness.

It is because God loves us that He allows us to be tempted. If we flee to Him in our times of trial, we will learn of His love for us. We will learn how much He cares for us. We will grow up in His love, abiding more and more in His commands, which are the way of love. Through sharing our temptations with Jesus, we will be able to grow into the full stature of Christ, and grow up as children of God.