

# Temptation

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For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin. (Heb 4:15)

## Introduction

Our ability to understand Heb 4:15 will materially depend on what we mean by temptation and our ability to determine what the author of the above passage meant by it. Consider the following line of reasoning. "We know that the law is spiritual" (Rom 7:14). Thus, the law is broken not only when we do wrong but when we want to do wrong. Assuming that temptation means wanting to do wrong but trying not to act on that desire, then temptation is already sin. So how can anyone say--as the author of Hebrews does in fact say under inspiration of the Holy Spirit--that Christ was "tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin"?

Below I hope to show that the impossible theological problem created in the above manner follows from an incorrect concept of temptation and also from flawed exegetical method.

In the New Testament the English word "temptation" represents the Greek word *peirazō* ("I tempt"). This word is used as a technical term and derives from the older and more general term *peiraō* ("I test"). Thus, the idea of "tempting" derives from the idea of "testing."

No one was ever tested so strenuously and unrelentingly as Christ was. And yet no one was ever so pure in his inner mind--so free from any desire to do wrong. Until we understand how Christ could be tempted, we will not understand temptation. It serves no useful purpose to reason from ourselves to ourselves and then impute the results of such reasoning to Christ. We must understand, at least in some degree, the role that temptation played in Christ's life or we will have no insight into the nature of temptation in our own experience. He must be the starting point in this as in all other discussions.

## The Temptation in the Garden

In the garden Satan came to Eve with an argument that is similar to the one summarized at the beginning of this paper. God had told our first parents not to eat the fruit of one tree (see Gen 2:16-17). But when asked, Eve embellished God's words, stating that the restriction was not to eat the fruit and also not to touch it (see Gen 3:2-3). Now, as she stands in front of the tree holding a piece of the forbidden fruit, the serpent could argue that she may as well eat because if, as she said, it was not to be touched, she had touched it. Had she not? The evidence was there in her hand. And because she had disobeyed she was already going to die. What is the difference between dying having eaten the fruit and dying having only touched it? Why not at least find out how it tasted? By now the distinction between actually eating and not eating was immaterial. The contest was already over. But the contest was not already over. Eve

could have put the fruit down and walked away. If she had done so, the history of our planet would read far differently from what it does.

Identically the same line of reasoning lies entwined, ever so innocently, between the lines of our theology textbooks. The argument goes as follows: It is true that with Christ's help you can avoid doing what Satan suggests, but you cannot avoid wanting to. And, because the law is spiritual, the desire is equivalent to the deed. So when temptation comes, you may just as well yield and enjoy doing what you have in mind because, as regards obedience, you have sinned already.

But why is it necessary to want what Satan suggests? I submit that it is possible for faulty human beings to want to do right. It is possible for us to have right desires, as Paul shows by way of confessing that he is unable to carry them out: "For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do" (Rom 7:15). This is a crucial fact, even if it is not the only one to consider. Being human does not prevent us from having a desire for righteousness--for oneness and rightness with God. Indeed, no one should feel this more strongly than one who has been separated from God. What we are talking about here is a special case of our very human need not to be alone. The need can be suppressed, but unless it is, it will make itself evident in some way.

## The Temptations in the Desert

Under circumstances vastly more forbidding than those which confronted Eve, Christ was invited to supply Himself with food on condition of doubt. He badly needed food so we can readily imagine Him wanting to comply with Satan's suggestion, pondering the enormous consequences of doing so, and then with superhuman effort, available only to Himself, resisting the temptation and in this way obeying His Father. But the law is spiritual. The desire to do wrong is itself wrong. So if being truly tempted is an evidence of sin--if taking the test is proof that we have failed the test--what can we say in regard to Christ's victory over temptation in the desert?

We can readily imagine a scenario such as this. But what really happened? How did Christ really respond to Satan's insinuation of doubt? "Not without a struggle could Jesus listen in silence to the archdeceiver."<sup>1</sup> So it is certainly true that He exercised restraint, but what required it was the strong impulse to dismiss Satan immediately. He could hardly listen to such talk. He did not have an inner desire to do wrong and He did not do wrong. He resisted temptation. He passed the test.

Tempting does not mean implanting a desire to do wrong. For any temptation to be effective the desire must be present already. Temptation is Satan's attempt to use this fact to his advantage. What Satan tried to take advantage of in the first wilderness temptation was Christ's entirely legitimate desire to eat, which was strongly present and appeared to render Him vulnerable. But the temptation was not a temptation to eat; it was a temptation to doubt. Christ did not recoil from the idea of eating. He wanted to eat. He recoiled from the idea of doubting. This He would not listen to.

Satan wants nothing more than to occupy the role of Christ. His is a personal rivalry, played out in the great controversy. Thus, just as Christ says to all men, "Come, follow me" (Matt 4:19), Satan offers his counterfeit.<sup>2</sup> This is temptation. The enemy would force us to follow

his suggestions if he could, but he cannot. He could not, for example, throw Christ down from the temple but had to content himself with inviting Christ to throw Himself down. Christ had just finished expressing a confidence in His Father's word that was stronger than death. Now He is asked to give substance to what He says by throwing Himself down from the temple or to show, by not doing so, that His claim of perfect confidence in the Father was not genuine after all. What made this a temptation was the fact that He was placed in a situation where He had to make a decision and act on it. There is no implication that He wanted to jump down.

Another principle illustrated by the second temptation is one that we could call point of reference. Christ was not under obligation to prove anything to Satan. He acted with reference to His Father. Like David, returning to Jerusalem after the death of Absalom, He could say, "Do I not know that today I am king over Israel?" (2 Sam 19:22). David did not have to execute Shimei in order to convince himself that he was really a king and Christ did not have to do what Satan suggested in order to convince Himself that He was really the Son. The words, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matt 3:17), were still ringing in His ears. Christ had full confidence in His Father and did not need to bolster that confidence by shallow demonstrations to an uninvited third party which in reality would have betokened not confidence but doubt.

In the third temptation Satan openly solicited Christ's worship. In doing this he was not only throwing aside a disguise of some sort on his own part but was acknowledging the truth of Christ's claims. He was the Son of God, just as the Father had indicated. He did have the trust that He claimed to have and could not be led into presumption. But now Satan had a piece of business to transact. Precisely because these things were true, the Father's plan would be disastrous to Christ personally. His faith was stronger than death and it was just as well because, not only would Satan be able to make His life miserable, but in the end the Father would lead Him to an ignominious death on the cross. If His purpose in doing all this was to win the world, why not just take the world at the outset and avoid the trouble? Why not change sides and join the rebellion instead of opposing it? If Christ would only acknowledge Satan's claims, as he had just acknowledged Christ's claims, they could rule the world jointly--with Satan in first place of course since his was the earlier and therefore greater investment in the rebellion.

This was all Christ could take. Politely but firmly He dismissed Satan in complete defeat. Notice that here also, as when dealing with other less obdurate minds, the Savior was not avoiding the issues but was addressing them directly. "Satan had questioned whether Jesus was the Son of God. In his summary dismissal he had proof that he could not gainsay."<sup>3</sup> He was meeting the enemy's mind by sending him away, just as He would later meet the minds of Nicodemus and the woman at the well by changing the subject (see John 3 and 4 respectively).

There is nothing haughty in the confidence Christ displayed. As David Paulson once observed, "Instead of being some peculiar tension or emotion of the mind, true faith is simply a recognition of things as they really are."<sup>4</sup> Temptation feeds on uncertainty. This is one reason why it could find no opportunity for success in Christ's life. He knew His Father well and trusted Him. Granting that this is true, can we say that the Father is any less faithful when we are the ones who need Him than He was when dealing with His Son so long ago? The One we are invited to trust is not what makes our experience different from that of Christ. On the contrary, it is the one point on which His experience and ours are fully identical. The difference is that our Forerunner--the One who has gone over the way before us--had an broader appreciation of just how trustworthy His Father was. He recognized things as they really were.

## Discussion

Christ's temptations were not confined to the desert. He was constantly under Satan's attack. Consider one further example. In one place Ellen White points out that "when Christ was treated with contempt, there came to Him a strong temptation to manifest His divine character."<sup>5</sup> One could argue that, because none of us are tempted to reveal an inner divinity, this temptation--which was not only real but strongly felt--has no relevance for us. But when we understand the principles involved, we can indeed recognize them in our own experience.

What made the above temptation so powerful for Christ was the desire, already present within Him, to tell the truth. But the One He had come to reveal was the Father, not Himself. That is what made this a temptation rather than part of His assigned task. What Satan hoped to gain by urging this particular point upon Him was some evidence of self-sufficiency. This Christ refused to supply.

It is unreasonable to suggest that, because the temptation to be independent from God is presented to us in a different form than it was presented to Christ, it is a different temptation or any more of a temptation. It is the same temptation presented in a different form. Similarly, Paul admits being tempted to covet (see Rom 7:7-8). The fact that today we covet different things than those available to him does not mean that he was not truly tempted to covet or again that we are not truly tempted to covet. The temptation is the same because it invokes the same principles, not because it involves the same objects. This should give us some limited degree of insight into how Christ's temptations can be compared to ours, even though they were on a higher level.

Christ was truly and thoroughly tempted. This is a biblical datum. And He was truly and thoroughly successful in resisting temptation. But if Christ's victory was really a victory, how can we say that His temptations were really temptations? It may be that we will never be able to understand fully how Christ could bring these two sets of facts together, but He does.

Never, in any way, leave the slightest impression upon human minds that a taint of, or inclination to, corruption rested upon Christ, or that He in any way yielded to corruption. He was tempted in all points like as man is tempted, yet He is called "that holy thing." It is a mystery that is left unexplained to mortals that Christ could be tempted in all points like as we are, and yet be without sin.<sup>6</sup>

There is a right and a wrong way to deal with these matters. It is one thing to discuss them with the intent of clarifying why they are mysterious and altogether different to try to resolve the mystery, thus showing that it was not a mystery after all. We should be warned away from the latter ground, but not from the former. Thus, while there is much to agree with in the following statement by Lauri Onjukka, I think he goes too far in placing all discussion of Christ's temptations off limits.

If Christ was not exempt from inherited *corrupt* passions, then the Scripture stating that He was tempted without sin would not be true, neither would His temptation be an incomprehensible mystery, for every natural man "is tempted when he is drawn away of his own lust." James 1:14. This lust is sin and draws to sin--something that a holy desire would never do. The source of Christ's temptation was not "his own lust" for God cannot be tempted with evil, but it was something that no man can understand because it is left unexplained. For some good purpose this mystery is

sealed by God. And if any man tries to break the seal that hides this knowledge from mortals, all that he thinks, says, or writes about it must be only speculation, and even seductive theory. We are safe only as long as we leave this mystery undisturbed.<sup>7</sup>

If the Holy Spirit wanted us to leave this mystery undisturbed, why did He lead the author of Hebrews to bring it to our attention? I agree that the problem of how Christ could experience temptation, much less all of the same temptations we do, goes beyond human wisdom, but there must be room in our model for the fact that He was tempted because that is a biblical datum. If it had been left unstated, our concept of Christ would be roughly that of Onjukka.

## Conclusion

The crux of the mystery concerning Christ's temptations is that His victory over them was so complete. The difficulty does not lie in showing that He was successful but in showing that He was tempted. And yet one cannot pass a test if it is not a test. So the two assertions are inextricably linked with each other.

Because anything of a selfish nature repelled Christ, we find it difficult to relate with His temptations. We find no point of contact in them between Him and ourselves. But it is not enough to admit grudgingly that Christ might have been tempted in some way. He was not tempted grudgingly. He was tempted with every weapon Satan could devise. And indeed, if sin, by its nature, is independence from God, then He alone could have any true appreciation of its full power, because for Him such independence was a realistic possibility. For us it is simply a foolish delusion. But He had life within Himself. He would not have had to be dependent on anyone. He would not have had to follow His Father to the cross. But for our sakes He freely chose to do so. And His choice was consistently maintained in the face of every conceivable enticement to rely on Himself.

The natural counterpart of perfect trustworthiness is perfect trust. The one quality cannot be revealed apart from the other. Thus, the only way that the Son could reveal the Father's trustworthiness fully was by trusting Him fully--under every circumstance, throughout His life, from womb to tomb, implicitly. Christ could not show us how faithful the Father really is by relying on Him so long as things went well and by drawing on His own infinite resources at other times. Even if He had lapsed into a revelation of Himself, however, He would still have been telling the truth (see John 8:14). The desire to tell the truth about Himself must have been pressed upon Him with almost overmastering force. What stronger temptation could there possibly be for One who was Himself "the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:3)? But He had not come to reveal Himself and He would not be turned aside from His purpose (see Isa 50:4-9).

We also must come to know God and trust Him.<sup>8</sup> If He is as thoroughly trustworthy as Christ has shown Him to be, then a response of this sort is the only appropriate one. But if there is some way to trust without obeying or obey without trusting, I do not know what it is. The two principles are inseparably united. Any theology which implies that trusting is good because it comes from faith, while obeying is bad because it tends to legalism, is a flawed theology. It makes a distinction where Christ has not made one. We should be willing to do right because it is right. It is by believing God fully that we receive power to resist temptaton when it comes and to obey Him from our hearts.

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. (15) For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. (16) Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (Heb 4:14-16)

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Note: All Scripture quotations in this paper, except when noted otherwise, are from the Holy Bible, New International Version. Copyright (c) 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society.

<sup>1</sup>Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1940), p. 119.

<sup>2</sup>Christ's call to discipleship does not in itself create a desire to respond to that call. If it did, everyone would respond affirmatively to Christ and all would be saved. Similarly, Satan's call to do wrong is not what creates the desire to do wrong. It is already there. Instead temptation is a call to decision—a call to exercise the faculty of choice.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>4</sup>*Footprints of Faith*, Redwood Paperbacks (reprint ed., Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1978; originally published Hinsdale, IL: Life Boat Publishing Company, 1921), p. 109. This autobiographical sketch by the founder of Hinsdale Sanitarium is a book that every Seventh-day Adventist should read.

<sup>5</sup>Ellen White, *Desire of Ages*, p. 700.

<sup>6</sup>*Idem*, Letter 8, 1895; *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1953-57), 5:1128.

<sup>7</sup>*The Sanctuary and Perfection* (Temecula, CA: Lifemark Press, 1982), pp. 23-24.

<sup>8</sup>It is only by trusting God that we can acquire a useful knowledge of Him. This process, being circular, is not self-contained. There must a starting point outside ourselves. We must become new creatures in Christ.