

Temptation - In the Life of a Christian

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Published by NTChurchSource.com

"Blessed is the man who endures temptation, for when he has been proved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren" (James 1:12-16).

The issues of temptation and sin are of utmost importance, and many of us do not have a clear understanding of them. We desire purity in our lives, but so often it escapes us and we live a life of condemnation instead of a life of triumph. Christ died so that we might live with Him, and He is in the presence of the Father. Let us consider this area again and ask the Lord for eye salve to see the way of victory, and for the deep working of His Spirit within to make the victory ours.

In the scripture we have just quoted from James, we can see there is a progression. It is being drawn away by our desires to sin, and finally to death. The admonition is: *"Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren."* Is it possible to be deceived to the point of death? Some would say no, or that this is physical death, not spiritual death. Our purpose here is not to consider the whole question of eternal security, but to see the seriousness of the warnings of scripture. If it were not possible to be deceived, the warning would be meaningless. If we will be honest with God and ourselves, we will recognize that the danger is real. Perhaps faulty teaching has taken the "edge" off the Word, but that excuse will not stand before God on the final day. What has God revealed to us? That is what we will give an account for.

The Holy Spirit is faithful in all of our lives. He is the one who convicts of sin and righteousness and judgment. He does not fail any of us. But even though He convicts, we still have a choice. God does not force any of us to choose Him, but He does compel us to choose. When we play with sin, we are playing with our salvation and our eternal destiny. We are playing with life and death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.

Desires

All of us have desires. If we did not, the world as we know it would have ceased long ago. If a man did not have a desire for food, he would have quit eating and died. If he did not have a desire for sex, he would never have entered into union with a woman because of the responsibility it brings, and the human race would have ceased to exist. Desires are not wrong, for it is God who gave them in the first place. It is the use of desires that is the question. *"Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled, but fornicators and adulterers God will judge" (Heb. 13:4). "All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any" (I Cor. 6:12).*

When desires begin to grow strong, sometimes our reaction is to try to "kill them." But nowhere are we commanded to put our desires to death. If we could destroy our desires, our lives would be an empty blob of nothing. God does not want to destroy our desires, nor will He answer a prayer to take them away. He wants our desires to be brought under control, so that we can be vessels of honor for His

glory. Christ died to make provision for our whole being to be brought under the control of God. In that place only can we know every joy and purpose that God has for us.

One of the reasons our desires seem to be so strong is that before we came to Christ, we lived lives of sin, controlled by our desires. Our desires were exercised in ungodly lusts, and habits were formed in us that are deeply rooted. Those habits were not automatically taken away when we came to Christ. In Paul's words, we had "sowed to the flesh," and now we are reaping the corruption that comes from our sowing (Gal. 6:8). This does not mean there is no hope, but when we see some of the results of sin in our flesh, we should not be surprised or dismayed. Christ has made a way for victory in Himself, but all the work is not done in one easy "flash," separate from us. This salvation is going to be worked out in our flesh *"with fear and trembling, for it is God at work within, both to will and do His good purpose"* (Phil. 12:13).

In the Spirit

Before we consider our walk in Christ, we need to review its foundation. There are only two conditions for mankind. We are either "in the spirit" or "in the flesh." In Romans 8, Paul makes this very clear, and the foundation he lays is the basis for victory in our lives. If we are in the flesh, we cannot please God (verse 8). If we are in the Spirit, our union with Christ forms the basis for power and victory over our desires. There are some who would try to make a third place somewhere between, but Paul does not give any such place. *"But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His"* (Rom. 8:9). The basis of victory is not knowing what to do, but being in union with Christ. Christ does not give us victory--He *is* our victory. We do not try to live our lives as best we can. He *is* our life. We are not trying to please God by our best efforts. We are called to live in the power of an endless life. This is the only place of victory for anyone of us. Our lives, our self-efforts, and our righteousness fall so far short of God's holiness that He calls it filthy rags. No matter how good it may look for a time on the outside, it is still rotten at the core because it does not come from God. Only God is good. He is the definition of goodness, and all else is sin.

The question, then, comes to each one of us: are we in the Spirit? What does that mean? It means that we have been joined to God by allowing His Holy Spirit to come into our lives. This is a specific act of faith before God. How can we know that we have been taken from death to life? The book of I John is a good place to find direction. John tells us why he was writing to the believers: *"These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God"* (I John 5:13). If you are not sure that you have entered in, then may I encourage you to read through this letter carefully on your knees before God, and ask the Holy Spirit to show you where you are. Jesus paid the price for all to know God in an intimate union by the Spirit. He desires all men to enter in. Faith says "yes" to God and allows Him to come in to dwell. He will bring divine evidence of assurance of His presence, and bring confidence to our hearts. May we not draw back in unbelief, but draw near with full assurance. He died that we might live in Him. He does not turn away from any man who invites Him in. Glory to His Name!

Walking in the Spirit

"If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit" (Gal. 5:25). Birth takes place in a moment. There may be preparation to bring us to that point, but we do not grow into life. We are born into a relationship with God, but it is only a beginning relationship. The rest of our lives will be spent walking in that relationship, and this is where so many fail. Our tendency is to look for a way out of responsibility, and to expect God to do something in us so that we never need to think about anything again. This mentality has come to us in many ways, and one way is through the teaching we may have had. The question that may have been held before us all of our lives is, "Are you saved?" The idea behind this is that even if we aren't experiencing a life of victory and close communion with the Lord, at least we can take comfort in the fact that we are "saved." Saved from what? Sin? "No," we say, "I sin every day but I ask God to forgive me." Saved from my desires? "No, because what I want to do, I don't do, and what I don't want to do, I do." Then what are we saved from? We have in our minds that we are saved from eternal judgment, and we are encouraged to keep believing that is true. But is this the salvation that Christ provided for us? Are not the promises in Revelation 2 and 3 to the "overcomers?" Did not Paul say that he was "more than a conqueror"? We must allow God to raise our vision of His great salvation. For the most part, we have accepted a gospel that is not a gospel. The salvation that Christ gave His life for is complete deliverance from the power of sin in our lives--now. It is also power to see our whole lives brought under God's control, so that we can say at the end of every day that we have done the will of God.

This may seem impossible, but let me encourage you today. This is possible for every person. Not only is it possible, it is the place that God has provided. How can it be ours? There is only one way, and it is by a walk in the Spirit. A walk is not a one-time experience, but a day-by-day lifetime experience. God wants us to experience Him in every aspect of our lives. The scripture that we began with says, *"Blessed is the man who endures."* Endurance carries the idea of continuing, even though the way may seem long and difficult. The prize goes to the one who finishes the race according the rules.

We will never come to a place where we can just drift along and rest on our past victories. Every victory in the past is a good foundation for victory today. But yesterday's victories are not today's victories. Today, too, we must walk in the power of an endless life. Today we must know Christ and the power of His resurrection in these vessels of clay. *"Today is the day of salvation."* All of God's promises are to be known afresh today.

We may feel that this is too demanding. But consider the natural example of love in marriage. How much comfort and joy can be found in a marriage where either member is looking back with a longing heart to the love once known on the wedding day but not being experienced today? That only brings bitterness and resentment. Joy is known when love is experienced today. The wedding day is almost forgotten in the new joys of today's love, because this love is maturing and bringing far more satisfaction than it was possible to imagine before. When love is alive, nothing is too hard. If someone suggested to such a couple that maintaining their love relationship was too demanding, they would not be able to comprehend the statement.

Is there any difference in our relationship with God? The burden seems heavy and the demands seem difficult when love is absent. But God has planned that our whole relationship with Him be a relationship of love. To walk in the Spirit is to walk in His love. *"Keep yourselves in the love of God"* is the admonition (Jude 21). This is a place of responsibility, but it is not impossible, for God has made the way. If we walk in the Spirit, we will not fulfill the lusts of the flesh (Gal. 5:16). Our desires will be under God's control, and we will know the victory we seek. How do we walk in the Spirit? Let us

continue to ask God for light in this area, and He will not fail us.

Self-Control

"But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, and to knowledge self-control" (II Peter 1:5,6). Peter tells us that these qualities must be added through diligence. The foundation is faith--faith in what God has done to bring us into relationship, and faith in His promise that He will complete what He has begun in our lives. All of these items must be added in faith--that is, in relationship with God. They cannot be added by self-effort. What is the difference? Self-effort says, in effect, "If I try hard enough, I can do it." Faith waits quietly before God with this prayer: "Lord, I know that separate from You I am nothing and can do nothing. I have invited You into my life to take control, and I want your life to be expressed in this vessel of clay. Open my eyes to see and my ears to hear, that I may be led in your triumph this day." I do not ask God to obey for me, but I acknowledge in the very core of my heart that He and He alone is the source of my strength.

What does God do? God sheds light into my heart. He gives "seeing"--a place to obey. He speaks words of encouragement to my heart. He speaks of His presence, His love, and His grace. He does not throw the whole book at me, but just gives me one step. By spiritual understanding, I know what to do. Now I must choose. Will I obey? Will I respond to what God is showing me? God has done all He will do. If I respond, in my obedience I will find strength beyond myself. In this place I will know the grace of God, for it is God at work within, both to will and to do His good pleasure. On the contrary, if I do not choose to obey God in the clear step before me, I grieve the Holy Spirit. I show my lack of trust in God, and I show that I do not love Him. My relationship with God begins to grow cold, and that which I saw becomes dim. We may reason in our minds to justify ourselves, but in our unbelief, we will rob ourselves of God's grace which was there all the time.

But if I respond to God, what does this do? It brings self under God's control. We call it self-control. The opposite of self-control is lawlessness. Instead of our members being under God's control, they are ruled by many other things. The salvation that is ours in Christ delivers us from lawlessness and brings us under Christ. When we are under His authority, He can lead us into green pastures where we feed in His presence. The joys are wonderful, but we do not drift into this place. It is active obedience that brings self under God's control. It takes diligent consistent obedience to see our bodily members disciplined and our "whole man" brought under the control of Christ. We may have the idea that this will happen automatically, but God does not work separate from us. He works in us, and through us, but never separate from our choice. His glory is to involve us in the process. Often we are praying for God to do something that He will not do. We must wait on God for light and direction, but once we have the direction, our time of waiting is over. Now is the time to rise up and diligently obey what He has shown us.

The Deeds of the Body

The idea of disciplining our desires brings us to the subject of expression. God's purpose is to express His character, His life. That is what our bodies are for--to express the life of God. The body is not for immorality but for the Lord (I Cor. 6:13). Obedience is the necessary element to bring this about. Until there is obedience, there is no expression. True faith culminates in obedience. The difficulty is that our bodies have been exercised in something other than God's life. They have been exercised in expressing our life. And that life was a life of sin, self-originated for our own purposes. Our bodies would be quite happy to continue on in that way. Habits go deep and our bodily members are quite content. Change is not easy. It takes effort. It takes purpose and a reason for changing.

Our reason for changing is that now our bodies are temples of the living God, and our motivation is the love of God. We have been bought with a price; we are not our own. With privilege comes responsibility. We want to be delivered from God's judgment, we want to know His presence, but there is a price to pay. God is light, and He cannot dwell with darkness. If we want to know the closeness of fellowship with God, then we must separate ourselves from that which defiles. *"Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty"* (II Cor. 6:18).

What does it mean to separate ourselves? *"Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God"* (II Cor. 7:1). This is something we must do. God will not do it for us. He gives the light and the grace, but we are the ones who must cleanse ourselves. How do we do this? When the Holy Spirit brings an area to light and I see that it is affecting my relationship with God, I must turn away from it. I "put it to death." Notice that we are not trying to kill ourselves or kill our desires. We are putting to death a deed, an expression of the old man. We can do this because we are "in the new man." *"For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live"* (Rom. 8:13). Touch not the unclean thing. Don't just drift on in old habits. Exercise the body unto godliness! Express the new life that God has placed within.

The Mind

Probably the most important member of our bodies is our mind. It is here that the battle is won or lost. All the expressions of the rest of the body begin in the mind. God has given us a new heart, and He writes His word on our hearts and on our minds. But He did not give us a new mind. We must take on the mind of Christ through consistent obedience. As we draw near to God and abide in Christ, the Lord will write His words on our mind. That is one of the provisions of the new covenant. You are deeper than your mind; otherwise Paul could not say, "Set your mind on things above." The mind is a member, a very important member. What we think about it is very important. If through lack of discipline we allow our minds to wander, soon the rest of our body will be wandering after it.

"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (Rom. 12:2). Notice that this is an active place before God. In faith, by the mercies and grace of God, we must do this. My whole mind must be renewed to think the way God thinks. The provision of the new covenant is that He will write His word upon our minds. If we are actively looking to God and listening to Him, we will recognize His word. In that word is the grace to obey. But if we disregard His word, we will not know the grace of God. We will find ourselves struggling, trying to do the will of God in our own strength--and we will fail.

In the area of desires, what we allow our minds to dwell on is very important. We are commanded to set our minds on things above. *"Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue, and if there is anything praiseworthy--meditate on these things"* (Phil. 4:8). If we meditate on things we should not, we will find our desires aroused in the wrong direction. We are placing ourselves in a position where we can be enticed by our undisciplined desires. Then when desire has conceived, it will give birth to sin. Sin breaks our fellowship with God, the love relationship grows cold, and the sin no longer seems to be so bad. Our vision dims, and the Word of God does not have the power it once used to have in our lives. At this point we are well on our way to

spiritual death.

How did it all begin? It began by not walking in the Spirit and putting to death the deeds of the body by the power of an endless life. We thought it was a small thing to entertain thoughts that were not pure. We did not realize what the consequences would be. We thought that the lack of discipline of our thoughts was not serious. But it is the little foxes that spoil the vines. Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.

Responsibility

At the very heart of the issue of temptation is the question of responsibility. Are we responsible for our actions? Many of us have had teaching that essentially implies that "we just can't help ourselves" and that Christ came to save us in spite of all that we say or do. An often-quoted scripture to justify this teaching is Romans 7. If we are trying to justify ourselves in our disobedience and sin, we can twist the scriptures and find what we are looking for. But if we are those who love the truth, we will not be comforted by false security. Romans 7 describes Paul's experience as a Pharisee; Romans 8 is his experience as a Christian. Romans 8 rings with victory, the victory that Christ secured for us at Calvary. Christ did not die to deliver us only from the penalty of sin. He died to deliver us from the power of sin in every way, and that means that we can now live in the power of His endless life.

Since Christ has destroyed the work of the devil, and made every provision for us to live in victory, He has every right to expect us to walk in that provision. This is not a theoretical salvation; it is a real salvation which delivers us from sin and from ourselves, and brings us into all that God is--not just in heaven, but now. We can do the will of God. We can obey Christ. This message is throughout the New Testament. If there is still a doubt in our minds, then let us search the scriptures again on our knees before God and ask God to open our eyes. He will if we want Him to. Once we begin to see the will of God and the provision of God to see His will worked out in us, then faith must take hold of God and begin to walk in that provision. It is a place of responsibility, but He has not asked us to do it in our own strength. He has made provision for us to walk in His strength. It is God at work within us, both to will and do His good pleasure. His grace is sufficient for each one of us. No matter how impossible it may seem to us at the moment, He is able to take each one of us through in victory.

Relationship

What then is the key? How can we know this victory in our lives, so we can come to the end of each day and know that we have done the will of God in every area of our lives? There is only one answer: a relationship with Jesus Christ. Jesus said, *"Apart from Me you can do nothing"* (John 15:5). This relationship, however, is not what many of us think it is. It is not a distant relationship, believing a few true facts, or adding some good religious habits to our lives such as going to church, a daily devotion, or prayer. Most religions around the world encourage these things. If we are going to know true victory, we have to look farther than this. This relationship with Jesus Christ by the Spirit is far beyond anything else that we know and has no equal in any natural example. But it is not beyond any person who desires it, if we are willing to come God's way. Let us look again at the plan of God for victory.

"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" "And I will pray the Father; and He will give you another Helper; that He may abide with you forever; even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor blows Him; but you know Him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you." "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and

make Our home with him" (John 14:6, 16-18, 23). In these words from our Lord Jesus we have the foundation for victory in our lives. The basis is not a doctrine, or in knowing what to do, or in any other special formula. The basis is a person--Jesus. He does not give us victory--He *is* our victory. This must be no longer just a doctrine we know to be true; it must become a reality. Nothing less will bring us into what God wants in our lives.

This union that God has made available for us in Jesus is an intimate union with God by the Spirit. When the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in vessels of clay, He brings with Him all that the Father and Son are. He comes not just to visit but to abide. Only the very life of God can produce in us the righteousness and holiness of God that satisfies Him and us. Apart from Him and the provision of Himself, we can do nothing to please God. The sooner we come to the end of ourselves and our trying, the sooner we can be on the road to real victory. The problem with many of us is that we have heard this truth all of our lives, yet we have not entered into the reality of it. So when we hear it again we say, "I know, but it doesn't work. What is the real answer?" There is no other answer. Jesus is the way.

Why then, do we not know the reality? There are probably several simple reasons. First of all, we have not realized how serious our condition is. As we have seen above, we are resting on a false security because man has told us that we are okay. We have heard that by not living a victorious life, we may lose a few "jewels in our crown," but at least we will be in heaven. Read chapters 1-3 of Revelation. The promises are to the "overcomers." There will be no stragglers in heaven. God only allows two conditions. We are either in the Spirit or in the flesh. To be in the Spirit is to be abiding in Christ, where He is our life. To be double-minded, not moving in faith, leaves us powerless to do the will of God, void of His grace. Only we can solve that problem. God has done what He will do. Our place is to make a choice. Either we are going to give ourselves to God without reservation, or we are not. The choice is ours, and the outcome of that choice is predetermined.

Secondly, the struggle in our lives is whether we are willing to humble ourselves before God, admitting in our hearts before Him that we cannot deliver ourselves. God cannot deliver us until we come to the end of our own self-efforts. We are very familiar with that doctrine also. But have we been honest before God in admitting our own inability and failure? This is a place others cannot enter into. Only the Holy Spirit can search our hearts before God. He is faithful if we will let Him in, but He does not force His way in. Apart from the conviction and light that the Holy Spirit brings, we are helpless. Jesus died so that He could send the Helper. The price of our redemption has been paid. But the Holy Spirit only comes where He is invited. God will not humble us--He tells us to humble ourselves. If we will not, God has nothing more to offer. He will meet us at the altar of humility and minister to our needs.

Thirdly, when the Holy Spirit sheds light on our path and brings conviction in our souls, there is always a step of obedience to take. If we do not take that step of obedience, our spiritual progress is halted. If we argue with the Holy Spirit and reason away the conviction, the light fades, and we find ourselves in darkness. And when the light becomes darkness, how great is that darkness! There is no salvation from sin apart from obedience. God does not save us in spite of ourselves. He does not move past our choice. His glory is to work in and through us. His plan is that we may move in union with Him. Jesus says that His sheep hear His voice and they follow. He offers no other explanation. He gives "ears to hear" to those who want to hear God and obey. Every other person is shut outside. To those who have ears to hear, He gives grace to obey--nothing more and nothing less.

When we obey God, all of the other things which we have discussed begin to take place. Our minds are renewed, our desires are brought under control, our habits are remade, and God's character begins to be formed in us. As we experience His grace, we sense spiritual strength coming to our hearts, and we are

changed into His likeness from glory to glory. Our whole lives become a walk in His life. This is God's only plan. If we move in it, every question will be answered. It leaves God fully in control and man fully involved. There is no problem in our lives too hard for God to solve, and no problem so simple that we can solve it apart from His grace. It leaves us in a place of utter dependence on God and His grace every day of our lives no matter how long we have known the Lord. It makes full provision for the child of God who was just born yesterday and is facing an impossible situation. It leaves God as God, and He is glorified as such in every situation. Every man is a participant according to the grace and choosing of God. How could we ask for anything more? The door is open for any person who desires to be a part of this great working, and no person has any advantage over any other person. No wonder Paul prayed that *"the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power"* (Eph. 1:18,19).

Beloved, it is a great salvation. It is a new and living way. How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? Let us draw near to Him today. He will draw near to us. Glory to His name!