

On Temptation

By John Wesley

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Sermon Title On Temptation

Sermon Footnote (text of the 1872 edition)

Sermon Scripture "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: And God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it." 1 Cor. 10:13.

Intro

1. In the foregoing part of the chapter, the Apostle has been reciting, on the one hand, the unparalleled mercies of God to the Israelites; and, on the other, the unparalleled ingratitude of that disobedient and gainsaying people. [1 Cor. 10:1-10] And all these things, as the Apostle observes, "were written for our ensample;" [1 Cor. 10:11] that we might take warning from them, so as to avoid their grievous sins, and escape their terrible punishment. He then adds that solemn and important caution, "Let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall." [1 Cor. 10:12]

2. But if we observe these words attentively, will there not appear a considerable difficulty in them? "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." If a man only thinks he stands, he is in no danger of falling. It is not possible that any one should fall, if he only thinks he stands. The same difficulty occurs, according to our translation, in those well-known words of our Lord, (the importance of which we may easily learn from their being repeated in the Gospel no less than eight times,) "To him that hath shall be given; but from that hath not, shall be taken

away even what he seemeth to have." "That which he seemeth to have!" Nay, if he only seems to have it, it is impossible it should be taken away. None can take away from another what he only seems to have. What a man only seems to have, he cannot possibly lose. This difficulty may, at first, appear impossible to be surmounted. It is really so: It cannot be surmounted, if the common translation be allowed. But if we observe the proper meaning of the original word, the difficulty vanishes away. It may be allowed that the word *dokei* does (sometimes at least, in some authors) mean no more than to seem. But I much doubt whether it ever bears that meaning in any part of the inspired writings. By a careful consideration of every text in the New Testament wherein this word occurs, I am fully convinced, that it nowhere lessens, but every where strengthens, the sense of the word to which it is annexed. Accordingly *ho dokei echein*, does not mean, what he seems to have, but, on the contrary, what he assuredly hath. And so *ho dokon estantai*, not he that seemeth to stand, or he that thinketh he standeth, but he that assuredly standeth; he who standeth so fast, that he does not appear to be in any danger of falling; he that saith, like David, I shall never be moved: Thou, Lord, hast made my hill so strong. [Ps. 30:6, 7] Yet at that very time, thus saith the Lord, Be not high-minded, but fear. else shalt thou be cut off: [Rom. 11:20, 21] else shalt thou also be moved from thy steadfastness. The strength which thou assuredly hast, shall be taken away. As firmly as thou didst really stand, thou wilt fall into sin, if not into hell.

3. But lest any should be discouraged by the consideration of those who once ran well, and were afterwards overcome by temptation; lest the fearful of heart should be utterly cast down, supposing it impossible for them to stand; the Apostle subjoins to that serious exhortation, these comfortable words: There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: But God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it. [1 Cor. 10:13]

I

I. 1. Let us begin with the observation which ushers in this comfortable promise: "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to

man." our translators seem to have been sensible that this expression, common to man, does by means reach the force of the original word. hence they substitute another in the margin, moderate. But this seems to be less significant than the other, and farther from the meaning of it. Indeed it is not easy to find any word in the english tongue, which answers the word anthropinos. I believe the sense of it can only be expressed by some such circumlocution as this: "Such as is suited to the nature and circumstances of man; such as every man may reasonably expect, if he considers the nature of his body and his soul, and his situation in the present world." If we duly consider these, we shall not be surprised at any temptation that hath befallen us; seeing it is no other than such a creature, in such a situation, has all reason to expect.

2. Consider, First, the nature of that body with which your soul is connected. how many are the evils which it is every day, every hour, liable to! Weakness, sickness and disorders of a thousand kinds are its natural attendants. Consider the inconceivably minute fibres, threads, abundantly finer than hair, (called from thence capillary vessels,) whereof every part of it is composed; consider the innumerable multitude of equally fine pipes and strainers, all filled with circulating juice! And will not the breach of a few of these fibres, or the obstruction of a few of these tubes, particularly in the brain, or heart, or lungs, destroy our ease, health, strength, if not life itself? Now, if we observe that all pain implies temptation, how numberless must the temptations be which will beset every man, more or less, sooner or later, while he dwells in this corruptible body!

3. Consider, Secondly, the present state of the soul, as long as it inhabits the house of clay. I do not mean in its unregenerate state; while it lies in darkness and the shadow of death; under the dominion of the prince of darkness, without hope and without God in the world: No; look upon men who are raised above that deplorable state. See those who have tasted that the Lord is gracious. Yet still how weak is their understanding! how limited its extent! How confused, how inaccurate, are our apprehensions of even the things that are round about us. How liable are the wisest of men to mistake! to inform false judgments; to take falsehood for truth, and truth for falsehood; evil for good, and good for evil! What starts, what wanderings of imagination, are we continually

subject to! And how many are the temptations which we have to expect even from these innocent infirmities!

4. Consider, Thirdly, what is the present situation of even those that fear God. They dwell in the ruins of a disordered world, among men that know not God, that care not for him, and whose heart is fully set in them to do evil. How many are forced to cry out, "Woe is me, that I am constrained to dwell with Mesech; to have my habitations among the tents of Kedar!" among the enemies of God and man. How immensely out-numbered are those that would do well, by them that neither fear God nor regard man! And how striking is Cowleys observation: "If a man that was armed cap-a-pie was closed in by a thousand naked Indians, their number would have them such advantage over him that it would be scarce possible for him to escape. What hope then would there be for a naked, unarmed man to escape, who was surrounded by a thousand armed men?" Now, this is the case of every good man. He is not armed either with force or fraud, and is turned out, naked as he is, among thousands that are armed with the whole armour of Satan, and provided with all the weapons which the prince of this world can supply out of the armory of hell. If then he is not destroyed, yet how must a good man be tempted in the midst of this evil world!

5. But is it only from wicked men that temptations arise to them that fear God? It is very natural to imagine this; and almost every one thinks so. Hence how many of us have said in our hearts, "o if my lot were but cast among good men, among those that loved or even feared God, I should be free from all these temptations!" Perhaps you would: Probably you would not find the same sort of temptations which you have now to encounter. But you would surely meet with temptations of some other kind, which you would find equally hard to bear. For even good men, in general, though sin has not dominion over the, yet are not freed from the remains of it. They have still the remains of an evil heart, ever prone to "depart from the living God." They have the seeds of pride, of anger, of foolish desire; indeed, of every unholy temper. And any of these, if they do not continually watch and pray, may, and naturally will, spring up, and trouble, not themselves only, but all that are round about them. We must not therefore depend upon finding no temptation from those that fear, yea, in a measure love, God. Much less must we be

surprised, if some of those who once loved God in sincerity, should lay greater temptations in our way than many of those that never knew him.

6. "But can we expect to find any temptation from those that are perfected in love?" This is an important question, and deserves a particular consideration. I answer, First, You may find every kind of temptation from those who suppose they are perfected when indeed they are not: And so you may, Secondly, from those who once really were so, but are now moved from their steadfastness. And if you are not aware of this, if you think they are still what they were once, the temptation will be harder to bear. Nay, Thirdly, even those who "stand fast in liberty wherewith Christ has made them free," [Gal. 5:1] who are now really perfect in love, may still be an occasion of temptation to you; for they are still encompassed with infirmities. They may be dull of apprehension; they may have natural heedlessness, or a treacherous memory; they may have too lively an imagination: And any of these may cause little improprieties, either in speech or behaviour, which, though not sinful in themselves, may try all the grace you have: especially if you impute to perverseness of will (as it is very natural to do) what is really owing to defect of memory, or weakness of understanding; if these appear to you to be voluntary mistakes, which are really involuntary. So proper was the answer which a saint of God (now in Abrahams bosom) gave me some years ago, when I said, "Jenny, surely now your mistress and you can neither of you be a trial to the other, as God has saved you both from sin!" "o, Sir," said she, "if we are saved from sin, we still have infirmities enough to try all the grace that God has given us!"

7. But besides evil men, do not evil spirits also continually surround us on every side? Do not Satan and his angels continually go about seeking whom they may devour? Who is out of reach of their malice and subtlety? Not the wisest or the best of the children of men. "The servant is not above his Master." If then they tempted him, will not they tempt us also? Yea, it may be, should God see good to permit, more or less, to the end of our lives. "No temptation," therefore, "hath taken us," which we had not reason to expect, either from our body or soul; either from evil spirits or evil men; yea, or even from good men, till our spirits

return to God that gave them.

II

II. 1. Meantime, what a comfort it is to know, with the utmost certainty, that "God is faithful, who will not suffer us to be tempted above what we are able." He knoweth what our ability is, and cannot be mistaken. "He knoweth" precisely "whereof we are made: He remembereth that we are but dust." [Ps. 103:14] And we will suffer no temptation to befall us but such as is proportioned to our strength. Not only his justice requires this, which could not punish us for not resisting any temptation if it were so disproportioned to our strength that it was impossible for us to resist it; not only his mercy, -- that tender mercy which is over us, as well as over all his works, -- but, above all, his faithfulness: Seeing all his words are faithful and true: and the whole tenor of his promises altogether agrees with that declaration, "As thy days, so thy strength shall be." [Deut. 33:25]

2. In that execrable slaughter-house, the Romish Inquisition, (most unfortunately called, The House of Mercy!) it is the custom of those holy butchers, while they are tearing a mans sinews upon the rack, to have the physician of the house standing by. His business is, from time to time, to observe the eyes, the pulse, and other circumstances of the sufferer, and to give notice when the torture has continued so long as it can without putting an end to his life; that it may be preserved long enough for him to undergo the residue of their tortures. But notwithstanding all the physician's care, he is sometimes mistaken; and death puts a period to the sufferings of the patient before his tormentors are aware. We may observe something like this in our own case. In whatever sufferings or temptations we are, our great Physician never departs from us. He is about our bed, and about our path. He observes every symptom of our distress, that it may not rise above our strength. And he cannot be mistaken concerning us. He sees exactly how much we can endure with our present degree of strength. And if this is not sufficient, he can increase it to whatever degree it pleases him. Nothing, therefore, is more certain, than that, in consequence of his wisdom, as well as his justice, mercy, and faithfulness, he never will, he never can, suffer us to be tempted above that we are able: Above

the strength which he either hath given already, or will give as soon as we need it.

III

III. 1. "He will with the temptation also" (this is the Third point we are to consider) "make a way to escape, that we may be able to bear it." The word *ekbasin*, which we render a way of to escape, is extremely significant. The meaning of it is nearly expressed by the English word *out-let*; but more exact by the old word *out-gate*, still frequently used by the Scottish writers. It literally means a way out. And this God will either find our make; which He that hath all wisdom, as well as all power in heaven and earth, can never be at a loss how to do.

2. Either he makes a way to escape out of the temptation, by removing the occasion of it, or in the temptation; that is, the occasion remaining as it was, it is a temptation no longer. First, He makes a way to escape out of the temptation, by removing the occasion of it. The histories of mankind, of the Church in particular, afford us numberless instances of this. And many have occurred in our own memory, and within the little circle of our acquaintance. One of many I think it worth while to relate, as a memorable instance of the faithfulness of God, in making a way to escape out of temptation: -- Elizabeth Chadsey, then living in London, (whose daughter is living at this day, and is no dishonour to her parent,) was advised to administer to her husband, who was supposed to leave much substance behind him. But when a full inquiry into his circumstances was made, it appeared that this supposition was utterly destitute of foundation; and that he not only left nothing at all behind him, but also was very considerably in debt. It was not long after his burial, that a person came to her house, and said, "Mrs. Chadsey, you are much indebted to your landlord, and he has sent me to demand the rent that is due to him." She answered, "Sir, I have not so much money in the world: Indeed I have none at all!" "But," said he, "have you nothing that will fetch money?" She replied, "Sir, you see all that I have. I have nothing in the house by these six little children." "Then," said he, "I must execute my writ, and carry you to Newgate. But it is a hard case. I will leave you here till to-morrow, and will go and try if I cannot persuade your landlord to give you time." He returned the next morning,

and said, "I have done all I can, I have used all the arguments I could think of, but your landlord is not to be moved. He vows, if I do not carry you to prison without delay, I shall go thither myself." She answered, "You have done your part. The will of the Lord be done!" He said, "I will venture to make one trial more, and will come again in the morning." He came in the morning, and said, "Mrs. Chadsey, God has undertaken your cause. None can give you any trouble now; for your landlord died last night. But he has left no will; and no one knows who is heir to the estate."

3. Thus God is able to deliver out of temptations, by removing the occasion of them. But are there not temptations, the occasions of which cannot be taken away? Is it not a striking instance of this kind, which we have in a late publication? "I was walking," says the writer of the letter, "over Dover cliffs, in a calm, pleasant evening with a person whom I tenderly loved, and to whom I was to be married in a few days. While we were engaged in earnest conversation, her foot slipped, she fell down, and I saw her dashed to pieces of the beach. I lifted up my hands, and cried out. This evil admits of no remedy. I must now go mourning all my days! My wound is incurable. It is impossible I should ever find such another woman! One so every way fitted for me. " I added in an agony, This is such an affliction as even God himself cannot redress! " And just as I uttered the words, I awoke: For it was a dream!" Just so can God remove any possible temptation; making it like a dream when one waketh!

4. Thus is God able to deliver out of temptation, by taking away the very ground of it. And he is equally able to deliver in the temptation; which, perhaps, is the greatest deliverance of all. I mean, suffering the occasion to remain as it was, he will take away the bitterness of it; so that it shall not be a temptation at all, but only an occasion of thanksgiving. How many proofs of this have the children of God, even in their daily experience! How frequently are they encompassed with trouble, or visited with pain or sickness! And when they cry unto the Lord, at some times he takes away the cup from them: He removes the trouble, or sickness, or pain; and it is as though it never had been: At other times he does not make any outward change; outward trouble, or pain, or sickness continues; but the consolations of the Holy One so

increase, as to over-balance them all; and they can boldly declare, Labour is rest, and pain is sweet, When thou, my God, art near.

5. An eminent instance of this kind of deliverance is that which occurs in the Life of that excellent man, the Marquis de Renty. When he was in a violent fit of the rheumatism, a friend asked him, "Sir, are you in much pain?" He answered, "My pains are extreme: But through the mercy of God, I give myself up, not to them, but to him." It was in the same spirit that my own father answered, though exhausted with a severe illness, (an ulcer in the bowels, which had given him little rest day or night, for upwards of seven months.) when I asked, "Sir, are you in pain now?" He answered, with a strong and loud voice, "God does indeed chasten me with pain; yea, all my bones with strong pain. But I thank him for all; I bless him for all; I love him for all."

6. We may observe one more instance of a somewhat similar kind, in the Life of the Marquis de Renty. When his wife, whom he very tenderly loved, was exceeding ill, and supposed to be near death, a friend took the liberty to inquire how he felt himself on the occasion. He replied, "I cannot but say, that this trial affects me in the most tender part. I am exquisitely sensible of my loss. I feel more than it is possible to express. And yet I am so satisfied, that the will of God is done, and not the will of a vile sinner, that, were it not for fear of giving offence to others, I could dance and sing!" Thus the merciful, the just, the faithful God, will, in one way or other, "in every temptation make a way to escape, that we may be able to bear it."

7. This whole passage is fruitful of instruction. Some of the lessons which we may learn from it are, First, "Let him that most assuredly standeth, take heed lest he fall" into murmuring; lest he say in his heart, "Surely no one's case is like mine; no one was ever tried like me." Yea, ten thousand. "There was no temptation taken you," but such as is "common to man;" such as you might reasonably expect, if you considered what you are; a sinner born to die; a sinful inhabitant of a mortal body, liable to numberless inward and outward sufferings; -- and where you are; in a shattered, disordered world. surrounded by evil men, and evil spirits. Consider this, and you will not repine at the common lot, the general condition of humanity.

8. Secondly. "Let him that standeth, take heed lest he fall;" lest he tempt God, by thinking or saying, "This is insupportable; this is too hard; I can never get through it; my burden is heavier than I can bear." Not so; unless something is too hard for God. He will not suffer you to be "tempted above that ye are able." He proportions the burden to your strength. If you want more strength, "ask, and it shall be given you."

9. Thirdly. "Let him that standeth, take heed lest he fall;" lest he tempt God by unbelief; by distrusting his faithfulness. Hath he said, "in every temptation he will make a way to escape?" And shall he not do it? Yea, verily; And far above thy thought His counsel shall appear, When fully he the work hath wrought That caused they needless fear.

10. Let us then receive every trial with calm resignation, and with humble confidence that He who hath all power, all wisdom, all mercy, and all faithfulness, will first support us in every temptation, and then deliver us out of all: So that in the end all things shall work together for good, and we shall happily experience, that all these things were for our profit, that we "might be partakers of his holiness."

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