



# Temptation

## WHAT IS IT & HOW TO OVERCOME IT

*By Paul Kokoski | April 2011 New Oxford Review*

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In the account of our Lord's temptation in the desert, St. Luke tells us that, after receiving baptism from John, "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit for forty days in the wilderness, tempted by the devil" (4:1-2). There is a clear insistence here that the temptations were not just an incident on the way, but were the consequence of Jesus' decision to carry out the mission entrusted to Him by the Father to live to the very end His reality as the beloved Son. Christ came into this world to set us free from sin and from the ambiguous fascination of planning our life without God. He did not do so with loud proclamations but by fighting the Tempter himself, until the cross.

## What Is It?

Temptation can be defined as a solicitation to evil by our spiritual enemies: the world, the flesh, and the Devil. It occurs when certain values previously acknowledged and embraced are put into question either in passing doubt or prolonged uncertainty. God does not tempt us directly but allows us to be tempted while providing us with all the graces necessary to resist evil: “God is faithful. He will not let you be tested beyond your strength. Along with the test he will give you a way out of it so that you may be able to endure it” (1 Cor. 10:13).

In His wisdom, God ordained things this way for excellent reasons. First, He wanted us to merit Heaven as a reward. He even wills that the recompense be in proportion to the merit and hence in proportion to the obstacle overcome. Second, He allows temptation as a means of our purification. Temptation reminds us that we have fallen in the past through lack of diligence and effort. It thus becomes for us an occasion for new acts of contrition and humility, which make for the purification of the soul.

## Three Phases

According to St. Augustine, there are three different phases of temptation: **suggestion, pleasure, and consent.** **Suggestion** is the proposal of some evil to our mind or imagination. No matter how alluring the representation may be, it does not constitute a sin, so long as we have not provoked it and

do not consent to it. **Pleasure** is what follows the suggestion. “Many a time it happens,” says St. Francis de Sales in *Introduction to the Devout Life*, “that the inferior part of the soul takes pleasure in the temptation, without there having been consent, nay against the soul’s superior part. This is the warfare which the Apostle St. Paul describes when he says his flesh wars against his spirit.”

If the will fights the temptation and repels it, it has scored a victory and performed a highly meritorious act. If, on the other hand, the will delights in the pleasure, **consents** to it, and willingly enjoys it, despite the protest of conscience, sin is committed. We can judge that no consent has been given if we feel disgust at being tempted and are cognizant of trying to overcome it. If, on the contrary, we recognize the temptation for what it is, yet do not repulse it as soon as it appears, we have committed a venial fault against prudence.

### **Three Weapons**

Our attitude toward temptation should be to forestall it with watchfulness, prayer, and fasting: “Be on guard and pray that you may not undergo the test” (Mt. 26:41). How often have we presumptuously thrown ourselves into danger under the pretense that we are strong enough to handle it? This was the sin of Peter, who proudly boasted before falling, “Even though all are shaken in faith, it will not be that way with me” (Mk. 14:29). St. Paul reminds us, on the

contrary, “Let anyone who thinks he is standing upright watch out lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12). The spirit may be willing but the flesh is weak, and safety lies only in the humble mistrust of self.

At the same time, however, we should not overly fear temptation, for although we are ourselves weak, we are also invincible in God who strengthens us and who does not allow us to be tempted beyond that which we are able to bear. Proper distrust of self helps us shun all dangerous occasions such as idleness, empty daydreaming, and laziness. Vigilance should especially be centered around our individual weak points, since this is where temptation is most likely to occur.

In addition to watchfulness, we must also engage in fervent prayer. Any kind of prayer — mental or vocal, public or private, prayer of petition or prayer of adoration — can be effective against temptation. It is prudent to pray in times of calm so that we will have the courage to raise our hearts in prayer to God during times of temptation. We can always be assured that God will hear our prayer and help us, because temptations from the Devil are aimed at destroying God’s own work in us.

Fasting also helps shut the door to temptation. The Devil attacks the weaknesses of our body; therefore, periodic abstinence from food and sex thwarts these assaults. Fasting also helps us mortify our egoism and opens our hearts to the love of God and neighbor.

Resisting temptation requires that it be fought promptly, energetically, perseveringly, and humbly.

The longer one delays, the more difficult it becomes to repel temptation. Some temptations (aversions to duty, seeking after human respect, etc.) are best fought head-on with honesty and with recourse to Catholic doctrine. Other temptations (e.g., pleasures) are more aptly put to flight by prayer and by turning one's attention immediately to something else.

We should fight temptations with determination and without any regret, lest they return. If temptations do return — the demon bringing with him seven spirits more evil than himself (cf. Mt. 12:45) — we must remain obstinate and persevering. We must also embrace humility, for humility attracts grace, and grace gives us the victory.

### **After the Battle**

**When we find that we have overcome bouts of temptation, we should make a point to thank God.** If, on the other hand, we become aware of having succumbed to temptation, we must not lose heart. Rather, we should avail ourselves of the sacrament of reconciliation, with trust in God's mercy and love for the contrite, exemplified in the parable of the prodigal son.

### **Consolations**

Often it happens that God will bestow sensible and spiritual consolations on souls in order to strengthen their will and draw them further into His service. **Consolations are graces that cause interior**

**movements in our souls, setting them aflame with love for God.** These consolations fill us with joy and enable us to pray more effortlessly and to love God more ardently. They spur us to form vigorous resolutions and to endure the little sacrifices of everyday life. Consolations can also be dangerous, however, if we allow ourselves to cling to them more readily than to God, the source and giver of consolations. When consolations vanish, we may become discouraged and prone to neglect our spiritual exercises and duties in life. Consolations can also foster pride in its various forms: complacency, vanity, and presumption.

### **Aridity**

Along with consolations, God also visits us from time to time with aridity. **The purpose of spiritual aridity is to detach us from created things so that we may learn to love God for His own sake.** God thereby also effects a further purification of the soul from past faults, present attachments, and all manner of self-seeking. When we have to serve God without any relish, on principle and by sheer will power, we suffer keenly, and our suffering becomes an act of expiation and atonement.

We must be careful, however, to check that this spiritual dryness does not come from our own faults of pride, sloth, excessive straining of the mind, etc. If we are not responsible for this dryness, we can draw great profit from the ordeal by convincing ourselves that it is

more meritorious to serve God without warm emotions or immediate spiritual rewards than to do so in the midst of many consolations.

Even more merit can be gained by uniting ourselves in this state to Jesus, who, in the Garden of Gethsemane, consented to sadness and weariness of soul out of love for us. Above all, we must not lose heart but rather imitate our Lord who “being in anguish prayed with all the greater intensity” (Lk. 22:44).

## **Scruples**

**The work of perfection is a work of endurance, demanding steadfastness of purpose.** To this end, we must also be on guard against scruples. **Scruples are a disease, physical and moral, which produce in us a sort of derangement of conscience and cause us to harbor vain fears of having offended God. They cause us to see sin where it does not exist.** Thus, we must distinguish between a delicate conscience, which is precious and highly desirable, and a scrupulous conscience, which must be carefully avoided. **The delicate conscience loves God immensely and seeks to avoid offending Him in the slightest way. It has an aversion to sin, knowing its own feebleness, and has a rational but quiet fear of displeasing God.** The delicate conscience also knows how to discriminate between venial and mortal sin. **The scrupulous conscience, on the other hand, is led by a certain egotism,**

**which causes an inordinate eagerness for absolute certainty of one's state of grace. It also harbors vain fears of sinning in every circumstance.**

If not checked, scruples can become an obsession and lead to anxiety, depression, and a loss of true devotion. However, if we accept scruples as a trial from God and try to correct them, they can become for us a valuable means of purification.

### **Three Temptations of Christ**

Our model and teacher in overcoming temptation is Jesus Christ. One of the most valuable lessons we can learn can be found in the story of His three temptations in the desert. After fasting for forty days and forty nights, Jesus was approached by the Tempter: "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread" (Mt. 4:3). Jesus responds, "Not by bread alone is man to live but on every utterance that comes from the mouth of God." As demonstrated at the multiplication of loaves for the thousands and at the Last Supper, Jesus wants us to know that **all will be provided for us as long as our fidelity to and adoration of God remains unbroken.**

In the second temptation, God has to prove once more that He is God: "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. Scripture has it: He will give his angels charge of you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone" (Mt. 4:6). These words would be

repeated by the mocking bystanders at the foot of the cross. The challenge is one of proof. The Tempter wants Jesus to prove His divinity. Our Lord replies, "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test." He did not cast Himself down from the pinnacle of the temple, just as He did not come down from the cross. Jesus is telling us that if we follow the will of God, we will never lose a final refuge in Him, despite the personal tragedies and terrible disasters to which we are subject.

Pope Benedict XVI further explains in *Jesus of Nazareth*: **"The arrogance that would make God an object and impose our laboratory conditions upon him is incapable of finding him.** For it already implies that we deny God as God by placing ourselves above him, by discarding the whole dimension of love, of interior listening; by no longer acknowledging as real anything but what we can experimentally test and grasp. To think like this is to make oneself God. And to do that is to abase not only God, but the world and oneself, too."

The third temptation is the climax of the whole story. Here, the Devil takes our Lord in vision onto a very high mountaintop and displays for Him all the kingdoms of the world in all their magnificence. The Tempter then attempts to strike a bargain: "All these I will bestow on you if you prostrate yourself in homage before me" (Mt. 4:9). **The question is raised as to what sort of action is expected of the Savior of the world. Is He to be a man of worldly power or a man of the cross?** Jesus replies, "You shall do

homage to the Lord your God; him alone shall you adore.” Jesus’ power comes by virtue of His resurrection, which presupposes His death on the cross. **The Kingdom of Christ is different from the kingdoms of the earth and their splendor,** which Satan parades before Him. Earthly splendor is ephemeral and eventually disintegrates. This is not the sort of splendor that belongs to the Kingdom of Christ. **His Kingdom grows through the proclamation of those who agree to become His disciples, who are baptized in the name of the triune God, and who keep His commandments.**

Jesus ultimately emerges victorious from His battle with **Satan and his lying promise of a future that offers all things to all men through power and wealth.** Jesus refuses to use His power as the Son of God to turn stones into bread so that He might satisfy His own hunger. Subsequently, the Father gave Him the power to change bread into His own body and blood in order to satisfy the hunger of every human heart. Jesus also refused to cast Himself down from the pinnacle of the temple in an arrogant display of power. Later, His Father would raise Him up from the depths of Sheol in recognition of His filial obedience. Finally, Jesus refused to bend His knee to Satan in exchange for an earthly kingdom. By raising Him up from death, His Father bestowed on Him a name above all other names, so that at the name of Jesus every knee in Heaven, on earth, and under the earth would bend in adoration.

## **Indirect Temptation**

It is important to note that, unlike the scene in the desert, **the Devil does not come out directly to tempt us to worship him. Rather, he uses insinuation that provokes and lures us from trust to mistrust:** “Did God say, ‘you shall not eat of any tree of the garden’?” (Gen. 3:1). **The first thing Satan tempts us to is not a denial of God but doubt about His covenant, about the community of faith, prayer, the commandments — all of which are the context for living God’s covenant.**

## **Conclusion**

**God permits temptations because He wants us to merit Heaven by cooperating with His grace, which is meant to purify souls.** To this end, we must “stay awake” and have recourse to prayer. By invoking Him with confidence, we obtain the grace of contrition and a firm purpose of amendment, which cleanses our souls, inspires within us an aversion to sin and its occasions, and strengthens us against further temptation. By leaning on Him who has overcome the world, the flesh, and the Devil, we will ultimately be able to claim with St. Paul, the great Apostle to the Gentiles: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. From now on a merited crown awaits me” (2 Tim. 4:7-8).