

Food for Thought—Temptation



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Temptation is something the Bible tells us to flee. We are told to *desire* spiritual gifts and to *pursue* love (I Cor. 14:1) as well as righteousness, faith, and peace (II Timothy 2:22), but we are told to "flee fornication" (I Cor. 6:18) and "youthful lusts" (II Timothy 2:22). We, being as flawed as we are, often get our priorities mixed up and pursue the gifts of the spirit, flee the fruit of the spirit (if they cost us anything), and desire temptations (or at least fail to flee them). Interestingly, we are not told to flee from Satan. We are told, "resist the devil and he will flee from you" (James 4:7). But we are told to flee temptation.

Temptation happens to everyone—ourselves, the people we know, and the people we don't know. It's important to be aware of it, though, because it's hard to flee or stay away from temptation if we never notice it or give it a moment's thought. Probably when Hezekiah showed everything precious in his house, the temple, and his treasury to visitors from Babylon, he was not at all aware he was succumbing to a temptation—the temptation to show off a bit for his visitors and to feel he was among his generation's top men. But it was a temptation that he fell for, and it brought about a high cost. It had given the Babylonians another reason to conquer Judah, for now they knew just how nice the pickings in Judah were. There were other reasons for Judah's fall to Babylon—mainly Judah's apostasy, of course. But Hezekiah's failure to even notice the temptation to show off for his new buddies played a role.

There are many people in the Bible whose temptations we know something about, but let's look just at a few—Joseph, Solomon, Baalam, and Jesus.

When we look at Joseph working as a servant in the house of Potiphar, we see someone who was completely successful regarding a temptation (Potiphar's wife's advances). And he did exactly what Paul—writing far later—advised. He (literally) fled temptation. And, of course, it worked. It didn't protect him from being unfairly treated as a result, but it did keep him from the erosion of his character. And that was far more important.

Solomon provides many lessons regarding temptation. First, his case shows us that nobody is immune to temptation. Solomon started out with a truly good heart. When God asked him what he would like to be given, Solomon asks to be given wisdom so that he will be able to properly care for the people. This shows humility (he knew he didn't have what it would take on his own), and it shows a heart for his people (he wasn't asking for wisdom in order to make Israel a world conquering empire or in order to make it the most famous nation on earth; he was asking for wisdom so that he could take care of the people, which means he cared about the

people). Yet having a good heart did not mean Solomon couldn't fall. He also had jaw-dropping experiences with God; God appeared and talked to Solomon *twice*, and he saw the Shekinah glory of God. Yet having these stunning experiences in his belt did not keep him from falling. And it is not like he didn't know. Solomon over the years takes 1,000 wives and concubines who were followers of other gods who were not Yahweh, something which God had told the Israelites not to do because it would turn their hearts away from Him. And that's exactly what did happen with Solomon. He liked his wives, so he made them their own little temples to Chemosh, Ashetoreth, Baal, and Molech and eventually went after those gods himself. If it weren't written down, we might not believe it of Solomon. Again, it is not as if he didn't know. He did not have to know every word of Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. His sin was one of the 10 Commandments—serve no other gods. Solomon had the same weapon available to him which Jesus used when He was tempted—the scripture. But Solomon failed to use it. And it is important to remember that Solomon was led into this error one wife at a time. Once he made the first mistake, it was easy-ish to make the next, then easier and easier. I wonder how different things might've been if Solomon's first (or even only) wife had been a follower of Yahweh. Solomon also seems to have had no one in his court who would stand up to him and correct him (something David did have in the form of Nathan). So...if the wisest man in the world and one who'd had a good heart and who'd had amazing experiences with God can fall, so can we.

Balaam is someone whose temptation the scriptures include in some interesting detail. As you may recall, when the Israelites are still in the wilderness, the king of Moab decides he is scared of them. He wants to get a well-known holy man, Balaam, to come curse Israel so that he can engage them in battle and defeat them. He sends some of his top men, along with the customary bribe gifts, to Balaam (and it was a fairly long journey, showing that Balaam was highly thought of). Balaam does appear to have been a God follower at this time, and when the top men arrive with their request, Balaam says that he'll have to ask God and see what he says and invites them men to spend the night. God tells Balaam not to go with them, that the Israelites are favored by Him, and that Balaam was not to curse them. Balaam explains to the Moabite princes the next morning that God said no. After this first failed attempt, the king of Moab sends even more important men and greater gifts to Balaam. This time God basically tells Balaam "If the men wake you up in the morning asking you to go with them, then go with them but say only the words I give you when you get to Moab." It is not clear why God didn't just give another simple "no" this time, but what is clear is that Balaam does not follow God's directions about waiting to see whether the princes come to wake him in the morning. Instead he gets up early without being waked by anybody and goes to them and says he'll go with them but will speak only what God wants. As the story unfolds we can see that God wasn't pleased with Balaam's actions. Why did Balaam fail to follow God's directions carefully (waiting to see whether the Moabite guests woke him)? I'm guessing that based on what God said, Balaam thought it likely God would end up sending him to Moab and then got excited about it and jumped the gun. We are certainly capable of "hearing" what we want to hear or changing what God says a little so that it lines up with what we hoped He'd say.

The other person in the Bible who goes through temptations about which we hear in detail is Jesus Himself. For Him, it happens right after He's been baptized and the Father has said, "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased" (what every son would be blessed to

hear). Then He is led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit. He stays there for 40 days with no food. Interestingly the scriptures say that "after" the 40 days he was hungry. Perhaps he was supernaturally not needing food during those 40 days. Perhaps he'd undergone the natural process which can happen in cases of starvation: after going hungry for some time, people often lose their appetite, but then as death approaches, they become ravenously hungry. Perhaps it was this just when this ravenous, desperate hunger came upon Jesus that Satan threw his iconic temptations at him, starting off by tempting him with food.

Why would it have been wrong for Jesus to turn rocks into bread, I've wondered. What's so bad about that? He turns water into wine not long after this, and He twice performs the miracle of multiplying food to feed gatherings of thousands of people. One thing we don't really ever see, however, is Jesus using a miracle to make His own life easier. He abundantly does them for the benefit of other people but not for Himself. He could've created food out of nothing every day if He'd chosen to, I imagine, but he chose to live as a human under the same conditions we all do. He would obtain food, clothing, and shelter the same way other ordinary humans did. I also think what Jesus says about this temptation reveals much. He says man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. This makes it clear that physical pleasures are not bad, but that they must be seen as much less important than spiritual priorities. The spiritual call is higher than the physical call. It doesn't seem from the scriptures' wording that God told Jesus, "Go fast in the wilderness for 40 days." The Spirit simply leads him to the wilderness, a place where there isn't any food. And he is not to leave that place until God tells him to. He will be taken back to normal life, including food, when the Spirit sends him there, not before.

Perhaps even more importantly, it is when looking at Jesus's temptations from a distance, that we can see that the three ways in which he was tempted correspond to the three main areas in which all the souls of mankind are tempted. We are tempted by physical pleasures, by fame, and by power. (And both fame and power are entwined with pride.)

We are tempted by physical pleasures, for one thing, when we get to the point of making them more important to us than things that really *are* more important. Sex is not bad per se, but it becomes bad when we demand it whenever we want it, regardless of the circumstances (putting pleasure before doing what's best). Food is not bad; it's good. But if we get a job offer in which we'd really be able to minister more to others than in our current job and feel God tugging at our hearts to do so but turn the job down because it is a poorer-paying job and we could no longer eat out as much as we like doing...well, that would be sin. We would've put the physical above the spiritual.

Jumping off the temple and surviving the fall because of angels catching Him would certainly have made Jesus instantly and wildly famous. Most of us will never have the chance to be tempted by fame on a large scale. But we can still be tempted to put fame in our local circle on a pedestal. When we are motivated not by a desire to do our best at work (which can lead to awards or people thinking well of us) but by a desire to work hard so that we can be thought the best, that is probably a temptation to put fame (even on a local scale) first—before our time with our family, for example, or any number of things that are truly more important.

As Satan tempts the Lord, he moves ever in the direction of the things he desires himself. Physical pleasures are things he can snare us with, but fame is more up his own ally, more the sort of thing he himself wants. And power, the final temptation, is totally the sort of thing he

wants (he probably can no longer imagine anyone not wanting it). Again, we may think we don't have any real opportunity to be powerful and that this is therefore not a relatable temptation, but we must remember that we can want power on a local level—being the one who calls the shots within the family unit or within our friend group or being someone who is constantly manipulating others to get what we want. And seeing how tempting power can be on a small scale should make us be very hesitant to take up positions of large-scale power if they were to come our way. I think it would be difficult to be a politician and remain a good person.

When we near the end of our lives, or if we become disabled or impoverished, we may think that at this point we can't really be tempted by great pleasures or fame or power. But actually, I'd say, we can. We can be very tempted to resent pleasures, fame, and power we did not get, for example, and I think this counts as temptation. It is certainly something Satan likes to snare us with, and the bitterness or resentment, when we succumb to it, makes us unfruitful.

The story of Jesus's temptation can only have been told to the disciples by Jesus Himself. There may have been many other temptations in the wilderness, but He chose to pass on these three, perhaps because just about any temptation can fall into one of the three categories those three temptations represent.

Also, Jesus was careful to include in his account the fact that to counter the temptations, He used a tool we all have at our disposal—scripture—and the ability to rebuke Satan and the temptation-thoughts that flit through our minds.

Finally, it's important to remember that no matter how badly or how frequently we mess up, God's mercies are new every morning, and new chances are ever before us.