

1.

The Saviour's warning against temptation

The disciples were feeling secure, although danger was just around the corner! It was then that the Lord gave this warning, 'Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation' (Matthew 26:41; Mark 14:38; & Luke 22:46). Every disciple of Christ needs the same warning. This warning contains three very basic lessons that every Christian needs to learn well.

- 1) Every Christian must constantly be on guard against temptation.
- 2) To 'fall into temptation' is to experience temptation in its most powerful and dangerous form.
- 3) To avoid being harmed by such an experience of temptation the believer must learn to 'watch and pray'.

Before we are ready for any of these lessons we must examine the basic teaching of the Bible on temptation.

In the Bible we see two different types of temptation. There is a good kind of temptation that God uses; there is an evil kind of temptation that Satan uses. Temptation is like a knife. It can be used for a good or a bad purpose: it may either cut a man's meat or his throat.

1. The good kind of temptation that God uses

Sometimes the Bible uses the word temptation to mean a trial or testing. (Note: Modern translations often use the word 'test' or 'trial' rather than 'temptation' where God's activity is concerned.) Abraham was tested by God (Genesis 22:1ff) and in one way or another all believers are subject to trials and testings (for example James 1:2 and 1 Peter 1:6).

There are two important points to note about such trials.

Note 1 — The purpose of God in sending trials

a) Trials help the believer to know about his spiritual health. Sometimes the experience of a trial will show the believer spiritual graces that God is producing in his life. God's trial of Abraham displayed the strength of his faith. Sometimes a trial will show the believer evils in his heart that he had never known about. God tried Hezekiah and revealed to him the pride of his heart (2 Chronicles 32:31). Sometimes believers need to be encouraged by seeing spiritual graces at work in their lives. At other times believers need to be humbled by learning the hidden evils of their hearts. God meets both these needs through the use of suitable trials.

b) Trials help the believer to know more about God.

- i) It is God alone who can keep the believer from falling into sin. Until we are tempted we think we can handle temptation in our own strength. Peter thought he would never deny his Lord. Temptation showed him that he would (Matthew 26:33-35, 69-75).
- ii) When we have learned our weakness and the power of temptation we are ready to discover the power of God's grace. This is the great lesson the Apostle Paul was taught through his 'thorn in the flesh' (See 2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

Note 2 — God has many ways of testing his people

God tests every believer in a very personal way. Here are three examples of the methods God sometimes uses to test his people.

a) He tests them by giving them duties that are beyond their own resources. The Apostle Paul refers to such testing when he writes, ‘We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure’ (2 Corinthians 1:8). This was a test that the Lord used to teach Paul not to rely on himself ‘but on God, who raises the dead’ (2 Corinthians 1:9). Believers must not be surprised or dismayed if God gives them a task that seems beyond them. In this way God tests believers, to show them whether their faith in God’s power is strong or weak.

b) He tests believers by permitting them to suffer for their faith. Sometimes the suffering is very severe, even to the point of death. Such suffering is a trial that most believers dread. Yet many believers have found unexpected strength given them to be tortured or even to die for Christ’s sake. All Christians are called to sufferings of one kind or another (Philippians 1:29; 1 Peter 2:21). The Apostle Peter calls such sufferings ‘the trial of your faith’ (1 Peter 1:7, AV).

c) He tests believers by allowing them to meet false teachers or false teaching. God tests the believer’s loyalty and love for himself in this way. Deuteronomy 13:1ff gives a good example of this kind of testing.

These are three examples of the variety of methods God uses to test his people. This type of testing that God uses is always intended for the good of his people. We are now ready to turn to the type of temptation that Satan uses.

2. The evil kind of temptation that Satan uses

Both types of temptation contain the idea of trial. Temptation is always a trial! The point to remember about the type of temptation Satan uses is its purpose. Temptation of this type is a trial designed to lead a person into sin. God is *never* the author of this type of temptation (James 1:13). It is this type of temptation that the Lord was warning his disciples about. It is this type of temptation which we shall study.

The Bible teaches that there are three major causes of this type of temptation. Sometimes these causes work together, sometimes separately.

Firstly — The devil is a tempter. Twice in the New Testament the devil, or Satan, is called ‘the tempter’ (Matthew 4:3; 1 Thessalonians 3:5). Sometimes the devil will tempt a believer to sin by putting evil or blasphemous thoughts into his mind. Sometimes there is the temptation to doubt the reality of God or the truth of his Word. This temptation often comes through evil thoughts injected into the mind by the devil. Temptations of this kind are called ‘the flaming arrows of the evil one’ (Ephesians 6:16). The believer is not guilty of sin because he has these thoughts. The believer is only guilty of sin if he believes these thoughts.

More often the devil will tempt by making use of two other ways: —

Secondly — The world (including worldly people) is a tempter. A fisherman uses the bait of a tasty worm to catch a fish. In the same way the devil often uses the bait of some attraction of the world to persuade a person to sin. When the devil tempted Christ, he used the

kingdoms of this world as his bait. It was a servant girl who tempted Peter to deny his Lord (Matthew 26:69). The world with all its things and people is a constant source of temptation to believers.

Thirdly — The flesh (i.e. selfish desire) is a tempter. Sometimes the devil works through a person's desires in order to tempt him. The devil tempted Judas to betray his Lord by using both the help of the world (i.e. the Pharisees and thirty pieces of silver, Matthew 26:14-16) and the covetous nature of Judas himself. In the words of James, 'Each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed' (James 1:14).

The kind of temptation used by the devil is always an attempt to persuade a person to sin. Such temptation may aim at persuading a person to sin in any or all of the following ways: neglecting his God-given duty; entertaining evil in his heart; allowing Satan to draw evil out of his heart; allowing Satan to divert him in any way from communion with God; failing to give God constant, equal, universal obedience to all that he requires (including the manner in which that obedience is given).

We are now ready to give some brief thought to the first of the three basic lessons listed at the start of this chapter.

1) Every Christian must constantly be on guard against temptation. We will illustrate the dangers of temptation by Satan under two points:

a) The great harm that Satan's temptation can bring to a believer. A major aim of temptation is to lead a person into sin. It may be a sin of doing what God forbids. It may be a sin of not doing what God commands. It may be a sin of the flesh that can be seen by others. It may be a sin of the mind, that only God can see. Whatever the sin may be, we must never forget that the aim of such temptation is to harm the spiritual health of the believer.

b) The great varieties of temptation that Satan seeks to use against a believer. Anything that can hinder us in doing the will of God must be seen as a temptation. It may be something within us (i.e. some evil desire) or any thing or person in the world. Anything that provokes or encourages a person to sin is a kind of temptation. Almost any desire a person may have could prove to be a source of temptation. It is not sinful in itself to want such things as an easy life, friends, a good standard of living, a good reputation (the list is endless!). These things, however, can all become a dangerous source of temptation that is hard to resist. Christians need to learn to fear temptations from such sources. They need to fear such temptations as much as they would fear temptations that lead to open and scandalous sin. If we fail to do this we are nearer the brink of ruin than we realise!