

JESUS' GREATEST TEMPTATION

By Paul Penno Jr.

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Oscar Wilde once said that he could resist everything except temptation.

Two characters looking at each other said, "How come opportunity knocks only once, but temptation beats the door down everyday?"

What do you suppose was the greatest temptation Jesus had to face? You know of course He was tempted—the Bible says "in all points like as we are" (Hebrews 4:15).

His temptations were real—they bored in to His inmost soul. Well, the greatest temptation He had to face was the temptation to doubt who He was. And if the truth were known, that's the greatest temptation you have to face also—to doubt who you are.

Jesus had to wrestle with that same question all His life on earth as our Savior. The first inkling that He knew who He was came at the age of 12 when He asked Mary and Joseph in the Temple in Jerusalem, "Wist ye not that I must be about My Father's business?" (Lk. 2:49). The problem surfaces in the temptations in the wilderness after His baptism at the age of 30.

For example, think back to Jesus' temptation in the wilderness after His baptism. Three times the wily old enemy, Satan, zeroed in on Him at the deepest core of His being—"if Thou be the Son of God," command these stones to be bread; "if Thou be the Son of God," do a hang-glide from the top of the

temple tower; "if Thou be the Son of God," claim the empires of the world as Yours and I'll give them to You, for they are mine, the devil said; just play ball with me, be reasonable, let's cooperate. Do you think that was a temptation? "If You are who You think You are." You have delusions of grandeur like a mental patient who thinks he is Napoleon. Yes, Jesus gained a victory then, but remember that the enemy came back again and again on this point of doubting His real identity as the Son of God.

Finally at the very end, something happened that helped to crystallize it all in Jesus' mind and heart when Mary washed His feet with tears. He realized that He was the only person in all of world history to be so honored; no one, not even Alexander the Great, had ever had his feet washed with human tears. Yes, Jesus realized, He was the King of kings and Lord of lords. Now He was ready for John 13. At that last supper, He got up, stretched Himself to His full height, laid aside His expensive robe, and knowing fully that He had come from God and went to God, He humbled Himself to wash His disciples' feet. He could not have done that until He had known for sure, and felt for sure, who He was. He could never have faced the cross until He had that assurance; and even on the cross that last temptation was flung at Him—"if Thou be the Son of God come down from the cross"!

Who are you? Do you know? You cannot be truly humble until you realize your true identity in Christ, redeemed by His blood.

Again, let me ask the question: Who do you think you are? I'm asking myself that question! Matthew

seems to be the one most aware of this problem that Jesus constantly wrestled with. Satan wouldn't let Jesus *alone* even as He hung on His cross in His last hours: "IF Thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross"! (Mt. 27:40).

There is still an ink stain in a room of the castle at Wartburg, Germany where Martin Luther was writing his commentaries and translating the Bible into German after his ordeal with the Roman Catholic Church. Luther threw his ink bottle at the devil as he was being tempted. Notice also that the place is also a place of *loneliness*.

So, I conclude, if the divine Son of God in our human flesh or nature had to wrestle with this problem in temptation, don't be dismayed if you find yourself wondering who you are! Are you a scullery-maid or a ditch-digger in the Father's house, or are you a prince of the realm? Do you have a right to hold your head high, or is Satan correct when he demeans you and seeks to destroy your self-respect?

There is a fascinating parable (or illustration) in Galatians 4:1-7. It tells of this barefoot boy running around the huge estate where even the slaves boss him about and tell him, "Go home to your Mommy!" But when this lowly kid grows up, slaves, watch out how you talk! He becomes the heir to the estate, your boss! So, says Paul, as long as we don't know who we are, don't know our true identity, all the devils in hell can torment us and boss us around; but when you are ready to believe that "in Christ" you are adopted as a son and you are indeed the lord of the estate, your spiritual or psychological

servitude is at an end. "Even so we, when we were children were in bondage under the elements of the world. But . . . "we have been redeemed, we have received the adoption of sons, and God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts." Read it, please: Gal. 4:1-7. Believe it and tell the devil and all his evil angels, "Begone!"

Is it a sin to be depressed? And who can say he/she has never been depressed? The more intelligent you are, the more susceptible you are to the temptation to be depressed. A vacuous frozen smile and endless laughter do not indicate happiness. Watching the TV comedies with their mechanical laughter dubbed in is a sure path to deep depression. Happiness is the result of wrestling with depression, soberly and seriously, and conquering the temptation.

If it is a sin to be depressed, then Jesus cannot be an Example to us, for if ever there was anyone truly and deeply depressed, He was when He cried out on His cross, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" You cannot say that Jesus sinned; therefore, it is not a sin to be depressed. The sin lies in choosing to remain in depression.

All through the Bible we read of God's faithful servants who suffered depression. There is David—read his psalms, they are full of depression. But with only one exception, he always chose to believe the Good News about what God said to him, and he overcame—by believing the Good News God had already said to him. But it was not a once-for-all victory for David. Read his psalms, one after another, David has these wonderful victories of

faith, and then, kerplop, he's back in depression again, having to fight the battle of faith all over again (see 1 Tim. 6:12).

So, when the temptation comes to you again and again, and you wonder "Why?" remember David. Drink deeply of his psalms. And then there is Job—the book that draws aside the curtain behind which God reveals Himself as present with you, closest to you when you feel farthest away from Him. Do you have a battle? That's proof God loves you personally, He is training you, disciplining you, building within you a foundation for lasting happiness.

If you are not depressed, or have never been depressed, you can shout Hallelujah and thank the dear Lord. It's only by virtue of His sacrifice on your behalf when He suffered depression on His cross, that you are free to sing and rejoice in the bright sunlight of His favor. If He had not suffered and died in your place on your behalf, you would be in the place of that poor man Jesus told us about, who has been cast into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mt. 25:30). And you will not despise those who do suffer depression. You will not be hard-hearted toward them, callous, telling them to "snap out of it," "you're foolish," "go help somebody else," etc. The closer you come to Jesus, the more sympathy you will have for others who suffer.

The basic problem for Christian people in depression is the haunting fear that God does not hear their prayers. They pray, and nothing happens; it seems that God does not care. And to believe in

God but that He does not care is worse than not believing in God at all! That's why Christian people, especially Christian teenagers, often suffer the most excruciating pain in their depression.

So, once again, we look to that cross where Jesus was uplifted, and where He will draw "all" unto Himself, where we too can learn to "glory" (Jn. 12:32, 33; Gal. 6:14).

As the Union Pacific Railroad was being constructed, an elaborate trestle bridge was built across a large canyon in the West. Wanting to test the bridge, the builder loaded a train with enough extra cars and equipment to double its normal payload. The train was then driven to the middle of the bridge, where it stayed an entire day. One worker asked, "Are you trying to break this bridge?"

"No," the builder replied, "I'm trying to prove that the bridge won't break." In the same way, the temptations Jesus faced weren't designed to see if Christ would sin, but to prove that He wouldn't.

As He hung on His cross in the darkness, He felt that His Father was despising Him. He said, "My God, why have You forsaken Me? Why are you so far from saving Me? . . . I cry out by day but You do not answer" (Ps. 22:1-3, NIV). The weight of all our sinful guilt was pressing upon His human heart. But did He give up and yield the battle to Satan? No.

Look what He did. (Read the rest of Psalm 22.) He made a choice to believe in the character of His Father as He knew it from His own history. Thus He was able to trust, to believe, despite the total darkness of His soul. In Him, right there, is healing for our human depression.

During my long lifetime I have met only one person who said she thought she did not have enough trials and tribulations. Her husband was wealthy and she had a new Cadillac every two years; and she gave of her time and strength and money to help the Lord's work wherever she saw a need. But most people I know feel they have more than enough trials and troubles.

Young people especially wrestle with the constant temptation to doubt and fear for their future, afraid that they are not accepted by God, conscious of their sinfulness and hesitant to believe that God can really bless them.

The Bible says that everyone who will be saved at last is a child of Jacob; frequently the Lord addresses His people as "O house of Jacob" (cf. Isa. 2:5 etc). I don't know that any of us are better than Jacob, whose name was Supplanter, someone who was so self-centered that he wanted to get ahead even from his birth. If you think you were better than that from your birth, well, you probably don't know your own heart. The life story of Jacob will be encouraging for you to study. Here was a man who felt God—forsaken that night when he tried to sleep with a stone for his pillow (Gen. 28:20-22). He knew he had sinned; he was keenly conscious of his unworthiness (we are, too!); yet the Lord tried to assure him of a ladder from heaven to earth right where he was, with angels of God ascending and descending on it to help him. Jacob sometimes had trouble remembering that dream, just like sometimes you have trouble remembering God's goodness to you; Jacob had plenty of

disappointments and sorrows, and he had to spend a whole night wrestling with the Lord in prayer. But his name was changed from Jacob to Israel. And so will your name be changed! Please accept some encouragement from the story of your "father" Jacob.

Grace is stronger than sin. The problem is that a lot of people who are smug in their assumption that they understand the gospel, don't understand it. They can't see that they don't know how "the gospel is the power of God unto salvation" (Rom. 1:16). The pure, true gospel is stronger than any addiction. And that's where we come to the fork in the road. Believe it, and you go on to enjoy victory; reject it, and you have nothing to save you but your own will power. And you'd better know now how weak that is!

All through the ages, Satan has tried to shake people's confidence in God's character. One thoughtful writer has said, "It is the darkness of misapprehension of God that is enshrouding the world."¹ Such false conceptions of Him are at the root of pagan or heathen religions, and multitudes of professed Christians are suffering various kinds of depression for the same reason. For example, think about the doctrine of God torturing lost people in painful fire for all eternity; that paints Him in darker colors than even Hitler, Stalin, or Castro.

But even those who seek to live close to God may be tempted to wonder if He is the kind, loving, just Heavenly Father that they want to believe in. Why

¹ Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 415.

does He permit injustice? When they pray to Him, begging for a piece of bread, does He give them a stone? Satan is so cruel that he would like to make you think that that is God's character!

The answer to that temptation, that will enable us to overcome that terrible temptation, is Jesus. When He became our "second Adam," entering the stream of our humanity to become "Immanuel, that is, God with us," He suffered being tempted "in all points like as we are" (Heb. 4:15). On His cross He cried out, "My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" The Bible is full of examples of people who were tempted to think He gave them a stone instead of bread: Job, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph sold by his brothers as a slave, David fleeing from the king of Israel, Saul "the anointed of the Lord," Jeremiah in his dungeon and his mud-hole, John the Baptist dying alone in a dungeon, Paul sick unto death. Let us build our faith not on transient feelings, but on the solid rock of Bible truth. Our heavenly Father is true and faithful!

You can't deny that it's a temptation: for over 150 years "we" have been preaching that Jesus is coming "soon," "it's the eleventh hour," "time is almost finished," etc. Now, many are wondering, because they are tempted to doubt: "Is Jesus really coming back again *soon* as we humans are forced to understand the word "soon"? And some who have long believed that Jesus promised to return visibly, personally, in the clouds, are beginning to try to redefine "the second coming" so it won't be personal and visible. That means they are repeating the arguments of "our" opponents of 150+ years

ago! While telling us they still believe in the Second Coming!

If you are tempted to doubt the fulfillment of Bible prophecy, let me suggest one simple observation you can make that can't help but clarify your vision: consider how our modern world is fast becoming like Jesus described the days of Noah before the Flood. Look at Matthew 24:37-40 (these are the simple, direct words of Jesus Himself): "As the days of Noah were so shall also the coming of the Son of man be. For as in the days that were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the ark, and knew not until the flood came and took them all away; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be." Genesis 6 describes those "days" as "corrupt, . . . and filled with violence" (vs. 11). All the people cared about was sex and pleasure. And Genesis says that "God repented that He had made man." Think of how we are today living in a time of solemn judgment, and contrast the giddy, pleasure-mad, yes, corrupt spirit that prevails, and you can't help but see that it's as it was in the days of Noah before the Flood. It's time for solemn, serious, sober thinking!

One of the most basic truths of the Bible is being subtly opposed even in the church: the teaching of the second coming of Jesus.

Not one "saint" will ever enter heaven except via the "first resurrection" (Rev. 20:5, 6; the Bible does not teach that anyone goes to heaven when he dies; each one who dies "sleeps in Jesus," 1 Thess. 4:15-17). And the resurrection cannot take place

until Jesus returns, for only He can raise the dead (Jn. 11:25). Therefore all the billions who have died believing in Jesus for the past 6000 years are prisoners in their graves, locked therein until He returns!

But Jesus CANNOT return until He has a people ready. As long as there is sin still buried in their hearts, even unconscious sin, they would only “be consumed by the brightness of His coming” (2 Thess. 1 and 2. Put a dish of food in your microwave with a metal spoon buried in it).

“Oh, I can never get rid of all sin, conscious or unconscious,” many say. And thus they oppose the second coming of Jesus. Some say they would rather die than say Goodbye to all sin, hoping they can get to heaven by the “underground route.”

But the Bible makes us uncomfortable, for it plainly declares that God will be successful in preparing a people for Christ’s coming; and they will not be a handful of loners scattered loosely in the wilderness. They will be “144,000 . . . who follow the Lamb wherever He goes, . . . without fault before the throne of God,” “in their mouth . . . no guile” (Rev. 14:4, 5). This coordinated, united, corporate “body” of believers will be the ripened “harvest of the earth” that gives that “angel” the cue to declare, “the time is come for Thee to reap,” and then “the Son of man” is free to come on “a white cloud, . . . having on His head a golden crown, and in His hand a sharp sickle” (vss. 14-16).

And this? It is denounced and ridiculed as being the heresy of “perfectionism.” “Watch, and keep [your] garments,” says 16:15. The Holy Spirit is

working night and day right now, world wide, to accomplish this task which is ridiculed as “impossible.”

Is it possible that sinners (like all of us are born to be!) can overcome sin and become truly Christ like in character? Can “the righteousness of the law” (perfect obedience, perfect loyalty) ever be achieved in this life? The Bible quite clearly says: “all have sinned, and continue [present tense] to come short” (Rom. 3:23). Our very nature is sinful; and even “saints” can’t help showing that they are sinners. Nobody is perfect. So is perfection of character an impossible dream?

The Bible insists on a Good News answer—YES! God sent His beloved Son into the world on the special mission to “save His people FROM their sins,” not IN them (Mt. 1:21). Rom. 8:3, 4 says that He was “sent . . . to condemn sin in the flesh, that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us.” The word “righteousness” used there means the righteous character of those who “walk after the Spirit.” (It’s *dikaionomata*, the imparted righteousness of saints, Rev. 19:8, whereas *dikaionomata* always is the imputed righteousness of Christ). Heb. 13:21 says that the Saviour will “make you perfect in every good work to do His will.” And Rev. 14:1-5 describes a people at the close of time who “are without fault before the throne of God,” who “follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth.” Not part way, but totally. They will refuse “the mark of the beast” and will receive “the seal of God” (Rev. 13:16, 17; 7:1-4).

Are they fanatics? Extremists? Strait-laced grumpy “saints”? No way! Jesus got in on the perfection debate Himself on the Good News side. He said: “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Mt. 5:48). In saying so, He gives us the key to unlock the perplexity. His context is learning to love like the Father loves, who sends His rain and sunshine on the just and on the unjust, who loves bad people, even His enemies. Jesus’ idea of “perfection” is simple: learning to love like that! John learned the idea from Him, for he also says that if you’ve learned to love like that, you “know God,” you’re “born of God,” He “dwells in” you, you have “His Spirit,” and you yourself “dwell in God.” Furthermore, you overcome fear (which goes along with sin), and you end up “perfect” (see 1 Jn. 4:7-18). True, you and I were born totally bereft of such love (*agape*); but there’s a filling station where the Holy Spirit “sheds it abroad in our hearts” (Rom. 5:5). Or to change the metaphor, it’s the simple matter of going to school to learn it, “the school of Christ.” The “best,” proudest person must graduate from kindergarten.

It’s cute to see little children lisp newly discovered words in kindergarten. They are so innocent. But when adults are still lisping words and haven’t moved on from kindergarten, then it’s pathetic. It’s time that we see the cross of Jesus and grow out of our narcissistic preoccupation with our needs and ourselves and seek what Jesus wants.