

The Temptation of Christ

IT is doubtless the primary object of this weekly breaking of bread to keep before our minds the Lord's death, as saith Paul, "*As often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord's death till he come.*" But this is not to be done profitably or scripturally by confining our contemplations to the fact of his death in an historic sense. What we have to do is to remember not only the fact but the meaning of the fact, and what God has accomplished by it for us. To do this, we must take into account many things not seen on Calvary, and not spoken of on that dreadful night when all the disciples forsook him and fled. We must have in view what went before.

Under this head, we might go back as far as the Garden of Eden, and look at the fact that by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin. I do not, however, propose this morning to go so far back as that, but to look at Christ in what may be called his moral preparation for that acceptable offering of himself to God without spot, which he accomplished through the Eternal Spirit, as Paul informs us in Heb. 9:14. That offering was the sacrifice of a proved and obedient man, tempted in all points like his brethren, yet without sin, that is, without disobedience—for as regards sin concreted, so to speak, in those physical effects produced by sin in the first instance, which Paul metonymically styles "*sin that dwelleth in me,*" Jesus was no exception to his brethren. He was "*the seed of David according to the flesh*" (Rom. 1: 3); he took part of the same flesh and blood as the children (Heb. 2:14); he was made in all things like to his brethren (Heb. 2:17); he was made in the likeness (that is, the sameness) of sinful flesh (Rom. 8:3); and was therefore made sin for us—he, who, in the moral sense, knew no sin (2 Cor. 5:21). Such is the testimony which is in harmony with the object of his sacrificial manifestation; to destroy, through death, the *diabolos* having the power of death (Heb. 2:14); to condemn sin in the flesh (Rom. 8:3). Such, also, is the conclusion involved in the elementary proposition that Jesus Christ came in the flesh.

It is not, however, the bodily element of the one great offering on which I wish this morning to fix your attention; but the moral qualification involved in the fact attested by Paul and others, that he was tempted. The testimony is that he was "*in all points tempted, like as we are*" (Heb. 4:15). We look at one particular form of this temptation—that which, by pre-eminence, is known as "the temptation of Christ." Here we shall find instruction and help in various directions, while we "*consider him who endured such contradiction of sinners against himself.*"

We have to note the time the temptation occurred. It was just after the baptism of Jesus when the Spirit of God visibly descended upon him, and abode upon him, in the presence of assembled multitudes of Israel, and when he had been openly and audibly acknowledged of the Father as His well-beloved Son, whom they were commanded to hear. Why was he at such a time "*driven of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil*"? We may note here an illustration of the principle proclaimed by the Lord himself that to whom much is given, of them is much required. Jesus endowed with an increased measure, yea, a measureless portion of the power and favour of the Father, had to be put to a proof equal to the new greatness conferred upon him. For thirty years before, during a private life at Nazareth, he had been subject to the common temptations of men; now, anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power, it was meet that he should be subjected to a corresponding test of faithfulness before going forth in the plenitude of this power to bear the Father's name before Israel. From this we may deduce the lesson practically applicable to ourselves, that our trials and our temptations will be commensurate with our opportunities, powers, and privileges. The privileges of the apostles were greater than ours; so were their troubles. The privileges of some at this present time are greater than others living at the

same time; so are their temptations and afflictions, and so also will be the measure of their stewardship.

The nature of the tempter in the case of Christ has always been a much disputed question. It is really of no practical importance where the orthodox devil is discarded. It is the principles involved in the temptation that call for attention as applicable to ourselves. Whether the tempter was external or internal, or both; or whether the temptation was done in reality or trance, the guidance of Christ's example to his brethren is the same. Their temptations take all shapes without altering the principle that achieves the victory. Therefore, it is practically immaterial what sort of a devil it was that put Christ to the proof, provided it be recognized that the supernatural immortal fiend of popular theology is out of the question. It is more than probable that Christ's temptation, like that of Adam and all his brethren, included an external tempter and those internal feelings to which he could appeal. It certainly was not his flesh nature merely, because it is testified that when the temptation was ended, *"the devil left him for a season,"* which his flesh nature did not do. Who the personal tempter was cannot be decided, because there is no testimony. It is a matter of little consequence. It is depressing to see a point like this zealously debated where the real teaching of the whole case is unappreciated or unacted on.

The first fact that strikes us is that Jesus employed the Scriptures to repel the suggestions of the tempter. He gave a Bible reason, in each case, for not doing what he was asked to do. This is suggestive in many ways. It exhibits Jesus in the aspect of being acquainted with the Scriptures, and of having that memory of their practical instructions that was equal to his requirements in the hour of need. It may be said that this acquaintance was due to the presence of the Spirit with him. There is no proof of this. The Spirit did not admit him to a knowledge of the day and the hour (Mark 13:32), nor of the times or the seasons which the Father had reserved (Acts 1:7). The bestowments of the Spirit in all cases were in the measure of the Father's intention, and that only. Hence the gifts differed amongst the spiritually-endowed brethren of the first century, although it was *"the same spirit"* in each case (1 Cor. 12:8-11). And hence also the apostles, who healed the sick as a public seal of the divinity of the Gospel, could not use the power for private purposes (2 Tim. 4:20) Jesus *"learned obedience"* (Heb. 5:8), and *"increased in wisdom"* (Luke 2:52), which implies development, in harmony with, and by the use of, the means God has appointed for those ends. If, therefore, Jesus knew the Scriptures, it was because *"his custom was"* to frequent the synagogue, and to read the Scriptures (Luke 4:16). Let no one imagine that this is inconsistent with his being God manifest in the flesh. All parts of truth are consistent. His being God manifest in the flesh led to his powerful proneness in a scriptural direction, and to the fruitfulness of his application in this direction; but it did not make him independent of the testimony which the Spirit in the Psalms says was his study all the day, and the understanding of which made him wiser than his teachers (Psa. 119:97-104).

In Christ, therefore, *"in the days of his flesh,"* we have an example of that endeavour to become familiar with the Scriptures in daily reading, which is the characteristic of the modern revival of the truth. Let us hold on to this. Let us not be like the Sadducees, of whom Jesus declared they *"knew not the Scriptures"*; but like him who commanded them to *"search the Scriptures"*; who reproved his disciples for their slowness of heart in the matter; and whose last attitude towards them was that of expounding to them, in all the Scriptures, the things concerning himself. Only in this way can we reach the condition of mind exemplified in the case of his temptation. The Scriptures known and pondered will come to our help in the time of need. We shall be able to refuse compliance with this and that, because *"it is written,"* but if we neglect the Scriptures, we shall forget duty in many matters, and fall an easy prey to the temptations that come upon us at all points. We shall be in the opposite case to that described in the Psalms: *"Thy word have I hid in my heart (that is, put deeply into my heart), that I might not sin against thee."*

All this implies that if a thing is written in the Scriptures it is a sufficient reason for our observing it. The recognition of this is the distinguishing mark of the sons of God nowadays as in the days of old. It is that which separates our profession of faith from all the religious systems of the age. We discard all tradition of merely human origin; we repudiate the notion of light within; we disown the so-called "Holy Ghost" outpouring of the sectarian theology as the mere excitation of animal magnetism, under the stimulus of false thoughts—terrifying or soothing, as the case may be. We also deny that a man's natural understanding can furnish any guidance as to the will of God, the nature of righteousness, or the way of salvation. We regard the Scriptures, and, in our age, the Scriptures alone, as the source of information and authority in all matters pertaining to God. On this foundation we stand with Christ, and in this confidence we know we have many good reasons to rejoice. It is a position that cannot, in true reason, be assailed either in the name of history, philosophy, or science. We are on a rock that cannot be shaken. Let us hold on to our advantage, and not be like those who, having once attained it, let it slip out of their hands by neglecting to read the word, and thus lapsing into their original ignorance and unspirituality.

The temptation is recorded in three particulars only, and these are very briefly put; but it will be found that they comprise, in principle, all the temptations to which we can be exposed. First, there was the proposal that Jesus should illegitimately minister to his own need in the matter of food. The temptation on this point was made as keen as it was possible to be. It was not brought to bear when Christ had no need. It would have been no temptation had the proposal not coincided with a strong desire in the direction proposed. It came to him after a fast of forty days; when the Spirit, having sustained him all that time with a supply of vital energy ordinarily derived from the alimentive process, permitted him to hunger. As the proverb has it, "Hunger will break through stone walls." Even lawlessness committed from the force of hunger is leniently viewed by men in general, as it is written, "*Men do not despise a thief if he steal to satisfy his soul when he is hungry.*" The hunger of Christ, therefore, made the temptation a very strong one. But the temptation was made still stronger by the way the tempter put it: "***If thou be the son of God, command that these stones be made bread.***" This was as much as to say that the proof of his Messiahship required him to do what was proposed, and that if he failed to do it, he would give his tempter ground for doubting the proclamation that had just been made on the banks of the Jordan. Thus Christ's desire to testify the truth was cunningly brought to the help of his hunger to incline him to provide himself with food. But the power to make bread at will, which Christ possessed, as afterwards shown by his feeding a multitude with five loaves and two fishes, was not given to him to provide his own natural wants, but to exhibit his Father's name to Israel. Consequently, though he had the power which the tempter challenged, he was not at liberty to put it forth at the time and for the purpose proposed. It would have been sin in him to comply with the suggestion. He repelled the suggestion by a quotation from the Scriptures which involved the assertion of those facts: "*It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.*"

The power of this rejoinder may not at first sight be, manifest; because, so far as appearance went, the proposal was not to discard the Word of God, but merely to provide the bread which the answer recognized as an element, though not alone, in the process of living. If we understand, however, that the proposed mode of providing it was wrong, the strength of it appears. "*Bread alone*" will finally land a man in the grave, because bread alone cannot bestow immortality. Bread, with the Word of God believed and obeyed, will be a stepping-stone to life that will never end (and it is in this sense that the Scriptures speak of men "*living*"). In fact, in this connection, bread becomes part of the pathway to eternal life, for without the bread first to develop and sustain the natural man, the Word of God could not have that ground to work on which leads to everlasting life (first, that which is natural; afterwards, that which is spiritual). But bread with the Word of God disobeyed, is "*bread alone*," so far as life-giving power is concerned; for the Word of God confers no everlasting life on

the disobedient. Consequently for a man to obtain bread on terms that involve his non-submission to the Word of God (and this was the tempter's proposal), is to take his stand on "*bread alone*." To such a case, the Scripture quoted by Jesus has obviously a most forcible application. The rejoinder was unanswerable.

Now, "*these things were written for our instruction*." It was intended that we should be able to wield this Scripture as a sword in the conflict with our tempters and our temptations. Are there no cases in which it is necessary? We have not received supernatural power to make bread; but we have all, more or less, received the natural power to do so in the sense of earning it, and the use of natural power is governed by the same law as the use of supernatural. We may not wrongly use our powers or opportunities in the gaining of daily bread. It is customary in times of stress in this matter, to say, "We must live." This is often made a reason for conforming to tricks of trade and other forms of unrighteousness. A man remains in the ministry, say (for there have been such cases), or preaches, or appears to preach, false doctrine, and maintains or appears to maintain an unscriptural system, because he or his family "must live." It is a sufficient answer to say, "*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God*." If he chooses, for the sake of bread, to ignore obligations and duties presented by the word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God, he chooses bread alone, and that, too, a bread that perishes, with which he too will perish. There are many cases and situations to which this will apply. Men of discernment and the fear of God will be able to make the application.

"*Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, and saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone*." Here we have a different class of temptation. In the first, he was invited for two powerful reasons to make a forbidden use of power entrusted to his hands. In this the tempter goes to the other extreme, and invites Jesus to throw himself ostentatiously on the promises of God. This, perhaps, was more difficult to meet than the other. It was as if the tempter said, "Thou art the Messiah, art thou not?"—"Yes." "It is written, is it not, that He shall give His angels charge concerning thee, and they shall bear thee, up?"—"It is so written." "Cast thyself down, then; how canst thou expect me to believe if thou dost not?" How was this to be met? By the assertion of a principle ignored in the tempter's application of Scripture—a principle which all divine promises presuppose, and which would have been violated by compliance with the tempter's challenge; that there must be no familiarity or presumption towards God: that we must make a wise and full use of all that He has put in our power, and that divine help is only for the need that remains after there has been a humble, wise and loving employment of the means already in our hand. This principle Jesus asserted by quoting Scripture: "*Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God*." Had he thrown himself down, as the tempter proposed, he would have done what the Scriptures thus forbid, and would have forfeited his claim to the promise to which the tempter so sophistically appealed. The protection promised in that passage was protection from evil beyond control, and not from evil rashly and presumptuously incurred.

The application of this to the brethren of Christ is obvious. They are not to tempt God by running into evil on the strength of promises that are for those only who in wisdom and the fear of God act the part of wise stewards of what God has already committed to them. They must learn rightly to divide the word of truth, and not, like the tempter, exalt one part of the word to the destruction of another. It is written, "*Cast thy bread to the hungry*": they are not, therefore, to scatter their entire substance to the beggars of the street for it is also written, "*He that provideth not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel*." Ministration to the poor is to be in the measure allowed by the provision of home. It is written, "*Seek not what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink: seek first the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you*." We are not,

therefore, to neglect the means of livelihood; for it is also written, *"If any man will not work, neither shall he eat."* *"Provide things honest in the sight of all men."* We are not to make temporal ends the object of life and the springs of our actions; we are to give this place to the kingdom of God. Nevertheless, we are to be *"diligent in business while thus serving the Lord."* It is written, *"Take no thought for the morrow."* *"Have faith in God."* *"He careth for you."* *"He knoweth what things ye have need of."* *"He will feed and clothe you."* We are not, therefore, to sit down in idleness, make no arrangement and put forth no effort, expecting the bread to be brought to our doors, for it is also written, *"Go to the ant, thou sluggard, consider her ways and be wise."* *"Labour with your hands, providing the thing that is good."* *"Commit the keeping of your souls to him in well-doing."* We are to find the harmony of these various directions of the word in an un-anxious, trustful, well-doing industry which we trust God to bless and prosper for the ministering of seed to the sower and bread to the eater.

These instances might be multiplied. Modern fanaticism and misconstructions of the word impose upon us frequently the necessity of confronting devil-quoted Scripture with the weapon Christ placed in our hand when he quoted, *"Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God."*

"Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; and saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me." Here the temptation takes a different direction. Having failed to induce Jesus to gratify illegitimately the cravings of the flesh or to transgress in the direction of presumption towards God, the tempter tries the effect of present honour, wealth and exaltation offered on the simple condition of doing homage to the offerer, as the kings and governors of the Roman earth were in the habit of doing to Caesar for their position and dignities. Jesus utterly repels the suggestion, reminding the tempter that the Scriptures command one service only. *"Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve."*

Jesus afterwards said, *"To him that overcometh, will I grant to sit with me in my throne, as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne."* Hence the victory of Christ in this temptation has a practical value for us. It is a something we can imitate. It may be asked, How can we imitate him in the rejection of an offer we shall never receive? Well, we shall never be offered power and wealth in the form in which it was offered to him; but we have the same temptation on a smaller scale. There is a continual and silent offer to every saint (and sometimes the offer is not a silent one) to possess this world's advantages on condition of falling in with the worship of the world in some form or other. Sometimes the worship proposed is ecclesiastical ("join our body, and it will be to your advantage"); sometimes it is political ("it will pay you to take part in politics sometimes it is social ("come out, good fellow, make yourself one of us you will not regret it"); sometimes it is undisguised, by pleasure-seekers and the immoral. In every case, there is an implied proposal to serve that old serpent, the devil and Satan, which is incorporate in, and deceiveth the whole world, backed up with a guarantee that we shall be rewarded. There is only one safe answer for every brother of the Lord Jesus. Do not parley: repel the advance decisively: *"Get thee hence, Satan."* We cannot serve God and Mammon. We cannot be the friend of God and the friend of the world at the same time. *"Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve."* It is Christ himself who has given us this motto; and he has led the way in the application of it. *"The kingdoms of the world and the glory of them"* will be the inheritance of Christ and his brethren in due time. While the devil has the disposal of them, it is their part to be strangers and pilgrims, having here no continuing city, but seeking one to come.

The temptation of Christ is a remarkable episode in a remarkable history. It deserves more attention than it receives, as regards the lessons it conveys. There is no temptation that can come to us but what was in principle involved in the specific temptation to which he

was subjected in the wilderness after his baptism. The consideration of his resistance to the suggestions of the tempter will help us in all our exposures to similar trial. Is it proposed to us to gratify some craving of the flesh in a forbidden direction? to make a vain-glorious or presumptuous use of spiritual privileges? to obtain temporal advantage by paying court to the enemies of God in any form? Cast our eyes to the wilderness of Judea, and remember the principles asserted by the Lord in Scripture quotations, in answer to similar proposals. Thus looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, we shall be helped in the consideration of him who endured such contradiction of sinners against himself. We shall be emboldened like him to make ourselves of no reputation, to carry the cross of self-denial, to make the Father's will the pleasure of our lives, and to choose rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season. This we shall not do in vain. It is only for a little while. At the last we shall know the unexplored depth of blessedness contained in the intimation that the object of it all, on the part of God, is *"that in the ages to come he might show the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness towards us through Christ Jesus."*

(Taken from "Seasons of Comfort" Volume 1, Pages 257-264, by Bro. R. Roberts.)