

The Nature and Limits of Temptation

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert, to be tempted by the devil.

St. Matthew IV. 1.

This deeply mysterious passage of our Lord's humiliation can never be understood by us more than in part. It is full of truths only partially revealed; and from our inability to comprehend them, we must refrain from offering too boldly to interpret the nature of His temptation.

Certain great truths, however, we may learn from what is here written, that same Spirit with whom the Son of God was one from everlasting;

and by whom also He was anointed
 at His baptism, was here His guide
 to the place of His spiritual conflict
 with the Evil One. When it is said,
 He was led of the Spirit, it is to be
 understood in the same sense as when
 it is said, He was anointed, tempted,
 and the like - The man Christ Jesus
 being susceptible of all these, by reason
 of His true and proper humanity.

That same Spirit by which He was
 anointed ¹ to preach to the meek, was
 also His guide in all that it behoved
 the Messiah to do and to suffer for
 the sin of the world. St. Paul tells us
 that it was "by the Holy Ghost" that He

¹ Isaiah Lxi. 1.

² Heb. ix. 14.

offered Himself to God; and that "He was predestinated the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of Sanctification, by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead:"³ that is to say, by the Divine Nature in which the Son and the Spirit are one and indivisible. Thus through the Spirit He was led up of His own free will to be tempted of the Devil. It was the onset of the warfare which was to end in the destruction of "him that hath the Empire of death."

There is an Evident relation, partly of coincidence, and partly of Contrast,

³Rom. I. 4

between the temptation of the first Adam
in the garden, and of the second Adam
in the desert. The first Adam
was tempted through the senses, and
by the allurements, of self-exaltation,
and covetousness of gifts which he did
not possess. So with Christ: He
was tempted to satisfy His hunger
by a miracle; to display His divine
nature, by suspending the laws which
govern our state, to which He had
made Himself subject, and to forsake
His Father for the sake of earthly greatness.
In the two first temptations, it does
not at first sight appear in what

The sin to which He was tempted consists. It may be that Satan sought for proof that He was the very Christ, and that he hoped either to destroy or to draw Him from God. His temptations were therefore put in a tone of incredulity and provocation, like the rulers who reviled Him upon the cross, saying, "He saved others let Him save Himself, if He be Christ the elect of God;" and the malefactor also, who "blasphemed Him saying If thou be Christ, save thyself and us".[†] These words express a great depth of contumely, mixed with incredulity and fear. It would appear that Satan half knew and half feared lest He were the Christ.

[†] St. Luke xxiii. 35, 39.

and so shaped his temptations as to lead
him, as he thought, into a manifestation
of Himself, and in ways that would
destroy the pure integrity of his obedience
to God. The temptation lay not so much
in the particular form, as in the moral
character and effect of the act. So it was
in the first temptation of man: the
act was in itself, it may be, indifferent;
the spring of it was disobedience, and the
end was death. In this instance it
would have been a renouncing of subjection
to his Father and a defeat of the ends
for which He had become incarnate.
Now, this temptation in the desert was
a part of the humiliation of the Son

of God. As He took our nature with all its infirmitie, it was needful that He should make full trial of our state. As He prayed, wept, and hungered, so also He was tempted. It belonged to the truth of our nature, and to the realities of our state in this world of sin, that He should suffer as we suffer. And this is specially mentioned by St. Paul who encourages us by saying that He was "tempted in all things like as we are, without sin." ^I It was needful He should learn by experience the full misery and hatefulnes of sin, and the weakness and susceptibility of our nature: for this, even the Crucifixion, because of the perfection of His own

^I Heb. IV. 15

Nature, learned "by the things which He suffered." What humiliation can be greater than that He "who is not a tempter of Evils", should be solicited by the horrible and hateful suggestions of mistrustful, presumptuous, self-exalting thoughts, and that with the taunts and allurements of the devil? What is more affecting to holy minds than the haunting suggestions or visions of evil? And yet surely no such trial was ever so affecting to any other as to the Holy One of God. The absolute holiness of the Godhead was then brought into contact with sin, as the divine immortality was brought into the neighbourhood of death upon

the Cross. It is impossible for us to measure the intense humiliation and spiritual anguish of such a familiarity with the Wicked One. None but God, in whose sight the heavens are not clean, can know the hatefulness of Sin as it was manifested to Christ, or the depth of sorrow and abhorrence which was excited in the soul of Him who was without Sin.

Again; this temptation, it may be, was as necessary to our redemption as the passion upon the cross. It was parallel to the temptation of Adam in Eden in this point, that as he by falling subjected us to Sin and death, so Christ by overcoming has delivered us from the same.

The first Adam was our head unto condemna-
 tion; The Second is our Head unto Everlast-
 ing life. Now it is to be observed, that
 our Lord was tempted as a Man, and
 as a Man He overcame. He did not
 put forth divine powers of Miracle, nor
 support Himself by divine interpositions.
 He might indeed have let loose twelve
 legions of angels against the tempter;
 but how then should He have been the
 Example and pledge of Mastery to us
 that are tempted? His victory over
 the devil was gained by the preparation
 of prayer and fasting, and by the
 power of patience and steadfast obedience
 to God. The same shield, and the same
 weapons of offence, we also possess.

His mastery was gained, as His temptation was subdued, strictly within the conditions of our humanity

That this conflict was complete is evident from the fact, that though St. Luke says "Satan departed from Him for a time", we elsewhere read that our blessed Lord was soon again solicited by his allurement. He was buffeted and blasphemed by the malignity of the devil; contradicted and pursued by the hatred of men; all the powers of darkness were in activity against Him; yet we elsewhere find that he was again tempted to withdraw His obedience from His Father in heaven.

Even in the last night of agony in the garden, in the midst of exhaustion, fear, and anguish, when the tempter might

had seemed to have found a season of peculiar weakness, he did not appear; his work lay elsewhere; he was busied in another direction. He had compassed the death of Adam whom he could not overcome; he had "entered into Judas"; he was counter-working, as it might seem, to destroy us whom he could not defile. Now this perfect overthrow of Satan, in our nature, is a mystery out of which our Master's own temptations are derived, as our falls are derived out of the first transgression. Christ has overcome for us; and by virtue of our union with Him, He daily overcomes Satan in and through our regenerate nature, and therein perpetually.

ly repeats and carries out his first mastery
in the desert. It was this great warfare
and victory that St. John saw in his
vision. "And there was a great battle in
heaven, Michael and his angels fought
with the dragon, and the dragon fought
with his angels: and they prevailed not,
neither was their place found any more in
heaven. And that great dragon was cast
out, that old serpent who is called the
devil, and satan, who seduceth the whole
world: and he was cast unto the earth
and his angels were thrown down with
him. And I heard a loud voice in heaven,
saying: Now is come salvation, and strength,
and the kingdom of our God, and the
power of his Christ: because the accuser
of our brethren is cast forth, who accuseth

them before our God day and night. And they
 overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and
 by the word of the testimony, and they loved
 not their lives unto death." ^I Apostles,
 prophets, martyrs, and saints, all the
 members of His mystical body became
 partakers of His mastery over the Kingdom
 of darkness, and over the devil, the prince
 of this world. So, through persecution,
 and distress, and torment, in the provinces
 and cities of the world, in marketplaces
 and theatres, in the wilderness and
 in solitude, they overcame the strength
 and the subtlety of the tempter, and in
 weakness confounded his power, whom
 all the world worshipped.

This temptation of our Lord Jesus Christ

^I Apoc. XII. 7-11.

Lays open to us the reality and nature of our own. It lifts the veil which is upon our eyes, the unconsciousness which is upon our hearts, and shows us what is really going on at all times in the spiritual world around us; by what we are beset, and what are the mysterious powers which are exerting themselves upon us. Much that we never suspect to be more than the effect of chance, or hazard, or the motion of our own minds or the caprice of fancy, may be the agency of this same awful being who tempted both the first Adam, and the Second. There is something very fearful in the thought that Satan, whom we so slight or forget, is an angel - a spiritual being of the highest order - Endowed therefore with energies and gifts of a superhuman power.

with intelligence as great as his Malice; Cofty, majestic, and terrible in his fall. Next to the holy Angels, what being can it be more fearful to have opposed to us, and that with intense and vigilant Security, and at all times hovering invisibly about us? From what we read of the temptation of Christ we may learn.

I First, that it is no Sin to be tempted; nor is our being tempted any proof of our being sinful. This is a most Consolatory thought; for among the afflictions of life few are so bitter and perpetual as temptation. Sorrows, pains, disappointments, crosses, oppositions, which come upon us from without, are not to be compared in suffering to the inward distress of being tempted to evil deeds, words,

desires and thoughts. The subtlety and insinuation of evil is so great that it gains an entrance before we are aware of it: Sometimes it seems to glance off by a sort of reflection from things the most opposite in their nature; Sometimes to be taken into our minds unperceived in the midst of indifferent thoughts, and then suddenly to unfold itself. Every one who is seeking for Christian perfection must have found how thoughts of resentment, pride, self-complacency, repining, and even others unholier still, sometimes seem to shoot off from the holiest acts and contemplations, and again to spring up out of subjects of the greatest purity and humiliation; sometimes also in times

of deep sorrow and depression, when our minds
 are most remote from any conscious intel-
 ligence of their own soul. This, and much
 more which is implied by this, will
 be recognised by all who are seeking after
 holiness; and it is this that causes the
 bitterest and most sickening distress
 of mind. Sometimes it makes us doubt
 of our whole religious life - almost of
 our regeneration. Am I not even yet
 "in the flesh," "in the gall of bitterness, and in
 the bond of iniquity" Can I dare to pray? is
 not even prayer a mere profession?
 how can I approach God with a soul
 haunted and darkened by such a
 presence of evil? It is indeed, well
 to be suspicious and self-accusing; for
 there can be no doubt but that most

of our mental temptations find their opportunity in actual faults, past or present, or in that original taint of sin which is still in us: that is to say, in those parts of our nature which are the effects of the fall of man, and of our own personal disobedience.

But the susceptibility of temptation belongs to us, not as fallen beings, but as men. Perfect beings may be tempted, as the angels; and sinless, as Adam in the garden, Christ in the desert.

So long as we are in this state of probation, and in this world of conflict between sin and holiness, it must be so. Even though we were made sinless at this very hour, still the power and subtlety of evil by which we are surrounded would not cease to approach us, and to force itself

upon our perception and our hatred. Thus much we may learn for our comfort: though we should convert it into a curse, if we were to solve the fact of our daily consciousness of evil thoughts and inclinations by this truth alone. It is too true that, for the most part, we are tempted because we have aggravated and inflamed our original sinfulness. We by disobedience have given to it a vividness and appetite which by nature it did not possess. Old thoughts, wishes, associations, practices, are the source of most of our inward defilements. To our natural susceptibility and our original corruption we have added an immense range of inclinations to things

forbidden; and on these Satan fastens. However, we may take this comfort: after we have assured ourselves by strict self-examination that the temptation by which we are distressed is not the result of any act of our own will, we may rest in peace, thanking God for the pain it inflicts upon us, praying Him to make that pain, if He sees fit, sharper and deeper, that it may issue in an intense hatred of evil, in a more vivid consciousness of our own misery in lower humiliation and greater purity of heart. Any suffering is to be welcomed which teaches us horror and hatred for sin. In this way temptations are turned by the Holy Spirit against themselves. That which in its first intention would be the defilement, if not the

death of the soul, turns to chastisement, mortification and cleansing. It wakes and quickens all the powers of the soul; fear, self-restraint, watchfulness, caution, sensitive shrinking from the least appearance of evil, strong and persevering efforts to deaden and destroy so much as the very liability to be affected by temptations. So it was with the Corinthians, to whom St. Paul said: "For behold this self-same thing, that you were made sorrowful according to God how great carefulness it worketh in you: yea defence, yea indignation, yea fear, yea desire, yea zeal, yea revenge; in all things you have showed yourselves to be undefiled in the matter."^I The very sorrow and distress are our safe-

^I 2 Cor. vii. 11.

guard. We should be in danger if we did not feel them; and we are safer as we feel them more acutely, and use them for our humiliation and spiritual cleansing.

2 Another truth following on the last is, that nothing can convert a temptation into a sin but the consent of our own will. This one principle, clearly seen, is a key to mis-tenths of all questions of conscience on this subject. The worst of temptations, so long as they are, without our will, are no part of us: by consent they become adopted and incorporated with our spiritual nature - thoughts become wishes, and wishes intents. Consent is the act of the whole inward man. So long as we refuse to yield, it matters little what temptations

beset us: they may distress and darken,
 and even for a time seem to defile our
 hearts; but they cannot overcome us.
 The thought of satisfying his natural hunger,
 of vindicating his divine Sonship by miracles,
 the visions of this false world, the Riquards
 of the Earth and the glory of them, were
 cast like shadows, on the clear brightness
 of our Lord's Spirit; but they were no assent
 left us traces, no deposit of doubt, desire
 or inclination. They were simply hateful,
 and were cast forth with an intense
 rejection; and that because they en-
 countered a holy will, which is of
 divine strength even in man.

In measure it is so in every Saint; it
 may be so with us. As the will is strengthened
 with Energy, and upheld with the pressure

of Christ dwelling in the heart of the pure and lowly; so the temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil, are expelled from us, and lose all share in our personal existence.

This explains the various degrees of power that temptations have over various men.

Some seem never mastered by them, some seldom, some often, and some always.

Of the first we have spoken enough. The others will be found in two classes: they are either those who, without positive habits of sin, are also without positive habits of holiness; or those whose habits are positively unholy. When I say, those who, without positive habits of sin, are also without positive habits of holiness, I mean, such persons as are pure in their lives, benevolent, upright, and amiable,

but not about towards God. This in itself is of course, in one sense, sin, because it is a coming "short of the glory" and acceptance of God. I am using "sin" in its popular sense, of wilful acts of evil. Now such people are open to the full incursions of the tempter in the whole extent of that natural sinfulness which is in them.

This gives them a predisposition on which he acts with daily success. They are open and unguarded, and the will that is in them is weak and undisciplined; it has no expulsive power in it, by which evil is cleared from a heart that is sanctified by a life of holiness. We see such people become inconsistent, vain, ostentatious, worldly, and then designing, far-sighted for their own interests, selfish, unscrupulous.

false to their friends, their principles, their professions. We are surprised by unexpected acts out of keeping with what we believe them to be, and lines of practice in direct opposition to apparent duty. The key of all this is, that they have secretly yielded their will to some temptation, and converted it into their own sin; and that sin is their master. We sometimes see such people deteriorating with a frightful intensity and speed; so much so as to make us remember how awfully the emptiness and preparedness of an unconverted heart is described by our Lord. The unclean spirit "saith, I will return into my house from whence I came out. And coming he findeth it empty, swept and garnished. Then he goeth, and taketh

with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter in and dwell there."^I

The case, is, of course, much more obviously true of those who live lives of positive unholiness. Every sin that a man commits is an invitation to the tempter to tempt him henceforward to that particular sin. So that every man of a profligate life is the subject of a manifold temptation, which is perpetually multiplying itself. First he is tempted of his own heart, then by Satan, then by consent he tempts Satan to tempt him again in the same form, circumstances, and details; for by consent he has made that his master-sin. And henceforward it becomes, as we say, a ruling sin which is so seldom broken off that St. Peter says of certain, that

^I St. Matt. XII. 44, 45.

They have "Eyes full of adultery and of sin that ceaseth not."² They have an active commerce with the tempter, a mingling of will and desire with him; and the inflammation and power of evil affections become a bondage through which it becomes at last morally impossible to break. And how does this differ from a possession of the devil? Is it not a possession in all the reality of fact and truth? How did Satan enter into the heart of Judas with any fuller or more personal presence than this? How can we otherwise explain the settled deliberate career of sin in which some were live - the perfect impenetrableness of heart and conscience with which they hold out against all warnings, fears and chastisements; as for instance, in sensuality, jealousy, or pride?

² 2 St. Peter II. 14

This, then, is the sum of the matter: temptations are no sins so long as we keep our will pure from all consent to them; when we consent, they become sins, are infused into our spiritual nature, and are the first admissions of that which in the end may be no less than a possession.

3 And this leads to one point more - I mean, to the nature and limits of the power of temptation. First, it is plain that Satan has no power over the will of man except through itself. It must be won by self-betrayal, or not at all. This is absolutely certain, and lies at the root of the distinction between obedience and disobedience, holiness and sin. Next, it would appear

that he can have no direct power over the affections. He must approach them, as they lie round the will, through the eye and the ear, the touch or the imagination. Through the senses, the avenues of temptation are ready and direct; and all the world around us ministers to danger. Therefore our Lord was so searching in His commands to pluck out the offending eye, and to cut off the offending hand. The first visible objects which Satan used to tempt withal were pure creatures of God, the fruit of the tree which God had blessed. So subtle is evil. But since he gained an entrance into the creation of God, he has, through the will and works of wicked men, framed for himself a world of his own, full of the visible

forms and suggestions of pride, lust, impurity, Covetousness. What ~~else~~^{else} are idolatries, Oracles, licentious Ceremonies, lying books, unholy sights, pomps and wars; or again, false Casuistry, Deftical and Refining Literature, Luxurious Arts, worldly Grandeur, and the like? And these things find their way into all Eyes and Ears, and are quickned by the subtle activity of men already corrupt. This world of Evil hangs upon us round about, and through it he insinuates the quality of Evil into the affections, and by these ways and possesses the will.

And again: we cannot doubt that he has still more concealed ways of addressing himself to us. He is a spirit and

we are of a spiritual nature. It is impossible to limit or defraud the action of intellect on intellect, and imagination on imagination. There are some temptations so peculiar, so sudden, so abrupt in their onset, so contrary to our natural and habitual bias, so disturbing and vehement in their first entrance on the mind, that we can hardly doubt that the tempter has a direct access to the intellectual and imaginative powers of our nature: for instance, religious delusions, in which he appears as an angel of light to the deluded mind. There is, by the common consent of man, such a thing as the direct visitation of the devil, which, though its means of working may be generally

through the senses, no cannot doubt is also
a work of direct and disembodied evil.
Such, for instance, as the unaccountable desire
to commit great and eccentric crimes;
sudden impulses to do things most feared
and hated, concurring with an opportunity
unperceived till the impulse detected it.
Now though these are extreme cases and
such as we are not commonly exposed
to, they lay open a law, so to speak,
of temptation which has place in our
common life. I mean, the direct power
and agency of Satan on the imagination.
It is not necessary now to go further, nor
to inquire whether the images of the
mind of which he serves himself are
gathered from the ideas of previous

Experience, or suggested, new and unknown
from without. All that we are concerned
with now is, to show that he has no
hold over the will, nor power over the
affections except through the images of
the senses and of the mind; and this
is a most consolatory and a most practical
truth. It shows us our perfect safety
so long as the Spirit of Christ dwells in
our hearts; and it teaches us where to
watch against the approaches of the tempter.
Let us pray then that our eyes, ears,
and all senses be mortified; that the
Cross be upon them all; that no images
of pomp, vanity or lust may pass through
them into the affections of our hearts; that

no visions of His past, nor remembrance
of any thing that can kindle pride,
anger, resentment, or any unholy passion
may haunt us; that our will may
be smelt in by the will of our Saviour
Lord, who for us mercies in the
desert, and, if we be pure and true,
will "crush Satan under your feet
Speedily"