

TEMPTATION AND TESTING

Julia's friend Dorothy tempted her to take some sweets in the supermarket without paying for them. Julia's teacher tested the homework that Julia had learnt. Dorothy had tried to coax Julia into doing something wrong. Julia's teacher put her through an unpleasant trial for Julia's own benefit, to show her how much she knew, and what she still needed to understand better. Christians face similar temptation from the Devil on the one hand, and testing from God on the other.

The Devil tempted Jesus during a period of forty days in the wilderness. He attacked Jesus soon after the Father had assured Him at His baptism that He was God's Son. The Devil twice tried to get Jesus to act independently of the Father on the basis that He was God's Son. Satan tempted Him, but the Spirit, who had descended on Jesus in His baptism, had led Jesus in the wilderness to be tempted. The Spirit allowed Jesus to be tested at His strong point, His Sonship of God. Satan attacked Jesus where He was at a disadvantage. After fasting for forty days, He was hungry. He had come to earth to get a following. Satan suggested that a spectacular demonstration at the temple would draw attention to Jesus. Jesus had come to gain the kingdoms of the world through His cross. Satan suggested that there was a way around the cross, simply by worshipping him.

Christian piety has a tendency to think of Jesus as though He had only one nature, the divine nature. Jesus was a genuine human being, and the temptations were not play-acting. They were real temptations.

Jesus never acted independently of His father. By using the divine power that He had in His human nature, He could easily have changed stones into bread. However, if He had done that, He would not have been depending on every word that came from God to provide for Him. Jesus could have thrown Himself down from the ledge of the temple and prevented Himself from being harmed. God had in one of the Psalms promised that His angels would not allow a believer to be hurt. However, if He had done that, He would have been putting God to the test instead of trusting Him.

Jesus resisted the temptation about making bread for Himself by quoting Scripture. Even the devil can appear as an angel of light. That was true in the temptations of Jesus. The Devil also quoted from Scripture. Psalm 91 had said, "For He will command His angels about you, to protect you in all your ways. They will carry you in their hands so that your foot may not stumble against a stone." Satan implied that, if Jesus did not trust that, He was not a true Son of God. Jesus answered Satan by quoting Scripture. Indeed, in each of three temptations He quoted from Deuteronomy, where Moses spoke to the Israelites after their forty years of wandering in the wilderness. Jesus was acting as the true Representative of Israel. Israel had repeatedly failed in testing during their forty years in the wilderness. In Jesus' forty days in the wilderness He prevailed where Israel had failed. In these three tests Jesus has shown us the way to resist Satan's temptations, by quoting Scripture at him. Luther had such confidence when he wrote in a line of "A mighty fortress": "One little word can fell him."

Jesus had come to free humankind by being obedient in their place. He was not going to save the world by great strength on His own behalf, by great public displays, or by taking an easy way out to avoid His cross.

Julia walked home the long way round. Dorothy took a short cut across a block that said, "No trespassers." Worshipping the Devil to win all the kingdoms of the world would have been a wrong short cut for Jesus. The kingdoms of the world would still have been under Satan's superior control, and Jesus would have acknowledged his authority, as if he were divine.

The two-sided reality of temptation from the Devil on the one hand and testing from God on the other is evident in the experiences of Abraham and of Job. God put Abraham through an extremely difficult trial. When Abraham and Sarah were very old, and Sarah was well past the age of bearing children, God had kept His promise by giving them Isaac. Then God asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac to Him. Abraham's great trouble was that, to him, God's second Word was a contradiction of His earlier promise, that He would bless all the nations in Isaac. Abraham had to believe that, if necessary, God could even raise Isaac from the dead to keep His promise. That was the kind of God Abraham was dealing with. He brings things into existence when they do not exist. In this strange action, in a context where people in the area of Canaan sacrificed some children to their gods hoping for an earthly blessing, God was hinting at the action that He would do for the nations of the world. He would give up His only Son, whom He loved, and would bring Him back to life. He would deliver Him for our offences, and raise Him for our justification.

God drew Satan's attention to Job on two occasions when Satan came into God's presence together with God's angels. Satan suggested on the first occasion that Job was upright because God blessed him so much. God then allowed Satan to strip Job of all his wealth and all his children. However, God set limits to what Satan could do. The first time He said, "Do not touch the man himself." The second time, although He allowed Satan to

afflict Job with severe bodily suffering, He said, "Spare his life." God also sets limits to the temptations that Satan brings to us. God is faithful, and does not permit us to be tempted beyond what we can bear. He always provides a way of escape for us. We must look for that.

The book of Job is all about human attempts to explain evil in the world. Job's friends were in error by suggesting that he was suffering so much because he must have committed some particularly bad sin. Even at the end, God did not explain to Job why he permitted him to go through his trials, and did not tell Job about His little wager with Satan about him. God put Job in his place for his attempt to question His dealings, and Job repented for that. Similarly, we must not, in temptation, ask the question "Why?" when it means "For what reason?" We may, and should, try to answer the question, "Why?" when it means "For what purpose?" Even then, we are only guessing at God's purposes, as Abraham and as Job must have done. Through our trials, we must cling to the conviction that God is dealing with us in love, as His dear children, and for our eventual good, in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

We usually think of the Devil as a liar. He brought death into this world by lying to Eve, that disobedience would not bring death. Satan does not always tell lies. If the Devil says to us, "No one will see you do this. You will get away with it", we should be sure that he is trying to trap us. However, when the Devil accuses us of sin on the basis of having broken God's Law, he comes in a far worse aspect than as a tempter. If he says, "You have sinned against God's law. I accuse you of being a sinner and deserving to be in hell with me", we have to acknowledge that he is telling the truth.

However, we thank God that, when the Devil accuses us of sin against God's Law, and, of deserving God's wrath and punishment, he is not telling the whole *truth!* Jesus Christ is our Advocate before God's court of judgment. He tells the Father, "You are just. You do not punish this person's sin twice. I have been fully obedient in this person's place. I have kept Your Law perfectly in his place. I have borne his guilt and suffered His punishment. Remember, Father, that, in the cost that I have paid, Your mercy and your justice meet." It is not that the Father has to be wheedled into giving His verdict of acquittal over us. He sent His Son in grace for just this purpose: that sinners might be justified through faith in Jesus Christ, His Son's, obedience. With this knowledge, we should bravely contend against the temptations of the Devil, using the Gospel weapons that God provides.