

Comfort for Tried Believers

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This tender yet challenging message from a pastor's heart deals remarkably with personal temptation, and includes many profound observations.

'There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it' (1 Corinthians 10.13).

This verse immediately follows the warning to 'him that thinketh he standeth' to 'take heed lest he fall'. We none of us know what we are really made of until we are tried and tested. It is a very easy thing to imagine yourself to be strong, but it is a very different matter to find that you have sufficient strength when you actually need it.

Let none of us imagine himself to be proof against the temptations of Satan, or even the grosser vices to which the flesh is prone. It may only need for you to be attacked at a certain point, and in a certain way, and you will be overcome even as others have been. The wisest way is to believe ourselves neither to be wise nor strong, and therefore to lie humbly at the feet of him who can make us both wise and strong. It ought to cool the hot blood of self-conceit in anyone to remind him that, although he 'thinketh he standeth', it is simply because he has not been tempted as others have been who have fallen.

After the apostle Paul had, by this warning, rebuked the boastings of those who thought they were standing securely, he thought of the far larger number of persons who never think that they can stand, but who are in constant anxiety lest they should fall.

1. God's Limitings

The first comfort, even in great trouble, is that we have not, after all, been tried in any very unusual way. 'There hath no temptation [or trial] taken you but such as is common to man.'

You may think, my dear brethren and sisters, that you have been tried more than others but it is only your lack of knowledge of the trials of others which leads you to imagine that your own are unique. There are many others, besides yourself, in the furnace, and in quite as hot a part of it as that in which you are now placed. Note what Paul says: 'There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man.' It is a human temptation, not a superhuman one, which has assailed you; that is to say, one which can be withstood by men, not one that must inevitably sweep them away.

Satan has tempted you, young man, but God has allowed you to be assailed in a way which is suitable as a test to you. The trials that have come upon you have been moderated to your capacity as a man. The Lord knows that you are but animated dust, so he has not permitted you to be treated as if you were made of steel or iron. He has himself dealt with you as an earthen vessel – a thing of clay in which he has caused life to dwell. He has not broken you with his rod of iron, as he would have done if he had smitten you with it.

'But I am very sorely tempted,' says one. Yes, perhaps you are; but the Lord has given you the history of the children of Israel in the wilderness, to let you see that you have not been tempted more than they were. 'Ah!' says another, 'but I find myself placed in a very peculiar position, where I am greatly tried. I have to labour hard, and I have much difficulty in earning my daily bread, and I am beset with trials of many kinds.' Well, dear friend, even though what you say is perfectly true, I am not

certain that your position is any more likely to bring temptation than was that of the children of Israel in the wilderness.

‘Ah!’ you say, ‘but they did not have to work to earn their bread. The manna came to them every morning, and they had only to gather it, and to eat it. They were not engaged in commercial transactions; there were no markets in the desert – no Corn Exchange, no Stock Exchange, no Smithfield, no Billingsgate – no taking down the shutters in the morning, and putting them up again at night, and going a great part of the day without any customers. They were separated from all other nations, and were in a peculiarly advantageous position.’

Yet, dear friends, you need not wish to be placed in such a position, because, advantageous as it was in some respects, the Israelites there were evidently tempted to all sorts of sins, and fell into them very grievously. Having often read the story of their forty years’ sojourn in the wilderness, you know their sad history. With so favourable a position granted to them, under the Lord’s own special guardianship, and enriched with many choice mercies, we might have expected that they would have been free from temptation – or, at any rate, that they would not have fallen into its snare. Yet it was not so, for the devil can tempt in the wilderness quite as well as in the city, as we know from the experience of Christ himself.

The devil would tempt you even if your bread were given to you every morning, instead of your having to earn it; he would tempt you if you had no business to attend to, and never had to go into the world to meet with your fellow men. In fact, the story of the Israelites teaches me that it is best for you to work, and best for you to be poor, and best for you not to make money as fast as you would like, and best for you to be surrounded by cares of various kinds.

I think I judge rightly that the people of God, the saved ones, do not fall into such gross sins as the Israelites did in the wilderness; so that the saints’ position, though it may appear worse than that of Israel, is really better.

To what, my dear brethren and sisters, are you tempted? Are you tempted to lust after evil things? They lusted for the meat that was not suitable to the climate, nor good for their health; and they despised the manna, which was the very best food they could have. Do you ever get a craving for what you ought not to desire? Are you growing covetous? Do you long for ease? Do you wish for wealth? Do you love pleasure? Well, dear friends, this temptation has happened to others before; it happened to those people in the wilderness. You are not the first to be tempted in that fashion; and if divine grace has helped others to overcome the covetous desire, and the lusting of the spirit, it can help you to do the same. But, mark also that if others have fallen through such temptations, and perished in the wilderness, you, too, apart from divine grace, will do the same. Therefore you have urgent need to cry to the Strong for strength, lest you also should fall even as they did.

Are you tempted to idolatry? It is a very common temptation to make an idol of a child, or of some particular pursuit in which you are engaged. Is there anything in the world that is so dear to you that the very thought of losing it makes you feel that you would rebel against God if he took it away from you? Remember what John was inspired to write: ‘Little children, keep yourselves from idols.’ But if you are tempted to idolatry, do not forget that this is a thing that is common to men. In the wilderness, the Israelites were tempted to set up a golden calf, and to worship it, and even to practise other idolatrous rites which were too foul for me to describe. They were tempted to idolatry, so it is not an uncommon temptation; and if you also are tempted in a similar fashion, you must cry to God for grace to resist and to overcome the temptation.

Are you tried, sometimes, even with that terrible temptation which is mentioned in the verse where Paul says, ‘Neither let us commit fornication, as some of them committed’? Has strong passion

sometimes suggested to you that which your soul abhors? Have you been, at times, forced to the very brink of that dread abyss of uncleanness, till you have had to cry, with the psalmist, 'My feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped'? Ah! this temptation also is not uncommon to men; and even those who live nearest to God, and are the most pure in heart, sometimes have to blush before the Lord that such evil suggestions should ever come into their minds.

And have you, too, been tempted 'to tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents'? They wanted God to change his plans and purposes concerning them; and they found fault with him, and said that he had brought them into the wilderness to destroy them. Do you feel that your present troubles are too severe – that they should not have been sent to you – at least, not so many and so heavy as they are? If so, and if you feel that you have a cause for complaint against the Most High, and that you want him to change his methods of dealing with you so as to suit your whims and fancies – alas! sad as such a state of mind is, it is only too 'common to man'.

And, possibly, you may also have been tempted to murmur, 'as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer.' I must withdraw that word 'possibly', for I am greatly afraid that many professing Christians do murmur, and that they do not always realise what a gross sin it is to murmur, seeing that it is an act of distinct rebellion against God. But, should you at any time feel a murmuring spirit rising up within your heart, you must not say, 'This is a trial which nobody else has ever experienced.' Alas! it is a very human temptation, which is exceedingly 'common to man'.

So, summing up all that I have been saying, and looking round upon this congregation, and upon all of you who know the Lord – although it would be impossible for me to recount all the different forms of temptation and trial through which you have gone, yet this is a matter of fact – 'there hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man.'

We are all in the same boat, brothers and sisters, so far as temptation and trial are concerned. We are all warring the same warfare; your duty may call you to one part of the field, and mine may call me to another part, but the bullets whiz by me as well as by you. There is no nook so quiet but it has its own special dangers, and there is no Valley of Humiliation so lowly but it has its peculiar temptations.

Sins are everywhere; they sit down with you at your table, and they go with you to your bed. Snares are set for you in your home and in the street – in your business and in your recreations. Snares are not absent from your pains, and they are abundant in your pleasures. Everywhere, and under all circumstances, must we expect to be tried; this experience is common to men. The remembrance that it is so ought to be somewhat of a comfort to us in every time of trial and temptation.

2. God's Faithfulness

But, secondly, in our text we have a rich source of comfort in the words: 'but God is faithful.' 'There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able.'

'God is faithful.' Oh, how I love those words! They sound in my heart like heavenly music. 'God is faithful.' You are not faithful, my brother or sister; at least, I know I am not, in the full sense of the term, faithful – full of faith, and faithful. 'But' (a blessed 'but'), 'but God is faithful!' 'If we believe not, yet he abideth faithful' – always true to every promise he has made, always gracious to every child whom he has adopted into his family, and 'a very present help in trouble'. He preserves us from sinking in our sea of trouble, and he delivers us from the trouble when it has accomplished the purpose for which it was sent.

‘God is faithful’ – faithful to the first promise which came into your soul when you yielded yourself to Jesus, and he whispered in your heart, ‘I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.’ Do you remember that promise, and has not the Lord been faithful to it?

‘God is faithful’ to all his promises; and in your experience, my brother or sister, he has been faithful to the promises which met your case in all your changing circumstances. Can you put your finger upon a single page of your diary, and say, ‘God was unfaithful then’? Your friend, who ate bread with you, has lifted up his heel against you; but has your God forsaken you? Even your children have been unkind and ungrateful to you, but has the Lord ever treated you badly? Where you had the most hope among your earthly friends and acquaintances, you have had the most disappointments; but has the Lord ever been a wilderness unto you?

‘All men are liars,’ you have said in the bitterness of your spirit, when you had trusted in them and they have failed you in the time of trial, but have you ever found Christ false to his Word? Can you not join your testimony with that of all the saints above, and the saints below, and say with Paul, ‘God is faithful’?

Even if any of you are facing a feared sickness or a painful operation, or business losses which may sink you from your present comfortable position, think of this truth, ‘God is faithful.’ The whole world may reel to and fro, like a drunken man; but the Rock of Ages stands secure. The shooting stars of temporary prosperity may die out in everlasting night, but God is ‘the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.’ ‘God is faithful.’

Whatever your future trials are to be, put this short sweet sentence into your mouth, and keep it there, as a heavenly lozenge which shall sustain you at all times. Make it also into a jubilant refrain as you go on your way – ‘God is faithful.’ Trials and temptations will assail you; ‘but God is faithful.’ Friends will fail and forsake you; ‘but God is faithful.’ Health may be lost, and property may vanish; ‘but God is faithful.’ What do you want more than this, soldiers of Christ? Here you have breastplate, helmet, sword, shield, spear – the whole panoply of God.

3. God’s Mighty Power

The third comfort for tried and tempted believers arises from God’s power, for Paul says, ‘God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able.’

God, then, has power to limit temptation. It is clear, from the Book of Job, that Satan could not tempt or try the patriarch except by divine permission, and even then his power was limited. Nor can he tempt us unless God allows him to do so. Although the devil had great power over the elements, so that he brought disaster upon poor Job, yet there was a very definite limit to his chain, even when the Lord let him loose to a certain extent. When God set up his barriers, Satan could not go beyond them.

You remember that the Lord first said to Satan concerning his servant Job, ‘Behold, all that he hath is in thy power; only upon himself put not forth thine hand.’ When the devil again intruded himself among the sons of God, the Lord let out more links of his chain, but there was still a most emphatic limit to his power over the patriarch, ‘Behold, he is in thine hand; but save his life.’ The devil would have liked to kill Job outright, but he could go no further than the Lord allowed him to go; and God still has unlimited power over the devil and over every form of temptation or trial that can ever come upon you.

If the Lord appoints for you ten troubles, he will not suffer them to be increased to eleven. If he ordains that you shall be in trouble for six years, you will not be in it for six years and a day; but, when the allotted time has expired, you shall come out of it. Nothing can resist the might of the omnipotent Jehovah.

If all the armies of the devil were let loose upon a single saint, who felt himself to be weak as a worm, and the Lord said to them, 'I am his defence, and you shall not touch him,' they could not touch him, and he would be able to say, with the utmost confidence, 'Greater is he that is for me than all that can be against me.' The adversaries of the righteous may rage as much as they will; but they will have to spend their strength in raging, for that is all they can do against God's people without his express permission.

Not a hair of their head can be scorched by the fires of persecution unless the Lord allows it. All his people are kept by his almighty power. How greatly this ought to comfort you who are sorely tried! Every twig of the rod of correction has been made by God, and every stroke of it is counted by him. There is not a drop more gall in your cup than the Lord has ordained. He has weighed in the scales of the sanctuary every ingredient of your medicine, and mixed it with all his infallible skill so that it may produce the cure of all your ills. Should not this make you rejoice in the Lord all the day long, and in the night seasons as well?

4. God's Assessment

Fourthly, not only should tried believers rejoice in God's power, but they should also rejoice in God's judgement or assessment of his people, for Paul says, 'God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able.'

Who beside God knows how much we are able to bear? Our consolation arises from the fact that God knows exactly how much we can bear. I have many a time heard a person say, 'If such-and-such a thing were to happen, I should break my heart, and die.' Well, that very thing has happened, but the person concerned did not break his heart, and he did not die. On the contrary, he behaved himself as a Christian in trial should, because God helped him wonderfully, and he played the man, and became more than conqueror, and was the brighter and the braver ever afterwards, for all the affliction through which he had passed.

Brother, your own strength, in some respects, is greater than you think, and, in other respects, it is less than you think; but God knows just how much you can bear, so leave yourself in his hands.

I have often admired the lovingkindness of the Lord to many of my own flock here, and have noted the great joy that our young Christians have had for a number of years, and observed how remarkably God has preserved them from temptation without and from trials within. The Lord does not send his young children out to battle. He does not intend such little boats as these to go far out to sea. He will not overdrive these lambs. Yet the advanced Christians are just as happy as the young people are, and they are stronger and more fit for stern service, and more able to sympathise with others, who are in trouble, because of what they have themselves passed through. As they have grown stronger, God has given them more fighting to do for him, while the raw recruits have been kept at home to be drilled and disciplined.

You know that when there is a desperate fight being waged, and the issue of the battle seems in doubt, the commander orders 'the old guard' to the front. That is part of the privilege of being an old guardsman – to go into the hottest place on the field of battle; and it is one of the privileges of the advanced children of God to be tempted more than others, and to suffer more than others.

If I could have any trial or temptation, which, otherwise, would fall upon a young brother, who has only known the Lord a week or two, I would gladly say, 'Let me have it.' It might stagger him, and I should be sorry for him to be staggered by it, so I will willingly endure it. You tried believers must not imagine that God does not love you as much as he did in the days of your spiritual youth when he did not test you as he does now. He loves you quite as much as he did then, and he trusts you even more than he did then. Because he has made you stronger than you used to be, he gives you

the honour and privilege of marching with the vanguard of his army, or leading the forlorn hope, or standing foot to foot with old Apollyon.

God knows exactly how much temptation or trial you can bear, and he will not suffer the trial to go beyond that point. But, mark you, it will go right up to that point, for there is no such thing in the world as faith that runs to waste. For every grain of faith that God gives, he usually gives the equivalent trial of some sort or other; for, if faith could ever be in excess, it would degenerate into fanaticism, or some other unholy thing. If the Lord supplies us, at our back door as it were, with his good treasure, we are to dispose of it in our front shop in our holy trading for him.

5. God's Palliatives

Fifthly, our text seems to intimate that God has in store something to go with our temptations. He 'will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.'

You know how you treat your own child. There is a dose of nasty medicine to be taken, and the little one does not like it. The very sight of the spoon and cup makes the child feel worse. But mother says, 'Now, Johnny, take this medicine, and then you shall have this lump of sugar or this fruit, to take away the taste of it.' And when God sends a trial or trouble to one of his children, he is sure to have a choice sweetmeat to go with it. I have heard a child say, 'I do not mind taking the medicine so long as I get the sugar,' and I have known some of the Lord's people say, 'We will willingly bear sickness, pain, bereavement, temptation, persecution, if we may but have our Saviour's presence in it all.'

Some of us will never forget our experiences in sickness; when our pain has been sharpest and worst, it has also been sweetest and best, at the same time. What do I not personally owe to the file, and the anvil, and the hammer in my Master's workshop? I have often said, and I say again, that the best piece of furniture in my house is the cross of affliction. I have long ago learned to prize it, and to praise God for it, and for that which has come to me with it, for I have often found that, with the trial, the Lord has made a way of escape, that I have been able to bear it.

Even with the temptation to sin, the Lord often sends to the tempted soul such a revelation of the sinfulness of sin, and of the beauty of holiness, that the poison of the temptation is quite neutralised. Even with temporal trials, the Lord often gives temporal mercies; sometimes, when he has been pleased to take away a man's wealth, he has restored to him his health, and so the man has been a distinct gainer.

I have known several instances in which this has occurred. When one dear child has been taken away out of a family, there has been the conversion of another of the children, which has been a wonderful compensation for the trial. And often trouble has been attended with an unusual delight in the Lord. The Word of God has been peculiarly sweet at such a time, and the minister has seemed to preach better than ever he did before, his message exactly fitting your condition just then. You have been surprised to find that the bitterness, which came with the trouble, has passed away almost before you were aware of it; and, as death is swallowed up in victory, like one bitter drop in a glass of water, so your trouble has been diluted with sweetness, and you have scarcely tasted its bitterness. Thus the Lord, by his grace and presence and comfort, has made you so glad that you have hardly known that you have been in such trouble, because of the superabounding mercy which came with it. Ought not that to comfort us, and to make us ready for whatever the Lord pleases to send to us, or to permit to come upon us?

6. God's Remedy

Now, notice, in the last place, that God makes a way of escape for his people. He 'will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.'

I will read that over again: 'He will with the temptation also make a way to escape that you may not have to endure it'? Oh no, it reads: 'that ye may be able to bear it'. That is a curious way to escape, is it not? Here is your way of retreat blocked up, and the opposing army is in front of you, yet you are to escape. You say to the Lord, 'Which way am I to run?' But the Lord replies, 'You must not run away; your way to escape is to cut a road right through your adversaries.' That is a singular way to escape, but it is the most glorious way in the world.

The best way for an army to escape is by conquering its foe. It is not the best way for the pilgrim to escape into the dark mountains on the right, or into the thick forest on the left, to escape from his enemies. The best way is to escape straight forward, despite all his adversaries.

Now, beloved brother or sister, you may at this moment be expecting some very heavy affliction; and you have been asking the Lord to make a way of escape for you. You have said, 'Oh, that I might not have to come to that hour of trial!' Nevertheless, you will have to come to it. 'But', you ask, 'cannot that dear one's life be spared?' I hope it may; but it is possible that it may not. 'Then, how am I to have a way of escape?' Your way of escape is not to avoid the trial, but to be able to bear it.

You must have the trial, but you will only have the beneficial part of it. You must be plunged into that sea of sorrow, but it will not drown you, it will only wash and cleanse you. You must go into that fire, your Lord has so ordained it, yet you are going to escape the fire. Do you ask, 'How can this be?' In this way: none of your gold shall be destroyed, only the dross shall be consumed, and you shall be all the purer for passing through the fire. I say again that this is the very best way to escape; for if we could escape in any other way, we should lose all the benefits of the trial.

What shall I say then, in closing, but this, brethren and sisters? Are you troubled just now, and are you inclined to despair? Take wiser counsel; the storms that are beating about your vessel are only such as beat about your Master's, and the boats in which his apostles sailed across the sea of old. These storms are not supernatural, nor beyond what believers in Jesus are able to bear. Put your vessel's head to the wind, like a bold sailor; do not try to avoid that fierce blast. Sail in its very teeth, for there is a power within you which can overcome all the winds and the waves, for is not the Lord himself with you as your captain, and is not the Holy Ghost with you as your guide, and have you not a faithful God to trust to in the stormiest night you may ever know?

True, your foes are many and mighty; but face them like a man. Have no thought of turning back, and flinging away your shield, but resolve, in the mighty power of faith, that 'as thy days, so shall thy strength be.' Say with Job, 'Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him.' It will not be easy to keep that resolution, yet the Lord deserves that we should keep it.

Think of yourself, beloved brother, in the worst conceivable condition; and then know that there is no sufficient reason, even in such a condition as that, for you to doubt your God. Imagine yourself brought to your last penny; yet remember that there was a time when you were not worth a penny, a time when you could not put food into your own mouth, and could not put on your own clothes. You were cast upon God in your first childhood, and he took care of you.

If you grow to be a child again, and the infirmities of age increase and multiply, he who was so good at the beginning will be quite as good at the end. Remember his ancient promise: 'Even to your old age I am he; and even to hoar hairs will I carry you: I have made, and I will bear; even I will carry, and will deliver you.' Such a promise as this, if God the Holy Spirit will bless it, will make the most tried believer rejoice in the Lord, and go on his way defying every foe who may be in his path.

I often go to see poor sick people, full of aches and pains, and it charms me to hear them talk of the goodness of the Lord to them. In talking this week with one of our brethren who is very sick and ill, he spoke with such holy joy and boasting of the Lord's goodness to him, that I could not help saying

that it would take a great many atheistic arguments to make me doubt the power of true religion after I had listened to him.

I like to see God's tried people dying full of joy, praising and blessing the name of the Lord who is their All-in-all, even in their most trying hour.

From a sermon preached at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Thursday evening, 21st September 1876.