

THE HEART OF TEMPTATION

by Ray C. Stedman

In our present series on *Understanding Man* we have gone back to the very beginning, to the Garden of Eden, and there we are seeking to understand the mysterious power which we call temptation. Yesterday I found myself tempted to steal. I was in a mountain cabin at Forest Hills Conference Grounds in Southern California, and I saw a little coffee carafe that was provided in each room for coffee. It was a very nice little container, and, when I looked at it, the thought flashed into my mind, "It would fit very neatly into my suitcase." Immediately I rejected the desire to put it there, and I confess (with perhaps a certain amount of pride), that it was not because the first thought that occurred to me was, "What would people say if the speaker of the conference stole something out of his room?" I resisted on the ground that it was not right, it was not pleasing to God.

You may be surprised to know that I have temptations like that. I also have many others. I am tempted to pride. I am tempted to lust. I am tempted to bitterness. I have been tempted often to envy. I am tempted to laziness, and to a great many others just like you! The process of temptation is always the same with me, as it is with you. It is that process we are looking at in this third chapter of Genesis. This is why this passage is so wonderfully relevant to us for it speaks right to our situation.

As we saw in our last study together, temptation occurs in three stages or steps, which James clearly and plainly describes for us {see Jas 1:13-15}. He says that "each person is tempted when he is lured or enticed by his own desire" (stage 1), then "desire, when it has conceived, gives birth to sin" (stage 2), and "sin, when it is full grown, brings forth death" (stage 3). We have already traced step 1. We watched Eve in the Garden of Eden being assaulted in mind and will by the Tempter in the form of a Shining One who appeared to her and sought to arouse a desire in her for the forbidden fruit. This pointed up the basic nature of temptation. It is always a pressure upon us to exceed the limitations which God has placed upon us. It is an urge within, a desire aroused, for us to move out beyond the limits which God has established for us. God has placed these limitations upon us, not out of cruelty or unkindness, but out of love and grace. They are necessary to our humanity. But the character of temptation is to utilize this limitation to make us restive and discontent and to move us out beyond the limits.

We saw also that the Tempter actually accomplished this with Eve. He aroused a desire by first creating a sense of unfairness in her. This is most revealing in the light of the situation we find so widespread today, when many are seething in a ferment of discontent and restlessness, suffering from a sense of being treated unfairly (oftentimes justifiably) but allowing that resentment to take over control of the thought and mind. The tempter's second step is to deny, blatantly and openly, the truth that God had declared. He can only do this after he has created a sense of unfairness, for then the mind is prepared to receive the thought that God is not trustworthy and does not really love. The third step was to present to her an incomplete and misleading statement of truth -- to twist it, distort it slightly. Thus her desire was aroused for the forbidden fruit. We closed our study last time with Eve standing before the fruit, aroused and deceived, drooling before the tantalizing mystery of it.

Now Stage 2 in temptation occurs. In many ways this is the most important of all. Before this stage was reached it was quite possible for Eve to resist the temptation that had been aroused within her, but after Stage 2, it becomes even more difficult, in fact, practically impossible. This stage is given to us in one verse.

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate. {Gen 3:6 RSV}

The picture that James gives us of this particular stage of temptation is one of conception and birth. The seed of an aroused desire has been planted in the heart, and there follows then a process of growth and development.

The mind now must come into play. Up to this point the Tempter has worked upon Eve's feelings and aroused a strong desire within her for the forbidden thing. But now the mind must come into action. It is the function of the mind to pass upon the logic of the situation.

Our mental faculties are a tremendous gift from God. Basically they are the ability to reflect on circumstances and facts, and relate our attitude or activity to these. There is a logicity that must prevail. The question of the mind is always: Is the action about to be taken, or the attitude about to be formed, a rational one? Is it consistent with the facts? In many respects this amazing ability to reason, to exercise rationality, is God's supreme gift to mankind. Rationality demands that the whole man become involved, that one acts as a total being. Irrationality, or insanity, is the action of a person based on only part of his being -- only his emotions, or even the direct activity of the will, apart from the exercise of mind or emotions. But rationality insists that the total man be involved. therefore the mind must come into play.

So it is at this point that the mind of Eve is engaged. But already a terrible thing has happened to her. She does not realize it, but it is evident from this account that the arousing of her emotion, the strong desire to have this fruit, which hangs there in all its tantalizing mystery and lure, has already prepared her will to act. Even before her mind comes into play she wants the fruit, and, secretly, has determined to have it. Thus, when her mind comes into action, it can no longer do so rationally. It cannot now consider the facts as they are, but must act on the facts as they appear to her. Since it can no longer act rationally it must rationalize. That is the deadly power of the mind in man. It has an amazing ability to rationalize, to twist the facts so that they accord with desire, to satisfy the urge that is springing up within by justifying it, even though it must slightly distort the facts of the situation.

Notice the process here. The first thing is that Eve looked at the fruit and said to herself, "It is good for food (i.e., it is profitable). It is something that will help me; it is physically profitable. Never mind the long range effects -- I'm not interested in that -- it will satisfy a present and immediate need, and what can be wrong with that?" Secondly, she saw that it was "a delight to the eyes," which means it was pleasurable, it satisfied the esthetic sense. It titillated her senses and was a pleasurable experience.

This element is always present in temptation. Each of us is well aware, because we are all experts in this, that sin is always fun -- for awhile! It has an element of pleasure about it and there is no use trying to blind our eyes to that fact. It is the pleasure of sin which makes it so enticing and alluring to us. The desire to have that pleasure, at whatever cost, is really the essential element of temptation. You know this is true. It feels good to indulge myself. I love the feeling of splurging, of doing something that gives me pleasure. It feels great. That is why I do it, even though my mind may be telling me that it may be ultimately harmful.

It feels good to act on pride. It satisfies me in some way. It feels good to lose my temper. Have you ever had the perverse delight of telling somebody off? Oh, how good that feels -- for awhile! It feels good even though you do not do it to someone's face, but go out in the woods to do it. Even that relieves the pain for a bit. It feels good to hurt my wife when she has done something that displeases me. There is pleasure in sin.

Howard Butt, a well-known Christian layman, puts it this way:

It's my pride that makes me independent of God. It's appealing to feel that I am the master of my fate. I run my own life. I call my own shots. I go it alone. But that feeling is my basic dishonesty. I can't go it alone, I have to get help from other people. And I can't ultimately rely on myself. I'm dependent on God for my very next breath. It's dishonest of me to pretend that I'm anything but a man, small, weak, and limited.

There lies the deceitfulness of sin. It offers pleasure. As Eve saw the fruit she said, "It is good for food, and it is a delight to the eyes. It gives me an esthetic sense that is pleasant." Finally, she saw that it was "to be desired to make one wise." It ministered to the ego. It was an ego-satisfying thing. Again, in the book of James {3:15-17}, we have a reference to the wisdom that is in view here, [desired to make one wise]. Yes, says James, but there are two kinds of wisdom. There is the wisdom that is from above, from God: and there is a wisdom which is from below, which, he says, is "fleshly, sensual, devilish." Notice the threefold division there: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes (sensual, pleasurable), and the pride of life (the devil). For the snare of the devil is pride of heart, the ego in man.

This is what Paul calls in another place "the wisdom of the world," {1 Cor 1:20, 2:6, 3:19}. It appears to be alluring, satisfying, giving tremendous results. How much of the philosophy of the world around us is based upon this. We must discover ways of building ourselves up, enhancing self, taking special courses by which we can develop the powers of our personality or going to school to develop charm or poise -- a Dale Carnegie course, or a Powers school. All of this is ministering to that pride of life, the satisfying of the ego.

When Eve felt all this she did not realize that her mind had played a trick upon her. It had taken the apparent facts which the enemy had set before her and had justified them, so that they looked reasonable, rational. The thing to do then, of course, is to give in. After all, anything that is good for food, pleasurable to the senses, and ministers to the satisfying of the ego, what can be wrong about that? But this is nothing less than the prostitution of the mind! It is reversing God's order.

Perhaps there is no element in the fallen nature of man more revealing than this single thing -- in fallen man, you have man operating in a different order than God intended him to operate. In man as God made him, the order is to be, first, an appeal to the mind, then out of that, the stirring of the emotions based upon the facts presented to the mind, and then the two working together, the mind and emotions, to move the will. This is why throughout the Scriptures, you invariably discover that the appeal of the gospel, the good news from God, is addressed first to the mind.

The first appeal of the gospel is never to the emotions, it is always to the mind, to the understanding. It is a presentation of certain historic facts which have significance, and the significance of those facts is what constitutes the good news. Paul says, "this is the gospel which we declared unto you, how that Christ died for our sins," {1 Cor 15:3}. He died (the fact), for our sins (that is the significance of it): and he rose again, to be a living Lord imparting himself to us. This is what constitutes the good news, that Christ died to solve the problem of our rebelliousness and our estrangement from God, and he rose again, to minister to us constantly of his life, of his grace, and of his strength. Upon these facts we can then make a decision. These facts move us and stir us -- they ought to, they are designed to. But there must constantly come first the appeal to the mind. That is why any evangelism which does not begin with teaching is a false evangelism. Any evangelism which moves directly to an appeal to the will to act, or to the emotions to feel, is a distorted evangelism and results in abortion instead of birth.

This technique of reversal prevails throughout the world. This is the technique of Madison Avenue and the advertising business. Thumb through a magazine and notice that all the advertisements are designed to arouse desire, first. There sits a beautifully designed and painted sports car, displayed in living color. You cannot look at these beautiful advertisements without beginning to drool a bit. There is a color TV set, the color so real it is unbelievable. Then you look at your drab, black-and-white set over in the corner, all covered with dust, and you think, "How can I put up with a thing like that any longer?" All showrooms and windows of stores are designed to short circuit the mind and appeal first to the will through the emotions.

This is the technique of politicians and propagandists of every school. They too seek to arouse an emotional reaction first. They cleverly and carefully think through what will make appeal to the emotion first and they start on that note. Someone wishes to move students, so they begin talking about war, the draft, or Vietnam. When the emotions are properly stirred then they present their plea for action, whatever the cause may be. With Negroes, there are certain emotional words that immediately arouse them, civil rights, black power, etc. To white middle classes, the propagandists talk about property values, free enterprise, and the "American way of life." By this sloganeering they attempt to arouse emotions first, with the realization that when the mind comes into play (as it will), it will not think rationally but will rationalize, it will take facts and distort them to justify the desire that has been aroused.

This explains why the propaganda which has appeared recently about the hazard of cigarette smoking has been relatively ineffective. Cigarette smoking is not based upon rational observation. If it were, no one would smoke. Who wants lung cancer? But the only way by which the effects of cigarette advertising can be counteracted is by fighting fire with fire -- by arousing emotions in the opposite direction. That is why we are now seeing so many articles on the terrible effects of throat and lung cancer, these vivid descriptions of what it feels like to have no throat, to have the larynx removed and to feed yourself through a tube. All this is with the

hope that the emotion of fear aroused will turn people from the dangers of cigarette smoking. But why do people smoke? Why do boys begin to smoke? I remember my own boyhood and my attempts at smoking. Why? Because I thought that in some way it made me a man. It ministered to my sense of pride and my desire to be a grown-up individual. That is the reason that most boys smoke. You can see how this kind of thing permeates society.

It would be entirely wrong to get the idea from this account that everything that is pleasurable is wrong, and everything that is right is boring, dull and flat. That, of course, is what the enemy would like to have us believe about God; anything God wants for us is very dull, uninteresting, and lackluster, and the only exciting things are the things that are wrong. But nothing could be more mistaken about that. After all, it is God who designed our emotions. He made us to have feelings, and he intends to satisfy them. There is nothing wrong. Desire is wrong when it is contrary to the facts, and thus prostitutes the mind, and subjects it to a rationalizing process, trying to justify facts in terms of that aroused desire. That is what is wrong.

See this in the Lord Jesus Christ. He, too, went through a time of temptation and notice how he handled it. He experienced the same order of attack that Eve did -- not in the garden this time, but in a wilderness, in a barren place removed from all the comfort, luxury, ease, and pleasantness of a garden. There in the barren wilderness, after forty days of fasting, he was tempted like Eve. The first temptation came on the same level as it did to her. She was tempted with regard to food, and the Tempter also came to the Lord and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread. You need bread. After forty days and forty nights your body is crying for bread. Surely God wants you to have bread; therefore turn these stones into bread," {cf, Matt 4:3}. But Jesus' answer was, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone'" {Matt 4:4}, i.e., bread is not to be used for spiritual satisfaction. If you try to use it for that you are distorting the way God made man. That is not the purpose of bread. It is better to starve to death than to use it for a purpose God did not intend. So he used the facts of the situation, the way God made man, and rejected the enemy's appeal, saying, "It's not right, and I won't do it."

Then the enemy took him to a high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world, in all their pomp, glory, and majesty {Matt 4:8}. This dream has entranced men for centuries. Some have caught a vision of even part of the kingdoms of the world and have fallen in love with the power, majesty, and glory of it. But Jesus was shown all the kingdoms of the world in their alluring glory, with the suggestion that if he would fall down and worship the enemy he could have all this. This was clearly a delight to the eyes, something to titillate the senses and give a feeling of power. But our Lord rejected it because it was not in accordance with the facts, {Matt 4:10}. The facts are that man is made to worship God and God alone..

Then the devil took him up to the Temple and suggested he cast himself off in order to display the power he had. When the people saw that he could do this without physical damage, they would acclaim him as a divine being and he would gain popular appeal, the pride of life. Again he rejected it on the basis of the facts. He said, "No, no. It is written, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God.' God is in charge of life, and I will not allow anything to enrich me but what comes through his hands," {cf, Matt 4:7}. Thus he rejected the temptation.

Now at this point it is important to note that Eve had not yet sinned. Even though her desire is aroused and her mind has justified it, still it is possible for her to recover herself, though it would be very difficult. But, as James tells us, desire when it conceives gives birth to sin. And at this point it is recorded that, when she saw that it was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that it was desired to make one wise, "she took of its fruit and ate." She acted on a lie and thus fell into the sin of becoming her own god, of making up her own rules in violation of her humanity.

But now notice something else: Adam had not yet fallen, only Eve. There was still hope for the race. Thus the scene now shifts to Adam because it is not in Eve that the race fell. It is in Adam that the responsibility ultimately lies. A battle has been lost, but the war has not yet been lost. But then we read that, after she took of the fruit and ate, "she also gave some to her husband, and he ate." The ease with which Adam fell is dreadfully hard on the male ego. Think of it. Here is this whole account of the struggle of the Tempter to reach through to Eve, and but one little line about Adam, "she gave to him, and he ate." Yet in those innocent but ominous words, "and he ate," there begins the darkness of fallen humanity. The fatal twist now appears as mankind is

transformed by this psychedelic drug (the forbidden fruit), and all men become the victim of a reverse psychology, mastered by emotional urges, no longer rational beings.

The lie is apparent in that man thinks himself to be rational. Because we can put our minds to certain tasks and think them through, we believe we draw logical conclusions from them that are based upon the facts, but it is not true. The record of history is powerfully to this effect -- that man operates from what Paul calls "deceitful lusts," urges, emotionally aroused urges within, which twist the facts by rationalizing and distorting so the mind is prostituted to false purposes.

In the next account we shall trace the meaning of the fall and the results that come from it. This is the third stage of temptation, the death that follows when sin completes its full growth. But we must close this study by asking ourselves: What is the value of this for us today? The answer, of course, must be that we see here that what Jesus says of the race is true: It is the victim of a distortion and twist which it is helpless to remedy by itself. We cannot change our basic natures. The fall has rendered us victims of emotional urges, and we cannot change that, no matter how desperately we try. We try urgently to be rational about things, but we cannot see the facts rightly. We do not even see the whole range of facts, and, ultimately, we find ourselves the unconscious victim of emotional twisting.

What can we do about it? If anything points up the absolute necessity for the new birth, it is this. As Jesus said, there is no other way out for humanity except through him. "I am the way. the truth. and the life; no man comes to the Father but by me," {cf, John 14:6}. There is no way to see reality apart from Jesus Christ. It is he who opens the eyes, it is he who restores balance to life, it is he who redeems my humanity, and helps make it possible for me to distinguish between what is right and what is wrong.

My little six-year-old daughter put it very plainly the other day. She said, "It's good that we've got God, because otherwise, how would we know whether we were doing right or wrong." Is that not the basic question here? How would we know, if it were not for God? How do we know how to look at life except we look at it through the eyes of Jesus Christ? How do we know which is right, among the welter of voices that call to us today from every side, unless we judge them all by the voice of Jesus Christ? How can we find our way through the morass of this present day, through the swamps of relativism that abound on every side, unless we are listening to the voice of the one who loved us and gave himself for us, that he might redeem us by destroying the works of the devil?

Prayer:

Our Father, we pray that we might see once again, plainly and clearly, that there is no hope for us apart from the Lord Jesus and our following of him, trusting his love, and yielding ourselves to his redeeming grace. We pray that any who have not begun with him may begin by saying to him now, "Lord Jesus, save me. Come into my heart and life and begin your redemptive work with me. Make me different. Deliver me from the distortions of a fallen nature and grant that I, too, can see things as they really are." For those of us, Lord, who have already begun, grant that we may now resolve anew to follow him, to obey him, to trust him, to day by day listen to what he says and follow him. We ask in his name, Amen.

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