

The Blessedness of Enduring Temptation

Charles G. Finney:

"Blessed is the man that endureth temptation; for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love Him." --James 1:12.

This passage presents the subject of enduring temptation. In discussing it, I will enquire,

I. INTO THE NATURE OF TEMPTATION.

II. INTO ITS DESIGN.

III. ENQUIRE WHAT IT IS TO ENDURE TEMPTATION IN THE SENSE OF THE TEXT.

IV. SHOW THAT THUS TO ENDURE TEMPTATION IS ONE CONDITION OF BEING SAVED.

I. The words tempt and temptation are synonymous with trial. To tempt is to try; to subject one to trial. Now sin consists in self-seeking, self-indulgence. Whatever, therefore, tends to selfishness, and draws the mind to self-seeking, is temptation, and is more or less strong according as this tendency is more or less strong towards self-indulgence.

The Bible mentions three great sources of temptation--the world, the flesh and Satan. The outward world is so correlated to our susceptibilities as to excite them and thus beget a temptation to self-indulgence. The flesh with its appetites and passions clamor for gratification; and hence the flesh and the outward world become temptations. Satan also presents his temptations in every form which subtle malignity can devise.

But I need not enlarge on this point; you are familiar with it in all its details.

II. A few words should be said next of the design of these temptations.

These temptations which environ us on every side in our present state are by no means designed by God to do us harm, but altogether to do us good. In creating the external universe and in giving us outward senses that we may behold and enjoy it, he had but one great end in view, and that is our good. From the fact that we are susceptible to pleasure from these sources, we are not to infer that God's end in view was to harm us by these temptations. They are undoubtedly to be considered as parts of a great system of moral probation, in which they perform the functions of means to a great, wise and good end. Real evils may be incidental to their operation, yet important good is their ultimate result.

The very term trial, shows that these things are intended as a test of character. God everywhere represents himself as trying his people that he may test and develop the real state of their hearts.

Another end in view is that he may greatly search their hearts. We are prone to be exceedingly ignorant of ourselves. Were it not for trials, we should live and die in this ignorance. To prevent so deplorable a result, God permits temptations to assail us on every side and bring out all the deep things of our hearts. Just so a chemist would take any particular substance into his laboratory and test it in his crucible. He would try it by placing it in contact with other substances that act powerfully upon it and by this he ascertains its affinities and its real character. So God takes us into his great laboratory and applies the tests of spiritual chemistry to our hearts. Often we are not at all aware that we have any such affinities for earthly objects, until we are brought into close contact by temptation;--then perhaps we find that we have strange susceptibilities about us which we had not known before.

Temptations are designed to empty us of our self-complacency. Peter was very self-complacent until he came into circumstances of great trial. It proved a great blessing to him to be thus tried. He thought much less of himself afterwards than before.

So it often happens. I know how often, perhaps in some hundred or thousand instances, I have seen men

brought into circumstances which greatly abated their opinion of themselves. They had been very self-complacent--they had come to imagine that they had something very good in themselves. They cherished this notion with self-satisfaction; God saw their danger and permitted his fierce and strong temptations to try them until he had developed to their own view the unknown tendencies of their hearts and made them loathe themselves in their own sight as much as they had delighted in themselves before.

The real children of God may always expect such self-disclosures. As sure as God loves them and sets his heart on their salvation, so surely may they expect some form of trial that will cure them of self-complacency.

Again, trials serve to empty the heart of self-righteousness. By self-righteousness I mean that which originates in ourselves and not in Christ working in us to will and to do. That is always self-righteousness where one supposes that his obedience to God originates in himself, and he does not realize that there is no good inherent in himself whatever.

Lest I be misunderstood on this point, let me say that I do not mean to imply at all that we are passive in our obedience to the divine law. If I had supposed the mind passive in this obedience I could not have spoken of God's working in us "to will." An influence which leads us to will must of course terminate in our highest activity. It never can be exerted effectually and yet we remain passive. Nothing can be more active than an act of the will.

Further, my meaning is not that whatever good we do, does not really belong to us, and is not really our own doing, pertaining to our own actions and states of mind. This cannot be denied.

These explanations being made, let me say again, that if any Christian loses sight of this fact that he never does any good except as God works in him, he must soon learn it by the endurance of such trials as will compel him to see it.

Again, another design is to teach us our dependence of God; to hedge us in and shut us up to Christ and make us abide in him. When temptations teach us our own weakness and certainty of falling unless we abide in Christ, we wax really strong in the Lord. Temptations are designed to develop, establish, and strengthen every form of virtue. This is made abundantly plain in the Bible.

III. What is it to endure temptation?

The original word is used for the trying of metals by fire and by such tests as are adapted to develop their real character, or to remove their impurities. That which abides the test and remains after the trial, might be said to have endured the temptation.

So of the moral trials of the Christian. To endure temptation is to stand the trial--to abide constant in the faith--to hold out and come forth only the more pure, as the precious metals when the searching fire has passed over them. It is to persevere, despite of all temptations to be inconstant in our allegiance to Christ.

IV. This endurance of temptation is a condition of being saved.

Temptation is always implied in a state of probation. There could be no such thing as a state of trial if it included no temptation. A person could not be tried or proved except in a state fitted for such a process and for such results.

Again, temptations are naturally incidental to our present state. They spring up from our very constitution, and from the relations we sustain to the world we live in. Indeed we might say, they spring out of our moral being, and that no moral being can exist in circumstances where he can find sources of happiness without being exposed to have those very sources of happiness become temptations to selfishness. We have reason to believe that there is no world where moral beings may not be thus tempted.

Certainly in this world, temptations are incidental to our very existence. Look at Adam and Eve. As long as they had bodily appetites they were in circumstances of temptation. Sometimes these temptations urged the will with great vehemence; at other times with less power, or not at all.

Now inasmuch as we all have these appetites and susceptibilities, temptation is naturally and necessarily incidental to our present state of existence. When the susceptibilities become strongly excited in any given direction, then temptation becomes in that degree powerful. The temptation urges us to forsake the guidance of

God and of reason and give ourselves up to self-indulgence.

At this point, let us contemplate another great fact; viz. that holiness is naturally and necessarily a condition of our salvation. It is of all things most absurd to suppose that any one can be saved without holiness. Of all human dreams and fantasies this is the most absurd. Strange that men who can think should entertain so flagrant a delusion.

I have often been struck with the absurdity of those who say that the doctrine of regeneration is a mystery and a humbug. So far is this from being true that it is naturally and forever impossible that one should ever be happy and be saved unless he comes into the state described in the Bible as the regenerate state, and made according to the Bible, a condition of salvation. When God declares--"Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God," he makes no arbitrary appointment. This is no capricious decree of the Almighty. It is one of the laws of our being that a selfish man must be born again and be thereby changed from selfish to benevolent, or he never can be happy in God, or really happy anywhere or anyhow in the universe. He must be sanctified, that is saved from being a sinner, or he cannot be saved from the misery inherent in sinning, or from the punishment consequent upon it.

Again, regeneration and sanctification are not physical changes, capable of being wrought upon us by an exertion of God's physical omnipotence. It is sometimes said--We know men must become holy, but God can work this thing in us. God can create in us the very state of mind which his law demands.

Now such persons need to consider that holiness is not some substance created in us, but is a voluntary conformity of heart and life to the law of God and to the laws of our own nature. It implies that we willingly and cheerfully consecrate ourselves to the very ends demanded in the law of God. This and nothing else but this, is true holiness.

The more I have thought of it the more I have been astonished that any class of men who ever think at all on moral subjects can ever tend towards infidelity. What! reject the religion of the Bible and then talk of salvation? The man knows not what he is talking about. He knows no more about the subject and no more understands what he says than the veriest maniac! For, what is salvation? What is eternal life? Only let the individual press the question--What is this thing about which I am talking?--and he will see that he must become just what the Bible represents men as becoming before they can be saved. He will see that it is in the nature of the case impossible that any man should be saved from misery to happiness unless he be changed from selfishness to benevolence.

It is therefore no arbitrary or governmental ordination of God which sends the sinning rebel to hell; he only goes to his own place--the only fitting place for one of his character which the universe affords.--He has passed through his state of trial and has come out not pure but vile; hence no place but one fitted for the vile and filled with the vile can at all befit him. Surrounding circumstances and divinely employed means and influences must actually secure our purity of heart here, or we cannot be saved hereafter. So both reason and scripture conspire to affirm.

REMARKS.

1. With this subject before us, we can see the real difference between those who are true saints and those who are not. The former are distinguished by enduring temptation; the latter by being overcome by it. All, both saints and sinners, are tried for the very purpose of developing character; in all cases it produces this very result; some endure the trial and some do not. The former of course are the real saints; the latter are deceived if they suppose themselves to be Christians. Temptation does not overcome the Christian;--he overcomes it.

2. We see what constitutes the Christian warfare. It is made up of resisting temptation--of resisting and overcoming all those inducements to turn away from God and to seek one's own ends and gratification. This is the strife and the struggle in which the Christian is engaged.

3. All men whether saints or sinners are tried, and all either endure temptation, or are carried away by them. The sinner is continually carried away. He is conscious of no conflict and no warfare, because he makes no resistance. He knows no other law than self-gratification. If he resists the temptation to self-gratification in one

form it is only that he may secure it in some other form. Whenever he desires self-gratification, he seeks it; and just for this reason he is a sinner.

The Christian is tried in the same manner, but he resists the temptation. He knows that it will not do to give himself up to seek after sensual or selfish indulgences.

4. Another remark is due here which may explain to impenitent men a thing they often wonder at as unaccountably strange. I can well recollect much of my own experience on this point before my conversion. I saw that Christians had trials of mind and many troubles and difficulties which I could not account for. I thought they of all persons ought to be happy, (for I was sure the wicked had no ground for being so.) I could not account for the fact which I often noticed that Christians seemed quite unhappy. I was quite observing of all the movements I saw among Christians, for I used to attend their prayer meetings and ponder all the developments of character I saw among them. For a long time I was at a loss to account for the fact that they seemed to have so much trouble and so little enjoyment. I rarely fell in with one of the rejoicing ones whose face would shine; this class were few in number then, and I rarely met with them. I can well remember one deacon who used to visit our office. Often however he seemed to be in an agony of soul; I could often hear him sigh, --could see his struggles of mind;--the tear would start in his eye, and the words falter on his tongue. I used to be searching after the causes of this. Why is it I would say that one who has so much reason to be joyful in God should seem so sad?

Perhaps some impenitent man who hears me has a pious wife, and sometimes surprises her in tears. Repelled perhaps by seeing tears, the cause of which he knows not, he may perchance peevishly exclaim--"I don't want such a wife--so often weeping and unhappy." You ought, my friend, to use a little philosophy about this and try to understand it. Perhaps your own conduct may have caused those tears. The indifference you manifest to the welfare of your own soul may be agonizing your wife. She may love you too well and her Savior too well to see you at enmity against him without feeling bitterly afflicted. Do not scorn those tears which your own folly and danger may have wrung out.

After my conversion I could see that I had often given Dea. H this trouble and anxiety which I had so frequently seen in his countenance. I saw that my folly and sin had caused him this deep grief. The fact is that if persons would consider they would often see the reason of this fact. The Christian has sore trials, and then instead of yielding as others to, he resists. Hence the struggle. Feeling a deep solicitude for the salvation of souls, when he sees their peril, his soul is troubled within him.

Instead therefore of wondering at these trials and seeing in them the evidence that they are wicked, we should rather deem it no strange thing and should see in them the evidence that such are righteous. The fact is that the Christian, standing in the midst of trials, is on battle ground. He is in a great strait, and if he might not take refuge in Christ, he would indeed be without hope.

Hence when you see Christians in the greatest agony and despondency, think not that they are not Christians, but rather be assured the more that they are. Those struggles are nothing else but a state of the sensibility and are not in themselves sin. They may rise to any degree of strength and yet not involve sin at all.

5. Sinners and false professors never learn the secret of standing by faith in Christ. Deceived professors sometimes seem to try; they talk as if they had some thought of making efforts, but alas, they seem to make no progress. In them are fulfilled the words of the apostle--"Ever learning, yet never able to come to the knowledge of the truth." Some kinds of truth they may learn, but never this great truth, that through faith in Christ, they may gain the victory over all sin. They do not learn how to take refuge in Christ under circumstances of temptation. They do not apprehend the great and blessed truth--"Thou standest by faith." How great the secret and how vitally important! Nothing can be more so. If a Christian does not understand this, his resolutions are all air, mere wind--good for nothing at all. All false professors and sinners of every sort utterly fail to learn this great secret of so standing by faith in Christ that they can endure temptation. They have none of this element in their religion and of course their religion can avail them nothing.

6. Temptations are among the most powerful means of grace. They are often the most effective instrumentalities which the Lord employs to bring sinners to Christ. Often we see them the most powerful means used to break men off from self-dependence. They serve to show men their utter weakness in themselves for any moral good; and this lesson once thoroughly learned, the individual is prepared to take hold of real help and strength in Christ.

7. There is no escaping temptation in the present life. We may get grace for victories, but we need not look to

grace for exemption from all conflict. The form of the conflict usually varies as saints make progress in the divine life. As they ascend higher in holiness, or rather as they go deeper into their own hearts, they must expect the form of the attack will change; but the same law of the Christian life will still prevail--war against sin--struggle against temptation.

8. Saints cannot but grow under temptations. It is just as natural as it is for the winds of heaven to strengthen the trees of the forest. You see a tree growing in the dense forest--it is tall and slender; it lifts its lofty head towards heaven and reels under the blasts of the storm; but there are so many other trees to help bear the pressure that no severe trial of strength comes upon any one. But let this tree take its growth in the open field and all alone; then see how it thrusts out its broad, bracing roots; see how rugged the form it assumes; see how the mighty thunder gusts break upon it and it only braces itself the more firmly to withstand;--so does the Christian under temptation. He grows up strong, fixed, steadfast. He is compelled to live in Christ all the time, and hence he cannot but learn to walk by faith and to stand in the evil day.

But place the Christian where he has little or no temptation, and he will come up slender, pale and faint-hearted. Not being in circumstances to develop his energies, they are not developed as under trials they might and would be.

The true doctrine on this point plainly is that trials afford us the means of gaining strength in the life of God. If then we trust by faith in Jesus for sustaining grace, we grow; if we fail to trust, we fall before the temptation and bring disaster of the worst sort on our own souls and on the cause of Jesus.

9. Christians are sometimes so troubled as not to be aware of their growth and hence they get greatly discouraged. How often have I seen this! There is a Christian;--how he is dashed along on the mountain surges--hurled from one crested wave to another--how hard it is to keep his head above water; he does not know as he is making any progress at all towards the shore and haven of rest; but he is, and as you stand upon land you can see it though he does not see it at all.

So often in the case of saints. Those who look on rejoice to see them making great progress. We bless the Lord that we can see how these temptations are molding and fashioning them in the most lovely manner and imbuing their tempers with all the humility, the meekness and the sweetness of Christ.

See that Christian who has fallen into sore trials. His very countenance shows that he knows what sore temptations are and also what it is to have great consolations. The moral agencies that renovate character operate in his case with intense energy.

Some seem to think that a state of sanctification is beyond trial, and quite exempt from its struggles. This is one of the greatest mistakes. The saint never in this life gets so high that the Lord would not develop his graces yet a little more. The Christian is never too far advanced to be blessed by being carried along yet farther. You are never so far along that God may not have yet other blessings in store for you, to come through being tried yet more perhaps in the furnace of affliction.

Commonly when Christians have endured a scene of stern and fiery trial, they find it succeeded by one of great peace and rest. It is with them as with our Lord; --when Satan had gone, "lo, angels came and ministered unto him."

Now some suppose that this peace in God is a state of sanctification. But perhaps it may not be. It may be only a temporary reward--a visit of some angel of mercy to refresh the weary soldier after a hard fought battle for the Lord, to prepare him for another scene of struggle.

Persons are sometimes thrown into trials when nothing is to be seen but the naked promise. All external circumstances may seem in the highest degree forbidding;--and nothing remains but to trust the naked work of the Lord.

And sometimes we seem not even to have any explicit promise, but are thrown upon the general character of God. We are shut up to him and can only say--"I know him, and though he slay me, yet I will trust in him." Job seems to have been in this condition; every earthly helper had failed him; perhaps he knew of no specific promise of the Lord on which he could rest; but he knew something of God's general character, and knew therefore that he could trust him everywhere and always.

This case of Job is indeed in many respects exceedingly interesting. If you could have seen him in the midst of

The Blessedness of Enduring Temptation

his trials,--property and children torn away; his wife become his tempter; Satan let loose upon him;--his flesh full of fire and his bones of anguish;--if you could have seen all this, you would have said, surely Job is the last man in the world to be benefited by affliction. This was indeed a fierce and terrible furnace through which to pass. Sometimes he frets, and sometimes almost slips; but still the Lord holds him up from falling; and probably there was no period in his whole life in which he grew so fast in the thorough knowledge of himself and of God--none in which he struck his roots down so deep and made them fast so firmly in the deep foundations of faith and trust, as then. If any suppose that Job was overcome in this trial they greatly mistake. Expressions did indeed escape him which showed that he was tried and almost beyond endurance, but his by no means proves that he was overcome. His constancy in God abides the trial, and by faith on the whole endures to the end.

You may have had an experience similar in some respects to this. You have been attacked by some vile, subtle, fierce temptation; your soul has been thrown into deep commotion; if any impenitent sinner had seen your struggles he would have been stumbled perhaps exceedingly and confounded;--but through grace you conquered and you came out as gold seven times purified, prepared to testify with one of old--"It is good for me that I have been afflicted."

While all things work together for the good of the true saint, the very opposite of this is true of every sinner. All things work ill to him. He falls before every temptation, and of course every scene of trial only serves to develop more and more his ungodly lusts, or his unbelief and his settled alienation from God. Often you see such persons thrown into a fever of irritation against God. Secretly, perhaps sometimes openly, they repine and complain of the Almighty and fret against the course of His Providence. Every thing goes to develop their true character and strengthen all its bad points. This is all evil.

It is easy to see who have a good hope. All those who have are more than conquerors. They abide the trial. If at any time their foot slips, it is only a slip; they take hold afresh and still are strong in the Lord and in the power of his might.

Let it also be remembered that it is only those that have a good hope that will endure temptation. Those whose hopes are false will not abide in the day of trial.

Hence those who fail and yield in the hour of temptation may see that they have no reason to hope. The features of their character are marks of the self-deceived and not of the true believer.

But you say perhaps--"I cant (sic.) tell--I dont (sic.) know where I am." A young man came to me a few days since with this complaint--"I don[']t know where I am; --I don[']t know what to think of myself. In fact I am so afraid of sinning against God that I hardly dare to eat or drink or sleep" Indeed, thought I, and where can you be? What is your state of mind, dear young man? So afraid of sinning that you scarcely dare to eat! So full of fear lest you displease God! Surely this shows for itself where you are. A heart so tenderly alive to the fear of displeasing God may be easily known.

Yet one cannot look at such a case as that of this young man without crying out--how cruel the devil is! And how mean, that he should love to torment a conscientious mind and throw him into a state in which he will scarcely dare to eat, drink, or sleep. What a devil he is!

When you see real Christians thrown into great temptations you will find that ultimately it will do them great good. Their graces will shine beautifully during the rest of their life, and God has said that when they die they shall receive a crown of glory that fades not away.

When, therefore you hear saints groaning, agonizing, trembling, be not afraid for them. The roots are striking deeper, and they will surely gain a firmer footing and will glorify God in the midst of the fires. You may see him enter his closet, looking sad, perhaps haggard, almost distracted; but anon he will come out, meekly saying--The Lord knoweth my way. The Lord knows the tears I shed. He has delivered me in six troubles and in seven and still I know that he will deliver me, and I will yet own and bless his name. O beloved, it is good to be afflicted, if only we have faith in God and so hold on upon his arms as to endure to the end. Then there remains for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.