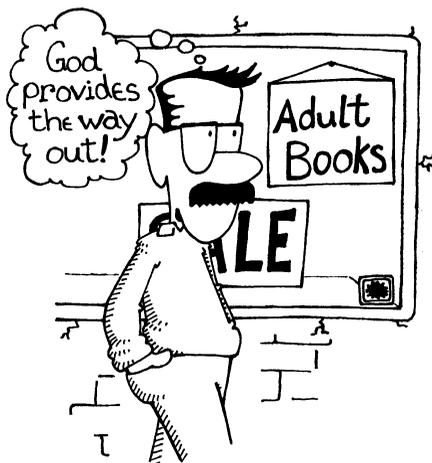


# Chapter 9

## RESISTING TEMPTATIONS

Oscar Wilde once said, “I can resist everything except temptation.” How we face and handle temptations are major factors in the directions our lives take. To succumb to temptations will lead to despair and emptiness. We are called to be faithful and not misdirected by the world, our flesh, or Satan. *“As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as He Who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do”* (1 Peter 1:14-15). To live “life at its best,” we need to tap into God’s strength and wisdom to overcome the enticements of the world. Only because of God’s presence in Word and Sacrament can we meet temptations head-on and be victorious. *“Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God promised to those who love Him”* (James 1:12).

What most of us want out of life is a meaningful relationship with our Lord, families, and friends. Only a relationship with Christ will fill our emptiness and give life meaning. For us to be intimate with the Lord, we need to walk with Him, willing to serve, obey, and follow. *“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—His good, and pleasing and perfect will”* (Romans 12:2). Are we able to say “yes” to Him and “no” to the temptations of the world?



## TEMPTATIONS LARGE AND SMALL

We all know what it is like to face compelling temptations. Some temptations will be large and noticeable, whereas others will appear to be small and insignificant. *“No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it”* (1 Corinthians 10:13). God promises that, when we call on Him, He will give us the strength to overcome any temptations.

We are tempted on a daily basis. It is not easy to fight the good fight. To experience temptations is not a sin, because temptations are part of being human.

However, as believers, we don't have to yield to them. God does not shield us from temptations, but He sustains us while we are facing them. *"Because He Himself suffered when He was tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted"* (Hebrews 2:18).

Our faith is paramount if we are to stand up to temptations with courage and conviction. Peter urges us to stand firm in the faith knowing that our *"brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings"* (1 Peter 5:9). When we stand firm in our faith, we can echo the words of the Apostle Paul's testimony shortly before his death, *"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith"* (2 Timothy 4:7).

Paul showed that he had developed the character to withstand the powerful influences that threatened to take over his life. Just as Paul was tested hundreds of years ago and kept the faith, today our faith and character are being tested. The goal for all believers is to be men and women of integrity who, empowered by the Spirit through Word and Sacrament, combat temptations with the character that God has developed and nurtured within each of us. *"The man of integrity walks securely, but he who takes crooked paths will be found out"* (Proverbs 10:9). Remaining strong in our faith will bring us into God's joy, peace, and freedom. Through the Holy Spirit Who lives in us, we are capable of saying "no" to temptations. Making proper choices builds our Godly character and makes us more effective in our lives of service to Christ.<sup>1</sup>

We live in a society that can compete with any in regard to the quantity and appeal of the temptations it offers. Standards of behavior considered indecent only a few years ago are not only tolerated today, but accepted and encouraged. From every direction, we are inundated with suggestive thoughts and images. The advertising industry uses sex and materialism to sell its products and entice us into a worldly approach to life. Paul warns us in Colossians 2:8, *"See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ."*

## **FACING TEMPTATION HEAD-ON WITH GOD'S GRACE**

Since, then, the possibilities for sin are endless, we need depth of faith and strength of character to face today's temptations head-on and to live "life at its best." To live a life worthy of His calling (Colossians 1:10), we need to call on God's strength within us to withstand the pressures we face. That strength will enable us to be selective in choosing the things that we will allow into our minds and hearts. That strength will also keep us on guard against the desensitizing of our consciences that comes from information or entertainment that does not promote, but rather ridicules, a Godly perspective. Paul's warning to the Corinthians is applicable to us today. *"But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the*

*serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:3).*

We must ask ourselves what we are putting into our eyes, ears, hearts, and minds. A phrase used in connection with computers is: "Garbage in, garbage out." We can choose to fill our thoughts with God's Word, or we can drown ourselves in the world's ideas and values. If the activities of life crowd out time spent with God in prayer and reading His Word, we cannot expect to stand up to the temptations of Satan and our world. Even Jesus, God Himself, knew the importance of prayer and made time alone with His Father a priority (Matthew 14:23; 26:36).



Jesus said that we should not be surprised about our trials. *"I have told you these things, so that in Me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world"* (John 16:33). Jesus told His disciples that in this world they would experience trouble, but He comforted them with the fact that He would overcome the world. He did this on the Cross of Calvary. Even today, after billions of us have chosen to live for ourselves and seek fame, power, and wealth, He still waits for us. God's love never stops. He died for us all!

We can often predict where temptations will come, but sometimes we are blindsided by the least likely things. We will be trapped unless we are on guard. *"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good"* (Romans 12:21). Scripture gives direction on how to face, endure, and overcome temptation:

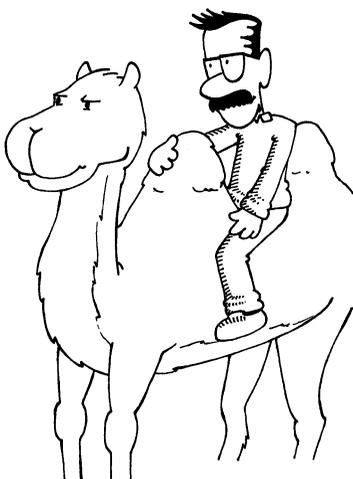
1. Pray. *"And lead us not in to temptation, but deliver us from the evil one"* (Matthew 6:13). *"Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak"* (Matthew 26:41).
2. Hate sin. *"...Hate what is evil"* (Romans 12:9). Love God. *"...Cling to what is good"* (Romans 12:9). *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength"* (Deuteronomy 6:5).
3. Stay away from evil. *"Avoid every kind of evil"* (1 Thessalonians 5:22). *"I will set before my eyes no vile thing. The deeds of faithless men I hate; they will not cling to me"* (Psalm 101:3).
4. Stand against Satan. *"...Resist the devil, and he will flee from you"* (James 4:7).

5. Use God's Word. *"How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to Your Word"* (Psalm 119:9).

When Jesus was being tempted by the devil in the desert, He used the Word of God to combat Satan. Paul calls the Word the sword of the Spirit (Ephesians 6:17), and it is our main weapon in the battle with temptation. God's Word helps us distinguish the true voice of God from the counterfeit enticements of the world. The areas in which Jesus was tempted (Matthew 4:1-11) are points where we, too, are vulnerable. First, Satan appealed to Jesus' physical desire: ". . . tell these stones to become bread." Relying on the Word, Jesus deflected that attack. The next one was aimed at a desire for status: *"If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down,"* for, Satan jeered, the angels would hold Jesus up. Again, the Word is Jesus' sword. Finally, Satan issued the temptation to attain power: *"All this I will give You if You will bow down and worship me."* Jesus final words were, *"Away from Me, Satan!"*



Our desires are similar: desire to satisfy our bodily needs, desire for status, and desire for power. Studying Satan's cunning schemes helps us see through the falsehoods and rationalizations that could deceive us. Meditating on Jesus' response alerts us to the danger of thinking: "Everybody's doing it," "Just once won't hurt," and "I can do this and still be a good Christian." We need to know God's truths to expose Satan's lies. Immersed in the Word and strengthened by the Sacraments, we have the knowledge to differentiate the whispers of temptations from the true voice of our heavenly Father and the strength to live "life at its best."



We must be constantly aware of Satan's enticements to sin, because he makes evil things look inviting and harmless. Satan is a master of deception. *"And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve"* (2 Corinthians 11:14-15). Without God's protection, it is impossible to prevent Satan from sneaking into our lives. Our "deserts" may be different, but Satan will attack us, as he did Jesus, when we are most susceptible. Satan knows our weak points. It is necessary to have an intimate relationship with Christ to withstand the everyday

trials of life.

Even though Jesus has defeated Satan, the devil is still in search of more victims. *“Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings”* (1 Peter 5:8-9). Satan is active, and he uses every weakness we have and situation in life to separate us from Jesus.

Jesus’ victory over temptations in the desert is our victory. Because Jesus stayed faithful and obedient even to the point of death, we have victory over Satan, the world, and the flesh. 1 John 1:7 promises, *“But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin.”* Ephesians 6:10-18 is the Christian manual for battle by which we defeat Satan and find eternal rest. There is Scripture to help us handle every temptation Satan sends our way. When we fill our minds with the Word, as Jesus did, we will be protected and well-equipped to overcome temptations.

Should we fail and give in to temptation, we *“confess our sins”* and find that *“He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness”* (1 John 1:9). God forgives us without our having to meet any requirements and without our merit. *“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come”* (2 Corinthians 5:17)! Christ died for all sinners. As Jesus told Satan, *“Away from Me”* (Matthew 4:10), we, too, can say to Satan, *“Away from me.”*

At the same time we are casting Satan out, we are turning to God, Who says to us, *“Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor Me”* (Psalm 50:15). In communion with our heavenly Father through prayer, we find that Christ is our Deliverer. He knew about temptation. That’s why, when the disciples asked Him to teach them to pray, He included in the Lord’s Prayer these words: *“And lead us not into temptation”* (Matthew 6:13).

Are we calling upon Christ and responding to temptations with trust in God’s faithfulness?

- Real trust is to take God at His word.
- Real trust is to believe God cares for us.
- Real trust is to recognize God is in control of our lives.

We should never allow tribulations or the *“worries of this life”* to cause us to forget that God loves us (Matthew 13:22).



## THE SOURCES OF TEMPTATIONS

As was mentioned earlier, temptations are many and varied, presenting themselves both when and where we least expect them and at times and in circumstances we can anticipate. There are three main sources of temptation: our own selfish nature (the flesh), Satan, and the world.

**The Flesh.** *“When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed”*(James 1:13-14). This passage gives us one explanation of the source of temptation: it is within us. With the fall of Adam, we have become sinful people. Because of our inner sinful nature, we are drawn towards worldly pleasures and activities. *“The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery . . .”* (Galatians 5:19).

Within the human spirit exists a condition of self-sins that separate us from dependence on the Lord. This condition exists not so much in what we do, as who we are at the very core of our beings. The following self-sins are enemies to our lives and obstacles to our spiritual growth: self-interest, self-sufficiency, self-admiration, self-righteousness, self-gratification, self-love, and self-dependence. Within each of these self-sins lies power to promote self. Subtly we become detached from God. We start to trust in ourselves.<sup>2</sup>

Only God’s presence in our lives can change our minds and hearts so that we can live a new life. *“Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires”* (Romans 8:5). The sinful nature will always be part of us. *“For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members,”* says Paul (Romans 7:22-23), and then he adds, *“What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord”* (Romans 7:24-25)!



**The Devil.** The sinful flesh is not our only enemy in our battle with temptation. When we read about the Temptation of Jesus in Matthew 4, it is the devil who is called the tempter (Matthew 4:1-3). It is the Word of God that Jesus used to combat the evil one (Matthew 4:4, 7, 10) and defeat him (Matthew 4:11).

From the beginning of creation, the devil has been at work trying to separate us from God. *“The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.”* (Revelation 12:9).

Scripture attests to the fact that the devil is in continual conflict with the people of God. *“For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan stopped us”* (1 Thessalonians 2:18). The devil is at work among us, and he eagerly increases the intensity of his enticements. The Apostle Paul said, *“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers,*



*against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms”* (Ephesians 6:12).

Again we find our victory in the words of Revelation 20:10 which describe Satan’s end at the hands of Christ. *“And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.”*

**The World.** When Jesus told the Parable of the Sower to the crowds beside the sea, He talked about how the cares and temptations of the world choke the Word of God and cause us to be unfruitful (Matthew 13:22). Martin Luther, referring to the source of temptation, wrote that the world “assails us by word and deed,” urging us to conform to its standards, falling to envy, pride, and hatred.

Spending an evening in front of the television will affirm the fact that we are being urged to follow the example of the world. The guy who drinks the right beer gets the great-looking girl. The thief who outwits the inept lawman is the hero who keeps the loot and lives in luxury the rest of his days. The men and women indiscriminately changing partners are cool and never suffer any consequence. The content of many of the top-rated shows is often at variance with Paul’s admonition which counsels, *“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things”* (Philippians 4:8).



God gave us life and a wonderful creation for us to enjoy. “. . . *And God saw that it was good*” (Genesis 1:25). Unfortunately, man’s sinful nature has united with the evil of the world to taint God’s good creation. Man’s self-seeking and self-indulging nature has created an evil world that attracts him to sin. Casinos, race tracks, brothels, abortions, illicit drugs, topless bars, and pornographic material are part of man’s creation.

We ignore the warning given us in James 4:4: “*You adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.*” Not only are we friends of the world, we ourselves are actually involved in ways to corrupt the world further and turn away from the blessings and satisfaction that God intends for us to have. We become God’s enemies. We choose to ignore God’s promises that He will provide for us and bless us when we love and serve Him. “*But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well*” (Matthew 6:33).

- The world has no place for what God thinks.
- The world is not interested in following God’s ways.
- The world does not heed John’s warning in 1John: 2:15-17.

*Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.*

A choice must be made. If we choose the world, our pleasures will be short-lived, for “*the world and its desires pass away.*” The reward for heeding this warning is great. It is life eternal. “*The man who does the will of God lives forever.*”

God equips us to resist the world’s temptations and keeps us safe for eternity:

*For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, Who gave Himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for Himself a people that are His very own, eager to do what is good* (Titus 2:11-14).

As we see the evils of the world, we take comfort in the words of 1 John 4:4: “*You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the One Who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.*” God has overcome all

the forces of evil. When we put our faith in Him, we celebrate with Him the victory He has won for us in Christ.

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:**

1. What are the sources of temptations?
2. What assurance do you have in your struggles against temptations?
3. Do you think temptations are stronger and more common today than in previous generations? Why or why not?
4. How do you gain discernment?
5. What temptations did Jesus face when He became one of us? How did He remain faithful and obedient to His heavenly Father?

### **AREAS OF TEMPTATION**



The following temptations represent four major areas of vulnerability:

Wealth: Some of us make money and possessions our security. To achieve greater security, we exert more effort to acquire more things. When money becomes our focus, we can easily start determining our value in life by how much we own. Chasing after money becomes our god, and the preoccupation with wealth pushes God aside. There is no time for or interest in spiritual matters.

Activities are not of value unless they involve making more money.

Fame: Most of us enjoy some attention, but popularity can become an obsession. Some of us strive for center stage and are willing to do anything to anyone to capture that attention. The fact that God wants us to be humble and to put Him first is not even considered.

Power: To be the boss is the goal for many. Why take orders when we can give them? Being in charge means we can have things our way. Power puts many on ego trips that cause not only a “better than thou” attitude,” but a “best of all” attitude. Those on a self-constructed pedestal may see God as a rival to the power they’ve acquired.

Pleasure: “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die” is an attitude of many. This is a lifestyle without consideration for tomorrow, one without an eternal

perspective. We may take the view that we deserve to be happy and fulfilled and, in our view, that means we can do what we want, even if it means lowering our standards and morals. When we seek inappropriate pleasure, we ignore God’s ways.

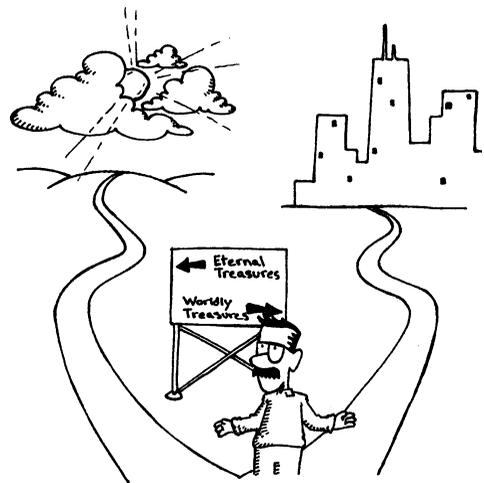
## PURPOSES OF TEMPTATION

Adam and Eve failed the first major temptation test when they ate of the forbidden fruit. The enticements to sin have not changed since the Garden of Eden. In his book, *Balancing the Christian Life*, Charles C. Ryrie discusses God’s purpose in allowing temptation to be so universal:<sup>3</sup>

### 1. The testing purpose of temptation.

It is true that God does not tempt us to do evil. It is also true that He allows temptations to occur so that He can prove His faithfulness to us.

*In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed (1 Peter 1:6-7).*



When we successfully withstand tests through the power of the Holy Spirit, we allow God’s strength to work in and through us. God’s strength enables us to stay committed to Him and to receive His approval. *“On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, Who tests our hearts”*(1 Thessalonians 2:4). When we are tested, God brings us through it. Our character and faith are matured to handle further temptations. If we succumb to temptations, we fail God’s faith test. Yet, amazingly, God freely gives us His gracious love and forgiveness.



The greatest temptation of all is for the Christian to deny his faith. “Temptation” as used in the Lord’s Prayer refers to that

ultimate test, that overwhelming, endtime struggle. In that context, our prayer is that God would not allow us to be tempted in such a way that our faith would not be able to survive. Our prayer is that God's grace would enable us not to yield. Life is not free of threats of pain, but we have the promise that God will see us through it all.

The struggles in life are what build our resolve and mature our faith. If we don't have to strain and face adversities, we will not fully grasp our dependence on God, and we will not grow spiritually. In Romans 8:17 we learn that *"If we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in His sufferings in order that we may also share in His glory."* God gives us the power to overcome our adversities and grow. *"To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God"* (Revelation 2:7).

## 2. Teaching purpose of temptation.

God brings tests through temptations into our lives so we can be taught certain things that we would not learn any other way. In Genesis 22, we read the account of Abraham and his long-awaited, much-beloved son Isaac and of God's request of Abraham to sacrifice that son. Did God know the strength of Abraham's faith? Did God know that Abraham would be able to fulfill God's request? Of course. Did Abraham? Probably, for, even if he doubted himself, Abraham knew his God was faithful. Did the whole incident have an effect? A resounding "yes!" For us who study this account, there is affirmation that the God Who tried his servant and went through the whole process with him is also our God. He does not forsake us, either, in our time of temptation.

Through the trials that Jesus faced, He taught us the importance of obedience. His obedience earned our salvation. *"Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from what He suffered"* (Hebrews 5:8). He endured and resisted temptation for *"the joy set before Him"* (Hebrews 12:2). We are urged to *"fix our eyes on Jesus"* (Hebrews 12:2). St. Peter tells us in 1 Peter 4:12-13: *"Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so you may be overjoyed when His glory is revealed."* Obedience cost Jesus agony. Without suffering, there is no glory. There wasn't for Jesus; there isn't for us.

In addition to obedience, we learn other life lessons from the trials we face:

Patient endurance:

*"You have persevered and have endured hardships for My name, and have not grown weary"* (Revelation 2:3). James 1:12 promises, *"Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial. . ."*

Dependence:

*Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, Who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and He will deliver us. On Him we have set our hope that He will continue to deliver us” (2 Corinthians 1:9-10).*

Hope:

*“ . . .we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, Whom He has given us” (Romans 5:3-5).*

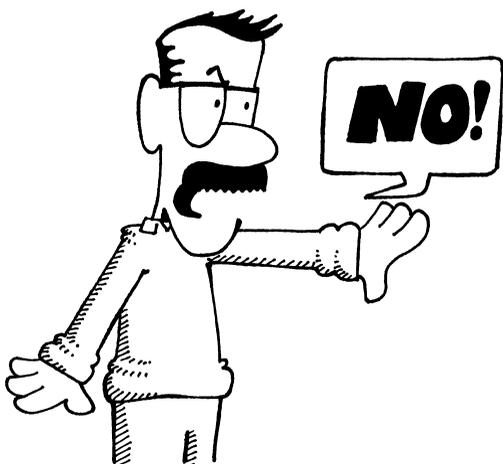
The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. When Satan tempts us and tightens his grip around us, our only strength will come from the Lord. We cannot underestimate these trials or falsely believe that we can in our own strength overcome them. Our comfort comes from knowing Christ Jesus has fought our battle, and He has taken us under His care and protection. No matter how hard the devil may tempt us, he is not able to take us out of God’s arms.

A personal temptation that I recently dealt with involved an opportunity I had that would have made it possible for me not to pay the six percent Michigan State sales tax on business items for my new business. Because I had worked for a non-profit organization, the office supply store where I shopped for my business items gave me a plastic card waiving the state sales tax on all purchases. Even though my occupation had changed, I still had the card. My human side encouraged me to use the card because my business wouldn’t be profitable for a period of time, and, since my business was that of serving churches, I deserved a small break. After no small personal struggle, I knew that, to overcome future temptations, I would have to destroy the card, which I did. God gave me the wisdom and the strength to do what was right.

## **OVERCOMING TEMPTATIONS THROUGH CHRIST**

In Scripture we learn that wrong thoughts, desires, and temptations affect everyone (1 Corinthians 10:13). We aren’t weak because temptations come our way. Temptations are part of life. *“So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me” (Romans 7:21).* Even the Apostle Paul struggled with wrong thoughts and prurient interests. He realized that he was incapable of dealing with his desires by himself. Paul accepted his weaknesses and looked to God for His help. He longed for God’s wisdom and strength to enable him to overcome his self-interests and desires.

*But He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).*



As God's redeemed children, we know that God's strength is more than sufficient to defeat the sinful pull of the world (1 Corinthians 10:13). God's Spirit gives us discernment and wisdom

to alert us when we head in the wrong direction. The Holy Spirit, working through Word and Sacrament, enables us to do what God wants us to do.

God's strength enables us to bear our trials, and He will deliver us from our temptations. It is not because of who we are, but because of Who God is and who we are in Christ, that we are enabled to have victory over temptation. The problems we face in life contribute to the strengthening of our faith and trust in the Lord. The more we depend on Christ, the more we will see Him working within our lives. His freeing power breaks us from our pasts and makes us new creations in Him (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Jesus' example showed us that to overcome temptation we must be prepared. To prepare Himself against temptation, Jesus spent time with His heavenly Father. This was a time of renewal and strengthening. For us, as well, the strength to win over temptation lies in our heavenly Father's provision. Prayer, God's Word, and the Sacraments are necessities. The Psalmist said, *"I have hidden Your Word in my heart that I might not sin against You"* (Psalm 119:11).

The battle with temptations is a battle of the heart. Which will have the upper hand: the message of the world or the Word of God that we've hidden in our hearts? Our inner beings need to rely on God's wisdom and strength for us to live in God's light. When we experience God's wisdom, we see Him in all aspects of our lives, even in trials and sufferings. In addition to granting us wisdom, He fills our need for love and support, which sustain and help us in the face of evil. Facing trials helps us realize our own weaknesses and how much we need His



## Life at its Best

strength. As He opens our hearts to Himself, He teaches us the futility of depending on other sources.

How we handle the temptations we face will direct us either toward a sinful life and increasing weakness, or, by the power of the Holy Spirit, toward a lifestyle of righteousness and growing dependence on Christ. When we are tempted and sin, not only do we do wrong, but Satan accomplishes what he wants which is to separate us from an intimate relationship with God.

Satan wants us to separate us from Jesus as he did the following during Holy Week:

- Judas who betrayed Him
- The people who called for His crucifixion
- The disciples who ran away
- The religious leaders who refused to accept Who He was

If we accept sin, the result is a life of defeat and death. If we remain faithful to God's calling and rely on His strength, we will be able to withstand temptations and receive the crown of life. An inheritance is kept for those "*who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time*" (1 Peter 1:5). When we persevere in faith, God equips us for more opportunities to serve Him, and our strength can be an encouragement to others.

The choices we make today between right and wrong will help determine the choices we make in the future. The choices of sin or God's righteousness build on themselves. If we give in to temptation today, we will find it easier to give in to temptation again and again. "*Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control*" (Proverbs 25:28). If we sin in one area of life, it is easier to sin in other areas. If we steal from our employers, we may find it just as easy to cheat on our taxes or to take something from our neighbors. If we sin today, sinning becomes easier tomorrow.

Conversely, when we resist sin, our lives are testimonies of God's wisdom and strength. The Holy Spirit empowers us to be obedient. "*So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature*" (Galatians 5:16). When, through the power of Christ, we repeatedly resist temptations, we develop habits that make it easier to resist future temptations. The book of Proverbs compares sin and the lack of self-control to crumbling walls. A contrasting scenario is provided for us in Proverbs 18:10: "*The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe.*"

We receive strength, safety, and comfort through the words of the hymn "A Mighty Fortress is our God." The third verse is as follows:

Though devils all the world should fill, /all eager to devour us,  
We tremble not, we fear no ill, /They shall not overpower us.  
This world's prince may still /Scowl fierce as he will, /He can harm us  
none,  
He's judged; the deed is done; /One little word can fell him.<sup>4</sup>



To resist all temptation is impossible, but God gives us His victory and forgiveness through the cross. Sin cannot be excused, but it is forgivable. God forgives us when we come to Him with repentant hearts. *“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness”* (1 John 1:9). The God we serve is able to save us all from trials. *“But God will redeem my life from the grave; He will surely take me to Himself”* (Psalm 49:15). Christ's death and resurrection are the measure of our full and complete salvation. In His death, the Innocent died

for the guilty. Blood was shed. The price was paid. In Jesus' resurrection, the payment for our sins was stamped, “PAID IN FULL,” and we have life eternal.

## **ATTITUDES AND ACTIONS**

### LIFE-ENRICHING

Is tempted and able to say “No”  
Perseveres under trial  
Is faithful  
Takes path of honesty and integrity  
Makes correct choices  
Associates with those of high character  
Receives strength from Christ  
Is prepared, on guard, and discerning  
Stands up to the crowd  
Sees the evil in the world  
Steers clear of danger  
Does what is honorable and right

### LIFE-DESTROYING

Is tempted and willing to say “Yes.”  
Withers under trial  
Lacks commitment  
Takes crooked paths  
Makes poor choices  
Makes poor choices of associates  
Depends on himself  
Has no preparation or concern  
Follows the crowd  
Is oblivious to evil  
Plays with fire  
Omits what should be done

## WRAPPING UP

Since the fall of Adam, man has been tempted and tested and has failed. Temptations exist, and, by our own strength, we can't resist. God gives us discernment and wisdom to see temptations as they are. His strength enables us to resist the pulls of the flesh, the world, and Satan. God gives us the spiritual strength to say "no." God does not keep us immune from problems, but He promises, "*I will be with [you] in trouble . . .*" (Psalm 91:15b).

The difference between falling to temptations and following God's ways is analogous to traveling an unsafe road versus a straight road. When we hold fast to God's ways, we are on His straight road of life that offers blessings and protection. The unsafe road is full of dangerous curves and potholes that lead to curses and death.

God shows all of us the way, but we are allowed to pick the road. If we seek life, peace, and happiness, we need to pick God's road. If we follow God's way, love Him, and put our trust in Him, we will avoid the unsafe road and the miseries of this life.

*See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God . . .*  
(Deuteronomy 30:15, 19-20).

Christ is calling us to renounce our self-interests and follow Him. He is willing and ready to set us free from a life of selfishness and bondage to our own pride. When in faith we surrender ourselves, we take God's high road and live "life at its best." Our lives are enriched as we follow God's way. Life is maximized when we understand that our purpose is not to serve ourselves but to please Him and assist others. When God is in control, His generosity, compassion, and Spirit will be seen through us.

Fittingly this chapter can conclude with the blessing called Saint Patrick's Breastplate, written sometime between the years 289 and 461:

May the strength of God pilot us.  
May the power of God preserve us.  
May the wisdom of God instruct us.  
May the hand of God protect us.  
May the way of God direct us.  
May the shield of God defend us.  
May the host of God guard us against the snares of the evil one and the temptations of the world.  
May Christ be with us. Christ before us. Christ in us. Christ over us.

May the salvation, O Lord, be always ours this day and for evermore.  
Amen.<sup>5</sup>

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

1. Where/how are you most easily tempted?
2. Read Galatians 6:1-2 and James 5:16. What do these passages say about bringing others into your struggle with temptation?
3. What do Ecclesiastes 1:9 and 1 Corinthians 10:13 say about the attitude that you are the only ones struggling with temptations?
4. Why does God allow temptations to occur? What can you learn from being tempted?
5. Can you reduce the frequency of temptations? How?
6. What takes place in the lives of sinners that helps you overcome temptations (Romans 12:2; 2 Corinthians 12:9-10)?
7. Read Ecclesiastes 2:1-11. What did the pursuits of Solomon give him?
8. Read Isaiah 55:1-3. Whom and to what is God inviting?
9. What were some of the Apostle Paul's thoughts as he faced temptation?
10. What can be done when one falls (Isaiah 1:18, 1 John 1:9)?
11. How does God build resistance in a believer?
12. What did Satan say to Jesus in the desert (Matthew 4)? What was Jesus' response? Where is your desert?
13. What is Satan's primary goal?
14. What are the seven deadly sins?
15. Explain Colossians 3:5-10 in your own words.

### Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Eisenman, "Temptation: Fighting to Win," *Discipleship Journal*, Navigator/NavPress Publication, Colorado Springs, Colorado, Issue 72 (November/December), 1992, 37.

<sup>2</sup> A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, (Wheaton, Illinois, Tyndale House Publishers, 1948) 44-47.

<sup>3</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life* (Chicago, Illinois, Moody Bible Institute, 1994) 142-146.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther, *Lutheran Worship*, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," (St. Louis, Missouri, Concordia Publishing House, 1982) 298-299).

<sup>5</sup> David A MacLennan, *Making the Most of Your Best*, (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, The Westminster Press) 113.