

HOW TO SUCCESSFULLY COMBAT TEMPTATION

13 ³⁶Simon Peter said to him, Lord, where are you going? Jesus answered, Where I am going, you cannot follow now; but you will follow later. ³⁷Peter asked, Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you. ³⁸Jesus replied, Will you lay down your life for me? I tell you the truth, Before the rooster crows, you will have denied me three times. (Jn. 13:36-38)

18 ¹⁵Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple. [Because] that disciple was known by the high priest, he was able to go with Jesus into the high priest's courtyard; ¹⁶but Peter stood outside by the door. So that other disciple, who was known by the high priest, came out and spoke to the maid who kept watch at the door and brought Peter into [the courtyard]. ¹⁷The maid who kept watch at the door said to Peter, Are you also one of this man's disciples? He replied, I am not. ¹⁸It was cold; and the servants and officers were standing around a fire they had made to keep warm. Peter also was standing with them, warming himself ... ²⁵As Simon Peter stood [by the fire] warming himself, they asked him, Are you also one of his disciples? He denied it, and said, I am not. ²⁶One of the high priest's servants, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, said, Did I not see you in the grove with him? ²⁷Peter denied it again. And at that moment a rooster began to crow. (Jn. 18:15-18, 25-27)

Introduction

Ann attended a Tuesday night Bible study. One evening a visitor came to the study. He was strikingly handsome, unmarried, and gave evidence of a real commitment to Christ. During the refreshment time following the study, Ann made his acquaintance and felt herself attracted to him. In subsequent weeks a friendship developed. They began to see each other not only at the Bible study, but also on other occasions—they would meet together for coffee or even for lunch. A promising romance was developing. But there was just one problem. Ann was married.

She knew this developing relationship was wrong. She felt guilty about it. But she found herself irresistibly drawn into this exciting romance. She found herself helpless, until she prayed. She confessed to the Lord the wrongness of this relationship and she turned it over to the Holy Spirit, surrendering herself unto Him.

From that point on the Lord began to graciously draw Ann out of this dangerous "friendship." Her whole perspective and attitude began to change. Her romantic affections and aspirations for this handsome stranger eventually withered and died, being replaced by a wholesome recognition of him as a Christian brother and by a sober realization of what their relationship should be before God and man. The Holy Spirit overcame her natural desires and delivered her from a potentially devastating sin.

How do you as a Christian combat temptation? Do you do what Ann did? Or do you imitate Peter?

In Mark 14:27 Jesus announces that before the night is over all of His disciples will forsake Him. But Peter adamantly denies that such will be the case with him. He concedes that all the others may forsake their Lord, but such will not be true of him!

The attitude we see exemplified in Peter is that of self-confidence. Peter was sincere; he meant every word that he spoke. But he made two very common and vital mistakes. First, he overestimated his own ability to stand for Christ in the hour of trial. Second, he underestimated the awful powers aligned against him in the hour of trial.

Like Peter, we tend to rely upon ourselves when confronted with temptation, and this inevitably results in failure. Because of the assorted pressures brought to bear against us in the hour of trial or temptation, we must trust in Christ and rely upon Him if we are to successfully combat temptation.

I. Trust in Christ to Successfully Combat Temptation, because of the Natural Pressures Brought to Bear against You

When the mob came out to seize Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, it at first appeared as if Peter would make good on his promise of allegiance even unto death. Simon Peter is the disciple who drew his sword and struck off the ear of the high priest's servant (Jn. 18:10.) Peter stood ready to defend his Lord and rout His enemies.

But upon closer inspection of the passage, we find that the real hour of trial had not yet begun. It was the power of Jesus that paralyzed the enemy and left them as dead men:

*Knowing all that was about to happen to him, **Jesus went forward**, and said to them, **Whom do you seek?** ⁵They answered, **Jesus of Nazareth.** Jesus said to them, **I am he.** Now Judas, the one who betrayed him, was also standing with them. ⁶When he said to them, **I am he, they went backward**, and fell to the ground. (Jn. 18:4-6)*

It was the courageous stand of the disciples that stimulated Peter's courage: *"And when those who were around him saw what was about to happen, they said, 'Lord, shall we strike with our swords?'"* (Lk. 22:49.) But now Jesus commands Peter to put away his sword, Jesus restores the wounded man's ear, and then allows His enemies to seize Him and lead Him away as their captive. Now the hour of trial "officially" begins.

Jesus has chosen not to immediately dispatch of His enemies; on the contrary, listen to His words addressed to His enemies and recorded in Luke 22:53, *"When I was with you daily in the temple courts, you did not lay your hands on me; but **this is your hour, and that of the power of darkness.**"* Now all the disciples forsake Christ and flee for their lives. Now what will Peter do?

The words of 2 Chronicles 32:31 may well be applied to Peter in this particular setting: *“God left him to test him.”* These words were originally describing the case of the Old Testament king, Hezekiah.

Now how well will Peter maintain his allegiance and fulfill his promise? Peter followed at a distance as Jesus was being led away to stand trial before the Sanhedrin (Mk. 14:54.) He sat in the midst of the temple guard to see the outcome of the mock trial to which the Lord Jesus was subjected (Matt. 26:58.) But when several little maids identify Peter as a disciple of Jesus, what does Peter do? Matthew 26:69-71 records his reaction and response:

Now Peter was sitting in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him. “You also were with Jesus of Galilee,” she said. ⁷⁰But he denied it before them all. “I do not know what you are talking about,” he said. ⁷¹Then he went out to the gateway, where another girl saw him and said to the people there, “This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth.” (Matt. 26:69-71)

Twice Peter has been identified as one of Jesus’ disciples, and twice he denies any affiliation with Jesus, the second time doing so with an oath: *“Then he went out to the gateway, where another girl saw him and said to the people there, ‘This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth.’ ⁷²He denied it again, with an oath, ‘I do not know the man’”* (Matt. 26:71-72.)

Apparently unable to escape, Peter soon finds himself surrounded by his accusers. Now, invoking a curse upon himself, he swears that he does not know *“the man”*—fearful to even refer to Jesus by name:

After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, “Surely you are one of them, for your accent gives you away.” ⁷⁴Then he began to call down curses on himself and he swore to them, “I do not know the man.” (Matt. 26:73-74)

What happened? What caused Peter’s confident promise of allegiance to be changed into a cowardly denial of his Lord? First, there was a change of circumstances: It is one thing to confidently affirm allegiance to Christ in the quiet of the upper room (or in church); it is quite another matter to do so in the very courtyard of the high priest (or on the job or at school.) Second, there was a change of company: Peter is no longer surrounded by the band of disciples standing behind Jesus in solidarity; now he finds himself in the company of Jesus’ enemies and he is in their territory. Third, there is a change of spiritual climate: Peter is no longer witnessing the power of Jesus (see John 18:4-6 referred to above); now he is experiencing the power of darkness (see Luke 22:53 referred to above.)

We must trust in Christ if we are to successfully combat temptation, because of the natural pressures brought to bear against us.

II. Trust in Christ to Successfully Combat Temptation, because of the Demonic Pressures Brought to Bear against You

Peter is being given over to a period of testing and trial at the hands of the devil; just as Jesus had formerly warned him:

Simon, Simon, Satan asked to have you so that he might sift you like wheat. ³²But I have prayed for you, Simon, so that your faith may not fail. And when you have come back, strengthen your brothers. ³³But he replied, Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death. ³⁴Jesus answered, I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me. (Lk. 22:31-34)

Jesus here speaks of a diabolical intercession: *“Satan asked to have you so that he might sift you like wheat.”* Furthermore, it is an intercession that is granted by God: the Lord does allow Satan to test Peter and sift him like wheat. The same thing happened with Job. When Satan requested that Job’s devotion to God be tested, the LORD replied to him, *“Very well, then, everything he has is in your hands”* (Job 1:12.) When Satan came back a second time, the LORD again granted permission for him to subject Job to even more severe testing: *“Jehovah said to Satan, ‘Very well, then, he is in your hands’”* (Job 2:6.)

It may appear strange to us that God would grant the devil’s request and actually allow His children to be subjected to the awful testing imposed by the devil. But we must bear in mind that this was the very testing to which God permitted His own Son to be subjected: *“Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil”* (Matt. 4:1.) Even as God permitted His own Son—His beloved Son with whom He was well-pleased (Matt. 3:17)—to be subjected to the vicious assaults of the devil, so does He permit those who belong to His Son to be similarly tested. This is a very real part of what it means when the Apostle Paul speaks of partaking in *“the fellowship of his (Christ’s) sufferings”* (Phil. 3:10.) We may also take note of Hebrews 2:18, *“Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”*

The Christian’s life in this world is not an easy, carefree existence; it is not a guaranteed immunity from the trials and temptations imposed by the devil. Those who hold to such an erroneous view either come to quickly abandon it—or they quickly abandon their allegiance to Christ, as our Lord indicates in His parable of the Four Seeds:

*Others are like seed sown on rocky ground: when they have heard the word, they **immediately** receive it with joy; ¹⁷but they have no root in themselves. They endure for a while; but then, when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, they **immediately** fall away. (Mk. 4:16-17)*

The true Christian's life involves identification with Christ and exposure in some measure to all that He experienced and suffered: *The [Holy] Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit, that we are children of God; ¹⁷and if we are children, then we also are heirs; heirs of God, and co-heirs with Christ—if we suffer with him, so that we may also be glorified with him.* (Rom. 8:16-17.)

The Apostle Peter explains to Christians experiencing a great measure of such trials the reason for them:

Beloved, do not be surprised by the fiery trials among you (that have come for the purpose of testing you), as though a strange thing has happened to you. ¹³On the contrary, since you are participating in the sufferings of Christ, rejoice; so that at the revelation of his glory you may indeed rejoice with exultation. (1 Pet. 4:12-13)

Returning to the passage of Luke 22:31-34, note, also, the diabolical purpose of this satanic intercession: *"Satan asked to have you, so that he might sift you like wheat."* The desire of the devil is to try his hardest to make you as a Christian deny your Lord; his determination is to demonstrate that we are not wheat, but chaff; to convince God that we do not really love Him, but are only interested in the benefits we can receive from Him. This was the very accusation the devil brought against Job, and he tried his best to justify that accusation. The devil's accusation in Job 1:9-11 is that Job serves the LORD only because the LORD has filled his house with good things:

Does Job fear God for no good reason? Satan replied. ¹⁰Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. ¹¹But stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face. (Job 1:9-11)

Then the devil's accusation in Job 2:4-5 is that Job serves God because He gives Job good health and makes life comfortable for him: *"Skin for skin! Satan replied. A man will give all he has for his own life. ⁵But stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones, and he will surely curse you to your face"* (Job 2:4-5)

This is basically the same type of trial/temptation to which the devil subjected the Lord Jesus: it was an attempt to show that Jesus' devotion to His Father was not genuine—but thanks be to God that our Lord Jesus demonstrated that His devotion to God His Father is genuine! Following our Lord's submission to baptism, His Father announced to the world, *"This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased"* (Matt. 3:17.) Immediately thereafter, the devil was given the opportunity to challenge Christ's allegiance to His Father and His willingness to submit to His Father's will—the divine will that requires self-denial and trust in God: *"Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil"* (Matt. 3:17.) This is the kind of trial to which we as Christians are

subjected every time we are tempted: the devil will seek to challenge our devotion to Christ, cause us to deny or compromise that devotion, and demonstrate to God that we are chaff and not wheat.

Every Christian, no matter how genuine our profession of faith, no matter how zealous our commitment to Christ, will do exactly what Peter did in the hour of trial, if we make the same mistakes that Peter made. First, the mistake of overestimating his own ability to maintain his devotion to Christ; and second, the mistake of underestimating the forces being brought to bear against him.

Conclusion

Peter trusted in his own devotion to Christ, instead of taking to heart the word spoken to him by Christ, *"Simon! Simon! Listen! Satan asked to have you!"* Let us never lose sight of the truth presented to us in Ephesians 6:12, namely, the fact that we are engaged in spiritual warfare; *"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."*

Peter trusted in his own ability to stand up for Christ instead of trusting in Christ's intercession: *"Satan asked to have you ... but I made supplication for you"* (Lk. 22:31-32.) Let us trust in our Savior's intercession for us and not in our own ability to remain faithful. In His high priestly prayer, one of the requests our Lord Jesus makes of His heavenly Father is for the spiritual protection of those whom the Father has given Him: *"My prayer is not that you would take them out of the world, but that you would keep them from the evil one"* (Jn. 17:15.) Our Lord's request is that God His Father would keep us from the clutches of the devil and not allow us to be enslaved by him unto the eternal lose of our soul.

Peter trusted in his own human strength instead of relying upon the power of the Lord. Let us ever trust in our Savior and in the Holy Spirit for preservation, deliverance and victory in the hour of trial, ever bearing in mind the one and only way of victory in spiritual warfare: *"This is the word of Jehovah ... Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, declares Jehovah of hosts"* (Zech. 4:6.)

Left to himself, Peter proved himself, indeed, to be "chaff" and not "wheat;" but the Lord Jesus Christ proved Himself to be faithful to Peter. Jesus foretold both Peter's denial **and** his restoration: *"I have prayed for you, Simon, so that your faith may not fail. And when you have come back, strengthen your brothers"* (Lk. 22:32.) Our Lord's words to Peter, *"when you have come back,"* indicate both his denial of his Lord as well as his repentance and restoration. Note how the Lord, after His resurrection, especially sought Peter out and restored him. Luke records the testimony of the other disciples: *"The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon"* (Lk. 24:34.)

The next time we find Peter facing trial and the temptation to deny his Lord and Savior, he is victorious—by the power of the Holy Spirit:

*The next day the rulers, elders and teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. ⁶Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and the other men of the high priest's family. ⁷They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them, By what power or what name did you do this? ⁸Then **Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit**, said to them, Rulers and elders of the people! ⁹If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, ¹⁰then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. (Acts 4:5-10)*

When we have failed our Lord and been unfaithful to Him, let us remember that, because of His great faithfulness, there is restoration when we return to Him in repentance. And let us remember that there is victory when we trust in Christ our Lord: listening to His word, relying upon His intercession, and surrendering ourselves unto His Holy Spirit.