

The Practical Discipline of Life

by A.B. Simpson

The sermon emphasizes the importance of viewing temptation as a means of spiritual growth and development, and of trusting in God's providence to guide us through life's challenges.

Scripture: James 1:2

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Temptation"

Description

A.B. Simpson emphasizes the importance of viewing temptations as opportunities for growth and spiritual discipline, urging believers to count it all joy when faced with trials. He explains that while temptation is inherently evil, it serves as a tool for God to strengthen our character and faith. Simpson highlights that both prosperity and adversity are part of God's providential discipline, teaching us to remain humble and dependent on Him regardless of our circumstances. He encourages Christians to endure temptation, as it leads to the crown of life promised by God to those who love Him. Ultimately, the sermon calls for a recognition of God's hand in both trials and blessings, transforming our struggles into avenues for grace and victory.

Transcript

"My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into diverse temptations." "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 1:2, 12).

Rotherham slightly changes the translation of these verses, as does also the Revised Version.

"My brethren, count it all joy when we fall in with diverse temptations." "Blessed is the man that endureth temptation (or testings), for when he is approved, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love Him."

The epistles of Paul and John represent the interior, the experimental, and spiritual side of Christian life, while that of James represents the practical. God makes His mosaics of many different pieces and the blending of all together makes the perfect whole. There is room for James as well as for Paul and John. Paul is the apostle of faith, John of love, Peter of comfort, but James is the apostle of good works, the apostle of practical living. He stands in the New Testament very much as the book of Proverbs stands in the Old. It has been said that the reason the Scotch are such a practical and prosperous race is because every Scotsman used to be brought up with the book of Proverbs in his vest pocket. It would be well to

have some cheap editions of Proverbs and more pockets to hold them.

This conservative old minister in the Church of Jerusalem, James, deals with the practical discipline of life from two sides.

I. THE DISCIPLINE THAT COMES TO US FROM TEMPTATION.

1. He first tells us that temptation is not an unmingled evil. By temptation he means undoubtedly evil; not trouble, but the solicitation of evil, the battle for right with the power of the tempter and our evil heart. "My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall in with diverse temptations. Blessed is the man that endureth temptation." While it is evil, it has a good side, and it becomes an agency in the education of our spiritual character and the strengthening of all the better elements of our nature.

2. While temptation is not directly from God, yet it is overruled by God, and made one of His instrumentalities of blessing to us. God does not "tempt any man, neither is tempted with evil," yet God permits us to be tempted. God put our first parents into temptation and He made it possible for them either to choose or refuse; gave them a nature subject to temptation, and while it might overcome them, it might also be overcome. God does not tempt any man, yet He does allow this to be one of the classes in the school of faith and holiness. He even led Jesus Christ, His own Son, into the wilderness by the Spirit to be tempted of the devil. Think it not a strange thing then, dear friends, if your life is called to pass through the ordeal of the conflict, evil from within and from without, not merely things that grieve, afflict and distress you, but things that tend to make you do wrong and draw you from the path of righteousness, truth and godliness. They will come. God wants you to be forewarned and forearmed, and to know it is better that they should come to you, if you but take the panoply of God and come through in victory.

3. The source of temptation; whence it comes. "Every man is tempted when he is drawn away of his own lust." Temptation comes from your own heart. There are innumerable tempters, men, women and fallen spirits of wickedness. But none have any power unless we have ourselves a traitor in the citadel of the heart. The enemy cannot get in unless you let him in. You hold the key of the fortress. Therefore it is in your own heart that the crucial battle is fought, the secret foe is hidden, your own lust, your own desire or "coveting," which is the literal translation, the thing in you that wants to do the wrong; your wish for it, even if it is not yet your will. This is the starting place of temptation. It is the blossom of sin. And this is where God wants to bring His sanctifying grace and take away the very desire. Just as the sea fowl plunging in the miry water comes up undefiled because its wing is oiled and burnished, and the filth around cannot adhere to it, so the Lord Jesus passed through the powers of darkness and the allurements of the world and all the evil that was around Him and was proof against it. He could say "the prince of this world cometh and hath nothing in me." It is in the heart that temptation has its starting point. Ask God to give you a true and holy desire to please Him, and an instinctive repugnance and recoil from evil, and so long as you have this, you shall not fall into temptation.

4. Then we have the blessedness of resisting and enduring temptation. "Count it all joy when ye fall into diverse temptations, knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing." (Jas. 1:2-4.) "Blessed is the man that endureth temptation." The battle does you good. The conflict educates you, strengthens you, establishes you, and is necessary for you that you may be grounded and settled and finally approved and rewarded. One of the best results of temptation is that it shows you what is in your own heart. It reveals yourself. Until temptation comes, you feel strong and self-confident, but when the keen edge of the adversary's weapon

has pierced your soul, you have more sympathy with others and less confidence in your own self-sufficiency, and you are humiliated and broken at His feet, a poor, helpless thing, and this is the best thing that can happen to you. God wants to disarm you and lay you low, and then He can lift and save you and give you His strength. It makes you humble and doubtful of yourself. You find you must not take the aggressive, but fly to your refuge in Christ. He will "make a way of escape that you may be able to bear it." Like the little conies that hide in the rock and do not face their enemies, but fly for shelter, you will find your only safeguard is Jesus Christ; He is the shield to cover you, and you will be safe not by fighting, but by hiding behind the cross and in the bosom of your Savior. If you have had much spiritual conflict, it has humbled you, shown you your helplessness, and taught you sympathy for others.

Temptation exercises our faith and teaches us to pray. It is like military drill and a taste of battle to the young soldier. It puts us under fire and compels us to exercise our weapons and prove their potency. It shows us the resources of Christ and the preciousness of the promises of God. It teaches us the reality of the Holy Spirit and compels us to walk closely with Him and hide continually behind His strength and all-sufficiency. Every victory gives us new confidence in our victorious Leader, and new courage for the next onset of the foe, so that we become not only victors, but more than conquerors, taking the strength of our conquered foes and gathering precious spoil from each new battle field. So that temptation strengthens what we have received and establishes us in all our spiritual qualities and graces. You will find the forest trees which stand apart, exposed to the double violence of the storm, are always the sturdiest and strike their roots the deepest in the soil. And so it is true in the spiritual world, as the apostle Peter expressed it; "The God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you." (I. Pet. 5:10.)

At the same time temptation teaches us to watch as well as pray, to avoid the things that bring temptation, and to keep off the enemy's ground. It is only the inexperienced Christian that plays lightly with evil. Luther used to say "He must needs have a long spoon who sups with the devil." "Pray," says Bishop Hamlin, "from God's side of the fence." Don't jump over into the devil's garden, and then ask God to help you, but keep on God's side, and watch and pray that ye enter not into temptation. Often our overconfidence betrays us. Like the man who had escaped the bailiff who tried to serve him with a warrant for arrest, and had just got across the State line, where the law protected him, when his pursuer, exchanging guile for force, laughed and said, "You have the best of me. And now let us shake hands and part friends." The foolish fellow reached out his hand, and in a moment the bailiff had pulled him over to his side of the line and clapped the handcuffs on him. So if Satan cannot beat us fairly, he will allure us so near the borders of danger that we shall be caught by his wiles. Some people sail so near the lake of fire that they get their sails scorched and find it impossible to get away. The maturest Christian is always the humblest and most watchful. Let us be not high-minded, but fear, and learn to combine the two blessed safeguards of hope and fear, which God has so wisely blended in these two passages: I. Cor. 10:12: "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall," and then adds in the thirteenth verse, "God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able." And yet once more, in the fourteenth verse, he returns to the language of warning and caution, "Wherefore, my dearly beloved, flee from idolatry."

Temptation also teaches us patience. "But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing." This implies that patience is the finishing grace of the Christian life. Therefore, God usually puts His children through the school of suffering last. It is the graduation class in the discipline of Christ. Let us not, therefore, be surprised if God puts us through the hottest of all furnaces, namely, that which is fired with the devil's brimstone, before He makes us vessels for His glory.

5. Temptation brings a glorious recompense of reward, for "when he is approved, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love Him." There is a reward for the soul-winner. There is a reward for the Christian pastor and worker. But there is also a special reward for the man or the woman that has had no great service, and perhaps has won no single soul, but has stood in the hard place, has kept sweet in the midst of wrong, and in the face of temptation, pure amid the allurements of the world, and simply withstood in the evil day, and having done all, stood at last approved. On the field of Waterloo, there was a regiment which stood under fire through all that awful day and was not once suffered to charge upon the foe. It held the key to the position, and as again and again permission to advance was asked, the answer came "Stand firm." When they had nearly all fallen, the message came back for the last time from their commander, "You have saved the day," and the answer was returned, "You will find us all here." Sure enough they lay a heap of slain on that fatal, yet glorious hill. They had simply stood, and history has given them the reward of valor and the imperishable fame of having turned the tide of the greatest battle of the nineteenth century. So God is preparing crowns for quiet lives, for suffering women, for martyred children, for the victims of oppression and wrong, for the silent sufferers and the lonely victors who just endured temptation. Tempted brother, be of good cheer. Some day you will wonder at the brightness of your crown.

II. THE DISCIPLINE OF PROVIDENCE.

In the striking parable of the potter and the wheel, Jeremiah has taught us that while God is disciplining the heart by the touch of His Spirit, He is turning round the clay on the wheel of providence and bringing us into new situations for the exercise of new graces and the teaching of new lessons with every alternation of life's conditions. So that His providence cooperates with His Holy Spirit in the education of our spiritual character, and we are to recognize the things that happen to us as in no sense accidents, but simply divine methods of dealing with us and teaching and blessing us. So James proceeds to bring out the relation of God's providence to our spiritual discipline in the ninth and tenth verses, "Let the brother of low degree rejoice in that he is exalted: but the rich, in that he is made low."

1. We have the discipline of prosperity. This is not a hard or uncongenial experience to the natural heart, but it often is the hardest of all experiences for the soul. "I have learned," says Paul, "in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound." (Phil. 4:11-12.) But how few Christians really know how to abound. How frequently prosperity changes their temper and the habits and fruits of their lives! To receive God's blessing in temporal things, to have wealth suddenly thrust upon us, to be surrounded with congenial friends, to be enriched with all the happiness that love, home, the world's applause and unbounded prosperity can give, and yet to keep a humble heart, to be separated from the world in its spirit and in its pleasures, to keep our hearts in holy indifference from the love and need of earthly things, to stand for God as holy witnesses in the most public station, and to use our prosperity and wealth as a sacred trust for Him; counting nothing our own, and still depending upon Him as simply as in the days of penury -- this, indeed, is an experience rarely found, and only possible through the infinite grace of God. And yet God calls His children in greater or less measure to pass through the test of blessing.

It may not be a great fortune, but a joy in your humble life worth more to you than millions. Now He does not ask us to refuse it, to be harsh, narrow and monkish, and to think to make ourselves better by asperities and penances. No, "Let the brother of low degree rejoice in that he is exalted." Open your heart to the love and joy He is bringing. Bask in the sunshine of His smile. But do it with a humble and unselfish heart. Let your blessing only make you more sensitive to the sufferings of others, more grateful to Him,

and more ready to make sacrifices and render services to your Master and your fellow men. Then can "God rejoice over you to do you good with all his heart and with all his soul."

2. Then comes the other side of the revolving wheel, the discipline of adversity. The brother of high degree is made low. Wealth takes wings and flies away. Friends prove false, and even the downy nest of love and home breeds viper's eggs and bitter heartbreaks. But we must still rejoice. God is testing us in the crucible. We have a witness for Him that only the dark shadows can bring out. Let us be true to our testimony. Let us glorify Him in the fires. Let us look over the head of all our trouble to Him, and still believe that all things work together for good to them that love God." Then nothing can be against us.

"And sorrow touched by God grows bright

With more than rapture's ray,

As darkness shows us worlds of light

We never saw by day."

Adversity often has to come to save us from the loss of eternal life. Then only when all other things fail us, can we fully find the all-sufficiency of God, and learn that within ourselves we may possess the resources of perfect happiness by having Him. It was thus that the Hebrew Christians could take joyfully the spoiling of their goods, knowing in themselves that they had a better and more enduring substance. (Heb. 10:34.) It is a rare secret in the alchemy of grace to be able thus to transmute a seeming flaw into an eternal touch of grace and glory.

A lapidary once purchased a beautiful stone, but found afterwards that there was a hidden flaw of iron rust beneath the surface. At first he was disposed to throw it away as worthless. Then there came to him the conception of a rich design, in which a female figure was cut in the stone, and the strong tint of the iron vein was carved into a rich robe, whose drapery and color added a beautiful adorning to the exquisite figure. Thus the flaw became the fairest charm in all the fine creation of his genius. And so God would have us take the things that seem to be against us and so transmute them by the power of His grace that "instead of the thorn shall come up the fir tree, and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle tree."

In conclusion let us learn to find in God the secret of blessing and victory under all conditions and circumstances, and even to turn the hate of Satan into an occasion of victory and blessing. Thus shall the curse be made a blessing, sorrow turned into joy, and even sin so conquered that grace shall much more abound.

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