

Have We Trials and Temptations?

In the name of him who commands us to repent and believe in his Gospel, dear friends in Christ: If you read the title to this message, you probably recognized that it comes from a much loved hymn (well, not so much loved by me personally; but by most others). Anyway, it's in the first half of the second verse of *What a Friend We Have in Jesus* that the hymn writer enjoins us to ask, "Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?" And then without really answering the questions, we get the hymn writer's reply: "We should never be discouraged—Take it to the Lord in prayer." For any believer in Jesus, that is good, sound advice.

But I want to go back to the initial question again – the question that wasn't answered because it was in fact rhetorical: Have we trials and temptations? Yes. Of course we do. Everyone does. Constantly. So, now let's ask the bigger question: *Why?* Why does the Lord expose us to trials? Why does he allow us to be subject to temptations? In the Lord's infinite wisdom, what good purpose can they possibly serve – if any? Drawing answers from this morning's Scripture readings, this is what I'd like to grapple with today.

Before we get into it, though, it will be helpful to make a distinction between *trial* and *temptation* – which fortunately for us is easier to do in modern English than it was for the epistle writer James. Speaking of God, James writes "He tempts no one." But in today's Old Testament lesson we read from Moses that "God tested Abraham". The trouble is that in the Greek in which James wrote and the Greek translation of what Moses wrote, *tempt* and *test* are the exact same verb. Anyone reading James in the original would have said, "What do you mean God tempts no one? It says right here in Genesis that's precisely what he did to Abraham." James, who undoubtedly was familiar with the Genesis story, is clearly using the word both translated tempt and test in a nuanced sense.

So, let's start with testing; that is, subjecting someone to a trial. God clearly does do that. We see it in today's Gospel. Immediately after his baptism, the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness east of the Jordan. This is to be a replay of the tests that the Lord put the people of Israel through. Remember that when he brought them out of slavery in Egypt, displaying his awesome power with the 10 plagues and the crossing through the Red Sea and all, he led them into the desert. And he told them, "I am the Lord. With your own eyes you've seen what I've done. I rescued you from Egypt with my mighty arm. And now, in accordance with my promises to you forefathers, I'm going to bring you safely to the land of Canaan and give it to you. You have nothing to worry about. Just trust me to do it."

And then almost immediately, he began to subject them to a number of trials in order to give them opportunity to exercise their faith. First it was a water shortage. Then the food they had brought along for the journey ran out. Then later a few more water crises. Then an attack by desert raiders. One test after another. And single every one of them they flunked. As soon as they encountered a bit of trouble is was "God hates us. He brought us out here into the desert to die. Oh, how I wish we had stayed in Egypt where life was so good." And every time, even though they flunked the test, the Lord came through and gave them what they needed in order to teach them that they could always trust him. "I've got you covered. If I brought you out here, then I have a plan. I told you I would take care of you, and I will. Need something? Ask me for it. Trust me." They never did quite get it. And yet God was faithful.

But now Jesus is called upon to be faithful Israel, to stand in for all of us, to pass the tests they failed. That's why the Spirit drives him into the desert where there is no food and very little water. He's made to experience hardship, hunger, thirst, discomfort. He doesn't know what his Father's plan is. He's made to trust that if the Spirit brought him out here, there must be a plan. God is gracious. God is good. He's going to take care of me. I know he will.

This is the purpose of trials. God puts us through them to increase our faith in him. Faith is like a muscle that needs to be exercised to increase in strength. If faith is never tested, it grows weak and flabby. We see this also in the account of Abraham. Long story short, Abraham had a long track record of not trusting the Lord to fulfill the promises that he'd made to him. Time and again, Abraham thinks he's got to take things into his own hands to make the promises of God come true. No. It never works out. It's only when Abraham has given up all hope in himself that the Lord comes through and gives him the child of promise – the son, Isaac, through whom all of God's promises will be fulfilled. Abraham knows this. So he's invested all his hopes and dreams into his son, the son he dearly loves. And then the Lord gives him the ultimate test of faith: take the boy and offer him as a sacrifice.

What to do? How's the Lord going to fulfill his promises to me if the boy through whom he's told me those promises are to be fulfilled is dead? I don't know. I only know that he's told me to do this frightful thing. And if he's told me to do it, he must have a plan. You see what the Lord is doing? He's stretching Abraham's faith to its maximum limit. He's working in him a higher level of trust – a trust that even if the boy dies, God will have to raise him up again to fulfill his Word. The Lord is calling Abraham to trust in the resurrection of the child of promise – which is the Gospel of our salvation. By grace through faith, Abraham passes the test.

And so it is with the trials the Lord sends to us in our lives. We need them in order to make it through the wilderness of this age – this age in which we live by faith and not by sight. If we had paradise on earth, if everything were perfect all the time, we wouldn't need any faith. That would be catastrophic, because in the mercy of God's wisdom he's chosen to save us through faith. So we need the hardships, the sorrows, the losses, the setbacks, the aches and pains of life in order to keep us in the faith, to keep us relying on the Lord. And the Lord in his perfect wisdom gives to each one of us the trials he knows to be best.

So, that's trial and testing that the Lord sends. Let's talk about temptation, by which I mean temptations to sin. These do not come from the Lord. Never. Why not? Because sin is inherently self-destructive. And the Lord does not want us to destroy ourselves. He wants us to live – and specifically to live with him in harmony, peace, and joy. The Lord will never tempt anyone to sin.

So, where do temptations come from? Well, we know the original temptation to sin, to go against the will of God, came from Satan when he tempted our first parents. And that makes sense, because the Scriptures inform us that Satan wants us to be destroyed. He is called a murderer from the beginning. And the way he murders is through lies and deceit. "There's a better way. Don't trust the Lord; trust what I'm telling you. You'll be better off if you do." Wrong. It never works out that way in the end. Oh, don't mistake me. There may be some short term benefit. I'm sure the forbidden fruit tasted great. It was delicious. But how long did the pleasure last? And it sure wasn't worth the consequences, was it?

We see Jesus being tempted by Satan too. In the midst of his trials of faith, he's also set upon by the devil. Mark doesn't give us the details. For those we have to turn to the Gospels of

Sts. Matthew and Luke. And there we find that the temptation is threefold. First, to use your divine power to turn stones to bread. In other words, to trust in yourself rather than in your Father who put you in this state of discomfort. Second, to get what you're after, authority over the whole world – and get it the easy way, skipping all the suffering and cross. All you have to do is defy God and worship me. And finally to despise God's grace by abusing it. You say you trust him to save you? Prove it. Jump off the tower.

These are the same temptations to which we are constantly subject: to rely on self rather than the Lord, to get what we want by disobeying the Lord, and to abuse God's grace and mercy through planned repentance, by which I mean jumping into sin thinking it will be okay because God is going to forgive me in the end. This last temptation is a dangerous game of spiritual Russian Roulette. If you play it too many times, the odds say that eventually you'll lose.

These are the temptations to which we are subject, but the source of them may surprise you. They don't come from the devil; not directly, anyway. Christ our Lord and our first parents had to be tempted directly by Satan because they didn't have a sin nature. On their own, they could not have come up with a sinful thought. It had to come from the outside. But we do have a sin nature. And that, according to St. James, is from where our temptations come. "Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire." It's an inside job. And describing it, James uses some especially graphic language. The word translated "lured" is stronger than that. It means to be dragged away like a lion might drag off its prey. And the word translated "enticed" means to be baited like you would bait a hook for fish or when you put a tasty treat in a trap to catch rodents. Both words hint at the extreme peril these temptations place us in.

And then in terms of conception and birth James tell us how it plays out. First comes the evil desire, the sinful lust or passion. That's the seed. If it's allowed to remain, if it's not blocked or shut down immediately, it grows like a child in the womb and eventually it's given birth as sin in action. And if that sin in action is allowed to continue and grow to maturity, it gives birth to death – which is a strange oxymoron, giving birth to death; but it captures the idea perfectly because continuing in sin is the fast track to eternal death.

So, what to do? How do you fight back and stay faithful when your biggest enemy is yourself, your own sinful nature? The answer is that your sinful nature is not your only nature. James reminds us that we believers in Jesus have been born again from above. "Of his own will he brought us forth by his word of truth that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures." That new nature needs to be equipped and strengthened to fight to good fight of faith. How do you do that? The hymn I referred to earlier suggests that prayer will do the job. And that's a good place to start. When that evil thought or desire pops into your head, taking to the Lord in prayer will help suppress it and keep it from growing. You can't stop the thoughts from coming, but you don't have to make them welcome either. As Luther said, I can't stop the birds from flying over my head, but I can prevent them from making nests in my hair. But if that happens, if a sinful thought should grow into action, then it needs to be brought to the Lord in repentance so that it doesn't continue to mature.

Prayer is one tool, and it's a good; but it's largely defensive. We also need to go on the attack. For that we have the Sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. The Same Word of Truth that gave us birth in Christ feeds and strengthens faith and causes it to mature. It also helps us to recognize and reject the lies our sinful natures tell us. Recall that when Satan tempted Jesus, he fought back every time with word from Holy Scripture. And we can too – but

only if we are well enough acquainted with it. If you want to learn swordplay, it takes practice. It takes study and training. But with the Word rightly handled, we can overcome temptation.

And that's what we want to do because, as James says, "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under temptation, for when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him." That's our goal. And Christ our Lord has showed us the way. For us he withstood all trial and temptation, and for us he gave his life and gained the victory. So may he keep us faithful in every trial and temptation that we may journey safely with him through the wilderness of this age, and win the crown of life. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!