

Temptation

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Embedded in most of the legends and stories of miracles which have gathered about the life of Jesus, we can almost always find a germ of truth, or the nucleus of some probable fact which is of importance, and significance, not only as regards the proper understanding of Jesus' life, but of importance and significance for the light which they throw upon the perplexing problems of every age and every nation. I take it that in this legend of the temptation, we find at the heart of it an experience of Jesus' life, which is not alone peculiar to him, but enters into the life of every man. This experience, I take it, is one of especial importance to us at this time, not only to us but to the entire community in which we live. If I can, I wish to strip the husks of the legend away and lay bare before you the gem that is hidden beneath.

Of course the legend does not give us an account of any specific event in the life of Jesus, but rather it collects together and localizes for dramatic effect that long struggle which Jesus had to go through, just as every other man has to go through, in that tremendously critical period of life when he passed from the days of boyhood through young manhood and finally gave himself up to the work of his life.

The incident has no moral or religious value, unless it portrays the experiences of a man. For one who is supposed to have a supernatural power, to be very God himself, to go through such a performance, is simply a mere scene of stage acting, which belongs rather to that type of pious self-conceit characterized by supercilious condescension. For one endowed with supernatural powers to pass through a process like that with full conscious knowledge of the final outcome before he enters into it robs the entire story of its force and vitality. It is no special help or consolation to me if I have to pass over a field of burning

plowshares, to know that he who has passed over the same field before me had asbestos feet. There is no special heroism or manliness involved in one who is immune to give himself to the service of a plague-stricken people. Our sympathy and our admiration rather rests in him who, conscious of the dangers of the disease, realizing fully that he is susceptible to its ravages, deliberately gives himself to the service of the suffering. If this legend relates the events of a being other than a man, as we are men, it is as perfect a piece of cant and supercilious piety as one can find in the whole range of literature. But I will not rob myself of the honor and love which I bear to the man, Jesus of Nazareth, for his noble, heroic life, by transforming him into a supercilious nabob strutting about like a peacock among the people, displaying his gorgeous array of virtues and powers. As the dramatic picture of the manly struggles of a manly man, this story of the temptation touches one in the very depths of his being, but as the narration of events of a supernatural being it is a most repulsive bit of cant and Phariseeism. As such I would have nothing to do with it.

But as a matter of fact it is a poetic expression of a series of struggles which comes home to every one of us with a force and a clearness that touches at the core of every man's life. If I may, I wish to place before you the bare and naked truth contained in this passage, stripped of all the husks of legend and imagery.

But I perceive that this legend addresses itself to those types of temptation by which the people of this nation are being tempted today, and to which they are yielding with as much grace as they may, and trying to cover up their weakness by pleadings of the influence of social pressure and the mastery of conditions over them. They philosophically hide themselves under the sophism that one must adjust himself to conditions, failing to observe the fact that there is a vast distinction between adjusting one's self to conditions, and debasing one's self before conditions. A man must not become so dissatisfied with the world as he finds it, and so captured by the ideal of the world as he would have it, as to lose his grip on life and spend his time in lamenting of a lost world, as men have done and are still doing. On the other hand, he must not

become so satisfied with the world as it is, as to lose sight of the vision of a better world towards which he must work. To adjust one's self to the world is to plant one's self firmly on the plain facts of life, and resolutely and joyously put the hand to the plow, and never turn back until the last furrow has been turned, and a new harvest reaped. What we need today is not a satisfied beast, or a discontented grumbling pessimistic ascetic, but a man who can put their hand to the plow and never turn back, however rocky and stumpy may be the land.

The first act in this little dramatic production describes how Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness and told by the Divine command that these stones be made bread, and the reply, put into the mouth of Jesus, is this, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God."¹

Now what is the meaning of this first act? Certainly one who has had to meet and does not meet this problem every day in life cannot fail to see the essence of the scene. It is a description of a type of life, which we see about us on all sides, that type of life wherein we find men who shut from themselves all the larger and finer and deeper things of life by deliberately narrowing themselves down to the mere physical needs and pleasures. Not alone is it the question which besets behind and before every youth, but it is equally the temptation that sets behind and before every man in every day of his life. The various illustrations of this type of life are too common to need mention. I need hardly to recall to your mind the disgusting and revolting evidences of such a narrowness of life as is seen in the low sensualist of all classes of society, whose only aim and purpose is to satisfy beastly nature by gratifying every chance desire of appetite and passion.

But one grade higher is the person of a more refined nature, but hardly less worthless, whose life is made up of gorging and indulging in the refined stimulants of social excitement, of literary culture, of religious intoxications. But I pass from those disgusting types to a less fortunate group of people, those who by the condition

¹ Matthew 4:4.

under which they are forced to exist, are compelled to make this their one aim in life, to earn by their day's labor enough to keep them physically alive and keep the wolf away from the door of the scantily furnished home. Happily the conditions are changing now, and we welcome the approach of a time when the man who toils away also has opportunities of enlarging the scope of his life, and comes into the richness of other things besides bread that proceed out of the mouth of God.

This first act of the drama presents us with a real human problem, and it was a real problem to Jesus of Nazareth, for consider the times in which he lived, and his own personal surroundings. The little towns of Palestine were particularly open to the influence of that self-indulgent sensualism which was rampant in the oriental world at the time Jesus had to face the problem of the kind of a life he should lead. One has but to remember the Palestine was the natural highway along which traversed the great caravans of pleasure seeking, and tracking people on their way from the East to the West, and the West to the East. The Roman love of sensualism and luxury was carried by the provincial rulers into every part of the Roman world, and the Epistles of Paul only too clearly picture to us the gross self-indulgence found even amid the little communities of early Christians.

But beyond this, Jesus was the eldest son of a large family. The death of his father left the burden of support upon his shoulders, and it may be that Jesus faced that same dubious outlook which so many face today, the absolute necessity of shutting up the interests of his life, to the one given necessity of providing bread for his widowed mother, and his fatherless brothers and sisters. That is the noblest work one can do, but many a soul hungry for other things that he might do for the loved ones, is compelled to rest in the satisfaction that he has done the negative service of keeping them from hunger and nakedness. These were the real vital problems with which Jesus had to struggle, with which you and I have to struggle. Jesus overcame the temptation.

We now pass to Act Two of the drama, which centers about the personal religious conflict of Jesus. He is taken to

the Holy City and set upon the pinnacle of the temple to view the world of religious interests, "If thou art the son of God cast thyself down, for it is written, He shall give his angels charge over thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest haply thou dash thy foot against a stone."²

Perhaps we can realize how much of a temptation this was to Jesus when we consider what kind of work his heart was centered on, as shown by his noble life of service. If we can think that the story which Luke tells of Jesus' interest in the learned doctors about whom he lingered on that memorable visit to the temple as a boy, we find one more clue to the conflict of his life.³ He had been touched by the passion for the ministry. In the victory over the temptation to a selfish life of indulgence, and the triumphant determination to do the work of a teacher and prophet of the good life, he had overcome one temptation only to come face-to-face with another and even greater. Upon the pinnacle of the temple of the Holy City, he saw the opportunity, the mechanism of the established religious system, bidding him come within its midst and become a conventional priest, whom the angels in their hands shall bear up, lest haply he dash his foot against a stone.

But perhaps even then when he was called upon to decide as to whether he would be a priest or a prophet, a subservient puppet or an independent preacher of the truth, those scathing words of condemnation which he uttered later against the scribes, Pharisees, and Hypocrites, told him only too plainly that not for him did the established religious system offer an opportunity of teaching and preaching the Gospel of the Rule of Love. For the ease and comfort and assurance which the established system offered him, he was not willing to sacrifice his own personal integrity.

Anyone who is at all familiar with the unrest, the disturbed and muddy waters of the religious conditions today, knows the temptation that Jesus faced. Every religious denomination in this country is honey-combed by

² Matthew 4:6.

³ See Luke 2:46.

the idea of modern thought which flatly contradicts the fundamental tenets of their creeds, and doctrines. From beneath the closed lid of the churches, upon which sits the grim-visaged medieval personage of authority, there emerges now and then a stifled cry for freedom, and here and there one more powerful than the rest lifts the lid enough to free himself and get a breath of the pure fresh air of truth. But there is turmoil beneath the lid, the lean and lank person of authority who is now going through the death struggles in his vain efforts to hold down the lid, will soon feel the hopelessness of the task. The lid will fly open, and that medieval monstrosity, a religion of authority, will be buried beneath his own crumbling temple of creeds, trinities, inspired Bibles, and Popes. It is a thing of no small significance that an editorial writer of a current magazine paraphrasing the words in which the historian Froude⁴ speaks of the dying religion of Roman Paganism, applies the same criticism to organized Christianity.

Here in the manuscript Earl Davis pasted in a clipping from the magazine. Transcribed:

Of religion as represented by the organized Christianity of today may we not slightly paraphrase Froude and say:

Religion, once the foundation of our laws and rule of personal conduct, has subsided into paganism on the one hand and hypocrisy on the other. The sophisticated in their hearts disbelieve it. Churches are still built with increasing splendor; the established forms are scrupulously observed. Public men and newspapers speak conventionally of Christianity, that they may throw on those who do not, the odium of impiety; but of genuine belief that life has a Christian meaning, there is none remaining beyond the circle of the silent, patient, unsophisticated multitude. The whole churchly atmosphere is saturated with cant—cant moral, cant political, cant religious—an affectation of

⁴ James Anthony Froude (1818-1894), English historian, novelist, biographer and editor of *Fraser's Magazine*.

high moral and spiritual principle which has ceased to touch commercial, industrial, political and ecclesiastical conduct, and flows on in an increasing volume of insincere and unreal speech.⁵

The criticism is scathing, but no less scathing criticism has been uttered within a year by ministers themselves groaning under this lid of authority and it is a criticism that will bear thinking over.

I know of no temptation more pressing, more alluring today than this one of the religious world, where the desire to maintain old forms, long since outworn, is leading men to put new patches onto old garments and new wine into old wineskins. We need to get at the meaning of this second act in the drama of Jesus' Temptation, and take to heart its truth, and do as Jesus did. Let the old forms sift for themselves, die their natural death, and be buried with the other dead institutions of history. This is what Jesus did when he met and overcame this temptation, and turning away from the dead forms of the past, set himself to teaching and preaching the Rule of Love, alone and unsupported by any established system.

In his conquest, the world made an epoch-marking step in advance.

This leads us to the Third Act of the drama, wherein Jesus is shown by the Devil all the Kingdom of the World, and the glory of them, and is told that they will be given to him if he will but follow the tempter.⁶ The last act is the closing scene of a process, in which the essence of the two previous acts are brought into the last. To serve the mere sensuous wants of the world, to be a selfish greedy animal, and under the cloak of the established forms of an ecclesiastical system, to become subservient to tradition and authority, that is but a form of life, which in its essence is but worshipping false Gods. Such a type of life is of the same nature as that all too common self-seeking,

⁵ Unfortunately Earl Davis does not include information about where this clipping was taken from, and I have been unable to locate it.

⁶ See Matthew 4:9.

in which men fight and struggle and clamber until at last they come into possession of all the wealth, all the power, all the influence that they want. But still something is lacking, for they cannot find peace, and are compelled to put out to sea, cut off from the very wealth they have acquired. Perhaps this was a pressing and vital struggle with Jesus, for he lived in the time of conquest and commercial achievement. But he conquered, and while the many who have enjoyed the fame of wealth and luxury of that day have gone down to unmarked graves of historical oblivion, the Carpenter Prophet has become the greatest man of all history because he choose to become the servant of mankind rather than to make mankind subservient to him.

Thus ends the little three-act drama in which are pictured the conquests of Jesus of Nazareth, of the common everyday temptations which you and I have to meet, either for conquest or defeat. Jesus overcame the temptations, and yet we wonder why.

Thus far I have simply mentioned the fact that he did overcome. I now wish to show why he overcame. This, I take to be the deeper meaning of the underlying motive of the entire drama, and of Jesus' life.

Jesus felt that he bore a direct relationship with the unseen God, the unseen spirit of the world. He felt that he was a co-worker with God for the good of the world, that his duty was God's duty, that his work was God's work, that his suffering was God's suffering, that in travail and pain they labored together for the growth, the up-building, the spiritual and moral quickening of human beings. Whatever noble impulse was within him, whatever lofty ideal of service or thought took possession of him, that he followed, that he gave himself up to, because of the voice of God, and came to him with the stamp of God's authority. He believed that he was here, not to indulge in the mere beastly desires of his nature, not to support or defend or prop up any institution; not to become master and director of men or nations, but that he was here to serve mankind, to do the will of God. "Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister."⁷ He counted it high treason to the cause

⁷ See Matthew 20:28.

of man, and God, to live the negative life of self-indulgence, or institutional apologetics, personal aggrandizement, and so he became servant of all, ministering unto all, relying upon this fundamental truth, deep and mystical in its meaning, that man and God are one in aim, purpose, rejoicing and sorrow, in pleasure and pain. Man and God are co-workers for the perfection of an uncompleted world.

This is the naked truth of this poetic drama of Jesus' temptation. That you and I are co-workers with God in the vineyard of his world, that, by relying upon this deep truth, that God suffers with us, that God rejoices with us, that God enters into all our feelings with us, and is within all that we do and say, by relying upon this truth, we can, and will, overcome the temptations, to selfishness in whatever form they appear. It was this truth that made Jesus victorious, and in the apprehension of this truth, and the conformity to it, he has become the only man in all history who has been true to what is possible in you and me.