

TEMPTATION LEADING YOU?



Scripture:

Psalm 32

¹Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. ²Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

³While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. ⁴For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. *Selah*

⁵Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,” and you forgave the guilt of my sin. *Selah*

⁶Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them. ⁷You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. *Selah*

⁸I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. ⁹Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you.

¹⁰Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD. ¹¹Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

Matthew 4:1-11

¹Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” ⁴But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

⁵Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

⁷Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

⁸Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” ¹⁰Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

¹¹Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



When I read this passage about the devil tempting Jesus to sin, I thought again of the amazing little book by C.S. Lewis, *Screwtape*

Letters. It is a fascinating and entertaining illustration of how ‘the evil one’ taps into our primitive human nature to tempt us to sin. The

Screwtape letters are letters of instruction from “Uncle Screwtape,” who is a senior devil teaching his junior devil apprentice, “Wormwood,” how to inspire his human subject to sin.

In his first training he says, “It does not matter how small the sins are, provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the human away from the light and out into the nothing. Murder is no better than gambling if gambling can do the trick. Indeed the safest road to hell is the gradual one, the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.”

THE SAFEST ROAD TO HELL

Let’s ponder these words for a moment. The safest road to hell is the gradual, subtle one. Like when we exaggerate facts, or tell little white lies that turn into bigger lies that end up destroying others and ourselves.

C.S. Lewis also comments about the human mind when Screwtape says, “It is funny how mortals always picture us (devils) as putting things into their minds; in reality our best work is done by keeping things out.”

Hmmmm...keeping things out like they say: ignorance is bliss? Or does he mean keeping things out of the brain like empathy and compassion for others?

On the topic of church attendance, the instructing devil says, “Surely you know that if a person can’t be cured of churchgoing, the next best thing is to send him all over the neighborhood looking for the church that “suits” him until he becomes a taster or connoisseur of many churches.” This is self-explanatory. Are you a church shopper or a church developer?

Screwtape describes hell as “their favorite place,” “where everyone is perpetually concerned about his own dignity and advancement, where everyone has a grievance, and where everyone lives with the deadly serious passions of envy, self-importance, and resentment.”

SEPARATION FROM GOD

I’ve also heard the definition for hell as separation from God. And the greatest separator from God is sin. Because sin makes us feel unworthy of God’s grace. But we must remember grace is inherently unmerited favor and love from God. No matter what we have done. God is always waiting to pour grace all over us.

Uncle Screwtape addresses this in the book. He warns Wormwood to not allow his subject to be compassionate to and love his neighbor because: “When they have really learned to love their neighbors as themselves, they will also learn to love themselves as their neighbors.” And when you love yourself you are able to love God even better, too.

And in the final training of Wormwood, his instructor basically tells him to increase his subject’s use of his reptilian brain by making him anxious and self-centered. He says: There is nothing like anxiety for barricading a human’s mind against the Enemy (God). God wants humans to be concerned with what they do (for others); our business is to keep them thinking (anxious) thoughts about what will happen to themselves” if they reach out.

JESUS’ TEMPTATION

Jesus succeeded in not buckling to temptation in the forty days and nights he was tempted. How did he succeed? He kept his focus on God. Christ’s response to the devil tempting him to turn rocks into bread tells us that he kept his mind in control and focused on the promises of God. He said, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

And when he is tempted to throw himself down from the top of the temple to prove that angels would save him, Jesus reprimands the devil and tells him to not put the Lord your God to the test.

OUR LORD’S PRAYER

Did you know this passage in Matthew links to our Lord’s Prayer? You know the part where we always say: “Lead us not into temptation.”

The Greek word for temptation is “Peirasmos.” It also means test or trial. So our Lord’s Prayer could be said, “Lead us not into a time of trial or into a test.”

In Matthew 6:13-15, where Jesus is teaching how to say the Lord’s Prayer, that passage ends with: “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.” For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly

Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

We tend to forget that Jesus emphasized forgiveness right after he taught us to not let ourselves be led into temptation. The Lord's Prayer can be better understood if we say, "Do not let ourselves be led into temptation," or "Help us not be led by temptation." It's very tempting to not forgive others.

God does not intentionally tempt us, but God does let us choose our response to temptation. James 1:13 says: Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one."

LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION

John Owens in his book *Overcoming Sin and Temptation* illustrates Jesus' words "Lead us not into temptation" with the story of a mother who takes her young children grocery shopping. She comes upon the candy aisle and she knows that taking her children down that aisle will only stir up desire, and greediness in their hearts. In wisdom, she takes another aisle away from the temptations. In this way the mother spares her children a trial. Praying, "Lead us not into temptation," is like praying, "God, help me avoid the candy aisle today." It's recognizing that we naturally grasp for things that can do us destruction and that God's wisdom can strengthen us to make good choices for ourselves.

A petition similar to our Lord's Prayer is offered by David in Psalm 141:4: "Do not let my heart be drawn to what is evil so that I take part in wicked deeds along with those who are evildoers; do not let me eat their delicacies."

(All of Psalm 141 is good to read during Lent. King David was praying for a force field against evildoers with Psalm 141.) When we are in the midst of evil doers, it is difficult to not be tempted to follow their evil ways. That is proven in the psychology of gang behavior. And also in barber shops and even in churches where one person starts badmouthing another person and the people around join in. Group dynamics are powerful.

WHAT IS THE OPPOSITE OF SIN?

It helps us not be led into temptation when we know what we are battling against. So what is sin?

It might help to look at what the opposite of sin is. Would you say love, peace, compassion, or virtue are the opposite? According to 'Got Questions.org,' there is not a perfect word in the English language that is the antonym for sin. Virtue is the closest they could come up with. But they said other languages have more fitting words. In Hindi, which is the language in India, they use the word "Punya" for the opposite of sin. It means good deed, or charitable act. A person who is a "Punya" is thought of as "saintly."

In Judaism there is a word "Mitzvah," which means to carry out a commandment of God or a good deed done from religious duty.

GRACE

But in Christianity, it seems to me that grace is the opposite of sin.

**When you are dispensing grace
or receiving grace,
grace is a force field against sin.
Pray to always be surrounded by grace
and to be a dispenser of grace.
Grace is forgiveness and mercy,
unmerited favor and love of God
all wrapped up together.
As a follower of Jesus you are to be
a dispenser of God's grace to all.**

Lent is a season set aside for us to take time to be more aware of God's grace that is all around us. Grace is symbolized in this meal we are about to receive. Grace is inherent in the beauty of nature all around us, in all of creation. Grace is the way you forgive someone, and the way you feel blessed. Grace is undeserved blessing, an amazing gift from God.

THE REPTILIAN PART OF OUR BRAINS

But why do we sin in the first place? Why do some people sin more than others?

Science has an answer. People who allow their reptilian part of their brain to control them tend to be more vulnerable to temptation than others. The reptilian brain refers to the primitive brain function that we share with all reptiles and mammals. It contains the coping mechanisms necessary for our survival. But it works against the other behaviors

that help us survive, like social connection. The reptilian brain operates with fear, anger, aggression, tribalism, and revenge. It promotes greed, competition, and selfishness.

Thank goodness most of our brains have evolved from our cave man days. Early fossil records show our brains doubled in size over three-hundred-thousand years. And they believe even though Neanderthals had larger brains than earlier humanoids, their brains had not developed the “social working together” part of the brain. Scientists believe the social relational development of the brain in homosapiens is the reason they survived and the Neanderthals went extinct. Thank goodness we still tend to operate out of the other two parts of our brains more than the reptilian brain. The emotional part of our brain gives us the feeling of love and compassion, and also helps us feel a need to be accepted socially by our community. The thinking brain is the largest part of our brain now and it is the neocortex which gives meaning and understanding to the emotional and the fearful sensations. Some of us have larger emotional centers than others.

But in times of crisis and stress, the reptilian brain may overpower the thinking and emotional parts of our brains causing us to just operate with self-centered survivor mode once again.

When we listen to a leader of any size group who heightens our fear of others, creates an image that we are being taken advantage of, incites aggression, anger and violence by blaming others for our own failures, then our reptilian brains activate and we feel threatened. When we feel threatened we are less compassionate and less empathic, and more tribal and isolative against others, especially those who seem different from our tribe.

Do not be tempted by your reptilian brain to sin. God will not intentionally lead you into temptation. But temptation is all around us and our instinctual survival behavior will be aroused when we allow the reptilian brain to lead us.

Nationalism, isolationism, a lack of global cooperation, and protectionism all lead to disunity. God commands us to promote unity and to love our neighbor. Not just the one next door, but the one in Yemen, and in Syria, and in Iran. Love is the proven cure for hate.

Consider grace is the opposite of sin. Then the times when you show God’s grace to others, you cause the light of grace to multiply and be passed on to others and the evil of sin to be overcome. Overcome evil with good, for God is good and you have God’s divine goodness inside your brain, too. But God gives you the freedom to choose which part of your brain you use more than others.

Choose grace and peace and love and compassion and think before you act. Use your reptilian brain only when your life is truly threatened, like when you are about to be hit by a bus. Then jump like a frog and get out of the way. Amen

Benediction:

JRR Tolkien, author of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, and other great books, was a good friend of C.S. Lewis. When asked about his assessment of our sinful world, he said, "*For myself, I find I become less cynical rather than more—remembering my own sins and follies; and realize that men’s hearts are not often as bad as their acts, and very seldom as bad as their words.*"

May that word of hope carry us all into this Lenten season, trusting that God’s goodness can overcome all sin and evil. May you be a dispenser of God’s goodness and grace in all you do and say. And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and forever more. Amen



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