

# How Can We Overcome Temptation in the Midst of Suffering?

by Ron R. Ritchie

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**Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry. And the tempter came and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread." But He answered and said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.'" Then the devil took Him into the holy city, and he stood Him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down. For it is written, 'He will give His angels charge concerning You, and on their hands they will bear You up, lest You strike Your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, "On the other hand it is written, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God.'" Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world, and their glory, and he said to Him, "All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me." Then Jesus said to him, "Begone, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.'" Then the devil left Him, and behold, angels came and began to minister to Him (Matthew 4:1-11).**

That is the story of how the Son of God, just before he began his public ministry on earth, battled with Satan, the tempter, in the wilderness. Satan tempted Jesus to become a baker rather than a Savior, a showman rather than a Redeemer, a landlord of the whole world rather than the Son of God. Even since the fall, every man, woman and child who has ever had a relationship with the living God Yahweh has met the tempter. Believers are tempted to give up on their relationship with Jesus Christ, tempted on every hand--as Jesus was tempted to do anything but face his crucifixion--to bypass suffering, to reach for the crown, not the cross.

So too were the Christians, to whom Peter wrote in his first letter in 64 A.D., tempted in every way, as was their Savior, and as we are in our day. They were tempted to try to escape all the political, social and personal suffering they were going through because they were Christians. When they first came to Christ, they had no idea of the suffering they would face because of their commitment; their hearts were filled with optimism and joy, peace and righteousness. But then the reality of suffering struck; they discovered that the world around them had no use for their Christianity. Their lives, their families' lives, their livelihoods--everything they possessed was at stake. Faced with all of this pressure, they were tempted to slip back again into the world system, to blend once again with their neighbors so they would have peace and security once more. Those who are faced with intimidation are tempted to remember all the good times of the past, but not the times of pain, fear and emptiness.

Peter was very much aware of this enticement to do wrong in exchange for pleasure or to gain the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the boastful pride of life--all were being set before the Christians of Asia Minor. Thus Peter began to consider the question, "How can Christians overcome temptation in the midst of suffering?" They not only had to face every day all the problems associated with normal human living, but now they had to deal with the tempter himself. How could they overcome all of that?

## **Live for the will of God**

Peter responds by answering, first,

**Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God (1 Pet 4:1-2).**

Here Peter presents four realities to the Christians in Asia Minor. To begin with, they should understand the spiritual reality of the death of Christ. In this letter, Peter again and again calls Christians back to the foundations of their faith: the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. When they placed their faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior they were spiritually identified--baptized--with His life, death and resurrection. In Chapter 3, we saw that as Noah was placed in the ark, so they were placed into Christ by God. Therefore, since Christ suffered in the flesh... "For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God, having put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit;..." (1 Pet 3:18). Peter is saying that the key to a Christian's understanding of his life in Christ is that "Christ suffered in the flesh"; in other words, He suffered physical death. When He was on the cross, He died physically; He breathed His last. And when He died, all that the tempter had to offer Him had no effect upon Him, as it has no effect on anyone who is dead. So He who was tempted in every area as we are, and yet without sin, now was in a position where temptation no longer had any power or influence over Him. That is the first reality of the death of Christ which Peter brings before Christians.

The second reality is, "Arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin." In other words, he who has died in the flesh has stopped sinning; a dead man has no ability to sin. Peter commands them, as Christ suffered at the hands of wicked men, but entrusted Himself to the righteous Judge, and finally suffered physical death, so Christians were to consider the spiritual reality of what that physical death meant to their own spiritual death. The fact is that the life they had before they accepted Jesus Christ was now dead. It died when Christ died, so temptation and sin no longer had any power over them; it was dead. And because of the resurrection of Jesus, as new creatures in Christ, they now had a new life, with resurrection power, available to them so that they might make righteous choices.

In Romans 6:8-14, the apostle Paul sums up our new life in Christ:

**Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life that he lives, he lives to God.**

**In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace. (NIV)**

I'm always amazed at how clearly the tempter tries to move in on me in certain areas of my life which I spent time developing before I came to know Jesus Christ. Yet, this Scripture says that once I place my faith in Christ, I'm set free for the first time in my life from continually participating in sin. In fact, I have discovered that when I'm about to sin now, the Lord quietly says to me, "You don't have to do this. This is contrary to My will. You now have My power to make a righteous choice." The voice of the tempter, of course, tries to encourage me not to make that righteous choice. (And keep in mind that temptation is not sin. Sin enters when I make the choice to sin, according to James 1.) So remember that as Christians, we have been given power through the resurrected Jesus Christ so that we don't have to sin. The power of sin has been broken. When I sin now, it's not because I have to, but because I want to. That's the difference between the new life in Christ and the old life.

The third reality is that Christians only have so much time, "so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men...." Here Peter is reminding Christians of their own mortality. They have a limited time on earth; then they face eternity. Non-believers, unfortunately, are mentally trapped in time and space, so they are constantly tempted to experience all that life has to offer. The comedian Richard Pryor is reputed to have said, "Enjoy as much as you can even if you live to be 90, because that's not as long as you're going to be dead." But the Christian can counter that blind philosophy with the words of the Psalmist, "As for the days of our lives, they contain 70 years, or if due to strength, 80 years...so teach us to number our days that we may present to Thee a heart of wisdom." These Christians once lived in the "B.C." years of their lives, before Christ entered to become Lord of their lives. But then they experienced the "I.C." years; that is, they were now "in Christ." Christ was now

their life, so when temptations came, they had power from within to withstand, to resist them and not give in. "No temptation has overtaken you, but such as is common to man. And God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may endure it." In the midst of the temptation, the Christian is given power to endure it because he will see what is going on from God's point of view.

In his new book, *Approaching Hoofbeats*, a study on the book of Revelation written by John in 90 A.D., Billy Graham says,

*It wasn't easy to be a Christian then. It isn't easy now. Late in the first century, during the time of John's exile, the persecution of the Christian church by the Roman Empire had begun in earnest. It was difficult to keep the faith then. It is now. There are grand and awful moments before a centurion's blazing fire. And there are little and awful moments almost daily when one longs to give in to the values of this world, to give up the high standards of our Lord, to give way to the various temptations that pressure every man, woman and young person who believes. Even Christians are tempted to surrender to the passions or the pleasures that pursue us all. We think of modern Christians living on under atheistic or totalitarian regimes as being the only ones who must daily decide their ultimate loyalties. It is not true. Every Christian in every nation--totalitarian, democratic or somewhere in between--decides daily to be loyal to Christ...or to give in to this age and its values.*

The fourth reality which Peter brings before us in these verses is that we are to live the rest of our lives for the will of God. That is probably the most difficult struggle in the Christian life--understanding what is the will of God. When I first became a Christian, I knew my life was not my own, but that I was bought with a price. Nevertheless, I hoped it was not the will of God for me to become a missionary to Africa of Alaska! As Bob Roe has said, "Lord, I'll serve you anywhere, but may I suggest Maui?"

But the Scriptures are very clear that the will of our Lord and Savior is that Christians develop a loving relationship with Him; that we come to such a deeper knowledge of His love for us that our ultimate desire is only to serve Him; "where" is of little or no consequence.

The best illustration of understanding the will of God is found in the life of Jesus. On more than one occasion he said, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent me" (John 4:34). "I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me" (John 8:10). In the Garden of Gethsemane, he said, "Not My will but thine be done." The key to this attitude of obedience on the part of Jesus is found in the words of John's gospel: "Just as the Father has loved me, I have also loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in His love... this is my commandment: that you love one another just as I have loved you..." (John 15:9-12). The apostle Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 4:3: "This is the will of God, your sanctification;" that is, your willingness to be set aside for his intended purpose. Further, Paul tells us in the same letter (5:16-18), "Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." The bottom line is that we can't know the will of God until we develop a personal relationship with God through His Son; then as our love grows for Him, our wills are molded into His will and our deepest desires will become like His desires; "Not My will but yours be done."

## **Die to the lust of the flesh**

How can we overcome temptation in the midst of suffering? First, by His power in us to choose to live for the will of God; and secondly,

**For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousals, drinking parties and abominable idolatries. And in all this, they are surprised that you do not run with them into the same excess of dissipation, and they malign you; but they shall give an account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. For the gospel has for this purpose been**

**preached even to those who were dead, that though they are judged in the flesh as men, they may live in the spirit according to the will of God. (1 Pet 4:4-6)**

Peter found it necessary to challenge the Christian community to take a look at what was going on in their lives in Christ. He understood their culture, how they were raised and how they lived before they met Christ. Now the tempter, the adversary, the devil was "prowl[ing] around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Pet 5:8). They were facing daily temptations to keep falling back into the old lifestyle of pursuing their own desires, those things the Scriptures call "deeds of darkness."

What are some of those deeds? Peter says, "For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desires of the Gentiles." You have done that; in other words, now it's over. You have begun a new life in Christ, and a desire to do His will, to put aside the lusts of the flesh. And, Peter says, you have the power to do so. The Roman historian Tacitus, writing in the first century A.D., gave us a little background on life in Imperial Rome when he and other writers of his day said, in essence, "In high society and in the slave community alike, we know of prostitution, adultery, homosexuality, child exposure and concern only for bread and circuses." There can be no doubt that the Roman culture was exceedingly depraved.

Thus Peter goes on to review some of the things these Christians had come out of, listing six specific areas: they were "pursuing a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousels, drinking parties and abominable idolatries." All of these are what Scripture calls "deeds of darkness." Before they came to Christ, they had "pursued a course of sensuality." They were on a track they couldn't escape from, a lifestyle of excess, outrages, debauchery and everything that pleased the senses. Like the Epicureans, they delighted in fine foods and wines. They were sensuous, delighting in colors, beauty, sound, texture and art. They sought the sensual pleasures of sexual gratification. They were trapped in "a course of sensuality." Only the Lord could rescue them from the path they had chosen.

The second of these deeds of darkness Peter mentions is "lusts"--i.e., the lust for power, fame, wealth and influence. I visited a shopping mall a few days ago with my wife and found myself amazed at the lust for things with which I was confronted. You never know how many things you really need in life until you go to one of those shopping centers! For instance, I didn't know I needed a telephone that had a television set in the handle. I found myself facing incredible pressure to buy things I didn't need, with money I don't have, to impress people I don't know! These are the things the advertisers say will bring us power, fame, wealth and influence. Peter calls them "lusts."

"Drunkenness, carousels, drinking parties and abominable idolatries" are four other deeds of darkness which Peter lists here. These all took place in what were called "mystery religions." In the Roman culture of that day, there was not only the Imperial cult, where people worshipped Caesar as god, there was Judaism, Christianity, and a variety of mystery religions. In these religions, participants were under oath not to reveal their esoteric rites. Some of these religions centered around a savior-god who had reputedly died and risen again. In the cult of Bacchus, devotees drank the fruit of the vine, as Bacchus was the god of wine, animals and vegetable life. They also ate of the flesh of newly slain bulls, believing that by doing so, they partook of the life of the god. They engaged in sacred dances which would induce ecstasy, in which they would supposedly be possessed by the spirit of Bacchus. That is why we have Paul's warning to the Corinthians: "...I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons, and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons" (1 Cor 10:20). The appeal of the mystery religions seems to have been the assurance of immortality which they gave their members, combined with fellowship, which many craved in a fractured, uprooted society. Sounds like some of our modern-day cults, doesn't it? There is nothing new under the sun.

"And in all this, they are surprised that you do not run with them into the same excess of dissipation, and they malign you." Christians were defamed, lied about and maligned. They were the light of Jesus Christ in a dark society. Though faced with all kinds of temptations on every hand, they possessed the Holy Spirit's power to not only resist the world, but to choose to live in righteousness. As a result, they had a threatening effect on the Roman culture; thus they were defamed and lied about.

Justin Martyr (103-163 A.D.) was a Christian philosopher and apologist who was beheaded in the fourth Roman persecution because he would not deny his faith by sacrificing to the idols of Rome. He wrote:

*We who formerly delighted in fornication now embrace chastity alone. We who formerly used magical arts dedicate ourselves to the good and unbegotten God. We who valued above all things the acquisition of wealth and possessions now bring what we have into a common stock and share with everyone who is in need. We who hated and destroyed one another on account of our different customs and would not even live with men of a different race, now since the coming of Christ, live on excellent terms with them; and pray for our enemies and endeavor to persuade those who hate us unjustly to live conformably to the good precepts of Christ; to the end that they may become partakers with us of the same joyful hope of a reward from God, the Ruler of all.*

Justin Martyr was maligned and finally killed because he possessed the light of Christ. It's easy to see how in a society with such low morals and values that that light in the lives of Christians would create all kinds of tension, so that believers were maligned and defamed as a result. Tacitus described Christians as "the enemy of mankind." He didn't just mean that they were a nuisance, but that they were an affront to his social and religious world. When later critics faulted Christians for not participating in civil affairs or the military, the point of such criticism was as religious as it was social. Taking aim at Christians, the 3rd century Roman critic Felix wrote: "You do not go to our shows; you take no part in our processions; you are not present at our public banquets; you shrink in horror from our sacred games" (Octavius 12).

But judgment is coming, warns the apostle in this passage: "They shall give an account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. All the unjust suffering of Christians, all the gossip and lies they were subjected to because they refused to join the course of sensuality to which those all around them were committed, would be judged by the Righteous Judge of all the earth. Knowing this, Christians should be encouraged not to give into temptation, not to strike back at their detractors. As those who mocked Noah when he preached righteousness in his day were dealt with, so also would those who were maligning them in that first century day be dealt with. As Noah and his family were placed in the ark, Christians were placed into Christ, and they could rest in that truth. That was the bad news for the maligners, but it was comforting news for the persecuted Christians who knew that the Righteous Judge would make all things right.

Then there was the good news of the gospel: "For the gospel has for this purpose been preached even to those who are dead, that though they are judged in the flesh as men, they may live in the spirit according to the will of God." The gospel had been preached by the apostles, the good news that said, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). That gospel had been preached to those who were now dead, who had lost their physical lives because they followed Jesus Christ, because they had resisted the temptation to give up on their faith. Though they had been "judged in the flesh as men," i.e., though they had been judged by the society in which they lived, and had lost their lives, they were now alive forever in the spirit, in the presence of God. James 1:12 says: "Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love Him."

How can we overcome temptation in the midst of suffering? First, because we have the Holy Spirit living within us, we now have the power to choose to live for the will of God; and secondly, because we have the power of the resurrected Christ and His Holy Spirit within us, we now have the ability to die to the lusts of the flesh.

We all face temptations daily. We all face the same struggles. You would be shocked at the number of times I have been tempted to give up on the ministry. The tempter is always offering me something that looks better. How many times the evil one has tried to tempt me to believe I'm worthless. How many times I struggle with who I am, as if just being myself was wrong... but remember that temptations in themselves are not sinful. When I am tempted, I look to Him who lives within me. I hear His voice saying, "It's a lie. The deceiver wants to make you believe you may gain the crown by bypassing the cross. Don't do it. Choose Me." As we come to the communion table this morning, we know that this reminds us of the price that Christ paid in order that we might

have the power to live in times of suffering and temptation. Let us partake with hearts overflowing with thanksgiving.

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