

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

The Evangelical Quarterly

JULY 15TH, 1949

TEMPTED, YET WITHOUT SIN

FROM earliest times, Christians who wanted to have witness to and confirmation of the really human character of Our Lord have turned to the letter to the Hebrews. Of course you find testimony to it elsewhere, and there is not a book in the New Testament that does not bear its own witness. It needs no mention that the Gospels are full of Jesus, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, with the spirit invincible set in the body that could cry out for very exhaustion. Or look through St. Paul. It is true that the Cross occupies so much of the foreground that some of the more human details of the picture are obscured, and the man Jesus is not so emphasised. And yet, the "form of a servant", and the "likeness of men", and the obedience "unto death, even the death of the cross", and the "fellowship of His sufferings"—all these bring before us Him who for very love became what we are in order that we might become altogether what He is. All this is true. Yet when we wish to have presented before us the Jesus of Nazareth, with the lines of suffering on His face and the emblems of humanity stamped unmistakably on His brow, it is to the Epistle to the Hebrews, for all its rather complex and unfamiliar apparatus of sacrificial idea and conception, that men have turned.

The Epistle presents Jesus in the light and shadow of the strongest contrast, with a greatness that is wholly divine and at the same time a humanity that is purely human. And for all the high resounding titles that it heaps upon His brow, it is all the time a brow on which you can trace the wounds that trouble and thorn have inflicted. "Like as we are"—this is the note that runs throughout the Epistle from beginning to end.

"Captain of our salvation" the writer calls Him. You might have thought that to such a One much might have been spared. If He is to lead men to the high destiny to which they are called and for which they are appointed, then surely it is

enough that He should lead—without being Himself troubled by the vexing troubles and trials of everyday ordinary life. But no. This One may be at the head of those whose destiny is heaven—but He himself graduates to its leadership through the ranks. And it is through the urgent press and the humdrum round of mortal life which we so well know that He reaches His position of authority: Captain of our salvation, yes; but He attains this eminence by being made “perfect through suffering”.

Or the verse immediately before: here is Jesus now “crowned with glory and honour”. He sits on the right hand of the Father and all the holy angels sing the songs of the redeemed in His hearing and to His praise. How does He come there? you ask. What is the route by which such a One reaches His place of distinction and eminence? Remember: all things are in subjection to Him, all are put under His feet. He must certainly, you think, be born to such a high estate. One does not attain it, but only inherits it. And of course you are quite right—or very nearly quite right. The estate is His by very birthright. Yet that same crowned head was humbled for a little while, that He might “taste death for every man”. It is a matter of “no Cross, no Crown”.

Or again it is by the name of Son that Jesus is called. And what higher name could be accorded Him than this? Who stands nearer to the throne of the King than the King's Son? And who is nearer to the Father than the only begotten Son of God? And things are wrong in the Kingdom of the great King, and some remedy must be contrived and applied. What is to be done? and who is to do it? You remember the story of the ancient Roman general. Legions upon legions at his command; and among his officers a son of his own, with the signs of greatness already upon him. And when the battle is about to be joined, the son urges a certain strategy. “Do this,” he said; “advance in this way; we shall have success, and it will only cost five thousand men.” And the old general turned quietly upon his son, and put the question: “Will you be one of the five thousand?” And when the salvation of the world is at stake, and someone had to apply the remedy and pay the cost of it, and you might be pardoned for thinking that at least the Son would have been spared, nevertheless it is here that He stands in. This is a Son who “learned obedience by the things which He suffered”.

Here again, it is the same story that is told. The "great high priest" is standing there between men and God, doing those things for their sakes which put men right with God. He is passed into very heaven, it would seem; and in the presence of God Himself does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. How high and elevated the status which now He holds and the office which He discharges! As He faces the Father in whose presence He stands, does He remember those whom He represents? How can He know where now He stands all the heart-break and the toil and the sordidness and the gross earthy quality of human life that we know here? But the whole message of the Gospel is that He does so know and remember: "still remembers in the skies His tears, His agonies and cries", as the Paraphrase has it; not untouched "with the feeling of our infirmities", says the Epistle writer; "in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin", as the text reads.

Christ's divinity and His humanity—I ask you to observe that this is the theme of the whole of the New Testament. How much simpler the whole thing would be if there were only one factor to take into account! Then the Jews would never have found a stumbling-block, and the Greeks would never have complained about the foolishness of the Gospel. Then the history of theology would have been robbed of the greatest of all its controversies; and the ordinary man in the street to-day would add it all up and find it made sense. All this—but also: Christians would be deprived of the power of God and the wisdom of God unto salvation. The witness of the Gospel is steadily that in the One whom the world calls Jesus we have One who was tempted and One who was also without sin.

You start with the one side—here is One wearing an air of quite distinguished authority. It is an authority which the common people hailed with gladness, and those themselves in authority recognised with hostility. It is the air of command and final distinction that brought St. Peter to his knees, as he cried: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." And then you have this same One standing aghast at the spectacle of human pain, and, hearing the story of human misery, "Jesus wept".

Or you start from the other side. Here is One who "went about doing good" just like any other decent man. But what is this that He is saying? "Thy sins be forgiven thee; go and sin

no more". And at once they cried out, as they had every right to do: Who is this that does what God alone has any right to do?

He openly claims, then, to forgive sins—as only God can do. But again you immediately reflect that this is He who fought with devils in the desert for forty endless days and nights of fasting and spiritual strife. Sinless—yet tempted; tried by all the afflictions of life—yet coming scatheless through; marked by all the ills of this life—yet possessing His soul in perfect patience; exposed to all the malice and the spite of men who see their position challenged and their rights threatened—and yet holding back the more than twelve legions of angels that stood instant at His command; suffering on the Cross the unspeakable agonies of crucifixion—yet offering pardon to His executioners; slain and hanged upon a tree—yet with His nailed hands unlocking the gates of eternal life for a fellow-sufferer. I cannot make sense of all this; and I do not know how it is done. But I can bend the knee and worship what is here. This is God and man, power and weakness, heaven and earth. Here is all the dreadful might of temptation, here all the purity of sinlessness.

Tempted yet without sin—*it is only One like this who can really know what temptation is.* The thing is evident in the medical world, and needs only the barest mention. Whose case will you say is the worse?—the man who feels in his body nature's warning of pain, notes it at once, and seeks medical advice, and is given remedial treatment in good time; or the man who disregards the warnings of nature, lives beside them till he notices them no longer, makes his book with disease, accepts it into his house, and now sits beside it at his own fireside—and all the time without realising who his dreadful guest really is. Whose case is worse of these two? Whose state is the more parlous and perilous? The answer is evident. Sickness is bad enough, but sickness unrecognised, concealed, covert, ready to leap out like an enemy from behind an ambush to overwhelm a man when he is least prepared—this is far the worse case. And this is a parable of the moral world. Give me the man who has some idea that things are not well with him. Sin has not done all its worst with him yet, and he may yet be set upon the way to save his soul. The really precarious case is that where nothing will arouse to a feeling of alarm.

Gilbert Murray is commentator with few equals when he talks about the Hellenic world. He tells us something of the

serene surface of Greek civilisation, with its strong life of culture, breeding, good taste and comfort. It was of course based on a slave system, but it was firmly and securely based. And the men of the day of Greek greatness for the most part sat in the sun, and discussed in the agora, and did their religious duties at the Parthenon on the Acropolis and elsewhere, and took it all pretty much for granted. And all the time, beneath the smooth surface of city life was the seething gulf. There were all the forces of barbarism, the horror of primitive abominations, human sacrifice and torture and the like. These all lurked just below the varnish and the polish of the culture of the day. All the time, these primitive and elemental forces drew their strength from the vast hinterland of pagan barbarism, and grew in power as they failed to find outlet. To keep them at bay, Gilbert Murray tells us, required a sustained and constant effort, most of it quite unconscious. If this were relaxed, as later was to be the case, civilisation would be overwhelmed by *la nostalgie de la boue*—a primitive predilection for the dirt. But of the thousands that enjoyed the culture of Greece, only a few—and in the end too few—of the far-seeing spirit saw the danger and noted the peril and felt beneath the smooth surface of civilisation the pulsing throbbing energies of pent up paganism.

So with us here. Life slips on with a fair degree of smoothness for many people. There is not too much to worry about. A thinly spread veneer smeared over the lips of civilisation holds them together so close that the casual observer does not see the cracks between. It needs your man of undeflected and undistorted vision to see things steadily and see them whole. Millions of Christians were quite content in the days of the greatest of the undivided Church of the West. Perhaps a few thousands were vaguely conscious that something was wrong. But there was only one St. Francis who put his finger on the source of the malaise, and pinned the charge of luxury to the Church of the day, and founded his Grey Friars in protest. The Reformation had its forerunners, as we all know; and the streets of Prague and St. Andrews grew hot with the heat of kindled martyr fires. But there was only one Martin Luther, big enough and strong enough to defy the formidable might of papal tyranny and corruption and to nail the Ninety-Five Theses to the door of Wittenberg Parish Church.

And One and only One, with flesh and blood like ourselves,

so saw and **knew** things as they were, as to realise the magnitude of the **power** of evil and its abundant influence for wrong and ill. **Only He** really wrestled with the piled-up might of temptation. **Where** others were unaware of the conflict that is here **because** they already were sin's victims and captives, or feeling **something** of the issues at stake made haste only to run away, **He, He** alone, stood in the breach and fought the war against temptation to the bitter, bitter end. And where lesser men of flesh yielded without a stroke given or received, or quit the field before battle was well engaged, **He** only stood, and engaged the full strength of the foe; **He** only remained on the field to contest it; and of course **He** only fully won—**He** who "was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin".

Tempted yet without sin—*only such a One could really know human need.* **He** only. **Jesus** comes before us in the Gospels possessing matchless courage and perfect purity. Here apparently is One whose courage is not accustomed to flag or wilt, and whose purity of conscience is without blemish or shadow. How brave the air with which **He** faces His critics and challenges them with fearless words and deeds! How audacious that setting of His face towards Jerusalem, in the full knowledge that His enemies lie there in wait for Him! "My strength is as the strength of ten, Because my heart is pure"—Tennyson's Galahad no doubt has the right to use the words; but how much more the **Man Jesus!** And yet what is this? There is a garden, and a **Man** in spiritual strife, and agony forces from Him the demand that the cup pass from Him, that **He** be not pressed to drink it. What will you make of this? Or again, there is the Cross and a **Man** in His last moments of life. And from His lips are wrung the dreadful words: "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" And we have asked ourselves: What does this mean? that such lips should speak such words of dereliction? Was this the final shrinking, the last weakness? the frailty of flesh overwhelming the strength of spirit? Yet others have gone to their death without evidence of such weakness and infirmity. Why could **He** not also go, silent and brave? As the reckless wastrel Sydney Carton went, without a murmur of complaint or repining? Why could not **He** meet it as Charles I is said to have done, who put on his trim black clothes and hung the George and the Garter riband round his neck as he stepped out of the doorway in Whitehall on to the scaffold, and as he

did so said: "This is my second marriage day. I would be as trim to-day as may be, for before night I hope to be espoused to my blessed Jesus". Why could He not manifest such courage as this?

And now I am afraid we may have raised bigger questions than we can ever hope to answer. Who will say that he has a reply to things as profound as these? All we can know is that this Man knows the issues here at stake as no man ever knew them before or since. For bad men, unless their conscience be aroused, will go to their death with a smile on their lips and a jest in their hearts—for they do not understand the importance of the moment. And good men will be led to execution with a bandage over the eyes, as though they should otherwise see too deeply into the issues that are here. But this Man knew it all, and saw it all as no man ever did. "No man," says Luther, "ever feared death as this man did." To Him only the deserts of death were apparent in all their empty godlessness. Only He knew how terrible it is to die and to be without God in dying. Tempted—yet without sin.

Yes, tempted, yet without sin. And because of this, *only One like Him can be of use to us*. For He only knows our need, and He only can represent it, and He only by the power of grace can also supply it. We therefore at this season fix our eyes upon Him, our great high priest, and we praise and trust Him, who can do for us more than we ask or think. For He "was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin".

J. K. S. REID.

Edinburgh.