

THE SINNER'S PROGRESS.

“Let no man when he is tempted say, ‘I am tempted of God’; for God is incapable of evil, and He tempteth no man. But every man is tempted when he is drawn aside by his own lust, and enticed: then the lust, having conceived, bringeth forth sin; and the sin, when it is mature, bringeth forth death.”—JAMES i. 13-15.

ARCHBISHOP TRENCH has found a proof of the depravity of man where few men would have looked for it, in the history of words. He points out that many words, which when first used had an innocent and even commendable meaning, have come by use to carry a doubtful or malignant sense; and in this degradation of our words he sees a proof and illustration of human depravity. If we taint and soil the words we commonly employ, that can only be because they pass through polluted lips. Words express character; and if our words sink into a lower and baser sense as we use them, it is because they are weighted with some evil bias from our character and lives.

The word “temptation,” both in Greek and English, is a case in point. According to its derivation and original use, the word simply means “test,” whatever tends to excite, to draw out and bring to the surface, the hidden contents of the heart, whatever serves to indicate the ruling bent. The heart of man is the home of a multitude of thoughts, desires, impulses, affections, many of which are contrary the one to the other; so that at times even we ourselves cannot tell what our ruling bent is, or what our true moral complexion. And any event, any touch of circumstance or occasion, which compels these conflicting impulses and passions to assort and organize themselves, and thus show us what our ruling bent really is, is a temptation. It is called a temptation, simply because it puts us to the proof, and reveals what manner of spirit we are of. But in process of time the word has come to

have a darker significance. For if there is much that is good in us, there is also much that is evil. And because, in their intercourse with each other, men are too often bent on provoking that which is evil in each other, rather than on eliciting and strengthening that which is good, the word "temptation" has sunk from its original plane, and has come to signify mainly such testings and trials of character as are designed to draw out the evil that is in us; trials and tests skilfully adapted to our besetting infirmities, and likely to develop the lower and baser qualities of our nature.

These, then, are the two meanings of the word "temptation." At first it denoted only a moral test, a test intended to prove and reveal inward character, whether it were good or bad. But it has come to denote moral, or immoral, tests which appeal to the baser elements of our nature, to lower character and pollute it. It is because of this double meaning of the word that we meet in Scripture such apparently contradictory phrases as, "Lead us not into temptation," and, "Count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations."

It is in this double meaning of the word, moreover, that we find the key to the apparently contradictory statements that God does tempt men, and that He does not tempt them. He does tempt us all in the sense that He puts us all to the proof, and compels us at times to see what manner of men we are. And it was in this sense, no doubt, that He tempted Abraham. So far as we can collect the story from the ancient record, Abraham had grown so fond of the son of his old age, that he could not tell which was his ruling affection, love for Isaac or love for Jehovah. He seems to have brought his doubt, his fear, to God, to have asked that he might be kept from loving his son more than he loved his Father in heaven. For God could not have tempted him in order that He Himself, the All-seeing

and All-wise, should learn which was the stronger affection of the two. It must have been for Abraham's sake that the trial came, to solve *his* doubt, to remove his fear. And the trial was of a kind which could not fail to show him what his ruling affection was. He was called, or he thought himself called, to sacrifice his only and beloved son. When he had met such a test as this, he could no longer doubt that God held the supreme place in his heart.

“But suppose he had failed to meet so severe a test?”

Well, even in that case, would it not have been merciful to expose him to it? If Abraham *was* failing in his loyalty to Heaven, if God no longer stood first with him, was it not better that he should know it, and so be led to repent his sin, than that he should be left to deceive himself till he utterly fell away from God? Would it not, even in that case, have been kind of God to put him to the proof, to teach him what he was and where he stood?

As God tempted Abraham, so He tempts us. He applies to us the test of opportunity, brings us into conditions in which we *must* disclose our true nature, our supreme affection, and show whether we do, or do not, love Him and His will above all else. In either case, His end, His purpose, is merciful and gracious. If we stand the test, our faith comes out of the fire all the stronger and purer, and we touch the joy of those who have “endured.” If we fail—if we love, and show that we love, the gain a lie will bring us more than the truth by which we may lose, or the praise of men more than the blessing of God, or the comforts of life more than the hope of immortality; if, in short, we cannot *endure* the trials which make men perfect,—is it not better that we should know it, that we should become conscious of the fatal weakness which, but for our failure, we might never have suspected, and so be driven to seek strength from on high? We are wont to live so negligently, to give entertainment to so many

various and often injurious affections and desires, that we perpetually need seasons of testing and self-manifestation, in order that we may know ourselves as we are, and be moved to self-condemnation and self-amendment.

But if, in this sense, God tempts every man, there is a sense in which "He tempts no man." For it is never the design of the trials to which He puts us to bring out and confirm that which is evil in us. Men may try to irritate us, to excite our passions, to pamper our lusts; but God never. It is always His purpose to bring out and confirm that which is good in us; or, if He show us wherein we are weak, it is not that we may remain weak and foolish, but that we may seek and find strength and wisdom in Him.

When we have fallen into "temptation," in the bad sense of that word—when, that is, we have yielded to an evil influence, and have suffered our baser passions to be excited,—we are apt to say, "I am tempted of God," to plead: "Well, after all, *He* made me what I am. Am I to blame for my passionate temperament, or for the strength and fierceness of my desires?" Or, again, we say: "Circumstances were against me. The opportunity was too tempting, my need or my craving was too importunate, to be resisted. And are not our circumstances and condition appointed by Him?" Thus we charge God foolishly, knowing and feeling all the while that it is we ourselves who are to blame whenever the lower part of our nature is permitted a supremacy against which the higher part protests. The forger pleads his poverty, the drunkard his insatiable thirst; but they both know that, before they yielded and became what they are, a thousand alarms were sounded in their breast, and that God was striving with them through these alarms, and that they might have resisted the temptation had they trusted in Him and trained themselves in self-denial and self-control.

God tempts no man, affirms St. James, and assigns as a reason, "for God is *unversed* in evil," or "God is *incapable* of evil," or "God is *untemptable* with evil"; for in these three several ways this one word is translated. His implied argument is sufficiently clear, however we may render his words. What he assumes is, "Every one who tempts another to do evil must have some evil in his own nature. But there is no shadow or taint of evil in God, and therefore it is impossible that God should tempt any man." To us, the absolute goodness of God is a mere truism. But we must remember that, to the early Christians, it would not be so mere a truism as it is to us. The gods whom their neighbours worshipped had much that was base and fierce and sensual in them. *They* were by no means unversed in evil or incapable of it. And hence they often tempted men, or were even tempted by them. It is against this dark heathen background that St. James writes, in letters of light, of a God unpractised in evil, incapable of it, and who can neither tempt men nor be tempted. The argument is unimpeachable. For if God is absolutely devoid of evil, if He is of an absolute goodness, it cannot be His will that any man should fall.

But if the evil temptations we have to encounter do not come from God, whence do they come? What is their true origin and source?

To this question St. James replies, "*Every man is tempted when he is drawn aside of his own lust, and enticed*"—the man's lust being here conceived of as a harlot who lavishes her blandishments upon him; "*then the lust, having conceived, bringeth forth sin; and the sin, when it is mature, bringeth forth death.*" The origin of sin is in man's own breast, in his own hot and extravagant desires for any kind of temporal or sensual good; and the Apostle traces the sinner's career through the successive steps that lead down to death.

First, the man is *drawn aside*. James conceives of him as occupied with his daily task, busily discharging the duties of his daily calling. While he is thus engaged, a craving for some unlawful or excessive gratification, for a gain that cannot be honestly secured, or an indulgence which cannot be taken soberly and in the fear of God, springs up within his mind. The craving haunts his mind, and takes form in it. He bends his regards on it, and is drawn towards it. At first, perhaps, his will is firm, and he refuses to yield to its attraction. But the craving is very strong; it touches him at his weak point. And when it comes back to him again and again, it swells and grows into what St. James calls a "lust." It is "his *own* lust," the passion most native to him, and most potent with such as he—the love of gain, or the love of rule, or the love of distinction, or some affection of a baser strain. It may be any one of these, but it is *his own*, that which is most special and familiar with him. For a time he may resist its fascination; but ere long his work is laid aside, the claims of duty are neglected, the warnings of conscience unheeded. He has, indeed, no definite intention of abandoning the ways of duty and peace; he would be indignant with you were you to charge him with any such intention. He will be back in a moment. All he means is to get a nearer view of this strange, alluring visitor, to lift its veil, to see what it is like and for what intent it beckons him away. And so he takes his first step: he is *drawn aside* from the clear and beaten path of duty.

Then he is *enticed*, "allured," as the Greek word implies, "with pleasant baits." His craving waxes stronger, the object of desire more attractive, as he advances. It spreads out all its enchantments before him, while all that might repel him is carefully concealed. All specious excuses—all that moralists have allowed or bold transgressors have claimed—are urged upon him, until at last his scruples are

overborne, and he yields himself a willing captive to his lust.

Then lust "*conceives.*" The will consents to the wish; the evil desire grows toward an evil deed. Peace has forsaken him. He can know no rest till his craving be gratified. All homely, loyal toils, all simple, innocent delights, lose their charm. The good work in which he was occupied looks tame and wearisome to him. He is fevered by passion, and absorbed in it.

Having conceived, "*lust bringeth forth sin.*" The bad purpose has become a bad deed, and the bad deed is followed by its natural results. Coming to the light, his evil deeds may be reprov'd. When the sin is born, the man may recognise his guilt. He may repent, and be forgiven and restored. If he be a good man momentarily led astray, he *will* be saved; for "the Lord knoweth how to deliver *the godly* out of temptation," even when they have succumbed to it. To Him that seeth in secret he will confess his secret sin. Humbled, penitent, suffering, yet not without hope, he will retrace his steps, resume his work.

But if he do not turn and repent, the last step will be taken, and *sin, being matured, will bring forth death.* Action will grow into habit, the sinful action into a habit of sinning. As sin grows and matures, it will rob him of his energy. He will no longer make a stand against temptation. He will wholly surrender himself to his lust, until all that makes him man dies out of him, and only the fierce, brutal craving remains.

Hogarth has left us a familiar series of pictures entitled "The Rake's Progress," in which the career of a profligate spendthrift is sketched from its commencement to its close. Were I an artist, I would paint you a similar series on a kindred but wider theme, *The Sinner's Progress.*

In the first you should see a man comely with health and

stalwart with honest toil, with all the tokens of homely comfort and cheerful, prosperous labour about him. He should stand at his work-bench surrounded by the products of his skill, the tools of his craft in one hand while, with the other, in a welcome pause of labour, he wipes the sweat from his brow. Through casement and door he should look out on green meadows, watered by a running, songful brook, on trees and flowers, and a heaven the brighter for its cloud, with whatever else might serve to suggest the content and peace of a wholesome and upward-tending life. But gazing on him through the open casement, and seeming to beckon him away, there should stand the fair, alluring wanton who is to work him so much woe (*Spring*).

In the second your eye should rest on the pleasant, secluded spot, hard by the brook and overarched with trees, to which she had led his wandering steps. Half hidden by the lush grass and wild flowers, there should lie the temptress, lavishing on him her charms and wiles, while on his face you should read the passionate lines of the conflict between duty and desire (*Summer*).

In the third you should see these two, parents now, returned to his old home, and, with them, their foul and deformed offspring, Sin: she despoiled of every charm; he, moody, weary of her, desperate of himself, with no heart for his former toils and no success in them, his face darkening with the prophetic shadows of coming doom (*Autumn*).

In the last, sad scene of all, the homestead should lie waste and overrun with weeds, the home desolate and tumbling to decay, the leafless branches torn and rent by wintry winds, the swift musical stream mute and chained by frost; within, webs, rags, broken and rusted tools, with all the signs of squalid penury, to suggest the bitter history of years. And as you peered into the gloom of the background two figures—but only two, for Lust is long since dead—should come duskily into view: the wretched

father lying wan and bleeding on the ground, and, standing over him, the Sin which he had begotten and fostered, his hand raised to smite the fatal blow (*Winter*).

For then you would have before you, not only the thought of the apostle, but *the very figures in which that thought clothed itself* when he penned this passage on the origin of sin and the pedigree of death.

Here, then, we may see both our danger and our safety. God sends us trials in our temperaments and conditions, and in the changes and opportunities through which we pass. Not only has He planted in our nature animal appetites and desires, He has also given us ambitions and affections, which are innocent and commendable when they are lawfully indulged. And, in His providence, He brings us to crises and tests which put our manhood to the proof, and show whether or not we have learned to rule and deny ourselves, and can subordinate that which is sensual in us to that which is spiritual, that which is temporal to that which is eternal. It is natural that we should love the comforts and pleasures of life, that we should pursue the gains by which they are brought within our reach. It is natural that we should love society, the good opinion of our neighbours, and even the distinction of being raised in some worthy way above the crowd. But our danger is lest we should seek any one of these, or any similar ends, with an undue eagerness, by unlawful or dishonourable means, and so permit it to become a "lust" to which we must sacrifice principle, conviction, and the sense of duty, caring more for it than for the love and service of God and man. God's end in trying us, in sending opportunities which disclose our ruling bent, is that we may endure them well, that we may let them work patience and self-mastery in us, that we may become perfect and entire, lacking nothing, and,

as being perfect, may receive the crown of life. But, alas ! every one of us has his own special lust, some craving which we find it very hard to resist ; and when the trial comes, instead of meeting it and surmounting it, we may suffer ourselves to be drawn aside and enticed ; we may fall into a sin, and so into a habit of sinning, that will only too surely bring forth death. And thus, by our fatal weakness, we may reach the very opposite end to that which God intended to lead us ; we may drown ourselves in sin and perdition instead of rising into a crowned and victorious life. Do we not all know men who, even if they are not killing their bodies, are killing their souls by intemperance and dissipation, or by a too eager pursuit of wealth and distinction, or even by a too close and absorbing addiction to the duties of an honourable vocation ?

If *we* are not thus losing our life in the attempt to gain it, it is not because there is not in us the evil proneness which is working death in them ; but because, by the grace of God, we have been guarded from its worst and most fatal effects, because in some poor measure we have been made partakers of the Divine nature which is incapable of evil. In this, and in this alone, lies our safety. We must become, as St. Paul phrases it, "partakers of Christ and of God," if we would not pass through temptation and lust and sin to death. Or, as St. Peter phrases it, we must become "partakers of the Divine nature" if we would escape "the corruption that is in the world *through lust*." Our natural cravings are so strong and constant, and habit soon acquires so great a force in us, that nothing short of the energies of a Divine life in the soul will enable us to rule our cravings or to break from the bondage of habit. And this Divine life is offered to us in Christ Jesus, who took our nature upon Him, that "we might be filled with all the fulness of God."