

Father, in Thy Mysterious Presence

Samuel Johnson (1822-1882)

Father, in Thy mysterious presence kneeling,
Fain would our souls feel all Thy kindling love;
For we are weak, and need some deep revealing
Of Trust and Strength and Calmness from above.

Lord, we have wandered forth through doubt and sorrow,
And Thou hast made each step an onward one;
And we will ever trust each unknown morrow, —
Thou wilt sustain us till its work is done.

In the heart's depths a peace serene and holy
Abides, and when pain seems to have her will,
Or we despair, —O, may that peace rise slowly,
Stronger than agony, and we be still!

Now, Father, now, in Thy dear presence kneeling,
Our spirits yearn to feel Thy kindling love;
Now make us strong, we need Thy deep revealing
Of Trust and Strength and Calmness from above.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

The Progress of Temptation

Kevin T. Bauder

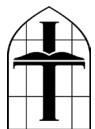
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Christians often make mistakes in the way that they think about temptation. On the one hand, they sometimes see any temptation as an evil in itself, as if to be tempted were already to commit the sin. On the other hand, they can think that temptation is merely the initial inducement to sin (or to sin again), which terminates with the sinning. In reality, initial temptations are less insidious than some suppose, while the later stages of temptation are far more sinister than many realize. Temptation occurs in a series of stages, each of which involves a growing element of implicatedness in the sin toward which one is being tempted. In the following paragraphs, I will summarize the stages of temptation, explaining how each stage brings one more deeply under the domination of the object of temptation.

The first stage of temptation is *inclination*. At this stage, an individual encounters the object of temptation and is somehow attracted toward it. Neither the object nor the attraction necessarily involves sin in itself. A person simply experiences a desire that cannot rightly be fulfilled under the circumstances. This most rudimentary form of temptation can even be glimpsed in the first temptation of Jesus: He was hungry, and He was tempted to create bread. The desire for food was not wrong, but it could not be fulfilled legitimately under the circumstances. When temptation is dealt with at this stage, no sin is committed.

If inclination is not resisted and dismissed, however, it leads to *consideration*. In this stage, an individual becomes preoccupied with the object of temptation. It is held before the mind's eye as an object of fascination or even of obsession. Rather than fleeing from the temptation, the person is now beginning to embrace it. This is the stage at which temptation begins to involve some element of sin, because our minds do not have to dwell upon the object of temptation. Indeed, rightly handled, temptation can become a signal to shift our thoughts to specific objects that are worthy of our consideration.

Unless it is interrupted, consideration will lead to *permission*. At some point, an individual decides that the object of temptation is worth embracing. The overt act has not yet occurred — indeed, it may never occur, for the indi-



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vidual may never encounter an occasion to follow through on the decision. Nevertheless, by ceding permission to the temptation, the individual is inwardly agreeing to commit the deed whenever it becomes possible. Often, some less obvious act may become a substitute for the full and obvious sin. As Jesus pointed out, character assassination is murder, lust is adultery, and loophole language is perjury. Once the decision is made, an individual is already implicated in the sin.

Naturally, permission is often followed by *participation*. This is the overt commission of the sin (or omission of the duty), no longer merely as a matter considered in the heart, but as a willful deed. Even for sins of attitude some transition takes place between consideration and participation. Some point exists at which an individual stops struggling against the forbidden attitude and indulges in it. Very often, participation represents a turning point in one's relationship to the sin. Once one has indulged in deliberate commission, the will is weakened and repeated instances of the sin become easier. Additional indulgence in the sin is likely to follow.

As indulgence continues, temptation moves to the level of *habituation*. As John Donne noted, inconstancy begets a constant habit. Each indulgence in the sin weakens the will, leading to further indulgence. Eventually, the sin becomes a regular part of life. As the sinner grows accustomed to the sin, it begins to seem normal. It becomes part of the sinner's environment. It becomes so transparent that it operates as a lens through which the sinner interprets reality. At this point, the individual is not merely a sinner, but a slave. The sin holds the sinner under bondage and begins to color everything.

The last and worst stage occurs when temptation turns into *identification*. The sin becomes so much a part of life that it begins to shape the sinner's identity. Sinners reach a point at which they begin to understand their selfhood in terms of their relationship to the object of temptation. It becomes part of them. They can no longer imagine living without the sin. If they lost it, they would no longer know who they were. The sin does not merely characterize their outer conduct, but even their inner frame of reference. At this point, trying to divest one's self of the sin feels very much like trying to kill one's self, for the sin has become part of one's identity.

One other stage may occur, though it occupies no particular place in the order of temptation. It is the step of *legitimation*. A person who legitimates a sin no longer sees it as a sin, but has found a way to justify it. This stage does not always occur. Many sinners know and acknowledge that they are sinning, even when they have progressed through the stage of identification. Still, some do attempt to vindicate themselves by finding a way to redefine the sin so that it is no longer sinful (at least in their own thinking).

Every temptation must be dealt with at the earliest possible stage. To wait

for later stages is to multiply exponentially the difficulty of resisting the sin. It is also to involve one's self increasingly with the sin itself. The first stage—inclination—brings with it no necessary guilt, but each of the succeeding stages involves growing participation in the sin. At no level is a sinner beyond the ability of God's grace to deliver, but to presume upon deliverance at some later stage is to put God to the test in the way that Jesus refused to do. Consequently, every Christian must seek God's grace early and employ those means that God has ordained for securing sanctification in the face of temptation.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
