



Russell D. Moore

TEMPTED
and
TRIED

TEMPTATION
and the
TRIUMPH of CHRIST



Tempted and Tried

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1

WRESTLING WITH DEMONS

Why Temptation Matters

So there I was, standing in a hotel lobby with a strange woman, a throbbing heartbeat, and a guilty conscience. In most ways it wasn't nearly as bad as it looks typed out on this page. But in lots of ways it was even worse. I didn't really do anything wrong—and certainly didn't set out to do anything wrong. But that was just the problem. Before I knew it, I was scared at how mindless I was about the whole scenario.

I'd gotten here kind of accidentally. My family and I were driving—through the state of Tennessee, I think—when one of those sudden rainstorms had emerged, the kind that brings the slick grime right up to the surface of the road and mucks up the windshield with smearing drops the wipers can't seem to keep up with. Even though we hadn't gotten nearly as far as I'd hoped, the rain just wasn't letting up. I pulled the minivan off the highway and left my family in the vehicle while I ran in to check for a vacancy in a chain hotel whose sign we'd seen through the storm.

I waited in line at the front desk. I was exhausted and irritated, mostly because of the rain and the almost Hindu-like mantra coming from the backseat—"Dad, he's hitting me"—repeated over and over and over again. My thoughts were clicking around

as I waited to check us in, moving from sermon ideas to budget numbers to parenting strategies.

The clerk, a young woman, gave an artificial pout and then a wink and a half smile, indicating she could tell it'd been a trying day. "Well, hey there," she said, and as soon as she said it I noticed she reminded me of a friend I'd known back in college. She had dimples in her cheeks, I think, and she tossed her hair back, holding it there in her hand for a minute as she checked on whether two adjoining rooms, one for my wife and me and one for the kids, would be available that night. When she called me by my first name, I felt a little jump in my stomach—like the feeling you get in the split second when the roller coaster creaks to the top of the pinnacle, just before you can see the drop in front of you. I started to ask, "How do you know my name?" before I realized she was reading my credit card.

As this woman waited for the credit card machine to rattle out my receipt and punch out my automated key, we talked about the rain outside and about how traffic was bad because of the ball game at the high school stadium down the road. She laughed at my little quips. She teased me about my soaking wet hair from running through the stormy weather. I felt like I was in college again, or maybe even in high school. I didn't have to judge between disputes over who had whose toys or explain how predestination and free will work together in the Bible. I didn't have to pay a mortgage or tell a faculty member he couldn't have a raise. And I liked it.

Just then I heard a word I never thought would terrify me, but it did, just that once. I heard "Daddy." And then I heard it again. "Daddy!" my three-year-old son Samuel cried out as he rode through the lobby in the luggage cart being pushed by his two older brothers. "Look at me!"

I did look at him and wiped a bead of sweat from my forehead as I realized I had completely forgotten that my family was waiting outside for me in the van. As I signed the credit card form, I noticed that my voice and body language toward the clerk had suddenly become a good bit more businesslike.

I felt as if I'd been caught doing something wrong, and it rattled me. As I pushed the luggage cart onto the elevator ("Benjamin, don't swing from that"; "No, Timothy, you can't have that 40-ounce Full Throttle energy drink from the vending machine"), I mentally reassured myself that everything was okay. I hadn't *done* anything; not even close. But for some reason I had paid attention to that woman, and worse, I hadn't noticed myself paying attention to her until my kids interrupted me.

Now on the one hand nothing happened. I hadn't—to use the biblical language for it—"lusted in my heart" for her. I'd just engaged in a minute of conversation. I'm afraid you'll think of me as some kind of leering, pervertlike preacher when, although I don't know all my own weaknesses, I don't think I'm particularly vulnerable at this point. I don't "check women out" as they pass by (and I roll my eyes when I see other men who do). Moreover, this woman's interest in me was nil. If she read about this, she would, I'm quite sure, not remember it. And if she did remember it, she would probably say, "You mean that little guy who looks like a cricket? Well, bless his heart."

But it scared me. I was scared not by what actually happened but by a glimpse into what could have happened. What if I hadn't been on a road trip with my family but on a business trip alone, as I often am? What if she'd been interested in me? For a moment, just a moment, I'd forgotten who I was, who I am. Husband. Pastor. Son. Christian. Daddy. I was struck by the thought, *It starts like this, doesn't it?* It starts as a series of innocent departures, gradually leading to something more and something more. What scares me even more is to wonder how many of those situations have happened in my life when I never had the clarifying moment of "waking up" to the horror around me. It scared me to think of how something like this could so seemingly naturally happen. What if I wasn't just accidentally winding up there in that hotel lobby at that exact point of exhaustion and irritability? What if I was being led?

A friend of mine heard me talk about my hotel lobby scare and pointed me to an older man in the faith who had written

of a strikingly similar situation, also with his child, several years before at a restaurant. After that I've found scores of men and women who have had similar moments of terror at looking behind the veil of their own temptations. My story was not unique, and neither is yours. There's something wild out there, and something wild in here.

The Bible locates this wildness in the universal tragedy of Eden, a tragedy the Spirit locates squarely in our own psyche as well as in history. Sure enough, the canon of Scripture shows us tracks of blood from the very edge of Eden outward. The biblical story immediately veers from Paradise to depictions of murder, drunkenness, incest, gang rape, polygamy, and on and on and on, right down to whatever's going on with you. But between our cosmic story and your personal story, there's Israel's story, holding the two together.

After Eden, God unveiled some hope through the calling of a man he named Abraham, "the father of many nations" (Rom. 4:17). It was through this man's line, the ancient oracles said, that God would bless all of the nations, that he'd restore the kingdom to the earth.

This all seemed to be on the verge of happening when God rescued Abraham's descendants, dramatically and publicly, from their tyranny by the Egyptian state. But then, just as tragically as in Eden, something happened in the desert. The kingdom of priests turned out to be not as far away from the enemy as they'd thought. There was wildness in the wilderness, still.

God called a series of warrior-kings, men of great renown who would fight enemies and hold back the wild. But, again, these kings also succumbed to the wildness inside themselves—to sexual anarchy, egoism, materialism, occultism—and the kingdom collapsed, again, to the wildness outside.

Then, in the fullness of time, Jesus arrived, preaching the good news of the kingdom of God. In three of the four Gospel accounts in the New Testament, we're told of a strange experience at the beginning of Jesus' public mission in which Jesus was led by the Spirit to be tempted by the Devil (Matt. 4:1–11;

Mark 1:12–13; Luke 4:1–13). He was away from his family and followers, out in a desert place in Judea; literally, he was in “the wilderness” or “the wild places.”

He went out there to meet his ancestors’ ancient foe—and ours—and to undo what had been done. If you will ever see the kingdom of God, it will be because of what happened under that desert moon, where the kingdoms approached each other, surveyed each other, and, long time coming, attacked each other.

Somehow the evil spirit of Eden appeared to Jesus. Poets and artists have speculated for centuries on what this must have looked or felt like. Did Jesus, like Eve before him, see the figure of a snake out there in the desert? Did Satan appear, as the apostle Paul warned us he could, as a glorious “angel of light” (2 Cor. 11:14)? Did he appear, as some icons and paintings depict, as a hideous goatlike monster bearing a tantalizing morsel in his hoof? Or did the Devil manifest himself, as he most often does to us, invisibly but with the painfully personal suggestiveness that disguises itself as one’s own thoughts? The Gospels don’t tell us. They simply tell us the Devil was there, and he was not silent.

Almost every world religion—and almost every backwater cult—has sensed that there are spiritual beings out there in the universe, including evil superintelligent beings that mean us harm. The gospel of Jesus Christ directly confronts this dark reality—in a way that often makes us contemporary Western people squirm.

In the beginning pages of Scripture, we are introduced to a cryptic hyperintelligent snake (Gen. 3:1), a being later identified as a dragon (Revelation 12), the chief of a race of rebel beings engaged in guerrilla warfare against the Most High God. These beings have sometimes been called “the Watchers.” Sometimes people have called them “gods.” Sometimes they’re called “demons” or “devils.” The Bible often calls them “rulers” or “principalities” and “powers.” The Christian church has confessed from the beginning that an old monster, known by many names but identified in the Bible as Satan, governs these creatures. How could a creature formed by a good deity become

so twisted into a monstrosity? That's not our story, and the Scripture doesn't tell us. The Bible describes evil, ultimately, as "the mystery of lawlessness" (2 Thess. 2:7), and we really shouldn't poke about too much in what we cannot comprehend.

In order for Jesus to proclaim the kingdom of God, he needed also to point out why the world that God created was anything other than his kingdom anyway. Jesus, like the prophets before him, showed us that the cosmic order was hijacked millennia ago by these "rulers" and "authorities" (Eph. 6:12). Jesus in his taking on of our nature, offering himself up in death as a sacrifice for our sins, and turning back the curse of death in his resurrection, has ended the claim these demonic powers have on the universe. These powers don't want to give up their dark reign, so they are lashing back, and with fury. This means war.

The sheer animal force of temptation ought to remind us of something: the universe is demon haunted. It also ought to remind us there's only one among us who has ever wrestled the demons and prevailed.

The temptations of Jesus in the desert show us what kind of strategies the powers will use on us. While I was writing this book, I heard an elderly pastor reflect that over half of the confessions of sin he hears from people these days were physically impossible when he started his ministry. There's a lot of truth to that. Saint Augustine never had to counsel, as I have, a wife whose husband has decided he wants to be a woman. Thomas Aquinas didn't have to speak to the issue of compulsive electronic gaming. And the list could go on and on.

But none of these are new temptations, just newer ways of surrendering to old temptations. The temptations themselves are, as the Scripture puts it, "common to man" (1 Cor. 10:13), and in Jesus' desert testing we see how true this is. Here the Scriptures identify for us the universal strategies of temptation. You will be tempted exactly as Jesus was, because Jesus was being tempted exactly as we are. You will be tempted with consumption, security, and status. You will be tempted to provide for yourself, to protect yourself, and to exalt yourself. And

at the core of these three is a common impulse—to cast off the fatherhood of God.

As we'll discuss later, God's fatherhood is embedded in pictures we see all around us in the creation order, especially in our human nature. In some ways a human father is, essentially, a second parent, doing some of the same functions and callings as a mother in the raising of children. But there are important distinctions, too, in most human cultures' understanding of what it means to be a father. Most human peoples have seen fathers as bearing a unique role in provision, protection, and the passing on of an inheritance (whether through a literal inheritance or simply through the role modeling of what it means to make a future for oneself).¹ This isn't to say that fathers—or biological parents—are the exclusive carriers of those roles. It is only to say that these archetypes of fatherhood, expressing themselves in various ways, show up repeatedly in human civilization. Some would attribute this to evolutionary natural selection. I would argue, instead, that this ideal of fatherhood persists because of something distinctively true about the fatherhood of God in his care, discipline, and husbandry of his creation and his creatures.

Temptation is so strong in our lives precisely because it's not about us. Temptation is an assault by the demonic powers on the rival empire of the Messiah. That's why conversion to Christ doesn't diminish the power of temptation—as we often assume—but actually, counterintuitively, ratchets it up. If you bear the Spirit of the One the powers rage against, they will seek to tear down the icon of the Crucified they see embedded in you (1 Pet. 4:14; Rev. 12:17). Ultimately, the agony of temptation is not about you or me. We're targeted because we resemble Jesus, our firstborn brother. We all, whether believers or not, bear some resemblance to Jesus because we share with him a human nature in the image of God. As we come to find peace with God through Jesus, though, we begin a journey of being conformed more and more into the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29). The demons shriek in the increasing glory of that light, and they'll seek even more frenetically to put it out of their sight.

TEMPTED *and* TRIED

When I say that we share common temptations, don't get me wrong. I am not saying that we all experience this temptation in precisely the same way. You may never find yourself in the situation I did in the hotel lobby, or anything like it. I don't know what's wrong with you. Maybe you tear up when you think about the words you screamed at your kids this morning. Maybe you've deleted the history cache of your computer this week, promising yourself you'll never access those images again. Maybe you carry that empty snack bag with you in your purse to throw away later so the people in your office won't see it in the wastebasket. Maybe the prescription drugs in your desk drawer right now are the only things keeping you sane, but you fear they're making you crazy. Maybe you just can't stop thinking about the smell of your coworker's hair or the clink of the whiskey glass at the table nearby.

Maybe what you're tempted to do is so wild that my publisher wouldn't allow me to print it here, or maybe it's so tame that I wouldn't even think to mention it. I don't know. But I think I know what's behind it all.

You are being tempted right now, and so am I. Most of the time we don't even know it. And in every one of those moments we want either to overestimate or underestimate the power of that temptation. We overestimate it by thinking something along the lines of, "I have these feelings, so therefore I'm predestined to be this kind of person." We underestimate it by thinking something along the lines of, "I'm not tempted to do anything terrible—like adultery or murder. I'm just struggling with this small thing—bitterness over my infertility."

The gospel, though, brings good news to tempted rebels like us. Just as our temptation is part of a larger story, so is our exit strategy from its power. The same Spirit who led Jesus through the wilderness and empowered him to overcome the Evil One now surges through all of us who are joined by faith to Jesus. We overcome temptation the same way he did, by trusting in our Father and hearing his voice.

The danger we face presently isn't cognitive but primal. The

demons are thinkers. They know who God is, and they tremble before that truth (James 2:19). Mere intellect cannot ensure that we are “led not into temptation” or “delivered from evil.” Only “faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6) can do that. We are not simply overcoming something about human psychology. We’re wrestling against the cosmic powers (Eph. 6:12), grappling with an animal-like spirit intent on devouring us (1 Pet. 5:8).

This isn’t a self-help guide, promising to do for temptation what a diet manual promises to do for obesity. Some of you reading this now will recognize the good news of what’s written here, and you’ll abandon it all for an orgasm or an ego. But maybe some of you who believe yourselves to be freaks of nature will cast that burden off as you see a Christ who identified himself with you even in temptation. Ask for what you want, and you’ll find what you’re looking for (Matt. 7:7–8).

Times like this call for the kind of desperation that ought to drive us to the only place we can find refuge—the spike-scabbed arms of Jesus of Nazareth. “Tempted and tried, we’re oft made to wonder,” the old gospel song says, “why it should be thus all the day long.” This book won’t remove the mystery of iniquity, but I pray it will rekindle the wonder. Before we can see what’s really going on in the wilderness out there—and in the wilderness in our own hearts—we’ll have to listen, again, to “the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1).

At the core of the gospel message is Jesus, who was tempted and tried in every way we are but who was never anything but triumphant. He is a high priest who shares our nature, who can pray for us and with us. He is, as God announced right before his testing, the “beloved Son” of God. But he is not by himself. He is “the firstborn,” to be sure, but he is “the firstborn among many brothers” (Rom. 8:29). Because we have a sympathetic High Priest, tempted in every way as we are, we are able then “with confidence [to] draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16). And what are we to pray? “Your kingdom come, your will

be done. . . . Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” (Matt. 6:9–13 NIV).

Quite simply, following Jesus isn’t just a metaphor. His first disciples literally “followed” after him all across the map of first-century Palestine. Jesus told them, “Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward” (John 13:36). He says the same to all of us who have recognized him in the two thousand years since. We will “suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him” (Rom. 8:17). This “suffering” the Bible speaks of isn’t only political persecution or social marginalization or difficult circumstances, as we often tend to think. It is also the suffering of temptation, as God walks us through the place of the powers.

Author Barbara Brown Taylor recounts going to a seminar where a presenter talked about taking student groups out into the wilderness to experience in hiking and rafting “the untamed holiness of the wild.” Brown writes that a participant raised his hand and asked whether “there are predators in those places who are above you on the food chain.” The wilderness guide said that there weren’t, of course, because he wouldn’t take his students to a place where they would be so jeopardized. “I wouldn’t either,” the audience member replied, “but don’t lull them into thinking that they have experienced true wilderness. It’s only wilderness if there’s something out there that can eat you.”² There’s some wisdom there. For Jesus, there was something dark and ancient and predatory out there in the desert.

Where we join Jesus in temptation won’t usually look as scary to us. We’ll meet our temptations in a hotel lobby or at the breakfast table or in the break room at work. But it’s just as wild and just as perilous. And there, in a thousand different places, we will face temptation in every one of the ways Jesus first faced it in that demon-haunted wasteland. If we have eyes to see, we’ll recognize that we’re wandering toward the desert place even now. The Spirit will take us through the same path he took with our Elder Brother, right through the place of the Devil’s reign. But we are not there by accident, and we are not alone.

“I’ve read many good books on dealing with temptation but this one stands out in a class by itself. I can guarantee that your spiritual health will benefit greatly from giving serious attention to this book. It will help you not only understand how temptation works, but how to defeat it.”

RICK WARREN, Pastor, Saddleback Church, Lake Forest, California;
author, *The Purpose Driven Life*

“Russell Moore is that rare author whose skills as a writer are matched by his theological and biblical substance. This book is realistic and honest about sin and evil, but more than anything it gloriously sets forth Jesus as the Devil-smashing Victor that he is.”

JOSHUA HARRIS, Senior Pastor, Covenant Life Church, Gaithersburg,
Maryland; author, *Dug Down Deep*

“Carefully examines the sinfulness of our hearts, biblically exposes the strategies of our Adversary, and ultimately exalts the Savior who alone has conquered sin and death.”

DAVID PLATT, Senior Pastor, The Church at Brook Hills, Birmingham,
Alabama; author, *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the
American Dream*

“Helps us all deal with the daily temptations of life and triumph in Christ. No believer serious about encountering temptation should miss this book.”

PAIGE PATTERSON, President, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary,
Fort Worth, Texas

“Russell Moore is a riveting writer, and you won’t have to read this book for long before you also find out that he knows some things that you need to know about the deceitfulness of our hearts, the trials of temptation, the schemes of the Tempter, and the power and grace of the Savior. Read it. Search your heart. Pray for grace. And join the fight.”

LIGON DUNCAN, Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Jackson,
Mississippi

RUSSELL D. MOORE is the dean of the School of Theology and senior vice president for academic administration at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. He also serves as a preaching pastor at Highview Baptist Church. He and his wife, Maria, have four sons.

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