

## WELCOME TO TEMPTATION ISLAND

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

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**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

I probably will never see *Temptation Island* because the Fox channel cancelled it as of Valentine's Day. Since September 11 viewing dropped off dramatically. People found the show trivial compared to real-life events. *Temptation Island* took unmarried couples to a Caribbean resort, split them up for two weeks and surrounded them with attractive prospective partners. After two weeks contestants could choose to stay with their existing partner or go off with someone more attractive. Even secular analysts said that *Temptation Island* trivialized temptation. Emphasis on sexual temptation can blindside us to equally dangerous temptations to pride, covetousness, envy, gluttony, anger, and despair. Two stories in the Bible give us a profound look at temptation. In the Old Testament, Eve was tempted to eat the forbidden fruit. In the New Testament the Tempter came to Jesus in the wilderness. Don't write these stories off as myths. They teach profound lessons about temptation. *you might want to get down real. hum...*

Lesson one: *We're more vulnerable to temptation when we're alone.* Jesus was alone when the Devil came. The Tempter often comes when we're alone. When we travel alone on business we're tempted to do things we wouldn't dare at home where everyone knows us. When we're alone and lonely we're prone to gluttony, covetousness, and depression. Alone with our thoughts, we can become self-righteous. We plan revenge against people we don't like. I realize that sometimes we must be alone. Sometimes we choose to be alone for good reasons as Jesus did. It's not a sin to be alone or enjoy solitude. But I also remember that God said of Adam, "It's not good for the man to be alone." Too much solitude may lead us into temptation. When we're alone the Tempter finds us vulnerable.

Lesson Two: *God wants us to help each other overcome temptations.* We're more successful in overcoming temptation when we're accountable to others. *Alcoholics Anonymous* achieves success because most people can't overcome their temptation to drink by themselves. People join *Weight Watchers* because it's easier to deal with our temptation to overeat if we're accountable to other people. People find depression and grief easier to deal with if they talk with others. God created us to help one another overcome temptations. But Adam failed when he could have helped Eve. Although the Tempter addressed Eve, the story says that Adam was *with her*. The Hebrew for *with her* means *right there, elbow to elbow*. Adam isn't away in another part of the garden. He's standing right there watching as his wife is tempted. He does nothing to warn or protect her. He refuses to get involved and ends up being complicit. Untold evil flows like a river into the world when good people stand by and do nothing when others are struggling with terrible temptation. God created us to help one another overcome our temptations.

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Lesson Three: *We're more vulnerable to temptation when we're weak.* Jesus was in a weakened state after he had fasted forty days. It was then that the Tempter came to him. When we get run down physically; when we deal with energy draining stress day after day; when we worry constantly about our marriage, job, or children; when criticism weakens us we become extremely vulnerable to all kinds of temptation. When we're weak we're more likely to express our anger in destructive ways; we're more likely to envy our neighbor's good fortune; we're more likely to become depressed. We're most vulnerable to temptation when we're weak.

Lesson Four: *The Tempter presents sin in an attractive package.* "When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate." The Tempter didn't say to Eve, "How'd you like to get kicked out of the Garden, have Adam dominate you, experience pain in child birth

and be ashamed of your body?" The drug pusher doesn't say, "How'd you like to become an addict and die in a gutter?" The Tempter doesn't ask the fifteen-year-old couple, "How'd you like to be responsible for raising a kid for the next 20 years?" The Tempter didn't say to Enron officials, "Let me show you how to ruin your reputation and go to jail?" The Tempter offers us a free Visa and encourages us to max it out. Charge now. Pay later. The Tempter introduces himself as *a man of wealth and taste*. He never discloses his true nature. He makes sin look so attractive and deceives us about the painful consequences of our bad choices.

Lesson Five: *Temptation is the price we pay for our ability to make choices.* Behavioral psychologist B.F. Skinner would disagree and say that we have no freedom or dignity and that all choices are illusory. John Calvin was right to remind us that our freedom is limited. But Christians have always believed that we have an incredible ability to make choices. Most creatures act on instinct. We choose our destiny. God didn't create a risk free world. Unlike some hyper-controlling parents who take away every element of choice they can from their children, God gave Adam and Eve a remarkable choice. God took a staggering risk when he created Adam and Eve as free moral agents. He didn't make them obey. God is a Parent who has allowed his prodigal sons and daughters to go into the far country. Temptation is the price we pay for freedom.

Lesson Six: *The Tempter quotes Scripture to make temptation more attractive to religious people.* The Tempter knows the Bible far better than most Presbyterians. He quoted the Bible to Jesus in an effort to get him to throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple. The Devil continues to use Scripture to justify terrorist attacks, slavery, the domination of women, countless wars, religious bigotry, the oppression of workers, the abuse of children, the persecution of gays and the list goes on and on. The Tempter is neither an atheist nor an

agnostic. He's a true believer and he loves to argue theology. He's often heard saying, "The Bible says...." So we religious people must be wary of how the Tempter manipulates religion and quotes the Bible in an effort to get us to make bad choices. That means that we must grow in our knowledge and understanding of Holy Scripture.

I hope these six lessons help us when the Tempter confronts us. I hope they point us to ways we might achieve substantial victory over temptation.

There's a temptation scene near the end of the movie *Indian Jones and the Last Crusade*. Indian Jones must find the Holy Grail, the cup Jesus used at the Last Supper. Only the Holy Grail can cure his father's mortal wound. His search leads him to a cave where he finds the Holy Grail but it's surrounded by many false holy grails. The true Grail promises life but the false grails lead to death. He must choose wisely. Jones is tempted to choose gold and silver chalices incrustated with rubies. Instead he chooses a plain wooden chalice. He chooses wisely and is able to save his father. All of us are faced with equally momentous temptations. Some choices lead eventually to spiritual and physical death. The choices we make are so important. I urge you to choose wisely. Choose your friends, your marriage partner, your vocation, and, above all, choose your God wisely. Our choices have eternal consequences.

*Almighty God, your Son fasted forty days in the wilderness, and was tempted as we are but did not sin. Give us grace to direct our lives in obedience to your Spirit, that as you know our weakness, so we may know your power to save; through Jesus Christ our Redeemer, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*