

THE
WORKS
OF
THE REV . JOHN NEWTON

LATE RECTOR OF THE UNITED PARISHES OF
ST. MARY WOOLNOTH AND ST. MARY WOOLCHURCH-HAW,
LOMBARD STREET, LONDON.

CONTAINING
AN AUTHENTIC NARRATIVE, &C., LETTERS ON RELIGIOUS SUBJECTS, CARDIPHONIA,
DISCOURSES INTENDED FOR THE PULPIT,
SERMONS PREACHED IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF OLNEY,
A REVIEW OF ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY, OLNEY HYMNS, POEMS,
MESSIAH, OCCASIONAL SERMONS, AND TRACTS.

TO WHICH ARE PREFIXED
MEMOIRS OF HIS LIFE, &c.

BY THE REV. R. CECIL, A. M.

COMPLETE IN ONE VOLUME.

EDINBURGH

Printed at the University Press, for

PETER BROWN AND THOMAS NELSON.

1830.

LETTER XIV.

ON TEMPTATION.

DEAR SIR,

WHAT can you expect from me on the subject of temptation, with which you have been so much more conversant than myself? On this point I am more disposed to receive information from you, than to offer my advice. You, by the Lord's appointment, have had much business and exercise on these great waters; whereas the knowledge I have of what passes there, I have gained more from observation than from actual experience. I shall not wonder, if you think I write like a novice; however, your request has the force of a command with me. I shall give you my thoughts, or rather shall take occasion to write, not so much to you as to others, who, though they may be plunged in the depths of temptation, have not yet seen so much of the wisdom and power of God in these dispensations as yourself. I shall first inquire, why the Lord permits some of his people to suffer such violent assaults from the powers of darkness; and then suggest a few advices to tempted souls.

The temptations of Satan (which, though not the most painful, are in reality the most dangerous) do not directly belong to my present design. I mean those by which he is too successful in drawing many professors from the path of duty, in filling them with spiritual pride, or lulling them into carnal security. In these attempts, he is often most powerful and prevalent when he is least perceived. He seldom distresses those whom he can deceive. It is chiefly when these endeavours fail, that he fights against the peace of the soul. He hates the Lord's people, grudges them all their privileges and all their comforts; and will do what he can to disquiet them, because he cannot prevail against them. And though the Lord sets such bounds to his rage as he cannot pass, and limits him both as to manner and time, he is often pleased to suffer him to discover his malice to a considerable degree; not to gratify Satan, but to humble and prove them; to show them what is in their hearts, to make them truly sensible of their immediate and absolute dependence upon himself, and to quicken them to watchfulness and prayer. Though temptations, in their own nature, are grievous and dreadful, yet, when, by the grace of God, they are productive of these effects, they deserve to be numbered among the "all things," which are appointed to work together for the good of those who love him. The light carriage, vain confidence, and woeful backslidings of many professors, might, perhaps (speaking after the manner of men), have been in some measure prevented, had they been more acquainted with this spiritual warfare, and had they drunk of the cup of temptation, which but few of those who walk humbly and uprightly are exempted from tasting of, though not all in the same degree. One gracious end, therefore, that the Lord has in permitting his people to be tempted, is for the prevention of greater evils, that they may not grow proud or careless, or be ensnared by the corrupt customs of the world. In this view, I doubt not, however burdensome your trials may at some seasons prove, you are enabled, by your composed judgment, to rejoice in them, and be thankful for them. You know what you suffer now; but you know not what might have

been the consequence, if you had never smarted by the fiery darts of the wicked one. You might have been taken in a more fatal snare, and been numbered with those who, by their grievous declensions and falls, have caused the ways of truth to be evil spoken of.

Another design is, for the manifestation of his power, and wisdom, and grace, in supporting the soul under such pressures as are evidently beyond its own strength to sustain. A bush on fire, and not consumed, engaged the attention of Moses. This emblem is generally applicable to the state of a Christian in the present life; but never more so than when he is in the fire of temptation. And though his heaviest sufferings of this kind are usually hidden from the notice of his fellow-creatures, yet there are other eyes always upon him. "We are," says the apostle, "a spectacle to the world;" not only to men, but to angels also. Many things probably pass in the invisible state, in which we have a nearer concernment than we are ordinarily aware of. The beginning of the book of Job throws some light upon this point, and informs us (of which we should have been otherwise totally ignorant) of the true source of his uncommon sufferings. Satan had challenged him, charged him as a hypocrite, and thought he was able to prove him one, if he could have permission to attack him. The Lord, for the vindication of Job's integrity, and for the manifestation of his own faithfulness and power in favour of his servant, was pleased to give Satan leave to try what he could do. The experiment answered many good purposes; Job was humbled, yet approved; his friends were instructed; Satan was confuted and disappointed; and the wisdom and mercy of the Lord, in his darkest dispensations towards his people, were gloriously illustrated. This contest, and the event, were recorded for the direction and encouragement of his church to the end of time. Satan's malice is not abated; and though he has met with millions of disappointments, he still, like Goliath of old, defies the armies of God's Israel; he challenges the stoutest, and "desires to have them, that he may sift them as wheat." Indeed, he is far an overmatch for them, considered as in themselves; but though they are weak, their Redeemer is mighty, and they are for ever secured by his love and intercession. "The Lord knows them that are his," and no weapon formed against them can prosper. That this may appear with the fullest evidence, Satan is allowed to assault them. We handle vessels of glass or china with caution, and endeavour to preserve them from falls and blows, because we know they are easily broken. But if a man had the art of making glass malleable, and, like iron, capable of bearing the stroke of a hammer without breaking, it is probable, that instead of locking it carefully up, he would rather, for the commendation of his skill, permit many to attempt to break it, when he knew their attempts would be in vain. Believers are compared to earthen vessels, liable in themselves to be destroyed by a small blow; but they are so strengthened and tempered by the power and supply of divine grace, that the fiercest efforts of their fiercest enemies against them may be compared to the dashing of waves against a rock. And that this may be known and noticed, they are exposed to many trials; but the united and repeated assaults of the men of the world, and the powers of darkness, afford but the more incontestable demonstration, that the Lord is with them of a truth, and that his strength is made perfect in their weakness. Surely this thought, my friend, will afford you consolation; and you will be content to suffer,

if God may be glorified by you and in you.

Farther, by enduring temptation, you, as a living member of the body of Christ, have the honour of being conformed to your head. He suffered, being tempted; and because he loves you, he calls you to a participation of his sufferings, and to taste of his cup; not the cup of the wrath of God; this he drank alone, and he drank it all. But in affliction he allows his people to have fellow-ship with him. Thus they fill up the measure of his sufferings, and can say, "As he was, so are we in the world." Marvel not that the world hates you, neither marvel that Satan rages against you. Should not the disciple be as his Lord? Can the servant expect or desire peace from the avowed enemies of his Master? We are to follow his steps; and can we wish, if it were possible, to walk in a path strewed with flowers, when his was strewed with thorns? Let us be in nothing terrified by the power of our adversaries, which is to them an evident token of perdition, but to us of salvation, and that of God. To us it is given, not only to believe in Christ, but also to suffer for his sake. If we would make peace with the world, the world would let us alone; if we would be content to walk in the ways of sin, Satan would give us no disturbance; but because grace has rescued us from his dominion, and the love of Jesus constrains us to live to him alone, therefore the enemy, like a lion robbed of his prey, roars against us. He roars, but he cannot devour; he plots and rages, but he cannot prevail; he disquiets, but he cannot destroy. If we suffer with Christ, we shall also reign with him. In due time he will bruise Satan under our feet, make us more than conquerors, and place us where we shall hear the voice of war no more for ever.

Again, as by temptations we are conformed to the life of Christ, so likewise, by the sanctifying power of grace, they are made subservient to advance our conformity to his image; particularly as we thereby acquire a sympathy and fellow-feeling with our suffering brethren. This is eminently a branch of the mind that was in Christ. He knows how to pity and help those who are tempted, because he has been tempted himself. He knows what temptations mean, not only with that knowledge whereby he knows all things, but by experience. He well remembers what he endured in the wilderness and in the garden; and though it is for his glory and our comfort that he suffered temptation without sin, yet, for that very reason, and because he was perfectly holy, the temptations of Satan were unspeakably more bitter to him than they can be to us. The great duty and refuge of the tempted now is, to apply to him, and they have the highest encouragement to do so, in that they are assured he is touched with a feeling of our infirmities. And, for the like reason, they find some consolation in applying to those of their brethren who have suffered the same things. None but these can either understand or pity their complaints. If the Lord has any children who are not exercised with spiritual temptations, I am sure they are but poorly qualified to "speak a word in season to them that are weary." In this school you have acquired the tongue of the learned; and let it not seem a small thing to you, if the Lord has given you wisdom and ability to comfort the afflicted ones. If your prayers, your conversation, and the knowledge they have of your trials, afford them some relief in a dark hour, this is an honour and a privilege which I am persuaded you will think you have not purchased too dear by all that you have endured.

Once more, temptations, by giving us a painful sensibility of the weakness of our graces, and the strength of our inward corruptions, tend to mortify the evil principles of self-dependence and self-righteousness, which are so deeply rooted in our fallen nature; to make Christ, in all his relations, offices, and characters, more precious to us; and to convince us, that without him we can do nothing. It would be easy to enlarge upon these and other advantages which the Lord enables his people to derive from the things which they suffer; so that they may say, with Samson, "Out of the eater comes forth meat;" and that what their adversary designs for their overthrow, contributes to their establishment. But I have already exceeded my limits. Enough I hope has been said to prove, that he has wise and gracious ends in permitting them, for a season, to be tossed with tempest, and not comforted. Before long these designs will be more fully unfolded to us; and we shall be satisfied that he has done all things well. In the meanwhile it is our duty, and will be much for our comfort, to believe it upon the authority of his word.

I should now proceed to offer some advices to those who are tempted; but I am ready to say, To what purpose? When the enemy comes in like a flood; when the very foundations of hope are attacked; when suspicions are raised in the mind, not only concerning an interest in the promises, but concerning the truth of the scripture itself; when a dark cloud blots out, not only the sense, but almost the remembrance of past comforts; when the mind is overwhelmed with torrents of blasphemous, unclean, or monstrous imaginations, things horrible and unutterable; when the fiery darts of Satan have set the corruptions of the heart in a flame; at such a season a person is little disposed or able to listen to advice. I shall, however, mention some things by which ordinarily Satan maintains his advantage against them in these circumstances, that they may be upon their guard as much as possible.

His principal devices are:

1. To hide from them the Lord's designs, in permitting him thus to rage. Some of these I have noticed; and they should endeavour to keep them upon their minds. It is hard for them, during the violence of the storm, to conceive that any good can possibly arise from the experience of so much evil. But when the storm is over, they find that the Lord is still mindful of them. Now, though a young soldier may well be startled at the first onset in the field of battle, it seems possible, that those who have been often engaged, should at length gain confidence from the recollection of the many instances in which they have formerly found, by the event, that the Lord was surely with them in the like difficulties, and that their fears were only groundless and imaginary. When the warfare is hottest, they have still reason to say, "Hope thou in God; for I shall yet praise him."

2. To make them utter impatient speeches, which do but aggravate their distress. It is said of Job, under his first trials, "In all this he sinned not with his lips, nor charged God foolishly." So long Satan was unable to prevail. Afterwards he opened his mouth, as Jeremiah did likewise, and cursed the day of his birth. When he once began to complain, his causes of complaint increased. We cannot prevent dreadful thoughts from arising in our hearts; but we should be cautious of giving them vent, by speaking unadvisedly. This is like letting in wind upon a smothering fire, which will make it burn more fiercely.

3. To persuade them that all they feel and tremble at, arises immediately from

their own hearts. Indeed, it is a most awful proof of our depravity, that we feel something within ready to close with the suggestions of the enemy, in defiance of our better judgment and desires. But it is not so in all cases. It is not always easy, nor is it needful, exactly to draw the line between the temptations of Satan and our own corruptions; but sometimes it is not impossible to distinguish them. When a child of God is tempted to blaspheme the name that he adores, or to commit such evils as even unsanctified nature would recoil at; the enemy has done it, and shall be answerable for the whole guilt. The soul, in this case, is passive, and suffers with extreme reluctance, what it more dreads than the greatest evils which can affect the body. Nor do the deepest wounds of this kind leave a scar upon the conscience, when the storm is over; which is a proof that they are not our own act.

4. To drive them from the throne of grace. Prayer, which is at all times necessary, is so in a time of temptation. But how hard is it to come boldly, that we may obtain help in this time of need! But, however hard, it must be attempted. By discontinuing prayer, we give the enemy the greatest encouragement possible; for then he sees that his temptations have the effect which he intends by them, to intercept us from our stronghold. When our Lord was in an agony, he prayed the most earnestly; the ardour of his prayer increased with the distress of his soul. It would be happy if we could always imitate him in this; but too often temptations and difficulties, instead of rousing our application, disheartens and enfeebles us; so that our cries are the faintest when we stand most in need of assistance. But, so long as prayer is restrained, our burden is increased, Psalm: xxxii. 3, 5. If he cannot make them omit from praying, he will repeatedly endeavour to weary them, by working upon the legality which cleaves so close to the heart. Satan is a hard task-master, when he interferes in the performance of our spiritual duties. This he does, perhaps, more frequently than we think of; for he can, if it serves his purpose, appear as an angel of light. When the soul is in a tempest, and attempts to pray, he will suggest, that prayer on these occasions should be protracted to such a length, and performed with such steadiness, as is found to be at that season quite impracticable. Such constrained efforts are wearisome; and from the manner of the performance, he takes occasion to fix fresh guilt upon the conscience. Short, frequent, and fervent petitions, which will almost necessarily arise from what is felt when temptation is violent, are best suited to the case; and we need not add to the burden, by tasking ourselves beyond our power, as if we expected to be heard for our much speaking. Blessed be God, that we fight with an enemy already vanquished by our Lord, and that we have a sure promise of victory. The Lord is our banner.

I am, &c.