

BY JOHN BRADSHAW



WHEN THE LION ROARS

**HOW TO OVERCOME
TEMPTATION**

WHEN THE LION ROARS

HOW TO OVERCOME TEMPTATION

Early one morning on my way to start my paper route, I noticed the large window of Mr. Rye's jeweler's store had been smashed. Several watches had been stolen, but many more had been left behind.

I sat on my bike looking at the beautiful watches. The beautiful, *accessible* watches. It was still dark, there was no one around, and no alarm was sounding.

It dawned on me that I now had a golden opportunity to "own" my very own men's gold wristwatch.

The temptation to steal one of the watches was overwhelming! To prove to myself I could

actually get away with taking a watch, I reached my hand through the broken window and held it above one of the nicest watches I had seen.

I knew it was wrong to steal, but I couldn't stop thinking about how wonderful it would be to have one of the very watches I had been admiring for months.

Every person alive is confronted by temptation, whether it be the temptation to steal, to cheat on a test, or to covet something belonging to your neighbor. While people are tempted in different ways, temptation is part of everyday life.

All sin begins with temptation. James wrote, "But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed" (James 1:14). James leaves us in no doubt about how serious temptation is. "Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death" (James 1:15). "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23), and sin begins with temptation.

So if a person can learn how to deal successfully with temptation, that person can learn

how to avoid sin and eternal death. It might be that the world is facing greater temptation—and temptations—than ever before. The Internet makes it possible to access sin at any time from virtually anywhere on the planet.¹ Temptation finds its way into approximately 97% of American and Canadian homes via television,² and the liberalization of generally accepted social standards means that many things that were taboo a generation or two ago are tolerated today. There are fewer “no can dos” and more “go right aheads.” And with a greater proportion of the population living in cities, more people can be exposed to temptation more quickly.

What makes temptation especially pervasive and powerful is that it doesn't rely only on external forces. Temptation can come from *within*. It can exist in the mind independent of outside influences. This is why David prayed

1 The Internet began to make a real impact in the world in 1995.

2 Household television ownership in the United Kingdom is close to 95%.

in Psalm 139:23–24 (KJV), “Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts. And see if there be any wicked way in me.” David knew sin was as much an internal issue as an external issue. He understood the power of temptation.

The history of the world would have been dramatically different had Adam and Eve said “no” to temptation in the Garden of Eden. But saying “no” to temptation isn’t always easy. Denying temptation can be extremely difficult.

The Bible says that “the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Peter 5:8). Satan devours his prey by first enticing people to sin, through temptation. You’d think that as well understood as the power of temptation is—and how disastrous its results so frequently are—temptation would be fended off more vigorously and successfully. My own encounter with lions helped me understand why it isn’t.

While filming an *It Is Written* television program at Antelope Park, just outside Gweru in Central Zimbabwe, I had the opportunity



to walk with a pair of male lions. While the lions were accustomed to interacting with their handlers, they were far from what you'd call "tame." Tourists on a previous lion walk were shocked when the lions with which they were walking suddenly—and without warning—raced away from them and took down a zebra. I knew that walking with these lions was potentially hazardous.

I was given strict instructions, a stick "to show them who's boss!" I was terrified when I saw two 20-month-old male lions walking towards me in a vast open field. There was nowhere to run, and nowhere to hide.

But a remarkable thing happened. Within minutes I was completely comfortable in the presence of a pair of powerful lions. I walked the trail between the two of them patting and scratching them on the back, and holding them by the tail. It took only a few short minutes before I was entirely at ease in the presence of man-eaters.

The same thing happens with the devil. When temptation first comes in the form of



certain vices or practices it isn't difficult to see them as the destructive forces they are. But in time—often, a remarkably short time—a person can see sin as much less harmful than it is. It's easy to become lackadaisical about sin, to let your guard down, to fail to see it as being toxic. Jesus said to His disciples in Mark 14:38, "Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation." Peter said that in view of the threat posed by Satan, the roaring lion, we should be "sober" and "vigilant" (1 Peter 5:8).

It has often been said, "The temptation was just too strong for me." But that is a statement that need never be true. How can a person overcome temptation, and not be overcome *by* temptation?

It must be understood that temptation is not sin. James explained that while temptation leads to sin, temptation itself is not sin. That's not to say a person should be cavalier or careless about temptation. The opposite is true. Jesus taught us to pray to His Father that He "lead us not into temptation" (Matthew 6:13).

Temptation is a minefield. A wrong step can result in disaster.

Because temptation can lead to spiritual ruin, the best thing a person can do is try to avoid temptation as far as possible. A vigilant person wouldn't leave his or her car or home unlocked, especially in a rough part of town. We protect that which is valuable.

Your heart—your eternal salvation—is more precious than anything else in the world and should be carefully protected. Just as a mother bear would protect her cubs at the first sign of danger, a heart should be protected from harmful spiritual influences.

Television, movies, music, and the Internet should be consumed with careful thought. The Psalmist wrote, "I will set no wicked thing before my eyes" (Psalm 101:3). Paul wrote to the Corinthian church that by beholding we become changed (2 Corinthians 3:18). We are molded by that which we focus on, and we become like that which we view or consume. A person who finds cable television too great a temptation to control would be wise to cancel

his or her cable subscription. Anyone who can't keep away from harmful websites should either install effective blocking software or no longer access the Internet. Anyone who finds alcohol a temptation should stay out of bars and nightclubs.

Sometimes, people or associates are a temptation. It is better to find new friends and be saved than to maintain existing friendships and be lost. Anyone who has raised a garden knows how important it is to keep weeds from growing among the plants being cultivated. But it's possible to do everything in your power to keep weeds out of your garden, only to have them grow persistently because of seeds that blow in from a neighbor's property. Sometimes, a change of location is needed to keep temptation from growing into a harvest of sin in your life.

Jesus said in Matthew 5:30, "And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell." That is, if

something—or someone—in your life is causing you to stumble, it is better to get that thing (or person) out of your life than to allow it to cause you to be dragged into sin. Even though modifying your life might cause discomfort, it is far better to endure that discomfort than to choose what seems to be an easier, but ultimately destructive, path.

Where a person lives can be a major factor in the way temptation affects that person's life. Children raised in the country may encounter much less temptation than children raised amid the bright lights and the hustle and bustle of a major city.

Yet in spite of being raised in a bad town, Jesus never fell into sin. Nazareth was so corrupt that one of Jesus' disciples expressed doubt that anything good could come out of Nazareth (John 1:46), which tells us a person who lives in the inner city is entirely as able as a person living in a remote country setting to live a life of victory. While one setting may be more conducive than another to successful Christian living, the grace of God is able to

keep secure any soul who follows God's leading, irrespective of location or environment.

It is imperative to remember that sin is not the inevitable consequence of temptation. The old saying, "The devil made me do it," is a complete falsehood. The worst the devil can do is to tempt a person to sin. It's a person's response to that temptation that determines what happens next.

God has promised deliverance from every temptation we face. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:13, "No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it."

Read those words carefully, and let them sink in. God "will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able." With every temptation He will "make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it." The word translated as "bear" in English is the Greek word *hyperpherō*, translated elsewhere in the New Testament as

“endure.” Temptation—any temptation—can be endured. Too often people wilt in the face of temptation, and one’s resolve to stand strong in the face of temptation often results in defeat.

Consider that amazing promise in detail:

1 No temptation comes to a person that does not come to others. And that’s reassuring! Millions are tempted by alcohol every day who don’t yield to the temptation to drink. Every moment of every day someone is tempted to lie, or to cheat, or to steal. No temptation is entirely unique to you. Others have been where you find yourself when temptation strikes. And if others have been victorious, then you can be victorious too!

2 “God is faithful.” As Jeremiah wrote in Lamentations 3:23, “Great is Your faithfulness.” God is *faithful*. The key to Abraham’s great faith in God is that he was “fully convinced that what [God] had promised He was also able to perform” (Romans

4:21). Abraham knew God was faithful. This was the key to his righteous experience.

3 God will “not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able.” While it’s easy to treat temptation too lightly, it is also easy to fail to see it for what it really is. God promises that whatever the temptation, “you are able,” which really means that *He* is able. No matter how difficult the temptation seems, it will never be too strong for you to handle—in God’s strength.

What a remarkable thought! The runaway emotions that so often lead a person into sin—anger, pride, lust, or jealousy, to name a few—do not have to drive a person to spiritual failure. The person who hears his or her friends saying unkind things does not have to retaliate in a destructive way. Nothing compelled David to fall into sin with Bathsheba other than his unwillingness to yield to God when temptation came. No matter how powerful the temptation seems to be, it is less powerful than God’s ability to keep you from falling.

4 In every temptation, God will “also make the way of escape.” Anyone in a burning building would immediately do everything possible to find a way out. Survival would depend on getting out of that building. Surviving temptation is a matter of spiritual survival. While it’s true that one fall into sin is not likely to cost a person their salvation, it only takes one fall to begin the slide down the slippery slope of sin. Just one fall can lead a person to give up on faith in God. One unwise decision, one wrong step, one sin cherished can lead a person to spiritual ruin. Escaping when temptation strikes is vital!

King David would have done well to find a way of escape when confronted with temptation. “Then it happened one evening that David arose from his bed and walked on the roof of the king’s house. And from the roof he saw a woman bathing, and the woman was very beautiful to behold” (2 Samuel 11:2). As far as the text reveals, David did no wrong by walking on the rooftop of his home. Looking

from the roof was by no means improper, and inadvertently seeing a woman bathing was not in itself an inappropriate act.

When temptation came to David, he had a choice. He could either dwell on the temptation, or turn from the temptation. The best time for him to turn from the temptation would have been when the temptation first arose. But the longer David waited, the more difficult it became for him to resist. Before long, David was overcome by temptation, a temptation which developed into lust, adultery, deception, and eventually murder.

Often, the best way of combating temptation is by displacing it. Focusing on a temptation often only results in the temptation becoming stronger, and passions or thoughts or emotions intensifying.

It Is Written founder George Vandeman once related the fable of the man who arrived in a village and announced he would demonstrate how to make gold. A large crowd watched as he worked, not noticing he had slipped some

small gold nuggets into the concoction he was mixing.

When he produced the gold at the end of his demonstration, the people were amazed. One man offered him a large sum of money for the secret to making gold. Taking the money, he offered his customer some very important advice. “Be sure you never think of the red-faced monkey while you are making gold. If you do, the gold will never appear!”

The gullible customer promised to remember what he was supposed to forget! No matter what he did, he couldn't stop the red-faced monkey from coming into his thoughts. Unsurprisingly, he was never able to successfully make gold!

Pastor Vandeman's story ended with this advice. “Concentrating on your sins will get you into trouble. Keeping your eyes on Jesus will keep you out of it.”

In many cases, it is wise to redirect your mind when temptation comes. Instead of dwelling on what someone has said about you, turn your mind to better things. Rather than

yielding to the craving for a cigarette or to the desire for revenge, direct your mind to dwell on Scripture, or something else that will take the place of the temptation at hand.

It is God's plan to bring "every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5). As impossible as that might seem to many people, it is not impossible to God. Philippians 4:19 promises that God "shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus." If you need deliverance in the face of temptation, God will supply that need. Six verses earlier, the apostle Paul wrote, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).

5 God's intent is that "you may be able to bear it." The God of heaven intends for you to learn to be triumphant in the face of spiritual challenges. Jude 24 (KJV) says, "Now unto Him that is able to keep you from falling."

Every human being alive is a sinner. Paul told the Romans that "All have sinned and

come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). He wrote that “there is none that does good, no not one” (Romans 3:10). A sinner’s best will never be any match for the enemy of souls. The sinner’s problem is within. To remedy that, God offers help from above.

One thing that makes temptation such a challenge is that over time it’s possible to acquire a taste for sin. If you’ve never eaten chocolate, the temptation to do so would likely be small. But if you were a lifelong chocolate lover, the temptation to eat another piece of chocolate cake—and maybe even another—would be much greater. The Bible teaches that we reap what we sow (Galatians 6:7), and that is particularly true in the area of temptation.

That being so, a wise approach when it comes to sin is simply not to start. While it might be too late for many people in certain areas of life, it’s important to stay as far from sin as possible so as not to weaken your resolve when tempted.

So where is the power to resist temptation found?

Jesus Himself endured severe temptation, yet the Bible says He “committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth” (1 Peter 2:22). Hebrews 4:15 says that Jesus was “in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.” How was Jesus able to be successful in the face of temptation? The Bible gives us a clear example of the secret to Jesus’ spiritual success.

After almost six weeks of fasting in the wilderness, Jesus was tempted by Satan to “command that these stones become bread” (Matthew 4:3). This was a significant temptation for someone who had gone a month and a half without food. And as well as tempting Jesus to use His divinity for His own benefit, Satan was also urging Jesus to doubt His Father. “If You are the Son of God,” Satan said, implying that perhaps Jesus was not the Son of God after all.

Shunned by the ruling class, rejected by the spiritual elite, and now gaunt and weakened in a desert, the temptation to prove that He truly *was* divine was undoubtedly intense. But only six weeks before, at His baptism in

the Jordan River, Jesus had heard His Father say, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17). To do as Satan suggested would have been to deny the word of His Father.

But Jesus chose the way of escape He had come to know so well. “It is written,” Jesus answered the devil, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4).

Jesus countered Satan’s following temptations in the same way—by quoting Scripture. “It is written,” He answered.

Jesus met temptation with the Word of God. He knew by experience what the writer to the Hebrews shared in Hebrews 4:12. “The Word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”

Jesus knew there was power in the Word of God. He neither entered into an argument with the devil, nor allowed Himself to be distracted

from the issues He was facing. When temptation came, Jesus claimed the power resident in the Word of God. It was the Word of God that spoke the world into existence. Hebrews 1:3 states that God upholds “all things by the word of His power.” If God can uphold the sun, moon, and stars through “the word of His power,” then He can certainly uphold you in the same way.

David wrote in Psalm 119:11, “Your Word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You.” With God’s Word in your heart there is power at work against temptation. Fighting temptation without relying on the Word of God is like trying to operate a blender without electricity. Without power, there’s no way of getting the job done. Without the power of God’s Word resident in your life, there’s no power to resist temptation.

In Jesus’ parable, the house built upon the sand—the house not built upon Jesus’ teaching—collapsed when the trials of life battered against it (Matthew 7:24). A life built on the Word of God will remain standing when

shaken by temptation. A life not founded on God's Word is destined for defeat.

Joseph was a slave in Egypt when he was tempted by the wife of his employer. Potiphar trusted Joseph to the extent that he "made him overseer of his house, and all that he had he put under his authority" (Genesis 39:4). But Joseph cared more for the honor of God than for his own well being. Knowing that to reject the advances of Potiphar's wife would invite serious repercussions, he repeatedly rebuffed her advances, saying, "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (Genesis 39:9).

Joseph understood sin to be "great wickedness." No one should deceive themselves by saying sin is of little consequence. Not only does sin lead to death, but honor for God will lead a follower of God to consider sin to be "against God." Sin dishonors God and brings pain to His heart. Sin in the life of a follower of God not only causes harm to the sinner and those wronged by his or her sin, that same sin is a defeat for the gospel, a denial of the power and

sovereignty of God. Falling prey to temptation suggests that—in that moment, at least—the power of sin overcame the power of God. Light was overcome by darkness. Righteousness was overcome by unrighteousness.

A victory for sin is a black eye for the gospel. Satan rejoices when God's people fall into sin. Joseph understood this, and was jealous for the honor of God. Knowing that choosing faithfulness to God would have serious ramifications, Joseph knew that the consequences of sin would be infinitely worse. When it comes to sin, it pays to have your eyes on eternity rather than the here and now.

Both Jesus and Joseph could be successful in the face of sin because they lived with an awareness of heavenly realities. That is, they were praying men who spent much time with God. People who neglect their spiritual growth leave themselves vulnerable to the roar of the lion. Satan, like a roaring lion, is looking for people to “devour,” to lead into temptation and sin. When your thoughts don't turn to God in

the midst of temptation, you're not looking for the way of escape.

A life built on prayer is a life connected to the power of God. A short time after assuring Jesus that he would not deny Jesus—"If I have to die with You, I will not deny You!"—Peter denied Jesus with cursing and swearing. "I do not know this man of whom you speak!" Peter said (Mark 14:71). Peter had neglected prayer, the source of spiritual strength. Jesus said to Peter, "Simon, are you sleeping? Could you not watch one hour?" (Mark 14:37). Prayer would have made the difference in Peter's experience.

Prayer connects a person with God, and appropriates the power of His grace. Prayer unites a sinner with Omnipotence. A life of prayer is a life of union with God. Nothing turns away temptation like the presence of God Himself.

Although salvation in no way comes by works, the story of Joseph makes clear that resisting sin requires some moral effort. Temptation can be extremely powerful. Surrender to the will of God requires a measure of determination.

The Bible says in James 4:7, “Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.” There’s a very real need for a disciple of Jesus to “resist” in the face of temptation. It takes resistance to say “no” to an offer of drugs or alcohol. It takes resistance to choose not to claim a tax deduction you’re not entitled to when you’re facing financial hardship. It takes resistance to change the channel or to click away from a website when something inappropriate presents itself. Speaking of the roaring lion, Peter wrote in 1 Peter 5:9, “Resist him, steadfast in the faith.”

But that resistance becomes possible—in-avoidable—when a believer submits to God. Paul wrote to the Romans, “Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness?” (Romans 6:16, KJV). God calls us to surrender to His will, as Jesus did when He prayed to His Father, “not as I will, but as You will” (Matthew 26:39). Such a surrender unleashes the power of the Holy Spirit, as God’s

will consumes your will and God's power takes hold in your life.

Weakness is never a reason why temptation should dominate a person's life. God said in 2 Corinthians 12:9 that His "strength is made perfect in weakness." A life surrendered to the indwelling presence of Jesus is a life in which is seen a demonstration of the power of God. Not only is God perfectly willing to "forgive us our sins," He pledges to "cleanse us of all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). The power of the Holy Spirit in a person's life is able to successfully ward off temptation, to the extent that anyone who is "in Christ" becomes a "new creation," with everything about that person made "new" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Destructive, sinful habits don't have to be perpetuated. As Paul wrote to the Philippians, "it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13).

Solomon wrote in Proverbs 1:10, "My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent." Falling prey to temptation occurs only with the consent of the individual being tempted. We

allow our minds to go in a certain direction. We *permit* ourselves to fly into a rage, or to respond rudely to the checkout operator in a supermarket.

Although it may take time, a mind that is surrendered daily to Jesus can grow in connection with Him, until it becomes as natural to yield to the will of God as it is for a flower to turn to face the sun. That's not to say temptation will ever go away, or that it will ever stop being a challenge. Every person alive has been born with a bent towards sin, and has developed a certain tolerance and liking for sin. But the power of God to keep you from sin is greater than the power of the devil to entice you to sin. It is said that Martin Luther once said, "You cannot keep birds from flying over your head, but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair." Although you may be challenged by temptation, temptation need not drag you down into sin.

So what should a person do who is overcome by temptation? Remember that the Bible says that "where sin abounded, grace abounded

much more” (Romans 5:20). Psalm 86:5 says that God is “ready to forgive.” John wrote in 1 John 2:1, “My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” God’s desire is that we do not fall in the face of temptation. But recognizing something of the frailty of human nature, John said that when someone yields to temptation, “we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” Jesus is an Advocate for sinners.

David wrote in Psalm 103, “The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy. . . . He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities. . . . As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. . . . For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust” (Psalm 103:8, 10, 12, 14).

The God of heaven is the God of forgiveness. That certainty isn’t intended to cause God’s children to be careless in the face of

temptation, but rather to assure believers that God's grace is always on offer to anyone who repents.

After a massive wave broke the mast of his 36-foot yacht, an Australian sailor spent nine days drifting 270 nautical miles off the coast of New South Wales. After he activated the vessel's emergency beacon, rescue officials asked airlines operating in the area if they would watch for the stricken craft.

An Air Canada Boeing 777 flying from Vancouver to Sydney answered the call, and dropped from 37,000 feet to 4,000 feet. Passengers were asked to watch for the damaged boat. Within minutes of the passengers and crew scanning the waters, the yacht was found. A day later, a very grateful sailor was standing on solid ground.

Drifting in the Tasman Sea, he was completely unable to save himself. He was rescued because help came from above.

Sinners caught in the grip of temptation are unable to save themselves from sin and its devastating effects. But the Bible tells us that

God so loved the world that He sent help from above. Jesus came into the world to die for the sins of a fallen world, and to provide “grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16).

I never did take a watch from the window of Mr. Rye’s store. I could have. I certainly *wanted* to. But I knew it would be wrong to steal, and I couldn’t imagine how I could ever explain to my parents where that beautiful watch came from. The temptation to take one—while no one was looking!—was strong. But there was another force at work that morning, and that was God’s grace keeping me from something I would regret. The power of God made available to me then is still available today.

God is able to save you from the tyranny of temptation. Although Satan—the lion Peter wrote of—may roar, the roar of a lion cannot do any real harm. It can confuse. It can intimidate. It exudes power and strength. But the roar cannot harm you. Temptation can be powerful. It can be intimidating. It can cause confusion. But it doesn’t have to result in falling into sin.

Satan is a defeated enemy. Revelation 5:5 calls Jesus “the Lion of the tribe of Judah.” Jesus overcame Satan while He lived on the earth as a man, and He will overcome Satan in your life also, if you’ll allow Him to do so.

Invite Jesus into your heart every day. Surrender your life to Him. Keep in close contact with Him through Bible study and prayer. And expect His power to defeat the power of temptation in your life! 