

## Preparation and Temptation

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February 21, 1904<sup>1</sup>

Scripture: Luke 2:41-52; Matthew 4:1-11.

Text: Luke 2:52<sup>2</sup>

Even the most casual observer cannot fail to distinguish a difference between a reformed or converted man like Paul, for example, and a man who by a steady and natural process of growth slowly evolves a full and rich life which expresses the Divine nature within him, such as we see in the life of Jesus. However much a man may think himself entirely reformed, and made new by his conversion, the fact still remains that he is the same person with precisely the same powers and characteristics as before. The only difference is that he has changed ideals. Instead of following a flitting firefly of chance desire, or indeed some fixed purpose that is erroneous, he is directing his course by a fixed and true star. The reformed life must subject itself to [the] process of education and growth before the reform becomes a lasting and permanent force for good. Paul, after he had seen his vision, went away into

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<sup>1</sup> The sermon itself is undated. However, there is internal evidence that the sermon was delivered on the first Sunday of Lent—see below—and the paper used in the sermon is the same as the paper used in a dated sermon from February 21, 1904, "The Roots of Victory." Complicating matters, but confirming the date, Earl Davis' sermon, "The Roots of Victory" and this sermon, "Preparation and Temptation," are written to the same text, Luke 2:52. Both sermons focus on Jesus' growth as a youth into manhood; his preparation for his test of temptation that he met—metaphorically—with 40 days and 40 nights in the desert. This suggests that Earl Davis was working with that text from Luke 2:52; he tried two different approaches, ultimately settling on "The Roots of Victory." The text for this sermon, "Preparation and Temptation," may never have been preached.

<sup>2</sup> Earl Davis does not include the text from Luke 2:52. It is, "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man."

Arabia for a period of three years in which to grow, develop and remold himself to the conditions and standards of his new conception of truth. The necessity of education, instruction and a thorough process of growth as a logical supplement of all reforms which in any way take on that rather spectacular transformation by conversion, has not always been recognized, and consequently we have to note the lack of lasting results in religious revivals and elsewhere. The power of Paul rests not in the fact of his conversion, but in the fact that he grew and developed into the follower of the ideal that came to him at the time of his conversion.

In Jesus we have a life apparently free from any great catastrophic transformation, marking the dawn of a new truth. Like the seed that expands, breaks its shell, takes root, unfolds its leaves, throws its blossoms, and produces its fruit, in the very soil where the wings of the mind chanced to leave it, so Jesus grew and developed and unfolded his great life in the soil of Palestine. Absorbing all the great truths of the life about him, he interprets them in his life of a natural unfolding of the human soul. He stands for us as the most satisfactory type of a man whose life manifests itself as a steady process of evolution. Our interest today is to discover the method of that life of growth.

In the calendar of the ritualistic churches, this day is designated as the First Sunday in Lent,<sup>3</sup> and is in theory the first Sunday of a period of 40 days of fasting and prayer which are observed in memory of the forty days temptation of Jesus, the account of which was read as part of our scripture lesson. Of course the language of this account with its highly imaginative character and its almost {???) setting precludes the possibility of its being a literal and accurate account of an event in the life of Jesus, and yet the very loftiness of the language, and the greatness of the conception indicate that it pictures an event of no small significance. But what is, in reality, the event that is back of this dramatic picture? Should we go back to that story in the life of Jesus that is given us in the Gospel of Luke, and is made forever graphic for us

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<sup>3</sup> This clue dates this sermon to either Sunday March 1, 1903 or Sunday February 21, 1904.

by Hofmann's famous painting,<sup>4</sup> and try to imagine what this day in the temple with the Doctors meant to the youth? I think that we should find that on that day there came in the mind of the boy the first seeds of manhood. Deeply influenced by the life of the wise-looking kindly old doctors, the boyish mind first framed the thought, as many a boy had done before, and many a boy has done since, "that is the kind of man I should like to be, that is the kind of a work I should like to do." It was the mind of an appreciative writer, he described that event that put into the mouth of Jesus as Jesus' reply to his parents, "Wait ye not that I must be about my Father's business."<sup>5</sup> He understood that from that day, the boyhood ceased to be, and the youth with new hopes and new ideals had come into being.

But such a thought as a seed taking root in an original mind like Jesus, {??} of bear fruit, stamped with Jesus' personality. For eighteen long years, as the youth grew up into manhood, working daily at his carpenters trade, observing keenly human nature, thinking deeply, and sympathetically of the great problems of human life, and entering into the great hopes, aspirations and powers of the human soul, that seed grew and shaped itself until we come upon the matured man, ready to begin his public ministry. He was a great prophet, he understood as no one else understood that the truths that welled up in his soul, and fed him with the bread of life were not those traditions, formal statements that he was accustomed to hear in the synagogues and at the temple. He understood that as he placed the value of a human soul far above any formality of the law, his teaching would bring him into disrepute with the teachers of the law, and the followers of the law. John the Baptist seems to have understood this same power for truth in Jesus, when he says, "there comes one after me whose shoes I am not worthy to bear."<sup>6</sup> Thus, as time went by, the great prophet, whose mind contained the truth that would shake the world of his times to its very foundation, came down to the river to be baptized by John the Baptist in the River Jordan, and then to take up his public ministry. Being a great deep man, understanding the temper of the times, and his own truth, just as he is about

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<sup>4</sup> The painting Earl Davis refers to is Heinrich Hofmann's (1824-1911) 1881 painting, "Jesus in the Temple."

<sup>5</sup> Luke 2:49.

<sup>6</sup> See Matthew 3:11.

to turn away from the quiet simple life as a carpenter in Nazareth, and to take up his work as a public teacher and preacher, he halts, hesitates for a moment at the threshold of his new life, just as you and I halt and hesitate as we come to the time when we must leave old home surroundings with all their endearing ties, and turn to face the world unknown and there to do our part in the world's work. With longing he looks back over his shoulder, and remembers the quiet peaceful days when he went about his work thinking high thoughts, drinking in the beauties of nature, and living in the very spirit of God. With hesitation, he peered into the unknown future, and saw there the hardships, the possibilities of defeat, the opposition, the travails, the strife, and he stops over-awed by the tremendousness of his decision that he must make. On the one hand, peace, quiet, home and God. On the other hand, hardship, struggle, possibly death, and God. Which must he turn to? It is the old question of the world and the individual, self-culture or service. This is the moment in Jesus' life that is here pictured in the story of his temptation, and that is honored and remembered in certain churches by the formal forty days of prayer and fasting.

The great interest of this dramatic moment of Jesus' life, when he stands before the world to decide between self and duty, rests in the facts, that it is a universal experience. Every human soul is called upon to face the great temptation and decide either one way or the other. Again it is of special significance in that Jesus withstood the temptation, and faced his duties to the world with a brave and resolute heart. Deep in our own natures there is a constant and ever-present prayer that to us also may be given the power to resolutely face the problems of life, and feel the presence of ministering angels, who feel satisfaction in our victory.

His was the victory, but when and why did he win it? Surely not at the moment of temptation. We go to a concert, and listen spellbound to the masterful performance of a great orchestra playing some great musical composition. A hundred men working harmoniously together execute in perfect time, and with the greatest variety of expression which thrills our very soul, some great masterpiece. We are quite over-powered in thinking that such a perfect piece of work can be done, and in our admiration we think it well-nigh a miracle, and it is. But we forget that we are but seeing the final product of a long period of preparation.

Could we but have followed each individual player as he slowly and laboriously worked his way along the thorny path of lonely and persistent labor in the hours and the days of mere drudgery as he was becoming master of the instrument that he played, and observing the laws of musical harmony, and sound and molding his nature to them, we might get some appreciation of the background of preparation upon which the success of the concert rested. Could we but have followed the long slow process of molding a hundred individual players into one great harmonious orchestra, then we would appreciate the vast and thorough preparation which made the way to success clear. Not on the night when you and I listened with soft attention to the soul-stirring pulsations of the music, not then, but in the lonely quiet hours of drudgery during the long years of preparation, when the whole man was being trained and being drilled in the laws of musical expression, so that by the freedom which comes from obedience to the laws of music, the men might put their whole souls into the final execution and render a perfect production before the great audience.

When did Jesus win his victory over this great temptation of his life? When did he learn to follow the command of truth, at the sacrifice of his own comfort and gain? Not at the time of that great dramatic moment of his life when he stands face-to-face with the stern realities of the moment. Not at the moment when he longs for the quiet and peace of his native Nazareth, and looks with hesitation into the unknown future with its unknown possibilities. Not then did he win, but in the quiet hours of his childhood, youth and young manhood, when, alone by himself, when mingling with the friends of his simple life, when meeting the strangers who came within the circle of his relations, when in the simple, daily duties of life, he learned to do the right, to follow the truth. In those days by the carpenter's bench when he quietly went about his work, thinking about the great and eternal truths of life, and revolved in his mind the great problems of the human soul. In those hours when he walked with the God of nature in the hills and valleys of Palestine, and listened to the voice of God speaking to him in the beauty and law of natural life. In those quiet moments in the dusk when the Divine presence spoke within his own soul, and he gave himself up to contemplation of the greatness of man, that is when Jesus overcame the temptation of his life. Long before John the Baptist baptized him in the Jordan, long before the dangers of a public ministry pressed upon, alone unwatched by the world,

the great man prepared himself to meet just such temptations, to be ready for just such moments of his life as we are considering today. The roots of victory rest deep in the soil of careful painstaking preparation. The triumph of Jesus on the mountain is the result of a long steady process of growth among the commonplace scenes of the valley when he was growing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.

To a certain extent we realize this truth. Nevertheless, the broken down constitutions, the victims of too strong temptation, the failure in moments when we most need victory, the lack of spiritual power in the hours of great disappointment, and sorrow, the lack of that abandonment to the will of God in any great service, are not these evidences that tell us only too plainly that we have not learned this lesson of preparation and growth, so essential to our lives, the truth that made Jesus the one man who has been true to what was in him, and to what is in you and me.

Coleridge says in his *Aids to Reflection*,

An unreflecting Christian walks in the twilight  
among snares and pitfalls! He entreats the  
heavenly Father not to lead him into temptation,  
and yet places himself on the very edge of it,  
because he will not kindle the torch which his  
Father had given into his hands, as a means of  
prevention and lest he should pray too late.<sup>7</sup>

How true that is? How little do we follow those laws of guidance which we apprehend in a general way, but have not absorbed into our nature, and given ourselves over to their obedience. We seem sometimes like men lost in the forest without knowledge of the forest laws and its conditions, and are thus unable to find our way out, and for a moment losing our trail, we become confused, think we are lost and rush blindly and wildly about in dire confusion and hopelessness. All this confusion and hopelessness is so needless for all about us are the very bits of knowledge that would lead the experienced woodsman to find his way out without danger. Should we but stop for a moment in this forest of life, and study the conditions about us, observe the direction from which the light comes now and then in the gloom, we would find right at our feet the very wisdom

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<sup>7</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), *Aids to Reflection in the Formation of a Manly Character, on the Several Grounds of Prudence, Morality and Religion*, 1825, Comment on Aphorism XIX.

that we need, the very signposts that should direct us. Should we look more closely we will find the half-hidden blazes of a trail that some thoughtful soul of a bygone day has traveled, and left behind these guides for those who come after. If we find ourselves in dire calamity, lost in the confusion of our life, in doubt because we cannot see far ahead, it avails us nothing to lose our self-control, and rush wildly about hoping that by mere chance we may come upon the truth. Let us sit down quietly and take careful observation of our condition, let us look for the blazed trail of some former wayfarer, and thus gaining our bearings, take up our journey again. May it not be that the power that led our forefathers through the darkness of the colonial days was the power that they received from the custom of daily scripture reading, and habitual turning away from the gloom, and seeking light in a moment of quiet contemplation. We are surrounded by an army of helpers if we will but turn to them for aid. The angels of high thoughts and fine hopes may minister unto us, as they did unto Jesus, and lead us into the unknown future. Our service together here each week is designed to help us find our way. We read sentences that have been uttered by great men, the blaze of the trail they followed, we turn to the source of all truth, and all light for guidance in the way. We exchange our own thoughts, our own observations our own ideals, that we may help one another in this long life of growth, and prepare to meet and overcome the temptations that may beset us.

But I cannot let this story of Jesus' temptation pass without pointing to its significance for us here in this church. We hold the key we believe that will unlock the door to the Kingdom of God on earth. We believe that we see the truth that this age needs as Jesus saw the truth that his age needed. We are bound, then, as servants to spread the principles of freedom, and brotherliness of man, bound by the same command of God that led Jesus triumphant on his mission, the command of God's truth speaking to our inner conscience. I had hoped that you would already have seen this writing on the wall. We must commit ourselves to that same quiet, persistent preparation, growing day-by-day in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man. When the great test comes, and we are called upon to make our lives count for great truth in a moment of great temptation, then we will be victorious, for already the victory will have been won in the conquest over the small daily tasks which beset us in our growth. Temptation is overcome by

preparations. The roots of victory rest deep in the soil of  
drudgery.