

"How to Face Temptation Like a Christian" Psalm 141

Introduction

- "The substance in the flask seemed to have all the makings of an excellent insecticide. It was a fine crystalline powder, easy to imagine spraying over a field, and its molecules were full of chlorine atoms, like DDT. To make it, Shashikant Phadnis, a young Indian chemist at Queens Elizabeth College, in London, and his adviser Leslie Hough, had begun by taking an eye-dropper full of sulfuryl chloride—a highly toxic chemical—and adding it to a sugar solution, one drop at a time. In the violent reaction that followed, a wholly new compound was born. On that late-summer day in 1975, Phadnis was told to test the powder, but he misunderstood: he thought that he needed to *taste* it. And so, using a small spatula, he put a little of it on the tip of his tongue. It was sweet—achingly sweet. 'When I reported my findings to Les, he asked if I was crazy,' Phadnis remembers. 'How could I taste compounds without knowing anything about their toxicity?' Before long, though, Hough was so delighted with the substance that he dubbed it Serendipitose and tried putting some in his coffee. 'Oh, forget it,' he said, when Phadnis reminded him that it might be toxic. 'We'll survive!'"¹
- So goes the fascinating story of the discovery of sucralose, as told in the article "The Search for Sweet" from the May issue of *The New Yorker* magazine. When mixed with fillers and sold in bright yellow sachets, sucralose is more commonly recognized as Splenda, the best-selling artificial sweetener in America.² What's interesting is that, like Splenda, the most popular artificial sweeteners were all discovered by accident; none of them taste much like sugar, and there is no final verdict on their safety.³ In fact, most taste researchers interviewed in the article won't eat Sucralose or any other artificial sweetener. The following may be why.
- According to the article, Saccharin, which has a sweetening power 375 times that of sugar,⁴ was found over dinner in 1879, by a chemist who was working with the coal-tar derivative toluene and forgot to wash his hands properly. Just in case you're wondering, toluene is a colorless, flammable liquid used in aviation fuel.⁵ Aspartame, a.k.a. NutraSweet, was found in 1965, by a chemist who was testing new drugs for gastric ulcers and licked his fingers before picking up a piece of paper. More recently, "in France, two chemists invented a super potent substance called super-aspartame which is roughly eight thousand times sweeter than sugar. Although it didn't appear to be toxic, super-aspartame had some unsettling similarities to cyanide."⁶

¹ *The Search for Sweet*, by Burkhard Bilger, *The New Yorker*, May 22, 2006, p. 40-46.

² *The Search for Sweet*, by Burkhard Bilger, *The New Yorker*, May 22, 2006, p. 40-46.

³ *The Search for Sweet*, by Burkhard Bilger, *The New Yorker*, May 22, 2006, p. 40-46.

⁴ "Saccharin," *Microsoft® Encarta® 98 Encyclopedia*. © 1993-1997 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.

⁵ *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition* copyright © 1992 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Electronic version licensed from INSO Corporation; further reproduction and distribution restricted in accordance with the Copyright Law of the United States. All rights reserved.

⁶ *The Search for Sweet*, by Burkhard Bilger, *The New Yorker*, May 22, 2006, p. 40-46.

- Each and every day you and I are tempted to gorge ourselves on sickeningly sweet things that promise euphoria, happiness, pleasure and joy but, in reality, are toxic. We live in a world that has been artificially sweetened by sin. And sin, like every artificial sweetener, starts off sweet but always ends up bitter. As we indulge, we say to ourselves, "Oh, forget it. We'll survive." But with sin there is a final verdict. It is always toxic.

Transition

This morning, as we continue our series through the Psalms called *The Songs of Life*, I want to explore Psalm 141. Remember, the Psalms teach us how to emote, how to feel emotion in a god-glorifying way. In the same way that we are predisposed to crave sweets,⁷ we are predisposed to sin—and wherever sin is, temptation is never far behind. The feelings of temptation are universal. Like a wishbone, we all know what it feels like to be torn in two by a temptation. Psalm 141 speaks of the tempting sweetness of sin and reminds us that when we are tempted we must turn to God for help. This psalm teaches us how to face temptation like a Christian. The big idea of Psalm 141 is that...

Proposition

- **Temptation can be defeated because God is able to do all his holy will⁸**

Transition

Let me say that again. Listen carefully. Write it down. **Temptation can be defeated because God is able to do all his holy will.** Why do we give in to sin? When faced with the choice of doing or thinking or saying or watching what is toxic—why do we poison ourselves and others?

- I believe we too easily give in to temptation because God's holiness has become irrelevant. The virtuous life is driven by an understanding of God's supreme and awesome holiness. *Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty.*⁹ This loftiness in God, this burning purity, this all-consuming blaze of righteousness is the very essence of who he is. He is holy. He is not like us. *The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him.*¹⁰ And we generally are unenthusiastic about holy living and overcoming temptation because we are unenthusiastic about the holiness of God. As [David Wells](#) has said in his fabulous book *God in the Wasteland*, "God's holiness is his utter purity, his incomparable goodness, the measure of all that is true and right, the final line of resistance to all that is wrong, dark, and malignant."¹¹ "Until we recognize afresh the centrality of God's holiness, until it once again enters into the innermost fibers of evangelical faith, our virtue will lack seriousness, our belief will lack poignancy, our practice will lack moral pungency, our worship will lack joyful seriousness, our preaching will lack the mordancy of grace, and the church will be just one more special interest pleading for a hearing in a world of competing enterprises. What has most been lost needs most to be recovered—namely, the unsettling, disconcerting fact that God is holy and we place ourselves in great peril if we seek to render him a plaything of

⁷ *The Search for Sweet*, by Burkhard Bilger, *The New Yorker*, May 22, 2006, p. 40-46.

⁸ Phrasing for this comes with help from Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 216.

⁹ Isaiah 6:3

¹⁰ Habakkuk 2:20

¹¹ Wells, p. 136.

our piety, an ornamental decoration on the religious life, a product to answer our inward dissatisfactions. God offers himself on his own terms or not at all."¹²

Transition

In Psalm 141, this is the God David seeks help from—the sovereign and holy Lord. David comes to God on God's terms in order to diffuse and defeat temptation. And again, what David finds is what we need to learn, namely that **temptation can be defeated because God is able to do all his holy will.**

Main Points

- Look now at [verses 1-2](#). In these first two verses David is in the throes of the temptation and he cries out to God for help. Listen again to David's pleading. *O LORD, I call to you; come quickly to me. Hear my voice when I call to you.* See, right here, David already does more than most of us do when we're tempted. He cries out to God in prayer during the temptation. The problem we have is that most of us, when we're tempted, deep down, don't really want to be delivered. The lure of the temptation is too sweet. The craving is too strong. We want to give in. We don't even fight. The difference between those who repeatedly and consistently give in to temptation, who powerlessly bow to their craving and those who are victorious, is the seriousness with which they bring their temptation before the throne of God. David is serious about not giving in to this temptation. He knows that he cannot beat it on his own. Help has to come from the Lord. And so David asks God to answer quickly. He asks that God might look favorably upon his prayer like the rising incense of the evening sacrifice. *May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice.*
- I want you to look now at [verses 3-4](#) because I want you to see the nature of David's appeal. Here we see more specifically what the temptation is. *Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips.* Part of the temptation is the tongue. Saying things he shouldn't say—cursing, swearing, slandering, lying, gossiping. You're not alone in your struggle to tame your tongue. *It is a restless evil. It is an uncontrollable wildfire* for all of us. Over and over in scripture, speech is listed as an indicator of one's relationship to the Lord.¹³ And the consensus of biblical truth is if you have no control over your tongue, your Christianity is worthless. James 1:26 *If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.* And so David asks that God might guard the door to his mouth like a watchman guards the city gate. God, guard my tongue, keep watch over the door of my lips.
- Apparently the temptation also involved participating in deeds with others—doing something he knew to be wrong. [Verse 4](#). *Let not my heart be drawn to what is evil, to take part in wicked deeds with men who are evildoers; let me not eat of their delicacies.* I want you to notice how enticing this thing must have been for David. Like a moth to a flame, his heart is drawn to do it, irresistibly pulled toward it as if led by an invisible thread. The possibility of doing this would have been like a sweet dessert, like a delicacy. Like David, each and every day you and I are tempted to gorge ourselves on sickeningly sweet things that promise euphoria, happiness, pleasure and joy but, in reality, are toxic. Sin is toxic. And David

¹² Wells, p. 145.

¹³ Psalm 34:13; 39:1; Proverbs 13:3; 23:23; James 3:1-12

knows this delicacy, whatever it is, has been artificially sweetened by sin. It is toxic. *Let me not eat of their delicacies.*

- This remembrance, this reminder that sin is toxic is the thrust of [verses 5-7](#). In the struggle to overcome temptation David plays out the logical consequences of either acting on his temptation or resisting and refusing it. That, I think, is what's happening here. It is a picture, a contrast, between the wise and foolish. The wise is pictured in verse 5. The foolish in verses 6-7. Look at verse 5. *Let a righteous man strike me--it is a kindness; let him rebuke me--it is oil on my head. My head will not refuse it.* You resist the temptation and you're wise, it's like being anointed with oil. We too easily fail to get this image. Who's anointed with oil nowadays? But "in a climate where dry skin was a problem, especially for travelers, anointing with oil was a refreshment."¹⁴ Often times in biblical language, "anointing with oil seems to be an image of high-spirited indulgence."¹⁵ In its sacred use, oil was a symbol of richness, of God's favor, of his lavish blessing. What David seems to be reflecting on in verse 5 is his knowledge that the truly refreshing thing is to not give in. Sin is never refreshing. Not giving in—that is where blessing is. Not giving in—that is the high-spirited, indulgent thing to do.
- And the opposite picture is of the foolish who gives in to temptation and reaps the consequences. *Yet my prayer is ever against the deeds of evildoers; 6 their rulers will be thrown down from the cliffs, and the wicked will learn that my words were well spoken. 7 [They will say,] "As one plows and breaks up the earth, so our bones have been scattered at the mouth of the grave."* Giving in to sin is like throwing yourself off a cliff. Sin is foolish. It is senseless. It's like a plow that breaks up the hard packed earth. Sin breaks our bodies, it wrecks our lives. We give in to sin and we might as well scatter our broken bones at the mouth of an open grave. Sin is death. Nothing good comes from giving in to temptation. When we are tempted, if we are able to realize that our choice is either a choice of life or death, it will make it easier to diffuse and resist the temptation.
- That brings us to [verses 8-10](#). These three verses are the key to diffusing and defeating temptation. Because without verses 8-10, we'll never get to the point where we realize our choices are choices of life or death. How do you face temptation like a Christian? You turn to the holy, all-consuming God of blazing righteousness who is burning with purity—you turn to the God *who cannot be tempted by evil*, as James 1:13 says, you stare him in the face and you take shelter in his holiness. If he is able to remain free from sin, untainted by sin, then those who take sanctuary in his holiness, those who find refuge in him find victory over temptation. **Temptation can be defeated because God is able to do all his holy will.** Look at verse 8. *But my eyes are fixed on you, O Sovereign LORD; in you I take refuge--do not give me over to death. 9 Keep me from the snares they have laid for me, from the traps set by evildoers. 10 Let the wicked fall into their own nets, while I pass by in safety.*
- When you are tempted, where is your gaze? Is it on God or is it on your craving? David's gaze is on the Sovereign Lord. Yahweh Adoni. In his internal battle with temptation and sin, David appeals to God's sovereignty. What does it mean to say that God is sovereign? Yes it means that God is omnipotent-all powerful. Job 36:22 *God is exalted in his power.* It means that God is in control. But more than his power and control God's sovereignty means that God is able to do all his holy will. What ever God does is holy. Whatever God decrees is

¹⁴ DBI, p. 603.

¹⁵ DBI, p. 603.

holy. Whatever God wills is holy. Whatever God thinks is holy. Whenever and wherever God acts he acts in such a way to preserve the splendor of his holy name. *"Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone. 23 I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Sovereign LORD, when I show myself holy through you before their eyes.'*¹⁶

- What this means is that the key to defeating temptation is God's holiness. What this means is that if in your moment of need, you appeal to the one who is holy, who cannot sin, if you appeal to the Sovereign Lord for help, if you take refuge in him and shelter yourself in his holiness, if take sanctuary in his blazing purity, if you throw yourself into his all-consuming presence so that you are at his mercy you will find that you have, as verse 10 says, passed by the snare, the trap, the net of temptation—you'll have passed it by in safety. And the words of Jeremiah will ring true. *"Ah, Sovereign LORD, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you. 27 "I am the LORD, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me?"*¹⁷ God is able to do all his holy will. He is able to keep you from sin. Nothing is too hard for him.

Conclusion

- It is so humbling to remember that, not only is God holy, but he expects us as people created in his image to be holy as well. *Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.*¹⁸ And if you've learned anything from Psalm 141, I hope you've learned that you and I can't be holy on our own. We must turn to God for help. And God offers the final and ultimate expression of help through Christ. When we believe by faith that God declares us not guilty of our sins through Christ's enduring sacrifice on the cross God imputes to us, he transfers to us Christ's righteousness—his holiness. What this means is that "Christians are characterized as holy not because by nature they are less corrupt than others but because God has acted to separate them to himself through Christ."¹⁹ And so through Christ God calls us saints and priests; our bodies are now temples, and sacrifices. And we seek to please him with holy virtuous living because he is holy. The virtuous life is driven by an understanding of God's supreme and awesome holiness.
- When you came in this morning, along with your bulletin you were given a piece of chocolate. I'm curious, how many of you couldn't resist the temptation and have already eaten it? This week, I want you to place this piece of candy someplace where you will see it frequently throughout the day. That chocolate is whatever is tempting you. And as you are tempted to sin I want you to remember that nothing is sweeter than the holiness of God. I want you to be reminded of the Sovereign Lord who is holy and choose the sweeter choice.

¹⁶ Ezekiel 36:22-23

¹⁷ Jeremiah 32:17, 27

¹⁸ Leviticus 19:2

¹⁹ Wells, p. 142-3.