

Jesus and the Way to Peace

*The meaning of Jesus' Third Temptation
in a time of war and totalitarianism.*

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The Fellowship of Reconciliation

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Jesus was born under a dictatorship. He knew what it meant to live in a period when naked power seemed to prevail; like men of our day, he faced the problem of how to deal with this evil.

Convinced that he was God's chosen instrument to deliver his people from the domination of the Roman conqueror, he declared: "The Kingdom of God is at hand: repent and believe the good news." To the Jews that meant: "The revolution is here, the day when there will be an end of tyranny and men will live in freedom and security." That was the vision of a life lived in obedience to God's laws that the prophets had held before Israel.

When a young man feels divinely called to a great mission, he is sure to be brought up sharp by the question: "That is a fine ideal but how are you going to realize it in this practical world?" It was that question Jesus faced in the Temptations. As we try to make that picture real to ourselves, we can understand what an awful problem Jesus felt it to be.

The story of the Temptations must have come to his disciples from Jesus himself. It was as though Satan himself drove him into the wilderness, he told them. For forty days and forty nights he went without food as he wrestled with his problem.

What was that problem? The briefest and simplest way, perhaps, for us to understand it is to think of the third and climactic temptation. He seemed to stand on a high mountain and "all the Kingdoms of the world and the glory of them" lay there before him. And Satan said: "Yes, this is the great world which you are to purge of dictatorship, oppression and war, and make into God's world. But of course you will need power to accomplish this. Great power. The kind of power that Caesar has, sitting on the throne of the world in Rome."

"Of course," Satan would have gone on, "you will not abuse your power as Caesar does. You will use it solely for good ends. With it you will save the world and make it over again."

A moment's pause and then the voice of Satan again as Jesus faced the greatest decision of his life:

"You are wondering how you can get all that power. How can you, a carpenter from Nazareth, make your way to Caesar's throne, so that you may free your people?"

"Well, there is only one way to do it. These kingdoms are mine. To have power over them, you have to fall down and worship me. You may be a little shocked to hear it put so bluntly, but a man who is going to become great must not be a dreamer. He has to take the world as it is. He has to get influence in the way in which influence is acquired in this world.

"Without political and military power you will be impotent. With them you will bring the reign of evil on earth to an end at last. When you are on the throne in Rome, you will not be like the other Caesars the world has

known. You are God's anointed, the Messiah whom your people await. You will mount the throne and bring order, righteousness and peace to the world."

It was at this point, it would seem, that all questioning in Jesus' mind ended. He was sure that he saw God's will and God's way to the goal. He said to that figure at his elbow: "Get thee behind me, Satan." This suggestion that had just been made to him he thrust aside as Satanic, the ultimate temptation that comes to the man who seeks to do God's will on earth.

Why did he judge this temptation to be so utterly Satanic?

For one thing, Satan's suggestion implied a conception of God totally opposed to Jesus' conception. The whole foundation of Jesus' faith was the conviction that God is Love, the Father of all men. Mankind is, therefore, God's family -- brothers and sisters. Keep hold of this truth and live by it -- "love the Lord thy God and thy neighbor as thyself" -- and you can solve all problems. Let go this truth, and all will be confusion and woe.

The very worst thing is to think of God as a dictator reigning over his subjects. "God, our Father," we can imagine Jesus exclaiming, "numbers the hairs of your heads. Without him not a sparrow falls to the ground. And you degrade him into a monarch lording it over slaves, a warrior trampling his enemies into the dust! To think of the Father in these terms is blasphemy; it is Satanism!"

In one of the most beautiful of the Parables Jesus said in effect: "Think of God as a very simple father, who had a no-good son. The son asked for his share of the inheritance and without a word of protest the father gave it to him, after which the son promptly went away and squandered it. When there was nothing else left for him to do, he went back home. And what did his father do about this wastrel? He had been looking and longing for him all the time, so he saw him afar off, and ran as fast as he could to meet him, and embraced him, and called on everybody to celebrate with him. The older son did not understand it. But that is how it is, and you had better understand it if you want to know what life means and how in this sad and tumultuous world things are to be set right again."

God does not resort to this thing men call power. Power can produce subjects for a monarch, but not sons and daughters who freely love each other and the common Father. When sin and evil arise, God keeps on loving. He would hardly be God, Jesus suggests, if he did not. Even sinners love those that love them. God is God because he loves sinners, and suffers with them and for them.

God cannot be found, therefore, where the big noise is heard and the great guns are going off. There was an Old Testament prophet who had to learn that lesson. There was the wind, and the earthquake, and the fire that devastated the mountainside -- and God was not in any of them. Then there was a still, small voice that anybody might have failed to notice. And that was God.

When things go wrong, and there is "trouble" in this God's world, it means that there are children who must be reconciled to each other and to God. It means that family ties that have been torn must be knit together again. That is the problem, and anyone who would bring good in place of evil must use means that are appropriate in dealing with such a problem.

That brings us back to Jesus standing on the mountaintop. If God was the kind of God whom we have described, then no armed Caesar could serve as his instrument and revelation. The Father could be revealed to men only by one to whom all men were brothers and sisters. He too would have to love the evil as well as the good -- especially the evil, for their need was greater! Like the Father he would keep on loving men no matter

how they might revile and oppose him, and no matter what it cost. Since his mission was to knit together again the sundered family of mankind, and to kindle love in the hearts of his brothers in place of indifference and hate, his methods could not be those of rulers and warriors. His ultimate weapon would have to be a Cross, not a sword.

We may put the meaning of that third temptation and Jesus' rejection of it in still another way.

Suppose he had sought to take Caesar's place and used the means that would be necessary to accomplish that end. By the time he got there, he would be like Caesar. The devil was a liar from the beginning, and never more so than when he said to Jesus, as he constantly says to good men and women: *"If you will bow down before me, then you can do God's will. If you do evil good will come of it. Through violence you will establish peace. You are the exception, so you will be able to use Caesar's methods to overcome Caesar and yet be utterly unlike the other Caesars when you get to the top."*

It was this suggestion that Jesus rejected as Satanic, because it is the last, most subtle temptation that assails the good man who is filled with a desire to save mankind. Such men are not subject to the ordinary temptation to be lazy, to steal money, to indulge the flesh. But just because they are not seeking their own selfish advantage, they feel: *"this evil is so monstrous that it must not be permitted to triumph. What if I, Jesus, have to kill some Romans in order to free Israel and other oppressed peoples? The alternative is to run the risk that this tyranny may continue; surely that cannot be God's will. What if we, Christian Americans, have to drop atom bombs on Japanese cities? Does it not stop the war more quickly and end Japanese militarism? What if we kill a quarter of a million human beings in Dresden in one night? Don't you have to use any means in order to stop the Nazi hordes? What if we must use hydrogen bombs on every Russian city? Is it not God's will that we defeat godless communism?"*

Suppose Jesus had yielded to such suggestions and had become the Warrior-Messiah his people expected God would send them? Whether he had succeeded or failed in his effort to liberate them from Roman rule, the world would have had another great national hero to admire. But there would have been nothing distinctive about that. There would have been no Christ. There would have been no Cross. There would have been no Christian church, no Christian faith. *All these, with all they mean for mankind, we have because Jesus did not yield to the suggestion that evil can overcome evil. He clung resolutely to the conviction that love is the only force that can overcome evil and redeem evil men, though he knew that in the end it would mean the defeat and the ignominy of the Cross.*

Love that accepts suffering on behalf of evildoers is Godlike. It is the ultimate expression of the divine nature. The idea that good can be accomplished and God's will be done by inflicting suffering on others is Satanic. It is the ultimate source of evil in the world.

At another crucial turning point, when Peter had exclaimed, "Thou art the Christ," Jesus again emphatically pointed out that this did not mean conquest and the paraphernalia of power.

At the very end, in the Garden, the agony was almost more than he could bear. Defeat and death stared him in the face. All his work was about to be undone. His disciples were about to run away. Nothing would remain. And he was God's chosen instrument to deliver his people. Surely God did not want this to happen! At any rate, it need not happen. *"Even now I could call and there would be legions at my command. Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me."*

But no sooner had he looked away from himself and from the surroundings into the face of the Father than the old conviction came back. God was the Father. He had no weapon against his rebellious children but a Father's

unwavering love. Jesus, if he was indeed to be the Father's son, must do the Father's bidding in his Father's way. There might be some question as to what his exhausted flesh and torn spirit wanted in that awful moment, but he could not question what the Father willed. Therefore -- "nevertheless, not as *I* will, but as *Thou* wilt."

Once again, what if Jesus had made another decision? There would have been no Christ, no Cross, no Christian church, no Christian religion. That is sure.

So when Jesus returned from the Temptation and began to speak to his oppressed people, he said something like this: "Do not hate these Romans. Love them. You say they are oppressors. They are, but so are You, O Pharisees. And it is worse for you, because yours are the law and the prophets. You should have set a higher standard. Repent of your own sin, instead of indulging in the pleasant pastime of repenting of the Romans sins.

"If you will give up the notion of overcoming Caesar by Caesar's methods and thus behaving like him in your turn, you will introduce a new, spiritual element into this vast edifice the Romans have built. You will be salt, leaven. You will lose your life, it is true, as one power-state among many. But thus you will break the eternal, tragic circle of evil leading to evil and in losing your life, you will save it and save this civilization as well. And then I will be your king -- a new kind of king who comes -- meek, and riding upon an ass.

"If not, if you attempt by the world's old methods to achieve liberation, you will perish. There shall not be left here one stone upon another that shall not be torn down. And because the salt that should have preserved this civilization will have lost its savor -- because you will have become just like everybody else -- this civilization also will perish. And me you will crucify.

"But," said Jesus, "that will not be the end. After three days, I will rise again. Why should you think that you can kill or stop Him from loving his children? Why should you think that you can get rid of me out of your thoughts or that you can keep my spirit from working in the world? Over and over again men will have to face the question as to whether they will try other ways -- build on sand -or whether at last they will heed these words of mine and do them, and so build human society on the rock."

What is the verdict of history in the matter? Paul, only a few years later, was sure he knew. "We preach Christ crucified," he said exultingly, "to the Jews a stumbling-block and to the Gentiles foolishness, but to them that are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

What the Jews and Greeks saw in that day was the mighty Empire of Rome. That was reality; that would last. Over against that they saw only a dead man on a Cross. What they heard were the disputations in the great universities of that day, and the clank of the money on its exchanges, and the laughter in the palaces and the night clubs, and above all, the tramp of the Roman soldiers on every road of that world. Surely there was reality, there was power.

What Paul and the early Christians saw and heard was nothing of that sort at all. For them, all that was already silent in the dust of history. What they saw was their crucified Lord "seated on the right hand of power on high." The creed of that early Church was, "Jesus is Lord!" -- not that man yonder in Rome. What they heard were the angelic hosts and devout souls in the ages to come, shouting:

*Crown him with many crowns
The Lamb upon his throne.*

Were these early Christians right or wrong? Is it Caesar who lives, or Christ?

We are living in the supreme crisis in our own and the world's history. Never has a nation possessed such a vast enginery of military power as the United States in this hour: the most highly mechanized army in the world, a navy greater than all others put together, the greatest air force in the world, a stockpile of atomic and hydrogen bombs, stores of biological weapons. Yet it is not enough. We are not secure. We are more afraid than we have been before.

What are we going to do? Continue to pile up arms, to seek security in material power and military might? Or will the Church of Jesus at last lead the nation in ceasing to depend upon these Satanic weapons? That can only happen if the churches that name the name of Jesus, themselves renounce war and dare to rely on the power of goodwill, of faith in God, of sacrificial love, to overcome evil.

What the churches do depends in turn on the decision that individual Christians make. What is your own decision? Can you reconcile participation in atomic war with the teachings and spirit of Jesus? If not, will you refuse henceforth any voluntary participation in war and war preparations, and join with others in seeking to demonstrate that sacrificial love, such as seen preeminently in Jesus, is indeed the one effective force for overcoming evil and transforming our confused and divided society into a creative fellowship?

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