

## Never beyond your ability?

**Egbert Brink**

*No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.*

(1 Corinthians 10:13)

### Asking too much

You will not be tested beyond your ability.<sup>1</sup> You will not be given more to carry than you can bear. This text has often been used thus to comfort people who have fallen on hard times. Or those who meet with adversity and feel unable to deal with it. They feel that God is asking too much of them. But how can this be so? Paul tells us: God will not let you be tempted beyond your ability! And how does this relate to Paul's own experiences? In his second letter he writes that they were so burdened beyond their strength that they despaired of life itself (2 Corinthians 1:8)!

### Temptation

Whoever delves into the context of 1 Corinthians 10 gains a different perception. Paul is talking about the journey through the desert, in which God's people were *tempted* in all kinds of ways and about evil desires that kept cropping up. He is referring more to temptation than to trials and tribulations. While it is true that the same word (*peirasmos*) is used for both in the New Testament, here it is clear, nevertheless, that this is about evil temptation and evil desires.

This becomes even clearer when looking at the examples Paul gives. His great concern is that the Corinthians are living a self-satisfied and settled life. They act as though they have already arrived. Certainly, they *have* received the wealth of the good news of Christ and the many special gifts that have become apparent (charismatic). But this does not mean that one can sit back.

### Be warned

Paul tells the history of Israel as *our* ancestral history. Forewarned is forearmed...It did not finish with the deliverance from Egypt and the baptism by the Red Sea. Would that were true! Our ancestors slipped up 'hopelessly'. The sequel to the story of liberation was one great let down. So many dropped out! A whole generation was lost. It is enough to make one despair. It started well, and it will be well again, but there are also evil powers at work that want to deprive us of our freedom.

And do not now say: 'That was then: those people were still unconverted, stubborn Jews. We have come a long way since then, we have the Holy Spirit and his gifts.' What happened back then happened with a view to us. In other words: it is a *prototype* (*tupos*), *a type of event that one can expect*. In that time in the desert, we come to recognize a

---

1

Some Bible translations speak of 'testing' or 'trials' [Tr.]

pattern of what will return later. We can recognize in this the tactic of the great tempter, of Satan. He is always of evil intent.

Paul is repeating what Jesus said. It is impossible that there will not be temptations. We cannot escape from traps or snares being laid along our path of life. 'Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come!' (Luke 17:1). We have been warned.

### **Attacks**

The freedom that we have received in Christ is under attack. Therefore, let us not live as though we have already arrived. Do not be so foolish as to think: that won't happen to me: I won't let that happen. There is a great danger of overconfidence. Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall (1 Corinthians 10: 12). Do not look down on others with an attitude that such will not happen to me. God would rather have us feeling weak and dependent, but alert, than that acting tough and strong. Evil is always lying in wait: luring, pulling, sucking, tempting. And the annoying part is that it dovetails with our deep evil desires, which dwell in us all. We happen to have a connection with evil. If you are being tempted, do not point to God, for it connects to your own desires (James 1:12-18).

Paul brings an area of temptation into the picture with the following traps: other gods, the power of *porneia*, provoking God, and living ungratefully.

#### *1. Fake gods*

But other gods do not really exist, do they? Indeed they do not, but they do present themselves as such. Demons do happen to exist. Paul is referring to the history of the Golden Calf. No sooner had God's covenant been made than the people were unfaithful. They did not want a distant God, to whom they had to listen and who sometimes kept them waiting. But a god who was close, that one could picture: the image of strength and fertility. A *god whom one can manipulate*. One who does what you want, and what you think is good and important. Whom you can move around and who can enter into your shoes. Who can be shaped into your image and your desires and your satisfaction and pleasure. Does that sound familiar?

#### *2. Porneia*

The word says it all: sexual immorality. This repeatedly formed a threat throughout the history of Israel. Baal and Astarte were paragons of this evil. Baal, the god of the growing economy, went together with Astarte, the goddess of free sexual morality. In the desert this already becomes clearly visible. At the end of the desert journey the people settled at Baal Peor, and became a little too sociable with those girls of Moab: it degenerated into a 'Bunga Bunga' party.

This is the danger Paul now also sees in the city of Corinth. There is talk of a free sexual morality. If you are in the spirit, then you are free, and your body with all its desires belongs to the old you, which you have left behind. And visiting a prostitute from time to time appeared not to be a problem. Paul repeatedly uses the term *porneia*. *Flee from*

*sexual immorality* (1 Corinthians 6:18). Sexuality is not wrong, but it is often wrongly used or abused. It can become a power that binds you. It can very easily become an addiction. The people back then were no better than today, but today's temptations are being multiplied through the media. Even a web filter does not fully guard against that. Porn can destroy your life.

### 3. *Provoking*

One could also say: mocking or challenging. This is about mocking Jesus, Paul says. That, in turn, has everything to do with *offending God*. Testing just how far you can go. You demand for yourself a space in which you can seek out the borders and subsequently cross them. God will then just have to look the other way...

### 4. *Grumbling*

*Grumbling is muttering multiplied*. If you grumble, you are dissatisfied. This is no good and that is no good. You have no eye for what you have. You are displeased. You make demands and are perhaps a 'prosperity child' [a child raised in our prosperous times]. Spoilt and not used to dealing with hardship. But if you grumble, you take it even further. Grumbling is clenching your fists. Grumbling is being at odds with others, obstructing, opposing, kicking up a row. If the cap fits, wear it.

### **Seize the promise of deliverance**

Paul concludes as he started, with a promise. You yourself are not resistant to Satan's attacks and temptations. *But with the temptation, God also gives the escape. He provides a base of operations (ex-base)*. It could be that he puts an end to the temptation and effectively frees you from the grip of evil. It could also be that he offers you an escape and provides a vent for release.

God does not, therefore, promise that you will always escape the temptation. You will have to pass through the area, and you might fall. But with that temptation he does not leave you to fend for yourself. In this way you are not tempted *inhumanly* and above your endurance. He offers a vent, but one that works only if you trust him. That can be by means of another who has been sent by him to help you. He can also do it directly. He promises his nearness and shelter. He sets a limit, so that the temptations you have to endure do not become inhuman. *With the temptation comes also his willingness to support you*.

One of the four temptations can make you fall really hard and can trip you up badly. But there is also a rock-hard promise: God will not yield. He never gives up. He remains faithful. That requires our faithfulness and trust. Christ has not endured all tribulations for nothing, enduring it even up to the very end. He did that, not for himself, but for you.

*It is not your perseverance with him,  
but his endurance  
with you, that is the deciding factor.*