

SENTINEL OF THE SOUL

THE GOOD CONSCIENCE 7



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A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

Sentinel of the Soul

Strong Souls 24
Sentinel of the Soul
The Good Conscience 7
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Sentinel of the Soul

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Welcome to *Sentinel of the Soul*

Every believer in Jesus Christ will face temptation every day of their lives. There's no avoiding it.

But temptation is not sin. We can indeed fall through temptation into sin, but we don't have to. If we can recognize temptation as such, then we can resist it and find the way of escape so that we grow through temptation to greater heights of spiritual maturity.

The conscience is that component of the soul that enables us to grow through temptation rather than fall through it. The prophet Asaph will show us how this works.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 Two Paths

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Galatians 5.22, 23

The root of our problems

At the root of all the problems facing humankind and the cosmos is our inability to practice self-control. It was precisely this which caused Adam and Eve to fall into sin, bringing death and corruption to the whole creation. Faced with an *emotionally* appealing proposal, which to choose could be easily *rationalized*, Adam and Eve rebelled against God and His Word, let their hearts and minds overrule their consciences, and fell through temptation into sin and death.

And the rest, as they say, is history (Gen. 3).

German theologian Helmut Thielicke defined temptation in this way: “To be in temptation means to be constantly in the situation of wanting to be untrue to God. It means being constantly on the point of freeing ourselves from God.” This being so, it’s no wonder that self-control is included among the fruit of the Holy Spirit. For without self-control, we will be unable to resist the many temptations which confront us day by day. We will always be falling through temptation into sin, guilt, shame, and spiritual setback, compromising our good conscience, sullyng our clean heart, and denying our sanctified mind, unless we cultivate the ability to resist temptation through the practice of self-control.

Here is where the function of the conscience comes daily and continuously into play. For the conscience, in addition to being the *referee* of the soul, arbitrating between mind and heart, is also the *sentinel* of the soul, guarding heart, mind, and life against those influences from within and without which encourage us to free ourselves from God.

The book on dealing with temptation

In Psalm 73, the prophet Asaph outlined a textbook analysis of temptation and how to deal with it. Whenever temptation comes, Asaph explained, we will travel one of two paths, depending on the condition of our conscience. Either we will, like Adam and Eve, *fall through* temptation into sin; or we will, like Asaph in Psalm 73, *grow through* temptation into greater maturity in the Lord. The role of conscience is to *guard* us against taking the wrong path and *guide* us by proven values and priorities and wise choices to take the right path.

That we are going to be tempted is certain. Paul indicates that we should be prepared to deal with every kind of temptation, and to find the “way of escape” which God has provided to combat temptation (1 Cor. 10.13). To find ourselves in the midst of temptation is not yet to sin; rather, temptation is the signal that sin is seeking to have us. Our duty, following our purified conscience, is to recognize the temptation, resist the devil, and press on toward holiness in the fear of God. Martin Luther is reported to have observed, “You can’t stop the birds from flying over your head, but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair.”

Self-control

And that’s what we want to do. It’s why we need a *good* conscience, one that is trained and set for good choices and good works. The practice of self-control involves *recognizing* temptation – by having in place the right values and priorities and the wisdom of God’s Word – and *resisting* temptation, by seeking the ways of escape God has made available to us.

Asaph was confronted by temptation pretty much the way we are – right smack in the middle of everyday life. Here he was, the worship leader of Israel, and, as he was going along on his way, he encountered a boisterous party of rich people off to do who knows what. He observed their lavish dress and extravagant manner. He

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heard their laughter and crude conversation. As he reflected on rich people he had known, it seemed to him that they were never in trouble or distress; they always had ample means to take care of whatever they might need. They were proud of their attainments and not shy about parading their wealth before the watching world. They didn't worry about what God might think about them – what could He do, anyway?

Rich people, Asaph mused, have got it made.

And what about me? he continued. Here I am, the servant of the Lord. I knock myself out in daily discipline, so that I remain faithful to the Lord. I get no respect from the people I serve. I got nothing: "Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocence. For all day long I have been plagued, and chastened every morning." (vv. 13, 14).

But just as Asaph was about to *vocalize* his complaint, it hit him. He was getting ready to break free of God. In Asaph's conscience, alarms were sounding. The sentinel of his soul came suddenly to a state of high alert, and now Asaph had to make a choice. He had encountered temptation, in the form of covetousness, and he was just about to step onto the wrong path. As he says at the beginning of his psalm, "my feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped" (v. 2).

Almost. But they didn't. And ours don't have to, either. When our conscience is good, primed, and ready, we can recognize and resist temptation so that, rather than rebel like Adam and Eve we can grow like Asaph.

At just the moment he was about to fall into sin's trap, Asaph heeded his conscience and practiced the discipline of self-control. We can learn from his example and teaching how to follow our conscience as it seeks the wisdom of God in the time of our lives and avoids the snares and traps of the devil.

For reflection

1. What is temptation? What's the difference between temptation and sin?
2. What two paths does temptation open before us? How can we determine which is the right one to follow?
3. How is the role of conscience in alerting us to temptation and helping us to resist it?

Next steps – Preparation: Today, make a list of any temptations to sin that confront you. What should you do to prepare for these temptations, and what should you do to resist them?

2 What's at Stake

"But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you." Matthew 6.33

Temporal situations, eternal issues

Faced with a powerful temptation, the prophet Asaph "nearly slipped" and stumbled into sin (Ps. 73.2). He observed the rich and was envious of their leisurely lifestyle. He heard them mocking God and plowing ahead with their agendas, rebellious and proud. He observed this parade of vanity and God-mockery, and, for a moment, he wanted to sign up.

But Asaph was a man devoted to God. He had been appointed by David as leader of the choirs and worship in the temple that was to be built. Now, under David's son Solomon, he had begun his service, leading the people into the presence of God and encouraging them in the work of His Kingdom. Would he now throw all that away for a season of sensual delight and self-indulgence?

Happily, Asaph was a man of a good conscience and a strong soul. He recognized the temptation that was about to engulf him and turned away, seeking the Lord's ways of escape from temptation, that he might grow through into greater love for God.

When we are faced with temptation, large, eternal issues are at stake. We might say to ourselves, "It's just a little transgression. No one will get hurt, and nobody will ever know." And that may be true. Except that God will know, and we will as well, that we are relinquishing the time God has given us for the way of folly and rebellion, rather than wisdom and the fear of the Lord.

And *what* we'll know is that, when, in the face of temptation, we give in to our lusts, we *fall through* temptation into sin. Then, ensnared in folly, we abandon the progress of the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. Thus, the time granted us for Kingdom *progress* becomes instead time for Kingdom *regress*, when the sentinel of our soul is asleep, or we choose not to heed the warnings of our conscience.

Begin here

When confronted with temptation, we need to remember who we are: God has called us to enter His Kingdom and know His glory. We are citizens and ambassadors of a Kingdom not of this world. We have been called to seek that Kingdom and to work for its progress in and through every aspect of our lives. Every day, in all that we do, if we are seeking the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, we are contributing to the progress of light, truth, grace, goodness, righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

But the moment we give in to temptation, all those glorious truths and possibilities get set aside, while we tread the path of the kingdom of self-indulgence and breaking free from God. Recognizing temptation is the first step; resisting temptation follows.

Ken Boa once explained that growing in the life of faith is like walking up a down escalator. It's hard work, to be sure, but we can make progress if we stay at it every moment. Forces are arrayed against us, to be sure, and it's a lot easier just to go with the flow. But as soon as we stop to take a rest, we don't just stand still; we decline. And when we give in to temptation, we don't just decline, we fall down the escalator to whatever depths of disobedience and degradation may capture our hearts and minds and run roughshod over our conscience.

When you come to the realization that you are being tempted to break free from the Lord and sin, face up to the situation for what it is. Name it. Refuse it. And get ready to stand firm against it.

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Called to serve the King

Asaph understood that he was called to serve the King – and not just King Solomon. He was *God's* man, sent to serve *God's* people, and devoted to the progress of *God's* Kingdom within Israel, every moment of every day of his life. Temptation would not cause him to lose sight of who he was or how he was expected to live.

Faced with temptation, therefore, it was important that Asaph recognize temptation as a blatant invitation to break free from God and turn from His rule. From this perspective, Asaph could see the situation for what it was; he could understand the strong allure of temptation; and he could see through that allure to the sin, guilt, shame, and setback which lay along the path he was contemplating.

Asaph's conscience, in other words, was at its post and working.

We are children of our heavenly Father, citizens and ambassadors of the Kingdom of God, followers of and witnesses to Jesus Christ, heirs of eternal glory, dwelling-places of the Holy Spirit, and ambassadors of our God and King. Nothing that happens on the path that follows from failing to heed the sentinel of our soul will contribute to realizing our true being and purpose. Indeed, everything we encounter along the path of sin distracts and detours us from Kingdom progress and joy. We must never forget who we are!

The apostle Paul promised that, whenever we are faced with temptation, God will provide a way of escape, so that we can bear up and *grow* through temptation into greater maturity in the Lord (1 Cor. 10.13). We are practicing self-control when we search for that way of escape and direct our steps toward it. Once we have recognized temptation for what it is and remembered who we are as citizens in the Kingdom of God, then we can begin to practice self-control toward God's way of escape through temptation into greater growth in the Lord.

For reflection

1. Explain Ken Boa's illustration of the life of faith. Do you experience this?
2. What do we need to remember when we are confronted by temptation? How can we do that?
3. What does Paul mean by a "way of escape" to combat temptation? How can you find that?

Next steps – Conversation: Talk with the Lord about temptation and sin – where you struggle, need to grow, or have to be especially on guard. Commit your day and all its temptations to Him.

3 Recognizing Temptation

And the Lord said, "Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat." Luke 22.31

Falling through

Poor Peter. Like the proverbial frog in the kettle, he failed to recognize what was happening until it was too late.

He felt no qualms about lying to a little girl who accused him of having been with Jesus (Lk. 22.56). After all, she was just a kid.

Then, when some unknown stranger agreed with that observation, it was easier to say, "No way, man!" So that, just as the rooster was opening his eyes and taking in breath to greet the new day, and a third person confronted him about being associated with Jesus, Peter could say, doubtless with an uneasy laugh, "Man, I don't know what you're talking about!"

But the crowing of that rooster stabbed Peter in the depths of his soul, "And he went out and wept bitterly."

How much better if Peter had listened to the Lord's warning and taken His Word to heart? If he had allowed the Word of Jesus to purify his conscience, that sentinel of the soul might have helped him choose the right path during those crucial moments following Jesus' arrest. Jesus had told him that he would deny Him three times, but Peter insisted that would never happen. Later, Jesus instructed Peter to pray, so that he would not enter temptation. Instead, Peter took a nap.

Peter, alarmed and panicking about the events of the evening and focused on his own safety and wellbeing, failed to recognize the temptations confronting him, and he fell through temptation into sin and bitter shame and remorse.

That's not where we want to be.

Growing through

Perhaps Peter should have spent more time meditating on Asaph's experience in Psalm 73. Asaph "almost slipped" into sin, but, unlike Peter, he chose the path of *growth through* temptation instead. He practiced the spiritual virtue of self-control in the face of temptation, and he showed us in his psalm how we may practice this virtue as well.

Resisting temptation begins with recognizing it. Temptation is not sin. Even Jesus was tempted – more than any of us. But He never sinned. We can't avoid temptation, as Luther reminded us; however, if we can recognize when it's beginning to work on us, we can start looking for the way of escape through temptation that leads to the path of greater growth in the Lord.

Since temptation means being at a point of wanting to break free from God, temptation must be something like a road sign which points away from the progress of God's Kingdom. If our conscience is purified and alert, it will not fail to miss such false signals. The more earnest we are in seeking the Kingdom of God, and the more we understand the signposts of progress along *that* route, the easier it will be to recognize any false detours that suddenly appear before us.

The Law – again

Jesus taught that greatness in the Kingdom of God is related to living and teaching the Law of God (Matt. 5.17-19). By His Spirit, Jesus is rewriting the Law of God on our hearts (Ezek. 36.26, 27), so that it will be

there for the conscience to read whenever temptation is present (Rom. 2.14, 15).

Temptation therefore is anything which encourages us to deny, neglect, ignore, or violate the Law of God. And since, as Paul explained (Rom. 7.7), the Law gives us the knowledge of sin, the more familiar we are with the Law of God, the easier it will be to recognize whatever might try to divert us from its path.

Psalm 1 teaches that the righteous person practices daily meditation in the Law of God, and in all His Word. The Scriptures are given by divine inspiration to equip us for every good work. The Bible guides us along the path God approves, so the more familiar we are with the Bible, the more consistent we are in daily reading, meditation, and study, the easier it's going to be to recognize temptation when it arises.

No amount of merely *hearing* the Bible preached or taught can substitute for spending time with God in His Word, reading, meditating, reflecting, internalizing, and planning to live what He reveals of Himself to you there.

Asaph, a devout student of God's Law, gradually recognized what was happening as he contemplated the ease and mocking lifestyles of the rich. Those thoughts of self-indulgence, that feeling of envy and covetousness, that tinge of resentment against his calling from the Lord – those were the signposts toward the path of sin. And once he recognized what was happening, Asaph began looking for the ways of escape which God provided.

For reflection

1. Describe the process whereby Peter fell through temptation into sin.
2. What was the first step for Asaph in growing through temptation? How was he able to do that?
3. Why is the Law of God important in recognizing temptation? Suggest some ways the Law of God can have a more viable role in the life of faith.

Next steps – Transformation: Determine to keep your radar up for temptation today. When it comes, whether large or small, stand firm in the Word of God and do not yield. Repeat as necessary.

4 We Never Sin Alone

*Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain,
And washed my hands in innocence.
For all day long I have been plagued,
And chastened every morning.
If I had said, "I will speak thus,"
Behold, I would have been untrue to the generation of Your children. Psalm 73.13-15*

Not a harmless matter

Asaph's victory over temptation began as soon as he recognized what was happening. Alarms went off in his conscience to clear his mind and refocus his heart. This was no harmless fit of self-indulgence he was contemplating. It was outright rebellion against God, and betrayal of the people he was called to serve!

So, rather than *voice* his resentment and covetous desires, and thus fall through temptation into sin, Asaph turned to God's way of escape, and practiced the discipline of self-control so that he would not fall through temptation into sin but grow through it into a closer walk with the Lord.

The first step along the way of escape is to remember that we never sin alone. We might think we can "get away" with some little secret sin, but we are part of a community of the faithful; we are members of the Body of Christ. If I introduce infection to one of my fingers, or poison to my tongue, sooner or later my whole body is going to feel the consequences. All the members of my body are connected to one another, and when one comes under stress, the whole body feels it.

It's the same thing with sin. Any time we break free of the Lord, we plant a root of disobedience and corruption in our own souls. But that seed will not remain there. Like dandelions, the seeds of rebellion can waft through all our thoughts, feelings, priorities, words, and deeds in ways we cannot predict, and may not be able to control. And there is no telling how many others might be adversely affected by our deviation from the Lord.

Separation from the Lord

Sin makes a separation between us and the Lord (Is. 59.1, 2). Once that separation begins, it's easy to forget or to rationalize disobeying the Word of God, as Peter did in that courtyard.

Further, when we harbor sin in our heart, God will not listen to our prayers (Ps. 66.18). Until His Spirit searches and convicts us of our sin, and we confess and repent, we are going to be running down the down escalator at a dangerous pell-mell pace (Ps. 139.23, 24; Jn. 16.8-11; 1 Jn. 1.8-10).

And do we suppose this will not affect the people around us? Can we be sensitive to the needs of others, when our own spirits are dulled by the presence of sin, and we are consumed with our own pleasure? Will we be looking for opportunities to encourage others in the Lord, or to bear witness to them, when sin is blackening our souls and suppressing faith? Will our worship be as rich and contagious, our joy as full and edifying, or our walk as exemplary as it should be, while sin is dragging us around by the collar of our soul?

Hardly. We never sin alone. Asaph remembered that he was a fellow citizen with the saints of the Lord, a member of the Body of the Lord's people, and he would not allow himself to become a point of entry for corruption into the holy nation. If we love our fellow believers and all the people to whom God sends us each day, we will heed the warnings of the sentinel of our soul and seek God's way of escape through temptation.

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Know your place in the Body of Christ

This is why it's important that each Christian understand his or her place in the Body of Christ. By His Spirit God has gifted us to serve our fellow believers with words of edification and deeds of love (1 Cor. 12.7-11; Heb. 10.24; Gal. 6.1-10). If we are not actively seeking to nurture and use our gifts in ministry, beginning in our everyday lives and our Personal Mission Field, we may already be allowing a root of sin to grow in our soul.

God has called us to become equipped for ministry and ready for good works, so that we serve others after the example of our Lord Jesus Christ (Eph. 4.11, 12; Tit. 3.8, 14; Jn. 13.1-15). If, because we have freed ourselves from God and His Word, we refuse to do this, and to take our place as contributing members of the Body of Christ, are we not disobeying the instruction of the Lord? Are we not betraying the people of God?

We never sin alone. Having recognized that we have come under temptation, the first step along the way of escape is to remember that we are linked by God's Spirit with all other believers in the world. Rebellion or corruption, introduced into our soul, will have deleterious effects on the other believers with whom we are associated.

Love of God and neighbors requires that, in the face of temptation, we look for God's way of escape, beginning with the first step, which reminds us that our lives are linked with those of all the other followers of Jesus Christ.

For reflection

1. What do we mean by saying we never sin alone? Can you give an illustration? How should knowing this help to keep us from falling through temptation into sin?
2. What can be the consequences of harboring sin in our heart?
3. How can remembering that we are part of the Body of Christ help us in dealing with temptation?

Next steps – Preparation: How will you prepare yourself today to recognize and resist temptation? Where do you expect to be tempted? How can you ready yourself to do good instead?

5 Slippery Slope

*When I thought how to understand this,
It was too painful for me—
Until I went into the sanctuary of God;
Then I understood their end.
Surely You set them in slippery places;
You cast them down to destruction.
Oh, how they are brought to desolation, as in a moment!
They are utterly consumed with terrors. Psalm 73:16-19*

God sees

The writer of Hebrews reminds us that God does not sit idly by while His children stray into the paths of sin. He is our Father, and He loves us enough to bring discipline against us, until we turn from our wicked ways and renew our journey along the path of righteousness (Heb. 12:3-11).

And, the writer hastens to add, such discipline as the Lord brings against us is never pleasant.

As Asaph, heeding his conscience, began to recognize the sin he was contemplating, and to turn from it, he found a way of escape by remembering that we never sin alone. The sins we indulge always affect others.

At the same time, he remembered that God hates sin and is opposed to those who pursue it. Sin, Asaph reflected, is a slippery slope, leading to judgment. Once we have begun on a path of disobedience, it's easy to continue on that road, as we saw in the case of Peter. One sin leads to another, and the likelihood, for those whom God has called as His children, is that, at some point in that slide, they're going to meet up with Him.

And it won't be pretty.

Sin-deterrent

We have seen that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Ps. 111:10). The fear of the Lord is also a pretty good deterrent to sinning. When we remember that sin is what sinners do, and God brings judgment against those who break away from Him (Rom. 1:18ff), the fear of the Lord can provide a second step along the way of escape that can help us to *grow through* temptation unto maturity, rather than *fall through* it into sin.

In this matter of the judgment of God, Asaph had a front row seat in seeing how the Lord dealt with David. David decided to shirk his duty as a king and stay home during the season when kings go out to secure their borders and eject any foreigners who may have made incursion on the land (2 Sam. 11). Perhaps he considered that he was just too great a king for such routine stuff. Or perhaps he had other plans.

Either way, his neglect of duty was a sin, and he and the people of God would pay dearly for what ensued.

One sin leads to another

As it turned out, David spent the evenings gazing on his neighbor's wife, until he could no longer resist the temptation to have her. Bathsheba – no bastion of purity in this affair – was an easy take. What neither of them planned on was her becoming pregnant.

Not a problem, David thought, now deep into a web of sin and disobedience. He sent for Bathsheba's husband under a pretense of wanting a report on the war, and arranged for him to spend the night with his wife before returning.

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What he didn't count on was that Uriah was a more noble fellow than David expected, and he refused to enjoy the privileges of marital bliss while his comrades were risking their necks in battle.

On to plan B: David sends a message to Joab – a scab if ever there was one – by the hand of Uriah, instructing Joab to arrange for Uriah to be killed in battle. By this time, sin has sapped David's conscience and captured his heart, so that he can only think like a rebel against God rather than His anointed king. His instructions to Joab being faithfully carried out, David took Bathsheba for his own wife.

But the child she conceived died shortly after birth – one more bit of collateral damage from David's sins – and from that point forward, David's family fell into disarray and dissolution. He very nearly lost his kingdom; and all his troubles traced back to a failure of self-control, in the season when kings go out to battle, and he didn't.

Lesson learned

All that was undoubtedly quite fresh in Asaph's mind as he remembered the plight of those who follow the path of sin, and he turned away from temptation and sin's slippery slope.

We don't have to be prophets to know that giving in to even the smallest sin is not a good idea. Each little compromise builds on previous ones until falling through temptation to sin becomes a way of life. And each such compromise sears the conscience a little more, making it less fit to recognize temptation and muster the resources of heart and mind to stand firm against it, and less inclined to fear the Lord Who hates sin.

The fear of the Lord can be a wonderful aid in finding the way of escape, when temptation is calling us to break free of God. But *now* is the time to be nurturing that fear, so that, when we need it to escape temptation and avoid the slippery slope of sin, the fear of God will be there to keep us on the path of growing in the grace and wisdom of the Lord.

For reflection

1. What do we mean by saying that unconfessed sin can be a slippery slope? How can remembering this be a way of escape through temptation?
2. How does the fear of the Lord function to deter sin?
3. How can we nurture a proper fear of God, at the same time we are growing in love for Him?

Next steps – Transformation: What is involved in nurturing a proper fear of God? What will you do today to make sure you fear Him as you should?

6 Flee to the Lord

*Nevertheless I am continually with You;
You hold me by my right hand.
You will guide me with Your counsel,
And afterward receive me to glory.* Psalm 73.23, 24

Shelter in the Lord

Now well on his way through the way of escape from temptation, Asaph takes the most crucial step of all. He has already reminded himself that any sin he commits will be a betrayal of the Lord's people. And he has remembered that sin is a slippery slope, along which, at some point, we can expect to meet up with the discipline of God.

Now Asaph flees to the Lord, for he knows this to be the surest way to escape temptation and secure his proper footing.

Jesus taught that apart from Him, we can do nothing. We may well start down the path of resisting the devil and following the Lord, but unless we take shelter in the Lord, and remain there, we will not be able to continue in the direction our conscience has indicated. We need the Lord's Presence, counsel, and power to keep us growing through temptation to greater wisdom and sanctification.

With us always

I want us to observe three facets of Asaph's turn to the Lord. Each of them is important in helping us to engage our conscience for the virtue of self-control.

The first is recalling and resting in *the Presence of the Lord*. Asaph recalls, "I *am* continually with You; You hold *me* by my right hand." Even if our sins never affected anyone else – but they always do – they would affect the Lord. Whenever we sin it is in the Presence of the Lord. He has promised to be with us always, and that means He is with us as we set our feet on the path of rebellion, corruption, and sin.

As if it weren't enough that our prior sins helped to put Jesus on the cross, now we're going to drive more nails into His torn hands and feet, and He is right there with us as we do?

I wonder how many of us have the sense of Jesus' Presence with us such that we can envision Him holding our hand as we walk through our daily activities in life. Jesus is with us as we're facing temptations, and we can draw on His Presence to help us resist whatever within us wants to break free of His hand and disobey.

But not only is Jesus with us where we are; according to the apostle Paul, we are also with Him, where He is, seated at the right hand of God (Eph. 2.6). If we can envision ourselves facing our temptations from within the throne room of God, from a place at the very right hand of the Father, it might prove to be a needed help along the path of resisting temptation and growing in the Lord.

Prayer

Second, Asaph turned to *prayer*. He was already engaged in prayer by verse 18, when he was talking with the Lord about the slippery slope of sin and how he did not want to come under the discipline of God. The rest of this psalm continues Asaph's prayer to the Lord. Having come to recognize the temptation he was considering, Asaph drew on the Presence of the Lord and opened a conversation with Him.

Prayer can be a strong source of spiritual energy for resisting temptation and growing in the Lord – even praying a psalm like Psalm 73, to remind us how to stay on the Lord's path. The more we practice the

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discipline of prayer throughout the day, the greater will be the likelihood that prayer will be there to help us find the way of escape from sin when we need it.

It will be more difficult to give in to temptation and fall through it into sin if you, like Asaph, sustain a vital conversation with the Lord.

The counsel of the Lord

Finally, Asaph sought the counsel of the Lord. He looked to the Lord to guide him concerning how he ought to deal with this situation.

At the very least, Asaph must have recalled the tenth commandment, “You shall not covet.” Perhaps his mind also ranged to reflect on those Scriptures which instruct believers to hate sin (Ps. 97.10), to fear the Lord and serve Him (Deut. 10.12), and to seek Him while He may be found (Ps. 3.6). Wherever his mind may have wandered throughout the whole counsel of God, Asaph would have found guidance and strength by turning to the Word of God, a sure lamp unto our feet when the darkness is threatening all around (Ps. 119.105).

As you seek the way of escape through temptation, remember that the Lord Jesus is with you always, and His Spirit dwells within your soul. Draw near to the Lord in prayer, resting in His Presence, and reflecting on His Word. This is a sure and strong step in responding to your conscience and practicing the self-control we need to keep us from falling through temptation into sin.

For reflection

1. What comes to mind as you think about fleeing to the Lord? How can you practice this throughout the day?
2. How do you experience the Presence of the Lord? How can drawing into the Presence of the Lord help in resisting temptation?
3. How can remembering that the Lord is always with us, and that He sees us at all times, help us in dealing with temptation? How can we keep this in mind?

Next steps – Preparation: Make a list of a few Scriptures you might turn to when faced with temptation. Write them down and carry them with you until you have them memorized. Use them faithfully to flee to the Lord when you are confronted with temptation.

7 Delight Yourself in the Lord

*My flesh and my heart fail;
But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.
For indeed, those who are far from You shall perish;
You have destroyed all those who desert You for harlotry.
But it is good for me to draw near to God;
I have put my trust in the Lord God,
That I may declare all Your works.* Psalm 73:26-28

Renewing self-control

Self-control is the virtue which enables us to postpone immediate gratification for more long-term benefit. It is an especially important virtue to have in place for dealing with temptation. The role of conscience is to rally the mind and the heart for self-control, so that our soul may be entirely and perfectly inclined to obey and follow the Lord in every situation.

When presented with an opportunity to sin, self-control alerts us to recognize temptation and engages our soul to resist it, so that we *grow through* temptation unto greater maturity in the Lord, rather than *fall through* it into rebellion and sin. By practicing self-control, we decline the short-term and deceitful enjoyment of sin to preserve and enrich the long-term delight of living in the favor of the Lord. Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit which He works in all those who love the Lord Jesus sincerely.

Thus it stands to reason that the more we love Jesus, and delight in Him, the more our entire soul – heart, mind, and conscience – will be ready to exert self-control when temptations arise.

Loving Jesus is the way to renew and strengthen the virtue of self-control, and all the other virtues and disciplines as well.

Finding the way of escape

Asaph found the way of escape by remembering that we never sin alone and that sin is a slippery slope, and by fleeing to the Lord in prayer and meditation. At the end of his psalm, the temptation to covet averted, he rests in his relationship with the Lord and is renewed and strengthened for whatever he may have to confront next.

As Asaph continued along the way of escape, he refocused on the Lord, and his soul was filled with the delight of contemplating God and resting in Him. Thus more firmly ensconced in the Lord than ever, he was strengthened in soul and body to continue in Him for His Kingdom and glory.

David had written that, in the presence of the Lord are fullness of joy and pleasures forever more (Ps. 16:11). He also declared that if we delight in the Lord, the Lord will give us the desires of our heart (Ps. 37:4), which, if we *delight in Him*, will certainly be *more of Him*.

Sin may be appealing, as it winks and beckons at us from the other side of temptation. But, as we have seen, sin separates us from the Lord, thus robbing us of the joy and pleasure we can know as we delight in Him. If, when temptation comes, we focus on the short-term but ultimately unsatisfying pleasures of sin, we will lose sight of, and then contact with, the *eternal* and *glorious* pleasures that can be known in the presence of the Lord.

But if, as temptations arise, we turn our minds to the Lord and contemplate His beauty and goodness and draw near to His Presence, our delight in Him will light the way of escape through temptation to a deeper

relationship with the Lord.

Knowing the Lord

It's clear that Asaph enjoyed a deeply personal experience of the Lord. He talked about the Lord as holding his hand, guiding him with counsel, being present with him on earth, as the strength of his heart, and the portion of his daily life. Asaph delighted in being near to the Lord and taking refuge in Him. It's clear that Asaph's faith was more than just a kind of intellectual assent. Asaph *knew* the Lord, and *knowing* Him, he *delighted* in God – he would not allow some short-term enticement to create any interruption in his fellowship with God.

Is this how you would describe your own relationship with Jesus Christ? Do you merely believe in Jesus, or do you truly *know* and *delight* in Him? Do you enter His Presence, gaze upon His glory, fill up with His Spirit, and soak in His Word? Knowing the Lord and delighting in Him are the privilege of all who name the Name of Jesus as Savior and King. That so few who profess to *believe* in Jesus truly *know* and *delight* in Him is surely one of the greatest scandals of the contemporary Church.

Knowing and delighting in the Lord is the forge in which self-control is strengthened – in the Presence of the Lord, relishing His beauty, drinking in His goodness, resting in His Presence and power, contemplating His good and perfect will, singing with joy in your soul together with departed saints and angels. They who will not nurture this kind of relationship with the Lord are certain to be vulnerable to every temptation that crosses their paths. Unless we discipline our mind to focus on, our heart to delight in, and our conscience to prefer the greater and eternal good of the Presence and pleasure of the Lord, we will too easily be drawn aside to the cheap thrills and deadly distractions of every passing temptation.

A good conscience is anchored in knowledge of and delight in the Lord. Make it your highest priority to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 3.18), and you will find the self-control you need to discover the way of escape through every temptation.

For reflection

1. What does it mean to delight yourself in the Lord? How should a Christian practice this?
2. What warning would you offer someone to encourage them to fight against falling through temptation into sin?
3. What counsel would you give a new believer to help them learn to recognize and grow through temptation into a greater likeness to Jesus?

Next steps – Transformation: How would you assess the state of your delight in the Lord? Is He truly the greatest joy of your life? What can you do to increase delight in Him?

Sentinel of the Soul

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Why is it appropriate to think of the conscience as the sentinel of the soul?
2. What is self-control, and why is it a function of the conscience? How does self-control work in a believer's life?
3. What is temptation, and how can we recognize when we are in it? What are the two paths presented to us by temptation?
4. What ways of escape are available to us when temptations arise?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this study for further purifying your conscience? How are you putting that lesson to work in your life?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.