

# Matthew 26:41 Commentary

Matthew 26:41 Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." ([NASB: Lockman](#))

**Greek:** gregoreite (2PPAM) kai proseuchesthe, (2PPMM) hina me eiselhete (2PAAS) eis peirasmon; to men pneuma prothumon e de sarx asthenes.

**Amplified:** All of you must keep awake (give strict attention, be cautious and active) and watch and pray, that you may not come into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak. ([Amplified Bible - Lockman](#))

**ESV:** Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.

**KJV:** Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.

**NET:** Stay awake and pray that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

**NLT:** Keep watch and pray, so that you will not give in to temptation. For the spirit is willing, but the body is weak! ([NLT - Tyndale House](#))

**Phillips:** Watch and pray, all of you, that you may not have to face temptation. Your spirit is willing, but human nature is weak. ([Phillips: Touchstone](#))

**Wuest:** Be ever watching and be ever praying lest you enter a place of testing where a solicitation to do evil may be the occasion which will lead to an act of sin. The spirit on the one hand is willing, but on the other hand, the flesh is weak.

**Young's Literal:** watch, and pray, that ye may not enter into temptation: the spirit indeed is forward, but the flesh weak.'

**KEEP WATCHING AND PRAYING THAT YOU MAY NOT ENTER INTO TEMPTATION THE SPIRIT IS WILLING BUT THE FLESH IS WEAK:** gregoreite (2PPAM) kai proseuchesthe, (2PPMM) hina me eiselhete (2PAAS) eis peirasmon; to men pneuma prothumon e de sarx asthenes:

- **Watching:** Mt 24:42 25:13 Mk 13:33-37 14:38 Lk 21:36 22:40,46 1Co 16:13 Eph 6:18 1Pe 4:7 5:8 Rev 16:15
- **Enter:** Mt 6:13 Pr 4:14,15 Lk 8:13 11:4 1Co 10:13 2Pe 2:9 Rev 3:10
- **Spirit:** Ps 119:4, 5, 24, 25, 32, 35, 36, 37,115,117,1 Isa 26:8,9 Ro 7:18-25 Ro 8:3 1Co 9:27 Ga 5:16, 17, 24 Php 3:12, 13, 14
- Matthew 26 Resources - Multiple Sermons and Commentaries

## Matthew 26:41 THE CONTEXT and BACKGROUND

**Keep the context in mind...** Jesus and his disciples have finished their "Last Supper" together, sung a hymn and gone out to the Mount of Olives (Mt 26:30). Here Jesus quoting Zechariah 13:7, predicted all of the disciples would "stumble" (Mt 26:31). Peter in his **flesh** responds "I will never stumble (see related nouns skandalon -- gives us English "scandalized")" (Mt 26:33) (Principle: Pride always makes us vulnerable to falling Pr 16:18, 1Co 10:12). Jesus responded with the prophecy that Peter would deny (arneomai) Him 3 times (Mt 26:34, 35). Peter still manifesting the strength of his own human (fallen) **flesh**, proudly and boldly persists in maintaining that he would not deny Jesus (Mt 26:35).

36 Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to His disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray."

37 And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and distressed.

38 Then He said to them, "My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and **keep watch** (gregoreuo [word study] in the present imperative) with Me."

39 And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will."

40 And He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, "So, you men could not **keep watch** (gregoreuo [word study]) with Me for one hour? (Mt 26:36-40)

## THE 5 W' & H QUESTIONS (interrogate with the 5W'S & H)

**WHEN?:** The night of Jesus' betrayal by Judas and leading to His mock trials and crucifixion in less than 24 hours.

**WHAT?:** Watch, Pray. Discussed in more detail below.

**WHO?:** Jesus, Peter, John, James. Which disciple did Jesus address directly? (Mt 26:40). Notice what name Jesus uses in the parallel passage in Mk 14:37. What might be significant about that name? Was it the "old" name or the "new" name for His lead apostle? Obviously "Simon" (from Hebrew "Shimon" = hearing) was the "old" name, whereas "Peter" (Greek = "Petros" = piece of rock) was the "new" name (see Lk 6:14). Peter the rock would soon "roll" when confronted with the accusation by a servant girl that he was one of the Lord's disciples. A new name in Scripture often signifies a change in character (Abram to Abraham, Sarai to Sarah, Jacob to Israel, etc). Simon thought he was a "rock" but first had to be tested (remember that often in Scripture the test is "neutral" and one's response determines whether it is a test or a temptation that leads to evil). Jesus knew that in the Garden Peter was still "Simon" at heart but had already promised (prophesied) he would become a "rock" (compare Lk 22:31 "Simon" with Lk 22:32). Upshot? What (spiritual) tests has God allowed or sent into your life that you have "failed"? Take heart, every believer is a divine "work in progress" and we can be assured that what He has begun in each of us, He will be certain to complete! (Php 1:6).

**WHY?** While there may be other reasons in Jesus' gentle warning to His men to watch and pray, Jesus was preparing the men for their soon to come falling away and denial of Him, albeit temporary.

**WHERE?:** Garden of Gethsemane - from **Gath** = Hebrew = upper trough where grapes were pressed by treading (Neh 13:15) + **Shemen** = Hebrew word which means "oil". In OT times the presses for making wine were usually cut or hewed out of rock (Isa 5:2) and were connected by channels to lower rock-cut vats where the juice was allowed to collect and ferment. The juice was squeezed from the grapes by treading over them with the feet (Job 24:11; Amos 9:13). God's judgment is vividly pictured by the metaphor of the treading of the wine press (Isa 63:2, 3; Re 14:19-[note](#), Re 14:20-[note](#)).

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;  
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored  
Is 63:2  
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword;  
His truth is marching on.

Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!

Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! His truth is marching on.

[\(Battle Hymn of the Republic - Choir Voca\)](#)

[\(Read story behind Julia Howe's Hymn and all the incredible lyrics\)](#)

How fitting that the sinless Son of God would be in **Gethsemane**, and would shortly thereafter bear the sins of mankind and experience the meting out of His Father's wrath against sin, crushing Him even as grapes were crushed...

But He was pierced through for our transgressions. He was **crushed** (Hebrew = daka' = bruised, broken in pieces, smitten) for our iniquities. The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging (Lxx = molops = bruises, whelps, marks left on one's body by the stripes of a whip, wheals left by the blows from a fist) we are healed. (Isa 53:5+ Read Isa 53:2, 3, 4, 5, 6)! Thank You, dear Jesus.

**Peter** summarized this event..

He Himself bore (literally bore up - to cause to move from a lower position to a higher position) our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls. (1Pe 2:24, 25-note)

**He Himself bore our sins** - During the Napoleonic Wars, men were conscripted into the French army by a lottery system. If your name was drawn, you had to go off to battle. But in the rare case that you could get

someone else to take your place, you were exempt. On one occasion the authorities came to a certain man and told him that his name had been drawn. But he refused to go, saying, "I was killed two years ago." At first they questioned his sanity, but he insisted that this was in fact the case. He claimed that the records would show that he had been conscripted two years previously and that he had been killed in action. "How can that be?" they questioned. "You are alive now." He explained that when his name came up, a close friend said to him, "You have a large family, but I'm not married and nobody is dependent on me. I'll take your name and address and go in your place." The records upheld the man's claim. The case was referred to Napoleon himself, who decided that the country had no legal claim on that man. He was free because another man had died in his place.

### [Hallelujah! What a Savior](#)

—Philip Bliss

Man of Sorrows! what a name  
For the Son of God, who came  
Ruined sinners to reclaim.  
Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Bearing shame and scoffing rude,  
In my place condemned He stood;  
Sealed my pardon with His blood.  
Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Guilty, vile, and helpless we;  
Spotless Lamb of God was He;  
"Full atonement!" can it be?  
Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Lifted up was He to die;  
"It is finished!" was His cry;  
Now in Heav'n exalted high.  
Hallelujah! What a Savior!

When He comes, our glorious King,  
All His ransomed home to bring,  
Then anew His song we'll sing:  
Hallelujah! What a Savior!

[\(Bruce Dickinson - Man Of Sorrows\)](#)

**Vance Havner** - The cross has become a pretty charm to wear around the neck. We preach a new Christianity that stresses similarities, not contrasts; that parallels the world instead of intersecting it; that makes no unpleasant demands of its converts. The church has devised a new cross today: an ornament to wear around the neck, a commonplace symbol twisted out of context, a charm, a holy horseshoe. Such an ornament does not interfere with godless living, never goes against the grain of our old nature. We need men of the cross, with the message of the cross, bearing the marks of the cross.

**PRECEPTS FOR LIFE:** This section begins to answer the question

**"How can a disciple of Jesus stand firm in the hour of testing and not fall into temptation?"**

The disciples, and specifically Peter, thought that in the own strength, the strength of their **flesh**, they would never fall away from their Lord. Jesus however knew their **flesh** and knew the results that would occur in their "hour of testing (temptation)". Peter filled with bravado and a great deal of "self", first failed the "**Malchus test**", cutting off the ear of the slave of the Jewish high priest (Jn 18:10). Shortly thereafter Peter steadfastly denied His Lord three times (Jn 18:25, 26, 27). Jesus knew what was coming and He was preparing them to understand that in **their own strength** they could never stand with Him and against His enemies (the **world**, the **flesh** and the **devil**). He was calling them to understand what it meant to die to self (Mk 8:34), and to learn to continually depend on the provision He would send after His ascension. Ultimately this warning of coming temptation was part of His preparing them for their Helper, the Holy Spirit (see Jn 7:38, 39, 14:16, 17, Lk 3:16). He wanted them to learn the lesson that ultimately they in their humanness ("**flesh**") could never stand against their adversaries, but that **only** "clothed with power from on high" (Lk 24:49, Acts

2:4, 4:8, 4:31, 9:17, 13:9, 13:52) could they be more than conquerors in Christ (Ro 8:37KJV). And so in His parting words the resurrected Savior reminded the disciples (and us today) of their (our) great need for spiritual power promising that...

you shall receive **power** (**dunamis** = inherent power to accomplish a task, "supernatural power for a supernatural life") when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses (Greek = martus = gives us our English "martyr", something that most of them literally became!) both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

These truths beg the question - **Are you trying to fend off temptation from the world, the flesh and the devil in your own strength (your weak "flesh") or are you learning the "secret" that the disciples and apostles had to learn -- of continual dependence on the Holy Spirit, Who gives us both the will and the power (Php 2:13-note) to keep watching and keep praying?**

**Adam Clarke** makes the point that if the disciples (and applicable to all saints) could not..

endure a little fatigue when there is no suffering, how will they do when the temptation, the great trial of their faith and courage, comes? Watch—that ye be not taken unawares; and pray—that when it comes ye may be enabled to bear it.

**Bob Deffinbaugh**...

What I see emphasized in this scene in Gethsemane is the **frailty and failures** of the disciples, as a backdrop to the **faithfulness** of the Lord Jesus. They assured Jesus that they would not forsake Him, but they couldn't even stay awake with Him in His most difficult hour yet. Jesus assured them that He would die as the Passover Lamb, bringing about the New Covenant. He remained faithful to His calling, even when His disciples were weak and failing.

**Keep Watching and Praying** - Jesus' double command pictures **watchfulness** and **prayer** as if they were two sentinels or soldiers on duty at their guard post constantly watching over the entrance of our heart (Pr 4:23-note), alerting us to sneak attacks, continually guarding against the subtle, often sudden approach of danger and giving us forewarning of that danger. The implication is clear that temptation lurks about, waiting for our unguarded moments and then attacks. God warned Cain...

If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? (context = Ge 4:5,6) And if you do not do well, **Sin** is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it. (Ge 4:7)

Beloved of God, our mortal enemy **Sin** is ever crouching, ready to send arrows of temptation which "desire" to destroy our witness, our credibility, even our very life (see what happened because Cain refused to stay alert, instead letting sin pounce on him - Ge 4:8) Now where did Cain stumble? His pride, right? What did he refuse to do? Didn't he refuse to humble himself? The moment we stake our "turf" and say "I'll take care of this my way God", is the moment we call down upon ourselves a veritable "holy war". Look at the results of proud flesh whether it be Cain, Peter, et al. God opposes ("stiff arms") the man or woman who refuses to humble themselves (cp 1Pet 5:5-note, Jas 4:6-note). Jesus is laying out for His disciples His "strategy" for victory over temptation - keep watching, keep praying. If we refuse to humble ourselves and obey His commands to watch and pray, we are setting ourselves up for a fall. Why? Because God opposes (the verb anthistemi is in the present tense [continually] and means God continually sets Himself against pride even as opposing armies would arrange themselves against one another in battle) the proud heart.

**Spurgeon**

It was truly kind on Christ's part to find an excuse for his weak and weary disciples; it was just like Him to say anything that He could in their praise even though they had slept when they ought to have watched. Yet He repeated the command, "**Watch**" for that was the special duty of the hour; and he added, "and **pray**," for

**prayer would help them to watch,  
and watching would aid them in praying.**

Watching and praying were enjoined for a special purpose: "that ye enter not into temptation." He knew what sore temptations were about to assail them, so he would have them doubly armed by— "Watching unto prayer."

**Forewarned** is **forearmed**! So let us...

**KEEP  
WATCHING**

**Keep watching** (1127) (gregoreuo [word study] from egeiro = to arise, arouse) pictures a sleeping man rousing himself from

slumber and so means to refrain from sleep and by default to be awake, alert, and watchful. A secular use of **gregoreuo** described a person carefully crossing a river while stepping on slippery stones. If they did not pay strict attention to their steps, they would end up in the water (compare "enter into temptation").

In Mt 26:41 on one level the meaning of gregoreuo is literal, conveying the idea that the disciples were simply to refrain from sleeping. On a deeper level the idea is for the disciples to remain alert, watchful, ready to meet the danger and be quick to perceive and act.

**Gregoreuo** is in the **present imperative**, which is a charge to continually stay awake! Jesus is saying that it is **imperative** that His disciples (and by application this includes us today) not become indolent and lazy and let down our guard or we will become easy prey for our inveterate, intractable enemies - the **world**, the **flesh** and the **devil**. The internal and external forces that come against us demand us to be alert and vigilant. Jesus is calling His disciples to be on the alert, maintaining a constant state of vigilance (vigilance suggests intense, unremitting, wary watchfulness; keenly alert to or heedful of trouble or danger as others are sleeping or unsuspecting).

**Puritan John Owen** explains that **keeping watch** means...

as much as to be on our guard, to take heed, to consider all ways and means whereby an enemy may approach to us... (this watchfulness requires) a universal carefulness and diligence, exercising itself in and by all ways and means prescribed by God, over our hearts and ways, the baits and methods of Satan, the occasions and advantages of sin in the world, that we be not entangled, is that which in this word is pressed on us.

**Gregoreuo** - 22x in **NAS** - alert, 10; awake, 1; keep, 1; keep watch, 4; keep watching, 1; keeping alert, 1; stay on the alert, 1; stays awake, 1; wake, 2

Mt. 24:42, 43; 25:13; 26:38, 40, 41; Mk. 13:34, 35, 37; 14:34, 37, 38; Lk. 12:37; Acts 20:31; 1 Co. 16:13; Col. 4:2; 1Th 5:6, 10; 1Pe 5:8; Re 3:2, 3; 16:15

Note that most of the 22 uses of **gregoreuo** are in the latter part of Gospels in the context of Jesus' soon to come crucifixion and repeated exhortations to His disciples **to be on the alert** for His future return. For example, **Jesus** concluded the parable of the 10 virgins with the warning

**Be on the alert** (gregoreuo - also a present imperative) then, for you do not know the day nor the hour. (Mt 25:13)

**Comment:** If we as believers today really **believed** (and therefore really **heeded** = *belief* dictates *behavior*, *creed* influences *conduct*) this command to continually be on "high alert" for the return of our Lord (**Second Coming**), **what effect might it have on our daily conduct and our prayer life?** (see 1Jn 3:2-note, 1Jn 3:3-note)

**Gregoreuo** is used three times in Mark 13 which closes with an exhortation to **watchfulness** in view of the Lord's Return. Jesus' addressing His disciples, Peter and James and John and Andrew, on the Mount of Olives tells them a parable of the doorkeeper, declaring that

It is like a man, away on a journey, who upon leaving his house and putting his slaves in charge, assigning to each one his task, also commanded the doorkeeper to **stay on the alert** (gregoreuo). Therefore, **be on the alert** (gregoreuo)-- for you do not know when the master of the house is coming, whether in the evening, at midnight, at cockcrowing, or in the morning-- lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all, '**Be on the alert** (gregoreuo)!' (Mk 13:34, 35, 36, 37)

**Vincent** comments on the significance of Jesus' using the illustration of an **awake, alert doorkeeper** in this parable writing that

"In the temple, during the night, the captain of the temple made his rounds, and the guards had to rise at his approach and salute him in a particular manner. Any **guard (doorkeeper)** found asleep on duty was beaten, or his garments were set on fire." (Greek Word Studies)

**Comment:** I wonder how that would effect the efficacy and frequency of our prayer life if we had such a potential punishment looming over us!?

**Charles Simeon** writes that...

**Unwatchfulness**, even in a victorious army, exposes it to defeat. Therefore much more must our unwatchfulness subject us to the power of our subtle enemy. Peter had experienced its baneful effects. He had

been warned of Satan's intention to assault him (Lk 22:31). He had been commanded to pray lest he should fall by the temptation (Lk 22:40); but he slept when he should have been praying (Lk 22:45, 46). He stands in this respect, like Lot's wife (Lk 17:32, Ge 19:26), a monument to future generations; but vigilance on our part will counteract the designs of Satan. The armed Christian, **watching** unto **prayer**, must be victorious (Ep 6:18-note).. ([1Peter 5:8, 9 The Means of Defeating Satan's Malice](#))

**Alertness** is required because our enemy rarely shows himself for who he is. He almost always masks himself as a religious personality, almost always endeavoring somehow in some way to be able to approach you subtly so that you can't recognize the reality of who he is. So you need to "**be on the alert!**"

**Spurgeon** reflects on the oft overlooked value of temptation so that we can truly live out Jas 1:2-note...

There is no temptation in the world which is so bad as not being tempted at all, for to be tempted will tend to keep us awake. Whereas, being without temptation, flesh and blood are weak. Though the spirit may be willing, yet we may be found falling into slumber. Children do not run away from their father's side when big dogs bark at them. The howlings of the devil may tend to drive us nearer to Christ, may teach us our own weakness, may keep us upon our own watch tower, and be made the means of preservation from other ills. (Spurgeon, C. H. Satan, A Defeated Foe)

Mark it down that the Christian who is not alert to the enemy's attack is in for trouble. Don't misunderstand... we are not to look for a demon behind every bush. We are simply called to a continual state of spiritual alertness.

**J R Miller** sounds a good word of caution reminding us that...

We are not at all times equally strong. There are days with all of us when we throw off temptation with almost no effort. But none of us are so every day. There are hours with the strongest of us—when we are weak. These are the times of peril for us, and our adversary is watching for them. In your weak hours keep a double guard, therefore, against temptation. Keep out of its way. Throw yourself with mighty faith on Him who was tempted in all points as we are (He 4:15-note), and knows therefore how to deliver us when we are tempted (2Pe 2:9-note, cp He 2:18-note). In time of special weakness—run to Christ for shelter!

**Phil Newton** summarizes Jesus' first command to be continually alert writing that...

in watchfulness, we recognize our propensity to fall into sin given the opportunity, and thus seek to avoid such occasions or to use every means to withstand in such times. We also see that the Adversary takes advantage of us wherever he can, so we seek to "not give the devil an opportunity," as Paul exhorted (Ep 4:26, 27-note). Rather than naivety, as we with the disciples, thinking that they surely could not fall into sin, we keep our minds sensitive to anything that would draw us away from devotion to Christ or faithfulness to Him (**Ed**: how to run with endurance = He 12:2-note, He 12:3, 4-note). With this in mind, borrowing from Owen, let me point out four ways that we can be watchful [131ff.].

(1) **Know your own heart and natural leanings toward sin.** Many of Satan's devices fall along the lines of our natural areas of weaknesses and lusts. Guard those areas of your life and give no room for the devil's devices [131-132]

(2) **Avoid the snares of your natural leanings by staying away from the things that lure us into sin** "Seeing we have so little power over our hearts when once they meet with suitable provocations," wrote Owen, "we are to keep them asunder (apart from each other in position), as a man would do fire and the combustible parts of the house wherein he dwells" [133].

(3) **"Be sure to lay in provision in store against the approaching of any temptation."** The greatest treasure against temptation is found in the gospel.

**"Gospel provisions will do this work;  
that is, keep the heart full  
of a sense of the love of God in Christ" [133]**

While the provision found in the **law** are helpful in that they restrain us, it is a mind fixed on what God in Christ has done for you, what Christ has tasted on your behalf, that keeps you resilient against temptation.

(4) **Put in the following safeguards.**

(a) Discover the reality of temptation early so that you can engage it quickly before it gets the foot in the door.

(b) Consider the aim of temptation is to utterly ruin you, so hate it and its aim.

(c) Meet temptation with thoughts of faith concerning Christ crucified for you. The shield of faith focuses upon Christ crucified, His love, and suffering for sin.

(d) Go to God in prayer, as the second sentinel; plead for a speedy deliverance through Christ; call upon Christ to give you aid even as He resisted temptation; look to the Lord as the One promising deliverance [135-137].

Christ gave us the example. Now, let us learn from His command to watch and pray so that we may not enter into the snare of temptation. ([The Son Drinks the Cup - excellent exposition](#))

**Thomas Watson**... has some pithy words of warning...

"Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry!" Lk 12:19 A Christian must deny his ease. "Ease slays the simple." The **flesh** is prone to sloth and softness. It is loath to take pains for heaven. Weeds and vermin grow in untilled ground; and all vices grow in an idle, untilled heart.

How can they expect to reap a harvest of glory—who never sowed any seed? Is Satan so busy in his diocese, 1Pe 5:8, and are Christians idle? Are they like the lilies—which neither toil, nor spin? O deny your ease! We must force our way to paradise.

God puts no difference between the slothful servant and the wicked servant, "You wicked and lazy servant!" Mt 25:26.

Those slothful people in Euria, who like drones enter into the hive and consumed the honey, were expelled from others and condemned to exile. Such as idle away the day of grace and fold their hands to **sleep** when they should be working out salvation (Php 2:12)—God will condemn to a perpetual exile in hell. Let us shake off sloth—as Paul did the viper!

Paul like a general keenly aware of the real spiritual war surrounding every saint, uses **four Greek military terms** to issue a staccato **command** (all in the imperative mood) to the church at Corinth (and the churches of every age) and all in the **present tense** (continuously) calling for each to be the habitual practice for the rest of our lives! (Note: "be on the alert" =**gregoreuo**) All saints are to be on guard at all times. They are not to give up an inch of vital territory. They are to behave with true courage.

**Be on the alert**  
**Stand firm in the faith**  
**Act like men**  
**Be strong**  
(1Co 16:13)

**Charles Simeon** reminds us of our need for **constant vigilance** and exertion writing that...

The old principle (**flesh**), as has been observed, still remains within us: and, if we be not constantly on our guard, it will regain its former ascendancy over us. A stronger army, if the sentinels fall asleep, may be surprised and vanquished by troops that are far inferior: and we too, notwithstanding the power given us by the indwelling Spirit, shall surely be overcome, if we be not constantly on our watch-tower. We must be prepared to meet our adversary at his first approach. Our blessed Lord says, "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation:" and the sad consequences of sleeping on our post may be seen in the Disciples, when they failed to observe this important admonition (Mt. 26:41, 43, 56). Corruption will often put on the appearance of virtue, and Satan assume the garb of an angel of light (2Co 11:14): but if we be on our guard, we shall detect his devices; and "if we resist him manfully, he will flee from us (Jas 4:7-note)." ([Gal 5:16 -WALKING IN THE SPIRIT, A PRESERVATIVE FROM SIN](#))

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**What need have we to be ever on our guard!** Perhaps at this moment Satan may be desiring to sift us. And what if God should give us up into his hands? (**Ed**: Think of Peter in the Garden with Jesus but soon to be "sifted" by the enemy to the point that he would deny His Lord 3 times! Lk 22:31, 32) If allowed to exert his strength, he could soon dissipate whatever is good in us; nor should our past zeal in God's service remove our apprehensions; that would rather provoke Satan to more activity against us. Let us then "not be high-minded, but fear. (Ro 11:20-note)" Let us follow the salutary advice which our Lord has given us (Mt 26:41) Let us plead with fervor those important petitions (Mt 6:13-note)— At the same time let us "put on the whole armour of God," and prepare, as God has taught us, for the assaults of our enemy (Ep 6:13-note, Ep 6:14, 15-note, Ep 6:16, 17-note, Ep 6:18-note). ([Horae Homileticae Vol. 13: Luke XVII to John XII \(105\). London. HE MEANS OF](#)

## KEEP PRAYING

**Praying** (4336) (**proseuchomai** [word study] from **pros** = toward, facing, before [idea of definiteness and directness in prayer with the consciousness on the part of the one praying that he is talking face to face with God] + **euchomai** = originally to speak out, utter aloud, express a wish, then to pray or to vow. Greek technical term for invoking a deity) in the NT is always used of prayer addressed to God (to Him as the object of faith and the One who will answer one's prayer) and means to speak consciously (with or without vocalization) to Him, with a definite aim (See study of noun **proseuche**). **Proseuchomai** encompasses all the aspects of prayer -- submission, confession, petition, supplication (may concern one's own need), intercession (concerned with the needs of others), praise, and thanksgiving. Vine says that **proseuchomai** carries with it a notion of **worship** (but see the Greek word for worship = **proskuneo**) which is not present in the other words for prayer (eg, aiteo, deomai, both of which involve spoken supplication)

### Notice the Order...

The commands to **watch** and **pray** precede the warning about temptation. In other words, don't wait until the temptation comes to begin to watch and pray. Watch and pray before the temptation comes! Then you are ready to deal with the temptation and much more likely to come through the testing time victoriously.

Jesus gave us one of the best "preventative" prayers to pray when He instructed His disciples to pray...

lead us not into **temptation** (testing - peirasmos discussed below), but **deliver** (rhuomai [words study]) us from (Greek preposition = **apo** = marker of dissociation, put distance between, away from) evil (Mt 6:13-note)

**Comment:** The idea is "Lord, don't lead me into a time of testing that I will not be able to resist." Deliver is in the form of a command, an urgent cry for God to rescue us out of evil. Beloved, this whole world lies in the power of the evil one (Satan, 1Jn 5:19) and therefore as we begin our days and our interactions with the world, this is a great prayer to start the day! Remember God's promise when we pray according to His will (1Jn 5:14, 15), which should further encourage us to pray Mt 6:13 on a regular basis. Always beware however of the "weakness of the flesh" to turn spiritual disciplines into "religious works", so that we begin to pray this prayer almost like a "good luck charm" or "mantra."

**Wiersbe** comments on **watch and pray** noting it is like saying

"Pray with your eyes open"... The familiar phrase "**watch and pray**" goes back to when Nehemiah was leading the people in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and restoring the gates. The enemy did not want the holy city to be rebuilt, so they used fear, deceit, and every kind of ruse to hinder the work. What was Nehemiah's defense? "Nevertheless we made our prayer to our God, and because of them [the enemy] we set a watch against them day and night" (Neh. 4:9NKJV). Jesus (Mt 26:41; Mk 13:33), Paul (Col 4:2), and Peter (1Pe 4:7) commanded God's people to "**watch and pray**," to be on guard and pray with intelligence and alertness. We are soldiers in a battle and we dare not go to sleep while on duty. (Bible Exposition Commentary - Old Testament)

**J C Ryle...**

**Prayer the Best Remedy in Time of Trouble** - First, let us learn that prayer is the best practical remedy that we can use in time of trouble. We see that Christ himself prayed when his soul was sorrowful: all true Christians ought to do the same.

Trouble is a cup that all must drink in this world of sin: we are "born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward" (Job 5:7); we cannot avoid it. Of all creatures, none is so vulnerable as mankind: our bodies, our minds, our families, our business, our friends, are all so many doors through which trial will come in. The holiest saints can claim no exemption from it: like their Master, they are often people of sorrow.

But what is the first thing to be done in time of trouble? We must pray. Like Job, we must fall down and worship (Job 1:20); like Hezekiah, we must spread it out before the Lord (2 Kings 19:14). The first person we must turn to for help must be our God. We must tell our Father in heaven all our sorrow; we must believe confidently that nothing is too trivial or minute to be laid before him, so long as we do it with entire submission to his will. It is the mark of faith to keep nothing back from our best Friend: so doing, we may be sure we shall have an answer. "If it is possible" (verse 39), and the thing we ask is for God's glory, it will be done: the thorn



in the flesh will either be removed, or grace to endure it will be given to us, as it was to St. Paul (2 Corinthians 12:9). May we all store up this lesson against the day of need. It is a true saying that "prayers are the leeches of care."

**Enter (eiserchomai)** means to go or come into or enter into, literally (Acts 16:40) whereas in Mt 26:41 the sense is more figurative, specifically entering into a spiritual temptation.

**Solomon** cautions us wisely...

Do not enter the path of the wicked (cp Ps 1:1-note), and do not proceed in the way of evil men. **Avoid** (command) it, do not pass by it. **Turn away** (command) from it and **pass on** (command). (Pr 4:14, 15)

**Comment:** And so in the present passage, the Lord Jesus instructs us that one way not to "*enter the path of the wicked*" is by **continually watching** and **praying!**

## **TEMPTATIONS: TESTING TIMES**

**Temptation** (3986) (**peirasmos** from **peirazo** [word study] = to make trial of, try, tempt, prove in either a good or bad sense) describes first the idea of putting to the test and then refers to the tests that come in order to discover a person's nature or the quality of some thing. Think of yourself as a tube of "spiritual toothpaste". Pressure brings out what's really on the inside!

The context determines whether the intended purpose of the "temptation" is for good or for evil. We see this distinction in James chapter 1 where the first use of **peirasmos** refers to "trials for good" (as in 1Pe 1:6)...

**Consider** it (aorist imperative ~ do it now once and for all!) all (wholly) joy ("whole joy", unmixed joy, without admixture of sorrow, not just "some joy" along with much grief! How is this possible? The Spirit produces His joy in you - Ga 5:22-note), my brethren, when (implies temptations are to be expected) you encounter (fall into the midst of so as to be totally surrounded by) various (poikilos - all "shapes and sizes" of) **trials** (peirasmos), knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. (Jas 1:2,3).

From this passage we can see that God sends or allows tests (peirasmos) to increase the strength and quality of our faith and to demonstrate its validity. Every trial becomes a test of faith designed to strengthen the believer's faith, but if the believer fails the test by wrongly responding, then that **test** becomes a **temptation** or a solicitation to evil.

Later **James** uses the related verb **peirazo** explaining that no one should

say when he is **tempted** (peirazo), "I am being **tempted** (peirazo) by God"; for God cannot be tempted (apeirastos from a = without + peirazo = tempt > incapable of being tempted) by evil, and He Himself does not **tempt** (peirazo) anyone." (Jas 1:13-note)

To summarize, if a believer responds to a peirasmos in faith (which in the context of Mt 26:41 = watching and praying prior to the peirasmos), he successfully endures a trial (and we call it just that -- a "trial" and not a "temptation") but if he falls into it, doubts God and disobeys, the trial becomes a "temptation" which can lead to sin. God allows "peirasmos" into our life not to make us sin but to make us more like the Savior. Not so with Satan as his encounter with our Lord illustrates.

**Matthew** records that

Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to **be tempted** (peirazo - the verbal root of peirasmos) by the devil. (Mt 4:1)

The temptation of Jesus was **morally neutral** -- there was nothing inherently evil in offering Jesus bread (Mt 4:2, 3, 4). The context however allows us to determine that the purpose of the testing was clearly for evil not good. Satan, the Evil one himself, used the "neutral" peirasmos in an attempt to induce Jesus to commit a sin. When **peirasmos** is used in a passage in which the context indicates it has to do with inducing one to sin, most modern Bible versions translate it as "**temptation**".

To reiterate, when God is the agent, **peirasmos** is for the purpose of proving us, never for the purpose of causing us to fall. If it is the devil who tempts us even though it is the same Greek word, his nefarious purpose is to trip us up.

In a sermon titled **Faith Tested and Crowned** (Ge 22:1-14) **Alexander Maclaren** distinguished between **being tempted** and **being tried or tested**. He said that temptation

conveys the idea of appealing to the worst part of man, with the wish that he may yield and do the wrong. The latter (trial) means an appeal to the better part of man, with the desire that he should stand.

**Temptation** says, 'Do this pleasant thing; do not be hindered by the fact that it is wrong.'

**Trial or proving** says, 'Do this right and noble thing; do not be hindered by the fact that it is painful.'

In sum, **peirasmos** refers to all the trials, testing, temptations that go into furnishing a test of one's character.

As **J C Ryle** said...

Trials are intended to make us think, to wean us from the world, to send us to the Bible, to drive us to our knees.

**J. C. Ryle** exhorts us to...

settle it firmly in our minds that there is a meaning, a needs-be and a message from God in every sorrow that falls upon us... There are no lessons so useful as those learned in the school of affliction... (and be encouraged for) The tools that the great Architect intends to use much are often kept long in the fire, to temper them and fit them for work.

**Comment:** The point is that testing will come, even as it did to Peter who cut off Malchus' ear and then proceeded to deny his Lord three times. The tests for Peter demonstrated his inability to withstand temptation in his own human strength. The tests always show us our insufficiency and inadequacy to live the "Christ life" and our desperate, constant need for God's grace and empowering presence in the Spirit of Christ.

**We cannot resist temptation  
in the weakness of our flesh.**

**God never said we could!**

**But He can and  
He always said He would!**

He can enable us to resist the temptation in His strength (Zech 4:6). When the tests/temptations come, may God's Spirit help us to recognize them, to humble ourselves, to surrender to His Spirit, to experience His all sufficient grace and to believe His promise that the Tempter must flee.

**TESTING/TEMPTING TIMES  
REFINING/PURIFYING TIMES**

**Spurgeon's** words on the value of trials/temptations in his personal life should encourage all of us to recognize and receive similar testing/tempting times in our lives as for our good and for God's glory. **Spurgeon** explains...

I am afraid that all the grace that I have got out of my comfortable and easy times and happy hours might almost lie on a penny. But the good that I have received from my sorrows, and pains, and griefs, is altogether incalculable. What do I not owe to the crucible and the furnace, the bellows that have blown up the coals, and the hand which has thrust me into the heat?... I bear my witness that the worst days I have ever had have turned out to be my best days... I can bear my personal testimony that the best piece of furniture that I ever had in the house was a cross. I do not mean a material cross; I mean the cross of affliction and trouble (cp Mk 8:34)... In shunning a trial we are seeking to avoid a blessing.

**When God gives a burden,  
He always gives the grace to bear it.**

**Charles Simeon** (commenting on praying Mt 6:13) wisely alerts us to the fact that...

Temptations present themselves to us on every side. Every thing that is agreeable to our senses or flattering to our minds, has a tendency to draw us from God. Even the things which are the most innocent when moderately enjoyed, often become snares to us. Our food, our raiment, our comforts of every kind, and even our dearest relatives, are apt to engross our affections too much, and to become the objects of an idolatrous regard — The cares and troubles of life also are frequently sources of unbelieving anxiety, or murmuring discontent... —To these temptations incalculable force is given by the corruptions of our own hearts ("fallen flesh nature" inherited from Adam). We are of our own selves prone to evil (Jas 1:14-note). The heart is ready to catch fire from every spark; and all the appetites and passions are quickly brought into activity in the service

of sin (Jas 1:15-note). In vain does reason remonstrate (present strong reasons against an act) with us: "the law of sin that is in our members, wars against the law of our minds, and brings us into captivity: (Ro 7:23KJV-note)" yea, even when the spiritual principle lusts and strives against the corruptions of the flesh, so strong is the corrupt principle within us, we cannot do the things that we would. (Gal 5:17KJV-note) Well therefore **may we pray to be kept from their power!** (Read the full sermon - [Simeon, C. Horae Homileticae Vol. 11: Matthew. Page 199](#))

**John MacArthur** has an excellent illustration of the purpose of trials (temptations)...

To test the genuineness of a diamond, jewelers often place it in clear water, which causes a real diamond to sparkle with special brilliance. An imitation stone, on the other hand, will have almost no sparkle at all. When the two are placed side by side, even an untrained eye can easily tell the difference. In a similar way, even the world can often notice the marked differences between genuine Christians and those who merely profess faith in Christ. As with jewels, there is a noticeable difference in radiance, **especially when people are undergoing difficult times**. Many people have great confidence in their faith until it is severely tested by hardships and disappointments. How a person handles trouble will reveal whether his faith is living or dead, genuine or imitation, saving or non-saving. ([MacArthur J. James. 1998. Moody](#))\

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THE Steinway piano has been preferred by keyboard masters such as Rachmaninoff, Horowitz, Cliburn, and Liszt—and for good reason. It is a skillfully crafted instrument that produces phenomenal sound.

Steinway pianos are built today the same way they were 140 years ago when Henry Steinway started his business. Two hundred craftsmen and 12,000 parts are required to produce one of these magnificent instruments. Most crucial is the rim-bending process in which eighteen layers of maple are bent around an iron press to create the shape of a Steinway grand. Five coats of lacquer are applied and hand rubbed to give the piano its outer glow. The instrument then goes to the Pounder Room, where each key is tested 10,000 times to ensure quality and durability.

Followers of Christ are also being "handcrafted." We are pressed and formed and shaped to make us more like Him. We are polished, sometimes in the rubbing of affliction, until we "glow." We are tested in the laboratory of everyday human experience. The process is not always pleasant, but we can persevere with hope, knowing that our lives will increasingly reflect the beauty of holiness to the eternal praise of God.—D C Egner

**Thomas a Kempis** has a needed reminder on the process and progression that occurs when we are tempted...

First there comes to the mind a bare thought of evil, then a strong imagination thereof, afterward delight and evil motion, and then consent... Withstand the beginnings. (**Ed:** Good advice. And in the context of Mt 26:41 we are in the best state of withstanding temptation when we are surrendered to and controlled by the Spirit to keep watching and praying! Be careful. Once you have allowed the tempting thought or vision to enter and "impale" your heart and mind, you are on the slippery slope to giving birth to sin in thought, word or deed!)

## **WHY GOD ALLOWS/SENDS TESTS TO HIS CHILDREN**

In Mt 26:41 clearly Jesus knew that trials were coming in not just His life (The Cross) but in the lives of His disciples. God could have prevented the trials in the lives of the disciples but He did not. In the context of the growth and development of the lives of the disciples, these trials were part of the "school of affliction" through which they (and we) must "matriculate".

**John MacArthur** has compiled the following list for modern day disciples to help us recognize and understand at least to some degree why we experience trials and tests (which become temptations to sin **if** we attempt to handle them in the weakness of our flesh). The purposes for trials include...

- (1) To test the strength of our faith (e.g., Ex 16:4, 2Chr 32:31)
- (2) To humble us (2Cor 12:7, cp Dt 8:1,2,3, 16)
- (3) To wean us from our dependence on worldly things (Moses allowed to spend 40 years as a shepherd after 40 years as an Egyptian prince, Ex 2:11-25)

(4) to call us to eternal and heavenly hope (Php 1:23, 24, 2Co 4:16, 17, 18)

(5) To reveal what we really **love** (cf Ge 22:1-12 re Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, cp Ex 16:4) and will **obey** Him (Dt 13:3, Jdg 2:21,22, 3:1,4) (Love God ~ obey God = )

(6) To teach us to value God's blessings (cf Ps 63:3, 4, 5, 6, 7)

(7) To develop enduring strength for greater usefulness (2Co 12:10)

(8) To enable us to better help others in their trials (cf Satan's sifting of Simon Peter Lk 22:31, 32).

(9) To engender a holy fear of God so that we might not sin (Ex 20:20)

(**Note:** The original list has been modified slightly)

## **IN SUMMARY TRIALS & AFFLICTIONS...**

(1). Prove our faith genuine - so when a believer comes through a trial still trusting the Lord, he is assured that his faith is genuine

(2). Are only for a little while (cf 1Pe 5:10-note, Ro 8:18-note, 2Co 4:18, Heb 12:11-note "for the moment")

(3). Are necessary to our growth in Christ -- thus trials in a believer's life are purposeful (cf Ro 8:28-note; Ro 8:29- note)

(4). Will cause grief & sorrow so we must not think they are not of any benefit just because we grieve (cf He 12:11-note "[All discipline](#) for the [moment seems](#) not to be [joyful](#), but [sorrowful](#)")

(5). Are multicolored, of various "sizes, shapes and colors" (Jas 1:2-note) but in (1Pe 4:10-note "manifold" = poikilos) Peter says God provides multicolored grace for multicolored trials! There is sufficient grace (2Co 12:9) to match every trial and there is no trial without sufficient grace.

(6). Ultimately will bring praise, glory and honor to God. There is great comfort for suffering saints in knowing that their sufferings are neither purposeless nor fruitless. On the other hand, the sufferings of the ungodly are only a foretaste of the pangs they will endure forever.

(7). Will not be fully understood as to their eternal significance until the revelation of Jesus Christ (1Co 13:12, 1Jn 3:2, Ro 8:18-note)

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**Spirit (pneuma)** has the basic meaning of breath or air (cp our English words "pneumatic", "pneumonia") refers to the vital spirit or life, the principle of life residing in man, that part of man that can live independently of the body (Mt 27:50; Ac 7:59, Lk 8:55).

**A T Robertson** writes that...

**Spirit** (pneuma) here is the moral life (intellect, emotions) as opposed to the **flesh** (cf. Is 31:3; Ro 7:25).

**Barnes** explains that...

The **spirit** indeed is willing, etc. The mind, the disposition is ready, and disposed to bear these trials; but the **flesh**, the natural feelings, through the fear of danger, is weak, and will be likely to lead you astray when the trial comes. Though you may have strong faith, and believe now that you will not deny me, yet human nature is weak, shrinks at trials, and you should, therefore seek strength from on high. This was not intended for an apology for their sleeping, but to excite them, notwithstanding He knew that they loved Him, to be on guard, lest the weakness of human nature should be insufficient to sustain them in the hour of their temptation.

**Wuest** says the human **spirit** as that part of man which gives him God-consciousness. He goes on to make an interesting (a bit difficult to understand) distinction that the spirit is

the higher life-principle in man by which the human reason, viewed on its moral side—the organ of moral thinking and knowing is informed... With the physical **body**, man has world-consciousness, with the **soul** he has self-consciousness, and with the **spirit** he has God-consciousness. With the spirit, man has to do with the things of God. He worships God by means of his human spirit, that is, (when regenerated) when that spirit is energized by the Holy Spirit. He serves God in the same way. The present body is so constituted that it is the efficient organ of the **soul**. The future physical body will be so adjusted that it will be the efficient organ of the

## spirit.

In this present life most of our time and activity has to do with the things of time and space, making a living, with the creative arts, with recreation, with the material world. The human spirit, however, should be the determining factor as to the character of the soul life. Yet it is in active use but a small part of the time, when we worship God, study the Bible, pray, serve God in some distinctive service in which we are giving out the Word of God to those who do not know Him. But in the future life, conditions will be changed. Then the soul-life as we know it now, will be a thing of the past. We will be occupied entirely with God and His worship and service. Our bodies will then be adjusted to the new life. They will be changed so that they will be efficient instruments of the human spirit. Just what the nature of this change will be, the Bible does not say.

## WILLING BUT WEAK FLESH

**Willing** (4289)(**prothumos** from **pró** = before + **thumós** = passion) denotes a willingness, a predisposition, a readiness, or an inclination. It means to be eager (and prompt) to be of service. **Prothumos** is a strong word. It means something like "ready, willing and able." It also can include the idea of passionate.

Have you ever said "I'm never going to do \_\_\_\_\_ again!" And then before the day is out you've committed that sin not once but several times. Our being willing or in a sense attempting to "will a victory" over temptation won't happen. Why? Because of where we are placing our confidence! If it's the **flesh** than we will get a "fleshly" defense and Jesus says it is a weak defense against temptation. Peter was willing. His flesh was weak. We know the results. We are all like Peter until we learn to depend on the Holy Spirit Who Paul teaches actually gives us the desire, the will and the "want to" to fight off temptation successfully (Php 2:13-note, Php 2:13NLT).

## Willpower... Won't Empower To Overpower!

English dictionaries define "willpower" as "energetic determination" or "the ability to control oneself and determine one's actions". In short, Jesus in essence declares "will power" won't empower the flesh so that it can overpower temptation! It might work for a while, but eventually the temptation will overwhelm the human will, because in and of itself, without the enablement of the Spirit, it is weak and will fail to keep one from falling into temptation.

**Flesh** (4561)(**sarx**) is used 147 times in the NT and a simple definition is difficult because **sarx** has many nuances (e.g., some Greek lexicons list up to 11 definitions for **sarx**!). The diligent disciple must carefully observe the **context** of each use of **sarx** in order to accurately discern which nuance is intended. The range of meaning extends from the physical flesh (both human and animal), to the human body, to the entire person, and even to all humankind! To keep this relatively simple there are 2 basic definitions of **sarx**, the first being the physical body ("flesh and blood"). The other main meaning of **sarx** is **flesh** in its moral, ethical sense. **Flesh** in this sense denotes fallen human nature apart from divine influence and even opposed to God and godliness. **Flesh** manifests "self" (remove the "h" and read "flesh" backwards > "self"! Note the middle letter of "sin" = the "big I" -- sIn!). The expression of the "anti-God energized" **flesh** is through the instrument of the physical body ("flesh and blood"), which is itself morally neutral but is the instrument of either righteousness or unrighteousness (cf Ro 6:12-note). In sum, **flesh** refers to man's unredeemed humanness, acting apart from God and the Spirit of Christ, and in total subjection to the power of sin.

**Bengel** on the "flesh" in Mt 26:41 states...

We should not take this as an excuse for languor, but as an incentive to vigilance.

**How weak is flesh?** Not even strong enough to stay awake for one hour with the Lord of the Universe Who is in agony! And if it can't even fight off this "temptation" to fall asleep, how is it going to fight off the greater spiritual tests?

**Constable** comments that in Mt 26:41...

The contrast between the flesh and the spirit is not between the sinful human nature and the Holy Spirit (as in Gal 5:17) but between man's volitional strength and his physical weakness (cf. Mt 26:35). We often want to do the right thing but find that we need supernatural assistance to accomplish it (cf. Ro 7:15-25).

While I would agree that clearly the "spirit" in this context is not the Holy Spirit and therefore the clash between **Spirit** and **flesh** of Galatian 5:17 is not in view, I think the **flesh** is still referring to the "fallen flesh" because what else makes a man or woman morally

"**weak**"? To be sure the disciples were undoubtedly physically "weak" (in that sense their "bodies of flesh and blood" were weak) but Jesus is clearly speaking not just of physical issues but of moral/ethical issues (prayer, temptation, falling spiritually). Keep in mind that all men have inherited the "sin virus" from Adam (Ro 5:12-note) and therefore are "contaminated" by Sin so that **everything** (exclamation point!) we do before we are born again, is tainted by the effects of the fall (and thus the effects of the "**flesh**"). In the context of Matthew 26 we have somewhat of a unique situation, in which the disciples clearly had believed in Jesus (cp Mt 16:16, 20) and yet they did not yet have the indwelling Holy Spirit (Jn 7:39), Who gives believers the desire and power necessary to live the Christian life (cp Acts 1:8, Ro 8:13-note, 1Co 15:10) and specifically in context, the desire and power to **watch and pray**".

**Warren Wiersbe** makes an important distinction regarding the ability of the flesh noting that...

The **flesh** is **weak** when it comes to doing spiritual things (Mt 26:41), but it is very strong when it comes to practicing religious rules and regulations. Somehow, adhering to the religious routine inflates the ego and makes a person content in his self-righteousness. (Bible Exposition Commentary - New Testament)

**James Montgomery Boice** expounds on "**The Weakness of Our Flesh**" asking first...

Did Jesus need to pray?

In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety. (He 5:7-note, see Mt 26:39, 40)

He obviously did, and he was the sinless Son of God. He was the Rock of Ages, an unshakable pillar of strength compared to those around him. But if he needed to pray, how much more do we who are weak and sinful and ignorant and usually oblivious to the temptations that surround us every day?

"**The flesh is weak**," Jesus said. But not only weak. It is a pit of corruption and rebellion too. The New International Version translates the Greek word *sarx* ("flesh") as "body" in verse 41, but that greatly weakens the word in my opinion.

In the New Testament, flesh usually means "**mere flesh**," that is, the whole person as he or she is apart from the regenerating and purifying Spirit of God. Flesh stands for "man the sinner," and man the sinner is more than physically weak. He is corrupt, sinful, and rebellious in his soul.

**What is the solution?** It is staring us in the face. "**Watch and pray**," said Jesus. Why? Because apart from prayer we will certainly "**fall into temptation**" (Mt 26:41). The only way we can stand is in the power of Jesus, Who was Himself able to stand and Who intercedes for us to enable us to stand (Heb 7:25-note, Ro 8:34-note, cp the Spirit also interceding for us - Ro 8:27-note), even as we pray.

**Peter thought he was strong.** When Jesus spoke of his impending death, indicating that the disciples would forsake him and scatter, Peter protested. Although that might be true for the others, it would not be true for him since he was willing not only to suffer but even to die for Jesus' sake. Peter meant it. He loved the Lord. He thought he could stand by him. But Peter was **weak** in the **flesh**, and he was not able even to keep awake long enough to pray.

**Peter also fell into temptation**, and he would have fallen away utterly if Jesus had not prayed for him that his faith might be strengthened. Jesus said, "I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith might not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:32).

John H. Gerstner suggested at one of the Philadelphia Conferences on Reformation Theology that it must have been Peter who composed the song found in some of today's hymnbooks. It has the recurring chorus line, "Lord, we are able." That is what Peter sang before his fall. But Gerstner suggested that after Peter had fallen and been restored by Jesus, he rewrote his self-confident hymn to read, "Lord, we are not able." **Peter was not able, and neither are we.** In the **flesh** we will fall, but we can stand in Christ if we come to Him and pray, seeking the strength He makes available. So pray. If you have trouble praying, remember that Jesus prayed and that he is praying for you right now. (An Expository Commentary – The Gospel of Matthew, Vol 2: The Triumph of the King).

**Alexander Maclaren** comments on this section...

Note the sad and gentle remonstrance with the drowsy three (Mt 26:40)... May we not see in Christ's remonstrance a word for all? For us, too, the task of keeping awake in the enchanted ground is light, measured against His, and the time is short, and we have Him to keep us company in the watch, and every motive of grateful love should make it easy; but, alas, how many of us sleep a drugged and heavy slumber!

The gentle remonstrance soon passes over into counsel as gentle (Mt 26:41).

## Watchfulness and prayer are inseparable...

The **one** discerns dangers,  
the **other** arms against them.

**Watchfulness** keeps us prayerful, and  
**prayerfulness** keeps us watchful.

To **watch without praying** is presumption,  
to **pray without watching** is hypocrisy.

The eye that sees clearly the facts of life will turn upwards from its scanning of the snares and traps, and will not look in vain.

These two are the **indispensable conditions of victorious encountering of temptation**.

Fortified by them, we shall not **'enter into'** it, though we encounter it. The outward trial will remain, but its power to lead us astray will vanish. It will still be danger or sorrow, but it will not be temptation; and we shall pass through it, as a sunbeam through foul air, untainted, and keeping heaven's radiance. That is a lesson for a wider circle than the sleepy three (**Ed**: I.e., all of us).

## WILLING SPIRIT... WEAK FLESH

It is followed by words which would need a volume to expound in all their depth and width of application, but which are primarily a reason for the preceding counsel, as well as a loving apology for the disciples' sleep. Christ is always glad to give us credit for even imperfect good; His eye, which sees deeper than ours, sees more lovingly, and is not hindered from marking the **willing spirit** by recognizing **weak flesh**. But these words are not to be made a pillow for indolent acquiescence in the limitations which the **flesh** imposes on the **spirit**. He may take merciful count of these, and so may we, in judging others, but it is fatal to plead them at the bar of our own consciences. Rather they should be a spur to our **watchfulness** and to our **prayer**.

**We need these because the flesh is weak,  
still more because,  
in its weakness toward good, it is strong to evil.**

Such exercise (watching and praying) will give governing power to the **spirit**, and enable it to impose its will on the reluctant **flesh**. (**Ed**: Note that Maclaren now speaks of the regenerate nature which is an application but is not exactly the condition of the disciples for they lacked the Holy Spirit at that time) If we **watch** and **pray**, the conflict between these two elements in the renewed nature will tend to unity and peace by the supremacy of the spirit; if we do not, it will tend to cease by the unquestioned tyranny of the flesh (**Ed**: Here Maclaren is speaking of Gal 5:16, Gal 5:17). In one or other direction our lives are tending. ([GETHSEMANE, THE OIL-PRESS](#))

**Spurgeon** offers us wise counsel regarding temptations stating that...

If you are successful in business or successful in holy work, then Satan will **tempt** you. If you are not successful and have had a bad time, then Satan will **tempt** you. When you have a heavy load to carry, he will **tempt** you. When that load is taken off, then he will **tempt** you worse than ever. He will **tempt** you when you have obtained some blessing that you have been thinking was such a great boon. For example, in the wilderness, when they cried for meat and insisted that they must have it, God gave them their heart's desire, but sent leanness into their souls. Just as you have secured the thing that you are seeking, then comes a temptation. To all of which I say, "**Watch**." "What I say unto you, I say unto all," said Christ, **Watch and pray**, lest you enter into temptation" (Matthew 26:41). And **by the conflict and the victory of your Master**, go into the conflict bravely, expecting to conquer by faith in Him, even as He overcame. (Satan, A Defeated Foe)

To summarize, a Christian has an old nature, the **flesh**, from his physical birth and a new nature from his spiritual birth. The New Testament contrasts these **two natures** and gives them various names which are more or less synonymous...

Old Nature	New Nature
our old man (Ro 6:6-note)	the new man (Col 3:10-note)
the flesh (Gal. 5:24-note)	the Spirit (Gal 5:17-note)
corruptible seed (1Pe 1:23-note)	"God's seed" (1Jn 3:9)

Dearly beloved of God, be ever aware of the deceitfulness of sin's desire to use our unredeemed flesh to cause us to try to fend off temptations!

As **Spurgeon** rightly reminds us...

**Corruptions may slumber,  
but godliness must watch.**

So long as we live, the corruptions of the old nature will be ready to rise in rebellion, and they must be held down by divine grace working in us continual care. Quaint Berridge wisely says:—

And if the monsters round thy head  
Lay harmless down, like sheep,  
Yet never once surmise them dead,  
They have but dropped asleep.

**Wiersbe** (in his commentary on 1Jn 2:15) explains that...

The **lust of the flesh** includes anything that appeals to man's fallen nature. "**The flesh**" does not mean "**the body**." Rather, it refers to the basic nature of unregenerate man that makes him blind to spiritual truth (1Co 2:14)... God has given man certain desires, and these desires are good. Hunger, thirst, weariness, and sex are not at all evil in themselves. There is nothing wrong about eating, drinking, sleeping, or begetting children. But when the flesh nature controls them, they become sinful "lusts." Hunger is not evil, but gluttony is sinful. Thirst is not evil, but drunkenness is a sin. Sleep is a gift of God, but laziness is shameful. Sex is God's precious gift when used rightly; but when used wrongly, it becomes immorality.

Now you can see how the world operates. It appeals to the normal appetites and **tempts** us to satisfy them in forbidden ways. In today's world we are surrounded by all kinds of allurements that appeal to our lower nature—and "**the flesh is weak**" (Matt. 26:41). If a Christian yields to it, he will get involved in the "**works of the flesh**" (Gal. 5:19, 20, 21 gives us the ugly list).

It is important that a believer remember what God says about his old nature, the **flesh**. Everything God says about the **flesh** is negative. In the **flesh** there is no good thing (Ro 7:18). The **flesh** profits nothing (Jn 6:63). A Christian is to put no confidence in the flesh (Php 3:3). He is to make no provision for the **flesh** (Ro 13:14). A person who lives for the **flesh** is living a negative life.

**Weak** (sick, helpless) ([772](#)) (**asthenes [word study]** from **a** = without + **sthénos** = strength, bodily vigor) (Related verb = astheneo—note concentration of asthenes/astheneo in the epistles to the Corinthians - almost 50% of NT uses) is literally without strength or bodily vigor. **Asthenes** describes one's state of limited capacity to do or be something and is used literally of physical weakness (most of these uses in the Gospels) and figuratively of weakness in the spiritual arena (weak flesh, weak conscience, weak religious system or commandment [Gal 4:9, He 7:18-note], etc) and thus powerlessness to produce results. In other words, when used in the moral sense as in Mt 26:41, asthenes denotes the disciples' (and our) inability and/or feebleness with regard to handling of temptations. Simply put, we cannot do it in our own inherent, intrinsic, natural "strength".

In Romans 6 Paul used the related word **astheneia** writing...

I am speaking in human terms because of the **weakness of your flesh**. For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in further lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death. (Ro 6:19, 20-note, Ro 6:21-note)

**Phil Newton** explains that in Mt 26:41 Jesus presents a radical contrast between...



the dignified desires of the human will ("the spirit") and the inherent physical weakness of the man ("the flesh") [Cleon Rogers, 60]. As we considered in the previous study (Mt 26:31-35), the disciples failed to realize their own inherent weakness, but gullibly thought they were capable of achieving lofty goals in their own strength. Even in His humanity, though sinless, Jesus faced normal human weaknesses (**Ed**: But clearly His "weaknesses" were not contaminated by the "fallen flesh"). He had to eat, sleep, and rest. We find Him hungry, tired, and asleep. Now the feelings of sorrow, grief, and distress weigh upon Him physically and emotionally. When He told the disciples "**the flesh is weak**," He understood that weakness of the physical frame under the duress of sorrow and anguish. Yet in every way, Jesus Christ displayed strength as He depended upon the Father. He watched and prayed as one that would have felt much more intensity from sin and temptation than any of us, setting an example for us to do the same. Those mired in sin scarcely feel temptation. It is those that resist it, who seek to walk in holiness and purity that understand the intensity of temptation. So, Jesus Christ gave us two sentinels that guarded His earthly life in the face of temptation. ([The Son Drinks the Cup - excellent exposition](#))

**ILLUSTRATION** - When a bird is sleeping on its perch, it does not fall off. How does it manage to do this? The secret is in the tendons of the bird's legs. God designed the legs that when it is bent at the knee, the claws contract and grip like a steel trap. The claws refuse to let go until the knees are unbent again. The bended knee gives the bird the ability to hold on to his perch so tightly. When we bend our knee in prayer, it enables us to grip on to those things which are valuable.... *honesty, holiness, honor, humility, helpfulness, and a heart for God.*

**J C Ryle** on the practical application of Mt 26:41 in the lives of believers...

### **Christians Must Watch and Pray Against Weakness**

Let us learn that there is great weakness even in true disciples of Christ, and that they need to **watch** and **pray** against it. We see Peter, James and John, those three chosen apostles, sleeping. We find our Lord addressing them in these solemn words: "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak" (Mt 26:41).

There is a double nature in all believers. Converted, renewed, sanctified as they are, they still carry about with them a mass of indwelling corruption, a body of sin (**Ed**: What I am referring to as the "fallen flesh"). Paul speaks of this, when he says,

"I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind" (Ro 7:21, 22, 23-note).

... But does our Lord excuse this weakness of his disciples? Far from it: those who draw this conclusion mistake His meaning. He uses that very weakness as an argument for **watchfulness** and **prayer**;

**He teaches us that the very fact that we are hedged about with weakness should stir us up continually to "watch and pray."**

If we know anything of true religion, let us never forget this lesson. If we desire a strong walk with God and not to fall like David or Peter, let us never forget to **watch and pray**. Let us live like men in enemy territory (cp "aliens and strangers" 1Pe 2:11-note), and be always on our guard. We cannot walk too carefully; we cannot be too jealous over our souls (cp Jas 4:5). The world is very ensnaring; the devil is very busy. Let our Lord's words ring in our ears daily, like a trumpet. Our spirits may sometimes be very willing; but our bodies are also very weak. Then let us always watch and always pray.

**John Calvin** makes an interesting point noting that...

As the disciples were unmoved by their Master's danger, their attention is directed to themselves, that a conviction of their own danger may arouse them. Christ therefore threatens that, if they do not watch and pray, they may be soon overwhelmed by temptation. As if he had said, "Though you take no concern about Me, do not fail, at least, to think of yourselves; for your own interests are involved in it, and if you do not take care, temptation will immediately swallow you up." For to enter into temptation means to yield to it.

And let us observe, that the **manner of resistance** which is here enjoined is, **not** to draw courage from **reliance on our own strength and perseverance**, but, on the contrary, from a **conviction of our weakness**, to ask arms and strength from the Lord. Our watching, therefore, will be of no avail without prayer.

The spirit indeed is willing. That he may not terrify and discourage His disciples, He gently reproves their slothfulness, and adds consolation and good ground of hope. And, first, He reminds them, that though they are earnestly desirous to do what is right, still they must contend with the **weakness of the flesh**, and, therefore, that prayer is never unnecessary. We see, then, that he gives them the praise of willingness, in order that their weakness may not throw them into despair, and yet urges them to prayer, because they are not sufficiently endued with the power of the Spirit (**Ed comment:** And I think this realization was to prepare them for the receipt of the Holy Spirit).

Wherefore, this admonition relates properly to believers (**Ed:** In other words here is the practical application), who, being regenerated by the Spirit of God, are desirous to do what is right, but still labor under the weakness of the flesh; for though the grace of the Spirit is vigorous in them, they are weak according to the flesh. And though the disciples alone have their weakness here pointed out to them, yet, since what Christ says of them applies equally to all, we ought to draw from it a general rule, that it is our duty to keep diligent watch by praying... there is no reason why we should tremble with excessive anxiety; for an undoubted remedy is held out to us... for Christ promises that all who, being earnest in prayer, shall perseveringly oppose the slothfulness of the flesh, will be victorious.

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**My Achilles Heel** - Nobody is temptation-proof. Even mature Christians have weaknesses in their spiritual armor that make them vulnerable to a wounding attack by the enemy of their souls. Our pride can provide the very opening needed for the sharp thrust of a satanic dart. So can the love of money, a quick temper, a critical tongue, or chronic impatience.

What, after all, is temptation? It's any enticement to think, say, or do something contrary to God's holy will. It may be a weak impulse or a powerful urge. It's anything that's against what God approves or desires for us.

The ancient Greeks told a story of a warrior named Achilles. His mother had been warned that he would die of a wound, so she dipped him as an infant in the river Styx. That was supposed to make him invincible. But she held him by one heel which the protective waters didn't cover. And it was through that heel that he received his fatal wound.

Each of us must ask: What is my Achilles heel? We need to know our weaknesses, where we could easily be wounded spiritually. Then, as we rely on the Lord for His help, we will be protected from "the fiery darts of the wicked one" (Ephesians 6:16). --Vernon C. Grounds

Leave no unguarded place,  
No weakness of the soul;  
Take every virtue, every grace,  
And fortify the whole. —Wesley

**Our greatest weakness  
may be our failure to ask for God's strength.**

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## OF TEMPTATION

The great Puritan writer, **John Owen** began this well known discourse with a discussion of our "target verse" Matthew 26:41... If you have time, I would encourage you to "wade through" this material (the old English is sometimes difficult for me to understand) which has been called one of the best discussions of Temptation ever written (Other than the Bible of course. **Note:** Only chapters 1 and 5 are posted below, but click the link to go to the full discourse which is posted at CCEL).

(Preface - From the text, Mt 26:41, the author considers in succession three topics deduced from it:—temptation, the means by which it prevails, and the way of preventing it. The most of the treatise is occupied with the last topic,—the means of prevention. It is subdivided into inquiries,—as to the evidence by which a man may know that he has entered into temptation, the directions requisite to prevent entering into it, and the seasons when temptation may be apprehended. The discussion of this last inquiry merges very much into an illustration of the Christian duty of watchfulness, and the treatise is closed by a general exhortation to this duty. Slight defects in the arrangement, the renewed discussion of a point after it had been quitted, and the disproportionate space accorded to some parts of the subject, are explained, perhaps by the circumstance

that the treatise was originally a series of discourses.—Editor)

## Chapter I

([Of Temptation by John Owen](#)).

The words of the text, that are the foundation of the ensuing discourse—

The occasion of the words, with their dependence—

The things specially aimed at in them—

Things considerable in the words as to the general purpose in hand—

Of the general nature of temptation, wherein it consists—

The special nature of temptation—

Temptation taken actively and passively—

How God tempts any—

His end in so doing—

The way whereby he doth it—

Of temptation in its special nature; of the actions of it—

The true nature of temptation stated.

“Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation.”—Mt 26:41

These words of our Saviour are repeated with very little alteration in three evangelists; only, whereas Matthew and Mark have recorded them as above written, Luke reports them thus: **“Rise and pray, lest ye enter into temptation;”** so that the whole of his caution seems to have been,

**“Arise, watch and pray,  
that ye enter not into temptation.”**

Solomon tells us of some that “lie down on the top of a mast in the midst of the sea,” Pr 23:34,—men overborne by security in the mouth of destruction. If ever poor souls lay down on the top of a mast in the midst of the sea, these disciples with our Saviour in the garden did so. Their Master, at a little distance from them, was “offering up prayers and supplications, with strong crying and tears,” Heb 5:7, being then taking into his hand and beginning to taste that cup that was filled with the curse and wrath due to their sins (He 2:9; Gal 3:13; 2Co 5:21);—the Jews, armed for his and their destruction, being but a little more distant from them, on the other hand. Our Saviour had a little before informed them that that night he should be betrayed, and be delivered up to be slain; they saw that he was “sorrowful, and very heavy,” Mt 26:37; nay, he told them plainly that his “soul was exceeding sorrowful, even unto death,” Mt 26:38, and therefore entreated them to tarry and watch with him, now he was dying, and that for them. In this condition, leaving them but a little space, like men forsaken of all love towards him or care of themselves, they fall fast asleep!

**Even the best of saints, being left to themselves,  
will quickly appear to be less than men**  
—to be nothing.

**All our own strength is weakness,  
and all our wisdom folly.**

Peter being one of them, who but a little before had with so much self-confidence affirmed that though all men forsook him, yet he never would so do. Our Saviour expostulates the matter in particular with him: Mt 26:40,

“He saith unto Peter, Could you not watch with me one hour?” as if he should have said, “Art thou he, Peter, who but now boasts of thy resolution never to forsake me? Is it likely that thou shouldst hold out therein, when thou canst not watch with me one hour? Is this thy dying for me, to be dead in security, when I am dying for thee?”

And indeed it would be an amazing thing to consider that Peter should make so high a promise, and be

immediately so careless and remiss in the pursuit of it, but we find the root of the same treachery abiding and working in our own hearts, and we see the fruit of it brought forth every day, so that the most noble obliging of ourselves to obedience quickly ends in deplorable negligence, Ro 7:18.

In this estate our Saviour admonishes them of their condition, their weakness, their danger, and stirs them up to a prevention of that ruin which lay at the door. Jesus says...

**“Arise, watch and pray.”**

I shall not insist on the particular aimed at here by our Saviour, in this caution to them that were then present with him; the great temptation that was coming on them, from the scandal of the cross, was doubtless in His eye; **but I shall consider the words as containing a general direction to all the disciples of Christ, in their following of him throughout all generations.**

There are three things in the words:—

**I. The evil cautioned against—temptation.**

**II. The means of its success—by our entering into it.**

**III. The way of preventing it—watch and pray.**

It is not in my intention to handle the common-place of temptations, but only the danger of them in general, with the means of preventing that danger; yet, that we may know what we affirm, and of what we speak, some aspects of the general nature of temptation may be proposed.

**I. First, For the general nature of tempting and temptation,** it lies among things indifferent; to try, to experiment, to prove, to pierce a vessel, that the liquor that is in it may be known, is as much as is signified by it. Hence God is said sometime to tempt; and we are commanded as our duty to tempt, or try, or search ourselves, to know what is in us, and to pray that God would do so also (cp Ps 139:23, 24).

**So temptation is like a knife, that may either cut the meat or the throat of a man; it may be his food or his poison, his exercise or his destruction.**

**Secondly, Temptation in its special nature, as it denotes any evil, is considered either actively, as it leads to evil, or passively, as it hath an evil and suffering in it:** so temptation is taken for affliction, Jas 1:2; for in that sense, we are to “count it all joy when we fall into temptation;” in the other, that we “enter not into it.”

Again, actively considered, it either denotes in the tempter a design for the bringing about of the special end of temptation, namely, a leading into evil; so it is said, that “God tempts no man,” James 1:13, with a design to make them sin;—or the general nature and end of temptation, which is trial; so “God tempted Abraham,” Ge 22:1. And He tested His people with false prophets, Deut.13:3.

Now, as to God’s tempting of any, two things are to be considered:—1. The end why he doth it;

2. The way whereby he doth it.

For the first, his general ends are two:—

**(1.) He doth it to show unto man what is in him,**—that is, the man himself; and that either as to his grace or to his corruption. (I speak not now of it as it may have a place and bear a part in judiciary obduration.) Grace and corruption lie deep in the heart; men oftentimes deceive themselves in the search after the one or the other of them. When we give vent to the soul, to try what grace is there, corruption comes out; and when we search for corruption, grace appears. So is the soul kept in uncertainty; we fail in our trials. God comes with a gauge that goes to the bottom. He sends his instruments of trial into the bowels and the inmost parts of the soul, and lets man see what is in him, of what metal he is constituted. Thus he tempted Abraham to show him his faith. Abraham knew not what faith he had (I mean, what power and vigour was in his faith) until God drew it out by that great trial and temptation. Ge 22:1, 2. When God says he knew it, he made Abraham to know it. So he tried Hezekiah to discover his pride; God left him that he might see what was in his heart, 2Chr 32:31. He knew not that he had such a proud heart, so apt to be lifted up, as he appeared to have, until God tried him, and so let out his filth, and poured it out before his face. The issues of such discoveries to the saints, in thankfulness, humiliation, and treasuring up of experiences, I shall not treat of.

**(2.) God doth it to show himself unto man** and that,—

**[1.] In a way of preventing grace.**

A man shall see that it is God alone who keeps from all sin. Until we are tempted, we think we live on our own strength. Though all men do this or that, we will not. When the trial comes, we quickly see whence is our preservation, by standing or falling. So was it in the case of Abimelech, Ge 20:6 "I withheld thee."

## **[2.] In a way of renewing grace.**

He would have the temptation continue with St Paul, that he might reveal himself to him in the sufficiency of his renewing grace, 2Co 12:9. We know not the power and strength that God puts forth in our behalf, nor what is the sufficiency of his grace, until, comparing the temptation with our own weakness, it appears unto us. The efficacy of an antidote is found when poison hath been taken; and the preciousness of medicines is made known by diseases. We shall never know what strength there is in grace if we know not what strength there is in temptation. We must be tried, that we may be made sensible of being preserved. And many other good and gracious ends he hath, which he accomplishes towards his saints by his trials and temptations, not now to be insisted on.

2. For the ways whereby God accomplishes His search, trial or temptation, include—

**(1.) He puts men on great duties, such as they cannot apprehend that they have any strength for, nor indeed have.** So he tempted Abraham by calling him to that duty of sacrificing his son;—a thing absurd to reason, bitter to nature, and grievous to him on all accounts whatever. Many men know not what is in them, or rather what is ready for them, until they are put upon what seems utterly above their strength; indeed, upon what is really above their strength. The duties that God, in an ordinary way, requires at our hands are not proportioned to what strength we have in ourselves, but to what help and relief is laid up for us in Christ; and we are to address ourselves to the greatest performances with a settled persuasion that we have not ability for the least. This is the law of grace; but yet, when any duty is required that is extraordinary, that is a secret not often discovered. In the yoke of Christ it is a trial, a temptation.

**(2.) By putting upon them great sufferings.** How many have unexpectedly found strength to die at a stake, to endure tortures for Christ! yet their call to it was a trial. This, Peter tells us, is one way whereby we are brought into trying temptations, 1Pe 1:6, 7. Our temptations arise from the "fiery trial;" and yet the end is but a trial of our faith.

**(3.) By his providential disposing of things** so as that occasions unto sin will be administered unto men, which is the case mentioned, Dt 13:3; and innumerable other instances may be adjoined.

Now, they are not properly the temptations of God, as coming from him, with his end upon them, that are here intended; and therefore I shall set these apart from our present consideration. It is, then, temptation in its special nature, as it denotes an active efficiency towards sinning (as it is managed with evil unto evil) that I intend.

In this sense temptation may proceed either singly from Satan, or the world, or other men in the world, or from ourselves, or jointly from all or some of them, in their several combinations:—

(1.) Satan tempts sometimes singly by himself, without taking advantage from the world, the things or persons of it, or ourselves. So he deals in his injection of evil and blasphemous thoughts of God into the hearts of the saints; which is his own work alone, without any advantage from the world or our own hearts: for nature will contribute nothing thereunto, nor any thing that is in the world, nor any man of the world; for none can conceive a God and conceive evil of him. Herein Satan is alone in the sin, and shall be so in the punishment. These fiery darts are prepared in the forge of his own malice, and shall, with all their venom and poison, be turned into his own heart for ever.

(2.) Sometimes he makes use of the world, and joins forces against us, without any helps from within. So he tempted our Saviour, by "showing him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them." Mt 4:8. And the variety of the assistances he finds from the world, in persons and things which I must not insist on,—the innumerable instruments and weapons he takes from thence of all sorts and at all seasons,—are inexpressible.

(3.) Sometimes he takes in assistance from ourselves also. It is not with us as it was with Christ when Satan came to tempt him. He declares that he "had nothing in him," John 14:30. It is otherwise with us: he hath, for the compassing of most of his ends, a sure party within our own breasts, Jas 1:14, 15. Thus he tempted Judas: he was at work himself; he put it into his heart to betray Christ; Luke 22:3, "he entered into him" for that purpose. And he sets the world at work, the things of it, providing for him "thirty pieces of silver" (Lk 22:5, "They covenanted to give him money"); and the men of it, even the priests and the Pharisees; and calls in the

assistance of his own corruption,—he was covetous, “a thief, and had the bag.”

I might also show how the world and our own corruptions do act single by themselves, and jointly in conjunction with Satan and one another, in this business of temptation. But the truth is, the principles, ways, and means of temptations, the kinds, degrees, efficacy, and causes of them, are so inexpressible large and various; the circumstances of them, from providence, natures, conditions, spiritual and natural, with the particular cases thence arising, so innumerable and impossible to be comprised within any bound or order, that to

attempt the giving an account of them would be to undertake that which would be endless. I shall content myself to give a description of the general nature of that which we are to watch against; which will make way for what I aim at.

Temptation, then, in general, is any thing, state, way, or condition that, upon any account whatever, hath a force or efficacy to seduce, to draw the mind and heart of a man from its obedience, which God requires of him, into any sin, in any degree of it whatever.

In particular, that is a temptation to any man which causes or occasions him to sin, or in any thing to go off from his duty, either by bringing evil into his heart, or drawing out that evil that is in his heart, or any other way diverting him from communion with God, and that constant, equal, universal obedience, in matter and manner, that is required of him.

For the clearing of this description I shall only observe, that though temptation seems to be of a more active importance, and so to denote only the power of seduction to sin itself, yet in the Scripture it is commonly taken in a neuter sense, and denotes the matter of the temptation or the thing whereby we are tempted. And this is a ground of the description I have given of it. Be it what it will, that from any thing whatever, within us or without us, hath advantage to hinder in duty, or to provoke unto or in any way to occasion sin, that is a temptation, and so to be looked on. Be it business, employment, course of life, company, affections, nature, or corrupt design, relations, delights, name, reputation, esteem, abilities, parts or excellencies of body or mind, place, dignity, art, —so far as they further or occasion the promotion of the ends before mentioned, they are all of them no less truly temptations than the most violent solicitations of Satan or allurements of the world, and that soul lies at the brink of ruin who discerns it not. And this will be farther discovered in our process. (From chapter 1 [Of Temptation by John Owen](#) )

## Chapter V

([Of Temptation by John Owen](#))

The second case proposed, or inquiries resolved—What are the best directions to prevent entering into temptation—Those directions laid down—The directions given by our Saviour: “Watch and pray”—What is included therein—

**(1.) Sense of the danger of temptation—**

**(2.) That it is not in our power to keep ourselves—**

**(3.) Faith in promises of preservation—Of prayer in particular.**

2. Having seen the danger of entering into temptation, and also discovered the ways and seasons whereby and wherein men usually so, our second inquiry is, What general directions may be given to preserve a soul from that condition that hath been spoken of? And we see our Saviour’s direction in the place spoken of before, Matt 26:41. He sums up all in these two words, “**Watch and pray.**” I shall a little labour to unfold them, and show what is wrapped and contained in them; and that both jointly and severally:—

**(1.) These is included in them a clear, abiding apprehension of great evil that there is in entering into temptation.**

That which a man watches and prays against, he looks upon as evil to him, and by all means to be avoided.

This, then, is the first direction:—Always bear in mind the great danger that it is for any soul to enter into temptation.

It is a woeful thing to consider what slight thoughts the most have of this thing. So men can keep themselves from sin itself in open action, they are content, they scarce aim at more; on any temptation in the world, all sorts of men will venture at any time. How will young men put themselves on company, any society; at first,

being delighted with evil company, then with the evil of the company! How vain are all admonitions and exhortations to them to take heed of such persons, debauched in themselves, corrupters of others, destroyers of souls! At first they will venture on the company, abhorring the thoughts of practicing their lewdness; but what is the issue? Unless it be here or there one, whom God snatches with a mighty hand from the jaws of destruction, they are all lost, and become after a while in love with the evil which at first they abhorred. This open door to the ruin of souls is too evident; and woeful experience makes it no less evident that it is almost impossible to fasten upon many poor creatures any fear or dread of temptation, who yet will profess a fear and abhorrence of sin. Would it were only thus with young men, such as are unaccustomed to the yoke of their Lord! What sort of men is free from this folly in one thing or other? How many professors have I known that would plead for their liberty, as they called it! They could hear any thing, all things,—all sorts of men, all men; they would try all things whether they came to them in the way of God or no; and on that account would run to hear and to attend to every broacher of false and abominable opinions, every seducer, though stigmatized by the generality of the saints: for such a one they had their liberty,—they could do it; but the opinions they hated as much as any. What hath been the issue? I scarce ever knew any come off without a wound; the most have had their faith overthrown. Let no man, then, pretend to fear sin that doth not fear temptation to it. They are too nearly allied to be separated. Satan hath put them so together that it is very hard for any man to put them asunder. He hates not the fruit who delights in the root.

When men see that such ways, such companies, such courses, such businesses, such studies and aims, do entangle them, make them cold, careless, are quench-coals to them, indispose them to even, universal, and constant obedience, if they adventure on them, sin lies at the door. It is a tender frame of spirit, sensible of its own weakness and corruption, of the craft of Satan, of the evil of sin, of the efficacy of temptation, that can perform his duty. And yet until we bring our hearts to this frame, upon the considerations before-mentioned, or the like that may be proposed, we shall never free ourselves from sinful entanglements. Boldness upon temptation, springing from several pretences, hath, as is known, ruined innumerable professors in these days, and still continues to cast many down from their excellency; nor have I the least hope of a more fruitful profession amongst us until I see more fear of temptation. Sin will not long seem great or heavy unto any to whom temptations seem light or small.

This is the first thing enwrapped in this general direction:—The daily exercise of our thoughts with an apprehension of the great danger that lies in entering into temptation, is required of us. Grief of the Spirit of God, disquietment of our own souls, loss of peace, hazard of eternal welfare, lies at the door. If the soul be not prevailed withal to the observation of this direction, all that ensues will be of no value. Temptation despised will conquer; and if the heart be made tender and watchful here, half the work of securing a good conversation is over. And let not him go any further who resolved not to improve this direction in a daily conscientious observation of it.

**(2.) There is this in it also, that it is not a thing in our own power, to keep and preserve ourselves from entering into temptation.**

Therefore are we to pray that we may be preserved from it, because we cannot save ourselves.

This is another means of preservation. As we have no strength to resist a temptation when it doth come, when we are entered into it, but shall fall under it, without a supply of sufficiency of grace from God; so to reckon that we have no power or wisdom to keep ourselves from entering into temptation, but must be kept by the power and wisdom of God, is a preserving principle, 1Pe 1:5. We are in all things “kept by the power of God.” This our Saviour instructs us in, not only by directing us to pray that we be not led into temptation, but also by his own praying for us, that we may be kept from it: John 17:15, “I pray not that thou should take them out of the world, but that thou should keep them from the evil,”—that is, the temptations of the world unto evil, unto sin, —“out of evil” that us in the world, that is temptation, which is all that is evil in the world; or from the evil one, who in the world makes use of the world unto temptation. Christ prays his Father to keep us, and instructs us to pray that we be so kept. It is not, then, a thing in our own power. The ways of our entering into temptation are so many, various, and imperceptible,—the means of it so efficacious and powerful,—our weakness our unwatchfulness, so unspeakable,—that we cannot in the least keep or preserve ourselves from it. We fail both in wisdom and power for this work.

Let the heart, then commune with itself and say, “I am poor and weak; Satan is subtle, cunning, powerful, watching constantly for advantages against my soul; the world earnest, pressing, and full of specious pleas, innumerable pretences, and ways of deceit; my own corruption violent and tumultuous, enticing, entangling, conceiving sin, and warring in me, against me; occasions and advantages of temptation innumerable in all

things I have done or suffer, in all businesses and persons with whom I converse; the first beginnings of temptation insensible and plausible, so that, left unto myself, I shall not know I am ensnared, until my bonds be made strong, and sin hath got ground in my heart: therefore on God alone will I rely for preservation, and continually will I look up to him on that account." This will make the soul be always committing itself to the care of God, resting itself on him, and to do nothing, undertake nothing, etc, without asking counsel of him. So that a double advantage will arise from the observation of this direction, both of singular use for the soul's preservation from the evil feared:—

**[1.] The engagement of the grace and compassion of God**, who hath called the fatherless and helpless to rest upon him; nor did ever soul fail of supplies, who, in a sense of want, rolled itself on him, on the account of his gracious invitation.

**[2.] The keeping of it in such a frame as, on various accounts, is useful for its preservation.**

He that looks to God for assistance in a due manner is both sensible of his danger, and conscientiously careful in the use of means to preserve himself: which two, of what importance they are in this case, may easily be apprehended by them who have their hearts exercised in these things.

**[3.] This also is in it,—act faith on the promise of God for preservation.**

To believe that he will preserve us is a means of preservation; for this God will certainly do, or make a way for us to escape out of temptation, if we fall into it under such a believing frame. We are to pray for what God hath promised. Our requests are to be regulated by his promises and commands, which are of the same extent. Faith closes with the promises, and so finds relief in this case. This James instructs us in, Jas 1:5, 6, 7. What we want we must "ask of God;" but we must "ask in faith," for otherwise we must not "think that we shall receive any thing of the Lord." This then, also, is in this direction of our Saviour, that we act faith on the promises of God for our preservation out of temptation. He hath promised that he will keep us in all our ways; that we shall be directed in a way that, though we are fools, "we shall not err therein," Is 35:8; that he will lead us, guide us, and deliver us from the evil one. Set faith on work on these promises of God, and expect a good and comfortable issue. It is not easily conceived what a train of graces faith is attended withal, when it goes forth to meet Christ in the promises, nor what a power for the preservation of the soul lies in this thing; but I have spoken to this elsewhere. (Mortification of Sin in Believers, vol. 6 chap. 14. p. 78)

**[4.] Weigh these things severally, and first, take prayer into consideration.**

To pray that we enter not into temptation is a means to preserve us from it.

Glorious things are, by all men that know any part of those things, spoken of this duty; and yet the truth is, not one half of its excellency, power, and efficacy is known. It is not my business to speak of it in general; but this I say as to my present purpose,—he that would be little in temptation, let him be much in prayer. This calls in the suitable help and succour that is laid up in Christ for us, Heb 4:16. This casts our souls into a frame of opposition to every temptation. When Paul had given instruction for the taking to ourselves "the whole armour of God," that we may resist and stand in the time of temptation, he adds this general close of the whole, Ep 6:18, "Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication."

Without this all the rest will be of no efficacy for the end proposed.

And therefore consider what weight he lays on it: "Praying always,"—that is, at all times and seasons, or be always ready and prepared for the discharge of that duty, Luke 18:1, Ep 6:18; "with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit,"—putting forth all kinds of desires unto God, that are suited to our condition, according to his will, lest we diverted by any thing whatever; and that not for a little while, but "with all perseverance,"—continuance lengthened out to the utmost: so shall we stand. The soul so framed is in a sure posture; and this is one of the means without which this work will not be done. If we do not abide in prayer, we shall abide in cursed temptations.

Let this, then, be another direction:

Abide in prayer, and that expressly to this purpose, that we "enter not into temptation."

Let this be one part of our daily contending (striving) with God,—that he would preserve our souls, and keep our hearts and our ways, that we be not entangled; that his good and wise providence will order our ways and affairs, that no pressing temptation befall us; that he would give us diligence, carefulness, and watchfulness over our own ways. So shall we be delivered when others are held with the cords of their own folly (Pr 5:22).



**Thomas a Brakel** (Christian's Reasonable Service) gives some excellent final instructions on how to conduct ourselves in warfare...

Endeavor to conduct yourself well, however, and to engage in this task properly. "And if a man also strive for masteries, yet is he not crowned, except he strive lawfully" (2Ti 2:5).

### **First, arm yourself therefore from head to toe.**

Paul teaches us what these weapons are. "Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; and your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God: praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit" (Ep 6:13-18).

### **Secondly, in this warfare be on your guard against:**

#### **(1) Carelessness.**

Do not imagine that you already have overcome when you have a good intention. Such intentions easily lose their vigor. Do not imagine that the enemy has already disappeared, for he lies in wait for you. Therefore, "Be sober, be vigilant" (1 Pet. 5:8).

#### **(2) Despondency.**

When the enemies are too strong for you, the warfare too heavy, and God is distant, do not give up courage, for that is as much as casting away your weapons and holding forth to the enemy (from whom no grace is to be expected anyhow) your defenseless hands. Therefore in reliance upon the strength and infallible promises of God, "Be strong and of a good courage" (Josh 1:6).

#### **(3) Pride and boasting in your own strength.**

Remember Peter who said, "Yet will I never be offended" (Matthew 26:33); "Yet will I not deny Thee" (Mt 26:35). Then the defeat is imminent. Therefore, "Be not high minded, but fear" (Ro 11:20).

### **Thirdly, in this warfare:**

#### **(1) Exercise caution, and do not go beyond the boundaries of your calling.**

Do not engage in things which are beyond your reach and beyond your competence. Do not hastily and with impulsive passion engage yourself. Do not imagine by yourself that you have enough wisdom, but always first seek the counsel of the Lord—however insignificant the matter or circumstance may be. A maid was strong enough to cast Peter down. In special cases seek the counsel of the godly. "He that hearkens to counsel is wise" (Pr 12:15); "See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise" (Ep 5:15).

#### **(2) Flee from those opportunities from which you are permitted to flee, and especially those by which you have frequently been entrapped.**

He already makes good progress who, in order to avoid sin, avoids the opportunities for sin, and does not engage in a specific endeavor unless called to do so.

#### **(3) Be especially opposed to the sin which you are most inclined to commit, toward which your nature is most inclined, and which is related to your calling.**

Carefully guard against the initial manifestations, for then it is easiest to resist it. Smother the children in the cradle, catch the little foxes, and remove the dead fly which can cause the most eminent substance to stink.

#### **(4) Always take refuge to Christ, for He is a sun and a shield (Ps. 84:11).**

As you permit your heart to wander away from Him, the arrow of the enemy will immediately hit you. Emulate David in this respect: "Deliver me, O LORD, from mine enemies: I flee unto Thee to hide me" (Ps. 143:9).

**(5) Be continually engaged in prayer**, for all your strength must come from the Lord—and God, when He is to do something, wants to be inquired of.

**"Watch and pray,  
that ye enter not into temptation" (Matthew 26:41).**