

STRENGTH AGAINST TEMPTATIONS

(PART II)

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SAINT AUSTIN says, then are holy men most speedfully heard of God, when he gives them not that that they covet (but after that he knows the best for them). God gives unto some men sweetness of devotion in the beginning of their turning for to (draw them out from the love of worldly things) and for to make them sad and stable in his love. Which sweetness afterward he withdraws that they should get them more meed and higher to be crowned (in the bliss of heaven). For since virtues, as says the philosopher, stands in that thing that a man may not come to (without strength and hardness), therefore that this is most hard to get is most of virtue when it is gotten. [But to be stable and lasting in the love of God and soothfast belief, in time of temptation and withdrawing of all actual and sensible devotion, is more hard than it is when a man feels sweetness and devotion and therefore it is more needful.] This betokeneth our Lord when he said to St Peter thus: '*Cum autem esses iunior cingebas te et ambulabas ubi volebas, cum autem senius extends manus tuas et alius cinget te et ducet te quo tu non vis* (John 21, 18). That is to say 'When thou wast young thou girded thyself and yode whither thyself list; but when thou waxest old, another shall gird thee and lead thee whither thou wilt not'. Yea for right as small children are first nourished and brought forth with sweet milk [and dancing and playing to the time that they be able to eat sad meats as men do, and do strong deeds], right so our Lord nourishes some men and women first with milk of sweetness and devotion and afterwards he makes them strong and perfect through sad meats of (temptation) and tribulation.

It is sweet and delectable for to follow Jesu with mirth and joy of heart and peacefulness and in soothness of soul, but it is full hard and full high perfection to follow our Lord without any comfort or ease of heart, and with continual impugnation of his mind and of his faith. It was sweet and delectable to Saint Peter for to be with Jesus in the mount of Thabor, in his joyful transfiguration,

* *Note.* The passages in brackets are proper to Hilton.

when he said to Jesus: '*Bonum est nos hic esse*' (Mtt. 17, 4), that is to say, 'it is good for us to be here'. But it was full hard and full fearful to him to be with Christ in his passion and his persecution, (that was so hard and so fell¹), in so mickle (that he denied him) and said he knew him not. And yet nevertheless he, that for the ferdness² of a little woman's voice denied Christ in his passion, afterwards he was made so strong (and so mighty) through the Holy Ghost, that he acknowledged our Lord before kings and princes unto the death. And for that this manner of passion comes oft of a man's own complexion, therefore whoso is thus tempted, it is good that he be ware, that he eschew that he be not mickle by him ane³, and that he ensearch not nothing, (nor discuss ever deeply through curiosity or subtilty of his thought, nor that he lean not on his own wit, nor presume over mickle of his own feelings, but that he meekly) fall to and follow the counsel and comforting of wise and discreet men, showing (and opening) to them his temptations and (his stirrings). (And this is both heful and speedful to him) for holy writ says thus: '*Vae soli quae cum ceciderit non habet sublevantem se*' (Eccles. 4, 10). (That is to say: 'woe is to him that is alone living,⁴ only in his own wit and his own feeling', for when he falls from grace through pride he has no lifter nor holder-up through ghostly comfort and counsel). And for as mickle as a man is thus travailed (and tarried), he is heavy and fearful both of his own complexion and of his temptation, but he shall make mirth and joy violently of force, if that he may no better do, through lifting up of his own heart. And ever the more that he is put down to sorrow and dread, the more shall he stir himself to mirth and gladness; for holy writ tells that the apostles went joying from the council of the Jews, for that they were worthy to suffer disease for the name of Jesus, as it is written thus: '*Ibant apostoli gaudentes a conspectu consilii quoniam digni habiti sunt pro nomine Jesu contumeliam pati*'. And therefore if a man sogates⁵ as I have said be tempted, although he feel a little or none of ghostly comfort, look that he suffer it meekly for great meed of his soul and that he take in the meantime honest and lawful bodily comfort, so that he fall not in to over mickle heaviness (or despair), or mistrust, for such (manner of bodily solace) is not because of vanity done, or lust, but it is done because of profit and covering⁶ of man's hele.

For the fiend oft times transfigureth himself unseeable into an angel of light, stirring forth vices under likeness of virtues and

1 cruel

4 'lyuand'

2 for his fear of

5 in this way

3 by himself alone

6 recovering

concealing errors under colour of soothfastness, evermore waiting how he might overcome a devout soul. For some, he brings to a man's thought, in time of God's service, mind of his sins and says that him needs to ransack his conscience and for to shrive him, and puts in his mind such other thoughts, and so under colour of holiness and virtue, he troubles and draws away his mind from that that he should say and think on; for it is written: '*Omnia tempus habent*', that is, all things have times. But soothly a sovereign and assayed medicine and a remedy for to put away such fantasies and vain imaginations and for to destroy ghostly temptation in time of debtful⁷ praying, is this: that a man on no wise, as far forth as he may, give (no listening nor beholding) nor take no tent to them.

⁸Sometimes also the fiend brings to the mind of a body their old done sins, which he has before time done away through true confession and pure conscience, and makes him believe that they are not forgiven him; or else he brings him in doubt whether they be forgiven him or not, (which he knew before soothfastly), and that does the enemy through a blinding and a withdrawing of the mind of his shrift made before or of other good deeds, smiting sharply his mind, with dread of weakness of heart. The wicked enemy means not through this bringing to mind, for to cleanse the soul from sin, through confession, but that the soul should through such falseness be troubled and (tarried and stirred) from peace and stableness of heart, (or else to bring him to despair), for he is a spirit of pestilence, and over all things he hates peace and quiet of heart, coveting overmore and desiring bitterness and troubling. To whose suggestion in this case thou shalt warily again stand on this wise. When thou feelest thus thy conscience troubled and tarried for such manner of confession of thy sins, (which thou knowest well thou hast been shriven of before time, and taken and done penance for them), (which⁹ conscience is stirred by temptation and tarrying of thy enemy), make thou dissimulation and feigning warily (as if thou heedest¹⁰ not thereof and leave off as soon as thou mayest) and flee away (and follow it not in deed), though thy false conscience againsay thee. For confession of sin, if it be profitable and needful to every man when true conscience and heful compunction stirs it, nevertheless it is unprofitable and unspeedful when it is stirred by

⁷ obligatory times of prayer

⁸ Compare following section with *Scale* II. ch. 22 (p. 312 sq.) and 11. ch. 11 (p. 265) and *Scale* I. ch. 37 and 38, Underhill edition.

⁹ This state of conscience

¹⁰ text 'roght nought'

false opinion or doubting and bitter and fearful in-sending of the fiend.

But thou shalt understand that this manner¹¹ of confession is not left for contempt or despite of the sacrament of confession and the ordinance of Holy Kirk but for a cautele¹² and a wareness of eschewing temptation of the fiend. For all things is well done that is done with a good intent, though it seem not so sometime in the sight of men. For only intent and cause makes ever each thing for to be meedful or unspeedful. This is the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ, when the fiend tempted him and set him on the pinnacle of the temple, and bade him if he were God's son that he should cast himself to the ground. Nevertheless he did not (at once as the fiend bade him), but he came down (easily) by the graces of discretion declining wisely his deceits (and his temptations) giving us ensample that when the fiend stirs anything under colour of good (and holiness) we shall not at once bow to his bidding and fulfil his suggestions, but we shall helefully by way of discretion againstand them.

Also the wicked spirit of errors sometime umbelaps¹³ the mind with divers perplexities and doubts and wonderful and privy distractions and wandering of thought, making that thing to seem unlawful and great sin, which is lawful and no sin, and says that is deadly sin which is but venial and (so continually that him thinks he is never shriven right) and over that more undiscreetly troubles and travails his heart (through feardness, dreads and ugsomeness and brings to his mind fantasies of divers sins) only for to let him from good working¹⁴ and (profitable occupation) through such disease, and also to make him a false conscience, in so mickle that he sometime draws a man and gears¹⁵ him (more cleave) and lean to such falseness and feigned conscience, (stirred by such subtilty and quaintise¹⁶ of the fiend), than for to consent to truth and be ruled by discretion. And this is a foul error and such a man needs by counsel and doom of a wise man (and a discreet), to put away all such false errors (and neither trow nor dread them nor follow them), but to follow soothfastness. And if he say that he may not put it away from him, he says not soothly thereof. For he may *will* to put it away from him, and if he *would* it were away, then *is* it put away (in effect, that it shall not defoul his soul) although the same

¹¹ practice of confession

¹² caution

¹³ surrounds, embraces. See similar phrase in *Scale* II, ch. 4: 'thou art so belapped with this image of sin', etc.

¹⁴ See *Scale* I, ch. 37: ugsomeness, horrors.

¹⁵ causes him more to cleave.

¹⁶ skill. O.F. *cointise*.

error dwell still in his inward feeling as it did before, if he will meekly assent and be buxom to wise men's teaching and counsel. This teacheth us the apostle saying: '*Nolite credere omni spiritu*' (1 John 4, 1), will ye not, he says, give credence and belief to every spirit, but prove first and assay by counsel (and discretion of wise men, which is the spirit of God and follow it and do after it, and look and seek by discretion whether it be one of the homely meneages¹⁷ of God, or it be the insending of the enemy, and thereafter work). And therefore discretion is alway needful to every each man, which discretion, as St Bernard says, is the upbearer of all other virtues. This discretion deems rightly betwixt good and ill, that a man be not deceived unwarily (nor receive no ill under colour of likeness of good) and therefore Saint Austin says in a book, *De spiritu et anima*, that some time a good spirit and some time a wicked takes to him man's spirit (and his thought) and it may not lightly be known of what spirit it is taken but only by that, that the good spirit touches us (and stirs us to good) and the wicked deceives us.

He beguiles men oft times in open good works (of kind as fasting, waking, praying, and such other) that if they once put their trust in them (that they are good and holy), then he leads them (through indiscretion or pride or hypocrisy) to his works and so are they turned in to sin.¹⁸ And so oft times he ravishes man's thought into hid and privy things, that it seems all one the spirit of him that suffers and the spirit of him that travaills him. And therefore it seemeth that it were his own thought and a true conceit,¹⁹ which is brought in through wicked stirrings and deceit of the enemy. Therefore he shall not in this case trow his own wit, nor lean to his own feeling, but he shall meek himself and be buxom and obedient to soothfastness and discretion of wise men. For our old adversary the fiend is a false and wicked, treacherous deceiver of men's souls, and when he sees that he may not lead the soul into errors through wiles, nevertheless he enforces to cast it down by over mickle dread, showing to it false illusions and fearful and hideous thoughts and through injecting of venom of his wickedness, for to make it painful and bitter through unsufferable heaviness that it feels, to that intent, to make him cease and leave off his good purpose, that he has begun. And therefore him behoves on all wise, in as mickle, as frailty suffers, with help of grace againstand his deceivable suggestions and to suffer patiently and meekly the pain

17 members of the household

19 opinion

18 See *Scale* I, chs. 59 and 63.

and the bitterness infected in his fearful²⁰ thought.

Also the fiend when he sees that he may not overcome a man waking nor make him consent (to his wicked stirrings), he is aboutward in sleep to (thresh him) and disease him through divers (scourings of fear and ugsomeness of dreams) and fantasies. And therefore says St Gregory super illum Job: '*Terrebis me per somnia*', he says the fiend when he sees that he may not overcome a man nor make him consent to sin waking, he fights with him more grievously (and more felly)²¹ sleeping. And that is suffered of the great goodness of God (and of his mercy), that will not suffer that the sleep of his (dear chosen darlings) be without fruit of ghostly meed. Ah (dear Lord Jesu), on how many wonderful wises is a chosen soul that only loves and dreads thee, cast hither and thither through divers temptations and smitten together and thrown together, through dread and fearfulness on every side. This bears witness (Holy Kirk) in an hymn saying, '*O tortuose serpens qui mille per meandros fraudes quas flexuosas agitas quieta corda*', he says 'Ah ah, thou burkill nيدر,²² that through a thousand wiles feigns and troubles restful hearts'. 'Yea, high²³ thy way and melt to nought, Christ is with us that has us bought. Thou wicked fiend without might, Christ's cross thee damn and all thy might!' Ah, ah, how merciful it is and how profitable, how charitable and how heleful for to comfortly strengthen and counsel and help a man that is thus-gates²⁴ travelled and pined, desolate and as it were forsaken and all left, as it were (in the hands of his enemy), and for to lead a man that on thus wise goes through the fire of temptation, out of the heat and burning tribulation, into a restful coldness and refreshing and comfort of the Holy Ghost. And yet, nevertheless, if he may not as soon get nor have this restful comfort and refreshing as he covets, he shall not therefore despair and if he forgo it long time (yea all his life time), he shall think that all this life is but a prison and a place of penance (and disease, and fully trust that that comfort and joy is profitable withdrawing from him here, and reserved and kept to him in the bliss that is endless.)²⁵

20 timid

21 cruelly

22 evil serpent

23 yea, go thy way

24 thus wise

25 The final Latin text is omitted. There follows here both in Bodl. 131 and the Latin Bodl. 43 a chapter from the pseudo-Bonaventure *Stimulus Amoris* (Book III, ch. 2 in prt. Latin ed.), namely on the usefulness of temptations. This beautiful addition has been taken for Flete's work in other MSS. where the addition is not marked as such. The translation in Bodl. 131 differs from Hilton's version of the *Stimulus* (Vernon and other MSS.) and if made by him must have been made at another time.