

The Temptations of Jesus Christ

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The temptations of our Lord Jesus Christ are the central subject of this article and they are recorded in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. But before we turn there, the Book of Hebrews gives us some important insight into the benefit of understanding Christ's temptations for us as believers today:

For indeed He does not give aid to angels, but He does give aid to the seed of Abraham. Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted (Hebrews 2:16-18; all scripture quotations are from the NKJV).

Bullinger's Lexicon defines "tempt" as "to put to the test in order to ascertain the character of anyone." Webster's dictionary defines it as "to entice to something wrong by some specious [superficially fair] argument or inducement." In the gospel accounts, Satan uses plausible arguments and reasoning to test Jesus. By His response to these temptations, the revealed character of our Lord becomes a brilliant example to us of the mind of Christ and gives us the pattern of how we can successfully repel the attacks of our enemy, Satan. We will see how Jesus used specific sections of God's Word to respond to the devil's temptations. A clearer picture emerges of our wonderful Savior, as one we can identify with, one who suffered temptation. Yet, He so trusted the truth of His Heavenly Father's Word that He was able to withstand the onslaught of the devil himself.

The Bible records that the devil directly tempted Jesus in three general areas. The first of these temptations is recorded in Luke.

Then Jesus, being filled with the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, being tempted for forty days by the devil. And in those days He ate nothing, and afterward, when they had ended, He was hungry. And the devil said to

Him "If You are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread." (Luke 4:1-3)

Jesus was filled with holy spirit at His baptism. At that time a voice came from his heavenly Father in heaven saying,

"This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17).

But the first recorded words of the devil to Jesus were, "If you are the Son of God" (Luke 4:1-3). Notice the first thing the devil did was to try and cast doubt on the truth of what God had spoken. The devil had successfully used this tactic against Eve in Genesis 3. Furthermore, in essence the devil was saying here, "Jesus, you haven't eaten in forty days. Obviously God isn't going to take care of your needs. If You're really the Son of God it is OK to do it yourself."

But Jesus answered him, saying, "It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God." (Luke 4:4)

Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 8:3b. But an examination of the context of this section of scripture reveals the great depth of His response.

And you shall remember that the Lord your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord. (Deut. 8:2,3).

Jesus was convinced that just as God provided for the needs of Israel during their forty years in the wilderness, so He would provide for His Son. Jesus didn't just throw out an appropriate "proof text", He quoted a verse from God's Word which carried with it all the implications of God's plan for His chosen people, which was culminating in the coming of Jesus as the Messiah.

Contrast the picture of Jesus alone in the wilderness, urged by the devil, turning stones into bread to feed Himself, with the record in John 6:5-13. This account describes Jesus turning five loaves

and two small fish into enough food to fill well over five thousand people with plenty of leftovers! The effect of this miracle is stated in verse 14.

*Then those men, when they had seen the sign that Jesus did, said, "This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world."
(John 6:14)*

God empowered Jesus to minister to a dying world and show Himself as God's promised Messiah, not to use that power for His own personal comfort or gain. The devil had to try a different approach in his attack.

Then he brought Him to Jerusalem, set Him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, "If you are the Son of God, throw Yourself down from here. For it is written: 'He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you,' and 'In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.'" (Luke 4:9-11)

The devil very skillfully used a section of scripture which, on the surface, seemed to validate his request of Jesus. After all, according to the devil's version of God's Word God had promised the protection of angels. But read in its entirety, Psalm 91 paints a very different picture of the meaning of these verses. Even the immediate context reveals the error the devil tried to propound.

Because you have made the Lord, who is my refuge, even the Most High, your dwelling place, no evil shall befall you, nor shall any plague come near your dwelling; for He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways. In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone. (Ps. 91:9-12).

Clearly, the prerequisite for God's protection is single-minded devotion to the one true God.

And Jesus answered and said to him, "It has been said, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God.'" (Luke 4:12).

Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6:16 which says,

You shall not tempt the Lord your God as you tempted Him in Massah.

The name "Massah" literally means "tempted". What happened in Massah that Jesus would respond with this reference?

Then all the congregation of the children of Israel set out on their journey from the Wilderness of Sin, according to the commandment of the Lord, and camped in Rephidim; but there was no water for the people to drink. Therefore the people contended with Moses, and said, "Give us water that we may drink." So Moses said to them, "Why do you contend with me? Why do you tempt the Lord?" And the people thirsted there for water, and the people complained against Moses, and said, "Why is it you have brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" So Moses cried out to the Lord saying, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me!" And the Lord said to Moses, "Go on before the people, and take with you some of the elders of Israel. Also take in your hand your rod with which you struck the river, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock in Horeb; and you shall you strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink." And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel. So he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the contention of the children of Israel, and because they tempted the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?" (Exodus 17:1-7).

Was the Lord among them? The people of Israel had seen the plagues in Egypt. They had observed the first Passover, during which God protected their firstborn while the firstborn of the Egyptians died. God guided the Israelites out of Egypt in a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. They had seen the Red Sea divided, had crossed over on dry land, and saw the Egyptian army destroyed. They had been provided with food in the desert on a daily basis in the form of manna from God. Yet they had said at Massah "Is the Lord among us or not?"

What the devil was really saying to Jesus was, "Is the Lord with you or not?" He disguised it in scripture, but the essence of the temptation to jump off the pinnacle of the temple was to force God into performing a "parlor trick". It would have been quite an entrance. Jesus, throwing Himself off the

pinnacle of the temple, landing safely in full view of the many people who would have been present, announcing Himself as the Messiah. But would such and act glorify God? An account in the book of Acts gives an indication of what the result might have been.

But there was a certain man called Simon, who previously practiced sorcery in the city and astonished the people of Samaria, claiming that he was someone great, to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the great power of God." (Acts 8:9,10 emphasis mine).

It was the man who got the ultimate glory, not the true God. Compare this account with this record in Luke.

Then it happened, as He [Jesus] was coming near Jericho, that a certain blind man sat by the road begging. And hearing a multitude passing by, he asked what it meant. So they told him that Jesus of Nazareth was passing by. And he cried out, saying, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Then those who went before warned him that he should be quiet; but he cried out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" So Jesus stood still and commanded him to be brought to Him. And when he had come near, He asked him, saying, "What do you want Me to do for you?" He said, "Lord, that I may receive my sight." Then Jesus said to him, "Receive your sight; your faith has made you well." And immediately he received his sight, and followed Him, glorifying God. And all the people, when they saw it, gave praise to God. (Luke 18:35-43 emphasis mine).

Other accounts of miraculous healings which resulted in God receiving glory are recorded in Luke 13:11-13, Luke 17:12-19, and Mark 2:1-12. Genuine miracles always brought deliverance to people and glory to God the Father. The devil tried to convince Jesus that God should be willing to give a sign that Jesus was His Son. Jesus saw right through this tactic and responded with a section of the Word which cut right to the heart of the matter. Obviously, the devil had lost this round.

Then the devil, taking Him up on a high mountain, showed Him all the kingdoms of the

world in a moment of time. And the devil said to Him, "All this authority I will give to You, and their glory; for this has been delivered to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. Therefore, if You will worship before me, all will be Yours." (Luke 4:5-7)

The devil offered Jesus the authority over the world - its wealth, its power, its people. Adam had delivered this authority to the devil in Genesis, and the devil was offering it to Jesus. But the price was high. Jesus would have to forsake His Father, the one true God, and worship the devil. Adam had done it; but not Jesus.

And Jesus answered and said to him, "Get behind Me, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve'" (Luke 4:8).

Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6:13. Again, examination of the context of this verse is revealing.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. So shall it be, when the Lord your God brings you into the land of which He swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give you large and beautiful cities which you did not build, houses full of all good things, which you did not fill, hewn-out wells which you did not dig, vineyards and olive trees which you did not plant- when you have eaten and are full- then beware, lest you forget the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage. You shall fear the Lord your God and serve Him, and shall take oaths in His name (Deut. 6:1-6,10-13).

This section of scripture begins with what Jesus called the first commandment (Mark 12:29-30). Total commitment to God was His first priority. No promise of worldly goods or authority would change that. Jesus affirmed His allegiance to God the Father, the God of promise. Our Savior was no doubt well aware of the prophecies concerning the Messiah given in scripture.

Those who dwell in the wilderness will bow before Him, and His enemies will lick the dust. The kings of Tarshish and of the isles will bring presents; the kings of Sheba and Seba will offer

gifts. Yes, all kings shall fall down before Him; all nations shall serve Him (Ps. 72:9-11).

As the Messiah, Jesus knew the time would come when authority over the world would be given to Him by God. But the devil was offering a world that still needed to be reconciled to God. The following verses make this clear.

Seventy weeks are determined for your people and for your holy city, to finish the transgression, to make an end of sins, to make reconciliation for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy, and to anoint the Most Holy (Daniel 9:24; cp. Isa. 53).

For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life (Romans 5:10).

Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-19).

The devil tried to get Jesus to take rulership of the world before it was time. Jesus needed to die, as the perfect sacrifice for sin, before He could rule in righteousness. He would not take the shortcut to power by selling out to the devil. Jesus had withstood all the temptations the devil could muster and remained faithful to His Heavenly Father. "Away with you, Satan!", was His reply. The devil had no choice but to leave, and after he had gone, angels came and ministered to Jesus. (Matthew 4:11)

No doubt they attended to all of Jesus' needs, including food and comfort. But was the devil really finished tempting Jesus? The gospel accounts show that these same temptations - presented directly by the devil in the wilderness- resurfaced throughout the ministry of Jesus presented by Satan through the people. The first recorded temptation would also be one of the last. As Jesus was dying on the cross, Satan would use people to cast doubt on His identity and tempt Him to save Himself.

Then two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and another on the left. And those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads and saying, "You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save Yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross."

Likewise the chief priests also, mocking with the scribes and elders, said, "He saved others; Himself He cannot save. If He is the king of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him. He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now if He will have Him; for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" Even the robbers who were crucified with Him reviled Him with the same thing (Matt. 27:39-44).

During His ministry Jesus was also tempted to give flashy "signs" that He was the Messiah. This was regardless of how many Godly miracles He had done.

Then the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and testing ["testing" = "tempting"] Him asked that He would show them a sign from heaven (Matt. 16:1).

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from You." (Matt. 12:38).

Finally, Jesus was tempted by people to claim rulership as the Messiah before God's time. There were many prophecies in the Old Testament of the Messiah as King, and the people of Israel looked eagerly for their deliverer. Continue reading the record in John 6 of the feeding of the thousands.

Then those men, when they had seen the sign that Jesus did, said, "This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world." Therefore when Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, He departed again to the mountain by Himself alone (John 6:14-15).

Satan also used those closest to Jesus to tempt Him in this way.

He [Jesus] said to them, "But who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day. Then

Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!" But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men" (Matt. 15,16,21-23).

Peter knew the scriptures. He knew the promised Messiah would deliver Israel and establish a Kingdom of righteousness that would last forever. No doubt Peter loved Jesus. He had left everything to follow Him. He was sincere and committed to the vision he saw revealed in scripture. But he was wrong. Jesus saw straight through all that and recognized the words of Peter to be inspired by Satan. He responded with the same words He used in Luke 4:8 when he was first tempted with rulership of the world. He would wait, and continues to wait, for God's timing to reign as King.

What an inspiration these accounts are to our Christian walk today! We may face temptation in a myriad of disguises: through pleasures and pressures, people we love and people not so lovable, the urge to have now and the fear of having never. But from these records we can learn some of the ways the enemy tempts believers and how we can effectively respond. We see that Satan will:

- get us to doubt our identity as God's children even though it is written, *"Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God" (1 John 3:1a).*

- try to tell us God won't take care of our needs even though it is written, *"And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19).*

- get us looking for signs to perform which will glorify ourselves instead of God even though it is written, *"But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us" (2 Corinthians 4:7).*

- get us not to trust God's timing even though it is written, *"But those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint" (Isaiah 40:31).* And, *"to wait for*

His Son from heaven, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come" (1 Thess. 1:10).

The temptations of Jesus were as real to Him as the ones we face today. Yet our Lord has demonstrated through His life, death, and resurrection that the promises of God never fail. Christ staked His life on the truth of God's promises of the Messiah, and now He is at the right hand of God, the Head of the Church, and will reign in the coming Kingdom. We can identify with our Savior and follow His example in standing up to the tests and attacks of the enemy by clinging to the promises of our Heavenly Father. And we can turn to Jesus Christ, as the one who went before us, to be our help in every situation. As the Book of Hebrews states:

Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find the grace to help in time of need. (Heb. 4:14-16).

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