

JESUS TEMPTED IN THE DESERT

Matthew 4:1-11

Our reading today tells the story of Jesus' epic struggle with Satan, which forms a bridge between Jesus's baptism with the Holy Spirit and his public ministry. We're seeing the conflict between the diabolic and the divine. So as we study this passage together, you can find the main text on page [***] of the church bibles and all the scripture I'm going to refer to will be displayed on the screen.

We might ask how Matthew and the other gospel writers obtained their material since only Jesus and Satan are stated to be present. Presumably, Jesus must have shared these events with the disciples, or at least some of them, as part of their spiritual training. The account makes it quite clear that Satan is real personalised entity. Don't ever forget that. One of Satan's best strategies is to convince us that he doesn't exist.

The question of the nature of the temptations also arises – were they real and objective or subjective and visionary? At least one temptation (that on the high place or mountain) must have had visionary elements, since there is no place on earth from which the whole of it is visible – as is required by the account in this Gospel. I believe that the temptations were probably mainly objective with some visionary elements – but, most importantly, let us never forget that the temptations truly came from Satan and were truly experienced as temptations by Jesus.

Scripture does not give us any reasons why this time of trial for Jesus occurred, although it happened immediately after Jesus's baptism by John the Baptist that Matthew records at the end of chapter 3 of his Gospel. Matthew simply introduces the story of the temptations and links it to Jesus's baptism with the words of verse 1 of our reading: "Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil." (Matthew 4:1 NIV)

The first thing we can note here is that this was not a random event or a misadventure of Jesus – Jesus was “led” by or “under the guidance of” the Holy Spirit. In the account of Jesus’s temptation in chapter 1 of Mark’s Gospel the point is made even more strongly:

“At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert,” (Mark 1:12 NIV)

Here, in the original Greek Mark uses the word ‘*ekballo*’ (weakly translated as “sent” by the NIV) which means that Jesus was ‘thrown out’ or ‘driven out’ into the desert by the Holy Spirit.

I believe that this was in order to conclude Jesus’s preparation for his public ministry and give him an insight into the way his messianic work could easily be marred. His temptation in the desert was the counterpart to his baptism. The two agents seeking to influence Jesus – the Holy Spirit and the devil – are set in contrast. As Frederick Godet said:

“Heaven opened at one and Hell yawned at the other, and both prepared Jesus to live as the victorious Son.”

Jesus was blessed at his baptism and then subjected to temptations. Often, after we are blessed by God, we are immediately subjected to trials – and so it was for Jesus. Let’s also note that even the holiest of men are tempted. There’s no sin in being tempted, the sin is in yielding to temptation.

Not only was Jesus ‘led’ or ‘sent’ by the Spirit, but Luke’s Gospel tells us (Luke 4:1) that Jesus was “full” of the Spirit. Clearly the Spirit remained on him following his baptism. This would, of course, be a great source of strength for Jesus during the trials to come. This is a lesson to us all. When we are facing or are about to face trials or difficulties, we should ask the Holy Spirit to come upon us and strengthen us and help us.

At the beginning of verse 2 of our reading, Matthew tells us that Jesus was in the desert for 40 days:

“After fasting for forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.”

(Matthew 4:2 NIV)

No doubt Jesus was tempted by the devil throughout that time and the three temptations recorded in our reading today came at the end of that time and were Satan's final effort when Jesus was weak from fatigue and hunger.

The 40 day duration of Jesus' exile into the wilderness bears an obvious parallel with the Israelites forty year sojourn in the wilderness, following their Exodus from Egypt, during which they (unlike Jesus) repeatedly failed God. We can assume that Jesus was probably reflecting on their failings during his time in the desert since, as we shall see in a moment, he answered Satan with three quotations from Deuteronomy which all make reference to Israel's tests and failures. The whole passage speaks of the similarities between the testing of the Israelites and the testing of Jesus, although Jesus, unlike the Israelites, did not fail the tests.

Finally, before we start to look at the temptations in detail, we do need to keep in mind that Jesus' incarnation as a human was complete. He was both 100% God and 100% man. Many Christians do not really understand this, even if they pay lip service to the idea. Jesus's divine nature did not intrude on his humanity in any way. He did not just seem to be a man, he was fully and completely human just as we are. At his temptation Jesus withstood the onslaughts of Satan as a real man, deriving his power to resist from depending on God the Father for strength. The temptations were real and Jesus withstood them as a man who was like us in every way. As the writer to the Hebrews says:

"Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted." (Hebrews 2:18)

The first temptation is put to Jesus in verse 3 of our reading:

"The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.'" (Matthew 4:3 NIV)

Here we need to remember that Jesus had been without food for almost six weeks and must have been consumed by ravishing hunger. Jesus was being tempted to use his supernatural powers for his own ends and to provide for his needs apart from the will of the Father.

Here Satan isn't denying that Jesus is the Son of God, rather he's seeking to exploit that status for his own ends.

However, Jesus recalled Deuteronomy 8 (and perhaps Exodus 16) which record the hunger of the Israelites in the wilderness and answered Satan with a quotation from Deuteronomy 8:3:

"Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"" (Matthew 4:4 NIV)

Neither Jesus nor Satan questions Jesus's ability to perform the miracle, Jesus merely says it would not be right for him to do it.

Jesus was saying I will not complain and I will not take matters into my own hands. Let this be a lesson to us when we are tempted to help God give us our due rather than trusting him and his promises. In chapter 6 of his gospel, Mathew records Jesus as saying later in his ministry:

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" (Matthew 6:25-26 NIV)

After Jesus' firm rejection of his first temptation, Satan tried a different tactic, which Matthew records in verses 5-6:

"Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: "He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"" (Matthew 4:5-6 NIV)

Having seen Jesus vanquish his first temptation by quoting scripture, Satan now quotes scripture himself, trying to persuade Jesus that he should obey the words of Psalm 91 verses 11-12. Satan may also

have been trying to persuade Jesus to behave like the Messiah as a Rabbinic reading says:

“Our teachers have taught, when the King, the Messiah, reveals himself, he will come and stand on the roof of the Temple” (Pesiqta rabati 36).

Even though all scripture is true it can still be misused – as Satan shows here – if we apply it inappropriately then it can mislead us.

This was a powerful and beguiling temptation. Satan was saying, in effect, in the first temptation you have shown your trust in God’s word. You are a faithful man – Psalm 91 is you! This is what the people are looking for in a Messiah. You are a man of faith aren’t you? Just jump and the whole world will see who you really are! Tempting Eh!

This is an example of someone being challenged to step out in faith when such an exercise of faith would have been entirely misguided. Fortunately, Jesus knew he had no word from God to do this thing and that he must not do anything in his own power, for that would be putting the Father to the test. There is a lesson for us all here. We are called to step out in faith, but only when we are sure that doing so is fully in accordance with God’s will and not the promptings of someone or something else.

Jesus again responds to Satan by quoting from Deuteronomy chapter 6 verse 16 as Matthew records in verse 7 of our reading:

“Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”” (Matthew 4:7 NIV)

Don’t rationalise a headstrong plunge by saying “If this works, God will receive great glory. Just think of all the souls that will be saved. God, you have to be in this – you just have to!” True the Father specialises in picking up the pieces, but we must not test him through rationalised disobedience. Make sure you are really hearing from God before you take that leap of faith. There is a fine line between depending on God for one’s needs in life and asking God to rescue us from difficulties we have ourselves created or invited.

Satan's third temptation of Jesus is recorded by Matthew in verses 8-9 of our reading:

“Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me.”” (Matthew 4:8-9 NIV)

Jesus again answers Satan with a scriptural quotation as Matthew records in verse 10 of our reading:

“Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”” (Matthew 4:10 NIV)

Jesus again answers Satan with a quotation from Deuteronomy, this time from Deuteronomy 6:13 where Moses was warning the people who were attracted to idolatry:

“Fear the Lord your God, serve him only” (Deuteronomy 6:13)

Satan is proposing to replace God as Jesus's benefactor. Since Jesus did not challenge Satan's ability to make such an offer, we may assume that Satan is indeed the ruler of the world in the present age. The question of what would happen at the final judgement with respect to Satan's authority was not an issue here and we can assume that Satan had authority at that time – see 2 Corinthians 4:4. This amounted to a temptation of Jesus to win the world the ‘easy way’ without drinking the cup of sacrifice that the Father would call him to drink. We can assume that such a ‘crossless’ solution would have resolved all problems of hunger, war, poverty, injustice and so on. However, it would not have dealt with the problem of our sin and our need to be reconciled to God. Such a victory by Jesus would have been completely hollow – as Mark records Jesus saying in Chapter 8 of his gospel:

“What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul.” (Matthew 8:36 NIV).

Of course, Jesus would have been well aware that any path which denied his Father as the one supreme God would lead to nothing beneficial and he firmly rejected this offer.

We do not have to look far to see the application to our own lives. The siren song of popular culture is to avoid pain and take the easy way, the path of least resistance. Jesus repeatedly refused the easy way and embraced the cross and calls on us to do the same. As Mathew records Jesus saying in Chapter 16 of his gospel: Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it." (Matthew 16:24-25 NIV)

Taking the easy way and following the path of least resistance contrary to God's will in our lives is idolatry – worshipping a false God. This does not mean that we must reject all material comforts – NO. God has given us the things of the material world to enjoy in an appropriate manner. However, it does mean that we are not to seek after such things in ways which are contrary to God's laws or against his revealed will for our lives.

It is likely that Jesus was also tempted at future dates, which are not recorded in Scripture. This is likely because Jesus was fully human and thus would have been tempted often, just as we are. Although Jesus completely confounded Satan in this 'Battle in the Wilderness', this is not the basis for our redemption. That would have to wait until Jesus finally and completely overcame Satan upon the cross as he drank the cup of sacrifice the Father had ordained for him. Yet in this battle in the wilderness we've been looking at this morning, Jesus settled the issue of what kind of a Messiah he would be. He rejected all political concepts and accepted the way of the suffering servant that God had ordained for him. As he faced the cross he would not use his Messianic powers to rescue himself.

Luke's Gospel tells us that after Jesus had resisted and overcome temptation, His ministry was greatly blessed: "When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time. Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him." (Luke 4:13-15)

Just as trials often follow a blessing, so does a blessing often follow our resisting and overcoming temptation.

I think we have four important things to learn from the events recorded in today's reading. Firstly, as the Son of God, Jesus chose to live in absolute submission to the will of God. In every temptation. Jesus' sole desire was to do what the Father commanded him. Nothing less and nothing more. If this was true for the Son of God how much more so must it be for us, God's adopted children.

Secondly, because Jesus suffered great temptation as a real man and yet did not succumb, he is truly able to help us when we are tempted. When Martin Luther was asked how he overcame the devil, he replied:

“well when he comes knocking on my door and asks who lives here? The dear Lord Jesus goes to the door and says ‘Martin Luther used to live here, but now he has moved out and I live here’”.

When Christ truly fills our lives and lives in our hearts, Satan has no entrance.

Thirdly, Jesus was able to conquer all temptation because he was “full of the Holy Spirit”. When we are facing times of trial, we need to pray for the Spirit to come upon us in power and strengthen and aid us.

Finally, we need to be filled with God's word. In response to each of the three recorded temptations, Christ answered with Scripture. He knew the truth of Psalm 119 “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you”. God's word reveals God's mind and that is pure and holy and cannot embrace sin. If we fill our hearts and minds with God's word, sin and temptation cannot overcome us.

Let's close with a few words of prayer. Father, from now on let us be filled with Your word and let us live in complete submission to Your will. Christ, we invite you into our hearts to dwell with us for ever more. Holy Spirit, we ask you to come upon us in power and

strengthen us and help us in times of need. In Jesus' name we pray
Amen.