

Temptations

For: Voice of the Church

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Temptations...we all experience them -- in small ways and big ways. Jesus Christ did too. In Matthew 4:1-11 we read about three temptations the devil held before Christ.

Matthew 4:1 begins by indicating the timing of these temptations when it opens with “*Then* Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” Then!

Moreover, we are told that God wanted his Son to be tempted by the devil at this point. That’s indicated by the fact that we are told, “Then Jesus *was led up by the Spirit* into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil” (Mt 4:1).

So, what is going on here? The opening word “then” indicates that there is a close link between these three temptations and Christ’s baptism and anointing at the Jordan River about which we read at the end of Matthew 3.

Christ’s baptism marked the beginning of Christ’s public ministry. By being baptized with John’s baptism, Christ was indicating that he was taking our sins upon himself. Christ’s anointing with the Holy Spirit was the public appointing and equipping for his task as Saviour.

It was then that the Spirit led Christ into three situations of temptation. As the Second Adam, Christ had come into the world to do what the First Adam had failed to do, namely, be obedient to God. As the First Adam was tempted by the devil soon after he was created and given his task to serve God in all things, so the Second Adam had to be tempted by the devil at the beginning of his task.

Adam was tempted in the lush and beautiful garden of paradise. Christ was tempted in a barren desert for the first of the three temptations, harsh circumstances which pointed to the effects of the Fall into sin and the fact that Christ had come to subject himself to the misery which Adam had brought into the world by the Fall into sin. Christ had come to save us from that misery!

After Christ had fasted 40 days and 40 nights, Christ was hungry. It was at the moment of Christ’s physical weakness – being hungry and tired -- that the devil came to tempt Christ. The devil waited for Christ to be in a vulnerable state, and then the devil struck. Isn’t that how the devil still operates today? I’m sure you’ve experienced that too. When we’re vulnerable, the devil attacks us. When we’re hurting and down-and-out, the devil comes at us. When we’re facing challenges and crises, the devil makes his move against us.

The devil’s first temptation was for Christ to turn stones into bread. As we read, “And the tempter came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread’” (Mt 4:3). It was an allusion to the words God the Father had spoken at Christ’s baptism and anointing with the Holy Spirit when “...a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased’” (Mt 3:17). Satan was suggesting that as the Son of God, Christ should not have to experience any hunger. Why was the Father not providing for Christ? According to the devil, Christ

should take matters into his own hands and turn the stones into bread. The devil was drawing on the words of John the Baptist earlier in Mathew 3 that God could raise up children for Abraham from the stones (Mt 3:9). According to the devil, if the Father could raise up *children* from stones, surely the Son of God could make *bread* from stones!

Christ could have turned the stones into bread, but it would have been a denial of why he had come into the world. The devil was trying to get Christ to perform a miracle out of self-interest, but we know from Christ's later ministry that whenever Christ performed a miracle it was not for his personal benefit but as a sign so that people would believe in him as the promised Saviour. The devil knew that Christ had to obey the will of the Father and that Christ was not allowed to take matters into his own hands. Otherwise, Christ would have ceased to be our Saviour! But Christ did not fall for it.

This temptation of Christ was similar to the devil's temptation of Adam and Eve in paradise. Satan had tempted Eve by suggesting that God was keeping Adam and Eve from their rightful position by forbidding them to eat of the one tree, and that they should take matters into their own hands.

Isn't that how the devil tempts us today too? When we are in difficulties, the devil whispers in our ears, "Where is God? As a child of God, you deserve better. Take care of it yourself! Do it your own way!"

Then the devil took another approach. "Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone'" (Mt 4:5,6). Why to the temple and not some other elevation? That's because Christ had been fasting in the desert, fasting and prayer go together, the temple was the place of prayer and worship, Christ had been fasting and praying with a view to his public ministry, and Christ would spend much time at the temple during his public ministry (Mt 26:55; Lk 19:47).

Besides, what a wonderful revelation it would be if Christ had jumped from the temple and the angels of God had caught him in mid-fall! Then everyone would know instantly that Christ was the Son of God. Had Malachi not prophesied, "And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple..." (Mal 3:1)?

The devil even quoted from Psalm 91. It sounded so good, but the devil was manipulating Scripture. In the first temptation, the devil tried to sow *distrust* of the Father in Christ's heart. In the second temptation, the devil tried to sow *false trust*. The devil was suggesting that since God had promised to protect his children, Christ had better show that he believed this. Again, Christ did not fall for it.

Today we are sometimes tempted to live recklessly -- doing dangerous things needlessly, making unhealthy lifestyle choices -- thinking that God will protect us under all circumstances because we are his children. We might think God owes it to us. But it is a false trust.

Then Satan tried one more time. "Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.'" (Mt 4:8,9). There was no subtlety left whatsoever in this temptation. As if this was for the devil to give away...!

The world would belong to Christ, but at a high price! It would cost Christ his life: the way to the crown would be via the cross! Christ would have to suffer and die for our sins. There was no other way. Any other way would have been a denial of the reason why Christ came into the world and there would have been no salvation for fallen mankind.

Isn't that how the devil still tempts us today? The devil suggests to us that we join in with the world which serves him and we won't have to make the sacrifices that we do as Christians. Then we can have it all! How easily we are overcome by a desire for the things of the world and ignore the LORD!

In these three temptations, the devil was trying to make the Second Adam fall just as he had made the First Adam fall. But note Christ's response to these temptations. In all three cases, Christ responded on the basis of God's Word. Christ used the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God (Eph 6:17)!

Rather than turning stones into bread, Christ quoted Deuteronomy 8:3 and said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Mt 4:4). Just as God provided manna when Israel wandered in the desert for 40 years – which was a time of trials and temptations for God's people -- so God could speak a word and provide for Christ. As a true man, Christ submitted himself to the Father's will and waited for the Father.

That's how we should also live today. That's what God expected of us in the beginning, Christ came to fulfill it for us, and now we are to live with that attitude in thankful obedience. We are to wait for the LORD and not take matters into our own hands.

Rather than throwing himself down from the temple and expecting God to rescue him, Christ quoted Deuteronomy 6:16 and said, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test'" (Mt 4:7). Israel had tested the LORD in the desert by demanding water to see whether the LORD *could* and *would* provide for them (Ex 17:1-7). It was sinful. Likewise, jumping from the temple and expecting God to rescue him would have amounted to testing the LORD. Today too we may not try to force God's hand by doing risky things and expecting God to rescue us because we are his children.

And, finally, rather than worshipping the devil, Christ quoted Deuteronomy 6:13 and said, "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve" (Mt 4:10). That's plain and clear for today also.

In all three cases, Christ quoted Scripture. Christ had studied Scripture from his youth onward. Do we study Scripture to know how to withstand the devil? Are we immersed in Scripture?

We are told, "Then the devil left him..." (Mt 4:11). Scripture is the antidote to the devil. It's like we read in James 4:7, "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you."

What happened next? We read, "...and behold, angels came and were ministering to him" (Mt 4:11). The Father spoke a word and angels came and spread a table before Christ so that he was nourished and refreshed! Because of the First Adam's *disobedience*, the lush garden of paradise was turned into a harsh place. Because of the Second Adam's *obedience*, the barren desert of this fallen world was turned into an oasis of plenty. It is a picture of the eternal abundance God has prepared for us through Jesus Christ the Saviour when we believe in him! It is evidence of Christ's victory over Satan!

When we are tempted by the devil today, Christ our crucified, risen, and ascended Saviour sympathizes with our weaknesses. We read in Hebrews 4:14-16, "Since then 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 is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has

been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” Christ can relate to us because he was tempted like we are, and we can turn to Christ for help when tempted.

Christ was victorious, not only in these three temptations, but all the way to the cross! We often fall when faced with the devil’s temptations. But Christ came for our sake! By grace through faith, we receive forgiveness in Christ’s blood and Christ’s victory over all temptations is our victory!
