

## Luke 4:1-13 — The Temptation of Jesus

(Matthew 4:1–11; Mark 1:12–13)

1 Then Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, 2 where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and when they had ended, he was hungry.

3 The devil said to him, “If You are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.”

4 But Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone.’”

5 Then the devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 6 “I will give you authority over all these kingdoms and all their glory,” he said. “For it has been relinquished to me, and I can give it to anyone I wish. 7 So if you worship me, it will all be yours.”

8 But Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’”

9 Then the devil led him to Jerusalem and set him on the pinnacle of the Temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down from here. 10 For it is written: ‘He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; 11 and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’”

12 But Jesus answered, “It also says, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

13 When the devil had finished every temptation, he left him until an opportune time.

### Footnotes

1 Or in the wilderness

4 Deuteronomy 8:3; BYZ and TR on bread alone, but on every word of God.

8 Deuteronomy 6:13; BYZ and TR “Get behind Me, Satan! For it is written ....”

11 Psalm 91:11-12

12 Deuteronomy 6:16

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This riveting narrative follows hard on the heels of Luke's brief account of Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan River (3:21-22). We notice three things there: (1) the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus, (2) the Father pronouncing him as his "beloved Son," and (3) the Father declaring he was "well pleased" with Jesus.

R.M. Edgar notes Christ received in the baptism three gifts from the Father: "the guarantee of a perfect revelation of the Father's will, of a perfect inspiration to do that revealed will, and of an assurance of Sonship during the trying ordeal." He adds that the three temptations correspond "very accurately" to those gifts.

We also note that all three replies with which our Lord met the tempter are taken from Deuteronomy 6 and 8. The Pulpit Commentary observes that Jesus chose to frame his rebuttals "from a book with which every Israelite from his earliest years had been acquainted."

## **vv.1-2**

We note two differences between Luke's account and Matthew's: (1) the order of the three temptations, with Matthew mentioning the "Temple pinnacle" before the "kingdoms of the world," and (2) that Matthew mentions only Jesus fasting for the forty days, whereas Luke has Jesus tempted during that entire time and not only at the end. We find no conflict between the two: Matthew simply focuses only on the three temptations that followed the forty days.

In Mark's abbreviated account, we note with appreciation one difference: a more vivid verb for the Spirit's action in sending Jesus into the wilderness. Whereas the other two Evangelists have him being "led," Mark paints a forceful image of Jesus being "thrown" (*ekballei*, S1544) into the barren land.

The Jews believed evil spirits had the most power in the wilderness and indeed saw the barren lands as an entry point to hell. (Cambridge) The Pulpit Commentary unpacks Luke's observation by saying Jesus was "incessantly tempted the whole time by hellish whispers and suggestions."

One tradition holds that the scene of the temptations was a mountain near Jericho called Quarantania. "The site is very probable, being rocky, bleak, and repellent." (Cambridge) Milton refers to the temptation wilderness as "a pathless desert, dusk with horrid shades." R.M. Edgar notes the contrast between "the happy garden" where the first Adam failed the test of temptation and "the most trying circumstances" under which Messiah met the tempter. He goes on to note that "the tempter's defeat there is promise of his defeat everywhere."

In the hellish landscape, Jesus spent forty days, a period of time that matches Moses' sojourn with God on Mt. Horeb, Elijah's fasting in the wilderness before his vision, and the wanderings of the rebellious Israelites. (Pulpit)

The important point is that, after forty days of fasting, Jesus would have been quite hungry, which provides the entrée for the first temptation.

#### **vv.3-4**

"If you are the Son of God" — You can hear the sneering tone in Satan's voice as he questions what the Father had declared when Jesus rose from the baptismal water.

"Tell this stone to become bread" — What harm would there have been in Jesus' working a miracle to feed himself? The evil is betrayed by the devil's questioning whether Jesus was the Son of God and could trust his Father to provide each need in his time. (MacLaren) The first temptation seeks to move the test of sonship away from obedience to God by appealing to "natural appetite and impulse." (Cambridge) Here we see the first worldliness mentioned in 1 John 2:16 – the desires of the flesh.

In reply, the Son of God takes a firm stand in solidarity with all humanity and quotes, in part, Deuteronomy 8:3. If he had yielded to Satan's devious suggestion, Jesus would have shaken off for his own sake the human condition he had taken for ours. MacLaren observes: "Jesus will not use his power as Son of God, because to do so would at once take him out of his fellowship with man, and would betray his distrust of God's power to feed him there in the desert." He goes on to add that "innocent and necessary wants may be the devil's levers to overturn our souls."

Expositor's Commentary notes that "while he is being 'tempted' (S4279) by the devil, Jesus is also proving faithful to God, in contrast to Israel's response when they were 'tested' by God in the desert. Jesus is dependent on God and obedient to his word."

### **vv.5-8**

"It will all be yours" — Do you believe the devil possessed the ability to keep this promise? He claimed that authority over all the world's kingdoms had been "relinquished" to him. Besides that, 1 John 5:19 says that "the whole world is under the power of the evil one." Yet Psalm 24:1 declares the earth, everything, and everyone in it is the LORD's, and Romans 13:1 asserts that governing authority comes only from God and that existing authorities have been appointed by the Almighty. Scripture certainly offers no basis for a claim that the devil holds delegated sovereignty over the world's kingdoms. Here we see the second worldliness mentioned in 1 John 2:16 – the lust of the eyes.

For his part, Jesus neither acknowledges nor challenges the devil's claim. One can hardly miss the irony, noted by several commentators, the Satan was offering the throne of the entire world to one who had lived as the village carpenter and who would, in the Father's manner and timing, assume the cosmic crown. The Expositor's Commentary observes, "Had Jesus accepted the devil's offer, our salvation would have been impossible. Jesus would have sinned by giving worship to the devil and thus could not have offered himself a perfect sacrifice for our sins."

"It is written" — By quoting, again in part, Deuteronomy 6:13, Jesus recognizes the devil's lying boast as a temptation to ascend to his throne via ungodly means. "Worshipping the devil could only help to set up a devil's kingdom," MacLaren writes. "This is our Lord's decisive choice, at the outset of his public work, of the path of suffering and death." He goes on to exhort today's disciples: "We have to beware, in our own little lives, of ever seeking to accomplish good things by questionable means. ... When churches lower the standard of Christian morality, because keeping it up would alienate wealthy or powerful men, when they wink hard at sin which pays, when they enlist envy, jealousy, emulation of the baser sort in the service of religious movements, are they not worshipping Satan? And

will not their gains be such as he can give, and not such as Christ's kingdom grows by?"

## **vv.9-12**

"If you are" — Now Satan returns to his challenge of Jesus' divine sonship. In the recurring sneer, MacLaren suggests one can hear "immense, suppressed rage and malignity." The temptation directed at Jesus is to willfully endanger himself with the expectation God would deliver him. In doing so, Jesus would himself have tempted God by seeking "to draw him to fulfil to a man on self-chosen paths his promises to those who walk in ways which he has appointed." (MacLaren)

"Throw yourself down" — This temptation "was based, with profound ingenuity, on the expression of absolute trust with which the first temptation had been rejected. It asked as it were for a splendid proof of that trust, and appealed to perverted spiritual instincts. It had none of the vulgar and sensuous elements of the other temptations." (Cambridge) At the same time, the devil admits his own impotence to make a person sin. Augustine said, "It is the devil's part to suggest; it is ours not to consent."

"It is written" — The devil takes a turn at quoting Scripture (Psalm 91:11-12) but, as one might expect, drags it out of context – ignoring v.9's rationale for Messiah's protection: "Because you have made the Lord your dwelling." The Expositor's Commentary reminds us that "the mere use of Bible words does not necessarily convey the will of God." Here we see the third worldliness mentioned in 1 John 2:16 – the pride of life.

"But Jesus answered" — For a third time, Jesus responds with a quote from Deuteronomy (6:16) about the absolute unacceptability of testing God. Israel sinned in the desert by putting God to the test – and testing his patience. Jesus refuses to repeat the sin by demanding a sign from God to put himself on display. The Cambridge Commentary lays it out plainly: "It is impious folly to put God to the test by thrusting ourselves into uncalled-for danger. The angels will only guard our perilous footsteps when we are walking in the path of duty. We cannot claim miracles when we court temptations."

The Expositor's Commentary warns against spiritual pride – “the belief that we may venture into dangers, either to our natural or to our religious life, where no call of duty takes us, the thrusting ourselves, unbidden, into circumstances where nothing but a miracle can save us.”

### **v.13**

“Every temptation” — These three, in addition to the “hellish whispers and suggestions” mentioned above, emphasize ‘every’ – that it might be true, as it is written: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who was tempted *in every way* that we are, yet was without sin.” (Hebrews 4:15, emphasis added) St. Augustine said, “Christ conquered the tempter, that the Christian may not be conquered by the tempter.”

“He left him” — Satan failed in his efforts to tempt Christ and left, validating the promise to all disciples: “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.” (James 4:7) He left, as Bengel notes, because “he had shot his last dart.” And as the Cambridge Commentary notes: “It is man’s trial to feel temptation; Christ has put it into our power to resist it. Temptation only merges into sin when man consents to it.”

“Until an opportune time” — The great assault, of course, will be in the Garden of Gethsemane and on Mt. Calvary, when the devil will attack the very human dread of pain and suffering.

As we focus on the specific temptations, we must not miss the larger picture: that Jesus was as truly human as he was truly God. It is far easier for Christians to see Jesus as “very God” than to comprehend him as “very man.” We must not soft-pedal the humanity of Christ, else we rob the narrative of all its spiritual meaning. (Cambridge) Because Jesus was tempted as a human being, his temptations were our temptations – and ours were his.

As Ray Stedman proclaimed: “There is a very mistaken concept among Christians today that Jesus came to show us what God was like and how he would behave among men. This is far from the truth, for Jesus ... came to reveal man as God intended man to be.”

Stedman concludes: "Temptation does not come to us because we are sinners. It comes to us because we are human beings. It was not as a sinner that Jesus was tempted, and our being sinners does not add anything to the force of temptation."

Utley notes that temptation is "the enticement of a God-given desire beyond God-given bounds. Temptation is not a sin." Furthermore, he adds: "Temptation was in the will of the Father for the Son. This temptation was initiated by God. The agent was Satan."

When facing temptations and trials, the disciple must remember it was God Almighty himself who nominated Job for the horrific attacks he endured from Satan. James 1:3-4 tells us we can find joy in our trials when we understand that the Lord uses them to develop in us perseverance, so we can be perfected (*holoklēroi*, S3648) in maturity (*teleioi*, S5046). We know we are his children because he is training (*paideuei*, S3811) us in love. (Hebrews 12:6)

We know how to deal with temptation because James keeps us properly focused on both the source and the danger: "Each one is tempted when, by his own evil desires, he is lured away and enticed. Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death." (James 1:14-15)