

## THREE TEMPTATIONS IN THE WILDERNESS

According to Mark 1:12, it was “immediately” after Jesus’ baptism by John that he was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness, where he was tempted of the devil for 40 days.

This close time connection strongly suggests that the object of the fasting and solitude which Jesus sought was connected with ascertaining the effect of his baptism upon his ministry. He had previously studied and absorbed the teachings of Old Testament Scripture. Now they were to be considered from the standpoint of giving direction for his future ministry of three and a half years.

This context thus suggests that the temptations also were connected with his ministry. He recognized that he had a special work to accomplish. What was the best way to accomplish it? How would God have him act during this new phase of his life? What Old Testament prophecies must he fulfill? Were there options to be considered in carrying out his fore-ordained role? All these were questions that needed answering. Forty days was none too long for this preparation and study concerning his unique work in the history of men.

It is with this contextual view that we want to look briefly at these three temptations.

{ A QUOTABLE QUOTE

“Instead of being taken to the mountain top of joy, our Lord was led by the Spirit into the wilderness; and his first experiences as a New Creature, begotten of the Spirit, were those of severe temptation...So we believe it is with some of the Lord’s followers at the moment of, and for a time after, their consecration. They are assailed with doubts and fears, suggestions of the Adversary, impugning divine wisdom or divine love for the necessity of our sacrificing earthly things.”

The New Creation, page 141 }

### STONES INTO BREAD

A 40-day fast is enough to make anyone hungry, even a perfect man. Thus, the force of this temptation to break his fast by the miraculous powers which he possessed was suggested by the Adversary. It would also provide a demonstration to himself that the powers which he felt he possessed would really work. These were undoubtedly some of the tempting thoughts he entertained.

But, we would suggest that there was yet more to this temptation. Jesus’ answer to this temptation was a quotation of Deuteronomy 8:3, “Man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord doth man live.”

Later in his ministry, Jesus uses another portion of the same verse to rebuke those who followed him “for the loaves and the fishes.” (John 6:26-31)

This linkage provides an interesting suggestion. The work that Jesus was considering was that of the Messiah. His studies of the Old Testament showed him clearly that that road led directly to his own death. His temptations, his options, were to suggest other means to that same end.

He knew from personal experience what hunger felt like, what a tremendous drive it represented. He knew by observation how poor man was, even for the daily necessities of bread and water. He saw how God had provided for Israel in the past with miraculous manna. Maybe...just maybe...if he were to turn the stones of the Judean wilderness into bread and solve the problems of the breadlines of the world...there just might be another way. But quickly the temptation is answered. Material bread was not man’s greatest need. His ministry was not to provide for those temporal necessities. Their real famine was for “the word of the Lord.” That was to be his ministry.

### **CAST YOURSELF DOWN**

The second temptation, according to Matthew’s gospel (Luke places it as the third), was to ascend the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem and there, in the sight of a huge crowd, throw himself over, only to be caught up in the hands of an angel. Such a demonstration would make a quick statement that God was on his side.

There was even precedent for such an action. Had not Moses asked for the ability to show a sign to demonstrate his selection by God as Israel’s deliverer? Had he not been given three miraculous signs to work in the presence of Pharaoh to make just such a demonstration? Good public relations never hurt.

Again Jesus turned to the Pentateuch for the answer, quoting this time from Deuteronomy 6:16, “Ye shall not tempt the Lord your God, as ye tempted him in Massah.” The temptation of Massah, detailed in Exodus 17:1-7, was when Moses performed the miracle of extracting water for the people from the rock. Jesus saw that this, just as much as the murmuring of Israel, was a temptation of the Lord their God, and thus to be rejected.

### **A FREE KINGDOM**

The final temptation was in the form of a deal. Satan volunteered to offer no resistance to Jesus’ exercising rulership over men in exchange for Jesus’ recognition of Satan’s ultimate authority over the world. Once again it was a shortcut to Messiahship. No suffering, no death would be involved. Reform would be permitted. But the beneficiaries would, at best, be only the living and those not yet born. The dead would have to remain dead, for only by dying could Jesus redeem a dead and dying race.

His answer, once again, is from Deuteronomy, this time 6:13, “Thou shalt fear the Lord thy God, and serve him, and shalt swear by his name.”

### **OUR THREE TEMPTATIONS**

In one way or another, it is these same three temptations which over and over challenge us as well.

How often we are tempted to discharge our spiritual duties by tending strictly to temporal needs—either of ourselves or of others. Too often we are more interested in “the loaves and fishes” than in “the Word of God.” How often Christians are tempted to use their spiritual power of prayer for such personal gains as health or wealth.

The second temptation suggests the numerous times we are offered the option of doing the spectacular, or modifying our conduct to win the approval of the world around us, often at the neglect of principles.

The third is the countless temptations in our lives to compromise Christian principles, and thus acknowledge “the god of this world”—Satan. Each compromise to lower our standards, each statement of “that’s the way life is” is an acknowledgement of Satan’s supremacy, and a bowing down to it.

The first is the temptation of our flesh, the second that of the world, and the third that of the devil. The Apostle John summarizes it well in 1 John 2:16, “For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh [satisfying our temporal needs at the expense of our spiritual], and the lust of the eyes [viewing with pleasure the kingdoms of this world in all their grandeur], and the pride of life [seeking recognition and honor by our own deeds], is not of the Father, but is of the world.”

### **QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT THE TEMPTATIONS OF CHRIST**

Q. Was Jesus of Nazareth, a perfect human man, ever tempted to sin?

A. Yes. The Apostle Paul writes in Hebrews 4:15, “For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.”

Again we read in Matthew 4:1, “Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil.”

Q. Does not the fact of his being tempted imply that he was a sinner?

A. No. Sin lies not in the fact of temptation, but in yielding to it. The Christian hymnist has phrased it well, “Yield not to temptation, for yielding is sin.”

Another apt and familiar saying is, “You cannot stop the birds from flying overhead, but you can stop them from building nests in your hair.”

Q. What exactly is Temptation?

A. A temptation is the consideration of an option to a wrong course of action. Temptation occurs when considering optional courses of conduct in a given situation and one or more of the courses violates principles of righteousness. The consideration of these wrong options is what forms a temptation. The choosing of one of these wrong options forms a sin.

Q. Is the consideration of a wrong course of action a sin?

A. Not necessarily. Proper decision making consists of considering all possible options in a given situation and eliminating the poorest of these. That which remains is one’s decision. Therefore, a course of action may be properly considered until it is identified as being in violation of a principle of righteousness. It is only after it is identified as wrong, that the further consideration of that option becomes a sin.

Q. Is sin only possible in actions, or can thought be sins?

A. God’s Law, in Old Testament times, only identified actions as sins. But, elaborating on the spirit of that Law, Jesus identifies even wrong thought patterns as sins in his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, chapter 5.

In verse 22 of this chapter he equates the thought of anger with the sin of murder. In verse 28 he likens lust to the sin of adultery; in verse 32 the concept of unwarranted divorce and remarriage with adultery. Even the last of the Ten Commandments deals with a sin of thought—“Thou shalt not covet.”

Q. Did Jesus’ mind dwell on tempting thoughts?

A. While it is impossible to answer this question with certainty, there is a strong implication that it did. It is true that Matthew 4:2 places his initial three temptations after forty days of fasting and meditation, but both Mark and Luke infer that the entire period of forty days was involved with the temptation.

Mark 1:13, “And he was there in the wilderness forty days, tempted of Satan; and was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered unto him.”

Luke 4:2, “Being forty days tempted of the devil. And in those days he did eat nothing: and when they were ended, he afterward hungered.”

If these three temptations occupied the whole of forty days, or even a considerable portion of that time, the implication is strong that the optional courses of action they suggested received consideration before rejection.

This is also supported by the thought that a course of action, rejected before being considered, could hardly be styled a temptation, certainly not one which would, as Hebrews 4:15 puts it, enable him to be tempted **“like as we are.”**

Q. Why was Jesus tempted?

A. There are at least three correct answers to this question.

First, from the perspective of his tempter, the devil, they were to cause him to take a wrong course of action. This would mean the failure of his mission which, in addition to the salvation of men, was the judgment of sin and its instigator, Satan.

However, though it was the devil which tempted him,. The Gospel accounts concur that he “was led by the Spirit into the wilderness” where he was tempted.

Undoubtedly the 40-day period of meditation was to clearly determine in his own mind the course of action he would take in accomplishing his ministry. Only by rejecting the improper options could he settle on the correct course. Thus they were, in a manner of speaking, a testing or final exam given him under the Spirit’s direction, to settle his resolve. As Paul says in 1 Timothy 3:16, he “was justified (proved perfect) in his spirit.” (See also Hebrews 2:10; 5:9)

But the third reason is perhaps the most important from the standpoint of God—to enable him to become a “*sympathetic* high priest.’ And so Paul continues in Hebrews 4:16, “Let us *therefore* come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.”

Q. When Jesus promptly rejected these three temptations in the wilderness, was he ever tempted again?

A. Yes. Although Matthew 4:11 clearly states that “then the devil leaveth him,” it does not say that he did not return. In fact Luke 4:13 states the opposite: “And when the devil had ended all the temptation, he departed from him *for a season.*”

Q. Are there any Scriptural examples of later temptations in Jesus’ life?

A. Yes, numerous ones. Perhaps three will suffice to illustrate the point.

In Matthew 16:23, replying to a suggestion from Peter that he not go to Jerusalem to die, Jesus responds, “Get thee behind me, Satan; thou art an offence unto me; for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men.”

Again, in John 19:11, when Pilate tempts him to break his silence and defend himself against his persecutors, offering to use his power to free him, Jesus responds with words similar to those he used to Satan's third temptation in the wilderness, "Thou couldest have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above."

And, finally, his last temptation, while on the cross, "If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him." (Matthew 27:42)

## WHO WAS JESUS?

Two opposing answers present themselves from the halls of Christendom.

Fundamentalism answers assertively, "He was God incarnate, The second part of the Trinity. God on earth." And they are quick with supportive tests. "The Word was God." (John 1:1) "I and my Father are one." (John 10:30)

Modernism answers as readily. Jesus was just whom the Jews thought he was, the son of Joseph and Mary. It is not the miracle of his birth, but the miracle of his teachings and his example that contains the saving power.

The debate is heated. It has effectively rent Christendom into two camps. But which is right? Is there a third option?

## WHO DID JESUS SAY HE WAS?

This is a question which Jesus had to frequently deal with during his earthly ministry because it formed the basis for his enemies' charges of blasphemy. It is interesting to note that his answer disagrees with both the fundamentalists and the modernists of today's Christianity. While disclaiming to be the son of Joseph on the one hand, his claim was not that of being God, but rather of being "THE SON OF GOD."

One place where this charge was pronounced is in John 10:33 in response to Jesus' query as to why they sought to stone him. "For a good work we stone thee not" but for blasphemy; and because that thou, being a man, makest thyself God."

Jesus begins his answer by calling their attention to the fact that the Psalmist David (Psa. 82:6) called their corrupt judges of ancient times "gods." Then he continues by saying in verses 35 and 36, "If he called them gods, unto whom the word of God came, and the scripture cannot be broken; Say ye of Him, Whom the Father hath sanctified, and sent into the world, Thou blasphemest; because I said, **I am the Son of God.**"

In point of fact, even the Jews' claim was not really that Jesus actually claimed to be God, but that he claimed equality with God. Note their words in John 5:18, "Therefore

the Jews sought the more to kill him, because he not only had broken the Sabbath, but said also that God was His Father, **making himself equal with God.**”

### **THE SON OF GOD—WHAT DOES IT MEAN?**

It means many things:

- That Jesus had a pre-human existence.
- That God, not Joseph, was his father.
- That his life-principle could be free from Adamic contamination, not having descended though the Adamic line.
- That he could willingly have been “the lamb slain from before the foundation of the world” (because he had been there at that time to willingly agree to such a proposition.)

### **WHAT DOES IT NOT MEAN?**

- It does not mean that he was or claimed to be equal to God.
- It does not mean that he was co-eternal with God, but, as the term signifies, the Son was younger than the Father.
- It does not mean that he was “God on earth,” for, in his gestation in the womb of Mary, he was given a body that was wholly human—not a half-breed, a god-man. It is phrased well in the Weymouth translation of Philippians 2:7, “He stripped Himself of His glory, and took on Him the nature of a bondservant by becoming a man like other men. And being recognized as truly human, He humbled Himself and even stooped to die; and that too a death on the cross.”

### **JESUS OF NAZARETH, A MAN OF DECISION**

One cannot read the Gospel narratives without having the impression that Jesus of Nazareth was a decisive man, a driven man, a man with a mission.

From the intensity of the 12-year-old who calms his mother’s worries with, “Wist ye not that I must be about my Father’s business?” (Luke 2:49) to the resolute defendant who boldly tells Pontius Pilate, “For this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth,” (John 18:37) he manifests the same purposefulness and steadfastness.

The secret to this resoluteness is in his attitude. In Hebrews 10, the Apostle Paul applies as prophetic of Jesus the words of David in Psalm 40:7, 8—“Then said I, Lo, I come: in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do thy will, O my God.”

It is an admirable thing for any to express such devotion to God as to be willing to do His will. But even this is far short of the statement of Jesus, “**I delight** to do thy will.”

While one may be willing to do the will of another, he can only delight in that activity by changing his own will so that it is the same as the one he serves. This is what is set before us. The hymn phrases it well, “May thy will in me be done, May thy will and mine **be one.**”

But this process is not so simple. One cannot copy the will of another unless he knows what the other’s will is. This search was even necessary for Jesus, who had intimate acquaintance with God from the early days of his existence. Hear his own words on the subject from John 5:30—“I can of mine own self do nothing; as I hear, I judge: and my judgment is just: because **I seek not mine own will**, but the will of the Father which hath sent me.”

Applying this lesson to the Christian, Paul admonishes them to first of all “present your bodies a living sacrifice” (Rom. 12:1). But they must go further. Verse 2 reads, “And be not conformed to this world; But be ye transformed *by the renewing of your mind*, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.” Again, in 2 Timothy 2:15, “Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”

Jesus’ words, “**I seek**” and Paul’s words, “**rightly dividing the word of truth**” suggest hard and diligent study. Some Christians, resisting the difficulties of this course, argue that Paul gives an easier way in his answer to the Philippian jailer’s question, “What must I do to be saved?” -- “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.” (Acts 16:30, 31)

But there is no lack of harmony between these two thoughts. The problem arises from a false concept of what it means to “be saved.” Quoting once more from Paul, notice the sequence of events in 1 Timothy 2:4, “Who [God] will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth.”

Paul says that salvation precedes coming “unto the knowledge of the truth.” Salvation is not the end of the Christian’s path. It is the beginning.

To the Christian, salvation means that the blood of Jesus Christ covers his sins, resulting in “justification,” a reckoned standing before God as a perfect being. But this justification is for a purpose; to enable him to “rightly divide the word of truth” and thus discern God’s will. For mankind in God’s “kingdom on earth,” salvation will mean an awakening from death and an opportunity to live once again. But this life will be for the purpose of being education in the principles of righteousness, being taught by Christ and



his Church, and thus “coming unto a knowledge of the truth.” The Prophet Isaiah summarizes it well in Isa. 26:9, “When thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness.”

With this vision before us, let us, first, **desire** to do God’s will and make it our own will; second, **study** to discern what that will is, so that we may, like Jesus our example, **delight** to do it.