

The Greatest Life Ever Lived

A Study in the Incarnate Life of Jesus Christ and An Exposition of the Four Gospels

LESSON XXI : THE WILDERNESS TEMPTATIONS OF JESUS

Matthew	Mark	Luke	John	related passages
4:1-11	1:12,13	4:1-13		

Lesson Overview

Having received baptism from John, Jesus is immediately led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness for forty days of prayer, fasting and temptation to prepare Himself for His voluntary ministry.

General Observations

- note the link between the preceding and this narrative: Jesus' baptism ended with the heavens opening, the Holy Spirit descending upon / within Jesus and the Father openly declaring "Thou art My Son." Now Satan tempts the man-Christ Jesus at this very point, even beginning some of his temptations with "*since* you are the Son of God...".
- Note the practical application of being filled with the Spirit and being tempted, having trials. Trouble is not necessarily a sign of lack of spirituality or sin in one's life. With Israel, the Lord met them on Sinai in glory and majesty, then *led* them immediately to a point of testing (Num 11). Jesus submits to His Father's will and is immediately *led* into testing.
- Who's order is correct: Matthew or Luke's? Matthew's account is (1) change stones into bread, (2) throw Yourself off the temple, and (3) worship me. Luke reverses the second and third temptation. Given no further evidence, Matthew's order would be favored due to the instances already in Luke where it is obvious that Luke is presenting his material in a logical order and is not necessarily concerned with strict chronology (e.g. see lesson 20's note concerning John the Baptist being thrown into prison). There are other indications of order however: note Matthew's use of the words "then ... afterwards ... then ... again ... then ... then" as if stating what occurred first, what followed, what came next, and how it ended. Luke does not write in that fashion. He mentions the three temptations but does not give any hint that they occurred in that particular sequence.
- Jesus here performs the task of all three of His offices: "In the present account, as *High Priest* He suffers being tempted (Heb 2:18); as *Prophet* He thrice appeals to Scripture (Lk verses 4,8,12); and as *King* He gives battle to His chief opponent and triumphs over him." [Hendriksen, *Luke*]
- It is only proper that Jesus be tempted, Him being the representative of the new humanity that God is selecting for eternity. As Adam our first Federal head was tempted, so must the second Adam (Rom 5, 1 Cor 15). Unlike the first however, Jesus rendered perfect obedience to the Father and thus proved Himself worthy of the title. Having been tempted and overcame, Jesus is now able to give mercy and grace to those in need (Heb 4:15,16).
- Were the temptations real? Could Jesus have sinned? The response typically given among those of our circles is that **(a) the temptations were real, attacking the humanity of Jesus; (b) however real the temptations were, the divine nature of Jesus prohibited Him from being capable of sin.** "The point of view that Christ could sin is designated by the term 'peccability,' and the doctrine that Christ could not sin is referred to as **the impeccability of Christ.** Adherents of both views agree that Christ did not sin, but those who affirm peccability hold that He could have sinned, whereas those who declare the impeccability of Christ believe that He could not sin due to the presence of the divine nature. The doctrine of impeccability has been questioned especially on the point of whether an impeccable person can be tempted in any proper sense.... A person who cannot sin, it is said, cannot be tempted to sin. This is not correct; any more than it would be correct to say that because an army cannot be conquered, it cannot be attacked.... A proper doctrine of the impeccability of Christ therefore affirms the reality of the temptations of Christ due to the fact that He had a human nature which was temptable. If the human nature had been unsustainable as in the case of Adam by a divine nature, it is clear that the human nature of Christ might have sinned. This possibility, however, is completely removed by the presence of the divine nature." [Walvoord, *Jesus Christ Our Lord*] Indian canoes attacking a modern aircraft carrier would be a real attack but fruitless and doomed to failure from the start. Regarding the mystery of Christ's two natures: "It remains true, nevertheless, that the possibility and reality of Christ's temptation surpasses our understanding. But is this not true with respect to every doctrine? And what do we really know even about ourselves, about our soul, and about the question how the soul and body interact? Very, very little indeed! How then would it be possible for us to penetrate to the depths of *Christ's* soul and analyze it so thoroughly that we could furnish a completely satisfactory psychological explanation of His temptations?" [Hendriksen, *Luke*]

Matt 4:1 Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil.

Mk 1:12 And immediately the Spirit driveth Him into the wilderness.

Lk 4:1 And Jesus being full of the Holy Ghost returned from Jordan, and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness,

Note each gospel writer makes this statement according to his own perspective: Matthew portraying Jesus as King says He was

led, Mark portraying Jesus as a Servant says the Spirit sent Him into the wilderness, and Luke portraying Jesus as the Perfect Man adds Jesus was filled with the Spirit. Wuest: *and Jesus, in the control of the Holy Spirit...*

“Retirement for reflection after the baptism was likely to be the first impulse of Jesus.” [Bruce, *Gk NT*]

Matt 4:2 And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He was afterward an hungred.

Mk 1:13a And He was there in the wilderness forty days, tempted of Satan; and was with the wild beasts;

Lk 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.

Luke’s account mentions that Jesus had fasted for forty days and the fast was completed. It is no wonder Jesus was (or became) hungry, but it’s interesting it does not state He was hungry during the forty days. “It would seem as though during their passing, He was unconscious of His physical need. His thoughts had been of things within the spiritual realm, and the demands of the physical had been unrecognized. At the close of forty days the sense of need swept over Him. He was hungry.” [G. Campbell Morgan, *The Crisis of the Christ*; quoted in Pentecost, *Words / Works of Jesus Christ*]. “Luke mentions Jesus’ abstinence from food for six weeks as a fact which was only the natural consequence of His being absorbed in profound meditation. To Him, indeed, this whole time passed like a single hour; He did not even feel the pangs of hunger.” [Godet, *Luke*]

“The fasting was spontaneous, not ascetic, due to mental preoccupation.” [Bruce, *Gk NT*] **It is mistaken of us to limit fasting to going without food. Scriptural fasting is the giving up of anything (e.g. sleep, food, fellowship, etc) not as a scheduled event but rather by being so spiritually burdened that everything else is secondary. Time is spent in prayer, study or fellowship with the Father under such a necessity that sleep is forgotten or hunger is not noticed. To skip a meal then sit down to watch a ball game is not fasting.**

The question arises to what the forty days refer: did Satan tempt Jesus for forty days or was Jesus fasting in the Spirit for forty days, after which time Satan came to tempt Him? Either interpretation is possible, with some preferring that Jesus was tempted at the end of the forty days because the only strictly chronological account (Matthew’s) implies that Satan came after the forty days. Mark is very generally stated and could be taken either way. The manner in which the KJV translates Luke’s account connects the forty days with Satan’s temptation. Hendriksen and A. T. Robertson however says the forty days more probably is a reference to the Spirit’s leading of Jesus. This in turn allows Matthew’s account to more easily coincide with Luke’s account. Another just as viable explanation however is that Jesus was tempted the whole time with the account given being the peak of Satan’s attack.

Scripture represents Satan as a personal, spiritual being. “The term *devil*, employed by Luke and Matthew, comes from *diaballein*, *to spread reports, to slander*. Mark employs the word *Satan* (*to oppose*, Zech 3:1,2; Job 1:6; etc.). The first of these names is taken from the relation of this being to men; the second from his relations with God.” [Godet, *Luke*]

Matt 4:3,4 And when the tempter came to Him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread. But He answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.

Lk 4:3,4 And the devil said unto Him, If thou be the Son of God, command this stone that it be made bread. And Jesus answered Him, saying, It is written, That man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God.

The sense of Satan is derision: “He probably meant, ‘Since that is what the Father told you at your baptism [Lk 3:22], and what you believe, make use of your majestic dignity, and no longer be tortured by hunger.’” [Hendriksen, *Luke*] Jesus being human was very hungry and being divine was capable of performing miracles, so this temptation was very real.

The common interpretation of this temptation is that this was an attempt to destroy the Son’s confidence in His Father’s will and power to sustain Him. “Don’t trust the One You claim as Your Father, take matters into Your own hands.” “The moral purpose - the grand moral purpose in all that was of God - was absolute submission to the Will of God. His Spirit had driven Him into that wilderness. His circumstance were God-appointed; and where He so appoints them, He will support us in them, even as, in the failure of bread, He supported Israel by the manna. And Jesus absolutely submitted to that Will of God by continuing in His present circumstances. To have set Himself free from what they implied, would have been despair of God, and rebellion.” [Edersheim, *Life of Messiah*]

Godet puts a slight twist on the explanation that is worth quoting: “But what criminality would there have been in the act suggested to Jesus? It has been said that He was not allowed to use His miraculous power for His own benefit. Why not, if He was allowed to use it for the benefit of others? The moral law does not command that one should love his neighbor better than himself. It has been said that He would have acted from His own will, God not having commanded this miracle. But did God direct every act of Jesus by means of a positive command? Had not divine direction in Jesus a more spiritual character? Satan’s address and the answer of Jesus put us on the right track. In saying to Him, if Thou art the Son of God, Satan seeks to arouse in His heart the feeling of His divine greatness; and with what object? He wishes by this means to make Him feel more painfully the contrast between His actual destitution, consequent on His human condition, and the abundance to which His divine nature seems to give Him a right.... On the one hand, He had been exalted to a distinct consciousness of His dignity as the Son of God; while, on the other, His condition as Son of man remained the same. He continued this mode of existence wholly similar to ours, and wholly dependent, in which form it was His mission to realize here below the filial life. Thence there necessarily resulted a constant temptation to elevate, by acts of

power, His miserable condition to the height of His conscious Sonship. And this is the first point of attack by which Satan seeks to master His will, taking advantage for this purpose of the utter exhaustion in which he sees Him sinking. Had Jesus yielded to this suggestion, He would have violated the conditions of that earthly existence to which, out of love to us, He had submitted, denied His title as Son of man, ... and would have made His humanity a mere appearance.” [Godet, *Luke*] “Suppose Christ had commanded the stones to become bread, what then? To Christ, considering the work He had to do, two things were necessary. He had to live His personal life (1) within the limits necessary to man, and (2) in perfect dependence on God. Had He transgressed either of these conditions He had ceased to be man’s ideal Brother or God’s ideal Son. Man cannot create; he lives by obeying Nature. He has to plough, to sow, to reap, to garner and winnow, to bruise and bake his grain, that he may eat and live. Now, had Christ by a direct miracle fed Himself, He had lifted Himself out of the circle and system of humanity, had annulled the very terms of the nature which made Him one with man.” [A. M. Fairbairn, *Studies in the Life of Christ*; quoted by Pentecost, *Words / Works of Jesus Christ*].

Practical: it is just as much sin for us to resist the providence of God and fight our circumstances rather than trusting and learning from them (it is interesting that the word for *patience* in the NT implies *a bearing under the pressure*). Consider those in sickness, what might be considered a bad marriage, work situations, church problems, etc. The balance of this is the fact that there is a proper place for desiring something different, there are proper times to leave bad circumstances, and fatalism is never promoted in the scriptures. We must also be sympathetic rather than judgmental of those in bad circumstances, *considering ourselves lest we are also tested in like manner*.

All three of Jesus’ responses comes from Deuteronomy, this first being quoted from Deut 8:3. Note **Jesus believed the scriptures to be the very Word of God, relying upon them as His authority and power in time of need**. Jesus replies with confidence in the providential care of His Father. “Certainly the One who, when there was no bread, had provided manna, and who quite recently had said, ‘Thou art my Son, the Beloved,’ would not fail His Beloved in this hour of trial!”

Matt 4:5-7 Then the devil taketh Him up into the holy city, and setteth Him on a pinnacle of the temple, and saith unto Him, If thou be the Son of God, cast Thyself down: for it is written, He shall give His angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.

Lk 4:9-12 And he brought Him to Jerusalem, and set Him on a pinnacle of the temple, and said unto Him, If thou be the Son of God, cast Thyself down from hence: for it is written, He shall give His angels charge over thee, to keep thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. And Jesus answering said unto him, It is said, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.

The exact location Jesus is taken to on the temple is not given, here stated to be the pinnacle (literally *wing*) of the outer wall of the entire temple complex. It may have been the roof-edge of Herod’s royal portico, overhanging the Kedron valley, a height of about four hundred and fifty feet. This was southeast of the temple court and according to tradition, at or near the place where James the Lord’s half-brother was hurled down. Another suggestion is the extreme corner of the ‘wing-like’ porch which led into the Sanctuary.

Satan’s temptation is along the lines of “if You’re so good at quoting scripture and are so confident in Your Father, then prove Your Father’s protection. He will not only stop your fall but will send angels to gently let You down.” Satan is asking Jesus to prove what He claims to believe.

Satan’s quote is from the LXX of Ps 91:11,12 in which he omits the last portion of the verse. Some regard this omission important, others do not. If important, the difference is Satan says “give His angels charge over Thee, to keep Thee” while the Psalmist added “in all your ways.” To some when this is included means the Lord will protect the righteous man in his *righteous ways*. With the omission it is easier to take this to mean the Lord will protect the righteous *no matter what he does*. Whether this omission is important or not, what Satan *does* omit is that God does not condone and punishes rashness, a trifling with providence, an impetuous rushing into totally unwarranted danger (Gen 13:10,11; Esther 5:14; 7:9,10; Ps 19:13; Dan 4:28-33; 5:22,23; Rom 1:30; 2 Pet 2:10). Note **Satan knows and uses scripture**; cp Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons, etc.

Rabbinical tradition says when the Messiah comes to reveal Himself, He will come and stand on the roof of the holy place. There are those who therefore read into this temptation that as with the following, Satan was tempting Jesus to bypass the cross to receive the crown. After all, besides revealing Himself as the Messiah, how much more spectacular would it have been for Him to jump off to gently float to earth, the angels providing for a safe landing. Hendriksen however says this is doubtfully the case. “There is nothing that would lend any further support to it. No spectators are even mentioned in the Gospel accounts. Moreover, Jesus, in His reply, does not refer to anything of the kind. I believe, therefore, that the entire idea should be dismissed. Luke 16:31 also argues against it.” [Hendriksen, *Luke*]

Jesus’ response comes from Deut 6:16, reflecting on the situation of Israel as given in Exodus 17. With no water at Massah and Meribah they rebelled against God. Instead of submissively asking for water they accuse Moses as leading them out to the desert to die, provoking the Lord by stating “is the Lord among us or not?” Jesus knows it would be similar of Him to expose Himself unnecessarily to danger just to see His Father’s reaction.

Practical considerations of our false confidence: a person asking for health while disregarding the guidelines of healthy living;

asking for spiritual growth while neglecting the Word of God, His people and prayer; asking for His care over their children while not living the life they should be living in front of their children; tithing then being irresponsible with the rest of our money. An illustration has been given of a church member being in a place where he should not have been, responding “I cannot deny that I was there, but while there I was praying that the Lord would protect my eyes from beholding vanity.” The proper response is not to put the Lord to the test, and not to be there in the first place!

Matt 4:8-10 Again, the devil taketh Him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth Him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; and saith unto Him, All these things will I give Thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve.

Lk 4:5-8 And the devil, taking Him up into an high mountain, shewed unto Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. And the devil said unto Him, All this power will I give Thee, and the glory of them: for that is delivered unto me; and to whomsoever I will I give it. If thou therefore wilt worship me, all shall be thine. And Jesus answered and said unto him, Get thee behind Me, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.

How this occurred we are not told. Did Satan assume a physical body temporarily and the two go to a mountain? In the vicinity of the Jordan wilderness, which mountain would that have been? Did they fly through the sky, Satan carrying Jesus? Even if so, how did Satan show Jesus *all* the kingdoms in all their glory (Matthew’s account) in a moment of time (as Luke adds)? I prefer to see this happening in a very real vision to Jesus, Satan showing Him the glory of the world in a moment and stating he would give them all to Jesus. Calvin answers this question in a manner which would leave room for any reasonable explanation: “It is asked, was [Jesus] actually carried to this elevated spot, or was it done in a vision? ... What is added, that all the kingdoms of the world were exposed to Christ’s view ... in a moment ... agrees better with the idea of a vision than with any other theory. In a matter that is doubtful, and where ignorance brings no risk, I choose rather to suspend my judgment than to furnish contentious people with an excuse for a debate.” [Calvin, *Commentaries*] The very item men live, fight and die for is offered to Jesus in exchange for once kneeling to Satan.

Did (does) Satan have the authority to make this offer?

- **YES:** those that respond yes often refer to the fact that Satan is described as the prince of the power of the air (Eph 2:2), that the demons are described as rulers of darkness and spiritual wickedness in heavenly places (Eph 6:12), and that the world lies in the power of the wicked one (1 Jn 5:19). Jesus also mentions that one of His purposes in coming was to cast out the ruler of this world (Jn 12:31). The general understanding is that Adam had dominion over this world as given by God but forfeited that dominion to Satan when he sinned. Note also that Jesus does not contradict the statement.
- **NO:** those that believe Satan does not have the dominion he boasts state the best commentary on this statement by Satan is given by Jesus when He calls Satan a liar and the father of lies (Jn 8:44). The references above are interpreted as representing Satan as exercising authority over those demons and the people who have acknowledged him as their master.

This is not a matter of falling out, nor a difference between conservative Bible exposition and liberalism; there are good orthodox men on both sides of the fence on this issue. If Satan is given any consideration at all in this matter, it must be tempered with the fact that (a) his power is limited and (b) his activities are intertwined within the whole mystery of providence. While Satan is exercising his wrath towards the Lord, everything he does out of hatred and to destroy God’s kingdom is somehow enveloped within the Lord’s working. Satan works without coercion, yet everything is either allowed or directed by the hand of God. In this framework Satan is “free” to work his wicked will among the inhabitants of the earth (Gen 3:15; Ps 2; Matt 11:27; 28:18; Rom 16:20; Eph 1:20-23; Col 2:15; Rev 12; 20:3,4,10).

Was the temptation real? Jesus could have known the devil was lying (if he really does not have the power he boasts) or even if he did, would he have delivered on his promise? The temptation here was to obtain the crown without enduring the cross, which humanly speaking would have been a true temptation to the Lord. It is in this light that we best understand verses such as Lk 12:50 and the struggle in Gethsemane. Jesus was a man as much as He was deity, and the flesh would naturally rebelled from the cross.

Practical: this is the temptation at which all self-seeking, ambitious men give into: the gaining power by compromising with evil. Consider Hollywood, modern business practices, and unfortunately some church situations.

Jesus’ response is taken from Deut 6:13, revealing the sharp contrast between Himself who always does what the Father desired and Satan whose purpose was the exact opposite. Note as well that Jesus connects serving with worship.

Matt 4:11 Then the devil leaveth Him, and, behold, angels came and ministered unto Him.

Mk 1:13b and the angels ministered unto Him.

Lk 4:13 And when the devil had ended all the temptation, he departed from Him for a season.

An important item to note is that this was not a unique time for Jesus, Satan came often to tempt the Lord. Luke specifically states that the devil having finished this temptation, left Him *for a season*. Others translate it *he departed from Him until an opportune time* [Hendriksen, NIV], *the devil stood off from Him until a more propitious time* [Wuest].

The wording is such that just not the temptations were finished but *every type of temptation was finished*, in the sense that Jesus

was tempted in manners which generally accounts for all temptation. The common interpretation on this concept is taken from 1 Jn 2:16: Satan tempted Jesus to turn the stones into bread by attacking *the lusts of the flesh*; Satan tempted Jesus to jump off the temple and prove Himself by attacking *the pride of life*; and Satan tempted Jesus with the kingdoms of the world by attacking *the lusts of the eyes*, showing Jesus what could have been His.

“And now, His position thus made clear, with God for His sure ally, and Satan for His declared adversary, Jesus advances to the field of battle.” [Godet, *Luke*]