

The Temptation of Christ (Lk. 4.1-13)

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And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness ² for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing during those days. And when they were ended, he was hungry. ³ The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread." ⁴ And Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone.'" ⁵ And the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, ⁶ and said to him, "To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. ⁷ If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." ⁸ And Jesus answered him, "It is written, "' You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.'" ⁹ And he took him to Jerusalem and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰ for it is written, "' He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you,' ¹¹ and "'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'" ¹² And Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'" ¹³ And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Introduction

The temptation of Christ follows His baptism and is therefore an initial act of His work in fulfillment of the eternal covenant between the members of the triune God: **And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness ² for forty days, being tempted by the devil (Lk 4. 1-2a).**

This morning I want to discuss the temptation of Christ in two steps: a) questions about His temptation and b) an overview of the temptation (many of the ideas here reflect the helpful treatment by Vos, "Revelation in the Probation of Jesus," *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments*, 355-367). There is much that is mysterious here; some loose ends necessarily remain untied, regarding our Savior and the wiles of the devil.

1A. Questions about His temptation

Why ask these questions in the first place? They help us orient ourselves to the fact that various erroneous views are brought to the text and the results are sometimes quite peculiar if not heretical.

1B. Could Christ sin?

It is a myth of free will that insists on the possibility of sin for Christ. This is surely one of Satan's devices to use good to cloak evil. Here virtue is defined as containing within it the ability to do good or evil. Thus it is said that to be a free person Christ must have had the ability to do evil. However, being God, He does not have the ability to do evil, and being a man does not equate automatically with susceptibility to sin (Vos 366; cf. the saints in heaven). In holiness, He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He is morally perfect and therefore immutable or unchanging in His holiness. If you try the suggestion that Christ could have sinned in terms of His humanity, you divide the person. We must remember that it is God the Son who became incarnate.

We must keep a number of things together unwaveringly: our Lord's deity, the unity of the person who is both God and man by the incarnation, and His perfect holiness (clearly, He did not sin; implicitly, He could not sin).

2B. Could Christ be tempted if He could not sin?

To answer this we need to distinguish different senses of temptation. It may involve an appeal to lust within. In this sense, God *cannot* be tempted (James 1:13). In this way, Christ could *not* be tempted. Jesus did not have to resist seduction within Himself that exerted a power within Him to some act of sin. That would mean that evil was present in Him already. But temptation can be an appeal to sin that comes from without. Someone is tempted to sin by being

invited to sin even if there is no inward tendency toward sin. In this sense, Christ could be tempted.

3B. How could Christ suffer in temptation as stated in the book of Hebrews?

Given that Christ could not sin and that He had no inner disposition of lust that could be prompted to various acts of sin then we might wonder how there could be any tension, conflict, or suffering through temptation (Heb. 2:18, **he ...suffered when he was tempted**). An analogy will help us though there is much we do not understand. Consider how you would feel if you were invited to witness a murder. Raising the stakes, let's say you were asked to perform the murder. Just bringing this up is not pleasant. You react adversely in your gut immediately at even the hypothetical thought. But note how the experience intensifies if the person to be murdered were given a name and it turned out to be someone you love. The idea gets more and more distressing and repugnant according to the love that you have for the offended party on one hand and for righteousness on the other. This is what makes the action of Abraham with his young son Isaac so horrific. The idea of putting a knife through the heart of your beloved son is an unbearable thought. If this is so, consider how much more it must have been the case for the Lord Jesus because of His perfect holiness and inability to sin, His love for righteousness, and His infinite love for the Father in heaven. For our Lord, it is the case that He would suffer incomprehensibly more than we can imagine when it is proposed that He sin against His loving heavenly Father. This would cause unparalleled anguish of soul.

4B. Who is in control in this temptation?

We have to be impressed by the fact that Jesus is filled with the Spirit who led Him in the wilderness (Lk 4:1). This indicates that Jesus went where the Spirit took Him. Jesus took every step but the Spirit decided the path on which He walked. Therefore, this activity in the wilderness is messianic work by the messianic Spirit. The goal of the Spirit was to bring Him to this place to be tempted by the devil. A temptation can have more than one design. Satan's design is to harm by sin. God's design is to prove and strengthen for holiness. God is testing by means of Satan's tempting. God is in control. The triune God is realizing the *pactum salutis* (the eternal covenant or plan of redemption). His temptation is part of our Lord's saving mission as a son of Adam. God's plan for the sons of Adam who fell down before the tempter unfolds in this rebuttal of the tempter by the second Adam.

5B. What is the point of the fasting?

And he ate nothing during those days. And when they were ended, he was hungry (Lk 4.2).

Is the point that Jesus is brought to the edge of death, to the point of starvation, and thus to the extremity of physical weakness? Truly, it was a point of physical weakness and intense need. He was brought to a place of hunger on a critical level. But this does not make Him more susceptible, more prone to temptation, more temptable, or ready to give in.

Let's think of the fasting in another way. Granted, in the nature of the case fasting intensifies hunger but it does so in a kind of cyclical way. That is, the one who fasts goes through various stages of hunger as the body adjusts in service to the goal of fasting. The goal here is intimate fellowship with God in prayer. Prayer and fasting are commonly tied together in Scripture and Jesus welcomed solitude as an occasion for prayer. Here we have the solitude of the desert combined with fasting. We have to conclude that prayer was foundational to our Lord's endurance of temptation over the forty days (Lk. 4.2).

We can also note that the weakened physical state of our Lord accents His strength. It proves His strength. Here He shows Himself boundlessly strong. A cue for understanding the temptation in this way is given in the parable of the strong man. Jesus asked, "**how do you rob a**

strong man of his goods?" (Mat 12.29). First, He tells us, you must bind him then you can carry off his possessions. In context of Matthew 12, the strong man represents Satan. The power of Christ over demon possession shows that He has bound Satan and is plundering him of his goods. When did Jesus bind this diabolically strong "man"? Because He began casting out demons early in His public ministry (cf. Lk 4.31-41), the binding must have occurred at the very beginning. So it must have occurred at the time of the temptation in this confrontation.

Thus the temptation was not brought upon Christ by the trickery of the moment in which the upper hand belonged to Satan. Instead, the tempting activity of Satan was so governed that it served as an assault on Satan's power and dominion. At the point of greatest physical weakness, Jesus showed Himself stronger than the strong man. If He is this strong in His weakest condition, then how strong must He be? Enduring this trial, Jesus was proven, equipped, and strengthened for the conflict that lies ahead. He won the initial battle. Now He will secure every territory. This account shows us how He goes forth conquering and to conquer. This is gospel-good-news.

2A. An overview of the temptation

There are three proposals and we can take them up one at a time. What we find is that Christ's work as Messiah and Savior involved a determined and voluntary subjection to the Father's will. This is submission, faith, and trust all rolled in one.

1B. First, it is proposed that Christ make stones into bread (Lk. 4.3-4).

³ **The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread."** ⁴ **And Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone.'" The answer given by the Lord no doubt accords with the central thrust of the temptation and it no doubt reflects the main idea of the text of Scripture quoted. It should be clear that there is nothing inherently wrong in changing stones into bread just as there is nothing wrong with changing water into wine. What is proposed is that Christ miraculously supply His need of food and remove His suffering. The need is clear and the suffering is intense; He has fasted forty days while being tempted.**

How does Christ respond? He replies that bread is not enough for life. It is not the solution to my present need for there is something that I need more than bread. I need to be nourished according to the will of God.

This is similar to God's dealing with Israel in the wilderness. He supplied Israel with manna. Otherwise they were without food. He gave them hunger to test them and teach them obedience to His will. Note the concern of the OT text: **The whole commandment that I command you today you shall be careful to do, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land that the LORD swore to give to your fathers. 2 And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. 3 And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. 4 Your clothing did not wear out on you and your foot did not swell these forty years. 5 Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the LORD your God disciplines you** (Deut 8.1-5). Old Israel failed miserably and thus were barred entry into the Promised Land. But Jesus stands strong. He says in effect that by the Spirit I have fasted in fellowship with God. The Spirit led me here to this place of hunger and temptation at the hand of Satan. It is God's will that I hunger and that He supply my need. I must live by His will and commandments. The time for nourishment is in His hands to be granted as He wills. Now is the time for fasting, prayer, testing, suffering, and endurance in strict submission to the will of God.

Thus to miraculously create my own bread would be to operate according to my own will. It will not be so, Satan. Man shall live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. What Israel in the wilderness was supposed to learn I have learned. I will obey the Father. The

Father wills the time of suffering here in this wilderness and symbolically in the wilderness of the lost world cast out of Eden. To bring a new Israel back to Eden, back from wilderness wandering to the Promised Land, I must suffer in submission under the Father's guiding hand.

2B. Second, it proposed that Christ worship Satan (4.5-8)

⁵ And the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, ⁶ and said to him, "To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. ⁷ If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." ⁸ And Jesus answered him, "It is written, "" You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve."" Satan makes a promise of kingdom glory: "all this I will give you." There is a bold directness about this proposal for Jesus is the Messiah and He has the promise of kingdom glory. However, His route to glory according to the Father's will is over the pathway of humiliation in worship and service to God alone. "I must wait for the Father's appointment to glory. I must do so in humble worship and exclusive service."

3B. The third proposal is to "cast yourself down" (4.9-12).

⁹ And he took him to Jerusalem and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰ for it is written, "" He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you," ¹¹ and ""On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone."" ¹² And Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'" The third proposal is to "cast yourself down" (4.9-12).

The temptation is to test God by an experiment in which it is shown whether or not He can be relied upon. There is no other reason to throw oneself down from some high point of the temple. If a person were to unwittingly stumble over something and fall, that is one thing. But as a wonder working display with no other purpose than a test of God, it would be a bold expression of unbelief. Jesus responds with Scripture: **You shall not put the LORD your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah** (Deut 6.16). We covered this theme in the book of Hebrews. Asking for a miracle-sign indicates the hardness of heart of the generation that fell in the wilderness. They died outside of the promised land in radical unbelief.

The response of Christ in the quotation of Scripture is to affirm again His submission to the Father, to show His reverential trust. "I trust Him implicitly. There is no need of a test of His faithfulness. There is only need of submission and obedience."

Summary

The design of the temptation was to show, test, prove, and strengthen Christ in His work as Messiah. How will He save? How will He bring the new Israel from the wilderness into the Promised Land and kingdom glory? He will do so by conquering evil and by binding the evil one. How does He bind the strong man? He does so by a determined, voluntary, and humble subjection of Himself to the Father's will. For Him as for us "faith is the victory that overcomes the world."

Implications of His temptation

1) It reveals the nature of the experience of Jesus as a man

His experience as a man is real. He suffers on earth as the man of sorrows who is acquainted with grief. He did so waiting for the Father's appointment to glory. This was His time of suffering. Suffering is not removed by His miracle working power; He will not limit His suffering by making bread from stones. His experience as a man is suitable. It is fitting that He suffer to become our Savior. His suffering was geared to bear the reproaches of His people.

2) It shows us the golden quality of His character

The temptation causes us to love Him more fully in light of who He is. We get a sense of the true and full beauty of His holiness. It causes us to see His patient endurance. He waits in communion with God for God's kingdom at God's time. We therefore love singing to our Lord: Jesus I am resting in the joy of what thou art: the holy God incarnate, grandson of Heli, son of Adam, and son of God.

Thus we come to understand His mission. He was out to form a new Israel to bring home from the wilderness to the Promised Land. This was the joy set before Him. You are His joy. His temptation forged the way for the saving of the lost sons and daughters of Adam.

No doubt the temptation of Christ at the beginning of His public ministry is representative of other temptations that occurred in His life. The writer of Hebrews includes the death of Christ as our high priest within the framework of His temptations (Heb. 2:18). His suffering in temptation is associated with the suffering of death He endured to bring us to glory (Heb. 2:10-11). And this involves the formation of a new family, a new seed of Abraham (Heb. 2:16), which is the new Israel that began to be formed through the ministry of John the Baptist (Lk 3.8-9).

3) The temptation of Christ calls us to submit to Him

As He subjected Himself to the Father in all things, so we ought to subject ourselves to Him in all things. As we are awed at Him, may we appropriately worship and serve Him. It is our duty to walk this way in the present evil age, but to do so with Him, waiting, suffering, for now until the Father's time, until His appointed time for our glory. He must suffer though equipped for miracle working beyond comprehension. The miracles serve the gospel. The miracle of miracles is His humble suffering in order to relieve our suffering in the gift of eternal life. Therefore, we love Him because He first loved us.

Granted, we must recognize that His temptation was unique for He was the Holy One and the temptation is messianic in which Satan is under attack. Although His temptation is unique, His endurance of it is built on the trials of Israel in the wilderness. The matters of bread in the manna account, water at Massah, and worship of God only all point to the central messianic duty of submission to the will and word of God. This has meaningful application to our spiritual warfare as members of His army. We think that we have to stand up, stand up for Jesus as soldiers of the cross. That is true in a sense, but first we must cast ourselves down at the feet of our Savior. In humble acknowledgment of our sins, we are to seek God's holy will and His glory. We verbalize this commitment in worship by song and prayer that we may walk in His steps in the pursuit of holiness. That is the highest standard: to seek to emulate the holiness of our risen Lord. To that goal, the Lord's conquest in the temptation prompts us. The devilish evil one has been bound; the way of victory is open before us. Therefore, we must learn to face our trials with a manna principle waiting on God to provide daily. While we wait, we work at doing the will of God by faith without tempting the Lord. Instead, we wait in worship of the Lord our God to serve Him alone.

May we fall down before the majesty of our God to worship Him with joyful thanksgiving and praise; may the Holy Spirit drive it home to our hearts that we in fact have the victory over the evil one and all evil through Jesus Christ our Lord; to the triune God be all glory both now and forevermore, amen.