

Temptation & Triumph

Matthew 4:1-11

Temptation comes to us in every from and at every stage of life. The Puritan Thomas Adams said, “Satan, like a fisher, baits his hook according to the appetite of the fish.” Temptation makes sin look good, sound, and feel good until it ends bitterly in sorrow and death. Because Jesus is the son of Abraham and son of David, a true man, He was tempted in every way that we are and yet He resisted, which is why we can rely on Him: “For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:15-16).

Lead Us Not Into Temptation

In the Lord’s Prayer we pray “lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” James tells us that “God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone” (Jms. 1:13). God does want us to sin, hope we will sin, or put us in situations where we have to sin. And yet Jesus is “led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil” (v. 1). Fresh off His baptism, He faces grueling temptation. Has the Father turn on the Son? No, while God doesn’t tempt in the sense of seducing us to evil, He does test us. Like Israel, Jesus has been brought out of Egypt, crossed the Jordan, and now heads into the wilderness to be tested: “And you shall remember that the Lord your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not” (Deut. 8:2). Yahweh tests Israel because this is how we grow and mature. What’s a big deal in third grade is small in middle school, and a high schooler feels so experienced. We prepare for careers, get married, have children, change careers, get diseases, endure conflict, lose loved ones, and ultimately face death. Even many blessings come with immediate temptations. A student gets into college and now has enormous freedom either to enjoy or squander. A newly married couple goes on a honeymoon, but then must learn humility, forgiveness, and sacrifice. Israel conquers the Promise Land and then has the wealth to tempt them into pride and complacency. Even before sin enters the world, Adam lives a short time in a beautiful garden with his perfect bride until the dragon comes to tempt. The devil is the tempter (v. 3), but God is the tester. Where the enemy is against us and desires our failure, God is for us and always provides a way of faithfulness (1 Cor. 10:13). In the Lord’s Prayer, we are asking Him to open our eyes.

Three Tests

Jesus is the new Israel. He fasts for forty days and forty nights and faces temptation in the wilderness, but instead of giving in, He remains faithful. Unlike the first Adam, He won’t eat the forbidden food, test the Lord, or exalt Himself.

Not by Bread Alone – Jesus is starving, not to mention almost certainly exhausted, aching, and disoriented. Right on cue, the tempter shows up: “If You are the Son God, command that these stones become bread” (v. 3). Jesus is the Son of God, and there is nothing wrong with eating. After all, He has already fasted for forty days. After Israel goes into the wilderness, they complain that there is no food, remembering fondly what ate while enslaved in Egypt. Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 8, which describes why God tested them: “So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He

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might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord” (Deut. 8:3). God allowed them to hunger so they would rely on His every word. When you’re destitute, hungry, tired, and alone in the wilderness, it does not feel like God is there for you. It’s easy to rely on other things. The test itself forces you to rely on something; it reveals your heart. Jesus hungers for God—every word of His—more than bread.

Do Not Tempt – In the second temptation the devil sets Jesus on the pinnacle of the temple, tells Him to show He is the Son of God by throwing Himself down, and accurately quotes Psalm 91:11-12, asserting the angels will bear Him up (vv. 5-6). This may have been roof edge of Herod’s royal portico, a vista looking down 450 feet into the Kedron Valley. Israel tests Yahweh at Massah (tempted) and Meribah (contention): “So he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the contention of the children of Israel, and because they tempted the Lord, saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?” (Ex. 17:7). There’s a progression from trusting in other things (bread) to openly insisting God prove Himself. “If God loved me, He would _____”, the accusing tiny human says. Would He send His Son to die on the cross, forgive all of our sins, and never allow anything to separate us from His love? We are like a Henry Ford truck demanding Henry Ford prove his existence and goodness. But God will not take a test to prove that you are God. This test demonstrates that we have failed the test. Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:16 (“You shall not tempt the Lord your God as you tempted Him in Massah”) where God tells Israel to trust and walk with Him in order to be blessed in the land. If we test God, doubting what He has done and will do, our negative prophecies may be fulfilled. But Jesus trusts the Father.

No Other Gods – The devil takes Jesus to the highest mountain and offers Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory if He will just fall down and worship him (vv. 8-9). Think of all the good you could do with so much power and influence, all obtained by one act of obeisance. When Moses was up on the mountain, Israel built and worshiped golden calf, bowing down to false god even as they called it “Yahweh”. What begins by living without every word of God, grows into tempting Him, now blooms into visible idolatry—Israelites naked before a golden statue. What sounded reasonable ended with death and plague (Ex. 32:28, 35). We don’t rely on God, we test Him, and then we turn to idols: self-esteem, self-help, career, fame, personal comfort, sexual immorality, lifestyle, wealth, social causes, name-your-God-substitute.

Cross Before Crown

Jesus withstands all of these temptations. The first two begin with “If you are the Son of God”, questioning His identity. Was He really baptized? Did the Father send His Spirit, and is He really pleased? Then why is He in the desert? Because He is God’s Son, which is what we are in Him (Heb. 12:7-8). Jesus suffered and was faithful, and then relief came (v. 11). He suffered the ultimate temptation, enduring the cross, and prevailed (cf. Matt. 27:42-43; Heb. 12:2). The last temptation the greatest bribe of all. It’s not that Jesus didn’t want the kingdoms of this world and their glory. It’s that He didn’t want them more than He loved the Father. Instead, He suffered the cross, was crowned with glory and honor, and took them from devil (Rev. 11:15).

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