

# The Temptation of Jesus: "It is Written"

*Psalm 95:7-11; Matthew 4:1-11; Romans 5:19; Hebrews 4:15*

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**B**eloved Congregation of Christ: If you were traveling around the world, and offered to eat fried tarantula in Cambodia; or *haggis* in Scotland, a pudding of sheep's liver, heart and lungs; or *balut* in the Philippines (duck egg with embryo); or sheep's eye in Morocco: would you be tempted to eat them? Most probably not. But if I was offered a prime rib dinner and spumoni ice cream, it would be a great temptation, because these are my favorites, but my doctor would not be pleased.

What then is "temptation"? *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines it as "something that causes a strong urge or desire to have or do something and especially something that is bad, wrong, or unwise." This bad connotation wasn't always attached to "temptation." But this is not the case in many Biblical uses. For example, in Genesis 22:1, we read, "God *tested* Abraham," and in Hebrews 11:17, "By *faith* Abraham when he was *tested*." But the same word is translated as "tempted" in one of our readings, Hebrews 4:15, Christ is our High Priest "*who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.*"

Our text in Matthew 4 also uses the same Greek word when it says, "*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.*" God the Father was proving to the Jews that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah who was coming to establish the kingdom of God.

To prove this, Matthew demonstrates that Jesus is the new Israel in his person and work. At his birth, Jesus is called "my Son" by God (Matt 2:15). At his baptism, his Father again called him "my beloved Son" (Matt 3:17). Just as Israel was tested in the wilderness for 40 years after they crossed the Red Sea, Jesus in our text was tempted by the devil for 40 days after he went into the Jordan River. And just as Moses gave the Law to Israel at Mount Sinai, Jesus gave the laws of the kingdom of heaven in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7). The parallels in the life of Israel and the life of Jesus are striking. But we will also see great contrasts, notably, the failure of Israel versus the victory of Jesus in resisting temptations and passing God's testing.

In this testing of Jesus, there is another parallel and contrast that we must not miss. And this is between the temptation of Adam in the Garden of Eden and of Christ in the wilderness. Again, Adam failed God's testing, while Jesus passed his.

So today, we will consider the three attempts by Satan to tempt Jesus so he could prevent Jesus from obeying and fulfilling all things that God sent him to do. If he failed in a single aspect of his mission, he would have failed to save his people from their sins.

## "Man Shall Not Live by Bread Alone"

First, who led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted? It was the Holy Spirit himself, as God planned it from eternity. All his life, Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit, "*the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD*" (Isa 11:2).

He is the pre-eminent Spirit-filled man. This is why Paul tells us to “*walk by the Spirit,*” be “*led by the Spirit,*” “*live by the Spirit,*” and “*keep in step with the Spirit*” (Gal 5:16-25). How did Jesus do all these while being tempted? He had the Word of God in his mind and heart, as we shall see later.

Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 127 lists three of our enemies whenever we pray, “*Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*” “Evil” should be “the evil one,” the devil. So the three enemies are the devil, “the adversary” (1 Pet 5:8), the hostile, unbelieving world (John 17:14), and our own sin nature, “the flesh” (Gal 5:17). We are to pray this petition because we are weak and without strength to overcome these enemies without the power of the Holy Spirit.

And who tempted him? Some people might think it was God since God the Holy Spirit led him to be tempted. No, rather, he was tempted by the devil: the same devil who tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden; the same devil who is called “*the great dragon . . . that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world . . . accuser of our brothers*” (Rev 12:9). That’s what his name means.

After Jesus fasted in the wilderness for 40 days, he was obviously hungry. Seizing this opportunity, the devil came and offered his first temptation, “*command these stones to become loaves of bread.*” The devil prefaced his first two temptations with, “*If you are the Son of God . . .*” But the word “if” is better translated “since” because Satan certainly knew who Jesus was. So the devil was saying to him, “Since you are the Son of God, you have the power to turn these stones into bread to satisfy your hunger.”

How did Jesus resist this great temptation? He remembered God’s Word in the Law of Moses, saying, “It is written,” in all three tests. The first is from Deuteronomy 8:3, “*man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.*” Here, Moses was reminding Israel that it was God who gave them manna from heaven, a gift that proved to them that God is perfectly true to his promises. Israel failed the test in the wilderness. They complained they had nothing to eat, and God sent them delicious manna from heaven. Then they got tired of manna, and lusted for meat, so God sent them quails from heaven.

Adam and Eve failed the same test in the Garden of Eden. They lusted for the fruit of the forbidden Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, instead of being satisfied with all the delicious fruits around them. When they looked at the fruit, they desired it because it was “*good for food*” (Gen 3:6).

Satan comes to us often in our most vulnerable moments. He accused Job before God, “If you take away his health, his riches, and his family, Job will “*curse you to your face*” (Job 1:11). He whispers to us through televangelists, “If God has not given you your dream house and car, if he hasn’t healed you from your cancer, claim his promises of health and wealth now!” But God promises more than health and wealth. He promises an eternal inheritance and life without pain, sorrow and death. But he wants you to be patient, not praying for instant gratification, but instead pray, “Give us *this day* our daily bread.” Jesus doesn’t offer easy street to his disciples.

## **“You Shall Not Put the Lord Your God to the Test”**

Failing in his first attempt, Satan uses another temptation. He took Jesus to the highest point of the temple in Jerusalem and tells him to throw himself down because it is written in Psalm 91:11-12 that God will command his angels to catch him with their hands to stop his fall. The devil knows God’s Word as well. Jesus has answered the devil with God’s Word, so the devil now uses God’s Word to tempt him!

If Jesus was tempted by this deception by Satan, he would have floated down to the temple court in full view of worshipers and gained the full adoration by the Jews. But Jesus knew that Satan was grossly misusing and misinterpreting Psalm 91:11-12. God was not encouraging his people to test his promises by willfully putting themselves in danger to prove that God can miraculously save them. This is what we hear today from many televangelists: give \$100, and God will give you \$10,000 back, or you will be healed of cancer or of blindness or paralysis, or have gold tooth fillings, or other health and wealth promises.

But Jesus again defeated Satan’s deception with another Word from the Law of Moses, this time from Deuteronomy 6:16, *“You shall not put the LORD your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah.”* Here, Moses was again reminding Israel of their rebellion against God in the wilderness in Exodus 17:1-7. The people had just witnessed God’s ten plagues against Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, and manna from heaven. But when they were thirsty, they quickly quarreled with Moses, blaming him for their hardship in the desert. Moses rebuked them, saying, *“Why do you test the LORD?”* So the LORD provided water from a rock. Moses therefore called the place Massah, which means “testing,” and Meribah, which means “quarreling.”

In Psalm 95:7b–9, the psalmist condemns the people for hardening their hearts during this incident, saying, *“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.”* After all that God had done for them, they ridicule him, saying, “What have you done for us lately?” So God punished them. All of them died in the wilderness without entering the Promised Land because of their unbelief.

This sin is also related to man’s insatiable quest for knowledge. How often have you wondered, “What is God’s will for me today?” Many consult their daily horoscope. In our youth, we often ask questions like, “Will I be pretty? Will I be rich?” And the answer is not, “Que sera, sera,” but, “What does God say in his Word?” and, “If the Lord wills, he will give me the desires of my heart.” And there are many difficult questions in life and in the Scriptures where God answers in Deuteronomy 29:29, *“The secret things belong to the LORD our God.”* We are not to pry into God’s mysterious ways. Instead, we are to be satisfied with the answers he has provided to us in life and in his Word.

This is also one of the temptations presented by the serpent before Adam and Eve, *“Did God really say so? Because if you ate this fruit, you will be like God, with knowledge of good and evil.”* So she looked at the tree and decided that it was desirable *“to make one wise”* (Gen 3:1-6).

Jesus resisted this temptation to test God's love for him by trusting God's word. He doesn't have to force God's hand to know that God cares for him. God's word was sufficient and reliable. And we often fail this test. "Would God really provide for our daily needs? Would he really protect me from temptations? Would he really give me relief from my sufferings?" These are good questions, and we struggle with them daily. But God is true to his Word. "What have you done for me lately?" Just look back to God's past provisions and faithfulness.

### **"You Shall Worship the Lord Your God Alone"**

The third and last temptation by the devil was the most confrontational and direct. Satan says to Jesus, "Worship me and I will give you everything you want!" This is another blatant lie. How could Satan give the whole creation to Jesus, when God and Christ own all of it? It was never his to give.

At that moment, Jesus as a human being did not yet possess the whole world. But one day, after he has accomplished his mission to suffer and die on the cross to atone for his people's sins, he *will* possess everything. He will crush the head of the serpent and all his enemies on the cross and at his resurrection, not by bowing down to the devil! From eternity past, God the Father promised Jesus his Son in Psalm 2:8–9, "*I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.*" In the fullness of time, God will fulfill this promise to his Son and to us.

Again, Jesus answers from the Law of Moses in Deuteronomy 6:13, "*It is the LORD your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by his name you shall swear.*" In this chapter, the LORD reminds Israel that the LORD God is one, and that they should love him with all their heart, soul and might, and no one else (6:4-6). And if they do not, and worship other gods, God's wrath will be poured out on them to destroy them (6:15).

Adam and Eve did not resist the devil's temptation. Instead of listening to God's Word, they listened to the devil. So instead of partaking of the Tree of Life, which would have given them eternal life through Christ, they ate of the Tree of Death, cursing them with sin and death. That was their innovative worship service: entering into the presence of the devil, listening to his lies, bowing down to him, and finally partaking of his deadly food.

We often fall into this same temptation of getting our desires and goals via the easy, but unlawful ways. We break the speed limit because we can't wait to get to a sale, or to get to our vacation, or to see our loved ones. We exaggerate to impress. We take shortcuts or loopholes in our tax returns to get easy money. Students cheat during exams, or even plagiarize.

**D**ear friends: We daily fall for the same temptations that the devil offered our Lord Jesus Christ. 1 John 2:16 tells us that our first parents fell for the same three basic temptations in life: "*the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life.*" Eve ate the forbidden fruit when she gave in to Satan's lie that it was "*good for food, pleasant to the eyes and desirable to make one wise.*"

Adam and Christ were alike in that both were tested by God through the devil. Adam had all kinds of delicious food to eat, his wife and beautiful animals for companions. But Christ's temptation was much more severe – 40 days of fasting in the desert, with nothing to eat, and no companions except wild animals (Mark 1:13). But with all his provisions, Adam still failed.

So did Israel in the wilderness. They gave in to the desires of the flesh for food and drink, the lust of the eyes in worshiping the golden calf, and the pride of having all they wanted back in their slavery days in Egypt. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:6-9 that they put "*Christ to the test.*" So also, we often fall into these three temptations.

Jesus resisted Satan's temptations by having God's Word in his heart and mind. This is also the psalmist's exhortation to us in Psalm 119:11, "*I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.*" But we must not lose sight of the two most important teachings in the temptations of Jesus.

The first is that Jesus is the Second and Last Adam who fulfilled what the First Adam failed to do: obey God perfectly. This is why Paul tells us in Romans 5:12-21 that through Adam's sin and disobedience, sin and death came into all the world. But through Jesus' perfect obedience and death on the cross, all who believe in him will be saved from the curse of sin and death.

The second is that Jesus is the true Israel, who unlike the Israelites, was perfectly faithful and obedient to his Father, even to his cruel death on the cross to save us from all our sins and give us eternal life.