

The Temptation of Jesus

Testing by the devil is the final episode in the preparation of Jesus for His ministry. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were tested by the cunning serpent and failed. In the wilderness of Sinai, the people of Israel lusted after the worldly pleasures of Egypt and murmured against the Lord's leadership. But Jesus Christ shows Himself to be the true Servant of the Lord in triumphing over the devil.

The devil was once an obedient angel serving his Maker. But this role was not satisfactory; he rebelled against the will of God and was cast down from heaven. With God's permission Satan tests the faith of believers. The ultimate clash between two wills is the contest fought by Christ and the devil.

Jesus is directed by the Holy Spirit to enter into this contest. After His baptism in the Jordan River, He is led by the Spirit into the desert, a location reminiscent of the wilderness through which Israel was guided by Moses. The temptation lasted 40 days; this again reminds one of the 40 years of the exodus from Egypt. The 40 days that Jesus spent in the desert are the origin of the 40-day period of Lent.

During these 40 days, Jesus fasted; He ate nothing and was terribly hungry. Israel also experienced hunger and thirst in the wilderness. The devil seizes upon this situation by suggesting to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become a loaf of bread," (Luke 4:3). The devil is not so much challenging Jesus to prove His divine sonship as tempting Him to use the power of that sonship for His own selfish purpose: to provide bread for Himself. Jesus responds by quoting a portion of Deuteronomy 8:3. These are words of Moses addressed to Israel: "He [God] humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD." The devil had focused attention on the bread alone; Jesus directs attention to the One who stands behind the bread. Jesus would fail in His mission if He used His divine power for His own selfish purposes to satisfy His earthly needs.

The next temptation reported by Luke (the order of the temptations varies from Matthew 4:1-11) is political in nature. The devil led Jesus to a high place and showed Him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. Then the test: "*I shall give you all this authority and glory... if you worship me,*" (4:6). As the Son of God, Jesus had almighty power. He could easily have become a great world leader and controlled nations. But in seeking this end, He would have been rejecting the will of His Father (even as Satan had done). Jesus overcomes Satan with a quotation from Deuteronomy 6:13: "*Worship the Lord, your God, and serve Him only!*"

Now the devil led Jesus to the highest point of the temple in Jerusalem. He urges Jesus to jump down from this height, assuring him by a quotation from Psalm 91:11-12 (though omitting the key phrase "in all your ways") of the angels' guarding care. Israel in the wilderness had put the Lord to the test in similar ways. Jesus refused this course by once more quoting the Scriptures (Deuteronomy 6:16).

Jesus won the victory over the devil by using the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. He did what Adam and the people of Israel had failed to do. Like us, He was tempted (Hebrews 4:15), but He was not overcome. He supplies us with the example of how we can use the Word of God to win victories over the temptations that come to us from Satan.

This defeat of Satan in the desert is not, however, the end of the story. Luke closes with the rather foreboding comment: "*When the devil had finished every way of tempting Him, he left Him until another opportunity would present itself,*" (4:13). Jesus would be faced with various tests during his earthly ministry. The most serious of these was the cross.

Through all the testings, Jesus continued to do the Father's will. We find comfort in the fact that although we do at times give in to the devil, Christ did not. He is our champion; by faith in Jesus, we are assured of the final victory over sin, death, and the power of the devil.