

THE SECRET TO RESISTING TEMPTATION

SERIES: JESUS, THE SAVIOR OF THE LOST

By Ron Ritchie

Have you ever been tempted towards evil since you became a Christian?

A few years ago, I was asked to participate with several other teachers in a seminar held in Bogota, Colombia. Our team ministered along with 70 Colombian ex-convicts who had become Christians while serving their sentence and wanted to be spiritually equipped to minister back in the prisons.

On the third day of the seminar we all heard the familiar sound of a bell that was rung by the nuns to call us to our meals. After finishing lunch I walked up to get some coffee and saw the bell out in the open. I was looking at it when we were encouraged to start our afternoon seminars. Nonchalantly, I picked up my shoulder bag and placed the bell in it, thus beginning my temptation. I rationalized that they probably had many bells in the convent and would be delighted for me to have it. It would make a wonderful "memorial stone" of the trip. In the midst of the struggle, I was called to continue my afternoon seminar.

During the seminar, a nun came into the room and announced that the dinner bell was missing. She said that the bell had no real value, but was a sentimental item for them. Knowing the backgrounds of the ex-convicts she said she understood if one of them was attracted to the bell, but implored them to return it to her in private.

I looked at my friend Ed and made a comment about how terrible it was to bring all these former prisoners to the convent for a seminar on ministering in the prisons and then have this happen. After he agreed, I said, "Ed, I have the bell."

In the passage we studied last week, Jesus had walked into the river of Jordan not to enter "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins," but "in order to fulfill all righteousness" and to experience the shadow of the cross by identifying with sinners. When he came out of the waters, it marked the end of John's ministry as the forerunner of the Messiah and the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus Christ. John would later declare to his disciples, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1: 28).

Before our Lord began his public ministry the Holy Spirit led him into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Within this biblical narrative we not only are given a great insight into the character of Jesus, as well as Satan and the ever present "spiritual warfare" all of us face, but we are also given the secret for resisting temptation within that warfare. All of us are faced with any number of temptations to steal, lie, deceive, murder, commit adultery or fornication; do drugs, have an abortion, abuse our children or spouse; or engage in pornography, drunkenness, or idolatry. As we look at Luke 4:1-13 we will find the answer to the question: What is the secret for resisting temptation?

I. The Power of the Spirit and the Word of God

Luke 4:1-4

And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led about by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing during those days; and when they had ended, he became hungry. And the devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread." And Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone.'"

In this first temptation we are going to see Satan trying to tempt Jesus to believe that his Father will not provide

life's necessities so he should take charge of his hunger and turn stones into bread. Luke's account of the temptations differs from Matthew and Mark in that he starts geographically at the floor of the Dead Sea, 3800 feet below sea level. He later moves up from the wilderness, into a high mountain, and finally to the city of Jerusalem, 2550 feet above sea level.

From birth, the Lord was indwelt by the Holy Spirit, who gave him power to make godly choices in his life. At his baptism, we saw that the Christ was filled with the Holy Spirit when the Father sent the Spirit to empower him for his public ministry. Likewise, a follower of the Lord is permanently indwelt by the Holy Spirit, but must daily choose to be controlled by the Spirit.

The Lord Jesus then allowed the Holy Spirit to drive him into the desert for 40 days. In the scriptures we see recurring examples of how God has used the wilderness to place his people in a testing ground, what I call "The School of the Desert." The story that is most relevant to our Lord's temptation is the story of Moses who had led the Israelites out of Egypt into the desert by the power of God and was preparing to enter into the Promised Land. Before the Jews could enter the land God called Moses to the top of Mount Sinai, and "he was there with the Lord 40 days and 40 nights; he did not eat bread or drink water. And God wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments" (Ex. 34:28).

At another point, before the Israelites were to enter the Promised Land, they sent out 12 spies to survey Canaan. After 40 days, 10 of the spies gave the people a negative report which frightened them. As a result, they did not want to enter the Promised Land. In response, the Lord said he would punish his people for their refusal to enter by giving them a year in the wilderness for every day the spies were in the Promised Land (Numbers 14:34).

At the end of those 40 years God told Moses to write the Book of Deuteronomy to the second generation of Israelites informing them of his purpose for bringing their fathers into the wilderness: "And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that he might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not." Over and over again as you study the scriptures you find that God used the symbolic number 40 and a season of wilderness as a time of testing as well as a time to draw near to God himself.

As the model for our new humanity, Jesus was ready to begin his ministry within the Jewish nation as its long awaited Messiah. On a human level we might think that he would have headed right up to Jerusalem with John and the remnant of baptized Jews, entering the city as the King of kings and Lord of Lords. What the Father had in store for him, however, was a face-to-face battle with Satan himself.

The reason is clearly seen once we dip back into Israel's history. After the days of Solomon, Satan had divided the Kingdom of Israel between Israel in the north and Judah in the south. He then tempted the kings of the divided nation with idolatry so that the people were defeated and taken into the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities. After the Jews were allowed back into the land under Ezra and Nehemiah they soon fell captive to the Greeks and the Romans. At the time of this story Israel had no true king, but the prince of darkness knew that a king was being prepared. Jesus' arrival in the desert initiated Satan's battle with the last king of Israel as well as the king of the Gentile nations; if he defeated this king all the kingdoms would be his.

Matthew, Mark and Luke record that our Lord was tempted by the devil throughout the 40 days in the wilderness. Having eaten nothing he became hungry, and it is at this point the devil tried to tempt him three more times at his physically weakest moment. He appeared before Jesus not in a guise of a snake, as with Adam and Eve; not as incarnate in Judas at the Last Supper; nor in the guise of a false prophet within the church. He appeared as a created angelic being who had rebelled against his Creator. He arrived in character as a deceiver and murderer with the motive of tempting Jesus to experience glory without the cross.

Before we look into the passage we need to answer two questions:

- (1) What is temptation? In this context, temptation is enticement to evil. The devil had determined to persuade Jesus to rebel against the will of His Father to undermine the power of their relationship and God's plan of salvation.

(2) Could Jesus really be tempted if he had a sinless nature? Jesus had two natures:

(a) A divine nature, which was set aside for a time; and (b) a sinless human nature. Since he had no sin nature he could not be tempted to sin from within, so the temptation had to come from outside his human nature. He was tempted in his person. Hebrews 4:15 says, "For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin." According to James 1, God cannot be tempted. Therefore, Jesus' divine nature could not be tempted, but his humanity could be tempted by an outside attack.

I liken this to an example of a rowboat attacking a battleship. It is possible for a rowboat to attack a battleship, but impossible for the rowboat to conquer the battleship. While the temptation of Jesus was real, there was infinite power to resist the temptation. Though his humanity did not have a fallen nature he still felt the physical, emotional, and spiritual agony of the temptation, yet without sinning. Hebrews give us insight into the purpose of his temptation: "For since he himself was tempted in that which he has suffered, he is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted" (Hebrews 2:18).

The key to temptation in our lives is to understand whether it comes from the world, the flesh, or the devil. Temptation is not sin, but sin comes when we give in to the temptation. "Each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death" (James 1:14-15). Satan appeared in the wilderness to entice the Lord to set aside his humanity and the plan of redemption.

Satan was present but invisible to the human eye when Jesus heard his Father say after the baptism, "Thou art My beloved Son, in thee I am well pleased" (3:22). Thus, Satan said, "Since it is true that you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread." Although this temptation was on the physical level of hunger, a basic physical need, the issue was not food. Satan appealed to the Lord's deity, ignoring the reality that Jesus had relinquished his heavenly powers and was now in his humanity. He was depending on his Father for all his words, actions, directions, and daily necessities. The point of the temptation was asking the Lord to bypass the will of his Father for him to live on earth in his restricted humanity.

Jesus immediately attacked that thought and cited the scriptures in Deuteronomy: "It is written, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord" (8:3). Deuteronomy was a book written by Moses, a man who understood the wilderness, testing, fasting, and waiting on the Lord for 40 days. Moses reviewed the Law of God with the second generation of Israelites at the end of the 40-year test in the wilderness, before they entered the Promise Land. In Deuteronomy 8:2,3 the context is the same as Jesus' experience: "And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. And He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man [in Adam] lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord."

The issue, therefore, is not bread but trust, dependence on the Father to produce in his own way and time. Part of the plan of redemption was that on earth Jesus would "empty himself" of the use of his divine powers. To violate that would be to provide for himself apart from God's resources.

Our Lord was hungry, and he would remain hungry until the Father intervened to feed him. The principle involved was that the plan of God for the salvation of humanity was more important than the momentary satisfaction brought by a loaf of bread. The essence of life is not bread, but waiting on direction from the Father, refusing to act independently of God's direction. Life is fulfilled in doing God's will, not by having our desires met. When the Israelites were in the desert, God provided for their needs by sending manna, something that the Jews had never experienced. It was God who provided for the Jews then, and who

continues to provide for us in every area of life. The proof is in the adventurous life of faith in God alone.

When I was living in an orphanage during my youth, we worked all summer and into the fall to store up food for the severe winter season. At times, however, we would run out of food in spite of our best efforts. It did not bother the workers at all. They would gather all the staff members and say, "Let's pray, we're out of food. We have 300 kids to feed, but we have no food." Many times we were provided with food, with no apparent evidence of its source. It was no less a miracle than manna to the Jews.

Our Lord chose to place His faith in the power of the Spirit and the Father's word in the scriptures to provide his life's necessities. So the secret behind resisting temptation remains,

II. The Power of the Spirit and the Word of God

Luke 4: 5-8

And he led him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. And the devil said to him, "I will give you all this domain and its glory; for it has been handed over to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. "Therefore if you worship before me, it shall all be yours." And Jesus answered and said to him, "It is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"

Here, Satan was testing Jesus' faith in God as the supreme moral ruler of the universe. According to Psalm 2, God had promised his Son that he would be given the nations after the cross, not before. The nations would all be given to him, and he would rule in their hearts. Satan showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world in one moment, like a quick video shot. I thought of it like the TV program called "The Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous" which each week invites us to lust for some of the most beautiful island, mountain, and desert homes of the rich and famous. Not once, however, are you given the true story of the many ruined lives behind those riches.

Satan said to the Lord, "I will give you all this domain and its glory. For it has been handed over to me, and I give it to whomever I wish." It is true that the world of unbelieving men lies in Satan's power for a specific period of time (1 John 5:19), but the the devil tempted Jesus with a half-truth. He is the prince of this world, but he only has power over the evil people in this world, not those who are indwelt by the spirit of God. Thus, he has power over the world and is deceiving the nations.

Notice though that Satan mentioned the glory, but not the sin and suffering of fallen humanity within the kingdoms-abuse, injustice, murder, deceit, immorality, and death.

What was the price tag attached to this package? "Therefore if you worship before me, it shall all be yours." Here is the half-truth, the lie. Satan did not mention that to worship him meant the Lord had to serve him. Jesus told us that Satan "was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature; for he is a liar, and the father of lies" (John 8:44). It was true that Satan was given limited power on earth for a time, but he did not have the power of which he boasted, for ultimately he will be defeated and judged at the cross.

Who is the moral governor of the universe? Psalm 2 states that God remains the supreme ruler of the universe, and he will give to his Son the nations as his inheritance. The issue is that Jesus came to earth to set up his kingdom in the hearts of men, not to be ruler over the warring, corrupt, and evil kingdoms.

The onslaught of temptation was intense: Be king of the world and the promised Messiah of the Jews now! Bring in the kingdom promises of Isaiah 61 now! Avoid the pain, humiliation, and death of the cross, and bring healing to the nations as well as suffering humanity. You can have your cake and eat it too, just worship me. Satan did not mention that worshipping something entails beings its servant. If Jesus had accepted this offer he would have been king of the world, but a servant of Satan without the power to set humanity free from the power of sin and death .

And Jesus answered and said to him, "It is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"

This quote is taken from Deut. 6:13 which is found in the context of warnings to the second generation of Jews about to enter the Promised Land: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. . . . You shall fear only the Lord your God, and you shall worship Him and swear by His name." The call to all created beings is to worship the Lord and serve him only. Satan was a created being who decided to rebel against God (Isaiah 14, Ezekiel 38), but would suffer the consequences at the cross. Hell is prepared for him, his angels, and all who have chosen to worship him.

What of the kingdoms of the earth? Paul wrote, "He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore also God highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2: 8-11). The apostle John writes in Revelation: "Grace to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come . . . and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth"(Rev. 1: 4-5). Jesus would accomplish his purposes in his own timing and way, doing it by faith, and resting in a promise made to him by God the Father.

What is the secret to resisting temptation? Once again, Jesus depended on the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit and the word of God to resist the temptation to rule the kingdoms of earth when he knew that after the cross he would be the ruler of the universe, the spiritual king over those who love, worship, and serve him in the "kingdom of God." Likewise, the power we need to resist temptation is

III. The Spirit of God and the Word of God

Luke 4: 9-13

And he led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here; for it is written, 'He will give his angels charge concerning you to guard you,' and, 'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'" And Jesus answered and said to him, "It is said, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'" And when the devil had finished every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time.

We have progressed westward from the wilderness, to the mountains, to the Holy City of God and the very heart of the Jewish world, the Temple of God. At this point, Satan placed Jesus on one of the pinnacles of the Temple.

In this third and last temptation Satan would seek to tempt Jesus to test God rather than trust him. David Gooding writes, "This was a challenge not to trust God but to tempt Him, not to prove his Sonship, but to abuse it. For no word had come from the Father to jump off the temple. The only motive for doing it would either be vainglory or the desire to test God to see whether he would keep his promise; and Scripture forbids man's testing of God in that way." Satan said in essence, "Listen, Jesus, I've got a plan that will win you to the hearts of the Jewish people. They will be overwhelmed by your ability to jump from this high pinnacle and land unharmed. Others who have jumped from this height have been killed instantly. The people will embrace you as their Messiah immediately. Just place your faith in God for protection. And since you have been using the scriptures let me quote a familiar passage to encourage you that you are on secure grounds to jump."

Again, Satan quoted scripture out of context to support his position of a half-truth. In citing Psalm 91, he did not refer to the first verses: "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow the Almighty. I will say to the Lord, my refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust! For it is he who

delivers you from the snare of the trapper. . . ." Following the partial quotation from Satan in verses 11 and 12, he omitted 91:13 "You will tread upon the lion and the cobra [Satan is called a roaring lion and a serpent], the young lion and the serpent you [Jesus the Messiah] will trample down" [at the cross and resurrection]. Satan hoped Jesus would have forgotten or ignored the rest of the verse in his weakness, and would go outside the plan of God by bypassing his humanity. It was the Father's plan that the redemption of the world must come through the shedding of the blood of the Lamb on the cross of Calvary. As a man, there could be no substitution for that course.

Jesus responded to Satan's challenge by saying, "You shall not force (tempt) a test on the Lord your God, as you tested him at Massah" (Deut 6:16). Staying in Deuteronomy 6 and moving down two verses, the Lord reminded Satan of the consequences of putting God to the test. In the wilderness, the people of Israel tested God at Massah by crying out for water: "Moses, we want water, did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" Moses said "Why do you test the Lord?" Then Moses was instructed by the Yahweh to take his staff and strike the rock at Horeb, and water came out. The people had the arrogance to challenge the Lord's intent for them. They should have realized that God would not have taken them into the desert to let them die of thirst, but they refused to trust. In response, Moses "named the place "Test" and "Quarrel" [Massah and Meribah] . . . because they tested the Lord saying "Is the Lord among us, or not?" (Exodus 17:7).

The principle here is that to test God is not to trust God. God would reveal his Messiah in his time, but not in the form of a circus act where he jumped safely from the pinnacle of the Temple. Only through the cross and resurrection could his will be accomplished. The key to resisting the temptation to tempt God by misusing the scriptures is to depend on the power of the Spirit and the word of God in context.

And when the devil had finished every temptation, he departed from Him until an opportune time. (Mark and Matthew add, "and behold angels came and began to minister to him.")

Satan would subsequently attack Jesus through the Pharisees, Judas' betrayal, the battle in the Garden, the denial of Peter, and the flight of the rest of the disciples after his crucifixion. After the devil left him, the Father sent his angels to meet Christ's physical, emotional, and spiritual needs at the proper time. As the history of Israel reveals, the loving, faithful Father was always present and available to meet their needs regardless of their impatience, rebellion, and anger. Although Israel failed in the wilderness to put themselves into their Father's hand, the Lord Jesus, the king of Israel and the Gentile nations, was victorious in this battle and reaped the blessings accordingly.

Last year I received a letter from a Christian family man who felt called to seminary training. He believed that God would provide for his needs, and was asking people to support him in his endeavor. In his desire to go, however, he was blinded by the reality that there was no evidence that he had the necessary spiritual gifts; he had no fellowship in a local body who could have supported him and confirmed his gifts. He had no job, no money, no confirmation, and yet he believed God wanted him to proceed to school. That is, I believe, "tempting God" by using his word incorrectly.

What is the secret to resisting temptation? It is being filled with the Spirit of God and the Word of God in its fullest context. In his humanity, Jesus met each temptation with the same resource we have today: the power of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God. Notice in this last verse that after this occasion Jesus was not free from temptation for the remainder of his ministry. Likewise, temptation is ever present in our own lives as well.

I was tempted to steal the bell. I had taken it. I was holding it. I wrestled with whether to keep it or not. However, the kind words of the nun, the power of the Holy Spirit in my heart, and the agonized look in Ed's eyes gave me the courage to explain how tempted I was to keep the bell. In the presence of the 70 ex-convicts, I returned it to the nun.

The next morning a Colombian senator who was working in the prisons said to me, "I am a mother with nine children. Every day for some 30 years I have rung a bell for them to come to breakfast, lunch, and dinner. They are all gone now, and after witnessing you return the bell yesterday, I decided to give you my bell as a

'memorial stone' of your ministry here."

No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able; but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it (1 Cor. 10:13).

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