

Matthew 4:1-11 “Overcoming Temptation”

Intro. I have just begun a series from the gospel of Matthew and last Sunday I preached about the baptism of Jesus Christ. I pointed out that baptism pictures how Jesus would save us from our sins and that is by His death, burial and resurrection (cf. 1 Cor. 15:3-4). At one point in my message I also pointed out that for Him to die for our sins, He must be spotless and without sin. We know this from the Old Testament, where sacrifices had to be spotless in order to be acceptable by God. So at the very beginning of His ministry, we see from v.1 that the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to face the strongest temptations the devil could bring against Him. The language of Mk. 1:12 is even stronger, “Immediately the Spirit drove Him [*ekballo*] into the wilderness.” Why did the Holy Spirit insist that Jesus go into the wilderness to be tested by the devil?

As the Union Pacific Railroad was being constructed, an elaborate trestle bridge was built across a large canyon in the West. Wanting to test the bridge, the builder loaded a train with enough extra cars and equipment to double its normal payload. The train was then driven to the middle of the bridge, where it stayed an entire day. One worker asked, “Are you trying to break this bridge?” “No,” the builder replied, “I’m trying to prove that the bridge *won’t* break.” In the same way, the temptations Jesus faced weren’t designed by God to see if Christ would sin, but to prove that He wouldn’t.¹ Temptation is a test of your character.

Now this morning I have a two-fold purpose for the message. I believe Matthew’s main purpose for this account was to affirm yet again that Jesus Christ is the sinless Son of God, the promised Messianic King. But I believe this text of Scripture also has a practical application. Jesus exposed Satan and his tactics, and He defeated Satan. Because of His victory, we can have victory over the tempter. So this morning I want you also to learn how to overcome temptation in your own life. All too often temptations come our way, and we are defeated by them. The devil gets the victory over our lives. Think of when you last yielded to temptation. Perhaps it was last night or even this morning. Well God wants you to be able to share in the victory of Christ over temptation. So be sure to listen carefully this morning, and I will share with you some ways you can have victory over temptation.

Now beginning in v.3 Satan assails the Son of God with 3 powerful temptations. Let’s examine each of these temptations together. In vv.3-4 we see:

I. CHRIST WAS VICTORIOUS OVER PASSIONATE DESIRE

Let me give you a little background to this temptation. Now Jesus fasted and prayed for 40 days and nights. He no doubt was preparing Himself spiritually for the ministry He was about to begin. Now with that background, I want to share with you a few principles that I gleaned from the first temptation:

A. Temptation May Come through Satan – James 1:14 says, “each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed.” Yes, I believe that most temptation comes from our

¹ Today in the Word, 3-14-91.

own sinful desires. However, there are times when Satan or one of his demons tempts us, as we see from our text today. Yet many people today do not believe that there is a devil. How can you fight an enemy when you don't even believe he exists! But the Bible clearly teaches there is a devil. In v.1 he is called "the devil." Then in v.3 the devil is called "the tempter." That is one of the names of the devil, for that is one of his main works (cf. 1 Thess. 3:5). Now it is clear that Matthew believed in the existence of a personal devil. It is clear that the temptation came from the outside, and not from within.² The Bible teaches that the devil is a real person. 1 Pet. 5:8 says that the devil is like a roaring lion that walks about, seeking whom he may devour. Though Satan is like a roaring lion, he would not have appeared in that form to Jesus. 2 Cor. 11:13 says that the devil can transform himself "into an angel of light." He is the master deceiver and he does not want to reveal his true form or his true intent.

So we need to watch, and be on our guard (1 Pet. 5:8). Satan or his demons are always looking for opportunities to tempt us.

The devil's main purpose was to overthrow the Messiah at the outset. He knew that Jesus had come to bring salvation, and he knew that if he could get Jesus to sin, that would ruin the whole plan of salvation.

B. Temptation Comes When the Opportunity Is Present – Satan waited until the conditions were right before he began his onslaught of temptation. Notice in v.1 it says that Jesus was "led up... into the wilderness...." The Judean wilderness stretches between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea. It is an area of yellow sand, crumbling limestone, and contorted strata. It glows and shimmers with heat like some vast furnace. The conditions of the wilderness made the deprivation of hunger and thirst even greater. Christ also faced loneliness and isolation, but probably found some refuge in a cave. So after spending 40 days in such a place, it is something of an understatement when Matthew says in the last of v.2 that Jesus "hungered." He was famished. It is said that during a prolonged fast, the feeling of hunger goes away after three or four days, only to return with renewed force. And this onslaught of recurring hunger became the opportunity for the first temptation.

So watch out for places and situations that give the devil opportunities to tempt you. For example, when you are hungry, the opportunity is certainly present for temptation. You may be tempted to satisfy your need for food by stealing. Or you may be tempted to engage in gluttony. Satan may tempt you at a time of bodily weakness. He may tempt you in a time of spiritual weakness. After you have missed church for several weeks, or after you have gone several days without praying and reading your Bible, you will be more vulnerable to the temptations of Satan. So we see that Satan is more likely to tempt you at your moment of weakness. On the other hand, another prime temptation opportunity is when you think you are strong and *self-confident* (1 Cor. 10:12; Mt. 26:35).

C. Temptation Is Tailored to the Individual – Notice in v.3 that Satan said to Jesus, "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread." Only recently at the baptism of Jesus, God the Father had confirmed that Jesus was the Son of God. So Satan uses that as the springboard of this temptation. It must have been in the spirit of derision that the tempter uttered the words, "Since you are God's Son, make use of your majestic power, and no longer be tortured by hunger. Son of God, hungry? How ridiculous! And if you are a Son, then God is supposed to be your Father. He must not care about you. You have to take matters into your own hands!" He was

² Yet Barclay attempts to show that the temptations were inward and that there was no personal devil.

tempting Christ to act independently of the Holy Spirit who had led Him into the wilderness. He was seeking to destroy the Son's confidence in His Father's will and power to sustain Him. Satan is always trying to get people to doubt the love and care of God.

Has Satan tempted you recently to doubt God's love? As people are facing job loses, sickness and other troubles, you can be sure that Satan will try to tempt you to doubt God or His love for you.

Satan's temptation was quite deceptive. After all, John had said that God could turn stones into sons of Abraham, and if Jesus is God's Son, then surely He could turn stones into bread, a lesser miracle. Later He would demonstrate that He could change water into wine, and multiply a few loaves and fishes and feed thousands. Oh, He had the power. And why not use it? The desire for food was innocent but strong, the need was imperative, and He had the power to secure instant relief. With the objections apparently nil, the bait is skillfully wound over the barbed hook.

How will Jesus respond? Will He yield to the suggestion, turn the stones into bread, and then quickly devour them? Well in v.4 we see another principle:

D. Temptation Can Be Resisted by Scripture – We are going to see that Jesus appealed to Scripture in all 3 temptations. For example, Jesus said in v.4, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'" Scripture is the weapon Satan fears more than anything else in this world. And all of our Lord's quotations that day were from Deuteronomy 6 and 8. Could it be that the Lord's meditation that morning had been in this portion of God's Word?

Now the primary application is that we also should learn the Word of God and use Scripture to resist temptation. The devil hates Scripture and attacks it, because he is like a punctured balloon before Truth. So you need to know and memorize the Word of God. Psa. 119:11 says, "Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You!" If you're standing outside a store and people begin to loot and steal from that store, remember the Ten Commandments, which says, "You shall not steal." Another commandment says, "You shall not murder," and the Minnesota police officer evidently violated that command. How about this command to resist temptation, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Now in this particular case, Jesus quotes from Dt. 8:3, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." The key is the word "alone." Always remember that your life is not sustained ultimately by bread but by God. In the context it shows how the Lord had fed the Israelites in the wilderness with manna, unknown to them, that He might teach them "that not by bread alone does man live, but by everything proceeding out of the mouth of the Lord does man live." The "word" here refers to the word of His power. It is His word of effective command. Cf. Gen. 1:3. God provided manna by speaking it into existence. God wanted the Israelites to know that they could trust Him to provide for their needs.

So Jesus is here giving an expression of childlike confidence in the Father's care. Certainly the One who, when there was no bread, had provided manna, would not fail His Beloved Son in this hour of trial. As a Son Jesus was obeying the Father by being in the wilderness, and He could trust in the provision of God. He only had to wait on God. God had provided food for His prophet Elijah (I Kings 19:5-7). Jesus later promised that if we seek first "the kingdom of God and His righteousness," all "these things" will be added unto us (Mt. 6:33). So He will wait for the Father's provision.

So Satan could not use the lust of the flesh to cause Christ to sin. Christ has won round 1. Now Satan tries his next temptation, and in vv.5-7 we see:

II. CHRIST WAS VICTORIOUS OVER THE TEMPTATION OF PRESUMPTION

Satan took Jesus to the temple complex, not just the sanctuary of the temple itself. Now I had always visualized Jesus up on the edge of the roof of the temple building. But actually, it was a different location. You see, when Herod expanded the temple courts, he had to build a retaining wall to do so, because the temple was near the edge of one of the hills of Jerusalem. The retaining wall was back-filled to enlarge the temple courts. Well the retaining wall at the southeast corner of the Temple complex was probably at least 50 feet high. And then at the base of the retaining wall there was a steep grade of several hundred more feet down to the Kidron Valley below (cf. v.6b). It is still very much like that even today. So picture Jesus at the edge of such a high wall, looking down into the rocky valley below. And now consider with me:

A. The Essence of the Temptation - From that high point, Satan proceeded to tempt Jesus. He said to Him in v.6, “If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down. For it is written: ‘He shall give His angels charge over you,’ and, ‘In their hands they shall bear you up, Lest you dash your foot against a stone.’” This may have been a follow-up to the response of Jesus to the first temptation. Satan was saying something like: “So, you trust your Father? Well let’s see how much you trust God. If you will not work a miracle for yourself, then let God work one for you. And since you seem to know Scripture, let me give you one,” and he proceeded to quote from Psalm 91:11-12, which he alleges will give Him a promise of safety. However, Satan misquoted Scripture. He left out the words, “in all your ways.” That made it easier to interpret the passage as if it were a promise of the Lord to protect the righteous no matter what he does. God does not promise this.

So what was the temptation here? Satan was urging the Lord to be presumptuous, not trusting. Furthermore, he was tempting Christ to put God to the test, to *prove* the reality of God’s love and care.

We are often tempted to demand a visible proof of God’s presence and care. For example, someone may say, “God, if you don’t heal me, I won’t believe in you.” That is not faith, but putting God to the test. God has given us His Word and we should take Him at His Word and trust Him without putting Him to the test.³

B. Jesus’ Response - The Lord knew His Bible better than to be taken in by Satan’s garbled version of a much-loved Messianic Psalm. So in v.7 Jesus said to him, “It is written again, ‘You shall not tempt [or test] the LORD your God.’” It would appear that such an act would be the highest act of faith. But it is not. There were 2 problems with such presumptive “faith”:

1. If you have to have a miracle in order to believe God, then you *lack* true faith. True faith does not put God to the test. Jesus quotes Dt. 6:16 which says, “You shall not tempt the LORD your God as you tempted Him in Massah.” That incident is found in Ex. 17:1-7. There they complained against Moses and God because there was no water. They *demand*ed water and said, “Is the LORD among us or not? If He is, then prove it by giving us water.” Instead of waiting on God’s provision, they put Him to the test. Putting God to the test is when you insist that God do something to prove Himself to you. True faith does not demand signs from heaven or miracles, but simply believes the Word of God.

³ I really don’t believe this was an appeal to be sensational. I believe that very few people, if any, would have even seen Him jump.

Now the second thing that was wrong with Satan's temptation was the fact that it was contrary to the following principle:

2. Faith Is Based on the Word of God - Now if God had commanded Jesus to cast Himself down, to do it would have been right. As He had not, to do it was not faith, but self-will and presumption. The Scripture Satan quoted did not support that idea of God's protection even in cases such as this, but in "all your ways."

Psa. 91 has been quoted during the pandemic. V.10 says, "No evil shall befall you, Nor shall any plague come near your dwelling." Then the next two verses were quoted by Satan. I believe we can trust God to protect us from the plague, but we must be careful not to cross the line into presumption and putting God to the test. If you take no steps to protect yourself, visit someone who is under quarantine (Lev.13-15), and if you willfully violate reasonable governmental health regulations (1 Pet. 2:13), will God honor such faith? Do not do foolish things and demand that God deliver you from the result of foolish actions. The Bible says, "You reap what you sow."

The lessons for us from the second temptation are weighty. Faith may be perverted. Daily life all around us affords abundant illustrations of false confidence. We tempt God when we put ourselves into circumstances that force Him to work miracles on our behalf. The diabetic who refuses to take insulin and argues, "Jesus will take care of me," may be tempting the Lord. God's rescuing power is not something to be experimented with; it is something to be quietly trusted in everyday life. The moment a man begins to tempt God, to prove trust; he proves that he does not trust. Perfect trust is submissive to God's will. We can claim God's protection only if we are in the center of God's will.

So round 2 is over. Jesus has won another victory over Satan and his temptation. Now the devil drops his mask and, having failed miserably in the first two attempts to conquer his enemy, stakes everything in one final, desperate attempt to achieve his purpose. And in this final temptation we will see that:

III. CHRIST WAS VICTORIOUS OVER THE TEMPTATION OF POWER

Most people like to have power. Many of our governors have declared a state of emergency, giving them broad, sweeping powers. Well, were going to see how Satan offered Christ position and power. Once again, let's consider:

A. The Essence of the Temptation – In v.8 we see that Satan begins this temptation by showing Christ all the kingdoms of the world. For Satan to show Christ all the kingdoms of the world would have required a miracle, even from a high mountain. Growing up in Georgia I would see many signs that said, "See seven states from Lookout Mountain," Tennessee, supposedly even Kentucky and Virginia. Well, I went there one time and could see only about 3 miles! Furthermore, Luke adds that he did this "in a moment." Jesus saw the proud glory of imperial Rome. He was saying, "All of it can be Yours—not just Rome, but beyond the Euphrates." Satan boasted that he has control over the kingdoms of the world (cf. Acts 26:18). That was partly true, but it was a great lie also. There is indication that he has temporary control now, but he could not grant permanent control. Remember, dear friend, that everything the devil can offer you is only temporary. It will not bring any lasting satisfaction.

Now Satan's offer was tempting in at least 2 respects:

1. Satan Appealed to Personal Ambition - How appealing it would be to many of us to be king of the world.

Once again:

2. Satan Appealed to Instant Gratification - Satan knew that according to Psa. 2, the Son is promised a kingdom. "Ask of Me, and I will give You the nations for Your inheritance..." (v.8). Conceding the fact that Jesus is Messiah and that He will one day set up a Kingdom on earth, the devil offered Jesus a shortcut to His kingdom. For Jesus that kingdom would be received only after a 3 1/2 year ministry and after suffering and dying on a cross. We now know that Christ has waited 2000 more years so far to become king, not just over His church, but the whole world. So Satan tempts Him to accept a kingdom *now*. All He would have to do is bow down and worship Satan just once (aorist tense). Then He could enjoy all the glory and power *now*, and without enduring any suffering.

Oh, how Satan effectively uses that kind of temptation today. Satan is always offering instant gratification. The Bible admits there is temporary pleasure in sin. Too many are like Esau, who traded the surpassing, future value of his birthright for the immediate and temporary pleasure of a mess of pottage. Youth seem vulnerable to this temptation. For example, Satan will say, "Why wait until marriage to experience the pleasure of sexual intimacy. I will give it to you now. Why wait until you are 21 to experience the high of alcohol. I will give it to you now." And many young people fall for such temptations of Satan!

Child of God, God's way may be the path of delayed gratification and even suffering, but it is the path of greater blessing ultimately, both in this life, and in the life to come. (Cf. Heb. 12:2).

B. Jesus' Response – In v.10 Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.'" Jesus' reply was simply, "God forbids it," and he quoted Scripture to prove that God forbids that we worship anyone but Him. Ex. 20:3 gives one of the 10 Commandments: "You shall have no other gods before Me." Christ put God and obedience to God above everything.

There is a beautiful principle here. If you will just learn the Word of God and obey the Word of God life is much more simple and better. If God says don't do it, just don't do it.

C. Share in the Supremacy of Christ – The final round of the conflict is over. Jesus was victorious over the most powerful temptations Satan could throw at Him. And because Jesus resisted all of the temptations of Satan, He experienced two blessings.

1. Satan Will Leave You - Because of his victory Jesus could issue the command, "Be gone, Satan." And v.11 shows the result of Christ's supremacy over him. Matthew says, "Then the devil left Him..."

The good news is that 1 John 4:4 indicates we can have that same supremacy. John says, "Greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world." James 4:7 says, "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." If you are a Christian, Satan has no authority over you. You can't say, "The devil *made* me do it." 1 Cor. 10:13 says, "No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it." Also, 2 Peter 2:9 says, "the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations...." There is never a necessity for the believer to sin. When you are tempted, remember that.

2. God Will Minister to Your Needs – We see an example of this in the last of v.11 says, "and behold, angels came and ministered to Him." They must have brought Him some heavenly hash, cool refreshing water, and perhaps some angel food cake for dessert! How would you like to be served a meal by angels?

And Christian friend, say “No” to temptation, and the Lord will take care of you and reward you as He did for Jesus. He will give you the joy of victory, peace from a clear conscience, your needs will be met, and ultimately, you will receive a heavenly reward. James 1:12 says, “Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life....” The Lord’s way is always the best way.

Conclusion – The battle is over. Christ won the victory. He was now ready to begin His ministry. He has proven perfect obedience. Now He has the right to call on others to obey God. Let us give Him our obedience and loyalty as Lord of our lives. And the Gospel writer has added yet more evidence that Jesus is the Son of God. And as the sinless, spotless Lamb of God, He will offer up Himself as a sacrifice for sin. If you have not yet believed in Jesus as your Savior, why not do so today? Don’t let the devil continue his victory over your life. Repent of your sins, and trust in Christ instead.

Most here today are Christians. Now let me review for you how you can have victory over temptation: 1) Learn the Word of God. Jesus quoted Scripture with each temptation. Eph. 6:12 says, “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age....” Eph. 6:17 says the Word of God is “the sword of the Spirit.” 2) Trust in the power of God available to you to enable you to overcome that temptation. 3) Grow in love with Jesus more and more. Delight in His love. Ps. 34:8 says, “Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good; Blessed is the man who trusts in Him!” Ps. 84:11b says, “No good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly.” The more you love Jesus, the less appeal the temptations of the world will have.

John Burroughs, the naturalist, says that when a hawk is attacked by crows or kingbirds, he does not make a counterattack, but soars higher and higher in ever widening circles until his tormentors leave him alone.⁴ I thank the Lord that the Lord has brought me along so that many things the devil has to offer are not even appealing to me any longer.

Sources: William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series: Matthew* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975); Charles R. Erdman, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Westminster, 1966); Oliver B. Greene, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Vol. 1, (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, Inc., 1971); William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture, Vol 6* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House); G. Campbell Morgan, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1929); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible [CD-ROM]* (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); John Philips, *Exploring The Gospel of Matthew: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999); Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew*, reprint, Christian Publishing Co.; James S. Stewart, *The Life and Teaching of Jesus Christ* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, no date), 39-45; Jerry Vines, *Great Events in the Life of Christ* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1979); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Loyal: Matthew* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1980). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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⁴ Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: #6525* (Rockville, Maryland: Assurance Publishers, 1979).