

Jesus' Temptations in the Wilderness

What was really involved in the temptations of Christ Jesus in the wilderness? If we can grasp a proper concept of just exactly what Jesus' temptations in the wilderness were, it will be a tremendous advantage to us in our Christian walk. In these three temptations of Jesus, Satan was doing all he could to spoil Christ's ministry – destroy the potential that God, the Father, had for Jesus Christ, His Son, to accomplish while He was here on earth.

Compressed within the description of these temptations is a prototype of Satan's work in the Christian's life. Satan seeks to attack the believer in a manner that will devastate God's desires and purpose He seeks to achieve in, and through, the believer's life.

Hebrews 4:15 teaches that Christ was “*in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.*” Jesus “*was in every way tested exactly as we are – yet without sin.*” What does that mean? Certainly, there are temptations today that did not exist in Jesus' day. What God is saying is that Jesus was tempted in the same area of temptations – the equivalent manner of temptations – that every believer is tempted. Jesus lived an earthly life like every one of us live, yet He lived without any sin.

It is important to consider the fact that Satan's temptations were attacks to rob Jesus of the potential ministry He was about to enter. Jesus, having just been baptized by water, heard His Father said, “*This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.*” (Matthew 3:16-17) The Holy Spirit led Him into the wilderness to be tempted (tested, as Adam was tested). From the time that this wilderness was over, Jesus was to begin His public ministry (Matthew 4:17).

Jesus' temptations in the wilderness demonstrate *three* kinds of temptations that every believer faces. These temptations may come from different sources, but there are just “*three*” various methods of approach in which Satan attacks the believer. Let's look closely at Jesus' three temptations and learn how to recognize these three forms of satanic attack.

Let's first read of Jesus' first temptation in the wilderness as recorded in Matthew 4.

“Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward a hungered. And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread. But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:1-4).

Here we witness an encounter between Jesus and the Devil and view a stupendous, breathtaking, *moral* contest between good and evil. Here titanic forces are locked in combat. The prize is *ruler* of this world. The kingdoms of this world – the moral balance of the universe – eternal life and eternal death – are at stake in this conflict of the ages!

Jesus was, and is, the Son of God, Satan could not change that – but he seeks to destroy Jesus' ministry – to make God's work invalid – to destroy the potential God had for Jesus to achieve. Satan presents himself before Jesus and presses his first temptation. The Devil attacks at the greatest temporary vulnerability. Verse 2 tells us that, after 40 days of fasting, Jesus was

physically hungry. Satan, knowing this, moved into his first attack. He said to Jesus, *“If You are the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread.”*

Miracle on Demand

The Devil suggests that Jesus ask God, the Father, to work a miracle on demand. The natural question that arises is, *“Is it a valid solution to ask God to work a miracle to satisfy physical needs, or some personal problems? Is the purpose of God’s supernatural miracles to bring temporary human satisfaction?”*

It is imperative that we realize that Satan’s temptation was not for Jesus to forsake God, but rather, Satan’s suggestion was that Jesus approach God for a wrong reason. The Devil sought to nullify Jesus’ potential ministry, as he does believers today! These are not the temptations of sinners, but temptations of Christians who seek to be used to their absolute total possibilities.

Jesus’ answer was, *“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.”*

The physical, or natural, event in God’s performing a miracle is, of itself, *not* the significance thing. The true significance of every miracle can only be understood by *“every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God”* – His divine Word! Miracles are not, of themselves, the significant thing! Their significance lies in a knowledge and understanding of Divine Truth.

We, of course, believe, and God’s Word teaches that miracles are for today! However, the question is not, whether or not we believe in miracles, but rather, the real question is why do we believe God will perform a miracle.

What Are God’s Promises For?

The real issue is, *“Why are God’s promises given to us?”* It is to see how far we can stretch them? Let me illustrate the answer to this question. Imagine a highway with sharp curves on the edge of a deep precipice. The highway department installs a fence and tells us, *“Now you will be protected from a life-threatening plunge over the dangerous embankment.”*

What are we supposed to do? Are we to get a large truck, fill it full with some heavy load, and drive it at high speed into the retaining wall to see if it is strong enough to stand the test? Is this how we *“prove”* whether the promising possibilities of the fence is true or not?

No, of course not! The fence is put there to protect us from unusual circumstances! If we are driving along the road and a tire blows, the car will bounce off the retaining fence. In case of emergency, the fence is there to prevent us from going over the precipices. It is there to help us when we are in deep trouble at that point of our travels.

God’s promises are, in the normal course of events, our needs will be supplied and, when extreme circumstances prevail, then our extremity becomes God’s opportunity.

Let’s look at some basic questions concerning miracles – and get our answers from the only reliable source – God’s Word.

What are Miracles?

A true divine miracle is a supernatural phenomenon occurring, contradictory to the laws of nature.

What was the main reason for the miracles Jesus performed? Let's look at Hebrews 2:3-4 for an answer:

“How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him; God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to His own will?”

I realize that this first statement concerning “*neglecting so great a salvation*” has been used to preach to those who have rejected Jesus Christ as Savior – and that is not wrong! Those who neglect salvation will not escape God's wrath to come. However, the book of Hebrews was written *primarily* to give instruction in Christian growth to believers. Development of a Christ-like character is the main theme of the book of Hebrews. Here, God is saying, “*If you neglect this, [If you neglect Christian development] how can you escape?*” – He continues, “*This Biblical truth first began to be spoken by Jesus Christ, Himself, and was confirmed unto us by those who heard Him, God also bearing them witness, by supernatural signs and wonders and many different miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.*”

Miracles, then, are to fulfill God's objective, to demonstrate God's purpose, not His power!

It would please Satan immensely to get the believer so interested in miracles – and the display God's power – that the believer loses sight of God's kingdom and God's purpose.

The book of Hebrews comes a grand climax in chapter 11, where God lists His great heroes of the faith. As one reads this 11th chapter of Hebrews he finds name after name of the great men and women of faith who lived and died. We read of those whom God used mightily down through the ages. But you look in vain, if you seek to find even a few miracles listed in this chapter of faith. What you do see is their faith and ability to endure cruel afflictions, even when they did not see the results of their faith, or receive the promises of God in this life.

Hebrews 11:36-40 concludes God's “*Hall Mark of Faith,*” when it states,

*“**And others** had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect.”*

Like the prophet Job, they lived by the motto, “*Though God slay me, yet I will trust Him.*”

Many Christians have what could be called, a “*mess-of-pottage*” approach to life, living, as Esau lived – “*Who, for a mess of pottage, sold his birth-right for temporary gratification*” – and their spiritual potential is ruined.

Notice that Satan tempted Jesus to circumvent God’s purpose for His life – in favor of a supernatural display of power, just to meet a physical need.

Does God work any miracles to bring us bread? Yes, if the need requires it – and God’s purpose is being wrought. God can, and does, work through *unnatural* means – miracles, when the situation demands. However, wheat grown in the field, brought to the granary, ground into flour, baked into loaves, is still God working – but through *natural* laws.

Those who expect God to provide them “*daily bread*” while they do nothing to bring it about, will be sadly mistaken. 2 Thessalonians 3:10 tells us “*This we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat!*”

There is a danger of becoming “*spiritually irresponsible.*” God is not at our beck and call to perform miracles on our demand. God had a purpose behind every miracle. It was for the advancement of His Kingdom and is was not just to satisfy man’s temporary need.

One way Satan can deprive the Christian of his full potential is to gets his attention on the immediate problem and seek a quick fix – rather than allowing God to fulfill His eternal purpose through it all.

Satan’s second temptation to destroy the ministry of Jesus was to . . .

PRODUCE A SPIRITUAL SPECTACULAR TO IMPRESS PEOPLE

*“**Then** the devil taketh Him up into the holy city, and setteth Him on a pinnacle of the temple, And saith unto Him, If Thou be the Son of God, cast Thyself down: for it is written, He shall give His angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone”*
(Matthew 4:5-6)

Think of it! There would have been thousands gathered in the Temple courtyard. How impressive they would have been to see Jesus jump from the high pinnacle of the Temple and just as He is about to land on the courtyard, to have angels swoop down and save Him in the nick of time.

Satan produces temptation on a high *spiritual* plane. It is important to note that this was not a temptation to deliberately commit sin, or to forsake God. The Devil even quotes God’s Word to enhance the temptation. What was the temptation? It was a temptation to exploit God’s promises. Satan suggested to Jesus, “*Produce a spiritual spectacular.*”

Was the promise Satan quoted valid? It comes from Psalm 91 where God promises protection and help in spite of impossible circumstances. Listen to Psalm 91,

“He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust. Surely he shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler, and from the noisome pestilence. He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler. Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day; Nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness; nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday. A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee. Only with thine eyes shalt thou behold and see the reward of the wicked. Their habitation Because thou hast made the LORD, which is my refuge, even the most High, thy habitation; There shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling. For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone. Thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder: the young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample under feet. Because he hath set his love upon me, therefore will I deliver him: I will set him on high, because he hath known my name. He shall call upon me, and I will answer him: I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him, and honour him. With long life will I satisfy him, and shew him my salvation” (Psalms 91:1-16).

Certainly this Psalm has been a great source of solace to many believers in time of need. There is no doubt about that. Thousands upon thousands, down through the years, have rejoiced to see these promises fulfilled!

The Devil takes a *valid* promise and uses it to tempt Jesus to move into the realm of the spectacular. Satan says, *“Jump off the pinnacle of the Temple and land safely on the stones below. Make a grandstand play! Become a spiritual superstar that will make a lasting impression on everyone – This is the key to spiritual success!”*

Satan still tempts believers in the same manner today. There are preachers who have ceased to believe in the power of prevailing prayer and trust in *“public relations promotion.”* Some even hire public relations firms to tailor their *“image”* – for the news media, and television shows – for impressionable multitudes.

Jesus' name is famous from Greenland's icy mountains to India's coral strand. He has fame – not because He cast Himself off the pinnacle of the Temple, but rather, because He gave Himself to fulfill the purpose of His Father had for His life – going to the cross and dying for the world's sins.

The best answer to Satan's suggestion is the answer Jesus gave, *“Thou shalt not put the Lord thy God to the test”* (Matthew 4:7). Satan said, *“Exploit the promises of God.”* Jesus answered, *“Don't bring God to court to attempt to persuade Him to produce what we presume He has promised.”* We must not demand our rights and treat God as if He were delinquent on His promises.

Philippians 4:19 does promise, “*My God shall supply all our need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus,*” however, it does not say, nor does it mean, that God will take care of us regardless how lazy, reckless or irresponsible, we are!

The New Testament is full of God’s of call to diligence and carefulness, lest Christians get the reputation of being fools – foolishness based on a false view of Scripture! Jesus, quotes from God’s Word, (Deuteronomy 6:16), “*Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God!*”

There are those who say they are “*living by faith,*” and have become charity cases. This ought not to be! We cannot, by a so-called “act of faith,” force God to perform a miracle!

Faith is “*resting in the Lord!*” It’s trust in God to know what is best. Living by faith means that God is the source of our ultimate confidence and, when we discover His will, we follow it as closely as possible

Genuine faith is a lot different than “*exploiting God’s promises*” to show what deep spiritual faith one has. That only damages the believer’s soul and hurts the faith of others!

God will keep His promises, He will “*supply all our needs according to His riches in Christ Jesus,*” however, only God’s omniscience...[His infinite knowledge]...knows what my needs are. I may perceive “*my need*” to be riches, when my real need is severe discipline!

It is Satan’s trick to tempt the believer to claim a promise that simply does not apply to the given situation. We must have wisdom that comes only from God to know the difference between genuine faith and presumption!

- Faith produces marvelous results in the lives of people.
- Presumption produces nothing but spiritual disaster!

The struggle to discern the difference between the two is due to one’s lack of knowledge of the Word of God.

Let me repeat, the deficiency of spiritual discernment between genuine faith and presumption is due to the lack of knowledge of God’s Word. It is God’s Word that produces “*spiritual discernment.*”

Study again the paragraph on page 2 – “*What Are God’s Promises For?*”

The promises of God must never become a substitute for faithfulness. It is Scriptural to say, “*All things are ours,*” however, that does not give us the right to steal. No, God’s Word teaches also, that one is to work and support his family – to be industrious! Our interpretation of a promise of God must be consistent with the *whole* of Scripture.

We dare not *revere* the promises of God more than the God who gives them. It is possible to lose sight of the Person, Jesus Christ, because our eyes are filled with His gifts.

A. B. Simpson, founder of the Christian and Missionary Alliance church states it wisely:

Once it was the blessing, now it is the Lord;

Once it was the feeling, now it is His Word;
 Once His gift I wanted, now the Giver own;
 Once I sought for healing, now Himself alone,
 Once 'twas painful trying, now 'tis perfect trust;
 Once a half salvation, now the uttermost!
 Once 'twas ceaseless holding, now He holds me fast;
 Once 'twas constant drifting, now my anchor's cast.
 Once 'twas busy planning, now 'tis trustful prayer;
 Once 'twas anxious caring, now He has the care;
 Once 'twas what I wanted, now what Jesus says;
 Once 'twas constant asking, now 'tis ceaseless praise
 Once it was my working, His it hence shall be;
 Once I tried to use Him, now He uses me;
 Once the power I wanted, now the Mighty One
 Once for self I labored, now for Him alone.
 Once I hoped in Jesus, now I know He's mine;
 Once my lamps were dying, now they brightly shine;
 Once for death I waited, now His coming hail;
 And my hopes are anchored safe within the veil.

TO REVIEW

1. Satan's first temptation, the "mess-of-pottage" approach, failed – because Jesus would not seek a miracle to satisfy any immediate personal need.
2. Satan's second temptation, the grandstand approach – to presume on God's promises, failed – because Jesus would not exploit the promises of God foolishly.
3. Satan tries a third attack in his attempt to destroy Christ's potential ministry:

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*“Again, the devil taketh Him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth Him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; And saith unto Him, All these things will I give Thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me” (Matthew 4:8-9).*

Satan offers Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. This was a valid offer! Scripture tells us that the Devil is the “*prince of this world*” (John 12:31; 14:30 and 16:11) – “*the god of this world*” (2 Corinthians 4:4) – “*the prince and power of the air*” (Ephesians 2:2) – “*the spirit that now works in children of disobedience*” (Ephesians 2:2) – “*the whole world lies in the wickedness*” [that is, “*with the wicked one*”] (1 John 5:19). As a result of Adam's abduction, the whole world is owned and operated by the Devil and he was offering it to Jesus – “*if He would bow down and worship him.*”

We do not know Christ's thought at that moment, but we can be sure that He was pressed by this temptation – or – it would not have been a temptation. “*Jesus was tempted in all points like as we are.*” All of the pull of satanic magnetism was presented to Jesus at that moment.

Does this sound so strange? Doesn't Satan offer us a certain amount of materialism – materialistic gain – in order to destroy our potential ministry?

Jesus' method of withstanding this powerful pressure, is given in verse 10, Jesus immediately quotes God's Word – *“Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve.”*

Jesus did not take time to *“think it over,”* but rather, He instantly gave a clear, straightforward answer, that, in essence, was a total and final, *“No! Get out of here, Satan, because God said in His Word, to worship God – and Him only should we worship!”*

The believer, who puts God first in his life, allowing nothing to come between him and God, will always give the right answer to the Devil.

Satan tempts by saying that the way to gain fulfillment – and the things of this world – is to worship him, however, Jesus says, *“The path to fulfillment is to turn to the Living God and worship Him only!”*

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Let me sum up the three temptations of Jesus:

The first temptation was to distrust God's love and care. To attempt to provide only for the immediate physical need, supply bread. It was Satan's an attack to use the power of God for personal gain or satisfaction. To take things into one's own hands and try to do it their own way. It says, in essence, *“God's order and appointment does not maintain us.”* or, *“I'll use God power to provide immediate gratification.”*

The second temptation was to presume that God would do things my way. Satan uses a legitimate promise, however, he perverted, misquoted and misapplied it. The promise is not *“God will keep us in all **OUR** ways”* – if we get out of God's ways.

Satan said, in essence, *“Do something sensational to show off your spirituality.”*

Jesus, confident that God was His Heavenly Father and that He would take care of Him, would not *“tempt”* Him – experiment by attempting to use God's promises to impress others by doing something sensational.

The third temptation was to worship the ways of Satan to gain the things of this world.

If you sincerely desire to enter into a ministry where God will use you to your full potential, then we must be aware of this pitfalls of Satan – and be on guard in these areas.

