
Tested in the Wilderness

Matthew 4:1-11

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God tests us. I hope that comes as no surprise. But what is shocking to many is the truth that Matthew lays out for us in this text: God tests us through temptations...

The New Testament is often an exposition, an explanation or an expansion of Old Testament texts and themes. Matthew has several important texts in mind with this opening part of Jesus' ministry. The truths and themes in Genesis 3, Deuteronomy 8 and James 1 form the basis for this text and later, for 1 John 2:15-17.

In Genesis 3, a perfect woman in a perfect place is tempted by Satan. She believes Satan's lies. Those lies give rise to desiring what God has forbidden.

⁶ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.

Here we see what John will help us to see even more clearly when he writes (1 John 2:15–17):

¹⁵ Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶ For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. ¹⁷ And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

The desire of the flesh is, "she saw that the tree was good for food."

The desire of the eyes is, "[she saw that] it was a delight to the eyes."

The pride of life is, "[she saw that] the was to be desired to make one wise."

Jesus' temptation will be in the same categories. But He is the perfect man, in the desolate wilderness, fasting who will submit His heart, His beliefs and His wants to His Father's will. Eve was tested through temptation and failed. Jesus will be tested through temptation as well.

James 1, which would have been in circulation when Matthew wrote his book, frames in this relationship between testing and temptations. James 1:2–4; 12-15:

² Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³ for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴ And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

¹² Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. ¹³ Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. ¹⁴ But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. ¹⁵ Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

God uses the trials and temptations to test, to refine, to expose hearts and as an opportunity to bear good fruit, to obey God from the heart.

Matthew structures this section of his book to show that Jesus is the new Israel of God. He is the out of Egypt called son, baptized, pleasing to God, and now tested in the wilderness.

¹⁶ And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; ¹⁷ and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

^{4:1} Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.

Arranged by God (3:17-4:2)

Matthew shows us how God prepares for this test of Jesus. But this is more than a story in the moment. Matthew is writing to tell us something profound about our own Christian lives...

By being Approved by God

(3:17)

At the end of the baptism, the Holy Spirit descends like a dove and the Father speaks. In the Father's speech, Jesus is approved by God.

Jesus is approved by God in His identity. The Father declares that Jesus is the Son of God. His identity is established. He is God, the second person of the Trinity. This is parallel to Deuteronomy 7.

Jesus is approved in His purity. The Father is pleased with Jesus. God delights in Christ.

By being Led by the Spirit (4:1)

God is taking Jesus into the wilderness to test Him by exposing Him to Satan's temptations. Through the temptation, Jesus' identity and purity will be challenged.

By Following the Plan of God

Jesus' going into the wilderness follows the plan of God. This is not an accident. It is in accordance with the types in the Old Testament and with what the Scriptures declare.

By Serving the Purposes of God

Jesus is led into the wilderness in order to be tested and tried. God's purpose is to vindicate Jesus' identity and purity through this testing.

By being Weakened through the Fasting (v.2)

It is almost certain that this is a religious exercise. He is fasting, not simply because there is no food, but because he has intentionally chosen not to eat.

Physical weakness is often the situation in which Satan will tempt us. It has the effect of heightening the physical temptations and weakening our spiritual resolve.

Tempted by the Devil (v.3-10)

The temptation is testing to see whether Jesus will obey God from the heart. Like Eve, He is tempted directly. Like Israel, He is tested to expose and exhibit what is in His heart. The Word of God is the bullseye in each of these temptations and all the testing.

The temptations are designed to challenge the identity of Christ. "If you are the Son of God" then you ought to be able to do these things. It has the "Come on, prove yourself" effect.

In the Needs of the Body (v.3-4)

Jesus is hungry. The body surely is craving food. But the right, natural desires of the body, even at the "craving" level, do not excuse sin. Satan's temptation frames heart issues for our own temptations:

³ And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." ⁴ But he answered, "It is written,

" 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.' "

To use His creative power to serve Himself.

His Divine power is not for His own, personal use. It is always to be subjected to the will of God, His Father.

To be impatient in the will of God

God will provide for Jesus in His own time. While Jesus may have the ability to do what Satan is suggesting, it is not the time now. He will wait on God.

To obey the commands of the tempter

Satan offers this first temptation as an imperative. It is spoken as a command. It is meant to see if Jesus will obey Satan to satisfy His body.

To give in to the demands of the body.

The wants, needs and even cravings of the body are to be in submission to the Word and the will of God.

Jesus' response in quoting from Deuteronomy 8 is not just an answer to turning stones into bread to satisfy His hunger. It tells us what is going on here. He connects His own experience with that of Israel. The wilderness with its hunger is a place to hear and heed the Word of God.

¹ “The whole commandment that I command you today you shall be careful to do, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land that the LORD swore to give to your fathers. ² And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. ³ And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.

In the Misuse of the Scriptures (v.5-7)

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple ⁶ and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, “ ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and “ ‘On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.’ ”

⁷ Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’ ”

In this temptation, Satan takes Jesus up to the Temple and then, quoting a part of Psalm 91:9-13. Satan tempts Jesus in two significant areas.

By changing the meaning of the text (Psalm 91:9-13)

Satan is changing what the text means – the dwelling place of the Most High is not the building made with hands but the eternal habitation of God. That is first the Lord Jesus and, later, the heavenly city of Zion.

By seeking to test God

It is not faith to put oneself in unnecessary danger in order to see if God will do what He says. It is presumption, even in the promises of God, to take risks solely to prove that God will keep His Word.

By attempting to end Jesus' life early

Satan does not believe that Jesus will be rescued. He thinks that if Jesus does this, then he will probably die. This is another attempt to destroy Jesus before He gets to the cross.

In the Worship of the Lord (v.8-10)

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. ⁹ And he said to him, “All these

I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”¹⁰ Then Jesus said to him, “Be gone, Satan! For it is written, “ ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve’”

Satan tempts in three critical areas:

By offering pleasure now instead of the pain now.

Jesus would be responding to the immediate gratification offered by Satan. Is Jesus willing to wait on God’s time for the public acknowledgment and acceptance of the Kingdom? This is an issue of the cross. Why not receive all that was promised without having the pain and suffering entailed?

By making promises he cannot and will not keep.

Jesus would be recognizing the illegitimate authority of Satan. Satan has no authority to do this, even as the prince and power of the air.

By eliciting praise he does not deserve or is entitled to.

Jesus would be reverencing Satan instead of worshipping God.

How do the temptations of Jesus fit into the schema of 1 John and James?

Jesus is tempted with three temptations, each one similar in category to the desires of the body, the desires of the eyes and the pride of life.

Jesus’ temptations by Satan are tests by God through which Jesus is proven to be without sin.

Reflect and Respond

God is at work to expose what is in your heart. He will bring particular times of testing, trial and temptation to show you what is going on in your inner man.

Your heart exerts an inescapable control over your behavior – your actions and emotions. You live out of the flow of words in your heart. You do and feel what you believe and want. Teacher: illustrate this with an example of wanting, denied and anger, frustration, etc resulting.

Physical weakness and vulnerability are special times of testing and temptation for our good. Our sin is not excused in these times. If anything, we are more accountable because God is doing an intentional work.

There is neither task nor trial too great for us to bear; God has made provision for them both.

Our great and merciful High Priest has been tempted just as we are and is able to come to our aid. May we be motivated to come to Christ for help.

