

The First Temptation of Jesus Matthew 4:3-4

A COUPLE WERE STRUGGLING to make ends meet after building their dream home. One day they went shopping, the man went to the men's clothing section and wife to the women's section. A little later the wife came with a \$1000 bill for a dress she bought. "How could you do this?!" Man asked. "I was outside the store looking at the dress in the window, and then I found myself trying it on," she explained. "It was like Satan was whispering in my ear, 'You look fabulous in that dress. Buy it!'" "Well," the husband replied, "You know how I deal with that kind of temptation. I would say, 'Get behind me, Satan!'" "I did," replied his wife," but then he said, 'It looks fabulous from back here, too!'"

3 THE TEMPTER came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread." 4 But he answered, "It is written, 'Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God'" (Matthew 4:3-4).

NOTICE THAT MATTHEW refers to Satan here as "the tempter." Mark calls him "Satan" (1:13), while Luke calls him "the devil" (4:2). Matthew is doing more than merely identifying our Lord's opponent; he is describing his nature and his character. This is who Satan is; this is what Satan does. He is the "tempter," and then, if he is successful, he becomes the "accuser" (see Revelation 12:10; Zechariah 3:1). Satan finds his joy in tempting, deceiving, and ultimately destroying people (he is both a liar and a murderer – John 8:44).

This is who Satan is, but notice carefully how Satan presents himself when he tempts (both at the fall in the Garden of Eden, and here). He comes alongside as an objective, HELPFUL "FRIEND." He discloses no conflict of interest. He appears to have nothing to gain. No wonder Eve can say (and Paul agrees – 1 Timothy 2:14) that the devil deceived her (Genesis 3:13).

I need to pause to offer a word of caution here. Some of the very worst counsel you will ever receive will be from well-meaning friends. Job's "friends," for example, felt they were being helpful, and that their counsel was right. But in the end, they were wrong (see Job 42:7-9). PETER THOUGHT HE was being a "friend" to Jesus when he rebuked the Saviour for talking about His death on the cross, but Jesus makes it clear where Peter's "counsel" was coming from:

22 So Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid, Lord! This must not happen to you." 23 But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me, because you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but on man's" (Matthew 16:22-23).

THE FIRST RECORDED TEMPTATION of our Lord actually sounds tempting to me. In some ways, it seems very logical for our Lord to command stones to become bread. Let's imagine that you were hiking in the mountains, far from civilization, and you are really lost. You are out of supplies and help is far away. Then you realize that you have your cell phone with you. Doesn't it make sense that you would use the cell phone to call for help? What could be wrong with using any available resources to save your life?

In my opinion, the reasoning Satan employs in the first temptation of our Lord goes something like this:

"Here you are, Jesus, out in the wilderness where there is no food. Forty days have passed already, and if you don't do something soon you will be dead. Now what good could you possibly be to anyone if you are dead? Save yourself by commanding that these stones become bread. And, after all, you are the Messiah are you not, so you have the power to do this."

ON THE SURFACE, it may seem that this first temptation has little correspondence to Satan's temptation of Eve in the Garden of Eden. Eden was the perfect place, a lush and fruitful garden, with a vast selection of delicious foods. It had plenty of water as well, and no wild beasts to fear. While the settings of these two temptations (in the Garden of Eden and in the wilderness) may be very different, the temptations themselves have a number of points of similarity. Consider the following:

(1) The tempter is the same person – Satan.

(2) Both cases involve eating food which should not be eaten. In the Garden, Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat of the one tree. In the wilderness, the Holy Spirit had led Jesus to fast,

and thus eating anything would be wrong, until God indicated that the time of fasting had ended.

(3) Both temptations were a direct attack on the right to rule of the ones divinely appointed to do so. Adam and Eve were commissioned to rule over God's creation (Genesis 1:26-28), and so was our Lord (Matthew 3:13-17).

(4) The temptation of both is based upon the Satan's insinuation that God does not have their best interest in mind. In the case of the deception of Eve, Satan implied that God withheld a good thing from them when He forbade them to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In the case of our Lord, Satan implies that Jesus is about to die of starvation.

(5) In both cases, Satan seeks to entice those who are to be in submission to God to act independently of God, seeking to achieve what Satan has declared to be in their best interest.

(6) In both cases, Satan solicits individuals to rebel against the revealed will of God. In the case of Adam and Eve, they rebelled by disobeying a direct command of God which forbade them to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In the case of our Lord, Satan sought to persuade Him to act in a way that rebelled against the leading and guidance of the Holy Spirit, who had "driven" (Mark 1:12; "led," Matthew 4:1) Jesus into the wilderness, and who was leading Him not to eat.

I MUST ADMIT that I initially allowed myself to get side-tracked by the fact that food was involved in this first temptation. Needless to say, Jesus was famished because He had not eaten for 40 days. Satan attempted to convince Jesus to create food for Himself out of the stones. But in the end, it is not really food that is at issue, but life. Let me illustrate this by calling your attention to the story of Jacob and Esau in the Book of Genesis:

27 When the boys grew up, Esau became a skilled hunter, a man of the open fields, but Jacob was an even-tempered man, living in tents. 28 Isaac loved Esau, because he had a taste for fresh game, but Rebekah loved Jacob. 29 Now Jacob cooked some stew, and when Esau came in from the open fields, he was famished. 30 So Esau said to Jacob, "Feed me some of the red stuff—yes, this red stuff—because I'm starving!" (That is why he was also called Edom.) 31 But Jacob replied, "First sell me your birthright." 32 "Look," said Esau, "I'm about to die! What use is the birthright to me?" 33 But Jacob said, "Swear an oath to me now." So Esau swore an

oath to him and sold his birthright to Jacob. 34 Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and lentil stew; Esau ate and drank, then got up and went out. So Esau despised his birthright (Genesis 24:27-34).

Like Jesus, Esau was famished when he came in from the fields. (One hardly gets the impression that he is really about to starve to death, even though he is very hungry.) Jacob had made some tasty stew, and Esau wanted some of it. Rather than give his brother some stew, Jacob used it to obtain his brother's birthright. When Moses records this story, he does not tell us that Esau justified selling his birthright merely because the stew was so tempting; he tells us that Esau gave up his birthright because he was, in his words, "about to die." What good would his birthright do Esau if he died of hunger?

WE HAVE A SAYING, "Where there's life, there's hope." Esau justified his actions because he convinced himself that he was about to die. Saving his life became Esau's justification for selling off his birthright. I think the truth is more on the side that Esau despised his birthright than it is on the side that his life was really at risk.

IN OUR LORD'S WILDERNESS temptation, Satan is playing the part of Jacob as it has been described in the Genesis text above. Jesus has fasted for 40 days, and He is now famished. Humanly speaking, death may not have been all that far away had Jesus not eaten soon. Since our Lord's life was at risk, why shouldn't He take whatever steps were necessary to save it? Since He was the Son of God, He had the power to turn stone into bread. Yet in order to preserve His life, He would have to give up His "birthright," the right to rule.

Our Lord's response to Satan's temptation is the key to understanding what the first temptation was all about:

But he answered, "It is written, 'Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God'" (Matthew 4:4).

THIS RESPONSE IS drawn from the Book of Deuteronomy, chapter 8, where Moses is speaking to the Israelites concerning the lessons they should have learned from their 40-year wilderness journey:

1 You must keep carefully the entire commandment I am giving you today so that you may live, multiply, and go in and occupy the land that the Lord promised to your ancestors. 2 Remember the whole way by which he has brought you these forty years through the desert so that he might, by humbling you, test to see whether deep within yourselves you would keep his commandments or not. 3 So he humbled you by making you hungry and feeding you with unfamiliar manna to make you understand that mankind cannot live by food alone, but also by everything [every utterance] that comes from the Lord's mouth (Deuteronomy 8:1-3).

We know that God sustained the Israelites for 40 years by providing manna and water for them. It was not for lack of food that any died. So far as I can tell from the Old Testament, not one Israelite died of thirst or hunger in the wilderness. God's supernatural provision for the Israelites while in the wilderness became a symbol of His faithfulness.

COMING BACK TO OUR Lord's response to Satan, I believe that He is making this argument:

(1) "Life" certainly includes physical existence, but it also involves much more. Life has a spiritual dimension, which transcends the physical dimension. Let's go back to the fall of man in the Garden of Eden. God told Adam that in the day he (or Eve) ate of the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they would surely die (Genesis 2:17). They did eat, but they also lived on physically for many years. The "death" they first experienced was spiritual death – separation from God. Life is much more than mere physical survival; it is living in fellowship with God.

(2) Spiritual life takes precedence over physical life. Spiritual life is eternal; it endures after physical death. Thus, Spiritual life is more important than physical life.

(3) Food sustains physical life, but the Word of God commences and sustains spiritual life.

22 You have purified your souls by obeying the truth in order to show sincere mutual love. So love one another earnestly from a pure heart. 23 You have been born anew, not from perishable but from imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God. 24 For all flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of the grass; the grass withers and the flower falls off, 25

but the word of the Lord endures forever. And this is the word that was preached to you (1 Peter 1:22-25

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(4) Following Satan's suggestion (temptation) would require Jesus to disregard and disobey God's guidance through the Spirit and to submit Himself to the devil's leadership. It was the Holy Spirit who led Jesus into the wilderness, and even to fast. If Jesus were to break His fast before the Spirit directed Him to do so, He would not only disobey God's leading through the Spirit, but He would also act independently of God; He would act in accordance with Satan's "leading."

WILL OUR LORD ENTRUST HIS LIFE to the Father's care? Will He endure physical death, if need be, in order to live in obedience to the will of His Father? This strikes at the very centre of God's purpose for our Lord. This will not be the last time our Lord will have to deal with the suggestion that He save Himself while disobeying the will of the Father:

21 From that time on Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests, and experts in the law, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. 22 So Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid, Lord! This must not happen to you." 23 But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me, because you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but on man's." 24 THEN JESUS said to his disciples, "If anyone wants to become my follower, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. 25 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. 26 For what does it benefit a person if he gains the whole world but forfeits his life? Or what can a person give in exchange for his life?" (Matthew 16:21-26)

Notice how our Lord contrasts physical life with spiritual life. The one who seeks to save his (physical) life will lose it, while the one who loses his (physical life) for our Lord's sake will find it (spiritual, eternal life).

ON THE CROSS, OUR LORD will once again be challenged to save His physical life:

35 The people also stood there watching, but the rulers ridiculed him, saying, "He saved others.

Let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, his chosen one!" 37 and saying, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself!" 38 There was also an inscription over him, "This is the king of the Jews." 39 One of the criminals who was hanging there railed at him, saying, "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" (Luke 23:35-39)

JESUS WAS IN A WILDERNESS, a deserted place, when He fed the 5,000. The crowds wanted Jesus to keep the meals coming. Notice how the principles which undergirded our Lord at His temptation are now central to our Lord's teaching in John 6:

24 So when the crowd realized that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the boats and came to Capernaum looking for Jesus. 25 When they found him on the other side of the lake, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you get here?" 26 Jesus replied, "I tell you the solemn truth, you are looking for me not because you saw miraculous signs, but because you ate all the loaves of bread you wanted. 27 Do not work for the food that disappears, but for the food that remains to eternal life—the food that the Son of Man will give to you. For God the Father has put his seal of approval on him." 28 So then they said to him, "What must we do to accomplish the deeds God requires?" 29 Jesus replied, "This is the deed God requires—to believe in the one whom he sent." 30 So they said to him, "Then what miraculous sign will you perform, so that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? 31 Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, just as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" 32 Then Jesus told them, "I tell you the solemn truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but my Father is giving you the true bread from heaven. 33 For the bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." 34 So they said to him, "Sir, give us this bread all the time!" 35 Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. The one who comes to me will never go hungry, and the one who believes in me will never be thirsty. 36 But I told you that you have seen me and still do not believe. 37 Everyone whom the Father gives me will come to me, and the one who comes to me I will never send away. 38 For I have come down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of the one who sent me. 39 Now this is the will of the one who sent me—that I should not lose one person of every one he has given me, but raise them all up at the last day. 40 For this is the will of my Father—for every one who looks on the Son and believes in him to have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:24-40).

At the core of this temptation for Jesus and for us are three things:

1 OUR NEEDS

The first temptation of our Lord should instruct us that man has ultimately only one need—God. To know Him and to have fellowship is to possess life in its fullest, even if the path of following him leads to physical death. Satan is always attempting to create the false perception of other, more pressing, needs. Adam and Eve had everything one could ask for, and were kept from but one thing. Satan set about to convince Eve that this one forbidden fruit was her one greatest need, a need so great that she could disobey God to attain it.

How foolish, and yet this same deception is going on all about us, and even within us. In the book written by Tony Walter entitled, *Need, The New Religion*, Walter's thesis is that our culture has subtly re-defined "wants" as "needs," and as such justified our whole-hearted pursuit of these things. I believe that Walter is correct. Satan has, once again, succeeded in focusing our attention on what we do not have, rather than on the sufficiency of God and the bounty of our relationship with Him.

Think about it for a moment. What characterizes your prayers, petition for what you do not have, or praise for what God is, for your blessings in Him. Don't answer. I know all too well from my own experience. But God is enough. He is sufficient. To be found in Him is all we should want, or need. Even physical life should be gratefully set aside for the intimacy of knowing and obeying God. That is why Paul found it difficult to determine how he felt about the outcome of his trial (Phil. 1:19-26). If Christ is our life, our sufficiency, our all, then surely He should be our preoccupation, our highest priority. The materialism which dominates our society, even the church (e.g. the prosperity gospel) informs us that we have been led astray by Satan. Let our Lord's priorities become our own.

2 Our Unbelief

Ultimately, the only reason for our Lord's disobedience (making the stone into bread) would have been unbelief—distrust of the Father's care, of His goodness, of His divine provision. As I understand the Bible, unbelief is the ultimate root of most, if not all, disobedience. Satan caused Adam and Eve to doubt God's goodness and to disbelieve His word concerning judgment for eating of the forbidden fruit. Israel grumbled against God in the wilderness and demanded that God prove Himself because they doubted His goodness and guidance. So it would have been in our Lord's case as well.

Our lack of belief in the goodness of the Lord is the nail that hangs in our life where Satan wants to hang his filthy lies. He whispers in our ears *God does not care for you. He will not provide for*

you. Take matters into your own hands. You can't rely upon God.

David wrote in Psalm 27:13,14 - *I would have despaired unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord In the land of the living.*
Wait for the Lord
; Be strong and let your heart take courage; Yes, wait for the Lord
.

3. Our lack of living skills

The temptation is to survive on this earth. The temptation is to focus only on physical living. But Life is more than mere physical survival and thus must be sustained by more than food. Luke stops after the words, "Man does not live by bread alone," thus emphasizing the fact that life is more than a matter of food. Surely the Old Testament (not to mention the New Testament) makes this abundantly clear. God told Adam and Eve that they would die if they ate the forbidden fruit, yet they continued to live physically after their disobedience. We know that the death they experienced included physical death, but involved much more. So, too, life was much more than physical existence. Intimacy with God was one of the things which was lost, for the evening walks in the garden were ended, along with life in the garden.

However, Matthew adds *but on the very word that comes from the mouth of God.*

Life comes from reading the scriptures and taking them to heart even in a literal way for God is speaking to us words that will give us life. In my years of being a Christian, I have become more of a literalist when it comes to the bible. Before you leave the church or toss me out for being a fundamentalist, I have come to see that what has been written applies to me. When the psalmist says *The Lord is my Shepherd*, I do not have to do any theological steps or text criticism to know that what has been written is literally true and not a possible maybe.

God also has given us the Holy Spirit and through the Spirit conveys his words through picture, dream and spontaneous thoughts that enter our heart and understood in our mind.

I have trained myself not just to listen and look but believe what I hear and see no matter how crazy it may seem to me. For the living God who created the Universe speaks to me and there I take notice and act or else I will find myself in the poo!

So today, be wary of the enemy's temptation that God does not care for all your needs nor does he care for you.

BE LIKE DAVID when he states *I would have despaired unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord In the land of the living.*
14

Wait for the Lord

; Be strong and let your heart take courage; Yes, wait for the Lord . Amen.