

Chapter 7: The Temptation of Jesus

Matthew 4:1–11

The temptation of Jesus is far more significant than it may appear on the surface. This is not one more story in the life of Jesus, but a critical moment where our Lord confronts his enemy directly—and comes out victorious. The implications of this victory are multifaceted. So, before we work through the temptations themselves, we need to work through some sense of the scope of what Jesus accomplishes in this narrative—personally, publicly, and as a pattern for his people. In summary, the temptation of Jesus shows us that *King Jesus came to fulfill all righteousness*.

The Significance of the Temptation of Jesus

The temptation of Jesus is far more significant than it may appear on the surface. This is not one more story in the life of Jesus, but a critical moment where our Lord confronts his enemy directly—and comes out victorious. The implications of this victory are multifaceted. So, before we work through the temptations themselves, we need to work through some sense of the scope of what Jesus accomplishes in this narrative. In summary, the temptation of Jesus shows us that *King Jesus came to fulfill all righteousness*.

Jesus' Personal Preparation

First, the temptation of Jesus is a critical moment in his personal preparation for public ministry. We should observe that, while the baptism of Jesus marked the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus does not immediately go public with his message and miracles. Throughout the course of Jesus' ministry, he will be pulled at from a number of directions to abandon his task of going to the cross for the salvation of his people. The temptation to bypass the cross is not something Jesus experiences from Satan alone, and at this moment alone, but something that even those closest to him will urge him toward (e.g., Matt. 16:22–23). So, as Craig Blomberg notes, “Jesus’ [page 83] resolve to fulfill God’s plans for him must be tested and proved right at the outset of his ministry.”¹

Second, the temptation of Jesus is essential for Jesus' ministry into his offices of priest and prophet.² As the Anointed One, Jesus is the ultimate prophet, priest, and king. Matthew's unique emphasis in this Gospel is on the kingship of Jesus, and Matthew works carefully to lay down the foundation of Jesus' kingdom in the first three chapters of this Gospel. Now, King Jesus must take up his role as priest, especially by his vicarious suffering for the sins of his people. While we see Jesus' humiliation by his association and identification with sinners at his baptism, this temptation narrative

¹ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 82–83.

² This paragraph is developed from the ideas in Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 221–22.

develops the theme more fully. Because Jesus was born without sin, he does not experience the enticing thrill from temptation that we do. On the contrary, the author of Hebrews tells us that Jesus has become our high priest *because* he has *suffered* through temptation (Heb. 2:18). Additionally, by quoting God’s Word to defeat Satan, Jesus enters into his prophetic office. It is instructive that Jesus does not first take up the mantle of a prophet by preaching publicly to adoring crowds. Instead, Jesus demonstrates his faithfulness in his private battle with the Enemy, when he is physically weakened by hunger and the harsh conditions of the wilderness.

Jesus’ Public Victory

Next, we should consider the ways in which what Jesus accomplishes was a public victory. Jesus’ victory during his temptation was not public in the sense that a crowd surrounded him as spectators while he endured the vicious attacks of the Enemy, for Jesus had withdrawn to the wilderness precisely to avoid the eyes of the crowds. Rather, by “public” victory, I mean that Jesus acted as a “public person,” so that what he did not only affect himself, but others as well. Calvin puts this idea well: “the Son of God voluntarily endured the temptations, which we are now considering, and fought, as it were, in single combat with the devil, that, by his victory, he might obtain a triumph for us....Christ was tempted as the public representative of all believers.”³

Third, Matthew very deliberately shows that Satan issues his temptations according to the rough pattern by which he had ensnared Adam and Eve so many years earlier. Craig Blomberg summarizes the connections concisely: “Interesting parallels emerge between Jesus’ three temptations and those of Eve and Adam in the garden (Gen 3:6—‘good for food,’ ‘pleasing to the eye,’ ‘desirable for gaining wisdom’). Both of these triads seem to parallel John’s epitome of human temptation: ‘the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life’ (1 John 2:16, RSV).”⁴ The essential point in this connection is to see how Jesus succeeds where Adam failed. Through Adam we died; but through Jesus, the “last Adam,” we will be made alive (Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Cor. 15:22, 45).

Fourth, Matthew also portrays the temptation of Jesus as successful precisely where *Israel* failed. On this point, Donald Hagner is worth quoting at length:

Indeed, in this passage we encounter a most interesting parallel to the experience of Israel in the wilderness. After the experience of her deliverance from Egypt and the establishment of the covenant relationship, Israel experienced a season of testing in the wilderness. The sequence in Matthew’s account of Jesus is similar: following the return from Egypt, we have the baptism (likened, by some scholars, to Israel’s crossing of the Sea of Reeds), the divine declaration of Jesus as God’s son, and the time of testing in the wilderness. The parallel is heightened by the fact that all of Jesus’ answers to the tempter are drawn from Deut 6–8, the very passage that describes Israel’s experience in the wilderness. Thus Jesus, the embodiment of Israel and the fulfiller of all her hopes, repeats in his own experience the experience of Israel—with, of course, the one major difference, that whereas Israel failed its test in the

³ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:210.

⁴ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 86.

wilderness, Jesus succeeds, demonstrating the perfection of his own sonship.⁵

Even Jesus' fasting for forty days and forty nights is a symbolic re-enactment of the forty years that Israel wandered in the wilderness.⁶ Grant Osborne takes this idea a step further by observing how Satan tempts Jesus at every point the *Shema*, Israel's creed, from Deuteronomy 6:4–5:

In effect the three tests concern the Shema (Deut 6:5), which calls on Israel to “love the Lord your God with all your heart...soul...and strength.” The first temptation concerns the heart and how Israel's hunger was intended to test their heart for God (Deut 8:2). The second temptation tests Jesus' safety and his desire to save his soul/life and whether he will follow God even if it means his soul/life. The third tests his resolve to draw his strength from God alone rather than seek to rule the world by himself.⁷

Jesus not only succeeds where Adam failed, but Jesus succeeds where the entire nation of Israel failed. Jesus is the Last Adam, and Jesus is True Israel. These two points are related, as G. K. Beale has noted: “Jesus' two roles as the last Adam and true Israel are two sides of one redemptive-historical coin.”⁸

Fifth, New Testament scholar Brandon Crowe argues persuasively that Jesus' success in this temptation is the decisive moment of obedience by which Jesus “binds the strong man” (Satan) in order to plunder the Enemy's house (Matt. 12:29).⁹ When Adam and Eve sinned, they became bound by their sin. No longer were they free to enjoy their relationship to God in the splendor of the garden of Eden, but they were exiled out of the garden into the wilderness. Here, however, Jesus defeats Satan *in* the wilderness, which results in the binding of Satan. This is what Jesus means when he says, “Or how can someone enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house” (Matt. 12:29). That is, Jesus has come to plunder Satan's house, redeeming sinners whom Satan has held captive. Just as Adam and Eve were bound to sin and Satan by their *disobedience*, so Satan is bound by Jesus' *obedience*. By this initial act of obedience in the face of such great temptation, Jesus binds Satan so that he can begin his ministry of plundering Satan's house by preaching the coming of the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 4:17).

Jesus' Pattern for His People

Sixth, Jesus here functions as the model for how we ought to resist temptation. Now, we must be very clear to point out that we are in a very different position from Jesus. We were born sinners, while Jesus was born without sin. We were already guilty of breaking the covenant of works because

⁵ Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 61–62.

⁶ Carson, “Matthew,” 141.

⁷ Osborne, *Matthew*, 131.

⁸ G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 428. Cited by Brandon D. Crowe, *The Last Adam: A Theology of the Obedient Life of Jesus in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 52.

⁹ Crowe, *The Last Adam*, 154.

of the transgressions of our first parents, while Jesus is here making a major step toward fulfilling everything required by the covenant of works on our behalf. If we, then, try to model Jesus in our own strength, we will fail—indeed, we failed long before we were born, through the sin of our first parents. Nevertheless, for those who have repented from their sins and looked to Jesus in faith, we have received a new heart, a new spirit, and a new will to obey God through faith in Jesus Christ. By the resources of this new nature—and *only* by those resources—we can follow Jesus by resisting temptation and obeying God through precisely the same means that he models here: by faith-driven dependence on the Holy Spirit, in accordance with God’s Word. Indeed, we *must* learn from this what we can, for, as Calvin writes, “God intended, I have no doubt, to exhibit in the person of his Son, as in a very bright mirror, how obstinately and perseveringly Satan opposes the salvation of men.”¹⁰

With this background in mind, let us consider Matthew’s account of the painful task that our Savior entered into for us, for our salvation.

Is God Good? (Matt. 4:1–4)

Matthew records for us that “Then [i.e., after his baptism] Jesus was led up by the Spirit [ὑπὸ τοῦ πνεύματος; *hupo tou pneumatos*] into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil [ὑπὸ τοῦ διαβόλου; *hupo tou diabolou*]” (v. 1). This brief sentence is filled with important theological content. First, we see that Jesus “was led.” This is a verb stated passively, describing something that happened to Jesus, rather than something that Jesus actively did. On the construction of this verb, R. C. H. Lenski writes, “This passive verb, however, in no way expresses a reluctance on the part of Jesus to meet the tempter. It intends to bring out the very opposite: the willingness of Jesus to do the divine will.”¹¹ Following immediately after Jesus’ baptism, where the Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove (Matt. 3:16), it is striking to see that the next action of the Spirit is to lead Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted.¹² Although Matthew does not always tell us this explicitly, we should understand that the Holy Spirit will play an unseen role in leading Jesus in the same way throughout the rest of his earthly life.¹³

Importantly, however, it is not the Spirit who tempts Jesus, but the devil, so that the language “by the Spirit” and “by the devil” are constructed in parallel, with the preposition ὑπὸ (*hupo*).¹⁴ On this point, Craig Blomberg observes, “By this phrasing, Matthew warns against two common errors—blaming God for temptation and crediting the devil with power to act independently of God.”¹⁵ Furthermore, Matthew’s description of Jesus’ willingness to be led by the Spirit is instructive in how we should approach temptation: “it wards off the idea that Jesus entered into this temptation of his own accord when at this very beginning of his ministry it might have been wise to avoid such a decisive test. We often rashly subject ourselves to temptation. Jesus was led into his ordeal by his

¹⁰ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:210.

¹¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 138.

¹² Blomberg, *Matthew*, 83.

¹³ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 162.

¹⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 138.

¹⁵ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 83.

Father's own Spirit."¹⁶ Indeed, far from suggesting that we should rush headlong into tempting situations, Jesus will teach us to pray that we would *not* be led into temptation (Matt. 6:13).

Earlier, we discussed how the forty days and forty nights of Jesus' fasting (v. 2) was a symbolic re-enactment of the forty years where Israel wandered in the wilderness. Functionally, this lengthy time of fasting forms the critical background information for the first temptation, for the fasting left Jesus "hungry." There are two Old Testament parallels to forty-day fasts in Moses (Ex. 34:28; Deut. 9:9) and Elijah (1 Kgs. 19:8).¹⁷ Both of those events were in the midst of close encounters with God (Moses on Mount Sinai; Elijah when God meets him by the still, small voice), and we should probably understand that Jesus also spent this time in close communion with his Father, through the Spirit who led him into the wilderness. While Jesus may have enjoyed rich spiritual fare during this time, his body was weakened, putting him at a serious disadvantage far beyond what Adam and Eve faced during their temptation, since they could eat freely of every other tree of the garden in paradise, while Jesus ate nothing for forty days in the wilderness.¹⁸

When Satan comes, the tempter immediately attacks Jesus' physical weakness by tempting Jesus to turn stones into bread (v. 3). What, though, would have been the sin in what Satan suggests here? Certainly, there is nothing sinful about eating, especially since we could hardly consider it to be gluttony for Jesus to eat after forty days and forty nights of fasting.¹⁹ Furthermore, there would be nothing directly sinful about eating food that he himself had created, since Jesus in all likelihood ate at his miraculously created feasts for the 5,000 and the 4,000 later in his ministry.²⁰ As in the garden of Eden, the temptation of Jesus is not about the physicality of the food.

Instead, the temptation comes when Satan adds a sinful spiritual element to the suggestion about the food: "If you are the Son of God...." This is a direct reference to the declaration of the Father at Jesus' baptism in Matthew 3:17. Nevertheless, Satan is too subtle to challenge Jesus' sonship head-on. Instead, Satan is testing whether Jesus will exploit his sonship to meet his own physical needs. Brandon Crowe writes, "Thus, one could translate the tempter's challenges: 'Since you are the Son of God,' which accords with the filial emphasis of the heavenly voice in the baptism. In other words, the devil is not testing the *fact* of Jesus's sonship but the *mode* of Jesus's sonship."²¹ Or, as D. A. Carson writes, "Satan is not inviting Jesus to doubt his sonship but to reflect on its meaning. Sonship of the living God, he suggests, surely means Jesus has the power and right to satisfy his own needs."²² By this temptation, the "devil is trying to drive a wedge between the newly declared Son and his Father."²³ That is, Satan is trying to lead Jesus to doubt and distrust his Heavenly Father: "Satan made a direct attack on the faith of Christ, in the hope that, after destroying his faith, he would drive Christ to unlawful and wicked methods of procuring food."²⁴ It is though Satan is saying, "God even

¹⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 138.

¹⁷ Osborne, *Matthew*, 132.

¹⁸ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 226–27.

¹⁹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:213.

²⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 143.

²¹ Crowe, *The Last Adam*, 75.

²² Carson, "Matthew," 141.

²³ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 127.

²⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:213.

allowed the Israelites to eat in the wilderness!²⁵ Shouldn't you, the unique Son of God, have the same privileges?"

Jesus' answer exposes the true intent of Satan's ruse (v. 4). Unlike Adam and Eve, Jesus does not allow Satan to use food "awaken distrust of God and of God's Word."²⁶ In his response, Jesus is not suggesting that the Bible will "fill the stomach. But it is a question of priority (which Jesus will express in another form in 6:24–33). Obedience to God's will takes priority over self-gratification, even over the apparently essential provision of food."²⁷ Jesus' *manner* of responding is just as important as the *content*. Unlike Eve, Jesus does not enter into a dialogue with Satan, debating and reasoning with him about the boundaries and limitations of obedience ("How much *could* I do before sinning?"; cf. Gen. 3:1–5). Instead, Jesus utters nothing here but the words of the Bible, from Deuteronomy 8:3. As Calvin writes, "The first thing to be observed here is, that Christ uses Scripture as his shield: for this is the true way of fighting, if we wish to make ourselves sure of the victory. With good reason does Paul say, that, 'the sword of the Spirit is the word of God,' and enjoin us to 'take the shield of faiths' (Ephesians 6:16,17)."²⁸ When Satan attacks, we cede the upper ground by reasoning with him, for he cannot be reasoned with, and reasoning with him gives him more rope that he will use to hang us. More so, reasoning with Satan betrays a posture of openness toward following his schemes and designs. Jesus admits no discussion, but declines the temptation with a decisive appeal to Scripture. By this, Jesus intimates that God has spoken, so that nothing more needs to be said. This is a *closed* posture toward temptation—the only godly posture toward sin that we can take.

Adam and Eve did not withstand the first volley of fiery arrows from the Enemy, but crumpled immediately under the suggestions of Satan. Jesus, on the contrary, passes this first test, and he does this in spite of the disadvantages that he had in comparison with Adam and Eve. As R. C. H. Lenski writes, "What succeeded in Eden, in that land of plenty, failed in the destitute wilderness. What succeeded in the case of Adam and Eve who were well-fed, failed in the case of Jesus, who was in great hunger. The temptation assailed Jesus from his human side; he resisted it, not by means of his divinity, but as man, with his trust in God and in God's Word."²⁹ Satan, however, is not done with his attacks against the Lord.

How Do We Know God Is Good? (Matt. 4:5–7)

Next, the devil takes Jesus to Jerusalem ("the holy city") and "set him on the pinnacle of the temple" (v. 5). The word for "temple" is ἱερόν (*hieron*), referring to all the buildings in the entire temple complex, and not ναός (*naos*) which referred to the sanctuary of the temple itself (the single building containing the holy places, etc.) itself.³⁰ Once more, Satan grounds his temptation upon the provocation, "If you are the Son of God..." While the two clauses are identical in v. 3 and v. 5, the

²⁵ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 130.

²⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 146–47.

²⁷ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 131.

²⁸ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:214.

²⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 147.

³⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 148.

intent runs in opposite directions. Here, Satan seeks “to induce Christ to make trial of his divinity, and to rise up, in foolish and wicked rashness, against God.”³¹ This is more than testing whether Jesus will simply remain hungry for a little while longer; this is asking Jesus to put his sonship to a decisive test. Lenski contrasts the two temptations nicely: “As the first temptation, under the plea of acting like a true son, tries to lead to distrust of the Father, so the second temptation, under the same plea, tries to lead to a false trust of the Father.”³²

To bolster the temptation, Satan appeals to Scripture, by citing the promises of Psalm 91:11, 12. By this, Satan puts a false dichotomy to Jesus: either (1) if God’s Word is true, then Jesus must demonstrate his faith in what God has said by submitting to Satan’s temptation; or (2) if Jesus does not jump off the building, he does not believe that God’s Word is true. Jesus exposes the hidden assumption when he cites Deuteronomy 6:16. God’s Word *is* true, but “whoever desires to make an experiment of the divine power, when there is no necessity for it, tempts God by subjecting his promises to an unfair trial.”³³ Jesus would not be trusting God by jumping off the temple; he would be testing God’s truthfulness. This would reveal a desire for certainty and control, rather than faith, by seeking to *know* that God is able to protect him, rather than *trusting* that God will do what he says that he will do: “it would demonstrate a lack of filial trust and a doubting of his Father’s competence or dependability.”³⁴ As with his earlier response, Jesus says nothing beyond the Scripture. He once again refuses to enter into a dialogue about this temptation, but flatly refuses it.

Is There Any Good Apart From God? (Matt. 4:8–11)

In the third and final temptation, the devil takes Jesus to a very high mountain, and he shows him “all the kingdoms of the world and their glory” (v. 8). It is difficult to know where exactly the devil might have taken Jesus to see all this, but there is no reason to dismiss this account as merely Jesus’ psychological fantasy. In this last temptation, Satan no longer tests Jesus’ sonship.³⁵ Instead, Satan tests Christ’s mission of coming to claim all the kingdoms of the world for himself, but to do so apart from God’s plan: “The kind of temptation here described was, that Christ should seek, in another manner than from God, the inheritance which he has promised to his children.”³⁶ The Father did send Jesus in to the world to gain all the kingdoms of the world; however, this mission would require the suffering of his entire life, and especially the suffering of the cross. The allure of this temptation is that Jesus will be able to claim these kingdoms by bypassing suffering.³⁷ Thus, this is a *pragmatic* temptation.

It is only at this point that Jesus adds his own words on top of what has been written down in the Scriptures, and he does so because of his “holy indignation” at the temptation.³⁸ Satan’s scheme is no

³¹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:218.

³² Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 151.

³³ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:219.

³⁴ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 133.

³⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 153.

³⁶ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:220.

³⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 155–56.

³⁸ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 156.

longer hidden and veiled, but open and unashamed, demanding that Jesus worship him, in direct violation to the First Commandment. Jesus is infuriated by such blasphemy, and he casts away Satan from his presence. After this, the angels came and ministered to Jesus (v. 11). The temptation is over; Satan has no options left to try, for Jesus has vanquished him at every turn. To be sure, Jesus will face more tests, but he has defeated and bound Satan, thus opening up a clear path for plundering the kingdom of darkness that has laid the world in captivity since the Fall of Adam and Eve.

Discussion Questions

1. What is Satan really after when he tempts Jesus to turn the stones into bread? Why does Satan bring up Jesus' sonship to the Father ("If you are the Son of God...")? How might Jesus be tempted to believe that it would be good for him to turn the stones into bread? Where have you faced similar temptations to distrust God's goodness for you? What part of God's goodness are you quickest to doubt? How might the Bible address those doubts?
2. What is Satan really after when he tempts Jesus to jump off the pinnacle of the temple? Why does Satan again bring up Jesus' sonship to the Father? How might Jesus be tempted to put his Father to the test in order to confirm his Father's goodness to him? Where you have faced similar temptations to put God to the test to prove his goodness toward you? Where do you want to gain certainty and control over your life that goes beyond the promises of the Bible?
3. Why does Satan offer Jesus all the kingdoms of the world? To what degree does this temptation align with Jesus' mission in coming to this earth? What would Jesus have to give up in order to gain Satan's promises? Where are you tempted to seek good outside of God and God's will? What do you have to give up in order to gain what the world, the flesh, and the devil offer to you? How does the Bible teach us to find good in God alone?
4. How does this story fit into the larger narrative of how Jesus came to fulfill all righteousness? In what way does this time of suffering through fasting and temptation prepare him personally for the difficult task ahead of him? How does the temptation of Jesus compare with the temptations that Adam and Eve experienced in the garden of Eden, or to Israel in the wilderness? What does Jesus accomplish through this temptation by binding the "strong man" of Satan (Matt. 12:29)?