



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Matthew 4:3-7

“The Messiah's Temptation, part II”

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] The theme of our series of studies has been the New Testament Revelation of the Messiah, and we're looking particularly at Messiah's Temptation. And this is the second of our studies in the temptation. And we're turning again to Matthew chapter 4, and the verses that we're going to look at today are Matthew chapter 4 verses 5 through 7.

The unsophisticated in the modern world tend to think that the idea that there is about us a malevolent spirit world belongs to the fables and myths of an ancient superstitious age. Some trace the belief to Persian influence and the characteristic dualism of Persian religious views. There is of course no substantial evidence for such dualism and convincing evidence against it. Christianity has always rejected dualism for the simple reason that there cannot logically exist two self-existent, eternal, omnipotent and infinite, and therefore, unlimited spirits. The very fact that the divine being is unlimited means that there cannot be two of them. Further, both our Lord and the prophets and apostles, with Israel in the early church, took the devil, the angelic beings and the spirit world seriously. And especially when the devil is reduced, as he is in some minds, to an evil tendency present in the inner man, as the Christian church objected to such opinions since that view of things would imperil the clear teaching of Scripture that our Lord was

sinless. So we must take very earnestly the existence of the devil and the spirit world of angelic beings. We regard, then, the encounter of our Lord with Satan as a real encounter between two objective beings.

But why must our Lord be tempted by the devil? The Bible does not give us an extended explanation of this although it provides us with enough information to come to a clear conclusion of God's purpose. When man fell through Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden, that was not the end of the conflict between Satan and the divine purpose. The fall, however, did lead to Satan's invasion of the world of the spirits and bodies of mankind. Satan's kingdom of darkness began to operate in human life. Therefore, collision with God's kingdom of light was inevitable, and as Jesus himself put it, pointing to what was involved in overcoming Satan's kingdom, "No man can enter into a strongman's house, and spoil his goods, except he will first bind the strongman; and then he will spoil his house." (Mark 3:27)

That, of course, is what Jesus must do - overcome Satan by entering the strongman's house, binding him and spoiling his goods by his atoning cross. He must reverse the failure of Adam. Adam was God's son, as Luke 3:38 puts it, and so is Jesus of Nazareth, although in a far higher sense. But just as Adam stood for the race and failed, plunging the race into sin, guilt and condemnation, so must the last Adam, the Lord Jesus Christ, stand for the people of God, accomplish redemption and win back for man God's intended purpose for his people. Thus, there stands in the background of the conflict of Jesus with the devil the failure of the first man under Satan's attack.

One notices that the accounts of the temptation all emphasize the fact that the temptation did not occur at the instigation of the devil, although there is little doubt that he would have attacked the last Adam as he did the first. The accounts say that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested. In fact, Mark states that he was driven into the wilderness, perhaps implying some shrinking on the part of our Lord, such as

reached a climax in Gethsemane when he said, "Oh, my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me."

The initiative then for the temptation comes from the divine side. From the standpoint of God's purpose, the conflict was imperative, and Satan accepts the challenge striding out for the battle like mighty Goliath strode out to destroy the young stripling from Jesse's family, the first David. But he will discover that this son of David is even more formidable than his great ancestor.

We have noted that in the first temptation which we have called a personal one, our Lord's test was representative, that is, he stands for the people of God in his temptation. There is also a stress upon his identification with the covenant nation Israel in the testing. Israel was God's son. (Exodus 4:22 and 23) And the nation failed at the time of the manna to trust God. Our Lord, however, as the divine son of God did not murmur over God's guidance and provision and stood fast in believing dependence upon his Father. The pattern of obedience was established from the beginning in our Lord's life. And, of course, it should be emulated in ours as well.

We made the point in our last study that our Lord was not only sinless but that he was unable to sin or impeccable. We noted that his impeccability in no way affirms a qualitative difference between the humanity of the first Adam and of the last Adam. We pointed out that his temptability arose from the constitutional susceptibility of his true human nature. But his impeccability has its basis in his divine personality. Further, while we did not label the point, it should be obvious that the New Testament writers may logically appeal to our Lord's temptation as a ground of confidence for our overcoming of temptation by his sympathetic help. Remember Hebrews 2:18 and chapter 4 verse 14 through 16. His sympathy for us in temptation arises not simply from his common human nature with us but also from the strength of the temptation which he experienced.

As the God-man, he experienced a degree of testing beyond that of which any mere man has ever or ever will experience for the simple reason that mere men all fail at

the varying degrees of temptation. But our Lord passed beyond all those degrees of temptation in obedience. And so, he knows the stress and strain of the greatest of temptation far more than any man has ever undergone, and thus, he can sympathize with us in our lesser temptations.

Well, we turn now to the second of the tests. It's described in Matthew chapter 4 verses 5 and 6 and 7. The request is described in verses 5 and 6. We've called this test The National Temptation since it's associated with the holy city, which is Jerusalem. (Notice chapter 27 and verse 53.) And it's also associated with the temple.

The setting for this second round of the contest with Satan over the future of man is the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem. It's my opinion that this does not necessitate Jesus being taken there in bodily form. As my old teacher used to say, "The sphere of the conflict need only be mental." On the other hand, if that is so, we still must affirm the real and objective nature of the test. It was no merely inward fantasy.

The test is described by Matthew in these words,

"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 and 6)

The Spirit of God had driven Jesus into the wilderness. The spirit of the devil now carried him to Jerusalem, so Edersheim says. It's Paul who reminds Corinthians of Satan's devices, and this was one of them. In fact, Satan may be said to be acting as an angel of light encouraging our Lord to prove Scripture and his own trust in it by obeying it.

There are several ways in which this test proposed by the devil might be taken. Since the Jews loved signs, as Paul points out in 1st Corinthians 1:22, Satan might be regarded as urging our Lord to demonstrate his Messianic claims by a spectacular sign.

One of the last prophecies of the Old Testament spoke of the Messiah coming suddenly to his temple, and the Jews might regard the working of a spectacular sign now as the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy.

There are some questions about this view of the test. For example, the performance of the sign might be thought to be a call to following the Lord based on sight rather than faith with no reference to a necessary personal relationship to him. Our Lord did not in his ministry seek to dazzle men into discipleship. Further, the gospels say nothing about the presence of multitudes of Jews around the Temple at the time, although there is some reason to think that this may be presupposed since there would normally be many Jews in that area. Finally, the text Satan cited is from Psalm 91 verses 11 and 12, and it has to do primarily with God's special protecting care of those who trust in him. I think, therefore, that it's better to simply regard the test proposed by the devil to be one in which he seeks to entice our Lord into abandoning his trust in God's providential care of him and into claiming at his own will, rather than his Father's will, this universal promise to believers. In other words, Satan's scheme is a naïve attempt to cause our Lord to be guilty of presumption. The promise is valid, but it's given with a fundamental presupposition that it is valid within God's providential determination, or in other words, at God's time. That Satan purposely overlooks.

What then was wrong with Satan's proposed test supportive as it is by a citation from Scripture? Well in the first place, as we've just said, the devil made the mistake of tempting our Lord to presumption, that is, the forcing of God's hand to act at our time. The first test had been an attempt to get our Lord to abandon his confidence in his Father. This second test is an attempt to cause him to pervert that confidence by using it at his own self will and not at God's will. It was a clever test set before the Lord, as it was on the pinnacle of God's temple in God's chosen city of Jerusalem. Further, since our Lord had cited Scripture in his first reply to Satan's first test, Satan second test was accompanied by a citation from Scripture too. It's almost as if he's learning from our Lord.

But as Shakespeare, or the bard of Stratford-on-Avon said in *The Merchant of Venice*, "The devil can cite Scripture for his own purpose." "What could be more religious," McLaren asked, "Than an act of daring based upon faith which was again based upon a word which proceeded out of the mouth of God?" In other words, on the basis of filial confidence in God's promises, cast off filial obedience to his directing will. It was a clever test but diabolically and hideously wicked in its goad.

And second, it should be noted that Satan's citation from Psalm 91:11 and 12 contains an omission that might be of some significance. The second line of Psalm 91:11, "To keep thee in all thy ways" is omitted entirely in Matthew 4:6, while in Luke 4:10, Luke's account of it, the last phrase "in all thy ways" is omitted. If we understand this phrase to mean in all the ways of thy life which have been determined by God's providence to occur, then Satan's omission of them might have been intended to lessen their force by diverting our Lord's attention away from all that the Psalmist had said.

And third, Satan made the mistake of opposing Scripture to other Scripture, as our Lord makes plain in his reply. He sought to have Jesus follow Psalm 91 versus 11 and 12 without giving careful consideration to the application of all Scripture to that promise. In other words, he did not compare Scripture with Scripture for accurate interpretation. He did not follow the analogy of faith, as the reformers put it.

Deuteronomy 6:16 expressed a truth that was at variance with Satan's view of and use of Psalm 91:11 and 12. The ancient students of the word of God who expressed their principles in the common scholarly language of Latin used to put it this way: *Scriptura ex Scriptura explicandam esse*, that is, Scripture is to be explained by Scripture. Johann Albrecht Bengel, the 18th-century German scholar, said it this way, "*Scriptura par Scripturam interpretanda et conkilianda.*" Scripture is to be interpreted and harmonized through Scripture.

There's some interesting points that should be noted here. First, Satan does not begin his temptations with a point-blank denial of Scripture. He usually attaches his "if"

to true and plain utterances of God. His "if" is attached to a solid truth in this instance: "If thou be the son of God," Well, of course, that's what Jesus was, so he puts his "if" upon a holy truth and in so doing casts doubt over nearly the whole of our Lord's life, including the thirty years of preparation for his incarnate life's work. The devil, it has been said, never puts an "if" upon anything not true, and in this case, his insinuations are Christ's certificate of sonship. If he says "if" about them, well, they are likely to be true.

Campbell Morgan has certainly put his finger on an important point. Every false teacher who has divided the church has had an "it is written" on which to hang his doctrine. If only against the isolated passage there had been the recognition of the fact "again it is written" how much the charge would have been saved.

From the ancient heretics, such as Ebionites, the Docetics, the Gnostics, Arius and others and on to modern times with such heretics as the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Mormons, the Armstrongs and others, there have always been attempts to fasten heretical teaching to specific Scriptures, cited but misinterpreted. The false doctrines of universal salvation, soul sleep and the denial of eternal punishment are usually based upon specific Scripture but falsely interpreted and often without consideration of all Scripture that bears on the points supposedly made. If only false teachers like these mentioned had remembered our Lord's words, "It is written again", how much doctrinal mischief might have been avoided. If only the false teachers of baptismal regeneration, for example, had not wrenched Acts 2:38 from its context and made it to bear the weight of entire denominations without even a cursory consideration of its related passage in Acts 10:34 through 48. Oh, if they would just remember "It is written again."

Our Lord's reply is given in verse 7. This is the clause with which Jesus opens his reply to the second test, for to the Jews he usually responded with "I say unto you". But to Satan he says, "It is written" thus honoring God's Word and giving us an example of how we ought to use it too. To Satan here he says, "It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God."

The citation is from Deuteronomy 6:16 where God warns Israel not to tempt the Lord as they had done at Massah, the occasion where water was brought from the rock in the wilderness for the murmuring and complaining Israelites. (Exodus 17 verse 1 through verse 7) Israel tempted the Lord or put him to the test by doubting his providential care of them, in effect saying, Is the Lord among us or not? Satan then was proposing a new Massah and hoping Jesus would fail the test of trust. Our Lord will not fall into the devil's trap. Satan hoped he would rebelliously lift himself up against God's providence and word, but he will not.

In the first test, he sought to use the Lord's lowly state in hunger and thirst, but now he urges the anointed Messiah to an inflated view of his relation to his Father at the present time hoping that our Lord would not depend upon the Father through the Spirit but strike out on his own in dependence upon himself alone. He would have our Lord to use his deity, his sonship, and intrude upon the present providential ordering of his life by God the Father.

It's wrong to experiment with the divine promises using them to prove God, thus doubting his providential care over us at all times. Calvin comments, "Does he yield to Satan when he criminally twists Scripture sense? Does he allow Scripture, his earlier defense, to be shaken off him or torn down? No, he gallantly throws back Satan's slander with a blow from Scripture in return. Thus, as often as Satan throws up Scripture in his efforts to deceive, and godless men on this same pretext rise up against us to circumvent our faith, let us borrow weapons for the defense of our faith from no other source than Scripture. True faith then goes with a true docility to the Lord God. A divine must of doing God's will at God's time rule the life of our Lord."

The words of verse 7 from Deuteronomy in the original text are in the plural number and addressed to Israel, but our Lord cites them in the singular as if applying them to himself as well as to Satan. He makes, in other words, the special application

from the general imperative to Israel. What was wrong for God's son Israel is wrong for God's son Jesus.

Let me say now a few words by way of conclusion. What may we say them by way of application of this second test. As someone has said, it's clear that Jesus will not dazzle men by carnal sensationalism. That's not the way of our Lord, but the spirit of Herod who wanted to see a sign from the Lord Jesus in order that he might give attention to him. He will not pander to the Jews' love of a sign from heaven, a miracle, nor will he force the door of a man's spirit. He will do his work only in God's way, patiently waiting on the divine power of God's providential working. That will suffice for our Lord.

There are specific lessons, however, that emerge here. And first, it's plainly taught that faith may be perverted. It may be turned into false paths of our choosing. God's promises are ours, not in the paths that we choose, however, but in the paths where he sends us, the paths that he chooses.

McLaren puts it beautifully, "If we take the leap without his command, we shall fall mangled on the very temple pavement. All of those individuals and Christian organizations that tell us of the great steps of faith they are taking and of our need to contribute financially to their plans have the responsibility of avoiding forcing God's hand in presumption. That's the path of mangling," so McLaren says.

And second, these temptations to abandon submission to the will of God for his Messianic work find echoes continually throughout our Lord's ministry. The popular attempt to make him a king after the feeding of the five thousand tested him. (John 6:14, 15) There is the suggestion of his brethren that he go to Judea, perform miracles there and show himself to the world. (John 7:3 through 5) One of the most satanic of the tests was the question of Pilate, "Art thou then a king?" (John 8:37).

Our Lord, then, was constantly threatened in his life and work. In this, too, he shared our human experience. When old foes are beaten back on one occasion, it's likely that with stubborn doggedness, they will come back to haunt us again. This is illustrated

in the fact that although Christ gained the victory once in the first temptation, the victory was not one gained forever. He must face the tempter many times, and we can expect no less a peril. May the Lord enable us to learn from him and give our Father filial dependence like his.

In the final moment or so, let me remind you that the way to the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ and the way by which we may come under the relationship of a son to a Father is through the saving work which the Lord Jesus accomplished on Calvary's cross. If you're listening to me today and you do not know Christ as your own personal Savior and do not have the assurance of the forgiveness of your sins, let me remind you that the son of God came, took to himself human nature, thus becoming the God-man and went to the cross at Calvary, suffered the penalty and judgment of our sin that sinners might be freed. If by God's grace, you've felt the burden, the condemnation, the guilt of sin and desire release from the bondage of it, come to Christ. Believe in him. Trust in him. Receive him in a simple act of faith in your heart thanking him for dying for sinners, acknowledging that you're a sinner and receiving by faith the salvation he freely offers.

In our next study, we'll finish our study of the temptation. I hope you'll be with me then.