



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Matthew 4:8-11

“The Messiah’s Temptation, Part III”

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] The theme of our series of studies has been the New Testament Revelation of the Messiah. And in our present short series we are dealing with Messiah’s Temptation and this is the third and final of our studies in the temptation of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We’ve been studying the temptation of the Messiah, the struggle that took place between the devil and the Son of God. Two solitary figures struggled for a huge stake: the souls of men and the Kingdom of God. One of the two, the last Adam, must retrace the history of the first Adam, regaining ultimately the paradise that the first Adam lost by his disobedience and surrender to Satan of his position as king of the earth, commissioned by God to have dominion over God’s physical creation, the world.

We have followed the tests that the devil put before our Lord in our last two studies. The first of the tests was designed to probe the Messiah’s submission to the word of God. Satan evidently hoped that Jesus would follow his lead and seek to acquire the messianic promises apart from the way of the cross. Our Lord’s reply, “Men shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds through the mouth of God,” makes it clear that he relies upon the path of implicit obedience in the acquiring of the messianic kingdom.

The second test in which Satan asked our Lord to cast himself down from the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem, adding to it as if he had learned it from Jesus, a citation from Scripture was one in which our Lord was enticed to abandon God’s providential care of him. He sought to cause our Lord to be guilty of presumption. That is, to obtain the promises of Scripture at his own will and in his own time rather than at God’s time and in God’s will. It is not clear that the spectacular sign had messianic meaning as if Jesus was to perform the act to demonstrate his messianic calling, although many students feel that this is the case.

It was, however, a sensational step that the devil suggested. Malcolm Muggeridge’s account of the test, cast as one might expect in the language and thought of a modern newspaper man, is particularly vivid. “The devil’s second proposition to Jesus,” Mr. Muggeridge writes, “was that he should use his miracles powers to draw attention to himself in his cause. What he needed to get his message across was to be spotlighted to get into the news and become a celebrity. After all, the devil’s argument ran, words of truth such as Jesus spoke were all very well but what if they were ignored or worse, induced anger and hostility. What if people who sat in darkness and saw his great light actually preferred the darkness? Now marvels would catch and hold their attention. Supposing then Jesus were to hurl himself from one of the temples’ high pinnacles in the sure knowledge that God would send his angels to ensure that no ill befell him? What a sensation that would make; headlines in all the newspapers, stories on all the television networks, everyone making for Jerusalem to interview the man who jumped off the top of the temple without hurting himself. Jesus in great demand everywhere, a ready-made international audience hanging on his words: Herod interested, Pilate too, and maybe the emperor Tiberius himself. All this not to boost Jesus, not at all, but to ensure that his words resounded through the great Roman Empire rather than just reaching a ragtag and bobtail following in Galilee. We who have lived in an age of technological marvels,” Mr. Muggeridge continues, “can easily understand this effort of persuasion on the devil’s part.

Taking a leaf out of the devil’s book, Governments try to dazzle us and make themselves acceptable by arranging visits to the moon and other wonders. Advertisers likewise by means of miraculous visual images demonstrate the delectable consequences that will follow smoking such a cigarette, visiting such a resort, anointing ourselves with such an unguent, or swallowing such a potion.

“So many in such diverse marvels offered on the devil’s behalf find a multitude of takers, but Jesus knew better and kept his head. His particular relationship with God and God’s care of him were part of God’s concern for all creation. Extending, Jesus was to tell us, even to a sparrow falling to the ground. Just because of this, God’s concern from him was not to be put to the test and exploited as the devil proposed. ‘Thou shalt not tempt the Lord, Thy God,’ he quoted from the Scriptures in rebuffing the devil for the second time. God’s love for Jesus and his love for a sparrow were part of the same universal love which shines through all his creation and must no more be particularized than a mother’s love for one of her children over another.” Well that’s the end of Mr. Muggeridge’s words.

We turn now to this final test in our Lord’s temptation. I call it the universal temptation because of the worldwide sweep of it. Matthew’s account reads in Matthew chapter 4, verse 8 through verse 11, in this way, and I hope you have your Bible with you and you’ll turn to Matthew 4:8 and follow along as I read,

“Again, the devil takes him up into an exceeding high mountain, and shows him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; and he said to him, All these things will I give you, if you will fall down and worship me. Then Jesus says to him, Depart, Satan: for it is written, you shall worship the Lord your God, and him alone you shall serve. Then the devil leaves him, and, behold, angels came and were ministering to him.”

Luke adds that the devil showed him all the kingdom’s in a moment of time, Luke 4:5, suggesting perhaps a rapid sweeping glance at the magnificence of worldly empire. That the view was of the outward glory of the kingdoms is indicated by the words and the glory of them. Of course, this is the only kind of kingdom that the devil could conceivably offer our Lord. He certainly couldn’t offer him one that glowed with the beauty of holy submission to God. The devil’s kingdom, and he is the God of this age, is one like the present kingdoms of earth. Kingdom’s filled with the corruption of rebellion against God in heaven. Hoping our Lord would not recognize this fatal weakness, Satan wished to dazzle Christ by the prospects of world empire; its power, its influence, its pageantry and wealth. And the devil wished to sweep Jesus off his feet by this sudden offer to give it all to him.

There was, however, a price. And the price was the worship of the devil by our Lord. One notices a very significant point in Satan’s proposal: there is no specific mention of God in it at all. It’s as if he has attained his ancient, coveted goal of being like God. In Luke’s account there is a hint that the devil recognizes God’s ultimate control of the kingdoms for he speaks of the power and glory as, quote, “Delivered unto me, and to whomsoever I will, I give it,” Luke 4:6. But there is clearly a belittling of God’s sovereignty over the kingdoms which, as one commentator points out, makes the reply of Jesus all the more crushing, for his reply gives permanence to the Almighty. “You shall worship the Lord, your God, and him only shall you serve.”

Now we see what Satan is really like: he is the prince of the power of the air and the God of this age, so Paul says. But these are descriptions that he has attained only by his fall into sin. He has since then sought only one thing and that is to be like the most high. He wants to be worshiped, but that’s the prerogative of God alone. Even the elect angels detest the thought of being worshiped, admonishing an apostle. The Apostle John who fell down before one of them, “See that thou do it not, the angel said, For I am thy

fellow servant and of thy brethren the prophets and of them which keep the sayings of this book. Worship God,” Revelation 22:9.

The devil, that wicked spirit, however fiercely and covetously desires to dethrone God and steal his right to worship. Question has occasionally been raised over this offer by Satan; it’s been thought that he had no real right to offer the kingdoms to Jesus Christ. Billy Bray used to say in his quaint way that the devil was wrong; adding, “The old rascal to offer Christ the kingdoms of the world, why he never possessed so much as a tater skin.” But as Denny points out, this saying which in Luke is put into the lips of Satan is not meant to be regarded as untrue. There would be no temptation in it if it was untrue. The right apparently belonged to him by virtue of his victory over man, the rightful heir to creation in the fall in the Garden of Eden.

I’ve called this test the universal temptation simply because it has universal aspects relating to the Abrahamic promises of worldwide blessing to Israel and the gentiles. To be fulfilled ultimately in the kingdom of Israel’s Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. Satan is offering this kingdom to our Lord and its worldwide blessing apart from the cross. And that’s tremendously significant. There can be no blessing for men apart from the bloodshed on Calvary’s Cross that men might be redeemed and find forgiveness of sins in that work that he did there.

The test in various forms that Satan proposed to Christ comes to many men. Stalker sees in it Mohammed and the Jesuits. “It was the temptation,” he says, “to which Mohammed yielded when he used the sword to subdue those whom he was afterwards to make religious.” And to which the Jesuits yielded when they baptized the heathen first and evangelized them afterwards. How will the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, respond to the test that Satan proposed? Well, the reply is given in Matthew 4:10 and 11, and his simple and crushing replies again from the word of God, “Get thee hence, Satan: for it’s written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only thou shalt serve.”

If Satan thought he would be successful, he was sadly mistaken. Our Lord is not a Jesuit. The end does not justify the means. He will not use the world nor its methods to attain his destiny. He must not become the Messiah of the world, nor of Satan, but of God. As Horatious Bonar, the well-known Scottish preacher, wrote many years ago, “The kingdom that I seek is thine, so let the way that leads to it be thine.” It sometimes affirmed that Jesus was not conscious of a Messianic ministry that touched the whole world, but this passage as well as others puts the denial to that claim.

Here in the beginning of the ministry it’s evident that the stakes are high and Jesus knew what was involved. The text that he used and that he cited is from Deuteronomy 6:13, set in the context in which Moses is exhorting the children of Israel to keep the law and to not go after other gods. The chapter is full of the contrast between Yahweh and the gods, and the Lord Jesus supplies the text to the offer Satan proposes. Messiahship involves a long and painful struggle with the evil one, ending in a cross before his works are destroyed and the kingdom comes but Satan would have our Lord avoid the struggle, taking the seemingly easy way out. Why not have Satan for an ally instead of an enemy? Then sovereignty over Israel and all the nations may be quickly won without pain or trouble, one might suggest.

In Deuteronomy 6 there is found the great shema Israel, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord: and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy might.” Deuteronomy 6:4 and 5, which effectively rules out all other gods and the worship of them. Jesus was certainly a student of holy Scripture. But in case anyone might miss the point, the chapter also states, “Ye shall not go after other gods, of the gods of the people which are round about you, for the Lord thy God is a jealous God among you, lest the anger of the Lord thy God be kindled against thee and destroy thee from off the face of the earth,” Deuteronomy 6:14 and 15.

Our Lord’s reply is the final thrust of the word of the Spirit in the temptation. And the citadel is held and the foe, Satan, is vanquished. Thoroughly beaten back, his power

was broken at its heart. This is why John Milton finished his *Paradise Regained*. At this point, having withstood Satan’s sharpest darts, the outcome was certain. He shall have further tests, many of them as the gospels reveal, but he shall overcome.

But does our Lord march from the battle field as other conquerors? Let us listen to Helmut Thielicke answer, it’s beautifully written. “By no means, how different is this victory from those of men? He rises to his feet and immediately sets forth on his *via dolorosa*. He too goes forth into the world. Once again he will have to contend with the powers of evil, which rise against him. He goes through the world which is a theater of war and battlefield between God and Satan. By winning his first victory he has entered this world. Christ will fight for the souls of the men he meets, whether they be publicans or Pharisees, fools or wise men, rich youths or poor men, working-class men or lords of industry, the hungry and thirsty or well-fed and safe. He will fight for the souls of all these men alike and he will die for all of them. Thus does the victor in this fight take his way hence, going straight towards his cross as though God had forsaken him.”

We’re reminded of the text, if I may interject, in the words from Thielicke, of our Lord’s comment on the cross, “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me!” Thielicke continues, “Is he not, after all, really the loser? A bankrupt king who has gambled away his crown as he sets forth on his path from the desert to the cross. Has he not won appearic victory? He travels the path beset with pain which leads to the cross, and not the way of glory and triumph which is also the way of God, for how can God’s progress be other than triumphal? Perhaps this contest in the desert was, after all, a drawn game. Perhaps in the long run the dread opponent will prove to have won the victory and regained his power over the world. Is there any man alive in the 20th Century who does not think that all the evidence points in this direction?”

And then Mr. Thielicke concludes, “But something more happens in the desert when the two go their ways. The angels came and ministered unto him, Matthew 4:11.

He must, after all, have won the victory.” How true that is. The very fact that we read in verse 11, “Then the devil leaveth him, and, behold, angels came and ministered to him,” signifies the Father’s good pleasure in the Son of God.

Now let me say a few words by way of conclusion. The lessons from the temptation are many and important, not the least of which is the place of Scripture in the event. Three times our Lord cites Scripture in defeating Satan’s shrewd proposals. And three texts from - of all books for modern readers, Deuteronomy, how well would we fare if our spiritual wellbeing depended on our knowledge of that book? Three times Jesus says, “It is written,” verse 4, “It is written again,” verse 7, and then again in verse 10 the Lord Jesus says, “For it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God and him only shalt thou serve.” The Lord Jesus lived by the word of God.

Some years ago I preached a series of sermons in Nacogdoches, Texas, in one of the local churches there. The theme included a sermon on the temptation. In the message I laid a great deal of stress on the importance of Scripture in the spiritual conflict believers are involved in. Waxing a bit too bold, perhaps, for the church was a relatively conservative one, made up largely of individuals who had at one time been in the Presbyterian church there. And I put this question to the church meeting one of the nights: excluding the Ten Commandments which are repeated in Deuteronomy, can any member of the audience cite another text from Deuteronomy? And I asked them to raise their hands if they could.

Now the church was an evangelical one, the strongest in the community, but no one raised a hand. The point I wanted to make was probably made right at that point. But afterwards two rather refined and usually very dignified ladies approached me and the spokeswoman for the two said to me, “Lewis, you’ll be interested in our conversation after you finished tonight. I turned to my friend here and I said I knew a text but I was too embarrassed to hold up my hand in the meeting.” She had been a Presbyterian for many years. “She asked me what my text was and I said my text was, ‘If my people,



which are called by my name, shall humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and forgive their sin and will heal their land.’ And she said to me, ‘It’s a good thing you didn’t hold up your hand because that text is from 2 Chronicles. Lewis, I then asked her, ‘What was your text?’ And she said it was, ‘As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.’ I laughed and said to her, ‘It’s a good thing you didn’t hold up your hand, for that’s from Joshua.’ So Lewis, I guess we don’t know Deuteronomy very well and Satan would have overcome us.”

I imagine that experience would be repeated in many of us if the question were asked us. We do not know God’s word as we ought. Let me now specifically conclude with a few doctrinal observations concerning the significance of the temptation.

In the first place it is important to observe that the temptation marks Jesus Christ out as one perfectly qualified morally to be the promised Davidic sovereign. One of the commentators has commented, “In the temptations the Messiah is being invited to take the center of the stage in one role or another. It’s significant that each time the response of Jesus puts God in the center of the stage. And each time the implication is made perfectly clear, even the Messiah is only God’s servant. Indeed, just because he is Messiah he must be preeminently God’s servant.”

This victory is one in a series that shall find a thrilling consummation in this book in the exultant declaration near the end, “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth,” Matthew 28:18. And that, too, is a further step in the process that shall be crowned with the climactic utterance of the voices in heaven at the sounding of the seventh trumpet of the Apocalypse where we read, “The kosmos kingdom of our Lord and his Messiah has come, and he shall reign unto the ages of the ages.”

In the second place, in the experience of the victory of the temptation Jesus Christ is seen to be perfectly qualified morally to be the savior. The cross was anticipated in his conquest for the salvation of the cross must be won by one who is without sin. Only in sinlessness can he be our valid substitute just as only in the possession of full deity can

his sacrifice have the infinite value sufficient to redeem the souls of sinners from eternal judgment in the overcoming of Satan and sins guilt and penalty. In the temptation there was then a pledge of the crucial victory of Golgotha which Paul describes in these words, “And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it,” Colossians 2, and verse 15.

Finally in the wilderness experience, Jesus Christ is seen to be perfectly qualified morally to be a sympathetic high priest. This is the principle use which the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews makes of the incident, he writes, “For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to sucker them that are tempted. And again, for we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.” To those related to this high priest there is no more appealing note upon which to conclude a study of the temptation than the exhortation which follows naturally, “Let us, therefore, come boldly to the throne of grace that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

You may be listening to me today and you may not even know this one who is the Messiah, the King, the high priest, and savior, and we remind you that he who victoriously met the temptations that Satan presented to him, went on to Calvary’s cross and offered himself a sacrifice for sinners. He the God-man died for sinners and offers the forgiveness of sins to those who trust in him. Come to Christ, believe in him, trust in him, and there is no better time to make that decision than right now in your heart.

Next week we continue on our series...

**[RECORDING ENDS ABRUPTLY]**