



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Matthew 4:1-11

"The Messiah's Temptation, part I"

TRANSCRIPT

[[Message] The theme of our series of studies is the New Testament Revelation of the Messiah, and we're looking today at the first of several studies on the Messiah's temptation. The passage of Scripture that we will be looking at is Matthew chapter 4 verse 1 through verse 11. And if you have your new Testaments handy, turn to Matthew chapter 4. "The Messiah's Temptation"

Against the backdrop of the wilderness with its wild beasts, two solitary figures wrestle for a gigantic prize – the kingdom of God and the souls of men. One is subject to the Spirit of God. The other is the infernal spirit Lucifer himself. The one – the last Adam, must retrace the history of Adam the first. Paradise lost must become Paradise regained. It was Augustine following Paul who said that the entire moral and spiritual history of the world revolved around two people - Adam and Christ. The temptation is a decisive moment in that history.

The circumstances of the temptations of the first Adam and the last Adam are in sharp contrast. For example, Adam was tempted in the garden while Christ was tempted in the desert, that great and terrible wilderness as Moses described it. Adam the first was well prepared for the tempter physically. He was strong and food was plentiful. But Adam the last, having fasted for forty days, was weak and hungry. Finally, Adam the first

was the object of Satan's initial seductions in the history of man. But Christ was attacked after his opponent had had four thousand years of practice. The odds were all on the side of a fall.

Many questions crowd in upon us as we meditate over our Lord's conflict in the desert, not the least of which is the devil's existence. As Muggeridge says, "Even those who are prepared in a vague way to acknowledge the existence of a deity draw the line at the devil." Muggeridge, speaking for many I'm sure, says that he has found the devil easier to believe in than God simply because he's had more to do with him. We do not have the time to discuss the existence of the devil which is so definitely and plainly affirmed by Holy Scripture. We assume his existence and go on to discuss some of the theological questions concerning our Lord's temptation that cry out for handling and solution.

The principal question is this one: Is Jesus Christ impeccable? Now, we're not asking: "Is he sinless? That is the clear teaching of the word of God and generally admitted by professing Christians. The holiness of the God-man, however, is more than this. The question is: Was he unable to sin? Was he not only able to overcome temptation but also unable to be overcome by it?" We cannot debate in detail this question. Its discussion is far beyond the limits and purposes of this study. The answer however has to be yes. It must be that he is "non potis piccari" not "potis non piccari", that is, he is not able to sin, not simply able not to sin.

There are some things that God cannot do and Jesus was God. God cannot be tempted and God cannot lie. There is something higher than the choice of the good. It is the happy necessity of doing that which is good. This belongs to the divine nature of the Messiah. As a matter of fact, if we remember that Jesus Christ is a divine person, we will have no difficulty here. He is not a human person raised to the power of deity by virtue of the incarnation because he existed before that incarnation. He is a divine person who at a point in time took to himself human nature as an additional nature. And his

impeccability is guaranteed by the union of the divine and human natures in one theanthropic person. He is as mighty to overcome Satan and sin as his mightiest nature is.

A further question naturally arises. Was then our Lord temptable? Again, the answer is yes. The human nature of the God man was both temptable and peccable. The divine nature may not desert the human nature permitting it to sin, for then the guilt would attach itself in part to the entire person. But it may leave the human nature alone when no sin or guilt is involved. This it did in the temptation. Therefore, temptability depends upon the constitutional susceptibility of human nature. And since he was completely human apart from sin, he was temptable. An invincible army may be really attacked. And that his testing centered in the human nature is evidenced by the statement that at the conclusion of the temptation "angels came and ministered unto him." (Matthew 4 verse 11) Deity does not need, nor can it use, the help of its creatures.

A final question comes: Is the temptation account genuine? For example, Harvey Branscomb, a New Testament scholar, while acknowledging that the account may represent perhaps a real experience has said, "What we have are the reverent speculations of members of the early Christian community." Branscomb's regard for the spiritual creativity of the early Christians is excessively lavish and unrealistic.

I'm inclined to agree with T. W. Manson who felt that the story went back to Jesus himself and was transmitted by the apostle substantially as he told it to them. Manson asks, "Who in the Palestinian Christian community pictured in the first half of Acts could ever have invented the story? No, the account is not an invention. It is a bit of intermit autobiography told the apostles by its subject Jesus himself. It has about it all the trustworthy trademarks of the Messiah himself."

The occasion of the relating of the experience to the apostles is more difficult to find. We may assume that the occasion was relevant to the spiritual principles which were prominent in the temptation account. Since the Messiahship of Jesus was so obviously the issue in the temptation, then a later occasion in which this subject was in

the foreground should be sought. Just such a situation is found in chapter 16 of Matthew, when after Peter's confession of his Messiahship, the Lord Jesus begins his instruction concerning the necessity of his death and resurrection. Immediately Peter rebukes Jesus and receives this stinging reply, "Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art a stumbling block unto me: for thou mindest not the things of God, but the things of men." (Matthew 16:23) It's obvious that Peter was not speaking *ex cathedra* at this point. At this very point, it seems to me, it would have been most fitting for Jesus to remind the apostles that the attitude of Peter was strikingly similar to that of Satan as reflected in the temptation and to relate and expound the force of that wilderness experience.

But let us turn now to the first of the tests, and we'll call it, for the sake of calling it something, The Personal Temptation. The request is given by Matthew in verses 1 through 3 of Matthew 4. And Matthew's text reads as follows:

"Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And when he fasted forty days and forty nights, he afterward became hungry. And the tempter came and said to him, If you are the son of God, command that these stones become loaves of bread."

The baptism by John the Baptist had marked the inauguration of the Messianic ministry of Christ. By this, the Lord's conviction was confirmed that he was born to suffer, born a king. The voice from heaven, that beautiful combination of Psalm 2 and Isaiah 42 had made it plain that he was the son who should rule, the messianic King of Israel, and that he would attain his inheritance by carrying out the ministry of the servant of the Lord.

In this remarkable synthesis of exaltation and suffering, there was a preview of his destiny. The vision was the visible counterpart of the voice. The Spirit's coming identified him as the King. But the form of the dove, a symbol of suffering sacrifice, reminded him of his work. All three of the tests are variations of the one great temptation

to remove his Messianic vocation from the guidance of the Father and make it simply a political calling.

One of the New Testament commentators in essence is right I think when he says, "It may be put this way, that what Jesus rejects in the temptations are methods of bringing in the kingdom of God: First, the economic, with all that apparatus so well known to us in these days of five-year plans and the like. And second, the game of political intrigue backed by military force. And third, propaganda which would eventually create an artificial nimbus for the national leader."

And yet, there are different emphases in the tests. The first has to do with the body, the second with the soul and the third with the spirit. The first looks at Christ as the son of God, the second as the son of David (that of course is not out of harmony with the divine sonship), and the third as the son of Abraham. The first test is directed toward the lust of the flesh, the second toward the pride of life and the third toward the lust of the eyes, things that John mentions in 1st John chapter 2 and verse 16.

The word "then" that begins the account in verse 1 is one of Matthew's favorite particles. It makes the connection with the preceding account of the baptism. As Scroggy has said, "After the testimony, the test, and after the dove, the devil." Shortly after the baptism, the Lord Jesus, full of the Spirit, that is girded with a richer grace and power of the Spirit and thus stronger to face the coming battles, was led into the wilderness for the temptation experience. Thoroughly weakened physically because he was made man to bear not only our passion but also our flesh, he faced the archenemy of his vocation Satan.

What was the purpose of the temptation and why did it come at this time? Let us remember the occasion of it. Jesus has just been baptized by John and has come out of the water praying. And immediately the heavens were opened and the voice of the Messianic anointing was heard together with the visible representation of the Holy Spirit being seen. Conscious of his new Messianic calling, because of the voice from heaven,

This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" and conscious of the endowment with power to do his work, Jesus' whole being must have been raised to a high pitch. His preparation of many years was filled with prayers and plans learned by the daily pondering of the word of God under the Spirit's instruction. And now the time had come for the work to begin. His mind was filled with thoughts from God's counsel and his emotions were throbbing with excitement. What happened at the baptism was then the moral cause of the temptation.

The purpose of the temptation is clear from the account itself. The son must be tested to ascertain his qualifications for his momentous and gigantic task. How will he use this new and infinite power of Holy Spirit with which he has now been endued? And the time of the test is set at just the moment when humanly speaking he might be most susceptible to failure and sin.

It's always that way with us too. When we are at the highest peak of spiritual success is the time at which we are often most likely to fall to the devil's stratagems.

There are other purposes in our Lord's temptation – purposes that relate to us directly. For example, he was tempted that we might see how bitter an enemy Satan is of the plans of God for our salvation and how persistent he is in seeking to defeat us. And further, he was tempted that we might know that if our divinely appointed representative was so sorely attacked with the full knowledge of the Spirit of God when he began his official work of redemption, the temptations that we meet do not come by chance or even at Satan's fancy. Our trials come presided over by the Spirit of God that our faith may be tried, strengthened and found to be God glorifying at Christ's Second Advent as Peter points out in 1st Peter chapter 1 and verse 8.

The opening question of the tempter – a name given Satan, incidentally, that we may the better beware of him – is related to the words that came from heaven at the baptism. We might paraphrase it this way: If for the sake of argument as the voice at your baptism intimated, you are the son of God, then demonstrate your Messianic office

by providing a kingdom of bread. (That's verse 3.) The test was a very shrewd thrust. Is it really true, Satan asked, that the God who said "Thou art my son" has also said "thou shall not eat? A hungry and needy son of God? Could this be of God?" Especially when one remembers that one of the features of the kingdom the Messiah is to bring is that of the Messianic banquet where everyone will have abundance.

Earlier expositors inventively suggested that the first temptation had to do with gluttony, the second with ambition and the third with greed. It is, however, exceedingly far-fetched to me to regard a hungry man seeking bread as guilty of gluttony. Actually, the bread is used simply for food as proper sustenance. And one of the blessings the Messiah is to bring is abundant, but not excessive, material sustenance. The reference then is to the Messianic promises. And Satan desired our Lord to seek to acquire the promised blessing apart from the way of the cross.

There are other interesting things about this first temptation that bear comment. Satan, it will be noted, does not begin with a point-blank denial of the truth. That would be too obvious. As in much of our contemporary theology, the unbelief is more subtle and deceptive. For example, as we pointed out in previous studies, the virgin birth is not denied by contemporary students. It's simply considered an unnecessary doctrine. The deity of Christ is not categorically rejected. It's explained away. Jesus is not the object of our faith, we are taught, but simply the founder of our faith and its classic example of trusting God. As Forsythe remarked of these apostates, "We must learn to believe not in Christ but with Christ." But if we take only one aspect of his teaching, we immediately see that this theology is bankrupt. He affirmed, "Except ye repent, you shall all likewise perish." Search his religious experience as deeply as one will and there is no trace of repentance in it. If he were only a man, where is his repentance? The fact is that the church has always known, and rightly so, that Jesus Christ is not only a man but more than a man. "He is my Lord and my God" as Thomas affirmed. He doesn't ask only for devotion to his example, his actions or his words. He demands devotion to himself.

A contemporary unbelief spearheaded by the passing fancy of theothanatology, that is, the doctrine that God is dead or meaningless, radical neo-orthodoxy, process theology, New Age theology and other aberrations seem simply an echo of the ancient serpent query, "Ye, hath God said?"

Jesus' reply is given us in the 4th verse, and the reply is a quotation from Deuteronomy, as is each reply incidentally, and it alludes to the manna given Israel by the Lord as they made their way through the wilderness. He says, "It is written, Satan, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." The reply is so apt that it may be said that he proves his sonship by a response that is worthy of a son.

Our Lord's reply is often superficially understood as if he were simply saying that one lives not by physical bread alone but also by the spiritual food of the word of God. That, as Calvin said, is a truism, but it was not what Moses was intending. The manna was an exceptional, in fact, a supernatural provision for Israel's life when there was no ordinary bread. Life depended upon God's command, God's Word, that Israel should live. The point is that physical bread will not sustain man's life unless God determines that man shall live. In other words, life is dependent on God's gift of life or his determination that we live. If he determines that man shall live, man will live whether he has food or not. As applied to our Lord, the meaning is clear. At the baptism, God indicated his decision that Jesus live and do the mediatorial work of the Messiah. Thus, while God may determine that ordinarily he would do his work by means of eating bread, the eating of bread is not necessary to his life. The decision of God that he live is. Therefore, Jesus refuses to respond by working a miracle which God has not willed that he work in order to bring to pass something, his continued life, which God has already willed. To put it simply, man lives first by God not by food. Obedience to his word is the prerequisite of life.

Calvin's comment is both interesting and true, as well as important. "Though it is bread that feeds us, we are not right to attribute the life that we receive to bread in itself but to the hidden grace which God breathes into the bread that we may be fed. Thus, on the other hand, those who live as if abundance of nutrition is the good life are simply guilty of foolish folly." And one thinking of this naturally thinks of our generation in which the good life is a thoroughly human, worldly and physical kind of life. Those who really believe that and live as if that is true are guilty of the most foolish of follies.

Let me say a few words by way of conclusion. One notices first that our Lord appears to be retracing the steps of Israel in their spiritual pilgrimage, triumphing in the tests by which they were defeated. They fell at the time of the test that led to the gracious gift of the manna, but he knowing that man's life is by the command of God and knowing that God wills him to live triumphs in God's provision. The practical point is clear: We too only have success when we trust his word which is the unbreakable shield against the darts and terrors of the devil and leads to a second point of application. If man lives by the word of God, then it follows that one must hide that word in one's heart. But, and this is very important, any individual or church or theological seminary that by its practice or doctrine suppresses or discourages the reading and study of the word of God as found in holy Scripture are in effect in league with Satan and are exposing the souls of men and women to eternal destruction. The Lord has terrifying words to say about blind guides who lead the blind, both falling into the ditch, and about those who prevent men from entering the kingdom of heaven.

We live in a day in which bread for the downtrodden, oppressed and politically deprived peoples is widely demanded of the Western world because they have worked and have abundance. We're sympathetic as believing Christians to the needs of the deprived. But it is surely in harmony with our Lord's words to make the point that the primary need of all peoples is his word. The Roman authorities gave free bread in the desire to promote Caesar's kingdom. One might reason – should not Jesus have done that

also to promote his kingdom? Free bread might advance an earthly kingdom a bit, but Jesus aimed for more than an earthly kingdom of bread. He aimed for the spirits of men, for eternal life is the only hope for fallen man.

May God help us therefore to compassionately preach the gospel of Christ, which alone provides the bread that is genuine life. And may the Lord help us to realize the importance of putting the life that is forever first before the life that is for a time. As the Lord himself so plainly put it, "I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst." (John 6:35)

We invite you, as an ambassador of the Lord Jesus Christ, at this very moment to respond to the invitation of the eternal Son. "I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst." Come to him that you may never spiritually hunger. Believe in him that you may never spiritually thirst but have the life that is life indeed.

Next week in our study we continue our treatment of the temptation. And I hope you'll be listening then.