

The Temptation of Jesus

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Introduction

The temptation of our Lord is recorded in each of the synoptic gospels (Matt. 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13). Satan tempted Jesus in the same ways that he entices us, i.e., through the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life (1 John 2:15-17).

Responding to each temptation, Jesus said, “It is written...” “It is written...” “It is written...” Herein, we are reminded of the words of Psalm 119:11, which says, “Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against You” (cf. also Psa. 1:1-3; 40:6-8).

The First Temptation

In Matthew’s gospel, the tempter came and said to Jesus, “If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread” (Matt. 4:3). Luke records, “And the devil said to Him, ‘If You are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread’” (Luke 4:3).

Here Satan appeals to the lust of the flesh, encouraging Jesus to improperly use His powers to satisfy physical craving. Miraculous powers served to reveal and confirm the truth, but were not for the purely personal benefit of those who exercised such. In a similar way, the devil tempts us to satisfy otherwise legitimate longings in an illegitimate manner.

According to Matthew, Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live on bread alone’” (Matt. 4:4). Luke records, Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live on bread alone’” (Luke 4:4). This quotation is taken from Deuteronomy 8:1-6, with specific emphasis on verse 3. As God allowed Israel to face hunger and thirst in the wilderness, the Son of Man faced the same. Following in the footsteps of Jesus, we must learn to trust in God, and rely upon His revealed word.

The Second Temptation

In Matthew’s gospel, the devil then took Jesus into the holy city and had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command His angels concerning You’; and ‘On their hands they will bear You up, so that You will not strike Your foot against a stone’” (Matt. 4:5-6).

According to Luke’s order, this temptation is the last of the three: The devil led Jesus to Jerusalem and had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down from here; for it is written, ‘He will command His angels concerning You to guard You,’ and, ‘On their hands they will bear You up, so that You will not strike Your foot against a stone’” (Luke 4:9-11).

Here Satan appeals to the pride of life, emboldening Jesus to test God’s promise of protection (cf. Psa. 91:11-12). Sacred Scripture speaks of the security of one who trusts in the Lord, but this does not mean modern-day disciples should jump in front of a speeding 18-wheeler just to prove the point.

Both Matthew and Luke record Jesus' response: Jesus answered and said to him, "It is said, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test'" (Matt. 3:7). Jesus said to him, "On the other hand, it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test'" (Luke 3:12). This quotation is taken from Deuteronomy 6:16-19, with special emphasis on verse 16. Additional background information comes from Exodus 17:1-7.

The Third Temptation

In Matthew's gospel, the devil took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory; and he said to Him, "All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me" (Matt. 4:8-9).

According to Luke's order, this temptation falls in the middle: He led Jesus up and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. And the devil said to Him, "I will give You all this domain and its glory; for it has been handed over to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. Therefore if You worship before me, it shall all be Yours" (Luke 4:5-7).

Here Satan appeals to the lust of the eyes, enticing Jesus to achieve His rightful dominion in the wrong but easy way. Satan often promises what he cannot deliver, and is never to be trusted (John 8:44). He is "the god of this world," not by right but by usurpation (2 Cor. 4:3-4).

Jesus responds by quoting from Deuteronomy 6:10-15, with a special emphasis on verse 13. Only the Lord God is to be worshipped, not idols, not mammon, and certainly not the devil. The same thought is echoed in Deuteronomy 10:12-22, especially in verse 20.

Conclusion

Coming to earth, Jesus left an example for us to follow. In life and in death, He committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth (1 Pet. 2:21-25). Being made like His brethren in all things, Jesus became a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God. For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted (Heb. 2:14-18).

Furthermore, we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Heb. 4:14-16).