

The Voice of the Devil: The Temptation of Jesus

Follow as I read our New Testament passage about the experience of Jesus' temptation, which followed his forty days in the wilderness, between his baptism and the beginning of his public ministry.

Luke 4:1-13:

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness,² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.³ The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."⁴ Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'⁵ Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world.⁶ And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please.⁷ If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours."⁸ Jesus answered him, "It is written,

*'Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.'"*

⁹ Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here,¹⁰ for it is written,

*'He will command his angels concerning you,
to protect you,'*

¹¹ and

*'On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"*

¹² Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"¹³ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Even though Jesus retained his full deity, he also took upon himself our humanity, including the experience of being tempted. Also, it was to be our example and our encourager in our temptations. As our High Priest, he is able to sympathize with us in our weakness, because he was "tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin" (Hebrews 4:15, NIV).

We too are tempted in every way. It's not a sin to be tempted. We're taught to pray for God to not lead us into temptation, "to the time of trial" (Matthew 6:13). In other words, we're not to ask for trouble, but are to seek grace to avoid temptation. We're to not flirt with temptation but are to flee it at every opportunity, having a holy distrust of self. As Martin Luther is credited for saying about temptation, "we cannot keep the birds from flying over our heads; but we can keep them from building nests in our hair."

As we look at the experience of this dramatic temptation of Jesus (and he was tempted throughout his earthly life), we find a great example for us in our waging our cosmic battle against Satan. Don't think of your life as insignificant. Satan knows that your life is vitally important in the kingdom of God. If you're a follower of Christ, Satan has lost the battle for your soul, but he's seeking now to destroy your usefulness in the kingdom of God and your joy in the Lord. Just as he attacked our Lord Jesus, he's attacking you.

And the timing of his tempting you will be so unwelcome! It was after Jesus' baptism, a high moment of the Father's affirmation of him, that Jesus was tempted, during a time of solitude and retreat. But after your times of spiritual mountaintop experiences, beware of the devil's attacks. He knows our emotional vulnerability to go from high to low points. "*Like a roaring lion (our) adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour*" (1 Peter 5:8). So, as Peter also says, we must resist him and stand firm in the faith.

Jesus was tempted to distrust God the Father (3-4). He was at the critical stage of beginning his public ministry, those three years of intense teaching, preaching, ministry and disciple-making, which would culminate in the cross and resurrection—his work to save us. This sojourn in the desert was a preparatory time of solitude with the Father, and Satan intrudes into this intimate experience by first attacking a basic need of the fully human Jesus—the obvious need to eat, to satisfy his hunger after 40 days of fasting.

The devil attacks us where we're feeling most needy and aware of our weakness. God created us with all kinds of appetites, and the temptation is to satisfy them in inappropriate ways and premature times. Perhaps in our loneliness the need is for a relationship that would satisfy the desire for companionship. Perhaps it's a basic physical appetite for pleasure and personal enjoyment through sexual gratification. Maybe it's the need for security and a sense of belonging. Satan appeals to our normal human desires, and wants us to ignore the way God wants to satisfy them.

The devil said to Jesus, "*If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.*" (3). At his baptism the Father affirmed that Jesus was indeed his Son, whom he loved and with whom he was well pleased (Luke 3:22). Now Satan wants him to question this most important relationship. If Satan can cause us to doubt our relationship with God then he can release us from our moral obligation and commitment to follow his will for our lives. We need always remember who we are and even more importantly, *whose* we are. We belong to Christ, and are no longer our own. Even our bodies, with all of their appetites and passions, are God's (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

The voice of the devil implied that if the Father really cared for the Son he wouldn't be hungry. And this is the voice of the devil we're also likely to hear in our personal times of difficulty and need. If God really loved and cared for me,

wouldn't he rid me or my loved one of this illness? Would he really allow me to go through a period of want, need or even intense suffering and grief?

Jesus knew that to trust the heavenly Father is to trust his care even in times of intense hunger and need. It's during such times that we learn what's more important than physical food or temporal gratification. Jesus was hungry as he sat beside Jacob's well. But when he spoke with the sinful woman and led her to faith in him as the source of living water, he explained to his disciples that he had forgotten his own hunger. He told them "I have food to eat that you know nothing about....My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work" (John 4:34). And this is what he meant when he replied to the devil with from Scripture: "*One does not live by bread alone*" (verse 4).

Throughout our lives we'll be tested regarding our trust in God and tempted to distrust him and to run after our own solutions and sources of satisfaction. The Father wants to meet our needs first of all in the context of seeking him first. As David wrote,

"Trust in the Lord and do good;
Dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.
Delight yourself in the Lord
And he will give you the desires of your heart" (Psalm 37:3-4).

The voice of the devil; says, "If you're a child of God, take care of yourself," continues the voice of the devil. But Jesus shows us that we're to wait upon the Lord to provide as we seek after him and learn to fully trust in him. Matthew's account of Jesus' temptation in the desert says that after the devil left Jesus the Father didn't leave him desolate and unattended. "Angels came and attended him" (Matthew 4:11). The Father desires to care of you and to attend to your every need.

The devil took Jesus to a lookout over a vast territory and offered him immediate authority in exchange for his worship. Since the fall of mankind (Genesis 3), this world and world order, apart from God's intervention, is under the dominion of Satan. In this sense, "the world" is not to be loved (1 John 2:15-17).

This worship of Satan and collusion with him in his fallen world order is a more subtle temptation and attraction than it may first appear (5). At first glance, it seems so unlikely that Jesus would be tempted to worship Satan, but it would be through his attraction to the "authority and splendor" of his kingdom that Jesus would be drawn. This present world order under Satan's dominion is temporal, and all that Satan can offer us is the "here and now," the immediate. Throughout his brief public ministry Jesus faced constant pressure from the world to be its immediate deliverer and political leader. When Jesus miraculously fed the crowd, they realized that his rule could usher in a utopian society, and so they

tried to “make him king by force” (John 6:15). Indeed, this would mean an instant following and immediate kingdom on earth, without a cross.

Jesus continued to face this temptation to avoid the cross. When Jesus, at the midpoint of his public ministry, explained that he must go to Jerusalem, where he would suffer and be killed and then raised to life, Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!” And then Jesus turned and said to Peter, “*Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.*” (Matthew 16:21-23). Jesus was in effect saying, “Peter, you are the same voice of the devil I heard at my temptation in the desert, the temptation to accept the immediate, cross-less kingdom of this fallen world.” Jesus’ final temptation for the immediate kingdom of this world would be in the Garden of Gethsemane, on the eve of his arrest, trial and crucifixion. He agonized in prayer to the Father in a cosmic battle over whether to complete his mission as a crucified Savior. His human nature yearned that there might be a way to avoid the cross, but then he surrendered, knowing the cross was the only way for our salvation (Luke 22:39-46).

We’re created and redeemed to worship the Lord God, who’s rescued us from this fallen world and placed us in his eternal kingdom. This kingdom of God is invisible to us now, but is just as real as the physically tangible. And we’re counting on the fact that Jesus, through his surrender to and death on the cross and his resurrection, has gained the victory over this fallen world and kingdom of darkness. We too are called to take up our cross to follow Jesus. The way of the cross continues to be the way that God draws people to himself and the way he forms the character of Christ within us. The way of God’s victory is to work through human weakness and even suffering to draw people to himself.

The devil next leads Jesus to Jerusalem and to the highest point of the temple (9-12). This was probably the Royal Porch on the southeast corner of the temple, which loomed over a cliff beside the Kidron Valley, some 450 feet below. Just looking over the edge of this point made people dizzy (Bock). Satan tempts Jesus to prove his divine Son-ship by throwing himself from that pinnacle. Jesus was tempted to manipulate divine power for selfish purposes and to by-pass the way of trust and obedience to the Father. Here the temptation by the devil was clearly meant to destroy Jesus. And that is the purpose that Satan always has in mind for us. If he cannot destroy our immortal souls, he will do his best to destroy our joy in the Lord and our usefulness in the kingdom.

Even Satan quotes Scripture (10, Psalm 91)! Here the devil sounds very pious and proves that he goes to church and can speak our language. He was tempting Jesus to put on a religious show in front of the religious crowd at the temple. This display of divine power would have served his ends of gaining immediate power and prestige. Good people can quote Scripture to lead us to use God for selfish ends. Whenever anyone speaks even Scripture that diverts

us from obedience to Christ is the voice of the devil. It's possible that "Roger Roberts" could be "the voice of the devil," if I mislead you from hearing and obeying God's voice.

Jesus answered the devil by quoting Scripture appropriately: "*Do not put the Lord your God to the test.*" (12, quoting Deuteronomy 6:16). To act outside of God's will, even in the guise of religious service, is to test the care and protection of God, and to place ourselves and others in peril.

If Jesus were to jump from the temple of his own accord, he would certainly jeopardize his messianic mission and put the Father to the test whether or not he would indeed rescue him. I recall a sermon preached in chapel during my seminary days. Being a colorful African American pulpit orator, the preacher, using the same text as ours for today, preached about Humpty Dumpty, the Mother Goose nursery rhyme about the egg of that name who sat on a wall and fell to a crumbly mess. It goes like this:

*Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall.
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
All the king's horses and all the king's men
Couldn't put Humpty together again.*

The preacher said that just as Jesus knew that to jump from that 450-foot pinnacle was to put God to the test, so eggs should not sit on walls. And neither should we expose ourselves to danger, expecting God to rescue us from trouble. Many have endangered their lives and their families by acting outside of God's will.

Although Jesus won this battle, the war wasn't over. Satan left Jesus momentarily, "until an opportune time" (13). The devil is not through with you either. Some of us may be in the throes of a struggle for our soul—whether to listen to God or the voice of the devil. It may not be the choice between the obviously evil and good. But it's a cosmic battle going on within you. I hope you can see the heavenly crowd of witnesses and can hear them cheer you on to victory (Hebrews 12:1). Your battle is much more significant than the biggest Super Bowl game ever played. Listen to Jesus.