

6. The Temptation

Immediately after his baptism, Jesus was tempted. It seems many Christians have the same experience. A short time after they've committed themselves, through baptism, to serving God, they find themselves confronted by difficult situations which quickly put to the test their good resolution. This can involve a failure, an illness, a chance to get rich dishonestly, being mocked, a feeling of laziness about the things we should do for God... whatever the exact nature of the situation, we are tempted. Satan has often managed to divert men from the will of God before they get very far in His service. But he was not able to do this with Jesus.

WHAT WAS THE TEMPTATION?

Some people have the false idea that just being tempted is already a sin. This cannot be true, because the Bible tells us that Jesus "was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). Temptation exists when we are attracted to something forbidden, when we want to do what we should not do AND when we have opportunity to do it. Both the desire and the opportunity must exist or we cannot talk of temptation. Opportunity plus desire constitutes temptation.

Then when temptation exists, a decision is required. Either you submit to the temptation—you take the opportunity and do the thing that you feel like doing—or you resist the temptation—you fight off the desire and refuse to use the opportunity to do wrong.

Where does temptation come from? In the case of Jesus, Matthew 4:1 tells us, "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." We see here that God allowed the temptation. His Spirit can lead us into a situation where we are put to the test, but it is the devil who tempts us. The devil wants our fall; he tries to seduce us, to deceive us, to intimidate us. His goal is to lead us to sin against God.

God sometimes tests us to show the depth and sincerity of our faith. He may thus allow instances of suffering in our lives. What He desires is that we pass the test by doing what is good. God never seeks to harm us. He does not tempt us in the sense of leading us to do wrong, as the devil does. This is why James says, "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone" (James 1:13). Is

God unjust because He sometimes allows the devil to tempt us? On the contrary, God places limits on the temptations that the devil can force upon us (1 Corinthians 10:13).

OF WHAT DID THE TEMPTATION OF JESUS CONSIST?

Let's look again at the temptation of Jesus. How was he tempted after his baptism and how was he able to resist? Before understanding what took place here, we need to remind ourselves of Jesus' mission, the will of God for him. You see, when we sin, it is because we are not doing the will of God. So what did God want Jesus to do?

He himself says clearly in Mark 10:45, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." Also in Mark 10:33,34, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death and deliver Him to the Gentiles; and they will mock Him, and scourge Him, and spit on Him, and kill Him. And the third day He will rise again."

After his resurrection, he explained to his disciples: "Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?" And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself" (Luke 24:26,27). Jesus knew in advance what would happen to him. He would offer himself as a sacrifice without blemish in the place of sinful men. The path to glory would necessarily take him through suffering and humiliation because he would have to suffer and be humiliated for you and me. This would not be easy at all.

As the hour approached, he was troubled. The Bible tells us that he was in agony and that sweat fell from him like drops of blood. But he said to God: "Not my will, but Yours be done" (Luke 22:42). The will of God for Jesus was truly that he go to the cross before being exalted again.

Now let's consider three temptations that the devil placed before him:

1. Jesus had fasted for 40 days and he was very, very hungry. The tempter approached him and told him to change stones into bread and eat. His argument was more or less like this: "You are not just

anyone. You are the Messiah, the Christ. You were born of a virgin. You have miraculous powers. You should use your power to avoid suffering from hunger. Is it right for a servant of God—more than that, the Messiah—to be deprived of what is necessary for him? Why suffer unnecessarily? Use your power and eat.”

Now Jesus was fasting to prepare himself for the task that was before him. Fasting is often a sign of humbling one’s self before God. It accompanies a prayer in which one implores God’s help. Satan suggested to him that it was not fitting for him to fast.

“But He answered and said, ‘It is written, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God”’” (Matthew 4:4). Jesus became a man and he accepted living as a man with all the suffering and humiliation that might come with that condition. Also, Jesus recognized that there are things more important in life than physical nourishment. Man does not live by bread alone. Jesus was seeking what is spiritual, and he did not let Satan turn him aside from that.

2. Satan tried again. He transported Jesus to Jerusalem, placed him atop the temple and told him to throw himself off. He added, “For it is written: ‘He shall give His angels charge over you,’ and, ‘In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone’” (Matthew 4:6). Satan again suggested that Jesus should not suffer, considering who he was. According to Satan, Jesus ought to make his importance known right from the beginning among the Jews, in their own capital city, so that he would already be acclaimed to be the Christ, the leader and liberator sent by God. If he performed a spectacular miracle in the middle of Jerusalem, the holy city, all would be led to accept him. No need to walk from village to village as a vagabond, no allowing himself to be insulted or going to the cross. To make his argument more convincing, Satan himself quoted scripture. And he quoted it correctly and without taking it out of context, because the passage actually was about Jesus.

“Jesus said to him, ‘It is written again, “You shall not tempt the Lord your God”’” (Matthew 4:7). Many people misunderstand the expression “to tempt the Lord.” They think that it is a question of running risks, of counting on the protection and blessing of God instead of taking precautions. So if there is a risk of being persecuted if we go to take the gospel to certain groups of people, we don’t go there for fear of

“tempting the Lord.” And yet, the Lord has warned us that we will be persecuted and he also promised, after giving orders to make disciples of all nations: “And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). To obey him by evangelizing is not tempting the Lord.

Then what does the expression mean—“to tempt the Lord”? The idea is that, in putting to the test the patience of God, we provoke His anger by our rebellion. The passage Jesus quotes is found in Deuteronomy 6:16,17. Moses told the Israelites not to serve idols or the anger of God would be kindled against them. Then he added, “You shall not tempt the Lord your God as you tempted Him in Massah. You shall diligently keep the commandments of the Lord your God, His testimonies, and His statutes which He has commanded you.”

And what had happened at Massah? God had just brought the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, and He was leading them across the desert and toward Mount Sinai where He would give them his laws; then He wanted to lead them to Canaan that He had promised them. Arriving at a place where there wasn’t any water, the people began to complain. Instead of taking their need to God with respect and confidence, they acted badly. “Therefore the people contended with Moses... and the people complained against Moses, and said, ‘Why is it you have brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?’ So Moses said to them, ‘Why do you contend with me? Why do you tempt the Lord?’” (Exodus 17:2-3). This behavior characterized the Israelites all the time as they traveled through the wilderness.

Later, they tempted God further, as we read in Numbers 14:2-4: “And all the children of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron, and the whole congregation said to them, ‘If only we had died in the land of Egypt! Or if only we had died in this wilderness! Why has the Lord brought us to this land to fall by the sword?... Would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?’ So they said to one another, ‘Let us select a leader and return to Egypt.’” So, tempting the Lord means rebelling against Him, refusing to follow the path that God has laid out for us.

The path that was laid out for Jesus was, as we have seen, a path of suffering and humiliation and death. Satan proposed a simpler way, quick and painless. But Jesus refused to tempt the Lord. He

refused to leave the path that God wanted him to follow.

3. Then Satan tried a third time. “Again, the devil took Him up on an exceedingly 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 will fall down and worship me’” (Matthew 4:8,9). Were these things not intended for the Christ? Didn’t he have the right to possess them? Why should he have to suffer poverty? Or die on a cross? What Satan proposed was so easy. Bow down before Satan and it would all be done. He would have the world at his feet.

But again Jesus used scripture to push the devil away: “Then Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan! For it is written, “You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve”’” (Matthew 4:10). No matter what advantage was offered to him, Jesus refused to disobey God. He remained faithful to the One who had sent him, and he had love for us who could be saved only by his obedience and his death.

Jesus vanquished the tempter but this was not his only battle. Luke 4:13 tells us, “Now when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from Him until an opportune time.” There would be other times when Satan would try to lead Jesus into sin and to divert him from his mission. When we have managed to resist a temptation, we must not think that he will leave us in peace from then on. We must be vigilant, for he will look for other ways to have us.

CONCLUSION

Because he was tempted, Jesus knows what we feel when we are tempted. He understands us. Because he conquered the enemy, his example shows us that it is with the help of the Word of God, that we can also resist temptation. So we must always study the scripture to know what God asks of us and to strengthen us in times of testing. It is important not to neglect hearing and studying the Word, because, as we have seen, Satan can also quote it. False teachers and false prophets use scripture. It is necessary to take into account all that the Bible teaches on a subject and not limit ourselves to a single verse which seems to favor what we want to do.

Finally, because Jesus was tempted and because he overcame, he was able to complete his mission. He was able to offer us salvation from our sins. Thus he became our model. He is also our only Savior.