

Why was Jesus tempted?

Matthew 4:1-11

Mark Vroegop

4 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. 3 And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." 4 But he answered, "It is written, "'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple 6 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, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'"

7 Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'" 8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. 9 And he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." 10 Then Jesus said to him, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written, "'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.'"

11 Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him (Matt 4:1-11).

Sometimes the most penetrating questions or statements come from children, don't they? Remember the children's book *The Emperor Has No Clothes*? It was a child who stated what was obvious but unacknowledged by everyone else: the emperor was naked. Children don't fully understand the ramifications or the social implications of what they are asking. For example, one of my nephews one time asked an overweight man, "When is your baby due?" Not good.

A while ago I was having a conversation with one of our boys, and he began to ask me a series of theological questions. He asked me if Jesus was fully God and fully man why was it necessary for him to be tempted. Good question. He also asked if Jesus was fully God then how was it possible for him to be tempted. Another good question. He didn't fully understand all that he was really asking.

Yet it is a really important question. Why was Jesus tempted? How was his temptation similar or different than the temptations that we face? If he was fully God how is it even possible for

him to be tempted? Further, if he was God was it even possible for him to sin? And what does that mean for his ability to understand what my temptations are like?

Today I'd like to take up the question as to why Jesus was tempted and as I answer that question I hope to answer the other ones as well.

Why was Jesus tempted?

Remember that the opening chapters of Matthew are designed to lay a foundation that will demonstrate that Jesus is in fact the Messiah. In other words, He's the One. Two weeks from now we'll begin a new study called "Get Real" where we will walk through Jesus' longest recorded sermon in the entire Bible – the Sermon on the Mount.

Every story in these early chapters is crucial because Matthew is trying to quickly move into the ministry of Jesus, and therefore he only highlights the most important events that serve to lay a foundation for who Jesus is. Last week we saw this in the baptism of Jesus. We learned that Jesus' baptism was to inaugurate his ministry and to identify with humanity.

It is very interesting that the next event in Jesus' life, immediately following the affirmation by the Father and the presence of the Spirit, is his temptation. It begs the question, "Why is this here?"

I think that there are at least five reasons why Jesus is tempted, and why Matthew felt that it was important enough to include in the introductory material of his book.

1. To show us divinely designed testing

Verse 1 begins with a sense of immediacy and urgency – "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." If we put the other two accounts (Mark 1:14-15 & Luke 4:14-15) together, we would find that Jesus traveled north toward his home in Galilee when he is directed "by the Spirit" to go into the wilderness.

The wilderness was a place of testing for Israel. It was where God tested the nation of Israel for 40 years after their refusal to obey the Lord's command to take the land of Canaan. The parallels between Jesus' 40 day fast and the fact that all of this takes place in the wilderness cannot be missed. Jesus is the perfect Israelite and his 40 days of wilderness will prove his obedience.

The word "tempt" is important to understand. It is the Greek word *peirazo*, and it expresses two kinds of meaning:

- 1) It can mean **testing to achieve approval** as in Genesis 22:1 where the Bible says, "After these things God tested Abraham..."
- 2) It can mean **tempting to achieve disapproval** as in 1 Corinthians 7:5 where the Bible says, "so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control."¹

The word can mean either depending on the motive behind the event and the one doing the testing/tempting. In fact, the same event (like the sacrifice of Isaac) could be testing from God's vantage point or tempting from Satan's. Job would be a great example of this. He was tested by God and tempted by Satan in the same event. God wanted to vindicate him through testing; Satan wanted to vanquish him through temptation. John Calvin said it like this: "The Father's aim is to accredit Jesus, the devil's is to discredit him."²

However, the most important point here is the simple fact that it is the Spirit who is leading him into the wilderness where he will be tempted or tested by the Devil. There is a clear sense here that this is not accidental. There are divine purposes here.

Jesus is going to prove his fidelity to the Father over the next 40 days. He will embrace his full humanity by not using his divine power to short-circuit the testing of the Father or the temptations of the Devil. Even though he could have instantly called for the spiritual resources to stop the hunger or to defeat the Devil. He doesn't. Instead, he allows the test to run its full course upon his human limitations, and he (remarkably) allows himself to be tempted by the Devil. And the main reason why Matthew 4 is in the Bible is to show us the complete obedience of the Son in every way.

All of this is part of the divine design. Jesus didn't wander into the wilderness, the Spirit led him there. And what Satan meant to destroy him actually served to validate him. The Father was in control of everything, including this.

Paul echoes the same thought in 1 Corinthians 10:13 – "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."

2. To uncover the schemes of the devil

It is remarkable how much we learn about the schemes of the devil through this story. If you think about it, there would be no more appealing and difficult target than the Son of God. Therefore, the devil has to be on his best game.

¹ David Turner, Matthew – Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic Publishing, 2008), 126.

² Ibid

His tactics are to lay before Jesus three short-cuts to the Father's will. Satan is going to try to use Jesus' identity and his power against him. He is going to appeal to Jesus' sense of obedience but offer him an alternative plan. In other words the Devil will offer Jesus a short-cut on full obedience. The devil is so sneaky.

In the first temptation he suggests that Jesus prove that he is the Son of God by using his divinely given powers to provide food for his hungry body. "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread" (Mt 4:3). In other words, prove who you are; make this trial easier for yourself. "Provide your own relief!" That was the short-cut.

In the second temptation the devil suggests that Jesus throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple, and he even cites Psalm 91 as a proof-text. He uses Jesus' power and the very words of Scripture against him. Now Jesus throwing himself off the temple and surviving would have created an immediate following. Satan is suggesting that Jesus take his popularity into his own hands. "Prove that you are real!" That was the short-cut.

In the third temptation the devil suggests that he will give to Jesus all the kingdoms of the world if Jesus will fall down and worship him. The first temptation appealed to his hunger, the second to Scripture, and this temptation appeals to his sense of mission. Satan is offering Jesus the opportunity to begin his messianic rule now. "Push your reign to now!" That was the short-cut.

Isn't it interesting that the Devil's strategies have not changed. Even in the Garden of Eden the Devil's strategy is the same: find the short-cut on obedience. That is what the devil offered to Adam; it is what he offered to Christ, and it is what he continually offers to us. His scheme is to offer an alternative pathway of that looks like obedience, that seems to make sense, that seems work – but it is a diabolical trap.

One of the reasons why Jesus was tempted was so that we could see the schemes of the devil.

3. To highlight the enormous value of the Word

Another reason why Jesus was tempted was to show how incredible valuable and powerful the Word of God is. We see that even Jesus - fully God and fully man – utilized the Scriptures in his battle against Satan. The power of his resistance was not rooted in his divinity; it was rooted in the Scriptures.

Hebrews 4:12 says, "12 For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." The inspired Scriptures are more than just a collection of ancient writings. There is power here. There is value here. There is victory here.

Jesus rebuffs Satan's appeal by using the greater authority of the Scripture. He quotes three passages, all from Deuteronomy 6-8:

- v 4 – "It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Deut 8:3)
- v 7 – "It is written, You shall not put the Lord your God to the test" (Deut 6:16)
- v 10 – "It is written, You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve" (Deut 6:13)

The equation is very simple: the devil is defeated by a greater force – the written word of God.

Martin Luther understood this and experienced this. He knew that the truth of God's word has power – real power!

A Mighty Fortress Is Our God

Did we in our strength confide, our striving would be losing;
Were not the right Man on our side, the Man of God's own choosing:
Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He;
Lord Sabaoth, His Name, from age to age the same,
And He must win the battle.

And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed His **truth** to triumph through us:
The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure,
One **little word** shall fell him.

That word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them, abideth;
The Spirit and the gifts are ours through Him Who with us sideth:
Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also;
The body they may kill: God's **truth** abideth still,
His kingdom is forever.

There are two other reasons that Jesus was tempted. These are by inference from Matthew, but clearly communicated in other parts of the New Testament.

4. To demonstrate Jesus' sympathy

One of the clear implications of Jesus' temptation is that he knows what it is like to be human. The Messiah was not an aloof ruler or leader. He truly understands. He is a Savior who cares. Consider the following passages:

14 Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. 16 For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. 17 Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. 18 For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted (Heb 2:14-18).

14 Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Heb 4:14-16).

So these passages link Christ's empathy to 1) his ability to help us, and 2) our confidence and hope. Who do you want when you are suffering? Do you want someone who has never walked in your shoes or do you want someone who knows what you are going through and has made it?

That is what Christ gives us in his temptation – he identifies with us, not only in baptism, he identifies with us in our struggle with the flesh.

Now some of you are asking a question in your mind that my kids have asked me: If Jesus was fully God and sinless how is his temptation like mine? Let me answer that question in three ways:

1. To sympathize doesn't require similarity in every respect

Sometimes people struggle with what it means that Jesus was tempted "in every respect...as we are" (Heb 4:15). But the meaning of this passage is that Jesus was tempted with the full throttle of human temptations. He felt the pull of sin that is in the world like we do. He felt temptation in every respect like we do.

The important point to note here is that the basic temptations of humanity have not fundamentally changed. The objects or the delivery vehicles of the temptations have changed. But the essence, the attraction, the lure, and the gravitation have not. Jesus understands that pull; he fought it.

2. He was genuinely tempted

Sometimes people wonder how can Jesus really understand my temptations if he wasn't sinful by nature? And my answer to that is the fact that it assumes that a sinful nature makes temptation harder, and I'm not sure that is the case.

Our sinful and fallen state makes battling sin an impossible task without outside help. In other words, spiritually dead people have no ability to make themselves alive or fight. Someone else has to do that. However, I'm not sure that depravity makes temptation any stronger. It could be that Christ's sinless state and divine state made temptation even stronger. After all he has the divine power to conquer sin but he chooses to battle it in his humanity. He not only fights the raw temptation, but he also must fight the temptation to use his divine nature for his own ends.

3. Jesus was fully God and therefore he could not have sinned.

Here we have a mystery, but one that we must acknowledge. Namely, the Jesus was fully man so he was really tempted, and he was fully God so he could not have sinned. Jesus was fully human, able to experience real temptations, and he was fully God, not able to sin.

Obviously those things are in tension but I think that the first temptation of Jesus helps us in that Jesus had the ability to make stones into bread. However he chose to not use his divinely given power to violate the reality of his humanity. In the same way, I see no problem with a divine nature that cannot sin meshed with a human nature that is fully temptable.

The fact that he couldn't or wouldn't do something doesn't negate the temptation itself or the reality of the temptation.

The point of all of this is simply that Jesus can truly empathize. He really understands, and therefore there is help and hope. I remember one of the most meaningful cards that we received after the death of our daughter. It was from a member of our church who, unbeknownst to us, had lost a child many, many years ago. There was an instant connection, a deep level of comfort, and an enormous amount of hope.

Why was Jesus tempted?

1. To show us divinely designed testing
2. To uncover the schemes of the devil
3. To highlight the enormous value of the Word
4. To demonstrate Jesus' sympathy

And there is one more. But you will have to come back next week to discover what it is and how it connects to verses 18-25.

© **College Park Church**

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce this material in any format provided that you do not alter the content in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Mark Vroegop. © College Park Church - Indianapolis, Indiana. www.yourchurch.com