

IN CONFLICT WITH SATAN

Matthew 4:1-11

When our Lord Jesus was lifted out of the waters of baptism by John the Baptist, He listened to the testimony as to His divine sonship, heard the Father speak His approval of the action of His beloved Son, and immediately thereafter was led by the Spirit into the fires of temptation. It is one of the great truths of life that when a person pursues the path of loyal obedience to the known will of God he will always find Satan in pursuit of him. Oftentimes our most blessed experiences are followed by the greatest conflicts and temptations. Frequently a sharp trial follows a special refreshing or some victorious experience.

At the behest of the Spirit, Christ went into a remote, desolate, and forlorn part of the wilderness to contend with Satan. Evidently it was a place of extreme solitude for the Bible says, "He was with the wild beasts." However, our Lord neither feared the wild animals nor was He injured by them.

Temptation is solicitation to do wrong. It is the common lot of all. The weakest and the strongest are subjected to it. None can escape temptation, but all can resist and overcome it. As Martin Luther said, "We cannot keep the birds from flying over our heads, but we can keep them from building nests in our hair." Temptation is not sin, but yielding to it is sinful.

I. The Tempter.

The tempter is Satan. God never tempts anybody to do wrong. Temptation always comes directly or indirectly from Satan. Nobody who acknowledges the truthfulness and authority of the Scriptures doubts that Satan is a real person.

Personal names, pronouns, plans, schemes, and acts are attributed to him, showing him to be an actual person, as truly as God is a person and as certainly as we are persons. No true follower of Christ ever doubts or denies the existence of Satan.

Satan did his utmost to entice the Lord Jesus to sin. He was determined to cause Him to sin if at all possible. Bear in mind that Christ was led into conflict with Satan on the ground of His humanity and not on the basis of His deity. The value of His victory over Satan rests on this fact, so far as we are concerned. Had Christ fought with Satan on ground we could never occupy, and in a strength which we could not possess, it never would have been said of Him: "He was tempted in all points, like as we are, yet without sin." He met and defeated the enemy on the ground of His humanity, and so can we.

II. The Tempted.

Christ Jesus was tempted by Satan. If Christ, the perfect One, was tempted by him, not even the best of His followers should ever expect to escape temptation. Satan approached Christ with the malicious hope of moving Him from His loyal obedience to the will of God, cause Him to doubt His Father's love, and persuade Him to desert His cause.

Christians should not be surprised or shocked when they are called upon to have conflicts with Satan. He gets great satisfaction out of leading them astray. From our Lord we learn how to conduct ourselves when we have an encounter with Satan.

III. The Temptations.

1. The first temptation of Christ.

Christ went out into a lonely wilderness and there in solitude He was tempted and tried by Satan. At the end of forty days and nights, during which He had fasted, our Lord was extremely hungry. Taking advantage of the situation, Satan tempted Christ to distrust God's care and use His divine power to work a miracle and satisfy His personal hunger. The tempter implied that the Son of God should not be subjected to such hunger, but that He should use His power and provide food for Himself. Had the Master done so He would have separated Himself from His brethren, for they were not able to work miracles to satisfy their hunger or their other needs. To satisfy hunger is legitimate, but Satan asked Christ to do it in the wrong way.

Christ's power was for the benefit of others, but Satan tried to get Him to use it to satisfy His own desires and needs. To this day Satan tempts God's children to use for their own advancement and glory the means that have been given them to advance the work of the Lord. Satan asked Christ to use His miraculous power for a selfish end. To hunger was not a sin. Neither was it a sin to appease hunger, but doing so under those circumstances would have been committing a sin, and that Christ refused to do. Instead of arguing with Satan, which in itself would have been useless, Christ merely answered him with a quotation from Deuteronomy 8:3: "Man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord doth man live."

All of Christ's miracles were performed for the benefit of others, and never to meet His personal needs. He refused to turn stones into bread to prove that He could do so. In fact, Christ never did anything merely to prove that He could do it. Even so, our gifts and powers are given to us for service and not for show. Satan pretended that he was deeply concerned about the physical welfare of the Master, but his real objective was to get Him to show His distrust of God by using His power to gratify self.

Had the Christ turned the stones into bread for His own use, as Satan suggested, it would not have been long until the devil would have said, "Now turn these stones into bread for my use." Satan never means well by any suggestion that he makes. He is set to sidetrack holy intentions, thwart righteous impulses, wreck lives, and destroy souls.

Today we are tempted to live as if there were nothing of real value except that which we can see, touch, feel, and taste. The peril of bread is to have everything with which to live and nothing for which to live. Satan tells us that physical ease and security are the only things worth striving for, but such living always leads men into all sorts of unethical and wicked practices. To Christ there is something superior to the gratification of the fleshly desires. With an all-time record in the field of material progress, we find that things have left us bewildered in mind and sick at heart. Any people who banish God's Word from public and private life,

and who take the day which God has designated for worship and rest and use it for profit and pleasure, will sooner or later come upon a time when the splendor of their achievements will be their ruin. Without the spiritual emphasis, love and devotion and sacrifice are wanting.

2. The second temptation of Christ.

Repulsed at one point, Satan made another attack on Christ from a new vantage ground. At the temple in Jerusalem, where one might have expected God's power to be at a maximum, Satan tried to get Christ to put God's keeping power to the test by jumping from one of the wings of the temple in plain view of the crowds below, with the full expectation that the Father would protect Him from any injury. Satan implied that, in the event that God did protect Him, Christ would then receive the acclaim of the people as their Messiah.

Wresting it from its setting, Satan quoted scripture in support of his suggestion that Christ presume on the grace of God by casting Himself from the temple into their midst. From Christ's refusal we learn that it is right to trust God, but that it is wrong to make presumptuous experiments in order to discover how far God can be trusted. In reply to Satan's appeal to Christ to do something spectacular and sensational, and thereby attract the attention and the plaudits of the crowd, Christ quoted Deuteronomy 6:16: "Ye shall not tempt the Lord your God."

3. The third temptation of Christ.

Having failed in his temptation of Christ in the realm of the appetite, and in the realm of adventure, Satan turned to the realm of ambition. He boldly sought to get Christ to render to him that worship which belongs to God alone.

Satan offered Christ supreme earthly power and glory, without the expense of suffering and death, on the condition that He worship him. Satan tempted Christ to sacrifice principle for property and power, but He did not yield to that subtle temptation. Instead of compromising with evil, Christ conquered it.

This bribe was the largest that Satan had to offer, so this temptation was the most powerful one that he had made. What Satan was really saying to the Saviour was, "Compromise! Come to terms with me! Don't hold your standards quite so high! Wink just a little at questionable and evil things, and then the people will follow you in great numbers." It was the temptation to try to change the world by becoming like it. Satan continues to tempt the followers of Christ to do the same thing today.

In abhorrence at Satan's subtle suggestion, our Lord repelled it by again quoting the written Word (Deuteronomy 6:13): "Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve."

IV. The Triumph.

Three times Satan sharply assailed the Master. He determined that he would bring Him into subjection to his own wicked will, if at all possible. But Satan made a miserable failure. He was unable to stand before the incisive power of God's Word, so he fled and left Christ alone for a season.

In His victory over Satan, our Lord's method involved the threefold principle of all triumph over Satan, namely, absolute dependence on God, accompanied by absolute faith in God, and reinforced by obedience to God. Follow His example and be triumphant too.