

THE FIRST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST

Matthew 4:1-4

We shall study this passage of Scripture in simple reliance upon the Holy Spirit with a view to deriving therefrom all of the practical values possible.

I. The Time.

"Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit." When? It was immediately after the Lord Jesus came up out of the waters of baptism, and the Holy Spirit had descended upon Him, and the voice of God the Father had been heard to declare, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

It was after the baptism. This illustrates the fact that when a person pursues the path of loyal obedience to the known will of God he will always find Satan in hot pursuit of him. It was also after the bestowal. His endowment of power for service was a definite challenge to the prince of darkness, for Christ came to destroy the works of Satan. It is only to be expected that anointing shall be followed by assault, or that after the Dove shall come the devil. Moreover, it was after the benediction. God expressed His pleasure in Jesus and attested His divine Sonship. But after the benediction came the battle.

It is not surprising that the Lord Jesus was tempted immediately after His baptism, which signified His formal entrance upon the Messianic work. It is one of the great truths of life that after every great moment there comes a period of reaction, and again and again it is in the reaction that the danger lies. It seems to be the law of life that just after our resistance has been the highest it frequently nose dives until it is at its lowest. Often, just after you get a special refreshing and have some victorious experience, the sharp trial comes. Oftentimes our most blessed experiences are followed by the greatest temptations and conflicts.

II. The Territory.

The Holy Spirit impelled Christ to go into a remote, desolate and forlorn part of the wilderness to think through the full significance of the step which He had just taken and to encounter, contend with the overcome His adversary. This wilderness stretched over an area some thirty-five by fifteen miles between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea. Between Jerusalem and Jericho was the wilderness of Judea -- a desolate, barren, rocky and rugged territory, full of precipices, deep hollows and bleak mountains. The scene of the parable of the good Samaritan was laid in this wilderness, which was infested with robbers and wild beasts. In that wilderness Christ Jesus could be more alone than anywhere else in Palestine. So far as human companionship was concerned, Christ went forth alone into the wilderness. Thus He moved from the greatest possible blessing to the most trying of experiences.

III. The Tempter.

The tempter was none other than the devil or Satan. In this story the personal devil is seen as really as the personal Messiah. Both of them are persons, one as actually as the other, and neither more so than the other. Just as certainly as the Bible is true, Satan is an evil person and not merely an evil principle or an evil influence.

Nobody who acknowledges the truthfulness and authority of the Scriptures doubts the reality or the personality of Satan. There is not a single impersonal reference to Satan in the whole Bible. Personal names, personal pronouns, personal plans, personal schemes and personal 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. There is a Satan just as certainly as there is a God. There is as much evidence for believing in the personality of Satan as in the personality of God. Nobody who follows Christ doubts or denies the existence of Satan. It is just those who do not offer him any resistance who deny his existence. The Lord Jesus never denied, discounted or doubted the reality of the devil's presence and power. God's Word tells us that Satan leads people into sin (I Corinthians 12:2, II Timothy 2:26); hides the gospel of Christ from the unsaved (II Corinthians 4:3-4); hinders Christians in their service (I Thessalonians 2:18); and gathers nations in battles (Revelation 16:13-14). Satan has always tried to belittle the Word of God and to hinder or mar the work of God. He did his utmost to entice Christ Jesus to sin.

Bear in mind that Christ was led into this conflict with Satan on the ground of His humanity and not His deity. Twice Satan appealed to Him as the Son of God in the words, "If thou be the Son of God", but our Saviour absolutely refused to be drawn onto that ground, not out of consideration for Satan, but for us. The value of His victory over this temptation rests on this fact, so far as we are concerned. Had Christ fought that battle with Satan on ground we could never occupy, and in a strength we do not possess, it could never 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.

IV. The Tempted.

Christ Jesus was tempted by Satan. He was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness, there to be tempted. He did not go there carelessly or presumptuously, but in compliance with the will and purpose of God. If Christ, the perfect One, was tempted, not even the best of His followers should ever expect to escape temptation.

The words "to tempt" and "temptation" are not used in the New Testament with uniform significance. One meaning is "to test, or try or to prove," and the other is "to allure, to entice, or to seduce." In the English language "to tempt" means "to allure, to entice or to seduce" one to do wrong, but in the Greek it frequently means "to test, or try or to prove." Jesus Christ was tempted. Concerning this fact the gospel narrative does not leave any doubt. Satan approached Him with the malicious hope of moving Him from His loyal obedience to the will of God, causing Him to doubt His Father's love, and persuading Him to desert His cause. The occasion whereby Satan would have Christ disproved was that whereby God found Him approved. Every test is not a temptation, but every temptation is a test. Everything of real worth is tested. In the case of all of us, testing is in order to make us pure; but in the case of Jesus Christ, it was in order to prove Him pure.

V. The Tests.

The first of these temptations came to Christ while He was alone in the wilderness. This is often the case with us also. In the solitary moments when nobody is near, we frequently find ourselves face to face with severe testings.

Satan tempted Christ Jesus to prove that He was the Son of God by working a miracle to satisfy His hunger, which was due to His fast of forty days and forty nights. He tempted the Saviour at the time of His greatest physical weakness.

Satan likewise takes advantage of our weakest moments, in times of perplexity, defeat and sorrow.

At the very beginning of Christ's public ministry, Satan tried to get Him to distrust God's care and use His own divine power to satisfy His personal hunger. He remarked, "Since thou art the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread." That was an appeal to the bodily appetite. The tempter implied that the Son of God should not be subjected to such hunger, but that He should put forth His power and provide food for Himself. That power of His was for the benefit of others, but the devil tried to get Him to use it to supply His own wants. To this day he tempts God's children to use for their worldly advancement and glory the means that have been given them to advance the work of the Lord in the world. Satan tempted Christ to gratify His natural desire or hunger in the wrong way. He tried to get Him to use His miraculous power for a selfish end. He asked Him to prove His divine sonship by working a miracle for His personal comfort. It was not a sin to hunger, and it was not a sin to appease hunger, but the doing so under the circumstances would have been a sin.

What was it that made this temptation so dangerous? It was a temptation to doubt the providential care of God. The insinuation of the devil was that such a state of need did not become so exalted a Person, and betokened neglect on the part of God. The line of argument was, "Fatherhood involves the primary responsibility to provide bread. Your Father is able to do this, but He has not done it. How, therefore, can you trust Him any longer? This evidence of God's neglect should lead you to give up your reliance upon Him." It was also a temptation to deny His dependence upon God. Here the stress was laid upon the claim that He was the Son of God. If so, He had both the right and the power to act for His own comfort at such a time without reference to the Father. It was a temptation to demonstrate that He was the Son of God. It was a temptation to do a right thing in the wrong way. It was right for Jesus to satisfy His hunger, but not by the use of power given Him for other ends -- a use which would have been an abuse. Christ never made an unholy use of power. It was a temptation to do a right thing at the wrong time. He was soon to work a miracle to feed others. Why, then, would He not feed Himself? But, no, His miracles shall all be for the needs of others, not for His own needs. It was a temptation to do a right thing from a wrong motive -- to turn stones into bread, not only because He needed bread but to prove that He could do so. Jesus never did anything to show that He could do it. Our gifts and powers are given us for service and not for show. It was a temptation to give the material precedence over the spiritual. It was a case of the material versus the spiritual.

There is nothing wrong in satisfying one's hunger. Satan pretended as though he were deeply concerned about the bodily welfare of the Master. But the real objective of Satan was to endeavor to get Jesus to show His distrust of His heavenly Father by using His power to gratify self rather than to glorify God.

VI. The Triumph.

After the tempter had urged Jesus to turn stones into bread, he was met with a sharp jab from the sword of the Spirit. We read, "But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." What a glorious answer our Saviour gave to Satan! He did not argue with the devil, but merely answered him from God's Word. This is a blessed testimony to the Saviour's evaluation of the Scriptures and His utter dependence upon them. His remark, "It is written," is assurance enough that He regarded the words quoted as of Divine origin and authority, and Divinely

designed to furnish guidance to every one in circumstances such as confronted Him. In repelling the assaults of Satan our Lord did not appeal to inward illumination, but to written revelation.

Had the Christ, Who had been so concerned about His spiritual interests that He had overlooked completely His physical needs, turned the stones into bread for His own selfish use, as the devil suggested, it would not have been long until the devil would have said, "Now turn this bread into stones for my use." The devil never means well by any suggestion that he makes. He is set to destroy souls, to wreck lives, to sidetrack holy intentions and to thwart righteous impulses. He wants to turn our virtues into vices, our prayers into presumption and our religion into blasphemy.

We have here the advocates of two kinds of life. The devil, who is the advocate of the earthly, the physical and the material, says: "Turn these stones into bread." Christ, the advocate of the spiritual, says: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." The question raised is, How shall we live? Satan answers this question one way; Christ answers it another. Satan would have us to believe that man can live by bread alone. His program is "Eat and live." Christ tells us that eating is not enough. Life is too large to be crammed into a program of bread; we live by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.

The peril in living is to overlook the spiritual. The temptation today is 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. Here is the peril to man and to man's civilization. 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. Putting bread in the cupboard will not meet the needs of a hungry soul. The soul must have life, and Christ alone can give life.

Christ's philosophy of life is entirely different from the bread theory of Satan. To Christ there is something superior to the gratification of fleshly desires. We are at a crisis because the things which we set as a goal have broken down. With an all-time record in the field of material progress, we suddenly find that the things in which we placed our confidence for security, prosperity and peace have failed us and left us bewildered in mind and sick at heart. This fate will always await us when we try to live by bread alone. Any nation that banishes God's Word from public and private life, that takes the day which God has designated for worship and uses it for profit and pleasure, and that makes pleasure its chief objective will sooner or later come upon a time when the splendor of its achievements will be as the ruins of Babylon. Living by bread alone takes the spiritual emphasis out of life. Without the spiritual emphasis the true values of life are wanting. Without the spiritual emphasis, love and devotion and sacrifice are wanting.

The experience through which our Lord Jesus passed suggests that to every child of God there belongs a special privilege and that is to use the Word of God. God has given us His Word for a purpose. It is not merely an object of admiration but a book of appropriation because He intends that its truths shall be translated into daily life. Christians have a formidable foe, and no weapon forged by the hand of man is of sufficient strength to deal with him. Nothing short of the sword of the Spirit will suffice.