



***“Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.”***

*(Matthew 4:1)*

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***“And now by some strong motion I am led***

***Into this wilderness; to what intent***

***I learn not yet. Perhaps I need not know;***

***For what concerns my knowledge God reveals.”***

*(Part of Jesus’ Soliloquy: John Milton – Paradise Regained)*

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Temptation is a common experience for everyone, whether they are Christians or not, but for Christians it is especially real, inevitable, and persistent. So it’s never a question of **if** we are tempted, only of **when, where** and **how**.

This is such an important area to be aware of in the Christian life, but one that I find is sadly neglected. Maybe teaching about it comes up during Lent but is largely absent for the rest of the year. Would that temptations were limited to the 40 days of Lent and we were free from them for the other 325 days!

However, by God’s grace, the synoptic gospels all mention the temptations Jesus faced in the desert and provide rich instruction on how to handle temptation. As God, Jesus couldn’t be tempted by evil (Jms.1:13), but as man, ‘Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted’ (Heb. 2:18).

This indicates that temptation is one of the ways Jesus, and we his followers, will suffer. And the more we resist temptation the more suffering we will experience. Think of Jesus sweating blood in the Garden of Gethsemane as he was tempted to bypass the Cross. However, it is encouraging and reassuring that Jesus himself is able to help us when the going gets temptingly tough.

But before we examine Jesus' battle with temptation in the desert, it is important that we are clear about the two main sources of temptation. Firstly, the devil, and secondly, our own fallen nature.

Sometimes we misidentify the source of temptation, blaming it all on the devil and making him responsible for the inward bias we all have towards indulging our senses, egos and ambitions. At other times we blame and condemn ourselves, failing to realise that we have a powerful adversary and his demons working against us. We need to keep both sources of temptation in mind, whilst recognising that they are often linked.

### **The Temptations of Jesus and What we can Learn from Them (Mt.4:1-11; Mk.1:12; Lk.4:1-14)**

***The timing of the temptations.*** The temptations came immediately after Jesus had experienced a wonderful spiritual event comprised of his baptism, the Holy Spirit coming upon him and hearing the voice of his Father from heaven saying, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

What a wonderful blessing, affirmation and confirmation this event was....and what wonderful preparation to face temptation!

Some people think that if you are filled with the Holy Spirit you won't face temptations, but in fact you are more likely to face them! The good news is that you will be in a stronger position to withstand them.

***The types, or channels, of temptation.***

- 1. First of all, there are the temptations which comes to us through our natural desires for food, drink, sex, sleep, excitement etc.***

Although all of these desires are created by God and given to us by God, the enemy seeks to exploit that fact and distort those needs and the ways in which they are to be legitimately met.

Because these needs are linked with our biological rhythms, they keep recurring and can be one of the most powerful, pervasive and insistent channels through which temptations arise.

Meeting the needs of these desires - fanned into flame as they often are by advertising, pornography etc. - can become addictive.

With regard to alcohol, I remember in our local paper some years ago there was a full-page article with the banner headline, “Does Harlow give a XXXX for its alcohol problem?” On the page opposite was a full-page advert from one of the supermarkets promoting bottles of wine at knockdown prices!

The first temptation Jesus faced was to do with his need for food. Not having eaten for 40 days he was hungry, so the devil saw an opportunity to tempt him through this basic desire.



However, the particular **way** in which Jesus was tempted in this regard was unique to him.

I would be very surprised if one of the main temptations you face takes place in your garden where you really do battle with the powerful desire to turn a stone from your rockery into a bread roll! It’s not going to happen!

Nevertheless, the devil knows our weaknesses and will personalise the temptations we face. In the same way that a fisherman will use different coloured baits to catch particular fish, - pike, apparently, find red and white or silver irresistible - so the devil knows the best ways to attract, entice and catch you and me.



It’s also worth remembering that the wily, crafty serpent in Genesis 3 persuaded Eve to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil when she ‘saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye.’

## **2. Doubts.**

As well as being the tempter, the devil is also the doubt-inducer, the one who will put questions into our minds as to whether we are Christians at all. Jesus also faced this kind of temptation. No sooner had God said to Jesus, “You **are** my Son” than the devil was whispering to him, “**If** you are the Son of God.”

Again, this type of temptation goes all the way back to Genesis 3 where the devil said to Eve, “Did God really say....?”

It is always best to discuss our doubts with God, not with the devil.

[For a fuller treatment of Doubt see the ‘Food for Thought’ article on “Doubt, Faith & Assurance”].

## **3. The Craving for Power and Authority.**

Another powerful temptation is the desire for power, status and authority. This may be the desire to exercise power and authority in the political realm, the financial realm, the ecclesiastical realm, the realm of the media, industry, business, sport, entertainment, whatever.

Sometimes we have to be wary of those who aspire to power. If they acquire power, they can easily become addicted to power and may then abuse power. Then, when they are booted out of power, they can be reluctant to leave power!

This vicious cycle happens regularly in Governments and peoples all around the world and has happened all down the ages, irrespective of whether the form of government has been of the democratic or the dictatorial type. Crowds agitating, revolutionaries marching, counter-revolutionaries opposing, leaders promising, all capable of doing and saying anything which will bring to their nostrils the enticing scent of taking, or holding onto, power! The goings-on in the USA, Uganda, Russia and Myanmar are just recent examples.

Of course, someone has to exercise power and authority in order for organisations and societies to function, but we need to be aware of the attendant temptations and pitfalls that those in power face.

And then there is the power and authority attached to titles, dress, rank, etc. which can be especially evident in organisations where there are hierarchical structures. Jesus warned us to watch out for such outward ostentation and what it may conceal (Mk. 12:38-40; Mt. chapter 23).

Perhaps, as a passing example, I will mention Freeman Freeman-Thomas, who was, to give him his full title, “Major The Most Honourable The Marquess of Willingdon – Viceroy and Governor-General of India 1931-1936”.

The Viceroy was also bedecked with a host of other glittering titles including GBE – Knight Grand Cross of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire; GCMG – Knight Grand Cross of the Most Distinguished Order of Saint Michael & Saint George; GCIE – Knight Grand Commander of the Most Eminent Order of the Indian Empire etc. etc.



But even as he came into post, the power and glory of the British and Indian Empires, like the glory of the Lord in Ezekiel’s vision of the temple, was fast ebbing away, and was soon, in the case of the empires, to disappear completely. Likewise, all the Marquess’ titles became extinct just a generation later when his only surviving son died, childless after 3 marriages.

I find this all so reminiscent of the devil taking Jesus to a very high mountain, showing him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour and saying, ‘all this I will give you if you will bow down and worship me’ (Mt.4:8&9).

But the truth surely is that any titles, honours, or ‘kingdoms’ which the devil has to bestow are all tawdry, gimcrack and worthless, even as they shine seductively with a false and fading splendour. And perhaps the more we bow down to him, the more he will dress us up, raise us up and entitle us.

Again, in terms of using the bait of power and authority as the hook for temptation, we see this at work again in Genesis 3 where the serpent said to the woman that if she ate of the forbidden fruit ‘your eyes will be opened and you will be like God’; Eve was then convinced that the fruit was ‘desirable for gaining wisdom.’ So it was, that false promises from the devil gave rise to false expectations in Eve.

#### ***4. Courting Celebrity, Popularity and Praise.***

Another of the temptations Jesus faced was to make a public exhibition of himself by jumping off the highest point of the temple. It is always part of the devil's strategy to take us to the highest place and then dash us on the rocks below.

Perhaps a modern example of this temptation is the surprising things that folks will do on television in order to draw attention to themselves! Some, after such exposure, have contemplated, or even committed, suicide.

And it is the 'reality' shows which have proved to be the most damaging and unreal of all, yet the most viewed. I often ask myself this question: Would Jesus, if he had come in the flesh in our generation, have chosen to appear on one of these shows? Myself, I think he would have rejected the temptation.

To court celebrity and popularity, would have been for Jesus to eschew the way of the cross that his Father had mapped out for him. So Jesus, rather than exalting himself, or even allowing others to exalt him, humbled himself, made himself of no reputation and chose the path of the Suffering Servant.

Even though Jesus has more than two hundred names and titles ascribed to him in the Bible, he neither used them to draw attention to himself, nor as status symbols. As a result, and in His time, God exalted Jesus to the highest place.

Meanwhile, the temptation remains for us all, and especially for leaders, that we 'love the praise from men more than praise from God.' (Jn. 12: 42&43). We must beware of the cult of charisma.

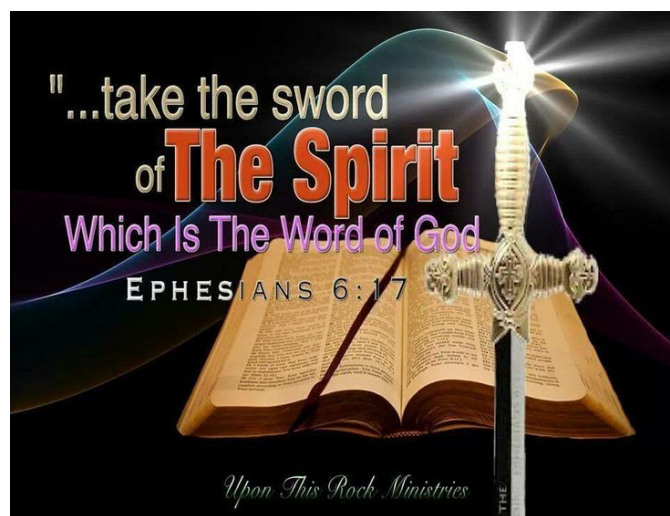
We notice too, with regard to this particular temptation, that the devil, if he wants to, can quote scripture accurately as he reminds Jesus of the promise in Psalm 91 verses 11 & 12. What the devil doesn't want us to do, however, is to understand verses in their immediate context and certainly not in the wider context of the whole Biblical revelation.

The more we understand and appreciate the whole sweep of scripture, the less likely we are to founder on the rocks of Satan's misuse of Bible verses or even individual words. It's usually a bad sign when Christians begin to quarrel and have disputes about the meaning of individual words (See 1 Tim. 6:4&5; 2 Tim. 2:14).

Having said that, we need to know the word of God generally ('logos') in order to be able to use and apply the word of God specifically ('rhema'). Jesus was able to counter the devil's temptations with specific, relevant, scriptural references.

Jesus' Bible reading notes must have been from Deuteronomy on those days when he was being tempted because, in his fencing duel with the devil, all of his ripostes came from that book!

Likewise, Paul instructs us to "take the sword of the Spirit which is the word ('rhema') of God" (Eph. 6:17). The 'rhema' is the precise individual scripture which the Spirit brings to our remembrance for use in a particular time of need and is very important if we are to stand against the devil.



**Summary:** So these 4 types or channels of temptation - through our appetites, through our doubts, via our seeking after power and authority and through our courting celebrity, popularity and praise - represent those temptations which arise physically through our bodily desires, mentally through our imaginations and ambitions and spiritually through our attempts to be 'gods' rather than to worship the One True God and serve Him.

Question: Do you think that the devil, in tempting Jesus, actually took him physically to the pinnacle of the temple and to a high mountain, or just mentally in Jesus' imagination?

How much of the temptation we face comes to us when we are in a particular place or location? How much comes to us through our imagination?

I would like now to move on to some of the practical steps I have found useful in resisting temptation.

## 12 Practical Ways To Resist Temptation.



1. Be aware of the setting in which the temptation takes place. Jesus was tempted in the desert when he was alone. Temptations often come to us when we are alone, so we need to recognise that actually we are not alone. The Trinity is with us and angelic assistance may even be available.  
  
In the OT, the desert was often the place where the people of God grumbled, disobeyed and failed. But Jesus transforms those desert places into times of fellowship with God and strengthening of our faith.
2. Look out for the escape route from temptation. I remember when the Lord once spoke to me about this. I was in a cinema watching the film 'ET' and the Lord said to me, "When you are in the darkness of temptation, (not that there was anything wrong with watching ET as such!), look around and you will see an illuminated 'Exit' sign. Take that route out of the temptation." (See 1 Cor.10:13 where the Greek word for 'way out' is 'ekbasin').
3. Remember that the particular temptation(s) you face is/are common to many people, though the enemy will try to persuade you that you are unique and no one else is tempted like you are. Not true.
4. Try and find someone you can trust to share your temptations with. Most people find this hard because of the shame, guilt and fear they feel. But remember, shame, guilt and fear will weaken your ability to withstand temptation, as will unresolved anger.
5. Remember that withstanding a particular temptation on one occasion will not necessarily make it easier to withstand it when it comes round again;



but to yield to a particular temptation will make it easier to succumb to that temptation again on a future occasion. Hence there is a constant battle with temptation and an ongoing need for God's grace and power.

6. Being tempted is not a sin in and of itself but can lead to sin. Wrong desires, which are often conceived through what our eyes see and what our minds dwell on, have a gestation period - which can be short or long - before they give birth to sin. So the sooner we deal with what our eyes see and what our minds consider, the easier it will be not to sin.
7. However, all of us do sin. If we claim not to sin, we are making God out to be a liar, we are deceiving ourselves and not being real. But it is as we go on confessing our sins (present active) that the blood of Jesus goes on purifying us from every sin (present active) and one day, when we see him, we will be like him completely and be purified from **all** sin once and for all (1 Jn. 1:5-10). I look forward to this; no more sin and no more temptation!
8. We are to watch and pray that we don't enter into temptation; this involves being self-controlled and alert, resisting the devil and wearing the full armour of God. (Mt.26:41; Eph. 6:10-20; 1 Peter 5:8&9). According to the prayer Jesus taught us to pray, each day we are to ask the Father for our daily bread, our daily forgiveness, our daily freedom from temptation and our daily deliverance from the evil one (Mt. 6:9-13).
9. We are to remember that Jesus has overcome all the powers of darkness and that Satan is a defeated foe (Col. 2:15). Ultimate victory has been won even though the battles and the war continue. Thanks be to God who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ (2 Cor. 2:14a).

One of the words that Jesus spoke to all of the 7 churches in Revelation chapters 2 & 3 is that his promises hold fast for all those who 'overcome'. Because Jesus has overcome the devil, we also can be overcomers. The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet (Rms. 16:20a).

10. Fasting from food, alcohol, sex, television, even sleep, can help us focus on God and resist temptation. In having a certain period of time free from some of these things, we can recognise the hold they may have over us.

And I have also discovered that, during periods of time when I have denied my body the things they were craving for and have been concentrating on the Lord and doing His business, I haven't missed any of them; rather I have felt closer to the Lord and more spiritually powerful (though withdrawal symptoms from food are difficult for a while and then pass).

As Jesus said to his disciples, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about. My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work" (Jn. 4:31-34). "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be stuffed full." (Mt. 5:6)

11. I think it is important to acknowledge that there are definite 'times and seasons' where temptation and spiritual warfare are more intense than others. I'm sure Jesus himself experienced this. After his wilderness temptations we read that 'the devil left him until an opportune time' (Lk. 4:13). The devil did indeed return throughout Jesus' ministry, speaking and acting through Peter, Judas and especially with powerful temptations that Jesus should bypass the Cross, come down from the Cross etc.

12. We must never underestimate the power of temptation or of our vulnerability to it. As Paul warned us, "If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall." (1 Cor. 10:12) This is especially true for those in Church leadership positions.

### ***Temptation as Trial and Testing.***

So far, I have only considered temptation in a bad, negative sense. But the Bible uses the same words translated 'to tempt' or 'temptation', in a good, positive way. In these instances, they mean to try, test, prove.

The difference between the two experiences is that God will test us with a view to our passing the test and our faith and relationship with Him being strengthened, whereas the devil tempts us with a view to our failing the test and our faith and relationship with God being undermined.

I think we can view the present pandemic in two ways. We can view the virus as something from the devil to **tempt** us and cause us to doubt and question God, and we can see it as a **test** of our faith in God which He has allowed.

In Genesis 22:1 we read, 'God tested Abraham' - unhelpfully translated 'tempted' in the AV but 'nisah' here means try, test, prove - to see how far Abraham's faith would stretch in terms of him being willing to sacrifice his son Isaac, believing God would raise him from the dead (See also Heb.11:17-19).

And Jesus is also committed to testing his Churches. He knows both the nature and duration of the test. He once said to the Church in Smyrna (present day Izmir) "the devil will put some of you in prison to test you ('pierazo') and you will suffer persecution for ten days" (Rev. 2:10).

The Church in Izmir, the only one of the 7 which remains today, has had another test recently, their city being hit by a devastating earthquake. And to the Church in Philadelphia Jesus said, "I will keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth (Rev.3:10).

So why does Jesus test his Churches? Surely with a view to his disciples remaining faithful to him as our faith is refined and we patiently endure all the trials and tests.

Although God will never tempt us, He will allow us to experience times of trial and testing and it is through our faithfulness in these times that we are approved, strengthened and rewarded by God: -

"Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him" (James 1:12).

Similarly, it was after Jesus had successfully resisted the temptations of the Devil in the wilderness that he was strengthened and 'returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit' (Lk.4:14).

Paul also calls us to test ourselves in order to check that we are not counterfeit Christians but the real deal (2 Cor. 13:5).

One of the growth points for us, I believe, is if we are able to acknowledge our weakness to a particular temptation and ask the Lord why this is. Why is the devil more successful in tempting us in this area rather than in another?

What we are **not** allowed to do is to tempt God. To tempt God is to treat Him with contempt; to be always quarrelling with Him, grumbling about His provisions and whether He is with us and among us or not. (See Ex. 17:1-7; Nu.14:21-23)

The one area in which we can, and are even commanded to, test God (not tempt Him) is in the area of giving: - "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. **Test** me in this," says the Lord Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it." (Mal. 3:10)

### ***Satan – The Original Vandal***

I close with the story of what was the most stunning visual aid I have ever had for any sermon I have ever preached; and I had no hand in preparing it!

I had been asked to go and speak at the Sunday evening service of a local Church and when I asked the Lord what he wanted me to speak on I heard these words very clearly in my mind, "I want you to speak on 'Satan – the Original Vandal'."

I should point out that such guidance is not always so clear and I had never spoken on that particular topic before, nor have I done so since. Anyway, I duly prepared the sermon, believing that it was a specific word that God wanted to bring to that congregation on that particular occasion.

When the Sunday evening came, I went out to my white estate car to go to the service and was shocked to discover that it was absolutely covered in 4-letter swear words that someone had daubed on it using some kind of sticky red paint.

Well, I didn't have time to clean it off so I set off for the Church. I will always remember the faces of those worshippers arriving at the Church as I drove my car into the car park!! Very embarrassing!!

But the car served as a powerful visual aid and a reminder to us all that we are not playing games here, but are indeed dealing with a real vandal, a real destroyer, a real tempter and an unrelenting enemy. However, Christ is the Overcomer and Christ is the Victor, and, in His Name, so are we. All Glory to Him!

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