

The Temptations of Christ

It was a wondrous time of revelation for Jesus of Nazareth. When he came to the Jordan River to be baptized, his cousin John the Baptist said “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” and said, “No, I should be baptized by you!” But Jesus believed that he was under the law the same as everyone else; it seemed the right thing to do to be baptized by John. And what affirmation Jesus received when he was baptized, for the heavens opened with the Spirit of God descending, and a voice that proclaimed, “THIS IS MY BELOVED SON, WITH WHOM I AM WELL PLEASED.”

With his ears still ringing with the praise of his heavenly Father, Jesus went into the desert to pray and meditate. Even though he had attended Temple and studied Scripture all of his life, the friendly, skillful carpenter was entering a new period in his life, and he needed to process this information. We are told that the Spirit led him into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

The deceiver was an expert on persuasion. He had cut his teeth, so to speak, on a brand-new creature named Eve in the most beautiful place on earth many centuries before. It was easy, really. A person who has never been tempted before is easy pickings for the con man. It started out innocently enough: “Did God *really* tell you not to eat from any of the trees in the garden?” Eve confidently set out to correct the serpent: “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; it is only the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said, ‘You shall not eat it or even touch it, lest you die.’”

Well, being oh-so helpful, the serpent strove to address a seeming misconception: “You certainly will not die!” Then he sweetened the proposition, saying, “God knows well that the moment you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods who know what is good and what is bad.”

Eve figured that the serpent must know something that she didn’t know. And the Bible says that she “saw that the tree was good for food, pleasing to the eyes, and desirable for gaining wisdom.” We know what happened after that.

The serpent had helped Eve want to do what was against God’s words with a partial truth and a false promise. This is what the devil has done ever since, even going so far as to twist the good intentions of well-meaning people into causing them to commit sins against God.

We all know that it is a mistake to go grocery shopping on an empty stomach. Everything looks and smells so good, and we end up with purchases that we didn’t intend to make and often food that we are better off not eating.

This is where the devil got started on Jesus. Jesus had been fasting for many days, and he was hungry. So the temptation started with a little taunt, “IF you are the Son of God, command that these stones become loaves of bread.” It seemed simple enough. Hadn’t the Father just told him he was his beloved Son? How about a little show of power? After all, he was hungry.

But a Hebrew scripture verse came to Jesus’ mind and he replied, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.” The verse is found in the St. Joseph edition of the Holy Bible in Deuteronomy Chapter 8 (verses 2-3):

Remember how for forty years now the Lord, your God, has directed all your journeying in the desert, so as to test you by affliction

and find out whether or not it was your intention to keep his commandments. He therefore let you be afflicted with hunger, and then fed you with manna, a food unknown to you and your fathers, in order to show you that not by bread alone does man live, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of the Lord.

So the devil “took” him to Jerusalem and stood him up on the parapet of the temple. Again came the taunt: “IF you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written: ‘He will command his angels concerning you, and with their hands they will support you, lest you dash your foot against a stone.’” (Psalm 91:11-12)

This was more subtle. Okay, Jesus, so you can quote Scripture. I’ll bet you know this one, so how about it? Why not show the world (and me) who you really are by making a miracle happen? After all, Daddy will take care of you.

Yes, Jesus knew Holy Scripture. He had sung the Psalm that contained it in temple, perhaps many times during his life. Still, there was another verse of Holy Writ that came to his mind and he answered, “Again it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test.’” This can be found in our Bible in Deuteronomy 6:16. The Israelites had demanded water, accusing Moses and, by extension, God of bringing them into the wilderness to die. Moses was constrained to strike a rock, and it produced water for the people. Moses knew that God doesn’t like it when even his children try to force his hand, so he said:

You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test, as you did at Massah. But keep the commandments of the Lord, your God, and the ordinances and statutes he has enjoined on you. Do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord, that you may, according to his word, prosper, and may enter in and possess the good land which the Lord promised on oath to your fathers, thrusting all your enemies out of your way. (Deuteronomy 6:16-19)

The taunts and the references to Scripture hadn’t worked. Jesus was unshakable. Now it was time for the tempter to go “all-in,” to make a huge, false promise to Jesus that he HAD to think about. Looming before Jesus was the way of the Cross, a way filled with heartache, loneliness, humiliation and unspeakable pain. The tempter was going to make it easy for Jesus. No death, no humiliation, no pain, IF ONLY he would do one thing.

So the devil gave Jesus a vision of being on a high mountain from which all the kingdoms of the earth, the pride of human civilization and accomplishment, was below him, and he said: “All these I shall give to you, if you will prostrate yourself and worship me.”

Jesus had heard enough. He said, “Get away, Satan! It is written, ‘The Lord, your God, shall you worship, and him alone shall you serve.’”

End of game, Devil. You did your best (or worst), and you could not shake the faith or the purpose of the Son of God.

The devil had to leave, but he wasn’t giving up just yet. Perhaps Jesus would stumble as the cruel reality of his destiny came closer. Or perhaps the disciples Jesus would have could provide occasion for sin. After all, isn’t it said, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions?” Yeah, that’s the ticket!

The Jerome Biblical Commentary states:

The temptations of Jesus all touch upon his Messianic mission; even in a theologically symbolic narrative Jesus is not represented as liable to the common temptations of mankind. Nor in the mind of the Evangelist is he really subject to the temptation to abuse his Messianic powers. The temptation comes not to him but to the Church, which carries on his Mission. The elaboration of the temptation story by Matthew has an ecclesial purpose. The spiritual dangers that threaten the integrity of the mission of the Church have already been met by Jesus himself; he has shown how the Church must overcome them.

There is an old Bible song that I learned either in Sunday School or from a children's radio program. It was the method used by Jesus to ascertain God's will. It comes from Psalm 19:11. I'll sing it to you:

Thy word have I hid in my heart,
That I might not sin against Thee;
That I might not sin,
That I might not sin,
Thy word have I hid in my heart.