

The Temptation of Jesus – Part 1 (Matt. 4:1–11)

By Jacob D. Gerber

The temptation of Jesus is far more significant than it may appear on the surface. This is not one more story in the life of Jesus, but a critical moment where our Lord confronts his enemy directly—and comes out victorious. The implications of this victory are multifaceted. So, before we work through the temptations themselves, we need to work through some sense of the scope of what Jesus accomplishes in this narrative—personally, publicly, and as a pattern for his people. In summary, the temptation of Jesus shows us that *King Jesus came to fulfill all righteousness*.

Jesus' Personal Preparation

First, the temptation of Jesus is a critical moment in his personal preparation for public ministry. We should observe that, while the baptism of Jesus marked the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus does not immediately go public with his message and miracles. Throughout the course of Jesus' ministry, he will be pulled at from a number of directions to abandon his task of going to the cross for the salvation of his people. The temptation to bypass the cross is not something Jesus experiences from Satan alone, and at this moment alone, but something that even those closest to him will urge him toward (e.g., Matt. 16:22–23). So, as Craig Blomberg notes, “Jesus’ [page 83] resolve to fulfill God’s plans for him must be tested and proved right at the outset of his ministry.”¹

Second, the temptation of Jesus is essential for Jesus' ministry into his offices of priest and prophet.² As the Anointed One, Jesus is the ultimate prophet, priest, and king. Matthew's unique emphasis in this Gospel is on the kingship of Jesus, and Matthew works carefully to lay down the foundation of Jesus' kingdom in the first three chapters of this Gospel. Now, King Jesus must take up his role as priest, especially by his vicarious suffering for the sins of his people. While we see Jesus' humiliation by his association and identification with sinners at his baptism, this temptation narrative develops the theme more fully. Because Jesus was born without sin, he does not experience the enticing thrill from temptation that we do. On the contrary, the author of Hebrews tells us that Jesus has become our high priest *because* he has *suffered* through temptation (Heb. 2:18). Additionally, by quoting God's Word to defeat Satan, Jesus enters into his prophetic office. It is instructive that Jesus does not first take up the mantle of a prophet by preaching publicly to adoring crowds. Instead, Jesus demonstrates his faithfulness in his private battle with the Enemy, when he is physically weakened by hunger and the harsh conditions of the wilderness.

¹ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 82–83.

² This paragraph is developed from the ideas in Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 221–22.

Jesus' Public Victory

Third, Matthew very deliberately shows that Satan issues his temptations according to the rough pattern by which he had ensnared Adam and Eve so many years earlier. Craig Blomberg summarizes the connections concisely: “Interesting parallels emerge between Jesus’ three temptations and those of Eve and Adam in the garden (Gen 3:6—‘good for food,’ ‘pleasing to the eye,’ ‘desirable for gaining wisdom’). Both of these triads seem to parallel John’s epitome of human temptation: ‘the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life’ (1 John 2:16, RSV).”³ The essential point in this connection is to see how Jesus succeeds where Adam failed. Through Adam we died; but through Jesus, the “last Adam,” we will be made alive (Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Cor. 15:22, 45).

Fourth, Matthew also portrays the temptation of Jesus as successful precisely where *Israel* failed. On this point, Donald Hagner is worth quoting at length:

Indeed, in this passage we encounter a most interesting parallel to the experience of Israel in the wilderness. After the experience of her deliverance from Egypt and the establishment of the covenant relationship, Israel experienced a season of testing in the wilderness. The sequence in Matthew’s account of Jesus is similar: following the return from Egypt, we have the baptism (likened, by some scholars, to Israel’s crossing of the Sea of Reeds), the divine declaration of Jesus as God’s son, and the time of testing in the wilderness. The parallel is heightened by the fact that all of Jesus’ answers to the tempter are drawn from Deut 6–8, the very passage that describes Israel’s experience in the wilderness. Thus Jesus, the embodiment of Israel and the fulfiller of all her hopes, repeats in his own experience the experience of Israel—with, of course, the one major difference, that whereas Israel failed its test in the wilderness, Jesus succeeds, demonstrating the perfection of his own sonship.⁴

Grant Osborne takes this idea a step further by observing how Satan tempts Jesus at every point the *Shema*, Israel’s creed, from Deuteronomy 6:4–5:

In effect the three tests concern the Shema (Deut 6:5), which calls on Israel to “love the Lord your God with all your heart...soul...and strength.” The first temptation concerns the heart and how Israel’s hunger was intended to test their heart for God (Deut 8:2). The second temptation tests Jesus’ safety and his desire to save his soul/life and whether he will follow God even if it means his soul/life. The third tests his resolve to draw his strength from God alone rather than seek to rule the world by himself.⁵

Jesus not only succeeds where Adam failed, but Jesus succeeds where the entire nation of Israel failed. Jesus is the Last Adam, and Jesus is True Israel. These two points are related, as G. K. Beale has noted: “Jesus’ two roles as the last Adam and true Israel are two sides of one redemptive-historical

³ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 86.

⁴ Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 61–62.

⁵ Osborne, *Matthew*, 131.

coin.”⁶

Fifth, New Testament scholar Brandon Crowe argues persuasively that Jesus’ success in this temptation is the decisive moment of obedience by which Jesus “binds the strong man” (Satan) in order to plunder the Enemy’s house (Matt. 12:29).⁷ When Adam and Eve sinned, they became bound by their sin. No longer were they free to enjoy their relationship to God in the splendor of the garden of Eden, but they were exiled out of the garden into the wilderness. Here, however, Jesus defeats Satan *in* the wilderness, which results in the binding of Satan. This is what Jesus means when he says, “Or how can someone enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house” (Matt. 12:29). That is, Jesus has come to plunder Satan’s house, redeeming sinners whom Satan has held captive. Just as Adam and Eve were bound to sin and Satan by their *disobedience*, so Satan is bound by Jesus’ *obedience*. By this initial act of obedience in the face of such great temptation, Jesus binds Satan so that he can begin his ministry of plundering Satan’s house by preaching the coming of the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 4:17).

Jesus’ Pattern for His People

Sixth, Jesus here functions as the model for how we ought to resist temptation. Now, we must be very clear to point out that we are in a very different position from Jesus. We were born sinners, while Jesus was born without sin. We were already guilty of breaking the covenant of works because of the transgressions of our first parents, while Jesus is here making a major step toward fulfilling everything required by the covenant of works on our behalf. If we, then, try to model Jesus in our own strength, we will fail—indeed, we failed long before we were born, through the sin of our first parents. Nevertheless, for those who have repented from their sins and looked to Jesus in faith, we have received a new heart, a new spirit, and a new will to obey God through faith in Jesus Christ. By the resources of this new nature—and *only* by those resources—we can follow Jesus by resisting temptation and obeying God through precisely the same means that he models here: by faith-driven dependence on the Holy Spirit, in accordance with God’s Word. Indeed, we *must* learn from this what we can, for, as Calvin writes, “God intended, I have no doubt, to exhibit in the person of his Son, as in a very bright mirror, how obstinately and perseveringly Satan opposes the salvation of men.”⁸

Discussion Questions

1. Why does the temptation of Jesus intervene between his baptism and the public portion of his ministry? In what way does this time of suffering through fasting and temptation prepare him personally for the difficult task ahead of him. How does the suffering of Jesus equip him to enter into

⁶ G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 428. Cited by Brandon D. Crowe, *The Last Adam: A Theology of the Obedient Life of Jesus in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 52.

⁷ Crowe, *The Last Adam*, 154.

⁸ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:210.

his office as our great high priest (Heb. 2:17–18)? In what ways have you seen God prepare you personally through times of testing and suffering?

2. How does the temptation of Jesus compare with the temptations that Adam and Eve experienced in the garden of Eden? How does the temptation of Jesus compare with the experience of Israel in the wilderness? Why do you think Jesus succeeded in resisting temptation, when all who came before him had failed? What does Jesus accomplish through this temptation by binding the “strong man” of Satan (Matt. 12:29)?

3. In what ways does the temptation of Jesus teach us how we should handle the temptations that we face? How is Jesus’ experience of temptation similar to ours? How is Jesus’ experience of temptation different from ours? What part of what Jesus does is unique and unrepeatable? What part of what Jesus does is something that we should study, practice, and prepare to use when we feel tempted by the Enemy toward sin?

4. How does this story fit into the larger narrative of how Jesus came to fulfill all righteousness? What does it mean to receive the fullness of Christ’s righteousness through faith? How does this passage encourage us to abandon any hope of trying to put together a righteousness of our own? What does it mean to follow after Christ’s righteousness? How does this passage equip us to follow in Christ’s footsteps, by faith-driven obedience to God’s Word by the power of the Holy Spirit?