

LEARNING BASIC BIBLE STUDY METHODS

An Inductive Guide to the Study of the Bible,

Using the Gospel of Matthew

THE TEMPTATION OF JESUS

Matthew 4:1-11

(Note: This is the fifth lesson in this series on learning how to study the Bible. To work through the series in order, start with the General Introduction and then proceed through the lessons in their sequence.)

So far in our developing a method for studying the Bible we have noted that while the narratives themselves give us the basic reports of the events, what we call the story lines, the quotations in the story reveal to us what is actually going on and why. So we focus on the quotations a good deal. Now in the account of the temptation of Jesus that is going to be true as well. With the quotations we know what kinds of temptations the devil brought to Jesus, and how Jesus overcame them.

We have also seen that the narratives are filled with citations from and allusions to the Old Testament. This should come as no surprise, for our Old Testament was their Bible. And they knew it well--they were people of the book. It would be hard to interpret these events without the understanding of Scripture. So we learn that even though we are in the New Testament, we have to spend a good deal of time searching the Old Testament to get the full understanding and background.

It is also true that there are frequently parallel experiences to be compared (such as the killing of the children by Herod and the killing of children in the Babylonian invasion according to the record of Jeremiah). Sometimes the parallel events do not at the outset seem that unique (a birth in Bethlehem--there had been lots of births in Bethlehem). But on closer study there are some significant comparisons (it was the birth of the king).

And so now in Matthew 4 we will find that the subject matter is temptation. Well, there are zillions of temptations--everyone is tempted to sin, almost daily, if not hourly. But, there is something different going on here. Here Jesus, at the outset of His ministry, is confronted by the devil with all his power, and He does not sin. Biblical writers from the outset have seen the parallel

between this temptation and the very first, the temptation of Adam and Eve. The Bible, in fact, will refer to Jesus as the second Adam, the head of a new “race” of people born into the family of God. As we shall see later in Matthew, with the agony in the Garden, the crown of thorns, the sweat, the nailing to a tree or cross, all the motifs in the record of Genesis 2 and 3 find a corresponding solution at Calvary. Likewise, the temptation.

And so we can think for a few moments about parallels and contrasts between the two great temptations, the first which plunged the human race into sin, and the second which began the way back with victory over Satan. Perhaps the most celebrated “study” of these two events are the works of John Milton, “Paradise Lost” and “Paradise Regained.” It is at the temptation of Jesus that Satan realized that he could not ruin Jesus as he had the parents of the race, and therefore that he could not stop God’s plan of redemption.

You might want to make a list of comparisons and contrasts to think this through further. In Genesis Adam and Eve were in a lush garden with all the food that they could eat; in Matthew Jesus is in a wilderness where he has been fasting for forty days. In Genesis the temptation was to eat; and in the wilderness the temptations of Jesus began with eating. In Genesis the temptation was to be like God by disobeying God; in Matthew the appeal to Jesus was to be the king, but without obeying God. In Genesis Adam and Eve sinned because they did not know precisely what God had said, not as well as Satan did; in Matthew, Jesus was victorious because He knew Scripture better than Satan. In Genesis, after the pair sinned, angels barred them from the tree of life; in Matthew, after Jesus drove the devil away, angels came and ministered to Him.

So with this history in mind, we can look now into this little passage in some detail. Mark 1:12,13 mentions the temptation, but does not include the details. Luke 4:1-13 provides a parallel account to what Matthew has. This raises an incidental question: how did these writers know about the event? The simplest answer is that Jesus told His disciples, and that report found its way to Paul and therefore Luke. The only significant difference is that in Luke the second temptation is concerning the kingdoms of the world, and the third is the temptation to jump from the pinnacle of the temple. Putting things in a slightly different order is a frequent characteristic of the different gospels, whether parts of an event or a teaching, or major events. The different gospel writers are writing for different audiences and are arranging the materials for their individual purposes. It does not make a major difference in the interpretation of the passage if one of them comes before another. Matthew’s is probably the original, and Luke seems to have reordered it with the Gentile world in mind (although you will find a lot of scholarship that spends a lot of time deciding who was first). We can appreciate why Luke would have the emphasis on the kingdoms of the world being Satan’s to give coming before the temptation in the temple of Jerusalem.

Reading the Text

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. ²After fasting for forty days and forty nights, He was hungry.

³The tempter came to Him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” ⁴Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

⁵Then the devil took Him to the holy city and had Him stand on the highest point of the temple. ⁶“If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down. For it is written:

‘He will commend His angels concerning you

and they shall lift you up in their hands,

So that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’”

⁷Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

⁸Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. ⁹“All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.” ¹⁰Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’”

¹¹Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

Observations on the Text

The structure of this narrative is relatively easy to trace: there is an introductory section providing some details, then three temptations with three answers, and then an aftermath. The main focus of the study will, of course, be on each of the three temptations, to determine what the temptation actually was and how Jesus dealt with it.

The introduction, the first couple of verses, tells us a couple of very significant things. First, that He was led by the Spirit of God into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. This is the same Spirit that just descended on Jesus at His baptism. Almost immediately this Spirit forces the temptation. This has to be given some careful thought. What it indicates is that it was the plan of God for Jesus to begin His ministry with this challenge--and that it was not the devil's doing. The devil was willing to tempt Jesus, to be sure; but it was the Spirit of God leading Jesus to it. The devil could tempt Jesus with every power he had, but he would not succeed. The temptation episode was God's way of showing that Jesus was the perfect man, that He could resist sin, that he could defeat Satan.

The second thing for us to consider here is the devil, Satan. This is the first introduction to him in the Gospel. Somewhere along the way you should read up on Satan in a good Bible dictionary. This is that old Serpent (Rev. 12:9) who had been in the Garden; this is the prince of demons, the god of this world, the fallen angel (or archangel) who seeks to destroy God's work. The Gospels do not shy away from affirming that there is a whole spiritual world around the physical world, filled with angelic beings, some of whom rebelled against God with their leader Satan and are therefore evil. These that are the fallen angels, devils, demons as they are called, do the work of their prince, attacking and inflicting all kinds of disorders on those who want nothing to do with God. But that prince, the devil himself, undertakes the more significant efforts. He was successful in getting Adam and Eve to sin and plunge the world into darkness; but he was not able here to defeat the Son of God.

Third, we are told that Jesus had been fasting for forty days and forty nights, and was hungry. There is no reason to doubt that it was forty days and forty nights as the text says; but "forty" is a common number in the Bible for a period of difficulty, hardship, or suffering. One thinks immediately of the Israelites' wandering for forty years in the wilderness--one whole generation. Forty days was a good long time to be fasting; and that duration is here underscored with the symbolic meaning that it was forty days, the number of duration and testing. You could look in some of the resources for the symbolical meaning of numbers to find other passages where this occurs.

In the aftermath of the contest we read how the devil left Jesus and angels came and ministered to Him. The enemy left as a defeated challenger; and the angels of God came to Jesus and served Him in ways that we cannot quite imagine. But they must have affirmed to Jesus with comfort and encouragement that He had done everything well and had won the victory over Satan.

But the center of this study will be the three temptations themselves, so we should look at them now to determine what they meant, and how they were met.

Analysis of the Temptations

1. Turn stones into bread. The first temptation picks up immediately on the fact that Jesus was hungry, that he had not eaten for forty days. The tempter said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

There is a fine point of grammar here that you would probably learn from a good commentary (unless along the way you studied Greek). You can still understand the temptation without knowing it, but knowing it helps just that much more. Sentences that begin with "if" (called conditional sentences) have different meanings. Some are contrary to fact, and some are not contrary to fact. The way it is written in the original indicates the type. For example, Martha said to Jesus, "If you had been here [but you were not], Lazarus would not have died." That is a condition contrary to fact. That is not what we have in the words of Satan here. When he said, "If

you are the Son of God,” he did not mean “If you are the Son of God [but you are not],” but rather he meant “since you are the Son of God.” He knew who this was, and would build his temptation on it. He was saying, “Look, you are divine! Why should you be hungry? Just change some stones to bread.”

Now then, we have to ask what was wrong with that. Was there anything wrong with making something to eat? He had the power to do it. He multiplied food later for people who were hungry. So why was this a temptation?

The answer, I think, is that Jesus had come out into the wilderness in order to fast for forty days. That was a spiritual exercise that had a very important place in His life at the moment. But the devil wanted to ruin the mission of Jesus, and so if he could convince Jesus on this seemingly trivial thing to abandon a spiritual work, then he would have had him. The temptation was to turn His spiritual nature into a means of satisfying His material need without reference to finding the will of God. In fact, he would be doing the will of the devil. The devil simply chose a little thing for the test; but it would have destroyed the work of Christ.

The perfection of Jesus is displayed in His refusal. Hunger was not wrong, especially in a spiritual time of fasting (fasting was designed to focus attention on the spiritual and away from the comforts of life). And Jesus was announcing to Satan, and to all of us who will hear it, that it is better to be hungry than to be fed without any reference or recourse to the will of God. Satan had hit the nail right on the head--Jesus is the Son of God. But the essence of Sonship is obedience to the will of the Father. He would not, therefore, act independently of the will of the Father. Jesus knew that the Spirit had led Him into a place that necessitated hunger, and so He would fulfill that task.

In response Jesus quoted from the Book of Deuteronomy: “Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” If you go back and read Deuteronomy 8 you will see that the topic there is about the Israelites hungering in the wilderness for forty years. God tested them in the wilderness so that they would learn that they must obey what comes from the mouth of God. He gave them Manna; but to acquire it and enjoy it required that they follow God’s instructions carefully. The main point was that if they obeyed the LORD He would provide their food. And so it was more important to obey God than to have all the food they could eat (recall that Adam and Eve chose to eat rather than obey God’s word).

So Jesus saw through the clever little ploy of Satan. He defeated the temptation by appealing to a clear principle of Scripture. But He was not just quoting a favorite verse; He was drawing in the whole context of the passage to show that if God puts you in a place of deprivation for some spiritual purpose you do not try to change it solely for the purpose of satisfying your physical needs. The first thing that the person must do is try to discover what God is doing through the deprivation, what spiritual growth is desired and how it should be achieved. This would show that one does not live by bread alone, but by everything that God says and does.

2. Throw yourself down from the temple. If the first test was in the realm of the physical, the second is a test of the spiritual. In fact, the test strikes at the heart of the previous victory. Jesus had escaped that temptation by showing that He was not just physical but spiritual,

that He could accept the hunger and the weakness if it meant obeying God. And so Satan wants Him to do something spectacular to demonstrate that He is spiritually perfect. Satan was saying to Jesus, “Very well, you have shown your trust in God in response to my first appeal; so now show your trust in God by flinging yourself from the pinnacle of the temple.” This, no doubt, was to be in full view of all the assembled people; they would witness that God was with Jesus in a very special way.

What is interesting now is that Satan himself quotes Scripture in making the appeal. He quotes from a psalm that says that God will give the angels charge over him so that he will not dash his foot against a stone (Ps. 91:11,12). The psalm is a psalm of trust, telling how God protects his people. It was never intended to be claimed apart from practical wisdom. God promises to protect His people; but He has also given them common sense.

The response to this temptation is a little more involved. At the outset one should consider the source: if the devil, or, more obviously for us, someone who has no inclination to obey Scripture, if such a person prompts you to do something that it looks like the Bible says you can do, you would be wise to think it through very carefully. A lot of Scripture is quoted out of context, or partially, and needs to be investigated.

Jesus’ response is also from Scripture: “It is also written, ‘You shall not put the LORD your God to the test.’” This also comes from Deuteronomy, 6:16. This is the chapter in the Law that is foundational to Israel’s faith. It had the creedal statement in it, “Hear O Israel, Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone.” The chapter then exhorts the people to obey His commands, and to do what is good and right before Him--but warns them not to test God.

The moment an individual puts God to the test, that person gives evidence that he or she does not really trust God. The context of Deuteronomy 6:16 refers to Massa and Meribah in the wilderness where the people murmured against God and tested Him--because they did not believe He could or would give them water (“Massa” is one name; it is derived from the verb in Hebrew nasa, “to test”; the other name is “Meribah”; it is from the verb rib, “to strive”). A trust that is weak or wavering seeks a sign or a dramatic intervention to make it steady.

So Jesus said, “No, my trust is perfect; I do not need to do anything heroic to prove it. And I will not test God’s word by doing something foolish--at your prompting.” And so the spiritual nature of Christ retained its dignity and lived out its quiet, confident trust in the Father. He refused to do something dangerous to see if the angels would protect Him.

3. Fall down and worship me. The last temptation is amazing in its boldness. It is almost as if the devil realized he was not winning, and so with nothing to lose calls for Jesus to worship him. Its purpose was to prevent the work of the king, the work for which He had come into the world.

He took Jesus to a high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the earth. This verse seems to suggest something mystical, something supernatural. There is no mountain in Israel high enough to see much of anything. But the idea is probably that the devil provided some vision of these kingdoms. And the promise was that he would give them to Jesus if only Jesus would fall

down and worship him. Luke adds that Satan claimed he had been given these kingdoms and it was his right to give them to whomever he wished. Satan was saying to Jesus, “Look, you came as the king to inherit the nations. Here they are. Why go through the trouble of being the suffering servant to get to the crown. Give me one moment’s homage and I will abdicate.”

Well, even in the words of Satan there were some clues that this was a malicious temptation. First, the offer was coming from the one who is the prince of liars. Who would knowingly do a deal with the devil? Jesus will later explain (John 8:44) that he was a liar from the beginning and the truth was not in him. What a lie this was. Did Satan actually imagine for one moment that the Son of God would believe him? Never would Satan have given him the kingdoms; that was simply the bait for him to bow before the evil one. Unfortunately, far too many people have believed the evil tempter. Adam and Eve surely did.

Second, all Satan could offer were the “kingdoms,” plural kingdoms--these warring, divided, conflicting powers and races in the world. Who wants them? The Father had promised the Son a Kingdom, united in peace and righteousness and harmony. Of course, there is no way to inherit such a kingdom apart from redemption, apart from changing human nature to make it fit for the kingdom, for without it there would never be peace and harmony in the world. Satan’s offer is a cheap substitute.

So Jesus’ response was, “Away from me Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the LORD your God, and serve Him only.’” This too comes from Deuteronomy (6:13). It is the cardinal truth of Scripture: worship God only. For the righteous there would not even be a thought of bowing down and worshiping the prince of darkness. Jesus would hold to that principle; He would never worship Satan. And so He would receive the kingdom in God’s time, and in God’s way--by defeating Satan, first here in the temptation, and later at the cross.. And His will be a far better kingdom than this world could ever offer.

Old Testament Background

As mentioned above, the obvious parallel and necessary background is the temptation in the Garden. The tempter there came in disguise, in the form of a serpent, a creature that the humans were to rule over; here Satan did not come in disguise, but in a bold and direct attack on Jesus.

In the Garden the tempter took the ploy of questioning what God had said. If you make a detailed study of that passage, Genesis 3:1-7, against the background of chapter 2, you will see that Eve made three changes in the wording (or was it Adam who told her in correctly?): first she diminished the privileges (God had said “you may eat to your heart’s content of all the trees,” but she simply said, “we may eat”); second, she added to the prohibition (God had said, of this one tree “you must not eat,” but she added, “neither may you touch it”); and third, and most importantly, she was not convinced of the punishment of death (God had said, “You shall surely die,” and she said, “lest you die,” leaving it as a contingency). When the tempter saw this, he

immediately denied the penalty for sin in exactly the words of the Creator: “You shall not surely die.” And this is the lie from the beginning, that you can sin and get away with it, or that God will not punish people whom He has made over sins like this.

The two observations to be made here are: Satan knew more precisely what God had said and was able to draw them into a discussion about the word of God with that advantage, and Satan boldly denied that there was a penalty for sin. This is why Jesus said that he was a liar from the beginning (John 8:44).

With that in mind we can see in Matthew 4 that Jesus could defeat Satan because He knew the word of God better than the tempter. He could come back with the wider picture: It is also written. Often temptation requires “getting rid of” one verse, or a prohibition that stands in the way (“if only that passage could be explained differently”). But the victorious believer will know how all of Scripture works, and that behind a prohibition or an instruction there is a general theological revelation that will govern the interpretation and application of details.

But we can also see that there is no trivial temptation. Eating from the tree in the Garden?--such a little thing. Turning stones into bread?--harmless. But each was a prompting from the devil to go against the will of God. And when anyone chooses to act contrary to what the living God wills, that person has chosen death. Satan knew that. We often do not; we often think something small can be winked at, easily rationalized, even though we know at the time it is not what God wants. The Bible is filled with examples of this, and the more you study the Bible the more you will see them. One classic example is the case of Moses. Commanded to “speak” to the rock and bring water from it, he lost his temper and hit it (Num. 20). For that he was not allowed to go into the Promised Land. Who could blame Moses after putting up with the people for forty years in the wilderness? But, in the eyes of all the people he disobeyed God and gave them the impression that God (and he) was (were) getting fed up with the people. God wanted them to see His power--not Moses’ anger.

Well, in the Garden the aftermath of the temptation is also instructive. The text of Genesis 3 tells us that when the woman realized that the fruit of the tree was good for food, pleasing to the eye, and desirable for gaining wisdom, then she took and ate.

This is probably what John is referring to when he talks of the cravings in the world as the lust/desire of the flesh, the lust/desire of the eyes, and the pride of life (1 John 1:16). Temptation worked on all three levels--desire of the flesh to eat, desire of the eyes for beauty, and the desire to be like God, spiritual pride. But when they ate, all that they discovered were guilty fears and their vulnerability to evil.

New Testament Correlations

Hebrews. The Book of Hebrews tells us that we have a High Priest, Jesus Christ, who was tempted in every way as we are, yet remained without sin (Heb. 4:14-16). This means that He fully understands all that we face in this world--He was tempted in every way, not just in these three temptations at the outset, but throughout His life on earth. Therefore, Hebrews says, we may approach the throne of grace in prayer with confidence so that we may obtain mercy and grace to help in the time of need. Prayer to Christ in the times of temptation and trial is therefore critical for victory over temptation. And this makes sense--seek help from the one who did it.

James. If you look in a Bible study book, or a dictionary, or a theology book, or a concordance, you should find New Testament teachings on temptation or on Satan rather easily. James tells us "Resist the devil and he will flee from you" (4:7). That indicates that the devil will go where there is the least resistance. It also indicates that the human heart is capable of producing a good bit of evil without the devil's prompting, a point that James makes in his epistle.

2 Corinthians. Paul also tells us that Satan masquerades as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14--but read the whole section of verses 1-15). Paul tells us that thanks to Scripture we are not ignorant of Satan's devices, and therefore should be able to resist the tempter. But it will require more knowledge of Scripture, and better spiritual perception (see Hebrews 5:11-14). By knowing Scripture well, we will both know what the whole plan of God is for our lives, and we will be better able to perceive what would undermine it.

Conclusions and Applications

So we have here a great drama between Satan and Christ. It ends with Christ's victory over the tempter because of His knowledge and use of the word of God. The attack of Satan was made against every vulnerable point--hunger, trust, and responsibility--and when these were held firmly, there was no other area the devil could attack. He struck at the material or physical need of food, but he found one who knew the spiritual was more important than the physical; he struck at the spirit's confidence in God, but found one whose trust in the Father did not need testing; and he struck at the carrying out of the divine commission, but found one who was determined to carry out that plan in a divine way. Thus was Satan defeated.

What did this mean for Christ's mission? It was a foretaste of the victory at the cross. Here Jesus defeated the tempter who tried to ruin His mission. But here Christ demonstrated that He would not be deterred from His mission. It was a very significant spiritual victory over the devil. And it would have given Jesus a tremendous boost (if we can say that reverently); He would know that the anointing of the Spirit gave Him the power to resist the evil one and to fulfill His mission.

On the theological level you might want to get off on an aside and think about what was going on here theologically. It makes a good little discussion. People often wonder whether or

not Christ could have sinned, and if not, was it a real temptation? We would probably say that as Jesus He could be tempted, but as the divine Son He could not sin (and so it is bound up in the mystery of the two natures). But we would also say that at the moment of the temptation Jesus may not have known this--it was a real temptation and He worked through it. But Heaven knew He would not sin. In His time in this world there were times when Jesus had that greater knowledge and insight, and there were other times that He did not seem to have it or use it. And when and how this works is hard for us to know. But this was a true temptation. Satan thought he could win. Jesus fought back with His knowledge and obedience of Scripture. And Heaven was not surprised that He defeated Satan. And I do not think Satan was all that surprised either.

The applications or lessons that can be drawn from this passage are many--and you may think up others as well.

One very clear one would be the necessity of knowing Scripture, knowing what God's will is (not for a career for your life, but the day in and day out spiritual life of devotion and obedience to God). This involves both understanding and being able to use the word of God in making choices between what is good and what is evil.

Another application would be the inspiration that can be drawn from the fact that Jesus as perfect man defeated Satan. Therefore, because he was tempted and because he was victorious, he understands us and stands ready to help. So prayer to him for victory would be a good lesson.

Other lessons can then be drawn from the individual temptations (and these have been discussed above so I will not go into detail here). The first had to do with knowing what is most important in life--obeying the word of God--and not living only to satisfy the flesh, or making a living, or using spiritual resources just to meet physical needs. Living by obedience to God has fallen on hard times today when so many are only interested in security of life through investments and entitlements, or indulging themselves in the good things of life. Seeking the good life can truly crowd out the spiritual things.

The second temptation had to do with trusting God. Those who truly know God and experience the reality of their faith daily do not need to find something spectacular to convince themselves and others. Today there is a growing pre-occupation with miraculous signs. Now God will do miraculous things--when He chooses to do them. But if people seek the spectacular in order to believe, or to convince themselves of the faith, it betrays a weak faith. Remember how in the vision of the rich man and the poor man Lazarus in their rewards, and the rich man asked Abraham for Lazarus to be sent to his family to warn them, thinking that they would believe if one came back from the dead? The answer was, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets [Scripture], they will not be convinced even if one rises from the dead" (Luke 16:31).

The third temptation had to do with fulfilling the commission or plan of God with a shortcut, not doing God's way. This is the common temptation to avoid the means to get to the ends, or as is said, the end justifies the means. But with God there is a way to accomplish His plan for your life, and it calls for absolute devotion and obedience to Him. But Satan always offers shortcuts, that if looked at carefully, will ruin your life.

So there are a number of very useful lessons that can be drawn from this account. These should start your thinking. You can probably meditate on these for a while and find other examples of how the temptations would work in life, and how knowing what God wants would prevent them. The bottom line is that Jesus demonstrated for us how to achieve victory over temptation. In other words, we do not have to sin. There are ways to spiritual success, if we are willing to take them.

One thing that the rabbis taught on temptation is helpful. You work the issues and temptations and choices out like a business person, with a profit-loss ledger. If you make this choice and do this, what are the benefits, and what will the cost be? In many cases the cost, including fallout afterward, is just too high. A wise decision will count the cost.

If Christ had followed any one of these temptations, the immediate result might not have seemed so great, but the overall results would have been disastrous--He would have been a sinner, another fallen human like us, unable to redeem anyone, and the mission would have been ruined by the devil. But that was not going to happen, for the Father sent the Son into the world to redeem us, and by doing that He had to conquer Satan.