

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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A Comparison of the Gospels Temptation

*[Please note: sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
The New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

In the preparation of this talk it became evident to me that I do not take enough time to study passages of the Bible that I am familiar with. You may be the same. I often read but don't take in or consider the detail of the text, the background, the setting, the characters, all of which helps bring the passage to life through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. I pray that this talk will encourage you, and challenge you, like me to be careful with the study of God's word, the Bible.

Introduction

This present series, 'A Comparison of the Gospels' looks at seven different aspects of the Lord's life here in this world. The aspect we are considering today is the Lord's temptation at the hand of Satan. Sometimes the writers of the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John cover the same aspects but from a different viewpoint. It is interesting to note that John does not mention anything about the temptation of Jesus. In John's writings he focuses on the greatness and glory of the Son of God, so he chose to leave out the text regarding the temptation of the Man Christ Jesus.

However, John does write in his epistle about temptation. 1 John 2 v.16,

“For all that is in the world - the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life – is not of the Father but is of the world.”

These are the three ways that Satan tempts us today, and we will see that the Lord was tempted in the same way. So, our comparison is really between Matthew 4 vv.1-11, Mark 1 vv.12-13 and Luke 4 vv.1-13. Matthew and Luke give us the detail and Mark gives us an overview in two verses. We will also compare a little, the temptation of the first man Adam in Genesis 3 vv.1-6. Although the Lord Jesus Christ was tempted, the Bible makes clear His sinless perfection. Hebrews 4 v.15,

“For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathise with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.”

There are other scriptures we will look at throughout this talk. So, let us investigate these passages which illuminate the blessed person of the Man, Christ Jesus. I pray that you will be encouraged, challenged, and uplifted as we study God's word together.

The background

We read very little of the first thirty years of the life of the Lord Jesus. We do learn of His birth in Bethlehem, that He lived in Nazareth, and of His annual journeys to Jerusalem with His parents for the feast of the Passover. We do learn some wonderful things; as a young man He grew strong in spirit, in wisdom and stature, other people liked Him, and that the grace of God was upon Him. John the Baptist then comes on the scene to declare that the Lord was now here in the flesh, Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, and everyone was about to see Him. Then Jesus was

baptised by John the Baptist in the river Jordan. This is a wonderful scene where the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descends on Jesus, the heaven opens and a voice from heaven sounds, it was God the Father Himself declaring,

“You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased” (Luke 3 vv.21-22).

The world was told that the Father was pleased and delighted with His Son, His life, His perfection, His humility, His obedience, in fact, every part of His life! We are then told that Jesus was about thirty years old when He began His public ministry. This brings us to the passages we are looking at today.

“Then Jesus, being filled with the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness” (Luke 4 v.1).

The setting and context

Three points to note.

1. Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. So, God allowed it. Why did God allow Jesus to be tempted in this way so soon after His baptism and just before He began His public ministry?
2. Jesus had fasted for forty days and forty nights, then He was hungry. Why did Jesus need to fast for this specific period?
3. Why does it mention that Jesus was with the wild beasts and that the angels ministered to Him?

The wilderness of Judea was the desolate area that ran back from the western shore of the Dead Sea. It was an unforgiving landscape which was very difficult to climb or traverse. It was a desolate place for the Lord of creation to be found during this time of loneliness and isolation. We know from other scriptures that the Lord had nowhere to call home in the world, but this was extreme. What a contrast to the beautiful Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve were tempted and failed. It seems that the Lord Himself made the voluntary decision to fast in preparation for ministry by drawing closer to God. One of the reasons people fast is to allow their body to go into a weakened state so they can focus on the basics of life and hear God’s voice, without creature comforts that can both soothe and distract us. Jesus knew what was ahead of Him. He had to go through temptation, which strengthened Him before He began to performing miracles. Having just been declared the Son of God at His baptism, He was reminded of His humility and that He had to cling to God so He could truly fulfil His Father’s work, and what a mighty work it was on the cross of Calvary.

Forty days is a distinct period in the Bible God chose which often meant a period of testing, trial and then, finally, triumph. For example, in Noah’s day the Lord caused it to rain for forty days and forty nights during the flood, Jonah prophesied that Nineveh would be destroyed in forty days, and there are so many others, it’s a good study! It is difficult for us to consider that the Son of God needed to go through this period of temptation. However, two things; firstly, as Son of Man, He had to experience the things that we experience so He can sympathise with us. Secondly, the Lord had to face temptation, trial, suffering and death, before He rose triumphantly from the dead, and defeated the power of death. It is difficult to comprehend that the Lord felt hungry and weak. Luke and Mark seem to indicate that Satan tempted Him during the forty days and nights, whereas Matthew indicates it was after the forty days. Either way at the end Satan attacked the Lord with a vicious onslaught when Satan appeared in person. In a prolonged fast I am told that the feeling of hunger goes away after three or four days, only to return at the end of thirty or forty. We cannot judge how the Lord felt apart from what the scripture tells us.

In Mark it says that the angels 'ministered to Him.' I am not sure what this means. In the garden the Lord was strengthened by an angel, on another occasion the Lord says that He could have called more than twelve thousand angels to protect Him. I think the angels ministered to the Lord in a spiritual way. They helped Him as He faced temptation and as He learned from God the mighty work that was before Him in the next three years culminating in His death on the cross. I am not sure why the beasts are mentioned in Mark's Gospel. In the garden of Eden, Adam was made head over creation, and no animals could harm him. Here we have the Lord of creation living amongst wild beasts. Were they a danger to Him? - I don't think so! Could it be a reference to the strong bulls of Bashan that we read about in Psalm 22? - I don't know. Maybe it was underlining the desolation of the place and the weakness of the Lord's body, which rendered it susceptible, naturally speaking, to be taken by a wild animal. However, we know that no person or animal could touch Him unless it was allowed by God.

The threefold temptation of the Lord

Jesus, after His days of fasting had ended, was hungry and physically weakened, then the devil comes in person to tempt and challenge the Lord. The order of the temptations in Matthew's account are slightly different to what it is in Luke's. The temptations of Christ are identical in the two accounts.

Matthew records them as:

1. Turn stones into bread to satisfy his physical hunger.
2. Leap from the temple pinnacle to show his divine nature.
3. Worship Satan to receive great power.

Luke changes the order of the temptations slightly to:

1. Turn stones into bread.
2. Worship Satan.
3. Leap from the temple pinnacle.

Matthew is primarily writing to a Jewish audience therefore the level of importance from first to last and Luke is writing to a Gentile Greek audience with the same applying. There may be other reasons. I have taken the order below from Luke's account.

Satan put the first temptation to the Lord,

"And the devil said to Him, 'If You are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread,' But Jesus answered him, saying, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God'" (Luke 4 vv.3-4).

Satan is cunning, he knows where and when there is weakness, and he tries to exploit it. The Lord was hungry and weak, food was a temptation. Satan said, 'If You are the Son of God then do this miracle.' Satan knew that the Lord could easily turn a stone into bread as He was the Son of God, but Satan's emphasis was derogatory, 'You, a poor, starved, emaciated being, famished and perishing with hunger, You the Son of God?' The Lord's answer was a verse from the word of God, Deuteronomy 8 v.3. There the LORD reminded Moses how He fed the Children of Israel in the wilderness for 40 years, the bread sustained them, but the life is in the Word of God. The word of God is important for our spiritual diet, so we should live by every word that comes from the LORD.

"For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Hebrews 4 v.12).

It is interesting to note that when Satan hears the word of God, he has nothing to say (no defence) so he immediately changes his angle of attack.

Satan then tempts the Lord a second time as he takes the Lord up a high mountain so He could see all the kingdoms of the world. The devil had full sway with them, and he offers them to the Lord, but only if He bows down and worships him. Satan offered the world to Jesus in exchange for worship. The issue is power. Power tends to corrupt. The Lord knew that the kingdoms of the world will be His one day, but He had to go through the awful punishment of sin by willingly giving up His life in death on the cross. The Lord stood firm and rebuffed the devil by quoting another scripture from Deuteronomy from the law of Moses "You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve." Again, the devil is rebuffed by the word of God. Satan had found the impenetrable armour of the word of God and Christ's holiness to be impervious to all his temptations.

In the third temptation Satan takes the Lord to Jerusalem, to the pinnacle of the temple. The pinnacle of the temple was high and overlooked the Kidron valley 450 feet below. Satan tells the Lord that he has no fame, no followers, no acclaim, You are not even known. The devil suggests that the Lord throws Himself down so He could be instantly famous, just look at the people below. Remember something very important, Satan can persuade, but he cannot push, he creates temptation, but we create the transgression. Satan quotes a part of scripture, but he cunningly misses out an important part. He quotes Psalm 91 vv.11-12,

"For He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways. In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone."

but he left out "to keep thee in all Your ways," and did not continue onto v.13 which says,

"You shall tread upon the lion and the cobra, the young lion and the serpent you shall trample underfoot."

This obviously refers to the day when the Lord will deal with all His enemies including Satan, the serpent. Satan lives daily knowing His time is short. Jesus again answers Satan with another quotation from Deuteronomy and the law of Moses, "It has been said, 'You shall not tempt the LORD your God.'" Satan departed from the Lord, he had no answer to the holy One, he would bide his time. The battle was won, Jesus was exhausted, but God's purpose was not that Jesus died of exhaustion or starvation. He refused to be shaken in His trust in the grace and goodness of God. The Lord was then helped by the angels. The Lord was led by the Spirit; He controlled His life. Instant food, instant fortune, now instant fame, the throne of the world without a cross. Christ's holy nature did not find sin attractive. He found it repulsive. Satan has no claim on Jesus, see John 14 v.30.

The temptations we face daily

It seems astonishing that the Lord allowed Himself to be tempted or tested by Satan. The Lord, the sinless One was not tempted to find out if He could sin, but to prove that He was the sinless One. Hebrews 4 v.15 makes it clear that Jesus the Son of God "was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin." The first temptation was the lust of the flesh, the second temptation was the lust of the eyes, and the third temptation was the pride of life. These are the same temptations that Satan attacks the believer with today. He uses the same cunning ways, he attacks after we feel spiritually strong, he attacks when we are physically weak, he attacks us with what we see, and he attacks the pride of our hearts. Satan was trying to get the Lord as a human Man to step out independently of His Father and act for Himself. Satan too wants us to step out of the Father's presence, so he can destroy our lives. Jesus's sole resource throughout the entire temptation was the word of God, the weapon Satan fears more than anything else in the world.

Each one of us will have times of testing, times of temptation in our lives. So how do we guard against it. Let me just finish with a few verses from the Bible; 1 Corinthians 10 v.13 tells us that God is faithful, He will make a way of escape for you in temptation, but you must make the move. James 4 v.7,

“Submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.”

Ephesians 6 vv.10-18 is the key to hold fast against Satan, we cannot take him on ourselves, we will lose. It is spiritual warfare, against powers of darkness, so we need the right weapons for attack and defence. We are told to be “strong in the Lord and in the power of His might.” We must put on the whole armour of God, to withstand evil. The Lord gives us, truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, the Spirit which is the word of God, and prayer.

I know how hard it is when temptation comes our way, remember you can be taken to the point of temptation, but Satan can't push you into it, it's your choice. Don't think you can escape without God's help. Be encouraged that the Lord knows and understands, He has been through it. We have all the resources in the Bible, that's what Jesus used so should we.

May God bless you today, Amen.

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk on A Comparison of the Gospels, 'Temptation.' Talk number T1373.

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