The Temptations of Jesus

(by Bob Waldron)

After Jesus was baptized, He was led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. The account of the temptation of Jesus offers some of the richest lessons in Scripture. In studying the temptation, many have sought to explain why Jesus did not follow Satan’s suggestions by various, sometimes ingenious, ideas. These ideas may be true, and are definitely worthy of thought. Jesus, however, knew best why He could not do the things Satan wished Him to do. We shall be guided in this study, therefore, solely by the replies Jesus Himself made.

Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days during which time He fasted. Both Matthew and Luke indicate that Jesus felt no hunger until after the forty days. ***“And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He afterward hungered”*** (**Matthew 4:2**). ***“And He did eat nothing in those days: and when they were completed, He hungered”*** (**Luke 4:2**). Hunger fell upon Jesus more as a blow than as something to which He had slowly grown accustomed. Mark indicates that Satan had been tempting Jesus already. ***“And He was in the wilderness forty days tempted of Satan”*** (**Mark 1:12**). Now Satan comes again.

***“If Thou art the Son of God, command that these stones become bread”*** (**Matthew 4:3**). Now we know that Jesus had the power to change one substance into another (see **John 2** where Jesus changed water to wine). We also know that several times Jesus used His power to provide food (**Matthew 14**, **15**; **John 21**). Why not this time? Satan seemed to be tempting Jesus to prove His Sonship, but Jesus’ reply was not, *“Satan, I do not have to prove My Sonship. Both you & I know who I am.”* Jesus replied, ***“It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God’*”** (**Matthew 4:4**). If we’re to understand what Satan’s temptation was, we’ll do so only by understanding Jesus’ response.

When Israel was encamped in the plains of Moab, poised to invade Canaan, Moses preached to them. He said, ***“All the commandment which I command thee this day shall ye observe to do, that ye may live, and multiply, and go in and possess the land which Jehovah swore unto your fathers. And thou shalt remember all the way which Jehovah thy God hath led thee these forty years in the wilderness, that He might humble thee, to prove thee, to know what was in thy heart, whether thou would keep His commandments, or not. And He humbled thee, and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee with manna, which thou knew not, neither did thy fathers know; that He might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by everything that proceedeth out of the mouth of Jehovah doth man live”*** (**Deuteronomy 8:1-3**).

If Israel had been asked to list necessities, they would’ve said food & water. We can’t be critical of them without some self-examination. If someone were chosen at random & asked to list the necessities of life he would list: (1) food, (2) water, (3) shelter. The Israelites had to learn that God was more important to their survival than bread. They had to learn that the first necessity is to obey the words that proceed out of the mouth of Jehovah. Oh, how we today need to learn to include that necessity at the top of our list.

How, though, does this point tie in with Jesus’ refusal to turn stones into bread? Satan was telling Jesus to use the power He had for His sole benefit. It was not the Father’s will that Jesus’ power be used in that manner. Though Jesus knew He needed food He also knew one thing He needed more – to do the Father’s will. God did not give Jesus His great power so that if He had a headache He could merely wish it away, or if He became thirsty He could cause a glass of water to pop into His hand. He always used His power for the sake of others to produce faith in them. Thus it would have been contrary to the *“word that proceeded out of the mouth of God”* for Jesus to use His power for His benefit. Therefore He would not and told Satan why. *“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.”*

In the third temptation of Jesus, recorded in **Matthew 4**, ***“the devil taketh Him unto an exceeding high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; and he said unto Him, ‘All these things will I give Thee, if Thou wilt fall down and worship me’”*** (**Matthew 4:8-9**). Satan sought to get Jesus to worship him. If ever the bald-faced audacity of Satan was ever manifested, it was then. The very idea of supreme Deity worshipping Satan is mind boggling. If Jesus had seen fit to fall down and worship Satan, then surely we who are far less in power could do no less than to follow His example. As I said, the consequences of such an action would have shaken the foundations of reason itself.

What was the appeal of this temptation? God had promised Jesus the ***“obedience of the peoples”*** (**Genesis 49:10**); ***“the nations for Thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for Thy possession”*** (**Psalm 2:8**). For Jesus to follow God’s way to the throne on the *“holy hill of Zion”* meant going to the cross. It was the hard way, the sacrificial way. Satan’s way was easy. All Jesus had to do was to fall down and worship him. If He had done that, being who He was, Deity would have been divided. Deity would have submitted to an inferior being’s power. The scheme of redemption would have been completely thwarted.

Jesus answered Satan, ***“Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, ‘Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve’”*** (**Matthew 4:10**). For the third time Jesus quoted from **Deuteronomy** (**6:13**). Moses warned the people that when they went into the land, they were not to follow after the idols. One may make a god out of anything. Satan wanted to exchange himself for God and let Jesus worship him, but Jesus refused. *“Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God and Him only shalt thou serve.”*

It will be profitable to look at a few reasons why Jesus was perfect. They are exemplified in the temptation accounts. We blame sin on our human bodies, but Jesus had a human body and did not sin. Sin comes from the heart. It is the heart which allows the desires of the body to become lust. Surely the divine nature of Jesus is the ultimate explanation of His complete, lifelong perfection. There are, however, two things which we may study with great benefit. One reason why Jesus never sinned is that He was not ignorant. He knew everything that was right. Many times we sin because we do not have the knowledge. We have not studied and learned. The more we know of God’s way the better we will be able to walk in it. Another reason why Jesus never sinned is that He always did what He knew was right. How often do we get to the end of a day and say, *“I should have done this or that,”* and did not do it? We can improve our service to God without learning anything else if we will immediately begin to do more of what we already know we should do. We can then further improve by studying the Scriptures more diligently. Let us be imitators of Christ and ***“resist the devil and he will flee from you”*** (**James 4:7**).