

THE SHADOW OF THE CROSS: JESUS' TEMPTATION

Matthew 4:1–11

At the outset, at the very start of Jesus' public ministry, the shadow of the cross could be clearly seen in his baptism. This high-key event was followed immediately by a period of temptation. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus was 'tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin'.

He was tempted in every way, just as we are. Temptation in itself is not wrong. Temptation is a form of testing and it is possible to overcome temptation. All of us have experienced temptation and given in to it. Oscar Wilde penned the famous line, 'I can resist everything except temptation.' But Jesus never gave in. He was without sin. So Jesus must have been tempted beyond anything we have experienced. He went beyond the level of intensity that has defeated us and overcame. He knows just how strong temptation can be. But he can also help us to overcome it.

Matthew 4 verse 1 presents us with a strange paradox. 'Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.' Led by the Spirit: tempted by the devil. When did this avalanche of temptations descend upon Jesus? It was at a point of high spiritual blessing. He had been obedient. Heaven had opened. God had spoken. The Spirit had descended. And now he was led by the Spirit. Luke tells us that he was 'full of the Holy Spirit'.

Let's pause for a moment to think about that ministry of the Spirit. Jesus was filled with the Spirit. Fulness is the opposite of emptiness. In our modern western society we've never had so many things and yet felt so empty and dissatisfied. That fulness and fulfilment comes not from material prosperity but from true spirituality.

And then, we read that Jesus was led by the Spirit. Guidance is the opposite of aimlessness. We live in a society that has rejected moral guidelines. There's no absolute right or wrong. Anything goes. Just do it. The result of this moral vacuum is not peace and happiness but anxiety and insecurity. When you know the presence and power of God's Spirit within you will know fulness instead of emptiness and guidance instead of aimlessness.

Jesus was led by the Spirit but then we get a surprise: led into the desert. Temptation often comes after a period of spiritual blessing. Think of Elijah's depression after the miracle on Mount Carmel. Think of King David's adultery after all his great military successes. If you've had a great blessing it's wise to be ready for a great buffeting. Mark's Gospel uses a strong word when it says that the Spirit thrust Jesus out into the desert.

Let's think about these temptations of Jesus. There were three of them.

THE FIRST TEMPTATION

The first temptation came in the area of his physical needs. Jesus fasted, he went without food, for forty days and forty nights. You can't go that length of time without drinking water and Jesus would have done so but he didn't eat anything and at the end of this period he was hungry. Verse 3 'The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."'

The devil was not actually questioning Jesus' sonship. 'If' in this context means 'since'. Given that you are the Son of God this is what you should do. What strikes me about this temptation is that it doesn't look like a temptation at all. What Satan suggested seems very innocuous, very sensible. They were in the desert. If Jesus did it no one would know. Where was the harm in it?

OK, where was the harm in it? Verse 4 tells us. 'Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"' That's Deuteronomy 8 verse 3. Our physical welfare is important but

ultimately what is most important is to be guided by God. 'Tell these stones to become bread.' That wasn't God speaking; it was the devil. Whenever you hear a voice inside your head saying, 'Go on, just do it. Where's the harm in it?' ask yourself: Is this God's voice or Satan's?

THE SECOND TEMPTATION

The second temptation takes us to a different level of subtlety, verses 5–6. 'Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"

Again, there's no suggestion of doubt in this suggestion. Satan says, 'I accept that you are the Son of God. Now here's what you should do.' Satan has certain control over Jesus at this point. He takes him, not to some den of iniquity, but to the holy city and the highest point of the temple. You don't have to be in the red light district to be tempted by the devil. He can do the job right here and right now.

Satan brought Jesus to the holy city and the holy temple and then he quoted to him from holy scripture. 'It is written.' The passage he quotes from is Psalm 91 verses 11 and 12. This must be one of the top ten of the psalms. It begins like this. 'He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust.'"

Jesus had had nothing to eat in the desert for 40 days and nights. I suspect the mention of nights is significant there. What sort of condition was he in physically to find himself on the highest point of the temple? I have no head for heights and I dread to think what that must have been like. Was Jesus swaying? Was that why the tempter said, 'Go on, throw yourself down. God won't let you be harmed.'

How does Jesus respond this time? Verse 7 'Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

God has the power to work miracles but we do not have the right to manipulate God and make him work miracles on demand. Jesus answered Satan with scripture, quoting from Deuteronomy 6 verse 16. Jesus demonstrates an important principle of interpreting the Bible. We must compare scripture with scripture.

THE THIRD TEMPTATION

Verses 8–9. 'Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me.'"

Do you remember the subtlety of the first temptation? There's no subtlety here. It's a full-on, blatant appeal to take the shortest route to power and glory. Behind it there's an assumption – that the world is Satan's to give. There's also an almost unspeakable question. What would have happened if Jesus had said yes? Satan is so good at dangling the bait and hiding the hook. But behind the bait there is always a hook.

Verse 10. 'Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

Once again, Jesus used the Word of God to defeat the devil, this time Deuteronomy 6 verse 13.

Verse 11 says, 'Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.' In Luke's account he says, 'When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.' This was not the end of temptation for Jesus, just the beginning, but relief came and the welcome ministry of angels.

ECHOES FROM THE PAST

The temptation of Jesus has echoes from the past. There are echoes of the very first temptation when Adam and Eve fell into sin. Genesis 3:6. 'When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.

There was a physical need, an inner hunger. There was an outside stimulus. And there was the promise of a way that was better than God's way. But where Adam and Eve failed Jesus overcame.

There are also echoes of the experience of God's people Israel following the Exodus when they left Egypt. They too were led into the desert to be tested. At the end of their desert wanderings Moses said, 'Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands' (Deuteronomy 8:2). Israel failed the test but Jesus was obedient.

Jesus overcame temptation by keeping God's word in his mind and by using it to answer Satan. It's fascinating that the scriptures he used were all from these very chapters of Deuteronomy that speak about the testing of the Israelites, chapters 6 to 8. It suggests that Jesus was meditating on these very verses and was able to use them when the testing came.

There are lessons for us as we face temptation. It may come at a time when we least expect it. It may be linked to some particular physical need. It may focus in the beginning on something apparently trivial and harmless. It may be cloaked in the disguise of a spiritual motive. It may build to a very strong desire.

But we have a Saviour who knows how to overcome temptation because he has overcome it to a degree that we will never experience. We need to hide God's word in our hearts so that we will not sin. We need to be alert and ready to recognise the tempter when he comes to us.

THE SHADOW OF THE CROSS

The temptation of Jesus at the start of his public ministry was a foreshadowing of his experience on the cross. His suffering at Calvary was not a voluntary fast but the callous brutality inflicted on him by an inhumane régime. On the cross Jesus said, 'I thirst.'

The crowds who passed by the scene of crucifixion said, 'Save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!' Do you see? It's that same temptation, but this time in a far more cruel form.

The first temptation was to accept the best that the devil could offer. The last temptation was to escape the worst that the devil could do.

Temptations still come in these two forms: the offer of something we want and an escape from something we definitely don't want. Jesus had prayed, 'Father, if possible, let this cup pass from me.' But then he said, 'Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done.'

When Jesus overcame temptation on the cross he again turned to scripture but the only scripture he found was Psalm 22 verse 1. 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'