

Mt 4:1-11'The temptation of Jesus' 29/01/2023

Sometimes when you're given a list of options,
there's only one right answer.

I remember the test I sat to get my learners permit.

It was a multiple choice.

When you come to an amber light you should:

a) accelerate to ensure getting through the intersection
before the light turns red.

b) check your mirrors to make sure no police cars are in the area
and then proceed through the intersection.

c) if possible brake and come to rest prior to entering the intersection.

I needn't have studied.

The right answer was glaringly obvious.

But life isn't always simple.

Often things operate at a number of levels and they're all true.

Australia is:

a) the driest continent in the world

b) the best cricket team in the world

c) the nicest place to live in the world

They're all true

And if there was no d) all of the above then I'd be confused.

It's like that with reading the temptation of Jesus.

Is this a story about Jesus the perfectly obedient Son of God the Father?

Is this a story about Jesus the man who overcomes Satan?

Or is this a story about Jesus the true Israel,

Succeeding in the wilderness where the nation had failed?

Answer, Yes.

d) all of the above.

This is a story about Jesus the perfectly obedient Son of God the Father.

The temptation of Jesus follows directly after his baptism.

The baptism finishes with the words,

“This is my Son whom I love,
with him I am well pleased.”

Jesus has just been declared to be the beloved and pleasing Son of God.
So the question this throws at you as you read of his temptations is
“Will Jesus continue in the path of faithful obedience?”

And Jesus did.

There’s absolutely no question that Jesus is going to get up and sing,
“I did it my way!”

Jesus approach to his mission is faithfully to do his Father’s will.

Each of the three temptations is at its heart,

A temptation to be disobedient or disloyal to his Father.

So this story is about Jesus overcoming that temptation
to be the obedient Son.

This is also a story about Jesus the man who overcame the devil.

And that’s an important perspective on the story.

Satan is mentioned lots of times in the gospels.

But this is the only story where Satan is an active participant.

Here is the only place you could say Satan is a character in the story.

And that’s pretty important.

Lots of people are attracted to the idea that evil is something
impersonal.

They’re comfortable with a dark side to human nature

But very uncomfortable with a personal being

who is the embodiment of evil.

Well this is the hardest passage in the gospels to read like that.

Verse 11 reads,

“Then the devil left him,

And angels came and attended him.”

It’s pretty hard to read that

like Jesus is having some sort of an internal psychological struggle
or something.

It sounds like the devil was actually there with him and then went away.

And I think it’s pretty important that we read it this way

Because only if Satan is real

does Jesus overcoming Satan have any significance for us.
 If Jesus is only confronting and overcoming his own internal demons
 then how does that help me when I'm struggling with temptation?
 Jesus' internal struggles might be quite different to mine.
 I've got a lot more wrong with me
 So my struggle will be harder than Jesus'.
 But if Jesus is confronting Satan,
 Then he has confronted and overcome
 the same enemy who I struggle with too.
 Satan is beaten in this encounter and finally vanquished on the cross.
 I fight against Satan
 in the power of the same Spirit that empowered Jesus,
 And I have access to the forgiveness Jesus obtained
 By living the life of an obedient child of God on my behalf
 and then paying the price for my disobedience.
 If Jesus overcame Satan here,
 Then he did it as our representative
 And the victory he won here was a victory in which we share.
 That's an important angle on the story.
 Let's not forget that Jesus has overcome Satan.

But there's one more angle and it's helpful too.
 In this story,
 Jesus is portrayed as the true Israel.
 The nation of Israel was anointed as God's Son in Exodus.
 Ex 4:22 Moses is told to say to Pharaoh,
 "This is what the Lord says,
 'Israel is my firstborn son.'"
 Like Jesus was anointed as God's Son at his Baptism
 And then the nation of Israel wandered in the desert for 40 years
 facing temptations
 to turn away from their heavenly Father
 Like Jesus was in the desert and tested for 40 days.
 The difference between Jesus and the nation of Israel
 Is that they stumbled at every hurdle but Jesus was faithful.

This picture of Jesus doing what Israel should have done is not lost on Jesus.

Every time he answers the devil,

He answers with verses of Scripture from the book of Deuteronomy.

These are verses that are reflecting on how Israel should have behaved when they were in the wilderness.

Well that's interesting, but how is it helpful?

Well by turning back to the pages of Deuteronomy,

We are able to look at these verses in their context

And better understand what Jesus is saying so we can learn from him.

And we'll do that as we look at each of the temptations in turn.

Temptation #1.

The devil said to him,

“If you are the Son of God,

Tell these stones to become bread.”

Well what would be wrong with that?

Surely there's nothing wrong with eating?

Now some might say the problem is doing the miracle in order to eat.

If Jesus had stumbled on to a bakery,

It would have been OK for him to buy a salad roll,

But he shouldn't turn a stone into a salad roll.

The problem with saying that

is that Jesus did feed the 5000 by a miracle.

So there can't be a problem with doing a miracle in order to eat.

Maybe the problem is doing a miracle for your own benefit.

Maybe its OK to feed the crowds by a miracle

but its selfish to do it for yourself.

The problem with that is it doesn't make much sense of Jesus' answer.

‘One does not live by bread alone.’

It doesn't sound like Jesus has a problem with doing a miracle,

It sounds like he's got a problem with eating bread

And that after fasting for 40 days.

It's all a bit confusing.

We need to turn back to Deuteronomy for some clarity.
This is the couple of verses preceding the bit Jesus quotes,
Dt 8:2-3

“Remember the long way that the Lord your God
led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years,
to humble and test you,
in order to know what was in your heart,
whether or not you would keep his commands.
He humbled you causing you to hunger,
and then by feeding you with manna,
which neither you nor your ancestors had known,
In order to make you understand
That man does not live on bread alone
But by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”

Now that makes it much clearer.

‘Man does not live by bread alone’ is not about denying your body and
not eating,

Like a monk fasting or something.

It couldn’t be that

because God was feeding them manna in the wilderness.

‘Man does not live by bread alone’ is about relying on God
to take care of your physical needs.

It’s about being humble before him

and knowing that there is no other way to live

But to be provided for by God.

If Jesus were to turn a stone into bread

then he wouldn’t be trusting

in the protection and provision of his Father.

His Father has lead him out into the desert.

His Father has set him on this path of self denial and service,

And Jesus needs to trust that his Father will provide him with food
when it’s time to eat again.

The devil is wanting Jesus to doubt God’s care for him.

This is what the devil is saying to Jesus.

“Isn’t God treating you badly.
You better take care of yourself.
You can look after yourself better than God can look after you.”

How about you?

Is God taking care of you?

Is he providing you with all the things you deserve?

Or does he sometimes lead you into the wilderness

And not even give you some of the things

that all the people you know have?

Does God give you fair weather friends?

Friends who are there when times are good.

Friends who are there

when you’re feeling full of energy and ready to play,

But friends who don’t have time to look you up and give you a call

When life is pressing in and you need cheering up.

Has God given you an average partner?

Someone who isn’t as affectionate as you deserve.

Someone who doesn’t do their share of the household work.

Someone who can’t seem to hold down a good job.

Someone who’s moody,

doesn’t treat you with the respect that you deserve.

Or maybe God hasn’t given you a partner at all?

Maybe you should take matters into your own hands.

Maybe you should stop relying on God to provide for you

And get some stuff for yourself to make you happy.

If God’s given you an average partner,

Maybe you should ditch the one he’s given you and find a better one.

You deserve better than that.

If God’s not making you happy,

Maybe you should engage in some retail therapy

That’s sure to cheer you up.

If God’s not making you happy,

Why bother with God at all,

There’s got to be more enjoyable ways to spend your time

Than with the crowd down at Holy Trinity.
 Why not spend your Sundays on the golf course somewhere?
 Why not turn this stone into bread?

In case you didn't get it,
 That's the voice of Satan.
 When he whispers those thoughts into your mind,
 He's tempting you to doubt God's care.

Temptation #2

He took Jesus up to the highest point of the temple,
 And said,

“If you're the Son of God,
 throw yourself down from here,
 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.”

Well OK Jesus.

If you're so committed to your relationship with your Father.
 You've refused to doubt that your Father is caring for you.

If you're so committed to your Father,
 Well show me how committed he is to you.

Throw yourself down from here.

Surely he will protect you.

You quoting the Bible at me

To tell me why you won't take my sensible suggestions.

Here I've got a proof text from Psalm 91,

“He will command his angels concerning you ...
 and further on ...

they will lift you up in their hands,

So that you won't strike your foot against a stone.”

Look God has promised he will save you.

Off you go,

Jump.

If you really have faith, you'll jump.
If you're scared that means you don't trust your Father.

Does Psalm 91 actually say that?

Yes it does.

The devil has quoted the Bible correctly.

He can do that.

You might have even heard him doing it yourself.

But when the devil quotes the Bible he twists the meaning.

What is the devil claiming that psalm 91 means?

“God will protect his righteous servant, Jesus,
you're his righteous servant,
so you can do whatever you like
and God will protect you.”

But what is Psalm 91 actually saying?

“Sometimes God's righteous servants are beset by troubles,
but have no fear,
God will protect you from all trouble.”

It's a subtle change.

But the devil is a devious character.

He wants to trick you into sinning
without even knowing that you're doing it.

The sins you'll feel guilty about
are the sins where you know you're doing the wrong thing.

But that's not Satan's highest goal.

He wants to get you sinning

And thinking you're doing the right thing at the same time.

Then you'll sin with a clear conscience and never repent.

Show us how much faith you've got Jesus.

That must be a godly thing to do.

Throw yourself off the temple.

How does Jesus respond?

“Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

It's words from Deuteronomy again.

6:16, but in its context it refers back to the story in Exodus

where Israel refused to trust

that God would protect them and provide for them in the wilderness

and demanded that he care for them on their terms

by providing water from a rock..

Now there's nothing wrong with wanting a drink of water.

What is wrong is saying to God,

“If you don't miraculously provide me with a drink of water now,

then you don't really love me.”

God had already provided them

with freedom from the Egyptians in spectacular style,

He'd already provided them with manna from heaven to eat.

Surely they could trust him not to let them die of thirst.

Demanding water from a rock was not actually faith

that God could provide water from a rock,

It was unbelief.

They were failing to believe

that God loved them and would care for them.

If Jesus had thrown himself from the temple,

That wouldn't actually have been faith.

It would have been unbelief.

He would have been failing to believe

that he was God's beloved Son,

as the voice from heaven had said at his Baptism.

And instead he would have been demanding proof that God loved him.

It's a bit like the old trick of the teenage boyfriend,

Exploiting the insecurity of his girl.

“If you really loved me,

you'd come to bed with me.”

To demand proof is to put the relationship to the test.

If he really loved her,

He wouldn't put her to the test.

Well the devil had one more trick up his sleeve.
He led Jesus up a very high mountain
And showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor.
And the devil said to him,
"All this I will give to you," he said,
"if you will bow down and worship me."
Imagine I took you round to my place and showed you round.
It's a lovely spacious four bedroom house.
Recently renovated, nice kitchen.
very easy walking distance to church
And the best playgroup in town.
Well maintained garden with fruit trees.
You can have it for 100K.
Would you be tempted?
You might be
But not if you knew it belongs to the church and not to me at all.
The devil is offering Jesus what's not really his to offer.
The devil is described as the 'prince of this world'
But his authority is pretty limited
Like that of a renter.
God is the owner of this world
And he has served the devil with an eviction notice.
The devil can't promise anything that will last.

Even more than that, look at what the devil promises Jesus.
It's his anyway.
Colossians tells us that Jesus is the firstborn over all creation.
And that in him all things were created.
So what is the devil offering?
Something that he doesn't actually own
And something that Jesus already has promised to him.
It doesn't sound like much of a temptation.
But it is a real temptation.

The temptation is for Jesus to get the glory without going to the cross.
 The devil says,
 “I’ll give you the same reward without you having to pay the price.
 You just swap sides from your Father’s side to mine.”
 That’s a terrible temptation.
 Going to the cross was the hardest thing anyone has ever done.
 It’s not so much the pain of being crucified,
 It’s the pain of being separated from his Father
 and punished by his Father for the sins of the world.

If you think about your closest relationship:
 Your spouse, one of your parents, a best friend, a child,
 And think about the pain of being separated from them.
 That really hurts.
 But our relationships are just shadows
 of Jesus’ relationship with his Father.
 They’re cardboard cut outs in comparison.
 Satan says,
 “Jesus, you can avoid all that pain
 and still get the glory,
 just come on my side.”

What does Satan say to Holy Trinity?
 “So guys, you want more people coming along to church?
 Well you’ve got two options.
 You can do it God’s way, serve him.
 He’ll get you to deny your desires.
 He’ll have you giving away all your money.
 He’ll have you engaging in some sort of repressed puritan lifestyle
 With no sexual freedom.
 He’ll have you losing all your friends
 and being regarded as a Jesus freak by the people you know.
 People will think you’re intolerant, boorish.
 He’ll have you bored witless on church committees,
 And totally asleep listening to preachers drone on and on

about irrelevant parts of the Bible.
 And he'll expect you to organize your whole life to please him.
 Not just an hour on Sundays
 but 168 hours a week.
 And maybe God will send some more people along to your church.
 That's God's way.

Or you can do it my way.
 I'll get you the same outcome.
 I'll fill the pews of your church.
 Instead of a sermon we'll have a 5 minute pep talk
 about how God really wants to bless your socks off.
 Bible readings are a bit stodgy,
 Maybe instead of Bible readings some church goers can write their own
 poems
 and we'll read those instead.
 That would be very creative.
 And as for lifestyle you can live however you want to,
 Just so long as you don't comment on how anyone else lives.
 You'll be totally free.
 We'll have inspiring hymns,
 Enjoy singing them,
 Just don't listen to the words.
 And when church is over there's no demands on the rest of your week.
 I won't even tell you that you're worshiping me,
 You can even keep on thinking you're worshiping him.
 Just grow your church my way.

Jesus said,
 "It is written,
 Worship the Lord your God and serve only him."
 Will we?

Today we've thought a bit about Jesus resisting Satan's temptations
 As an example for us.

Jesus showing us how to resist the wiles of the devil.
But I want to conclude in a slightly different way.
Instead of summarising how we can follow Jesus' example,
I want to conclude by reminding you
that Jesus is our representative as well as our example.
He lived without sin
And he did that for us.
If you sat there today
being reminded of all the times you have given in to the devil,
Don't despair.
Jesus has defeated the devil.
Just keep trusting in Jesus
And one day Satan will no longer tempt you.
In the new heavens and the new earth there will be no temptation
And no struggle with sin.
The weary travellers will finally have rest.