

LESSON TWO

OVERCOMING TEMPTATION

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

MATTHEW 4:10



REFLECTION

Even more certain than death, hunger, and taxes is the reality of temptation. And worse, as someone once quipped, temptations are like stray cats—treat one nicely, and before you can blink, it will be back with a dozen of its friends! How would you define temptation to a child? How would you describe the process of being lured into sin?

SITUATION

Matthew, like the other Gospel writers, wastes little time in getting to the beginning of Christ's public ministry. After relating the story of Jesus' birth, he quickly moves to describing the Lord's baptism and his temptation in the wilderness. These events serve as the starting point in each of the Gospels for Jesus' subsequent ministry on earth.

OBSERVATION

Read Matthew 3:13–4:11 from the New International Version or the New King James Version.

NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION

^{3:13} Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John.
¹⁴ But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

¹⁵ Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented.

¹⁶ As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

^{4:1} Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³ The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

⁴ Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

⁵ Then 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 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."

⁷ Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

⁸ Again, 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."

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

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

NEW KING JAMES VERSION

^{3:13} Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ And John tried to prevent Him, saying, "I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?"

¹⁵ But Jesus answered and said to him, "Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he allowed Him.

¹⁶ When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. ¹⁷ And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

^{4:1} Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry. ³ Now when the tempter came to Him, he said, "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread."

⁴ But He answered and said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'"

⁵ Then the devil took Him up into the holy city, set Him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶ and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down. For it is written:

'He shall give His angels charge over you,'

and,

'In their hands they shall bear you up,
Lest you dash your foot against a stone.'"

⁷ Jesus said to him, "It is written again, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God.'"

⁸ Again, the devil took Him up on an exceedingly high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. ⁹ And he said to Him, "All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me."

¹⁰ Then Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve.'"

¹¹ Then the devil left Him, and behold, angels came and ministered to Him.

EXPLORATION

1. Take a few moments to look at this passage you've just read. What was John the Baptist's role in the ministry of Christ?

2. Look carefully at the sequence of events this passage. Why do you think Jesus was led into the wilderness to be tempted right after God expressed how pleased he was with him?

3. Eating food is certainly not a sin, and we know that Jesus was hungry in the wilderness. What would have been so wrong with him turning stones into bread?

4. What was Satan attempting to get Jesus to "prove" through his second temptation (see Matthew 4:5-6)? Why did Jesus refuse to take Satan up on this offer?

5. What do you think Jesus felt in the midst of this time of testing? How does this differ with how he responded?

6. How did the devil misuse Scripture to try to entice Jesus to act independently of the Father?

INSPIRATION

Have you ever thought about the evil things done to Christ? Can you think of times when Jesus could have given up? How about his time of temptation? You and I know what it is like to endure a moment of temptation or an hour of temptation, even a day of temptation. But *forty* days? That is what Jesus faced. "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil" (Luke 4:1-2).

We imagine the wilderness temptation as three isolated events scattered over a forty-day period. Would that it had been. In reality, Jesus' time of testing was nonstop: "for forty days he was tempted by the devil." Satan got on Jesus like a shirt and refused to leave. Every step, whispering in his ear. Every turn of the path, sowing doubt.

Was Jesus affected by the devil? Apparently so. Matthew doesn't say that Satan *tried* to tempt Jesus. The verse doesn't read, "for forty days the devil *attempted* to tempt Jesus." No, the passage is clear: "he *was tempted* by the devil." Jesus *was tempted*, he was *tested*. Tempted to change sides? Tempted to go home? Tempted to settle for a kingdom on earth? I don't know, but I know he was tempted. A war raged within. Stress stormed without. And since he was tempted, he could have quit the race. But he didn't. He kept on running.

Temptation didn't stop him, nor did accusations. Can you imagine what it would be like to run in a race and be criticized by the bystanders?

Some years ago I entered a 5K race. Nothing serious, just a jog through the neighborhood to raise funds for a charity. Not being the wisest of runners, I started off at an impossible pace. Within a mile I was sucking air. At the right time, however, the spectators encouraged me. Sympathetic onlookers urged me on. One compassionate lady passed out cups of water, another sprayed us down with a hose. I had never seen these people, but that didn't matter. I needed a voice of encouragement, and they gave it. Bolstered by their assurance, I kept going.

What if, in the toughest steps of the race, I had heard words of accusation and not encouragement? And what if the accusations came not from strangers I could dismiss but from my neighbors and family?

How would you like somebody to yell these words at you as you ran: "Hey, liar! Why don't you do something honest with your life?" (see John 7:12). "Here comes the foreigner. Why don't you go home where you belong?" (see John 8:48). "Since when do they let children of the devil enter the race?" (see John 8:48).

That's what happened to Jesus. His own family called him a lunatic. His neighbors treated him even worse. When Jesus returned to his hometown, they tried to throw him off a cliff (see Luke 4:29). But Jesus didn't quit running. Temptations didn't deter him. Accusations didn't defeat him. Nor did shame dishearten him. (From *Just Like Jesus* by Max Lucado.)

REACTION

7. Why do you think it was necessary for Jesus to be baptized before starting his ministry?

8. Why do you think John was so reluctant to baptize Jesus? What did he recognize in Christ?

9. Which of the temptations that Jesus faced would have been the most difficult for you to resist? Why?

10. Theologians like to argue about whether Christ could have actually given in to the devil's temptations. Some argue that Jesus was divine, and God is incapable of evil. Others say if it was impossible for him to give in, then this temptation account is meaningless. What do you say?

11. What are some times in your life in which you find yourself more susceptible and vulnerable to temptation than normal?

12. What have you learned from Jesus' example on how to handle temptations? What have you learned from his example about the importance of knowing God's Word?

LIFE LESSONS

We can find great comfort in Matthew's account of Christ's temptation. Theological possibilities aside, the fact remains that in Jesus' humanity, he was ravenous and exhausted, and the devil slyly moved in to try to exploit his vulnerable condition. Nothing in the text suggests Satan's wilderness attack was quick—rather, it was tricky and relentless. But Christ resisted, which means we have a victorious Savior who *truly understands* what it is like to be wooed and enticed to do evil. And in the Lord's dogged adherence to God's truth, we have a magnificent example for what to do when we find ourselves "wanting to please our sinful selves, wanting the sinful things we see, and being too proud of what we have" (1 John 2:16 NCV).

DEVOTION

Thank you, Lord, that you understand our weaknesses. While on earth, you were tempted in every way that we are. Thank you, Lord, for your steadfast refusal to sin. You are holy, and you have promised to make us holy. Grant us discernment today to do your will.

JOURNALING

What are some practical and specific steps you can take to combat the most common temptation in your life right now?
