



Resisting Temptation

Matthew 4:1-11; Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

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We are now in the season of Lent the period of preparation for the great festival of Easter. It is 40 days long inspired by the Jesus' wilderness fast of 40 days. No sooner had Jesus stepped onto the public stage of ministry, than he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. It was a time to establish him for ministry.

The Genesis passage tells us of the prototypical human sin, the disobedience of Adam and Eve against God's command to them.

Temptation to Waver – to Doubt God's Words

The striking thing about the temptation in the garden was how doubt was used to lure them into disobedience: "Did God really say?"

The command to Adam had been, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die."¹

But the tempter distorted the command, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat of any tree in the garden?'"²

They were tempted to think about the desirable qualities of disobedience and minimize the consequences. Do you recognize that strategy in temptations you have experienced? The desired action or thing always appears so very desirable and the negative consequences are somehow minimised or dismissed. Afterwards, the poverty of the benefit becomes so obvious and the consequences loom so large.

When Jesus was tempted, the same technique of casting doubt on God's words was used. He had just been baptised and as he came up out of the water, God the Father spoke to him saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."³

The first two temptations attack this revelation and assurance. If you are the Son of God...⁴

So here is a tip for us. Be alert to temptations which cause you to waver, which cast doubt on what God has said, especially any promises he has made to you. The tempter would seek to take away your confidence in God's words.

The Three Weaknesses

In John's first epistle, he refers to three weak points in us – three forms of desire:

¹ Gen 2:16-17

² Gen 3:1

³ Matthew 3:17

⁴ Matthew 4:3,6

1 John 2:16 For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world. [RSV]

If we compare these with the two accounts we have heard of the temptation in Genesis and of Jesus, we see the same factors at work.

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. ⁵

- The fruit was good for food – the appetite for food was stimulated.
- It was pleasing to the eye – seeing it made her want it.
- It was desirable for gaining wisdom (“You will be like God”) – it appealed to her desire for status and personal advancement – the pride of life.

There was nothing wrong with the basic desires for food and for wisdom but there was something very wrong with disobedience. There is nothing wrong with driving a car, unless you are still a child.



In Jesus' case the three temptations fall into the same classifications. He was tempted to satisfy his hunger by doing a miracle for himself – a desire of his body.

He was taken up to the highest point of the temple and tempted to throw himself off so angels would rescue him and everyone would be amazed – a desire for recognition and attention appealing to the lust of the eyes.

Thirdly, he was taken to a mountain and shown the kingdoms of the world and their splendour and offered them in exchange for worshipping Satan. This is a temptation addressed to the pride of life.

Eating bread was not bad in itself. Making bread miraculously was not bad – Jesus did that at the feeding of the 5000 and the 4000. But the Father's will at that time was for Jesus to fast. If he made bread and ate it, he would disobey the Father's will for him.



We may actually have a portion of that high point of the Temple building. A stone has been found next to the temple site from the high lookout from which the temple attendants observed the sunset and appearance of the first three stars. There they blew trumpets to announce the beginning and end of the Sabbath day. So it was a high lookout on the temple which might well have

⁵ Genesis 3:6

been where Jesus was tempted to throw himself down.

Jesus would do great miracles typically when his heart was moved with compassion and certainly when his Father told him to – for he said,

John 5:19 "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.

Jesus will rule all the nations at the right time – but not at the cost of worshipping Satan, nor at the cost of avoiding the cross.

Resisting Temptation

Let's look at how Jesus resisted temptation. These were real temptations. Hebrews tell us that he was tempted in every way as we are - but without sinning.⁶

The Word of God

I was reading "The Jesus Way" by Eugene Peterson last week and Peterson drew out the idea that Jesus being the Way is not only the way as in the route, but the manner of going as well. That is to say our following Jesus affects how we behave as well as where we are going. Peterson pointed out how strong a theme "The Way of the Lord" is in the Old Testament especially in the Psalms. And then it struck me: Psalm 119 that great poem extoling the value of God's word for us as a guide, as Laws, as truth – its second stanza starts:

Psalm 119:9-11 How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word. I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.

This could have been in Jesus' mind, it was certainly in his heritage and training. To keep your way straight live by the Word of God. Memorise the word so it is available to you to resist sin.

And so, out of those treasures hidden in his heart, Jesus used scriptures to defend himself against the temptations thrown against him. And all of those scriptures were from Deuteronomy, relating to the wanderings of Israel in the wilderness. The people were tested and failed. Jesus was tested in the wilderness and did not fail.

To the first temptation to turn stones into bread, Jesus responded with Deuteronomy 8:3 but hear the larger context of that verse:

Deuteronomy 8:2-3 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. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.

How appropriate, how relevant for Jesus' situation! For the second and third temptations he uses portions of Deuteronomy 6:13-16.

Fear the LORD your God, serve [or worship⁷] him only and take your oaths in his name. Do not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples around you; for the LORD your God, who is among you, is a jealous God and his anger will burn against you, and he will destroy you from the face of the land. Do not test the LORD your God as you did at Massah.

Satan misapplied scripture when tempting Jesus. But Jesus used the Word of God accurately to defend himself. It is like a sword fight. For each blow the enemy swings at him, he parries with a word from scripture. The analogy is apt because Paul likens our defence to armour and the Word of God to a sword. Obviously, it helps to be familiar with scripture, but the Spirit can remind you of scriptures you need to use.

⁶ Hebrews 4:15

⁷ Alternative meaning according to Brown, Driver, Briggs: *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, also in the Septuagint.

What God has said is the foundation for resisting the temptations thrown at us. We need to stand on the security of his words. And we can say those words back to counter the thoughts and doubts which come to our minds. Say them out loud – it is more effective.

Withstand the Devil

Did you notice anything different on the third temptation? Jesus said,

“Away from me, Satan!” ... Then the devil left him....⁸

The other strategy we can learn from Jesus is that he ordered the enemy to go away. Following his example, we can command tempting agents to go. Certainly, we need to take responsibility for our own weakness – but some of what affects us is from outside.

James wrote, “Submit yourselves ... to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”⁹

And Peter wrote, “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith”¹⁰

Let’s review what we have seen:

- **Waver:** Temptation often takes the form of doubting what God says.
- **Weaknesses:** Our three great weaknesses are: the lust of the flesh; the lust of the eyes and the pride of life.
- **Word:** Jesus used the word of God as a defence.
- **Withstand:** Jesus resisted the enemy and told him to go. “Resist the devil and he will flee from you.”

Friends, we have seen that Jesus trusted God and trusted the promises of God made to him through the written Word of God. If Lent is a period for fasting, it is also a period for study of God's Word. Why not aim to study a portion of the Bible this Lent?

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⁸ Mt 4:10-11

⁹ James 4:7

¹⁰ 1 Peter 5:8-9