

The Temptations in the Wilderness

First Series – Sermon Seven

Original by George MacDonald

Paraphrase by Dale R. Howie

The temptations in the wilderness were not about the devil and Jesus, but Jesus and us. We see unpacked the way forward to our New Name and the Life of Christ within.

The way is one of humility and submission to the Father's will. Jesus chose to be a river of Life, not a container filled with it. God gives us Power and Life not to use for ourselves, but to do the work of the Father. The power is ours in harness, to flow through us to others.

We are like flower delivery people. Ones who participate in the excitement and joy experienced by the ones loved, by delivering gifts purchased and given by another! *"How beautiful are the feet of messengers who bring good news!"* Romans 10:15 NLT



Outline

Revelation - How much more must God know of which we know nothing!

Parables – The parable is Jesus' first and most comprehensive choice for illustrating truth.

Temptations – We will see how the devil tempted Him to evil, not with evil.

Stones to Bread (Act Independently) – This power was His, not to take care of Himself, but to do the work of His Father!

Trying God (Trust) – To Jesus, Life is doing the will of His Father!

God's Deliverance (Root not Fruits) – The Temptations are the contest between the seen and the unseen, the outer and inner, the possible and actual, and the show instead of reality.

God's Will – The Father's will would be done. We will mature into the likeness of God's thoughts for us and not after our own!

Matthew 4:1-11 NLT

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted there by the devil. For forty days and forty nights he fasted and became very hungry.

During that time the devil came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become loaves of bread." But Jesus told him, "No! The Scriptures say, 'People do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then the devil took him to the holy city, Jerusalem, to the highest point of the Temple, ⁶ and said, "If you are the Son of God, jump off! For the Scriptures say, 'He will order his angels to protect you. And they will hold you up with their hands so you won't even hurt your foot on a stone.'"

Jesus responded, "The Scriptures also say, 'You must not test the LORD your God.'"

Next the devil took him to the peak of a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. "I will give it all to you," he said, "if you will kneel down and worship me."

"Get out of here, Satan," Jesus told him. "For the Scriptures say, 'You must worship the LORD your God and serve only him.'"

Then the devil went away, and angels came and took care of Jesus.

Revelation

This story of the temptations is not of human invention but comes from the Lord Himself. With this view in mind, how much more must God know of which we know nothing! Think about His understanding, imagination, and heart in which lie all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Human language cannot express what He knows, feels, imagines, and rejoices in that we cannot understand! Things that human hearts cannot conceive! He is always bringing us His thoughts out of the infinite light! He was in His human form as if veiled, veiled from the full radiant glory of His being. What could be revealed was revealed, with infinitely more still behind. What Jesus and His Father spoke about on the mountain tops can only be partially revealed to us. For the voice of His Father to us was but the sound of thunder!

Parables

But could the temptations even be revealed to us in mere intellectual forms? Or, given that it might be possible, could it be given to those who could only see a little? Those who were confused about who Jesus was and what He had come to do? No. These personal revelations of Jesus can only come to us in parables. For many even simpler things, He chose parables to share. The parable is His first and most comprehensive choice for illustrating truths He wishes to reveal.

Some say this is a straightforward narrative about the prince of this world. **Who came quoting scripture like the religious of His day. Thinking scripture could tempt Him to deny His Father through the promise of power. There is but one Source of power, and that is God! The prince was trying to convince Him to break every connection He had with creation by bowing down and worshipping the adversary of Truth, humanity, and God.** How could Satan be so foolish? Or, if he is, how would Jesus' victory here be a victory for us? Told as a parable, it is much more vibrant than relayed as a narrative. So, I believe it was spoken as a parable to communicate the truths He wanted to convey.

It is through our awareness that the Spirit reveals things. The laws of the Spirit are first seen and encountered at a distance by us.

So, here is the question whose answer illuminates the whole parable. How could the Son of Man be tempted?

If anyone says there was no temptation for Him, then He has no victory at all? For there to be meaning for us, our human need, struggle, and hope must be addressed.

Temptation

How could the Son of God be tempted with evil? Be tempted with what was plain to Him in its true colors as strife and its actual shape as deformed? Or, how could He be the Father's Son when His Father could not be tempted with evil?

The answers to these questions are the seeds of the whole interpretation. Jesus was not tempted with evil but with good. A good that is just conditional or acceptable, while the beautiful and complete waits for the time of the Father. **I do not believe He was tempted with evil, but I think He was tempted with good. Tempted to be less than He was would be evil for Him. The ruin of the universe that is bound in Him!**

But does not all evil come from good? Yes, but it has come out of it. There is only one Source, and it is good! The evil that has come out of it is no longer good. Good corrupted is no longer genuine! This corruption could not tempt our Lord. Revenge may originate in justice, but it is revenge that is evil, not justice. Revenge is unjust. Evil is wrong, no matter how it is corrupted. **There was no temptation for Jesus to take vengeance on His enemies, but He could remove them from the face of the earth without destroying them forever. To destroy them forever would not have tempted Him.**

There are plenty of illustrations of this in our passage. We will look at each temptation and its representation in Matthew's Gospel. **We will see how the devil tempted Him to evil, not with evil.**

Stones to Bread (Act Independently)

First, He was hungry, and the devil said, "Make bread from this stone."

Jesus had been fasting for forty days, a difficult fast except with intense spiritual and mental focus. He was very vulnerable! There is no sin in getting food or wanting to eat. Eating would restore His focus on the eternal, strengthening His mind and will, releasing hope and faith. In eating, there would be delight, confidence, praise, and patience as well. Why should He not help Himself? Why should Jesus not use His power to create food?

Because this power was His, not to take care of Himself, but to do the work of His Father! The power was His in harness to represent His Father as He wished to be known. His Father was more honored in the ordinary and conventional ways of wonders than in the extraordinary means of miracles. He chose to show restraint because it was His Father's business to take care of Him. His responsibility was to do the will of His Father. Changing the stone to bread would be to take His provision out of His Father's hand and turn His divine power into the everyday use of self-preservation.

In nothing was He to be unlike us, except in faith. No refuge for Him that was not shelter for us, no shelter except in the love and care of the Father. No safety through divine power could be anything but hell to Him. The Father was His refuge. The Father was His Life!

Was He not to eat when the opportunity arose, and His power could change the stone to bread? Did not the chance for food come?

Consider the word *change* used here, changed from what? From what God had made it to be. Changed into what? Into what He did not make it. Why change it? Because Jesus was hungry, and God would not feed Him with food convenient for Him. The Father did not give Him a stone when He asked for bread. It was Satan that presented the stone and told Him to provide for Himself. His Father called the stone a stone, and the Son would not command it to be bread. No creative command will contradict another. Jesus would be hungry or starve but would not change what His Father had made as one thing into another. There was no such change in the feeding of the multitudes. The fish and bread remained fish and bread. I think this is important as it relates to the true nature of miracles and their relationship to God's ordinary ways.

If we examined His answer to the devil, we would see the rest of the matter at once. "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." Yes, even by the original Word that made a stone a stone. Everything left as it was. It is harmonious with life to leave the stone a stone. It would be disharmony and death to change one word that God has spoken.

"Man shall not live by bread alone." There are other ways of living than natural bread. We can live by the Word of God, what He says to us, and what He intends for us! We can live by the Truth of the Father's Being revealed to His children and the communion of love between them. Men say, without food, we would die, but we won't. Instead, we will find that the awareness that has hidden the universe of stars will be gone. We will see the heavens as never before. The old consciousness will have passed away, and the new one comes.

The new one living by the Word of God, the Bread of Heaven like never before. I've been speaking of the conscious life of our existence. Not of the Spiritual Life on which all others depend. This Life cannot exist for a moment except within the heart of the Father! If we try to live from bread alone and not by the Word of God, we may think we live, but we are dying or are already dead. Jesus said, "*I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again... Yes, I am the bread of life! Your ancestors ate manna in the wilderness, but they all died. Anyone who eats the bread from heaven, however, will never die.*" **All Jesus cared about was doing the will of His Father. The Father does not forget His child, who is busy trusting Him. The One who cares, but was not even willing to pray for Himself.**

The highest truth of this first temptation remains the same as it relates to our feelings about food. We do not live by bread but by the Truth. That is the Truth, Word, and Will as the spoken Being of God!

I wish I did not have to write here about milk for babes when I would rather speak of bread for men and women. **I must say this: by the Word of God, I do not mean the Bible. The Bible is a word of God, the chief of His written words, because it speaks of the Word, Jesus Christ!** Everything the Father has done or given is a word of His. What He gives is a necessity for man, without which we cannot live! And our receiving it is our life. Everything the Father has revealed or spoken is as a whole. Every little thing is essential. He says nothing foolish or empty, but as the Word of God and not as our Maker only. He is our

Father because He speaks to His children. We must understand every revelation of Him in our hearts and minds, that we will know that He is there. No, instead of that, He is here!

Even Christ Himself is not the Word of God in the most profound sense to a man until He is the Revelation of God to the man. Until the Spirit, that is, the meaning of the Word has come to him. Until His speech is unlike the sound of thunder, but as the sound of words. For a Word is more than an utterance. It is a communication to be understood. No word is entirely a Word of God until it is a Word to the person who recognizes it as God's. This is the reason it was spoken. The words of God are as the sands and stars. They cannot be numbered, but the end of each and every one of them is a Revelation of God!

Nor can a man know that they are the words of God to him, except as a revelation in him. It is to him that it will be in him, but he cannot know that it was to him until it is in him. The Father must be God in the man before he can see that He is God!

If by the will of God, that is the truth in Him. We live that life will be ten times more when His will has become His word to us. When we receive it, His will has become our will, and by it, we will live in God. The Word of God, once understood, means living by the faith of the revelation of God, not by our feelings about Him. God is the Truth itself, understood by what proceeds out of His mouth. We must live by this Truth. The absence of emotions is not the end of life. We live because God is true, and we know that we live because God is Truth. We live, therefore, by the vision and Word of God. The Word we have received when all is dark, and there is no vision at all.

Trying God (Trust)

We now come to the second temptation. Then Satan said, "If God is to be trusted, try Him, and here is the scripture for it, 'He shall give His angels charge concerning you; not a stone shall hurt you.' Take Him at His word. Throw yourself off and prove to us you are the Son of God."

So, Jesus responds with a scripture of His own. Jesus is not arguing scripture with Satan but giving him the reason for His stand. **Satan comes quoting scripture as an authority to be obeyed. Jesus quotes it as the truth of His being.**

If we examine the temptation, we will find that Jesus' answer is, in principle, the same as before. That is, to Jesus, Life is doing the will of His Father! The temptation was to show the powers of this world that He was the Son of God and that the universe and its elements were subject to Him. By this display, He could stop the raging of the heathens and the people's empty imaginations. It would be to show them the truth. But He was already the Son of God! His response, however, was, "What is the will of the Father?" Testing His Father was not the divine way of convincing the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment.

His response sheds light upon His words, "*If you have faith and never doubt... if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea;' it will be done.*" Good people have tempted God upon the strength of this statement, just as Satan tried to tempt Jesus here from the Psalms. Testing God as a way to faith fails everyone in time. **Faith is that when a man knows the Lord's will, he goes and does it! Or, not knowing it, stands and waits. A trust as content in ignorance as it is in knowledge. Because God's will is neither found in pressing into an unknown future nor careless with the understanding that opens**

the path to action, its most noble exercise is acting with an uncertainty of the result. Even when the way is uncertain or when the road seems clear. A man can be mistaken in the latter, and his works can burn, but the very fire will save him. Nothing delivers a man more than the burning of his works in the refiner's fire except the doing of the work that sustains in the same fire!

But to put our questions to God in any other way than, "*What will you have me to do?*" would be an attempt to pressure Him to answer or to hasten His work. This pressure was probably the sin of Judas. It is similar in the presumption of making stone into bread. It is either the forcing of God to act where He created no need or make a situation where He looks unfaithful if He does not act. This person removes themselves from God's path instead of operating from the divine will within. He challenges God to see what He will do. When our first response is always, "What does God want me to do? Not, "What will God do if I do " ____"?

To tempt God in such a way is nothing but spiritual pride, the pride that assigns the tenderness and love of God not to a man's being or need, but some distinguishing excellence found in the individual himself. This excellence that would cause the Father to love him more than others. This is not the relationship the Son had with His Father! **Mountain moving faith is based only on the confidence that comes from seeking God's will and nothing else. Jesus' faith would rather suffer the unbelief of His creation than to act outside the will of His Father.**

Tempting God is not the path to the Father's will. It is not the way the Father works as our gradual relationship develops in life and history. Not the way to generate free and loving children of the Father. Everything the Father does is in harmony with His character and nature. Jesus, as the Son of Man, is Man's history and my history. Will our new life begin with an exception? With an exception for Him? Yet, it may have been a temptation for Him, who longed to free His creation.

God's Deliverance (Root not Fruit)

Let's look at the third temptation. The first was to help Himself in His moment of need; the second was to try and assert the Father where He did not need to be; the third was to deliver His brothers another way.

To deliver them, that is, after the ways of men from the outside still. In fact, the whole of the Temptations is the contest between the seen and the unseen. That is, of the outer and inner, of the possible and actual, and the show instead of reality. Like the others, the temptation lay in the putting of something else over doing the will of His Father.

Would it be other than a temptation to think that He could grab the reins of government, leap into the seat of power, and ride out conquering and to conquer? "Behold your King!"

I am not asking whether this reality was possible without the worship of Satan. I will ask, however, to know better and not to do it. Is this not a serving of Satan? Whether to lead men on in the name of God towards something less when the end is not the best. Is it not the serving of Satan to appeal to their pride in making them conquer nations instead of their own evils? In short, whether to desert the mission of God, the reality that freedom could come in any other way, and of who sent Him to be a man, a true man, the one man among them, that His Life would become their Life. Their life would be free. Free in prison, on a cross, or on a throne. Free to worship the Father in Spirit and Truth. Free in nothing other

than in love. The offering of themselves in obedience and service to God in harmony with His will. Anything else would have been to fall down and worship Satan! Not all the sovereignty, the power of God, as theologians call it, delegated to the Son, and done in the wisdom of the Spirit, could have brought the kingdom of heaven to even one corner of the universe. Nothing but the obedience of the Son, obedience unto death. That is the absolute doing of the Father's will because it was the Truth that could redeem the prisoners, the widows, and the orphans. But it would save them by redeeming the conquest-driven conqueror, the jailer, the unjust judge, and the devouring Pharisee himself with his insatiable moth-eaten heart.

The world will be free because Love is more powerful than death! Therefore, should violence and wrong, hypocrisy, and religion play out their weary hands? He would not prune the spreading branches but lay an ax to the root of the tree! God will take His time, for death will be destroyed and thrown into the lake of fire. It will take time, but the Father has enough time to spare. It will take courage, strength, self-denial, and endurance. It will cost pain, agony, and torture in body and mind, yes. But this, Jesus, was ready to bear!

It would include the seeing of many hopeless situations. Jesus would see tears He could not wipe. He would bear sighs that He could not change into laughter, dead that could not be raised, and weeping that could not be comforted. Jesus would look upon His brothers and sisters as children crying over their broken toys that He could not fix, and He would go to His grave without them knowing He has set everything right! His work would be one with the completion of His Father's Creation and Will.

God's Will

All of our disappointments, sorrows, and fears He could bear, He did! **The Father's will would be done. Humanity will be free, not merely as we would think of ourselves as free, but as God thinks of man's freedom. The divine heart is free in creation. We will see God's deliverance face-to-face. We will mature into the likeness of God's thoughts for us and not after our own. The Father's will, in its vastness, beauty, and perfection, will be done.**

"Get out of here, Satan," Jesus told him. "For the Scriptures say, You must worship the Lord your God and serve only him.... Then the devil went away, and angels came and took care of Jesus." Then Satan would come once more. When? In His last moments, in agony, when the Lord cries out, "Why hast thou forsaken me?" Even in His last temptation, the enemy has failed. Failed forever! For when He seemed to feel forsaken, His final cry was still, "My God! My God!"

CLIFFNOTES WITH ORIGINAL MACDONALD QUOTES

Revelation

The story bears upon it no sign of human invention. With this in view, I ask you to think how much God must know of which we know nothing. Think of his understanding, imagination, heart, in which lay the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Must he not have known, felt, imagined, rejoiced in things that

would not be told in human words, could not be understood by human hearts? Was he not always bringing forth out of the light inaccessible? Was not his very human form a veil hung over the face of the truth that, even in part by dimming the effulgence of the glory, it might reveal? What could be conveyed must be thus conveyed: an infinite More must lie behind. Would what he said to God on the mountain-tops, in the dim twilight or the gray dawn, never be such that his disciples could have understood it no more than the people, when the voice of God spoke to him from heaven, could distinguish that voice from the inarticulate thunderings of the element?

Parables

That a visible demon came to our Lord and, himself the prince of worldly wisdom, thought, by quoting Scripture after the manner of the priests, to persuade a good man to tempt God; thought, by the promise of power, to prevail upon him to cast aside every claim he had upon the human race, in falling down and worshipping one whom he knew to be the adversary of Truth, of Humanity, of God?

Temptations

I do not believe that the Son of God could be tempted with evil, but I do believe that he could be tempted with good—to yield to which temptation would have been evil in him—ruin to the universe.

The Lord could not have felt tempted to take vengeance upon his enemies, but he might have felt tempted to destroy the wicked from the face of the earth—to destroy them from the face of the earth, I say, not to destroy them forever. To that I do not think he could have felt tempted.

We shall see how the devil tempted him to evil, but not with evil.

Stones to Bread

Because such power was his, not to take care of himself, but to work the work of him that sent him. Such power was his not even to honor his Father save as his Father chose to be honored,

And in nothing was he to be beyond his brethren, save in faith. No refuge for him, any more than for them, save in the love and care of the Father. Other refuge, let it be miraculous power or what you will, would be but hell to him. God is refuge. God is life.

That God's will be done is all his care. That done, all will be right, and all right with him, whether he thinks about himself or not. For the Father does not forget the child who is so busy trusting in him, that he cares not even to pray for himself.

What I must say is this: that, by the Word of God, I do not understand The Bible. The Bible is a Word of God, the chief of his written words, because it tells us of The Word, the Christ.

Even Christ himself is not The Word of God in the deepest sense to a man, until he is this Revelation of God to the man—until the Spirit that is the meaning in the Word has come to him—until the speech is not a sound as of thunder, but the voice of words; for a word is more than an utterance—it is a sound to be understood. No word, I say, is fully a Word of God until it is a Word to man, until the man therein

recognizes God. This is that for which the word is spoken. The words of God are as the sands and the stars—they cannot be numbered; but the end of all and each is this—to reveal God.

Trying God

Satan quotes Scripture as a verbal authority; our Lord meets him with a Scripture by the truth in which he regulates his conduct.

Faith is that which, knowing the Lord's will, goes and does it; or, not knowing it, stands and waits, content in ignorance as in knowledge, because God wills; neither pressing into the hidden future, nor careless of the knowledge which opens the path of action. It is its noblest exercise to act with uncertainty of the result.

To tempt a parent after the flesh in such a manner would be impertinence: to tempt God so is the same vice in its highest form—a natural result of that condition of mind which is worse than all the so-called cardinal sins, namely, spiritual pride, which attributes the tenderness and love of God not to man's being and man's need, but to some distinguishing excellence in the individual himself, which causes the Father to love him better than his fellows.

The faith which will remove mountains is that confidence in God which comes from seeking nothing but his will. A man who was thus faithful would die of hunger sooner than say to the stone, Be bread; would meet the scoffs of the unbelieving without reply and with apparent defeat, sooner than say to the mountain, Be thou cast into the sea, even if he knew that it would be torn from its foundations at the word, except he knew first that God would have it so.

God's Deliverance

It was not the way of the Father's will. It would not fall in with that gradual development of life and history by which the Father works, and which must be the way to breed free, God-loving wills. It would be violent, theatrical, therefore poor in nature and in result—not God-like in any way. Everything in God's doing comes harmoniously with and from all the rest. Son of Man, his history shall be a man's history, shall be The Man's history.

To deliver them, that is, after the fashion of men—from the outside still. Indeed, the whole Temptation may be regarded as the contest of the seen and the unseen, of the outer and inner, of the likely and the true, of the show and the reality. And as in the others, the evil in this last lay in that it was a temptation to save his brethren, instead of doing the Will of his Father.

Could it be other than a temptation to think that he might, if he would, lay a righteous grasp upon the reins of government, leap into the chariot of power, and ride forth conquering and to conquer?...
"Behold your King?"

That so they might be as free in prison or on the cross, as upon a hill-side or on a throne—whether, so deserting the truth, to give men over to the lie of believing other than spirit and truth to be the worship of the Father, other than love the fulfilling of the law, other than the offering of their best selves the service of God, other than obedient harmony with the primal love and truth and law, freedom.

The earth should be free because Love was stronger than Death.

God's Will

The disappointment and sorrow and fear he could, he would bear. The will of God should be done. Man should be free—not merely man as he thinks of himself, but man as God thinks of him. The divine idea shall be set free in the divine bosom; the man on earth shall see his angel face to face. He shall grow into the likeness of the divine thought, free not in his own fancy, but in absolute divine fact of being, as in God's idea. The great and beautiful and perfect will of God must be done.