

## QUESTION 8: “WAS JESUS REALLY TEMPTED BY SATAN IN THE WILDERNESS?” (Matthew 4:1-11)

6.30.19

### INTRODUCTION

[Ali-Frasier I, Madison Square Garden, March 8, 1971]

First time two undefeated fighters had met for world heavyweight championship

Both also previously won Olympic gold medals for the US.

Both ended over 80% of their fights by knockout

The event actually exceeded the hype, and the hype was so intense, the tickets so coveted, that not even as big a celebrity as Frank Sinatra could finagle ringside tickets. To be close to the action, he actually hired himself out as a photographer for Life magazine so that he could be allowed to be as close to the action as possible.

The idea of the two biggest guys on the block going after each other. Is that how it was back in the Judean wilderness, when Jesus Christ met Satan? Let's look at that event.

### TEXT (Matthew 4:1-11)

*Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” Then the devil took him to the holy city (Jerusalem) 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.’” Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’” Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.*

### ANALYSIS

One of the most comforting verses of Scripture is right at the end of Paul's letter to the church in Rome, where he says: *For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope — Paul, Romans 15:4.* In other words, we get learning for our lives from the lives of the past — the Biblical wins and losses that we read in both the OT and NT. That is a huge part of what is behind the temptation of Christ in the wilderness. We are provided the details we are in Matthew (and also in Luke) so that, when temptation comes our way, we have a model in how to fight it.

But first let's look at the combatants. Is this a fair fight? Was Jesus really tempted? The answer to both of those questions is an undeniable YES — and here's why.

If Satan is trying to overpower the one true God with temptation, he's dead before he hits the ground. That would be a complete “no-contest.” Why? Because the first thing we need to keep in mind is the answer to the questions: Are God and Satan co-equals? Is Satan equally powerful, equally able? There are three answers to those questions: (1) No, (2) not true, and (3) Baloney! God and Satan are NOT equals; they are not 1A and 1B in the universe power structure. There is

God — end of story. Satan may be able to toy with us but, regarding God (and no pun intended), he hasn't got a prayer. God is the one and only, infinite, everlasting, always-has-been, always-will-be. Satan is finite. He is a created being. Where God is limitless, Satan is limited. The only way this confrontation in the wilderness means anything is if Satan is taking on Jesus in Christ's role as fully human. I will never be God, but I will always be fully human. Fully human is the only way there is anything in this battle for me. So now that that's established, let's remember one other thing: Whenever we were tested in school, the test was not for the benefit of the teacher. It was for the benefit of the student. So let's see what our Teacher has given for our benefit in his test.

**Context:** Now this battle is happening almost immediately after Christ's baptism by John the Baptist. Matthew tells us what happened: *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. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased"* — *Matthew 3:16-17*. Jesus received an incredibly personal word of affirmation from his Father that told him:

- 1) God is proud to identify Jesus as his Son.
- 2) God is quick to declare his affection for his Son.
- 3) God is delighted to declare his pleasure with his Son.

After leaving the delights of heaven for earth, emptying himself of all that was rightfully his, and to leave his Father's side to live as a servant to men, to have his Father's affirmation of love and relationship at that moment, not to mention God's testimony of precisely who Jesus was, must have been incredible for him.

But before Christ's ministry can begin, he must endure a "final exam" of testing from his most challenging adversary. In this Jesus completely identifies with us. Adam and Eve, God's created people, in the midst of the greatest "heaven on earth" paradise in history, failed their exam — resulting in complete expulsion from the Garden of Eden and sin coming into the world. Centuries later, the Israelites, God's chosen people, failed their exam regarding trusting God as they were at the cusp of entering the Promised Land — resulting in 40 years of wandering in a barren, unforgiving wilderness until that unfaithful, unbelieving generation had completely died away. How would Jesus do with his testing? And just to ensure that we understand how important this all was to Christ's ministry, Matthew tells us that the Spirit of God led Jesus out into the wilderness. Rather than trying to avoid Satan, God sends Jesus after him.

And God knew, and Jesus knew, and we need to know, that behind every one of Satan's temptations is always a trick. The temptation may be the surface moment of difficulty, but it is the trick behind the temptation, what Satan is really trying to accomplish, that is his most dangerous weapon. For instance, a moment may tempt me to get angry at somebody. But behind getting angry is the trick of getting me comfortable relying on myself, maybe thinking more of myself than I should, not to mention the destruction that can be caused by my thinking my feelings are more important than somebody else's. **BOTTOM LINE:** Satan is always going after something more than our momentary "face-plant." So — bell please:

**Round 1: "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread" — Satan, Matthew 4:3b.** Now, in the Greek context of these verses, Satan is not doubting in any way that Jesus is God's Son. The idea that Satan is presenting is: "Since you are the Son of God." But also notice what Matthew tells us just as this confrontation begins: *After fasting forty days and forty nights,*

*he (Jesus) was hungry* — *Matthew 4:2*. That’s just under six weeks without food. Obviously, at least from a human position, Jesus would be very weak. Now Jesus has not sinned by being without food, but Satan wants to make it look like God has sinned — abandoning Jesus to this state of near-starvation. Doesn’t look like God can be trusted to take care of him, so Jesus better use his own power to take care of him. But while Jesus may have been terribly weak physically, he was unbeatable spiritually. He didn’t just spend those 40 days studying geology or going on hikes, maybe even doing a little rock-climbing just to stay in shape. He was fasting. He was getting himself into top spiritual shape for the coming showdown by devoting all his time to prayer, to incredibly intimate fellowship with his Father. He would be ready when Satan came calling.

So, back to the temptation. What’s the trick behind the temptation? Using Jesus’ powers outside the will of God to show his lack of trust in the love and power of God. Jesus lived to please his Father; giving in to this temptation would have denied that desire because Jesus would have been driven by his desires instead of the Father’s. And specifically, Jesus answers this temptation by quoting a verse from Deuteronomy 8: ***“[M]an does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God”*** — *Moses, Deuteronomy 8:3b*. Jesus makes the point here that feeding the spiritual person is far more important to God than feeding the physical person. The fact is, when we put our physical needs ahead of our spiritual needs, we sin. When we allow circumstances to dictate our actions instead of letting God rule in ALL circumstances, we sin. God often uses the ordinary things of our lives (like eating and drinking) to test our faith in his ability to provide for us far beyond what we think might be possible.

Notice also how Jesus counters Satan’s attack: He uses God’s word. The psalmist famously wrote: ***I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you*** — *Psalm 119:11*. Having God’s word in our hearts keeps us centered in our faith because it keeps us in the middle of God’s will. Remember that God’s word is God’s will. Jesus knew that God’s word most clearly reflected God’s will for how we are to live — and how we can push back against Satan’s efforts. Paul in writing to the Ephesian church told them that the word of God is a means by which we can take the offensive against Satan. For all the “armor of God” that he describes, ***the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God*** — *Paul, Ephesians 6:17b*, is the only offensive, attacking piece in our arsenal. Why? It’s the only attacking piece we need. It’s that powerful. And that brings us to, bell please:

**Round 2:** *Then the devil took [Jesus] to the holy city (Jerusalem) and had him stand on the highest point of the temple (thought to be somewhere around 450-500 feet above the ground). “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’”* — *Satan speaking, Matthew 4:5-6 (quoting Psalm 91:11-12)*. Ain’t he clever? Jesus responded to his first temptation by quoting Scripture, so Satan figures he’ll take a crack at that strategy, too, basically saying: “OK, if you’re going to believe in everything God says, how about when he said this,” and then goes on with his quote. Problem: Satan didn’t quote the Psalms passage accurately — what a shock! He left out the verses immediately preceding his quotation, which states: ***If you say, “The Lord is my refuge,” and you make the Most High your dwelling, no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent*** — *Psalm 91:9-10*. Will God protect us? Absolutely — but God keeps his promises only when we keep his ways — and that starts by surrendering our ways to him, to making the

Most High our one and only dwelling. He is not just hanging out waiting for somebody to say: “Um, God, I’m in trouble here, so any time you like, I’m ready for you to rescue me.”

While the temptation is whether or not God’s word (and his promises) can be trusted, Satan has thrown an interesting trick into the mix: He misquotes Scripture. That’s one of his best things. He can twist the Scriptures to have it appear to say something that was never intended, thus tricking people to think they have Biblical support for their unbiblical positions [EXAMPLE: “God is love”]. Make sure that God’s word contains God’s word. Make sure you know what the Bible is saying before you “throw yourself off the temple” of whatever situation you’re in and find yourself only proving that, wow, the “ground” is really hard!

Jesus’ response is perfect, and again taken from the OT Scriptures: **“Do not put the Lord your God to the test” — Moses, Deuteronomy 6:16.** The test? Daring God to do something, like rescuing us when we are in trouble, when we are outside his will. Deliberate disobedience results in very few rescues. Which brings us to the last temptation, bell please:

**Round 3: Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me” — Matthew 4:8-9.** Remember how we said at the beginning that Satan is finite? This temptation is proof that certainly his brains are finite. How in the world could he think that the kingdoms of this world would be even a fleeting desire compared to the wonders of heaven that Jesus had left just a few short years ago? What a meat head! And, on top of that, the kingdoms of the world had already been promised to the Son — by the Father: **“Ask me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession” — God speaking, Psalm 2:8.**

But the trick in this temptation is incredibly wicked: Satan, knowing Scripture, knows what Jesus has been sent to do: Be an atoning, redeeming sacrifice for the sins of the entire world — and the kingdom that will embrace those redeemed will be a spiritual kingdom, but established at a horrific physical price. Essentially Satan is saying: “Jesus, son, there is an easier way to accomplish gaining a kingdom than being butchered in some grotesque, bloody sacrifice. I’ll tell you what: I’ll make it easier for you. You bow down to me, just this once, just a little worship, no big thing, and I’ll get you the kingdom you deserve. What do you say?” Of course, Satan has always wanted to be worshiped, because Satan has always wanted to be God.

This is what Jesus says: **“Away from me, Satan! For it is written (again quoting from Deuteronomy): ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only’” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 4:10 (quoting Deuteronomy 6:13).** Winner by knockout! Jesus had made the final, best, most important points: First, there are no shortcuts to the will of God; often the center of his will can be an incredibly difficult place to be, and second, whatever we worship is the god we serve. Jesus worshiped God through his obedience and his devoted service to him. A.W. Tozer said it this way in his book *The Knowledge Of The Holy*: “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.” And Jesus clearly tells Satan — and us — what he thinks of God: He is completely worthy of worship, he is completely worthy of service, and he is completely worthy of being our singular one-and-only. We need not bring worship or service to anyone else because, when it comes to worship and service, and life, there is nobody else.

But now while Satan is defeated, he ain’t going anywhere. In fact, it is Luke’s closing of this particular episode in the life of Christ that sounds a somewhat ominous tone: ***When the devil had***

*finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time — Luke 4:13.* He was going to remain in the vicinity of Jesus’ ministry, continuing to look for opportunities to take him down. We will see Satan in Peter’s trying to change Jesus’ mind about going to Jerusalem for the suffering that Christ knew was ordained for him (Matthew 16) and, following the feeding of the 5,000, in the people *intend[ing] to come and make [Jesus] king by force — John 6:15a.* The temptation? There’s an easier way to get a kingdom. The trick: The easy way would have destroyed any possibility for our salvation.

## APPLICATION

Now there are very few areas of endeavor in which people engage in “scouting reports” more than in sports. Teams are always looking for insights into how another team plays the game. Managers, coaches and players all want to be aware of trends an opponent may use, and the best ways to defeat those trends, all in the hope of coming out on top. So what can we learn about Satan’s “playback” in how he went after Christ? In other words, what is Satan really good at? There are a few things we can be aware of:

First, Jesus was not led into the wilderness to show God what he is. He was led into the wilderness to show everybody in the history of the planet what he is. And what is that? Jesus Christ is a conqueror. He triumphed over Satan and, because of that victory, we can know victory over Satan as well. Jesus would continue to defeat Satan at every turn, culminating in his ultimate victory over Satan at the cross. But notice that Satan continued to try. And that is the first thing: Satan is very, very good at moving past his defeats. Satan is tenacious! He will continue to try to get us to fall. Just because we experience victory in one temptation does not mean that another test is not on the way. Satan doesn’t give up; in fact, our moment of victory may actually make him try harder.

Second thing that Satan does really well: Satan attacks our weakest points — and we most assuredly have some. Whether it is physical fatigue or stress or bumpy moments in family relationships or whatever, Satan is the undisputed king of “kicking us when we’re down.” He will do all he can to get us when we are the most vulnerable. That’s one reason why Jesus told his disciples: *“[A]part from me you can do nothing” — Jesus Christ, John 15:5b.* We are helpless without him — including fighting with Satan. The key: Embrace that helplessness. Let’s just figure that we’re always helpless. We will always need Christ for every moment of every day, no matter what we’re doing. Relying on Christ completely in that way will bring you to the place that the apostle Paul found: *When I am weak, I am strong — Paul, II Corinthians 12:10b.* And why is that? As Jesus told him: *“[M]y power is made perfect in [your] weakness” — Jesus Christ, II Corinthians 12:9a.* Don’t try and tangle with Satan on your own. You’ll fail. Why would anybody want that?

Third, the thing that maybe Satan does best, with all his vast arsenal of tricks, is lie. He got Adam and Eve to buy a lie at the very beginning of time, and he’s continued right on down to this very moment. When you find something that works, you stick with it, right? And for Satan, lying has continued to work. Jesus said it best: *“[The devil] was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies” — Jesus Christ, John 8:44.* That’s why it is so incredibly important to, as you live your life in Christ, don’t forget to “bring your sword” — your sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. You can never know God’s word too well. You can never memorize too much. You can never spend too much time reading it and

meditating on it. Billy Graham once said that, every time he opened the pages of his Bible, he realized how little he knew. But it has been given as our weapon with which to attack and advance against all that Satan tries to do. There is no substitute for knowing, and using, the word of God. Nothing is more contrary, nothing will stand out more, against the purity and light of God's word than Satan's lies.

And one of his best lies: His way is better because his way is easier. Hey Jesus, it's easier to eat than go hungry. Hey Jesus, it's easier to get your kingdom through me than through the cross. Hey Christian, it's easier to just move forward than apologize for a mistake or a hurt. Hey Christian, it's easier to just move forward than to rebuild a relationship. Hey Christian, it's easier to spin a lie than to tell the truth. Hey Christian, it's easier to think my way is the best than to look for the good of the body. No; God's ways are best. His path may be momentarily the valley of the shadow of death, but his eternity in his presence makes every moment here more than worthwhile. Easier is not better. Satan's way is not better — never has been, never will be.

## **CONCLUSION**

**BOTTOM LINE:** Satan opposes in every fiber of his being the person, plans and purposes of God. He will do anything he can to cause disruption, division and disaster for the people of God and the body of believers. Just look at his history: God said, "Don't eat the fruit" to Adam and Eve; Satan said, "Go ahead; he's just holding out on you." God said to the Israelites, "Go ahead into the Promised Land; I'll be with you so you can do this." Satan said, "Don't go; the people are too big and too fierce. You can't do this."

At the end of the day, we have something to claim that is more valuable than anything Satan will ever know: God's victory through Jesus Christ. The apostle John said it this way: ***[T]he one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world — I John 4:4b.*** Did you hear that? Translation: The greatest power in the world — powerful enough to purchase salvation, powerful enough to forgive, powerful enough to hold onto us no matter what comes our way, is in us in the person, and reality, of Jesus Christ — and he'll never let us go. The moment Jesus died on that cross, Satan's career came to an end. His time is over. When our lives are bundled into Christ, we claim a life that will go on forever — and a power that will never end.

Do you know that life? Let's pray!