

When Three Temptations are One:
The Wilderness Temptations as an Examination of Jesus' Relationship to Power

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In the wilderness, Jesus faced three temptations and triumphed. In *Brothers Karamazov*, through the Grand Inquisitor, Dostoevsky claimed the Church has faced these temptations and soundly failed.¹ Many commentators see the temptations as individual sins, such as gluttony or greed. Dostoevsky perceives something different: All three temptations are about power. Jesus refused to use power to serve himself or advance his cause. How might the Church—and even world history—be different if Christians joined Jesus in resisting this temptation? In this paper, I will exegete the temptation passage from Matthew, demonstrating how each temptation addresses the use of power and how Jesus’ responses mark out a path defined by trust in God and other-centered, co-suffering love.

All three synoptic Gospels include the wilderness temptation. Mark refers to it in passing,² while Matthew and Luke paint the scene in detail with only minor differences.³ Its inclusion in all three Synoptics indicate this story mattered a great deal to the Early Church. Those first Christians were intimately familiar with Hebrew Scripture.⁴ They would have nodded knowingly as Jesus crossed the river and entered the wilderness, mirroring the Exodus. At his baptism, Jesus’ identity was affirmed as the beloved son. The Exodus story begins with a similar declaration of Israel’s sonship.⁵ The audience might have recalled Hosea’s declaration, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”⁶ If they didn’t, Matthew

¹ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov* (Random House Publishing Group, 2003), 333–52.

² Mark 1:12-13.

³ Matthew 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-12.

⁴ Many had been raised Jewish, and even for those from Gentile background, the only “Bible” available was the Hebrew Scriptures. This was true for Jesus, for all the disciples, and for Christianity for at least a full generation, and likely longer.

⁵ “Thus says the Lord: Israel is my firstborn son.” Exodus 4:22 (NRSV, all subsequent quoted citations are from this version).

⁶ Hosea 11:1.

reminded them two chapters prior, drawing a link between Hosea's prophecy and Jesus' childhood escape to Egypt and subsequent return.⁷

In their ears, well-tuned to the music of Hebrew scripture, this prophetic bass note would associate Jesus with Israel, the Exodus, and the hoped-for Messiah. Jesus' forty days in the wilderness echoed a repeating theme: Noah's forty days on the ark, Moses forty years in the wilderness, and then forty days on Mt. Sinai, the Israelites' forty years of wandering, and even Elijah's forty days of fasting. The original audience certainly would understand that, like their ancestors, Jesus was entering a trial prior to a great act of salvation.

Additionally, all three Gospels situate this episode in the same narrative sequence. The temptation stands between Jesus' baptism and ministry like a gateway, an intersection of possibilities. "If you are the son of God..." the tempter repeats twice. Before anything else, this is a challenge to Jesus' identity. If Jesus is the Son of God, the promised Messiah, what ways and means will he choose? What kind of king would he be?

Modern and ancient commentators alike have suggested each temptation correlates to some specific sin. Ambrose of Milan, for instance, proposed appetite, boasting, and ambition.⁸ Other commentators suggest that Jesus' responses model how individuals can overcome temptation.⁹ Readings like these obscure something vastly more important. Origin points the way. This was a

⁷ Matthew 2:15.

⁸ St Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels, Collected Out of the Works of the Fathers, Volume III Part 1, Gospel of St. Luke* (Cosimo, Inc., 2013), 145.

⁹ One example of this sort of pastoral commentary proposes that individuals can resist temptation by memorizing scripture, meditating on scripture, and quoting scripture out loud. This is an odd reading to which Shakespeare might apply his famous quip, "The devil can quote Scripture for his purpose; an evil soul producing holy witness." Stiles, Wayne, "How to Resist Temptation Like Jesus," *Wayne Stiles*, August 29, 2016, <https://waynestiles.com/how-to-resist-temptation-like-jesus/>.

pivotal battle for a kingdom. “Two kings are earnestly contending for a kingdom; The king of sin who reigns over sinners...The king of righteousness who rules the righteous...”¹⁰ This battle, however, is not about strength. It is a revelation of the character of the king.

The scene begins perhaps unexpectedly. “Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit...”¹¹ God intends Jesus to face this trial.¹² Ambrose commented, “He was led therefore into the wilderness, to the intent that He might provoke the devil, for if the one had not contended, the other it seems had not conquered.”¹³ Matthew’s Gospel identifies the tempter as διάβολος, the slanderer or the accuser.¹⁴ Once, in 4:3, Matthew uses πειράζω, the one who tests or examines.¹⁵ Calling the devil an *examiner* primes the hearer to notice that what follows is more than a temptation to wickedness. It is an examination of how Jesus sees himself and his mission.

Then, the first temptation: “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.”¹⁶ “Famished,” Jesus needed sustenance.¹⁷ It is not gluttony for a starving person to eat, nor a moral temptation for the hungry to desire food. Instead, this first test would reveal what prerogatives Jesus thought came with his identity. This was a temptation to take up Divine power to meet his own needs. If Jesus were God’s son, he would either have the ability to transmute worthless stones to bread, or he might be so in union with God that asking for a miracle he would receive it.

¹⁰ Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*, 148.

¹¹ Matthew 4:1.

¹² Audrey West, “Commentary on Matthew 4:1-11,” *Working Preacher from Luther Seminary* (blog), 2008, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/first-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-matthew-41-11-2>.

¹³ Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels, Collected out of the Works of the Fathers: St. Luke.*, ed. J.H. Newman, vol. 3 (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1843), chap. 4:1-4.

¹⁴ G. Abbot-Smith, *Abbott-Smith’s Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Charles Scribner & Sons, 1923), s.v. “διάβολος.”

¹⁵ G. Abbot-Smith, *Abbott-Smith’s Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Charles Scribner & Sons, 1923), s.v. πειράζω.”

¹⁶ Matthew 4:3.

¹⁷ Matthew 4:2.

Jesus' responds quoting Deuteronomy 8:3. "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."¹⁸ This seems to suggest that God's word (perhaps in the form of scripture) can sustain life. Yet Deuteronomy 8 refers to actual people literally starving in the desert. In context, the "word from the mouth of the Lord" is God's declaration to provide, in this case, supplying manna to meet physical hunger. Jesus—a hungry person in the wilderness—cited scripture to name his intention to trust God's provision for his literal hunger.

By citing this scripture, Jesus also steps away from any special privilege that might be his as the Son of God. It is a man or human—*ἄνθρωπος*—who cannot create their own food,¹⁹ and Jesus stands with them.²⁰ Jesus will miraculously provide food in the wilderness, but not now, and not for himself. Mennonite writer, Bert Newton, frames it this way: "When Jesus does perform a food miracle in the desert, he does so as an act of sharing, producing an abundance of food for the people."²¹

Next, the tempter sweeps Jesus away to the top of the temple.²² "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down..."²³ The tempter attempts persuasion, citing Psalms 91, which promises comprehensive protection to those who have made God their "refuge and fortress."²⁴ Certainly, if this promise extended to the devout among Israel, it would also apply to the Messiah. Why not test this

¹⁸ Matthew 4:4.

¹⁹ The NRSV translates *ἄνθρωπος* in the phrase quoted as "one," but the more familiar rendering in the NIV and KJV is "Man shall not live on bread alone." Deuteronomy 8:3 in the LXX uses the same Greek word and form.

²⁰ I'm grateful to Rev. Dr. Judith Jones for this insight. Judith Jones PhD, "Commentary on Matthew 4:1-11," *Working Preacher from Luther Seminary* (blog), 2014, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/first-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-matthew-41-11-4>.

²¹ Bert Newton, "The Temptations of Jesus: Bread, Power and Security," *PeaceSigns* (blog), 2012, <https://pjsnpeacesigns.wordpress.com/2012/12/28/the-temptations-of-jesus-bread-power-and-security/>.

²² One of the few differences between Matthew and Luke's telling is that the last two temptations are reversed. This paper follows Matthew's order.

²³ Matthew 4:5.

²⁴ Psalms 91:1-2, 11-12.

promise? Additionally, if Jesus is the Messiah, something must convince others to join his cause. The tempter provides an opportunity. At the temple, Jesus could demonstrate his identity in a spectacular way where the important and influential could see. As with the first test, this is a temptation to presumption and an invitation to leverage the privilege of his identity. Now, the tempter suggests using a miraculous demonstration to shortcut the necessary process of convincing others to follow.

Jesus responds, quoting Deuteronomy 6. “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”²⁵ A facile reading assumes Jesus and the scripture cited forbid testing God. Yet, Malachi 3:10 instructs Israel to test God’s provision. The Psalmist urges seekers to “taste and see” God’s goodness—more poetic, but no less a test.²⁶ Gideon famously tested God with a favorable response.²⁷ Reading further in Deuteronomy 6 reveals that Jesus resists testing God in a certain way. “Do not put the Lord your God to the test, *as you tested him at Massah.*”²⁸ Massah is where Israel complained that God was letting them die of hunger and thirst in the desert when in Egypt—as slaves—they had plenty.²⁹ Ron Julian points out that this complaint ignores a sequence of interventions that should have shown beyond question God’s presence and provision. Instead, the people imagined themselves abandoned because God wasn’t immediately relieving their discomfort.³⁰

²⁵ Deuteronomy 6:16.

²⁶ Psalm 34:8.

²⁷ Judges 6:36-40.

²⁸ Exodus 17:1-7.

²⁹ Continuing the echoed themes from the Exodus, Jesus was presently in the wilderness without water, like Israel had been at Massah. He stood in the liminal space between baptism and ministry, like Israel between the parting water and the promised land. Israel, in many ways, failed to embody the Shema through the wilderness wanderings and even upon entering the land. These three temptations provided Jesus the opportunity to demonstrate faithfulness to that same ancient prayer.

³⁰ Ron Julian, “Testing God,” *Gutenberg College* (blog), 2001, <https://gutenberg.edu/2001/02/testing-god/>.

If Jesus were to reveal himself in Jerusalem spectacularly, he could validate his identity and put his mission into high gear. By citing the events at Massah, Jesus rejected the temptation to force God's providence in a moment of difficulty, trusting instead what he already knew of God's character. John Chrysostom saw this example as instructive, preaching from Matthew 4:7, "we must overcome the devil, not by miracles, but by forbearance and long-suffering, and...we should do nothing at all for display and vainglory."³¹ Jesus would choose not to dazzle people into following. He would notably instruct those he healed to keep quiet³² and explicitly reject requests for validating miracles.³³ The tempter offered an opportunity for Jesus to demonstrate God's glory by "throwing himself down." Instead, Jesus set his face toward the cross, where God's glory would be seen when he was "lifted up."

With the final test, the tempter pointed toward Jesus' ultimate goal. If Jesus was to usher in a new kingdom, why not seize that power right now? From a high mountain, the tempter suggested he was able to give Jesus "all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor," in exchange for worship.³⁴ This is the test most obviously about power. Would Jesus take the crown of authority over the nations from Satan's hand?³⁵ One cannot ignore what this really means. Human governments most often achieve their glorious aims through violence or threat of violence. Why bother persuading people at all?

³¹ John Chrysostom, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Volume X: Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew*, ed. Philip Schadd, vol. Ten (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1888), sec. "Homily XIII."

³² Examples include Mark 1:43, 5:43, 7:33-36, 8:22-26.

³³ Examples include Mark 8:11-13 and Luke 23:6-17.

³⁴ Matthew 4:8.

³⁵ Among many early exegetes, the idea that Satan had the authority to make this offer was considered laughable. In Luke's telling Satan explicitly claims to have this authority, but the early exegetes considered this another of Satan's lies. Titus of Bostra: "[Satan] lied in two respects. For he neither had to give nor could he give that which he had not; he gains possession of nothing, but is an enemy reduced to fight." Ignatius of Antioch is even more direct: "Yea, thou even darest, most accursed one, to appropriate the works of God to thyself, and to declare that the dominion over these was delivered to thee." Irenaeus agrees: "he certainly did not speak truth, but a lie..." Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: St. Luke*, vol. 3, chap. 4:1-4.

Why not simply legislate God’s will and then cull the non-compliant? God’s coming kingdom could be established worldwide by the end of the week. Mission accomplished.

Unmasking who in this exchange truly holds authority, Jesus declares: “Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”³⁶ Again, Jesus cites Deuteronomy 6. This quote comes on the heels of the Shema,³⁷ the prayer that anchors Israel’s identity. God is God alone. For God’s people, true worship occurs when the fullness of human focus—heart, soul, and might—is aligned with God’s character. To use heart, soul, or might in violation of God’s way reveals a mixed commitment and possible idolatry. For Jesus to build God’s kingdom through the coercive power of human government would be idolatry of the highest sort, worship of Satan.

When Jesus arrives in Jerusalem to be crowned, instead of leading a conquering army, he would ride a donkey to receive his thorny crown and be raised up to his throne, the cross. All authority would come at and through the revelation of cross and resurrection.³⁸ John Chrysostom explained Jesus’ strategy: “Christ took [Satan] captive by meekness, He overcame him by humility.”³⁹ This humility, the Apostle Paul points out, included death on a cross.⁴⁰

Through the Grand Inquisitor, Dostoevsky identified the three temptations as ways of using power. “There are...three unique Forces upon earth, capable of conquering for ever by charming the conscience...these forces are: Miracle, Mystery, and Authority.”⁴¹ The Grand Inquisitor reveals to his

³⁶ Matthew 4:10.

³⁷ Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

³⁸ Jones, “Commentary on Matthew 4:1-11.”

³⁹ Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: St. Luke*, vol. 3, chap. 4:1-4.

⁴⁰ Philippians 2:8.

⁴¹ Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 340.

silent prisoner that the Church had long ago determined Jesus was negligent in setting these tools aside.⁴² The Grand Inquisitor represents a bleak view of the Church, yet there is truth in this vision.

Henri Nouwen wrote, “Every time we see a major crisis in the history of the church...we always see that a major cause of rupture is the power exercised by those who claim to be followers of the poor and powerless Jesus.”⁴³ This is the perennial temptation. Will Christians and Christian organizations take up power to protect themselves or further their mission in the world? Christians who fail this test often talk about protecting their church’s witness, advancing the Kingdom, or defending the Gospel. Like the Grand Inquisitor, they cannot reconcile their glorious vision of the Church’s work with other-centered, co-suffering love. They cannot see that the way of power is entirely different from the way of Jesus.

Benedict XVI points this out: In the temptation, Satan “proposes a different messianic path to [Jesus], far from God’s plan because it passes through power, success and domination rather than the total gift of himself on the Cross.”⁴⁴ Ignacio Ellacuria, a Salvadoran priest assassinated by his government, called this scene the “temptation of false messianism.”⁴⁵ Similarly, when the Church takes up these tools—even to further Godly aims—it fails the temptation and enters into false discipleship. To use means that Jesus rejected is to reject Jesus himself.

⁴² Dostoevsky, 342.

⁴³ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad Pub. Co., 2002), 44.

⁴⁴ Benedict XVI, “General Audience of 22 February 2012: Ash Wednesday | BENEDICT XVI,” Vatican.va, February 22, 2012, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20120222.html.

⁴⁵ Samuel J. Youngs, *The Way of the Kenotic Christ: The Christology of Jürgen Moltmann* (La Vergne: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2019), <https://www.scribd.com/book/438295686/The-Way-of-the-Kenotic-Christ-The-Christology-of-Jurgen-Moltmann>, citing Ignacio Ellacuría, *Freedom Made Flesh*, p.54–60.

Henri Nouwen is one who seems to have learned this lesson. At the height of his recognition and academic career, he chose to step away from the spotlight, becoming a chaplain for people who were not even capable of reading or understanding his eloquent words. Nouwen was inspired by so many before him who had followed the downward path of Jesus. He wrote: “The long, painful history of the Church is the history of people ever and again tempted to choose power over love, control over the cross, being a leader over being led. Those who resisted this temptation to the end and thereby give us hope are the true saints.”⁴⁶

A careful reading of Matthew’s temptation pericope shows us that the test in view is about power rather than particular sins. Jesus overcame this trial by refusing to use power and privilege to achieve his ends. This was not a quibble over acceptable ways and means but a declaration of the character of God and the nature of God’s work in the world. A great act of salvation would come out of this wilderness trial. Rooted in his trust of God’s character, Jesus chose the cruciform path. Those who adopt the way of power cannot fathom that other-centered, co-suffering love is anything but weakness. They are wrong.

Reverend Ben Cremer brilliantly makes the point:

“It is quite the fragile God who needs political power to preserve and enforce their will. It is quite the powerful God who partners with peasants, is born in poverty, washes feet, heals the sick, advocates for the oppressed, is unjustly killed and still changes the entire world.”⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*, 45.

⁴⁷ Rev. Ben Cremer, “It Is Quite the Fragile God Who Needs Political Power to Preserve and Enforce Their Will. It Is Quite the Powerful God Who Partners with Peasants, Is Born in Poverty, Washes Feet, Heals the Sick, Advocates for the Oppressed, Is Unjustly Killed and Still Changes the Entire World.,” Tweet, @Brcrermer (blog), December 8, 2021, <https://twitter.com/Brcrermer/status/1468581433182601216>.

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