

THE THREE TEMPTATIONS OF CHRIST

Matthew 4:2-11

By Raymond White

No one escapes temptation. Not even Jesus. And the devil made Jesus a special target because everything depended on Jesus. If Satan could make Jesus fall, the war for the souls of men would be over.

There is a great deal for us to learn about Satan and his thinking from the three temptations that he poses to Christ.

[1] FIRST TEMPTATION

Matthew 4:2 And when he had fasted forty days and forty night, he was afterwards an hungered. *:3* And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread. *:4* But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.

So, what's the big deal about bread? Is bread a sin? If I go to the kitchen and make a slice of toast, am I sinning? No, of course not. But just about everything that people do can be a sin, or not, depending on the circumstances. If I bring that toast into a living room full of kids, and I give it to one kid ignoring the others present, there is a high likelihood that a fight will erupt: "Hey, don't I get one?" Even my generosity, it seems, can at times be a sin. Intimacy in marriage is no sin, outside of marriage it is sin. Killing a chicken is or is not a sin depending on who owns the chicken. Bread is not a sin but can be if it stands between you and God. A beach house, a Mercedes Benz, an attractive person who stirs your chemistry; anything, including food, is not intrinsically sinful but has the potential — (and only the potential) — to stand between you and God, and become a sin. If you are morbidly obese so that those carbs you love are threatening your life, I'm sorry, but you've made food sinful. If you're in an important meeting where important decisions are being made and you *have* to duck out for lunch even though everyone else is staying to work, and you return to learn that all the important decisions were made without consulting you, that's pretty much like sin. And your pitiful excuse, "but I was hungry," won't impress anyone. They were too, but they stayed and took care of business. You didn't. Now they know, as far as you're concerned, food is more important. Yes, there are times and circumstances where innocent food can be sin. Satan is here manipulating food, very innocent food, to create a stumbling block for Jesus to trip over.

Jesus was in the desert to commune with God. Satan was there to prevent it, and he took advantage of Jesus's hunger. Forty days is a long fast and Satan rubbed his nose in it: "My goodness, Jesus. God has left you stuck out here in the desert, no food, starving to death, and you, the Son of God. My, my. God is not taking good care of you, is he? Well, you'd better take care of yourself. Take charge. Here, change these stones to bread. Use your wonderful abilities to serve yourself. Go on, you have a right to it. God's will doesn't apply here because God has abandoned you. He's not living up to his part of the deal so you'd better take care of yourself."

Another aspect of this temptation is his divine power. Jesus had full creative power before he was born (*John 17:5*), then surrendered it at birth (*Philippians 2:6*). At his baptism,

the Holy Spirit came and restored all of that to him bringing divine power to earth. That, in fact, is what precipitated Jesus going to the wilderness to *be* tempted. And now, Satan poses the logical question: To what end? How is he to use that power? For what purpose? To feed his own hunger or for something else?

Do you see the point of all this? The temptation is not Jesus's right to satisfy his hunger, but that his hunger was somehow incompatible with him being the son of God. In other words, if God is God, he would treat you better; therefore, you have a right to do what you want to do. That's the temptation. God has abandoned you so take charge and grab what you can.

Note too that God intentionally makes his point with something so trivial and innocent as bread. If the story had turned on a more glaring sin such as adultery or murder, the point would be entirely lost. The sinful "thing" is not the issue here. The issue is that anything at all — fill in the blank — that causes you to doubt God so that you set aside his interest to satisfy your own interest. That is sin. So God makes his point with innocent bread so that we won't fix on the bread.

The broader spin is this: "If God is God, there wouldn't be evil in the world, children wouldn't be starving in Africa, my brother wouldn't have died in that car wreck," or whatever. Our reason to disbelieve and disobey is here based on the idea that God has failed to live up to our expectation of what he ought to be, and therefore he can't be God. God has abandoned me therefore I am justified to abandon him and seek my own way.

Do you hear Satan whispering that in your ear? Do not believe it. It is a lie. God has never abandoned you. When people don't get what they want they feel deprived, abandoned, like God has forgotten them, and that is their excuse to take what they want even if it violates God's will. "But I have a right to it," that's the justification.

And what was Jesus's answer? "I'm here for God's word, not bread."

So, how should you handle temptation in such times when you are really convinced that God has abandoned you? C.S. Lewis wrote it best at the end of *Screwtape* letter XIII. In it, the senior devil, *Screwtape*, writes this to a junior devil, *Wormwood*: "Our cause (stealing souls) is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do our Enemy's will (God's will) looks round upon a universe from which every trace of him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys."

Amen to that. Have you ever felt completely abandoned? Have you ever really lost faith? Here's what you should do: obey anyway. And why not? Frankly, what have you got to lose? Your life? That's gone anyway. Remember this simple truth: It is not bread that keeps you alive, it is God.

One extra point: Who deserves the most credit? The strong believer who obeys, or the weak believer who obeys? Hum. The strong believer has greater motive, a high expectation of reward. But what of the weak believer who also lives right but has little expectation of reward? Does that obedience count for more? Just something to think about.

[2] SECOND TEMPTATION

Matthew 4:5 Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple. :6 And saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their

hands they shall bear him up... :7 Jesus saith unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.

Exaggerating an opponent's point into absurdity is a sly and effective debate tool. That's the ploy that Satan now uses against Jesus. Satan first tried to get Jesus to not trust God. Satan failed because Jesus knew that life is sustained not by bread but by God's provision. That set up the second temptation which is: "Oh, so you trust God do you? Well, if you really trust God, prove it. Go on. I dare you."

There is a difference between trusting God and tempting God. Trusting God is believe that has nothing to prove. Tempting God is unbelief demanding proof: "betcha can't."

Now, unbelief is not automatically bad. We all start there. Unbelief that wants to believe can be a good thing as in **Mark 9:24** *Lord, I believe. Help thou my unbelief.* But cynical unbelief which rhetorically demands "betcha' can't," that kind of unbelief God rejects. And then worse than unbelief is laziness pretending to be faith: "Why work? God will take care of me." And even worse still is indulgence: "We can't afford that car, but let's buy it anyway because God will take care of us." That's lust masquerading as faith. There are many ways to tempt God.

These two temptations of Christ show us two sides of the same coin. There are two principles here, polarized, but equally true. The first principle is trust God. The second principle is obey God. The first *assures* us as: **Romans 3:23** *being justified freely by his grace.* The second *commits* us as: **Philippians 2:12** *Work out your salvation with fear and trembling.* Do these two principles contradict? If they don't exactly contradict, they at least tense up against each other like two tectonic plates pushing against each other in opposite directions creating lots of friction and eventually earthquakes. Here we have two competing truths with lots of friction as they chaff against each other. And Satan works us from both sides. To Jesus he said, "If you won't do a miracle for yourself (make bread) than force God to do one for you (jump!)" To us, Satan says, "If you have grace, then you are free to sin." How do you argue against such reasoning? Simple. God said, "Don't!" That's exactly Jesus' argument: "Don't!"

If Satan can't keep you from the truth, he will try to push you past it. Be very careful when you are trying to understand two competing truths such as grace versus works. The temptation is to embrace one and reject the other. If there are two sides to the coin, remember that God gave you the coin. Jesus gave us the perfect example of this balancing act: trust God, yes, but don't tempt him.

[3] THIRD TEMPTATION

Matthew 4:8 *The devil...sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them :9 And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt...worship me.*

Finally Satan removes the mask and reveals his true intention, "What I really want is for you to worship me," and he offered the entire world.

In the first two temptations there was at least a pretense, a reasoning that made those temptations seem justifiable. Here there is none, and therefore it is the most dangerous of the three. Here Satan is saying, "Forget right and wrong. Just do the bad thing and I'll give you what you want." The first two temptations attempt to trick our conscience with reason. This temptation

sidesteps reason altogether and entices us to abandon our conscience, not because we deserve something but just because we want it.

Why did Satan think this might entice Jesus? Jesus already owned the world. He created it. So just what was the temptation? The world belonged to Jesus but Satan held it hostage. There is a legal adage: possession is $\frac{9}{10}$ of the law, which, while not literally true, illustrates that if you have something, the law assumes you own it until someone proves otherwise. And so we have a divine ownership dispute, a cosmic game of keep-away. Jesus is right to say, "Give it back, that's mine," but Satan insists, "Prove it. I have it, I'm keeping it, and I'll only give it back if you beg for it." But Jesus will not beg for it, will not worship Satan, instead, he will go to the cross and purchase it with his own blood thus establishing, as we would say, clear title so that Satan has to hand it over.

Satan knows something about us, that we will fight harder and compromise more to get back something that is rightfully ours to begin with. "Want it back? Worship me and it's yours." That's the appeal, to get back what's rightfully his without the struggle, without the cross.

There are always two ways to get what we want. Satan's way which is easy but wrong, and God's way which is hard but right. Which did Jesus choose?

***Matthew 4:10** Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.*

For Jesus, the right way led to the cross. Satan wasn't disputing ownership, he was just saying to Jesus, "Why go to the cross to win the world when I can give you the same thing without the pain?" Such a deal. There was just one problem: God forbade it. God will not permit us to worship anyone but God. The only way open to Jesus was the cross.

It is tempting to get what you want by easy means. Why work if you can steal? Why study if you can cheat? Why marry if immorality provides the same pleasures? Why tolerate people who get in your way if you can just kill them? Why do right which is hard and sometimes painful when doing wrong is easy and offers the same rewards? Why? Because it's what God wants from us, and because when you take what is not yours, guess what, it's still not yours. But what God gives you by your own diligent hard work and personal sacrifice is yours, for real and forever. Reject Satan's easy, cheating ways to get what you want and don't worry so much.

***Philippians 4:19** My God shall supply all your need.*

[4] THE END

So, how does this story end, this conflict between Jesus and Satan?

***Matthew 4:11** Then the devil leaveth him, and behold, angles came and ministered unto him.*

Just do what's right. The devil will leave and angels will take care of you. It doesn't mean that Satan is gone for good, he comes back (***Matthew 16:23, John 22:3***), but it does mean that Satan is gone for now.