

## Places of the Heart: Overcoming Temptation

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**Luke 4:1\*** Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led around by the Spirit in the wilderness **2** for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And He ate nothing during those days, and when they had ended, He became hungry. **3** And the devil said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.” **4** And Jesus answered him, “It is written, 'MAN SHALL NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE.'”

**Luke 4:5** And he led Him up and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. **6** And the devil said to Him, “I will give You all this domain and its glory; for it has been handed over to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. **7** Therefore if You worship before me, it shall all be Yours.” **8** Jesus answered him, “It is written, 'YOU SHALL WORSHIP THE LORD YOUR GOD AND SERVE HIM ONLY.'”

**Luke 4:9** And he led Him to Jerusalem and had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down from here;

**10** for it is written,  
'HE WILL COMMAND HIS ANGELS CONCERNING YOU TO GUARD YOU,'

**11** and,  
'ON *their* HANDS THEY WILL BEAR YOU UP,  
SO THAT YOU WILL NOT STRIKE YOUR FOOT AGAINST A STONE.'”

**12** And Jesus answered and said to him, “It is said, 'YOU SHALL NOT PUT THE LORD YOUR GOD TO THE TEST.'”

**Luke 4:13** When the devil had finished every temptation, he left Him until an opportune time.

I want to talk about temptation, and I think it's important to understand that temptation is really nothing more than opportunity. It's an opportunity to either draw closer to God or to turn away from God. We sometimes confuse temptation with sin, and we think that because we are tempted to sin, we must have already failed, that we must not be spiritual enough or holy enough. Yet if Jesus was tempted, then we should expect to be tempted as well, and we are, sometimes severely.

I suggest that the reason we sometimes lose the battle with temptation is that we fight it in all the wrong ways.

**Often we fight temptation as though it were primarily a physical struggle, when in fact it's primarily a spiritual struggle.** Long before temptation manifests itself as an outward sin, it manifests itself as an attitude of the heart. **Jesus said, “For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery”** (Mt 15:19).

If we want to overcome temptation, we must address those places in our heart where we are losing the battle. We will look at three types of temptation that Jesus experiences. I've labeled these according to three spiritual places from this passage in which we often find ourselves: hard places, high places, and holy places.

\*All Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible Updated Edition, 1995, unless otherwise indicated.

## 1. Hard places

As we begin to look into this passage of Scripture, we immediately encounter some points that are worthy of our attention.

First, I think it is significant that Jesus' temptations come at the very beginning of his ministry. **"Jesus full of the Holy Spirit returned from the Jordan."** We recall that the Jordan was not only where Jesus was not baptized, but also where He experienced what we might describe as a divine calling. It was there that the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus, and it was then that Jesus heard the voice of God saying, **"This is my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."**

So these temptations of Jesus come in the context of Jesus' calling and preparation for ministry. Perhaps you have experienced some temptation in the process of being called and preparing for ministry.

There is much to be said for prophecies and for those wonderful times when God speaks to us. We need to cherish those moments and to meditate on them as milestones in our spiritual journey. And there is a lot to be said for the spiritual disciplines of fasting and prayer, for seeking God with all of our hearts, and for dedicating ourselves to further training in ministry. But it's also important that we don't allow those things to lure us into a false sense of security and start thinking that because we can do Greek exegesis, for example, Satan is no longer interested in us.

If anything, Satan is more interested in you than he was before because of the steps you have taken to accept God's call and grow in ministry.

So here we find, at the outset of this passage of Scripture, Jesus having devoted himself to seeking the will of God through fasting. He's out in a desert, He's lonely, **He's in a hard place.**

I think most of us, if given a choice, would choose not to go into hard places. Hard places are uncomfortable places. They're unkind places. They're challenging places. Hard places are places of desolation and loneliness, where you look at your surroundings and see nothing but a dry and thirsty land, and you wonder, how did I get here?

It is important for us to see that Jesus was led *by the Spirit* into the desert. He was led by the Spirit into a hard place. He was led by the Spirit into a place of testing, where He was tempted by the devil. We need to see that because, in the course of being obedient to the will of God, we will find ourselves in hard places from time to time.

We tend to think that when we find ourselves in hard places we must have somehow missed the will of God. But let me say it again: Jesus was led *by the Spirit* into the desert where He was tempted by the devil. **Just because you find yourself in a difficult place, don't assume that God didn't put you there.**

There is something about a hard place that is good for us. It's in the hard places that we learn to trust God in ways we never had before. It's in the hard places that we come to know God in ways greater than we had before. It's in the hard places that we tend to see through all the clutter of our lives and focus more clearly on the things that truly matter.

And so the devil comes after Jesus in a hard place, when Jesus is hungry, and says to Him, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.”

### **The temptation of hard places is the temptation to circumvent the provision of God.**

The trials we face in hard times are often based on genuine needs. Jesus needed food. He hadn't eaten in 40 days, His body had begun to feed on itself, and if He didn't get food soon He was going to die—and then the devil came and said, “Jesus, I know You're hungry, but You don't have to be.” He says the same thing to us today: “I know you're lonely, but you don't have to be.” “I know you're depressed, but you don't have to be.” “I know you're sad, but you don't have to be.” The enemy sets before us a multitude of options that are contrary to the will of God to enable us to get rid of those things. He sees our needs, and he would have us meet those needs by not trusting in the provision of God.

Temptation in hard places comes down to this: **we either have to be willing to go without or be willing to go nowhere at all.**

Here's what I mean. Notice how these temptations of Jesus in the desert parallel the experience of Israel in the desert in the Book of Exodus. Israel was in the desert for 40 years. Jesus was in the desert for 40 days. And whereas Jesus resisted the devil and got out of the desert, Israel gave in to the devil, and for 40 years they went in circles. It took them 40 years to make a journey that some say should have taken just a few weeks.

For Israel the temptation wasn't to turn stones into bread, but to complain, when they ran out of bread, that God had abandoned them. The challenge for you and me is to see our genuine needs as an opportunity for God to be glorified. But that can never happen as long as we are complaining about our circumstances.

The difference between Jesus and Israel was that Jesus trusted in God to provide for His needs, even in the midst of difficult circumstances.

The challenge for every one of us is not to turn to an unworthy substitute for the provision of God when we find ourselves in hard places. The challenge for us is to not turn to cheating when we find ourselves struggling to make the grades that we need. The challenge for us is to not turn to pornography when we feel sexually frustrated, to not become prideful when we're given a new position, to not become angry when we get offended. Every time we do one of those things, we end up settling for something less than the provision of God.

As we see in the second temptation of Jesus, not all temptation takes place in hard places. Sometimes temptation takes place when we have our heads in the clouds and when our eyes are beholding the abundance the world has to offer. Sometimes temptation takes place in high places.

### **2. High places**

If the first temptation—the temptation of hard places—was centered on the need to survive, to meet genuine needs, then this temptation—the temptation of high places—was centered on the desire for success. Satan took Jesus to a high place and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and said “**This will all be yours**, if you will bow down and worship me.”

It is often debated in regards to this passage whether the devil really had the authority to give Jesus the kingdoms of the world. In other words, were they really his to give, or was he just being his usual delusional self? But this is an irrelevant question. It makes no difference whether the devil **could** give Jesus the kingdoms of the world. What matters is, **would** he give Jesus the kingdoms of the world—and the answer is no. Satan never delivers on what he promises.

In fact, in the Gospel of John Jesus describes Satan by saying, **“He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies”** (8:44).

We are fooling ourselves if we think that the devil intends to give us anything good. He will promise you sexual gratification, and will give you AIDS. He will promise you fame, and will give you a hollow existence. He will promise you wealth, and will give you poverty of the soul. Satan never delivers on his promises.

My father at one point in his life was a very wealthy man. He spent his whole life in pursuit of wealth, and yet no matter how much he had, he was never satisfied. Eventually he found himself over a million dollars in debt and took his own life. And the point is, as someone put it, you can never have enough of the things you don't need to make you happy.

The key to overcoming the temptation of the high places, the key to overcoming the temptation to be exalted, and the temptation to be great, and the temptation to be wealthy, and the temptation for notoriety—comes **through proper worship**. Your ambitions will be shaped by what you worship.

All of us are going to worship something. We will either worship God or we will worship things, as Paul says in Romans: **“they exchanged the truth of god for a lie and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator”** (1:25).

What we see here is that the proper worship of God is essential to godly living, because worship directs our affections to the One who rightly deserves it. Worship reminds us that God is to be exalted, and that we are to be humble. We overcome the temptations of high places by taking a lowly posture, by bowing ourselves before God in worshipping and exalting Him.

**Mankind was designed to worship.** The writer of Ecclesiastes says that God has put eternity in the hearts of men. Worship is a part of who we are, and if we're not worshipping the real God, we will find ourselves worshipping something else.

There are a multitude of things that can become false gods and idols in our lives. Good grades can be an idol. Pastoring a big church can be an idol. Positions of leadership can be an idol. It's important to see that the thing Jesus is being tempted with here—the kingdoms of earth—is directly related to what He had actually been called to be and do. Jesus was to be given the kingdoms of the world. He was the promised Son of David whose Kingdom would never end. We see this clearly in the opening verses of Luke's Gospel:

**Luke 1:32** “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; **33** and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end.”

I can promise you that the enemy is going to tempt you precisely in the area of your calling.

The constant challenge for us in ministry is to worship, not our calling, but the One who calls us. In other words, don't worship the idea of being a pastor, or the idea of being an evangelist, or the idea of running a ministry. But rather worship the One who has called you to do those things.

The crucial question, of course, is, how do we know if we're worshipping God or worshipping what God has called us to do? The answer is simple. We just need to ask, *how hard would it be for me to give up what God has called me to do?* If we're unwilling to give up our calling, then maybe we've come to worship our calling.

Isn't that exactly the point of the story of Abraham and Isaac going up Mt. Moriah? God knew that Abraham could not be a blessing to the nations if he cared more about his calling than about the One who called him.

Neither can you be a blessing to anyone if you love your call to ministry more than you love the One who calls you to ministry. If that's the case, then there's nothing you won't do—including sin—to protect and preserve your calling. Why do you think Bible school students cheat? It's because they love the idea of being a pastor more than they love the One who called them in the first place. Why do pastors sometimes steal money from their churches? Because they love the idea of being a pastor more than they love the One who called them to be a pastor.

If you're not willing to give up your calling, then you'll do anything to hold on to it. But the essence and the evidence of true worship is surrender. True worship produces in us the idea that we don't want anything that is not of God, that if God does not provide it and if God doesn't help us, then we would rather do without. That's the kind of worship that produces in us the kind of heart that can be mightily used by God.

### **3. Holy places**

In the last temptation, Satan drags Jesus back to the very place of religious activity that Jesus had come to do away with. Jerusalem and the temple during Jesus' day were places teeming with religious fervor and religious activity—but not necessarily teeming with faith. In fact, Jesus had some very strong words for the religious leaders of His day: **“Isaiah was right when he said about you – ‘These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me’”** (Mt 15:8).

And yet in this last temptation Satan takes Jesus to the temple and tempts him to jump from the highest point.

I was intrigued by this last temptation, because most sane people are not tempted to jump off of buildings. But if we look at this carefully, we see that there is something much more sinister at work. Satan throws the Word of God at Jesus (misinterpreted and out of context, by the way), which Jesus had been using effectively to resist the devil, and says, “if you really believe this is true, if you really have such great faith in the Word of God—then prove it.”

Be assured that Satan will tempt you regarding the very foundations of your ministry.

The temple in Judaism represented the very center of God's presence and provision. Thus Satan was saying, if you really believe in God's presence and provision, then test God and see if He will live up to his promises. Satan quotes Psalm 91, saying,

“HE WILL COMMAND HIS ANGELS CONCERNING YOU TO GUARD YOU,'  
and, 'ON *their* HANDS THEY WILL BEAR YOU UP, SO THAT YOU WILL NOT  
STRIKE YOUR FOOT AGAINST A STONE” (Lk 4:10-11).

What Satan leaves out is the fact that the context of Psalm 91 is faithfulness to God—the idea that God's protection and provision are given to those who trust in God. Psalm 91 begins with “Those who dwell in the shelter of the Most High.”

The paradox here is this: The minute you put God to the test, then you are no longer trusting in the protection and provision of God. God's protection and provision are promised only to those who trust in God.

So the temptation of the holy place is the temptation to place ourselves, rather than God, at the center of our faith.

The reason this is a problem is that, as Jesus would go on to show, sometimes the provision of God comes through suffering. Sometimes suffering is central to the provision of God, as it was with the Cross. If you and I in our ministries have no theology of suffering, then we will spend our lives avoiding the difficult things that God might call us to do.

Not only do we need a theology of suffering, but we also need a theology of the Resurrection. Because the Resurrection is evidence that our suffering is never pointless, but that it is entirely redeemable, that whatever happens to us in this world is never the final word.

In conclusion, I want us to note the three things that enabled Jesus to overcome temptation and that will also enable us to overcome temptation: the Spirit of God, the worship of God, and the Word of God.

This whole passage begins with Jesus being led by the Spirit. For more than ten years I was addicted to drugs and alcohol, and it wasn't until I was filled with the Spirit that I had the power to change. Whatever temptations you are facing, if you're trying to overcome temptation by mere willpower, then you're going about it all wrong.

The one thing that will give you victory over temptation is not willpower, but spiritual power.

Paul says exactly this in Romans 8:

**13** For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, **14** because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. **15** For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, “*Abba*, Father.”

As we surrender to the will of God through the worship of God and through the indwelling of God's Spirit, and through trusting in the certainty of God's Word, we discover the infinite resources bound up in being a child of God.