

THE THREEFOLD TEMPTATION OF CHRIST

MATT. 4:1-11

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Before considering the special character of the temptations that came to Christ in the wilderness of Judah, we are confronted with the question of the general interpretation of the story. How are we to understand the passage generally in relation to historical fact? Are we to view it as literal truth, or as a painting of the imagination? Is it prosaic fact, or poetic fancy, or, in some measure, both? That is the first question to be faced. No doubt it presents itself with most force to the Protestant Christian, who believes that the gospel is addressed to the mind as well as to the heart; but it has excited the interest of all the ages. Innumerable solutions have been offered: we only speak roughly when we mention three general points of view as typical of the rest. The first and the most prevalent opinion is that the story is throughout literally and prosaically historical, and deals with certain outward occurrences in which Christ and the tempter met face to face, and traveled from place to place, and interchanged words, and quoted Scripture to one another. The second is that the story is throughout unhistorical: a fanciful legendary enlargement to fill out the blank in Christ's life in the period preceding his public ministry; valueless, therefore, so far as the history of the Savior's life is concerned. The third view stands between these two extremes, and gives the story a pictorial interpretation, treating it not as outward history, but as the pictured history of what took place veritably in Christ's mind.

Shall we say then that this story is literal fact, or legendary fancy, or the picture of a real spiritual experience?

The first, the literal interpretation, has now been very widely abandoned. The details of the story point of themselves to some other interpretation than the sheerly literal. Even John Calvin doubted of the literal existence of any mountain from which all the

kingdoms of the world could be seen in a moment of time, and therefore he inclined to the view that this part of the story at least must be interpreted as a vision. But it is not this part but all the parts of the story that require a more spiritual rendering. With the best of will to believe in the literal Satan who "goeth about seeking whom he may devour," we cannot readily admit that he has the power of conveying the people of God from place to place. Such powers have indeed been ascribed to him in the legends of superstitious imagination; but even then the makers of these legends had usually some spiritual meaning in the background of their thought; and in any case it is reasonable to argue that as Satan does not now exercise any such power, he does not and never did possess the power. But—what is a still more vital objection—the appearance of an outward literal tempter would have quite nullified the force of the temptation. Had Satan appeared in his own person before Christ, there would have been little temptation to listen to his suggestions. Temptations lose all their force when they are clearly seen to be of the devil, and so Christ would have repelled these promptings of Satan without effort, for the very reason that it was Satan that proposed them. If, then, the temptations recorded were real temptations that tried even Christ, we must suppose that their originator was hidden and that Christ felt them as the visions and desires of his own heart; prompted by no devil, but by his own sympathy with men, and faith in God, and high ambition.

But if so, are we shut up to the other extreme, and obliged to declare the whole story to be quite unhistorical? A pictorial narrative is not therefore mythical and unreal. It is quite possible, and we are entitled to hold that what we have here in pictorial form is still history, namely the history of a conflict that took place in Christ's mind at the beginning of his ministry: a conflict both important in its nature and decisive in its issues. We shall be strengthened in this view if we consider how natural these temptations were in the circumstances of Christ's life, and especially in his opening ministry. If we believe that Christ was subject to the laws of human growth and spiritual development we naturally expect to find some severe moral contest in the beginning of his ministry, when he felt called for the first time to proclaim the kingdom of God. For does not every one pass through

the valley of temptation on entering upon his life's work? Sooner or later every one must pass from the life of innocence and instinct to the mature life of principle; and before the life of principle is established, there is a contest to determine what principle is to rule. The great questions of life force themselves to the front with irresistible power, demanding a practical answer; and every one experiences a struggle and a conversion either to what is holy or to what is unholy, either to the service of God or to the service of Mammon.

Once to every man and nation
Comes the moment to decide
In the strife of truth with falsehood
For the good or evil side.

That supreme moment of life is the supreme moment of temptation; and it is then that Satan marshals all his forces, and plies us with fairest argument, that he may find our vulnerable spot. And was there nothing parallel to this in Christ's life? How could he be really human, if he had no experience, at the entrance of his career, of the same fiery furnace of temptation? He who "grew in wisdom," and "was in all points tempted like as we are," must have been tempted sorely throughout his ministry by the expectations of the Jewish people, tempted sorely to propose to himself some lower ideal for his messianic work. And if he did not succumb to these in the hour of danger or of death, must it not have been that he had already battled with them at the beginning of his ministry, and had already in principle overcome them all, when he first set the divine ideal before him, and girded himself for his life's work? In short, the view that commends itself as most reasonable is this, that the story of the temptation of Christ, though pictorially represented, has a real foundation in his actual life, both in that decisive hour when he conquered the desires of the flesh and of the mind and set himself to proclaim the pure kingdom of God, and also in those later temptations which arose in the course of his ministry, and tended to turn him from his mission. In a word, we have here a picture of the soul-struggle of Christ, which he had to endure both at the beginning and also all through the course of his public ministry.

These considerations may help us to enter more thoroughly and fruitfully into the special meaning of the temptations as here narrated.

We take them as temptations that came to him in the prospect of his opening ministry, and his messianic work. The first two were assaults upon Christ's faith; the last was concerned with the Messianic ideal.

The *first temptation* was an assault upon Christ's faith, to lead him to distrust his own calling as the Son of God and the Messiah of the people. "He was an hungered and the tempter came and said: If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread."

Christ had retired into the wilderness to be alone with himself and God, and to strengthen his soul for his life's calling. The wilderness around him, those bleak forsaken wastes, and his own weariness and hunger, reminded him of the want and poverty of his nation. How different were the hard matter-of-fact circumstances of Israel from that ideal of the messianic time, when the wilderness should rejoice and blossom as the rose, when instead of the thorn should come up the fir tree and instead of the brier should come up the myrtle tree, when peace and plenty should fill the land? Must not the Messiah of Israel accomplish all that the prophets proclaimed, or prove the falseness of his claim? How could he be the Messiah, unless he put an end at one stroke to the poverty and privation and want that prevailed in Israel? How could he himself be allowed to hunger and thirst in the wilderness, if he had indeed received this high calling of God to be the Savior of the people? Could he be the promised shepherd, who could neither satisfy his own hunger nor feed his flock? If Christ were human some such thoughts must have passed through his mind. Doubts as to his calling must have frequently come to him if only because they were suggested from without. The question came to him once from a lonely prison: "Art thou he that should come, or look we for another?" The outward signs seemed wanting to John the Baptist as he lay pining in prison: Art thou he that should come, the foretold Messiah indeed, to relieve the oppressed, and right the wrong? And yet Christ had to leave his forerunner to his fate. How little the outward circumstances of Christ's own life seemed to harmonize with the prophetic ideal! The prophets spoke of messianic triumphs, and of a people all righteous and obedient to their king; but there was little of outward triumph in Christ's life; his Messianic activity led him to the cross, and there again the doubt was suggested to him in the jeering cry: "If thou be the Son of God, come down

from the cross! If thou be Christ, save thyself and us!" But Christ had faced and overcome this spirit of unbelief from the very outset. He lived too near to God to have any personal doubt as to the Father's promises and purposes regarding his people. If privation and hardship still continued, entailing suffering both on the Messiah and the children of the kingdom, they must be permitted by God as serving a divine end. These things must be part of the necessary bread of human life, wisely designed to make the Messiah perfect through suffering, and to lift the minds of his followers to higher things. The people therefore must spend some time in the wilderness, before the promised land was theirs. That was the law of progress now that the kingdom was at hand, as it had been when the children of Israel left their house of bondage in Egypt; first the spiritual training, then the crown of happiness. And so Christ could make his own and apply to his followers those ancient words of the prophet to Israel: "Thou shalt remember all the way the Lord thy God led thee, in the wilderness: to humble thee and to prove thee, to do thee good at thy latter end. And he humbled thee and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee with manna from heaven, that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God."

This temptation is no doubt recorded for our encouragement. The stones of difficulty and trial will not remove at a word of command, or a word of prayer; but if we endure bravely they will become bread of life to us. When therefore outward want or suffering comes upon us; when the soul feels itself in a dry place and parched with drought; when our external circumstances are hard and our prospects lowering; and when we begin to question the ways of God, and to ask why he should thus abandon us; let us pluck up courage from this victory of Christ; and accepting in his spirit the hardships of life as seeing the final end of good, let us learn to build upon that word of eternal truth, that "man doth not live by bread only, but by every word of God."

The *second temptation* was also an assault upon Christ's faith, but from the other side, namely, to lead him to overconfidence and presumption. "The devil takes him into the holy city, and sets him on a pinnacle of the temple, and saith unto him: If thou be the Son of

God (and know that thou art in God's hands), cast thyself down from hence!"

This is a picture of all false and fanatical faith, which disregards the ordinary laws of life, and the means God has given to preserve it, and presumptuously claims the special intervention of the Deity. Might not Christ as the Messiah have been specially tempted to such an overweening faith? There were other self-styled Messiahs of that day among the Jews; and they fell one and all into this snare. We are told of the false prophet Theudas, that he gathered a large number of followers after him, and marched them toward the Jordan, assuring them that as a proof of his divine mission, he would lead them across the river dryshod! With similar presumption a certain Egyptian Jew led thousands of Zealots into the wilderness, and promised them that at his mere word the walls of Jerusalem would fall down flat, and give them a free and triumphant entrance into the city! These promises proved vain and illusory, and as many as hearkened to them were scattered and brought to nought. The same temptation came to Christ. "Show us a sign from heaven," was the cry of the people! If you are the Messiah, reveal your greatness! It seemed a sign of weakness that the Messiah did not presume more than ordinary men on God's special assistance and care. But the moderation of Christ in the use of extraordinary means is precisely what distinguished him from all false prophets. He would give the people demanding it no sign from heaven, but told them instead to read the signs of the times, and to seek the divine elsewhere. Nor did he presume personally upon the divine protection in his conflicts with the Pharisees. While trusting in the heavenly Father, he used all ordinary precautions against the assaults of his enemies. He knew that his enemies could not take him till his hour was come, but he knew also that his Father meant him to use all the ordinary means of self-preservation.

That Christ triumphed over this temptation, which proved the snare of other prophets, was due to a fundamental difference between his ideal and theirs. These other prophets were proposing to found an earthly kingdom on the ruins of the Roman Empire; and for that forsooth they required both signs from heaven to make the people believe in its possibility, and continuous miraculous interventions to

lead them to victory over their irresistible foes. But the empire that Christ came to found in men's hearts did not require any outward signs or portents, such as the false prophets promised and the people eagerly desired. It was a kingdom that should come without much observation in the outward world, and should win its triumph on earth by the spiritual signs of patience and meekness and self-sacrifice.

This leads to the *third temptation*, concerning Christ's royal Messianic ideal. "The devil takes him up into an exceeding high mountain, and shows him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them; and saith unto him, All these things will I give thee; if thou wilt fall down and worship me, it shall all be thine."

Christ was called from the first to choose between worldly and spiritual empire. And here again there was no visionary tempter needed; the great tempter was the Jewish people. They desired and hoped for a deliverer that should break the yoke of Rome, and give them the pre-eminent place among the nations. They would have hailed with acclamation such a deliverer, and revered him as their king and the son of God! They would have shouted Hosannas in his praise, and followed him with enthusiasm to battle and death! Yet now—and it must have been at the beginning of his ministry—Christ turned this temptation forever aside. He had the vision of a greater kingdom, and mightier empire still, to be attained even through trial and opposition and death: a universal kingdom of faith, hope, and brotherhood, that far surpassed all Jewish ambitions. In that pure and heavenly ideal all narrow patriotism dissolved and all personal ambition was quenched. It was now his meat and drink to establish the spiritual kingdom of God; and having once put his hand to the plough he could not look back upon any lower, personal, or national ideal. "Get thee behind me, Satan; for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve."

The same choice is set before us all; and the same temptation comes to us to prefer the earthly ideal to the heavenly and eternal. Whether we are entering upon our life-work, or well advanced in it, the choice is offered us, and the decision more or less definitely made: either for some narrower ideal, limited and earthly, and with self not far from the center, or for the larger ideal of the kingdom of God. We all seek a kingdom somewhere; we have all certain powers and

cravings and ideals; and our kingdom is where these powers and ideals are satisfied. What kingdom have you chosen as your ambition? what ideal are you seeking to realize?

The future hides in it gladness and sorrow;
 We press still through;
 Nought that abides in it daunting us—onward.
 And solemn before us, veiled, the dark Portal,
 Goal of all mortal
 Perplexing the bravest with doubt and misgiving.
 But heard are the voices, heard are the Sages,
 The worlds and the ages;—
 “Choose well, your choice is brief and yet endless.”

No doubt the choice is a hard one, especially when everything that makes life attractive is set on the one side, and God and goodness alone on the other. And the temptation to look back comes even to the Christian who has made his choice, and is seeking to make the treasures of the kingdom of God increasingly his own. The kingdom of evil has still its power in the world; and the Christian is tempted at times to repine at the trials heaped upon him, or at his want of worldly advancement. He begins to think, like the Baptist in his lonely prison, that the kingdom is still far off which promises to the meek the inheritance of the earth; that it is the servants of Mammon, the avaricious, ambitious, unscrupulous, who win in the race and that righteousness doesn't pay. So far as this is true, we must endeavor to accept calmly the hardship implied; we are called to follow our master. As he passed through suffering, persecution and death in order to establish the kingdom, God may well suffer us to endure hardship for the further promotion of it, and to prove our faithfulness. But let us not exaggerate the power of evil in the world. For Satan's kingdom has more glitter than gold; its enjoyments are temporary, and more in appearance than in substance. Whereas the treasure of the kingdom of God is like capital that goes on steadily increasing, and will yield an increasing interest of happiness and joy, both now and in the ages to come. Both the present and the future are promised to the man who seeks the kingdom of God; for it is to God and not to Satan that belong “the kingdom and the power and the glory.” “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness; and all other things will be added unto you.”