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Do Not Lead Us
Into Temptation –
Jesus in the Desert
(Matt 4:1-11)

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Do Not Lead Us Into Temptation – Jesus in the Desert (Matt 4:1-11)¹

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Matthew's temptation account is otherworldly. Satan and Jesus meet in three staged encounters that occur outside the normal run of the Gospel story. Interpreters are aware that the temptation account is not intended to be a literal report, but a narrative that functions symbolically and metaphorically to reflect upon a very difficult subject.

The account begins in an unsettling fashion: "Jesus was led into the desert by the Spirit to be tempted by the devil" (4:1).² Later when Jesus teaches the disciples to pray the "Our Father", the penultimate petition will be: "lead us not into temptation" (6:13). It seems that Jesus' own prayer is unanswered here. This petition has caused interpreters difficulty for the past 2,000 years and is currently the subject of revisions in several languages to lessen the theological shock that God would somehow lead us into temptation. At Jesus' temptation, the shock cannot be mitigated since God's own Spirit leads him into the desert. However, while the Spirit leads, it is the devil who tempts. Temptation does not come from God. The Spirit leads Jesus into the zone of temptation to do battle with the devil.

JESUS AND GOD'S SPIRIT

The reference to the Spirit recalls the preceding account of Jesus' baptism. After overcoming John's protestations of unworthiness, Jesus is baptised by him (3:13-15). This is followed by the opening of the heavens and the descent of the Spirit of God in the form of a dove coming to rest upon Jesus (3:16). Jesus, who was conceived in his mother Mary's womb by the Holy Spirit (1:18, 20), is now publicly invested with the Spirit of God at the start of

1 A modified version of this article was delivered on March 1st 2020 at Glenstal Abbey.

2 Only chapter and verse numbers will be indicated for references to the Gospel of Matthew.

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THE FURROW

his adult ministry. It is interesting that the title Spirit is qualified as the Spirit of God and not the Holy Spirit as heretofore (1:18, 20; 3:11). Matthew's insistence on the link between the Spirit and God is further supported by the mention of the Spirit coming from God's habitation in the heavens. From the moment of his baptism Jesus is intimately associated with God's Spirit. There is no surprise, therefore, that he would be led by the Spirit in his future ministry. However, it is unexpected that the Spirit should lead Jesus to be tempted by the devil. Nevertheless, Jesus is not alone in this combat. Although the Spirit leads Jesus into the desert to be tempted, he also accompanies Jesus in that temptation, as he will do throughout his life and ministry.

JESUS' DIVINE SONSHIP AND THE DISCIPLES' STATUS AS CHILDREN OF GOD

The baptism account contains another important divine manifestation: "There is a voice from heaven which says: 'this is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased'" (4:17). The voice acclaims Jesus as Son, thereby identifying itself as the voice of Jesus' Father, whose home is in heaven. Jesus is not only acclaimed as Son, but also as one in whom the Father delights. The investing of the Son with God's Spirit tightens the bond between Father and Son. Jesus' close relationship to God is repeated throughout the Gospel. While Jesus addresses God as "my Father" (7:21; 10:32-33; 11:27; 12:50; 15:13; 16:17; 18:10, 19, 35; 20:23; 26:29, 39, 42, 53), the Father again proclaims him "my beloved son" before the disciples at the Transfiguration (17:5). Jesus extends this filial language to include his disciples. The peacemakers (5:7) and those who love their enemies (5:45) will become children of God.

When Jesus speaks of the Father to his disciples, he refers to him as "my Father" and "your heavenly Father" (5:16, 45, 48; 6:1, 4, 6, 8, 14, 18, 26, 32). Jesus has a unique relationship with God and only he employs the singular possessive pronoun "my". When Jesus prays to his Father, he addresses him as "my Father" (26:29, 39, 42) but when he teaches his disciples to pray, he has them address God as "Our Father" (6:9). Jesus' relationship with God is unique as Son. However, the disciples are to *participate* in this intimate relationship as children of the Father through prayer (6:9-13) and following Jesus' teaching: "whoever does the will of my father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (12:50).

FIRST TEMPTATION – THE LIFE-GIVING POWER OF THE WORD

The confirmation of Jesus' status as Son of God at the baptism is an important prelude to the temptation narrative. The devil does

DO NOT LEAD US INTO TEMPTATION

not question Jesus' divine sonship but openly attests it and seeks to persuade Jesus to avail of his power as Son: "Since you are the Son of God tell these stones to become bread" (4:3); "Since you are the Son of God throw yourself down" (4:6). The dispute with the devil is not whether Jesus is Son of God, but *how* Jesus is Son of God. The devil seeks to persuade Jesus to avail of God's power for himself, to take God's place and in effect separate himself from God. Jesus remains closely bound to the Father in the Spirit and refuses to comply with the devil's suggestions. Jesus *models* the way for other children of the Father to deal with the temptations they experience.

Jesus spends 40 days and 40 nights fasting in the desert, after which he is tired and hungry. The tempter's suggestion of a ready-made meal through turning stones into bread is indeed tempting. Jesus answers with a *scriptural* quotation: "one does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (4:4). This verse refers both to Deuteronomy and Wisdom, but implicitly also to Genesis. While the temptation account evokes the first temptation of Adam and Eve involving desirable food (Gen 3:6), it also, through this verse, recalls creation: God spoke, and things came to be. The phrase "and God said" occurs ten times in the first account of creation (Gen 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26, 28, 29). The world and all its constituent elements, humankind's home, is created by God's word. Life begins for humanity through God's word: "Let us make humankind in our image" (Gen 1:26) and is sustained by God's word: "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen 1:28). While the serpent succeeded in deceiving Adam and Eve, Jesus remembers the life-giving and life-sustaining word that comes from God's mouth.

Jesus' response to the tempter also evokes the use of bread as a metaphor for the teaching of God in wisdom literature: "so that your children, whom you loved, O Lord, might learn that it is not the production of crops that feeds humankind but that your word sustains those who trust in you" (Wis 16:26). It is the bread which comes from God that Jesus desires over and above any other food. Lastly, by using a quotation from Deuteronomy 8:3 in his response to the tempter, Jesus employs God's own word, further indicating the enduring relationship between Father and Son.

SECOND TEMPTATION – OBEDIENCE TO GOD

The tempter first approached Jesus in the desert, but the devil now takes Jesus to the Holy City (Jerusalem) and places him on the pinnacle of the Temple. He again affirms Jesus' divine sonship, ("Since you are the Son of God" [4:6a]), before asking him to

THE FURROW

throw himself down and quotes scripture to say that he will be rescued by angels (4:6b). Jesus is in effect being asked for a *sign*, as he will also be later in the Gospel. To the scribes and Pharisees' repeated demands for a sign, he replies that they will get no sign other than that of Jonah (12:38-39; 16:1). Jesus speaks of the Son of Man who will spend three nights in the heart of the earth as Jonah did in the belly of the sea monster. The Son of Man has no miraculous rescue from contact with the ground but is to be buried in the heart of the earth. Jesus doesn't avoid death but will defeat it. At his arrest, Jesus shows that he can call upon God to send angels: "Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?" (26:53) However, Jesus refuses to invoke this help, so that the scriptures may be fulfilled (26:54).

The closest parallel with this temptation occurs at Jesus' crucifixion, where first bystanders and then the high priests, scribes and elders repeatedly call for Jesus to come down from the cross. The bystanders' words closely echo those of the devil: "Since you are the Son of God come down from the cross" (27:40). Jesus gives no answer, but readers of the Gospel recall his earlier answer to the devil in the desert that he will not put God to the test. The mockers at the cross paradoxically speak the truth: "he trusts in God, let God deliver him now" (27:43). Jesus trusts that his Father will save him and does not usurp his Father's role.

Jesus responds to the devil once again using God's own words from *scripture*: "You will not put the Lord your God to the test" (Deut 6:16). The words can be taken in two ways. Jesus directly rebukes the devil who, although he acknowledges Jesus' divine Sonship, seeks to test him. Jesus also makes these words his own in his refusal to cast himself down to precipitate the intervention of angels. Jesus' trust and obedience are in God's word and not the devil's word.

THIRD TEMPTATION – TRUE WORSHIP

The devil now takes Jesus up a high mountain and having shown him the world's kingdoms and their glory, offers all to Jesus if he but falls down and worships him (4:8-9). Throughout the Ancient Near East, mountains are understood to be liminal zones at the intersection of divine and human habitation, where encounters with the divine are more likely to occur. Jewish kings were not averse to building sanctuaries to pagan gods on mountains. The elderly King Solomon erected altars to Chemosh the god of Moab and Molech the god of the Ammonites on the mountain east of Jerusalem (1 Kings 11:7), while Jeroboam erected temples at

DO NOT LEAD US INTO TEMPTATION

Bethel and Dan and other sanctuaries at high places (1 Kings 12:27-32). The ideal however is expressed in the developed Sinai-Horeb and Mount Zion traditions. These locations represent highpoints of God's relationship with Israel through the prophets Moses and Elijah and through the Jerusalem Temple. Although Israel often fell short of this ideal, God kept calling from on high. While the devil's temptation holds out the option of idolatry – into which humanity had so often fallen – Jesus' refusal reaffirms humanity's relationship with God.

The devil draws Jesus into this liminal space where all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, the whole creation, come into view. The devil wishes Jesus to claim the glory that belongs to God and then worship him. Jesus refuses outright. There is an interesting distinction in the use of the verbs “to worship” and “to glorify” in the Gospel of Matthew. The verb “to worship” occurs thirteen times and apart from here Jesus is nearly always the object of the worship. The Magi (2:2, 11), various suppliants who encounter Jesus (the leper [8:2]; leader of the synagogue [9:18]; Canaanite woman [15:24]; mother of sons of Zebedee [20:20]) and the disciples at the calming of the storm (14:33) and when meeting the Risen Lord (28:9, 17) all worship him. Herod is the only character in the narrative who falsely proclaims his intended worship of Jesus (2:8). It is striking that in Jesus' answer to the devil he quotes scripture “you will worship the Lord God and him alone you will serve” (Deut 6:13). This begs the question why Jesus accepts the worship of the suppliants and of his disciples. The other verb “to glorify” provides a corrective. The good works of the disciples are to be made manifest so that God may be glorified (5:16). At Jesus' healing of the paralytic the crowds give glory to God that he has given such power to humankind (9:8). Later when he heals the lame, the maimed, the blind and the mute, the crowd again give glory to God (15:31). Although Jesus is worshipped, ultimately God is glorified through his actions and those of his disciples. The honour shown to Jesus is therefore *redirected* to God.

This is the climax of the temptations, where Jesus is challenged to choose the devil over God. He prefaces his final Deuteronomy quotation with a rebuke to the devil: “Go away Satan” and the devil abandons the scene, leaving Jesus in the presence of angels. Later in the Gospel, when Jesus predicts his forthcoming passion, death and resurrection, Peter rebukes him. Jesus in turn remonstrates with Peter in much the same words as with the devil: “Go behind me Satan” (16:23). Suffering and self-sacrifice are part of Jesus' mission but will also be part of the disciple' missions (16:24-25). Temptations come through Satan and many whom he uses as

THE FURROW

his agents. As seen above at the cross, temptations follow Jesus throughout his ministry.

DEUTERONOMY AND THE *SHEMA ISRAEL*

Jesus has responded to each of the temptations with quotations from scripture. All three quotations come from Deuteronomy, just after the *Shema Israel* (Hear O Israel) section which is prayed daily by Jews (Deut 6:4-9). The prayer affirms that Israel is to love the Lord her God exclusively, with all her heart, with all her soul and with all her strength. This precept is to be remembered at all times through the regular daily activities and by being fastened to hands and foreheads, door posts and gates of the home. The command to love God exclusively is to be a protective shadow for all Israelites at all moments and places where they live. Jesus as a Jew would have prayed this prayer daily. It is the equivalent of the “Our Father” for his disciples. During these great temptations Jesus does not call upon legions of angels but employs the regular words of his daily Jewish *prayer* to fend off the devil. Jesus undergoes temptation, refusing to avail of divine privilege. Instead, submitting to it as one of the human family, Jesus makes the word of God his own and shapes his discourse through this word.

THE “OUR FATHER” — A PRAYER FOR ALL TIMES

Jesus endured temptation endowed with God’s Spirit, trusting in his relationship with the Father and *equipped* with God’s word. Disciples often face temptation and might see the fabulous account of Jesus’ triumph through his temptations as beyond them. Nevertheless, they are endowed with the Holy Spirit (3:11; 28:19), which is also described as the Spirit of the Father who will come to their assistance in times of trial and tribulation (10:20). Disciples are also beloved children of the Father and are *gifted* with God’s word, especially through the teaching of Jesus. They, therefore, possess the vocabulary to hear and to speak God’s word in a dialogical relationship with the Father through life and particularly in times of trial. The recent institution of the *Sunday of the Word of God* has been explicitly designed so that disciples “appreciate the inexhaustible riches contained in that constant dialogue between the Lord and his people.” (*Aperuit Illis* no. 2)

Preeminent in this teaching of the word is the prayer of the “Our Father” which is a veritable manual for disciples facing the daily challenges and temptations of life. This prayer recalls the disciples’ status: they are beloved children. This metaphor is powerful as a child always retains its relationship with the parent. There is no

DO NOT LEAD US INTO TEMPTATION

doubting one's position as a child of God. In times of trial it is good to recall the benevolent gaze of the Father who looks on his own at all times, especially during times of temptation.

GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD

Jesus' first temptation is visible *today* in the constant tussle to have more. The signs of greed are evident as the *Celtic Tiger* economy roars again. Yet such greed breeds dissatisfaction. People seek security, but enough is never enough. Jesus could change the stones into bread and satisfy his desire, but he trusts in God's word and invites his disciples to share in this trust: "their heavenly Father, who knows of what they have need, will provide for them (6:32-33). The disciples are not to worry about what they will have to eat or drink or how they might be clothed (6:25). While the devil offers bread from stones, and there is no greater symbol of death than an inanimate stone, the Father generously feeds the birds of heaven every day and gives us our daily bread (6:11). Jesus asks if anyone's child looks for bread, who would give him a stone? (7:9) Disciples may be confident that their Father in heaven will give good things to those who ask him (7:11). Petitioning for daily bread is a sure path to receiving *correct nourishment*. In place of the struggle and strife for more, this petition of the "Our Father" breeds filial trust and brings peace to the disciple.

THY WILL BE DONE

The devil's invitation to leap from the parapet seems distant from any temptation that a disciple might encounter. Both in this temptation and at the cross Jesus' response of acting within human limitations is *instructive* for every disciple. There is a real challenge to accept the limitations that ebb and flow through the stages and illnesses of life. While many spend fortunes on cosmetics or surgery to maintain an illusion of youth, Jesus reminds his disciples that they cannot make one hair white or black (5:36) and yet all hairs are counted by God (10:30). By vain attempts to take complete control of their life, disciples risk shutting out the One who knows them better than they do themselves. In addition, the drive for autonomy often comes at others' expense. Children in families and at school, spouses in marriage, friends, work colleagues all share the same environment and must cultivate mutual obedience and acceptance rather than struggle for domination with winners and losers. Sadly, this dynamic is seen at a global level through the squandering of natural resources to great cost for future generations. The beautiful creation bequeathed by God (6:28-30) is being disfigured by human

THE FURROW

exploitation. The third petition of the “Our Father”, namely “thy will be done” (6:10b), is an effective way to avoid the *illusions* of self-will and autocracy. By adopting the Father’s will, the disciple aligns with the Father’s desire for the full flowering of creation, humanity and each individual disciple. The Father desires nothing less than that all humanity be fruitful (Gen 1:28) and it is his will that is the surest guide for this.

THY KINGDOM COME

At the third temptation, in exchange for the kingdoms of the world and their glory, Jesus is incited to practice idolatry by worshipping the devil (4:8-9). Jesus refuses, in obedience to the commandments (Deut 6:13). Although the allure of transient kingdoms is manifest in the world, only the glory of God’s kingdom endures. Many are drawn in by the *bling* society of ostentatious wealth, popularity and reputation, exchanging God for mammon and its attributes (6:24). These treasures are confined to earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, rather than heaven, where neither moth nor rust can harm or thieves steal (6:19-20). Earthly kingdoms are a poor investment. The second petition of the “Our Father”, that the Father’s kingdom come, places present kingdoms and powers in the right *perspective*. They possess glory but will come to an end. The true glory will be revealed at the coming of the Son of Man and the renewal of all things (16:27; 19:28; 24:30; 25:31). This is the glory that God intends disciples to share and so they all the more eagerly pray, “thy kingdom come”.

CONCLUSION

Jesus undergoes temptation exercising no divine privilege. He does not defeat the devil with signs and wonders or with legions of angels but with the word of God which is accessible to every disciple. The specific words are drawn from Jesus’ most familiar daily prayers. The disciples are *not* left bereft in the face of temptation. Jesus has equipped them with a special prayer, the “Our Father”. Disciples might say this prayer to keep the devil at bay and to correct the distorted visions of reality that he proffers. More positively, the regular repetition of this prayer shapes disciples’ thoughts, words and imagination, aligning all with those of their Father. The prayer both assures disciples of their status as beloved children of God and provides the words for conversation with their Father. During Lent, disciples might say this special prayer more often and so open a dialogue through the Spirit with their loving Father who wants so much for them.