Jesus Resists Temptation

Read Deuteronomy 6:13-16 & Matthew 4:4-11

Key verse: “It’s written, People won’t live only by bread, but by every word spoken by God” (Matthew 4:4).

When my two brothers and I were little, our parents bribed us to memorize Bible verses. It was big money too—a nickel for each verse successfully memorized and correctly quoted. At the time, I was driven by the lure of money and sibling rivalry. Now, many years later, I am grateful for parents who helped me “hide the Word in my heart.” And I still remember many of those Bible verses I learned so long ago.

I have since learned that following Christ is much more than memorizing Bible verses. Yet, there is no substitute for knowing and obeying God’s Word!

The temptation of Jesus, recorded in Matthew 4, is loaded with theological nuance and significance. But we should not miss the obvious truth of this passage: Jesus defeated Satan by using a weapon available to every believer—the “sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God” (Ephesians 6:17).

Temptation 1 – After Jesus had fasted, alone in the desert for 40 days, Satan tempted him by saying: “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread” (4:3). Jesus answered, “It’s written, People won’t live only by bread, but by every word spoken by God” (4:4).

Satan tempted Jesus where he was most vulnerable—alone, tired, hungry. And Satan tempted Jesus to satisfy a legitimate physical need, hunger, in an illegitimate way and time.

Satan tempts us when and where we are most vulnerable. So, we need to be ready and watchful. Satan tempts us to satisfy legitimate physical needs—for food, for sex, for rest—in illegitimate ways. So, we need to be willing to defer physical gratification in the short term in order to experience God’s blessing over the long haul.

Satan tempted Jesus to satisfy physical, material needs at the expense of His relationship with God the Father. But Jesus knew we are not made to live “only by bread.” We are not only material beings, we are spiritual—made for a
relationship with God. Materialism fails to satisfy the deeper needs of our souls. Knowing this truth can help us resist temptation.

Jesus overcame this first temptation by wielding the sword of the Spirit, God’s Word: “It’s written, People won’t live only by bread, but by every word spoken by God.”

Temptation 2 – “After that the devil brought him into the holy city and stood him at the highest point of the temple: He said to him, ‘Since you are God’s Son, throw yourself down; for it is written, I will command my angels concerning you, and they will take you up in their hands so that you won’t hit your foot on a stone.’ Jesus replied, ‘Again it’s written, Don’t test the Lord your God.’” (4:5-7).

With this second temptation, Jesus was tempted to shortcut His God-ordained mission—gaining a following by flashy miracles or magic. This temptation also involved the lie—one we face today—that God is our magician in the sky, ready to perform at our request.

Notice also that, in this second temptation, Satan quoted Scripture, too. Anyone can twist a Scripture away from its larger context and thus distort its real meaning. So, while knowing the Bible is essential, it is important to know and understand specific verses in light of their larger context. As John Wesley taught, we are to interpret Scripture by Scripture. That involves interpreting specific verses in light of entire chapters, books, and the whole Bible.

Context is essential. So is a commitment to know and love the author of the Bible! The Bible was written to bring us into a relationship with God through Christ. This involves loving and obeying God, something Satan had no intention of doing.

Even with these cautions about misreading Scripture, the fundamental lesson is reinforced in this account of the second temptation: Jesus overcame temptation by wielding the Sword of the Spirit, God’s Word. And so can we!

Temptation 3 – “Then the devil brought him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. He said, ‘I’ll give you all these if you bow down and worship me.’ Jesus responded, ‘Go away, Satan, because it’s written, You will worship the Lord your God and serve only him.’ The devil left him, and angels came and took care of him” (4:8-11).

This is temptation in its most basic and compelling form: follow God and put Him first or follow the devil in hopes of gaining all that this world has to offer. Again, Jesus overcame temptation by wielding the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God. Jesus defeated Satan by using this weapon that every believer has at his disposal. I’m reminded of the following testimony:
“In the fall of 1956,” writes Gordon MacDonald, “I began my final year at the Stony Brook School, then a boys’ college preparatory school in New York. Among the required courses that last year was Senior Bible, taught by the school’s headmaster, Dr. Frank E. Gaebelein, a man who required us to memorize 300 verses of Scripture over the course of that year. If he met a student on the pathway from the classroom to the dining hall, he might say, ‘Gordon, give me John 13:34 please.’ He expected us to recite the verse from memory without faltering.

“One of the passages he tasked us to memorize was Psalm 46. For days we memorized, recited, memorized, recited until the Psalm 46 was part of us. ‘God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea….’

“In the spring of 1957, Senior Bible ended. A few days ago my doctor called me. ‘Gordon, I have some difficult news for you. There’s a tumor in the back of your head, in the lining of the brain. It is not malignant, but it will have to come out.’ I have spent my whole life helping other people face doctor-call moments like these. Now it was my turn and the very first thing that began to surge through my mind was: ‘God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be removed….’

When I was a teenager, a brilliant and godly man pumped my friends and me full of Scripture. But now his effort is paying off. Thanks to Dr. Gaebelein and Psalm 46, I may be concerned and cautious, but I am not inclined to be fearful” (from Leadership Journal Online, August 2013).

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