

**The Jesus Way** / **BE PREPARED**  
**Temptation: The Invisible War**  
**Matthew 4:1-11**

There is an invisible war that has gone on since time began, an all-out blitz of battle between Satan and God. The war is played out on the stage of history and chronicled in the pages of the Bible from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22. It is not fought with guns and grenades, tanks and troops, but the weapons of our warfare are spiritual. “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places (Eph. 6:12).”

The battle fields of this war are not memorialized by such names as Antietam and Gettysburg, Iwo Jima and Normandy, but were played out in climactic struggles of other locations familiar to those who know their Bible: The Garden of Eden; Job’s ash heap; the Altar of Abraham on Mt. Moriah; the Red Sea; Mt. Sinai’s summit, where the law was given; and Mt Sinai’s base camp where the Law was broken; the Garden of Gethsemane; Calvary; the Empty Tomb.

Because of that battle at the Empty Tomb, fought and won by our Living Lord, we know the ultimate outcome of this invisible war. “Death is swallowed up in victory!” And, “Greater is He that is in you, than he that is in the world (I John 4:4).”

You see, the outcome of the war is not in doubt. The war is not between two nearly equal opponents—God and Satan—who pull and tussle as with a tug-of-war rope with the outcome somewhat in doubt. No, actually, all beings in the universe can be divided into two categories: those who are God and those who are not God. Satan is in the pile under the label, “Not God.” Though powerful in his demonic struggles, though sneaky in his devious strategies, he has only the freedom to act within God’s sovereign allowance.

But within that allowance Satan wins many skirmishes: prejudices, genocides, dishonest leaders, fallen Christians.

That’s one casualty of war I am concerned about today: the Christian who falls to temptation. Down in the soul’s battlefield where you fight your own “invisible war,” I want you to win this week.

A study of today’s text might help. One of the greatest battlefields of the Bible’s flow of history is found in our text today, Matthew 4:1-11. The wilderness. Jesus alone. Fasting. Forty days. Satan fired three fiery darts.

Jesus not only was a sinless warrior during temptation, but also shows us the way to victory in the invisible war.

**1. The temptation to satisfy legitimate needs through self-willed means.**

<sup>1</sup> Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.

<sup>2</sup> After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. <sup>3</sup> The tempter came to

him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.”

<sup>4</sup> Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

Did you notice what the Word of God says here? Jesus was “led by the Spirit” into the desert to be tempted by the devil. That same Spirit that descended visually upon Jesus in the form of a dove at his baptism, then led him by divine guidance into the path of temptation. What do we learn by making this observation from Scripture? When we are confronted with temptation we know something from this passage. Encountering temptation is not sin. The Spirit can still be leading us even when we are tempted. After all, Jesus was actually “led by the Spirit” into the teeth of temptation. And when you are tempted, you have not sinned...yet.

Martin Luther stated his agreement that being tempted is not sin, describing temptation like birds flying overhead. “You cannot keep the birds from flying overhead,” he wrote, “But you better keep them from building nests in your hair.”

What then, was the first temptation of Jesus? The temptation to satisfy legitimate needs through self-willed means. Verse 2 says, “After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.” Why forty days? Perhaps it was to draw an unexpressed comparison to the forty days in which the twelve spies searched out the Promised Land. When the children of Israel did not respond by faith, but reacted with fear, they spent the next forty years in wilderness wandering. Now, one greater than Moses, Joshua, and Caleb, stands, having been baptized, ready to begin his ministry. Jesus Christ needs to show himself to be everything Israel failed to be. He had to be the perfect human before he could be the perfect Savior.

And so Satan comes to him with his heavy artillery—the fiery darts. If Satan could induce Jesus to sin, the whole plan of redemption would be shattered. Like broken crystal, the plan of God for our redemption, would be irreparably broken into un-gluable shards. Mankind—you, me, all of us—would go to hell.

Now Satan may have thought he could get Jesus to sin, ruining God’s plan of redemption. Remember, Satan is not God’s equal and does not share God’s attributes. God is omniscient; Satan is only knowledgeable. He did not know for sure his plan to tempt Jesus would fail. (Satan is also not omnipresent, being only ubiquitous).

Jesus did not sin. I believe Jesus was not only able not to sin, but also not able to sin. Did this lessen the temptation? No. Example. Suppose you owned a yacht moored in New Orleans August 29, 2005. Suppose you heard a hurricane was on its way and you did not want to move your boat. So, instead, you brought to the wharf hundreds of yards of cable. You tied up your yacht from every angle to every anchor and every mooring on every side. There was no way the boat could sink. Not only was it able not to sink, it was not able to sink.

After Hurricane Katrina passed over doing its damage and sinking all the other vessels in the harbor, your yacht still floated. Did it experience the fierce winds? Did it understand the fury of the surf? Yes. In fact, your yacht knew better the intensity of the storm than did the dinghies, dugouts and dories that sunk under the surf after a mere hour, two, or ten.

Similarly, Jesus knows what we go through. Even though he did not succumb to the temptation,

he knows full well the fierceness of the battle. “Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest...For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted (Heb. 2:17-18).” Jesus vanquished Satan not just on the cross at Calvary, but during the temptation in the wilderness. He first had to “bind the strong man” if he is afterwards to “spoil his house.”

The temptation to satisfy legitimate needs through self-willed means. “After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.” You think? The longest I’ve ever fasted with three days. And after fasting three days and three nights, I was ravenous. Of course, I have heard from those who know about such things, that the hunger pangs decrease and eventually disappear. But then hunger comes back as a final warning before harm or death might result from malnourishment. So the Bible says, “Jesus was hungry.” He had a legitimate need for food.

And at that place of vulnerability, Satan steps forward with his first temptation, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” Forty days before at his baptism in the Jordan River, the voice from heaven had declared, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased.” Now Satan picks up on that declaration with “If you are the Son of God...” In other words, prove it! Prove it by some miraculous feat. Don’t consult God the Father; don’t pray for his leading; don’t wait for him to provide. The need is legit; the opportunity is here, so “tell these stones to become bread.”

[Use a large stone as a visual aid.]

How often Satan tempts and defeats us with the same strategy. He knows we have legitimate human desires—the desire to be popular, to be comfortable, to have a romantic relationship, to be married, to have children—these are human desires that are legitimate. Nothing wrong with those desires.

But often Satan turns our legitimate desire into a deadly trap. As he said to Jesus, he whispers to you, “Don’t consult God the Father; don’t pray for his leading; don’t wait for him to provide. The need is legit; the opportunity is here, so “tell these stones to become bread.”

Oh, for you it probably isn’t wanting a rock to become rye, or a stone to become scone. But it might be wanting to be popular so you compromise your standards. Or wanting to be married, you ignore the spiritual gulf between the two of you. Or wanting to fit in, you stifle your witness.

How did Jesus respond so as to defeat the temptation? How does he model for us the strategy of victory? Jesus replied with Scriptural truth, a quote from Deuteronomy 8:3, “It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

That which you think you have to have or you’ll die, is only necessary if God allows it. And he will never supply what you really need through your independent disobedience.

## **2. The temptation to paint God into a corner by self-initiated predicament.**

<sup>5</sup> Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point

of the temple. <sup>6</sup> “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down. For it is written:

” ‘He will command his angels concerning you,  
and they will lift you up in their hands,  
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’”

<sup>7</sup> Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

Satan learned from Jesus’ response to the first temptation that quoting Scripture might work well to bolster one’s argument. So Satan quotes Scripture from Psalm 91:11-12.

For it is written: ” ‘He will command his angels concerning you,  
and they will lift you up in their hands,  
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’”

Don’t be surprised if cultists who proclaim a Gospel of human works instead of a true Gospel of God’s grace, can know Scripture and even quote it. Shouldn’t surprise us. Their leader in this Invisible War was able to quote Psalm 91.

But what was the substance of this temptation. The temptation to paint God into a corner by self-initiated predicament.

[Display paint roller as a visual aid.]

God had not led Jesus to go to the spire of the temple and, with great public fanfare, do a swan dive in front of the gasping crowds, before sticking his landing, a perfect 10. That was not the path God had for Jesus, not the way he was to be presented and proven as Messiah. In Psalm 91 there is a qualifying phrase Satan conveniently omitted from his quotation. In the middle of his Psalm 91 quote there is another line, “To guard you in all your ways.” God’s plan of presentation for Messiah was not in spectacular glory, but in servant-hearted humility. God had already prophesied the means for his public presentation in Zechariah 9:9, “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you. He is just and endowed with salvation, Humble, and mounted on a donkey.”

God was going to present Messiah on Palm Sunday on a donkey, not now in a circus show stunt. Jesus replies from Deut. 6:16, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

This temptation to “put God to the test” can also come to us. No, we may not be tempted to jump off the US Bancorp building without a hang glider, but we may be tempted to paint God into a corner in other ways. To borrow money foolishly and then [use paint roller to emphasize points] demand God bail us out. Tempted to have unprotected sex, and then [use paint roller to emphasize points] demand God make the test result negative. To get married to a creep or a flirt, and then [use paint roller to emphasize points] demand God change him or her into what you should have been looking for in the first place.

Oh, God’s mercy is so great. Sometimes he does unexpectedly give financial help; sometimes the test result is negative; sometimes our spouse does have a spiritual transformation. But the temptation is to step toward those sinful and foolish situations because you think you’re holding

a Magic Lantern, and God is your genie who can come to your rescue. No. God is no genie. He refuses to be painted into a corner of your making. He only guarantees rescue from the pavement below if he has led you to the pinnacle above.

### **3. The temptation to ascend the mountaintop without going through the valley.**

<sup>8</sup> Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. <sup>9</sup> “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.” <sup>10</sup> Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”

<sup>11</sup> Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

Someday Jesus will receive what was dangled before him here. There will come a day in which all the kingdoms will be his.

We glimpse a vision of that day ahead in Revelation 5:

<sup>9</sup> And they sang a new song, saying,  
“Worthy are You to take the book  
and to break its seals;

for You were slain,  
and purchased for God with Your blood men  
from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.

<sup>10</sup> “You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God;  
and they will reign upon the earth.”

<sup>11</sup> Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands, <sup>12</sup> saying with a loud voice,

“Worthy is the Lamb that was slain  
to receive power and riches and wisdom and might  
and honor and glory and blessing.”

<sup>13</sup> And every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying,

“To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb,  
be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever.”

<sup>14</sup> And the four living creatures kept saying, “Amen,” And the elders fell down and worshiped.

Someday Christ will have what was offered. The temptation was in the means to obtain the goal. “All this I will give you,” Satan said, “if you will bow down and worship me.”

The honor was to be accomplished merely by worshiping the Devil. And by doing so, the Cross could be avoided. No need for the agony of Gethsemane. No need for the crown of thorns. No need for the whip, lash, and clubs. No need for the spikes, the thirst, the exhaustion, the Death. But Jesus knew the Invisible War game plan. He knew souls could only be purchased with the blood that flowed in His veins. Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sin. He

is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

We can be so grateful our Lord and Savior and Victorious Warrior replied quoting Deuteronomy 6:3, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”

The temptation to ascend the mountaintop without going through the valley.

Sometimes that temptation comes to us. For Jesus, it was the temptation to receive His kingdom without going to the Cross. For us it may be other things. There are some lessons we only learn, some depth of character we only achieve through the excruciating pain of loss—bereavement in death, heartache through betrayal, dashed hopes after financial reversals, or other emotional valleys. We are often given messages that life is to be pain-free.

[Display large bottle of painkiller pills.]

Recently, I was at a medical facility and on the wall was displayed a placard that said, “Patient’s Bill of Rights: You have a right to be without pain. If you are experiencing pain, tell your medical provider.” Now that is fine—to be as physically comfortable as possible when undergoing medical procedures. But that philosophy has pervaded all of life. We expect not to have pain ever, physically or emotionally. And when we find ourselves in pain, walking in those valleys, the temptation is to look at God with suspicious eyes. To curse God and push away from him in bitterness and despair. But instead, we should burrow our face into his chest. We realize the path to the mountaintop leads through the valley. So if you’re going through a valley of trial, will you call on God for comfort instead of cursing God in complaint?

So which of these three temptations has Satan been hammering you with lately?

1. The temptation to satisfy legitimate needs through self-willed means.
2. The temptation to paint God into a corner by self-initiated predicament.
3. The temptation to ascend the mountaintop without going through the valley.

There is an invisible war all around us. Don’t be taken captive as a POW. Keep your eyes on the victory ahead. The end of history is not in jeopardy. We’ve read the Book. Revelation 21-22 gives away the ending.

“And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them, and He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes, and there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.” And He who sits on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” (Revelation 21:2-5).