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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE FOUR GOSPELS

UNIT 6: THE TEMPTATIONS

Immediately after his baptism, we are told that Jesus was “led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil” and that “After fasting forty days ... The tempter came to him” (Matthew 4:1–3). All three of the Synoptic Gospels describe this pivotal event in the life of Jesus, two of them in detail (Matthew 4:1–11; Mark 1:12–13; Luke 4:1–13). In this unit we will examine the accounts and learn the significance of the temptations for understanding the ministry and work of Jesus.

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

We will focus on Matthew’s account of the temptations which draws heavily on terms and imagery from the Old Testament that would have been very familiar to contemporary readers of his gospel. For example, in the Septuagint Greek version of the Old Testament (which is known to have been used in first century Judea), the terms *Iesous* (Jesus) and *diabolos* (devil) both appear in Zechariah 3:1 and are identical to the words Matthew uses in his account (Matthew 4:1). So, Matthew does not need to introduce the concept of the devil to his readers (see Note 1) – Jewish religion of that period already recognized the devil as being a tempter based on scriptures such as 1 Chronicles 21:1.

When we look at the details of the temptation story, we see that its connections with the Old Testament are very specific. The whole account of Jesus’ temptation reprises the story of the “temptations” experienced by the people of Israel in their desert wanderings after the Exodus. Just as the people of Israel went into the wilderness after their figurative baptism in the Red Sea (1 Corinthians 10:2), the gospel accounts mention that the Son of God was “led by the Spirit into the wilderness” (Matthew 4:1) after his baptism. In fact, the story of God’s “son” Israel (Exodus 4:22-23; Deuteronomy 8:5; etc.) specifically states that Israel was “led” into the wilderness at the time of the Exodus (Exodus 13:18 ESV; etc.).

The fact that Jesus was then tested in the wilderness for forty days (Matthew 4:2) also recalls Israel being tested in the wilderness for forty years (Deuteronomy 8:2 – see Note 2). During this time, Jesus communed with God while fasting, just as Moses (a symbolic “type” or forerunner of Christ – Deuteronomy 18:15) did during Israel’s own time of wilderness wandering (Exodus 34:28). All of these ideas – being led into the wilderness, being tested, and for a “forty” span of time – are found together in a single verse in the book of Deuteronomy:

Remember how the LORD your God *led* you all the way in the *wilderness* these *forty* years, to humble and *test* you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. (Deuteronomy 8:2, emphases added)

As we will see, this verse describing the testing of Israel is the very verse before one quoted by Jesus during his own wilderness temptations. Although Jesus' time in the wilderness was forty days rather than forty years, the symbolic connection is still clear, and we should not forget that Jesus fasting before he began to teach and preach also directly paralleled Moses fasting for forty days while communing with God before returning to give the law to the people of Israel (Exodus 24:18).

Finally, we can see that Israel's Old Testament background to Jesus' temptations was not only known by the original readers of the gospels, but also was specifically in the mind of Matthew when he composed his account. We can know this because Matthew includes the three passages of Deuteronomy that Jesus quoted in his temptations (Deuteronomy 8:3; 6:13, and 6:16) not in the order they are found in the book of Deuteronomy, but in the order of the "tests" or trials Israel underwent in the wilderness – just as they are recorded in the book of Exodus.

So it is clear that the Old Testament background of Jesus' testing in the wilderness gives us a symbolic framework by which we can understand this important event. Although God's "son" Israel failed to keep his commandments when tested in the wilderness, Jesus obeyed when placed in the same situation – proving his obedience was greater than that of physical Israel. The exact way in which Jesus' obedience was demonstrated compared to the failure of the people of Israel and the significance of his obedience will be examined next.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

A number of books claiming to show discrepancies and contradictions in the New Testament mention that the accounts of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness found in Matthew 4 and Luke 4 give the temptations in a different order. This is supposed to show disagreement among the New Testament writers as to what happened and that they were not sure of the facts themselves. The temptations are actually identical in the two accounts, but Matthew records them as being for Christ to:

1. Turn stones into bread.
2. Leap from the highest point of the temple.
3. Worship Satan.

Luke changes the order of the temptations slightly to:

1. Turn stones into bread.
2. Worship Satan.
3. Leap from the highest point of the temple.

However, there are very likely reasons for the different order in Matthew's Gospel and that of Luke. Matthew's Gospel was written to a Jewish audience. Luke's Gospel, on the other hand, seems to have been written to a primarily Greek-speaking audience. Many of the differences between the two gospels – for example, the genealogies of Jesus – are clearly as a result of these different audiences. The stories of the temptation of Jesus are no different.

In Matthew, from a Jewish perspective, the temptations are arranged in an increasing order from appropriating God's power for personal needs, to taking an easier but wrong path to fulfilling God's will, to finally placing another god before God himself. For a Jewish audience, all these temptations would seem serious, but there is no question that they would be seen as being in an increasing order.

In Luke, the order of the temptations is subtly but importantly changed. For a gentile Greek audience, the temptation to perform the miracle of changing stones to bread would not be as great as a temptation to great power and rulership in the world, but that would itself not seem as great a temptation as to become like a god oneself. Luke's order of the temptations perfectly fits this gentile Greek perspective, as do so many of the details in his gospel.

There is also another fact that we should consider in looking at these accounts. Matthew's order of the temptations not only fits the Jewish perspective best, but also seems to be in actual chronological order. We see this in the fact that Matthew uses chronological markers in his account – he writes “then...” or some similar term before each of the temptations to show that one followed the other (Matthew 4:1, 5, 8, 11). Luke, however, uses no chronological markers and simply tells us what the temptations were – in an order that would make the most sense to his own primarily non-Jewish audience. On the other hand, as we saw above, by using a chronological order Matthew was able to follow the sequence of the events described in the book of Exodus.

The three temptations themselves have been interpreted in various ways, but it is not difficult to understand them.

The three temptations themselves have been interpreted in various ways, but it is not difficult to see what they signified. The first temptation, that of turning stones to bread, is doubtless the easiest to understand. Anyone fasting for an extended period of time would have no difficulty comprehending the physical temptation to turn objects into food, if they had the power to do so. Additionally, this temptation involves the desire to use power given for other purposes for one's own physical desires.

The second temptation (in the order given in Matthew's Gospel) is more difficult to understand. Many scholars note that there were plenty of high points in the Judean wilderness, but simply jumping from a high point would not be a real temptation. They feel that the temptation must be understood based on the fact that if Jesus had thrown himself from a pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem, worshipers in the temple courts would have witnessed his being safely let down by angels (according to the devil's reasoning regarding Psalms 91:12) and would thus believe in him – as this was, of course, before the many legitimate signs Christ did give after his testing. The temptation would be an appeal to Christ's emotions and was perhaps offered to him as an alternative to the route of eventual crucifixion (see Note 3).

The third temptation – to bow to Satan in order to gain power over the whole world – can clearly be seen as the temptation to elevate the self by means that involve putting something else before God.

When we compare these wilderness temptation accounts of Israel and Jesus, we see how direct the parallels are. First, the Israelites gave in to temptation regarding their physical desires by not trusting God for sustenance even when God supplied manna for them to eat (Exodus 16:2-3; Deuteronomy 8:2-4).

We also see the Israelites giving in to the temptation to argue with Moses and God regarding how God's plan for them was carried out. The Bible shows that Israel “tested” God repeatedly in this way during their desert wanderings (for example, Exodus 17:1-7, notice particularly verses 2 and 7; Deuteronomy 6:16).

Finally, we see the Israelites falling to the temptation to worship something other than God in their bowing down to the golden calf and other idols and pagan gods in order to fulfill their own desires (Exodus 32:1-4; Deuteronomy 6:13-15).

We know that these three failures of ancient Israel directly paralleled the temptations endured by Christ in the wilderness because Jesus quoted specific references to exactly the same stories from the book of Deuteronomy in response to each of the three temptations he underwent. Jesus resisted the temptation to turn stones to bread by quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, “man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” – which comes from the section of Deuteronomy talking about the Israelites’ sin regarding food. He resisted the temptation to tempt God by throwing himself from the temple pinnacle by quoting from Deuteronomy 6:16 in which Moses rebukes the Israelites for putting God to the test. Finally, he resisted the temptation to worship Satan by quoting from Deuteronomy 6:13-15 – the section faulting the Israelites for worshiping other gods.

CONCEPTS AND APPLICATIONS:

Now that we have examined the Old Testament background and the meaning of the individual aspects of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness, we must turn to the question of what the overall meaning and significance of this event was. First, it is important to realize that there are different views of the temptation accounts in Christianity. Traditionally, and perhaps still for most believers today, the story is regarded as biographical – as a literal one which objectively recounts a specific event in Christ’s life.

Some Christians see the story as more of a parable, however. This is because the temptation narratives, unlike the accounts of Jesus’ later teaching and miracles, are not reported by the gospel writers themselves – we are told that Jesus was in the wilderness and no one else was present at the time to record this event. Some feel therefore, that the story was perhaps told by Jesus himself to relate his own spiritual battles in the form of a parable. Lack of specifics in the gospels regarding the origin of the accounts means that it is impossible to “prove” one view or another, but however we interpret what was involved in the three temptations, it is clear that they reflect certain concepts and teach important lessons.

First, in the temptations, the responses of Jesus – his words and actions – had larger significance than that applied to him alone. The temptation narratives show that Jesus not only overcame Satan’s temptations, but in doing so he also overcame Satan himself. The apostle John wrote that, “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work” (1 John 3:8) and that process began with the temptations.

Second, the accounts of the temptations teach us a great deal about temptation and obedience. Each temptation Christ underwent can be seen to make a unique appeal to human nature, and his trials have everything to do with the temptations we face in our own lives (Hebrews 2:18; 4:15). We see this in the temptation to not trust God with our physical needs, the temptation to “tempt” God regarding the fulfillment of our emotional desires, and the temptation to elevate something other than God in fulfilling our psychological desires. These are the underlying forms of temptation the apostle John warned against in writing about “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life” (1 John 2:16).

In fact, this is the very core of what Jesus’ testing was all about and what is at the heart of all temptation: the urge to push aside God and his way and to choose our own desires over his. The details of Jesus’ temptation mesh not only with that of ancient Israel, but also with the Garden of Eden temptation. All show these same three types of uncontrolled desire. Genesis 3:6 states that when Eve took the forbidden fruit, she saw that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was “good for food” (lust of the flesh – physical desires), “pleasant to the eyes” (lust of the eyes – emotional desires), and “a tree to be desired to make one wise” (the pride of life – psychological desires). This understanding harmonizes well with the fact that Christ underwent all the same types of temptation experienced by humans (Hebrews 4:14).

Falling to these three types of temptation was a mistake that our first ancestors and ancient Israel both made. But it was a mistake that Jesus did not follow in overcoming Satan's deliberate and carefully calculated attempts to destroy him. Jesus overcame temptation in the Judean wilderness not only by knowing and quoting precisely relevant scriptures, but also by understanding the nature of temptation and by acting on that knowledge through the power of the Spirit of God. We see this underlying truth in the words of Jesus himself: "By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me" (John 5:30). Unlike the ancient Israelites in the wilderness, Jesus' response to temptation was based on his desire to please God more than himself. If, with God's help, we are to successfully overcome temptation in our own lives, we too must know God's word, must want to please God more than ourselves, and must understand what lies behind the choices every temptation offers.

Just as Jesus learned from his trials, from the things he suffered (Hebrews 5:8), so do we, and if we respond properly in the face of temptations, it is often the case that we can learn more from our trials than we do from our triumphs.

* Note 1: The Hebrew concept of *ha satan* (the accuser) used throughout the Old Testament and that of *diabolos* (devil) used in the New Testament are different in some ways, but the Jews frequently used the Greek term to refer to the Satan or his demons.

* Note 2: The Bible frequently uses the equivalency principle of a day for a year. See, for example, Ezekiel 4:5–6; Daniel 9:24–27.

*Note 3: We see the same temptation in play when Peter tried to dissuade Jesus from allowing himself to be sacrificed – and Jesus' identical response of "Get behind me, Satan!" (Matthew 16:23; Mark 8:33).

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REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Basics:

Make a brief summary of the similarities between the temptations of ancient Israel (Deuteronomy 6-8) and those of Jesus in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1–11).

Beneath the Surface:

What basic desire or temptation lay behind ancient Israel's making and worship of the golden calf?

Everyday Applications:

Think about how understanding that there are three kinds of temptation – as seen in the stories of Adam and Eve, of Israel, of Jesus, and in 1 John 2:16 – can help us understand temptation in our own lives.

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