



Spirit Led

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Matthew 4:1-11

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Was Jesus really tempted? Doesn't temptation imply a confusion or indecisiveness that seems uncharacteristic of Jesus? Was he really that human? Why would the Spirit lead Jesus to temptation? Yes, Jesus experienced temptations just like any of us but he did not fall to them (Hebrews 4:14).

Jesus experienced firsthand what it means to face the chilling headwinds of temptation to the point of teaching us to beg God not to do that (Matthew 6:13; see also Psalm 141:4). The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke all clearly say that Jesus experienced temptation in the desert. These three gospels paint a very human portrait of Jesus. John, in contrast, portrays Jesus as keenly aware of his divine origin and destiny.

Sister Mary McGlone reminds us: "Jesus' temptations were not a one-time event, nor simply an experience in the desert and then the Garden of Gethsemane. In some form, they summarize all the ways he and any of us can distort our vocation to be images of God."¹

God does not put one in harm's way by tempting people. God, in fact, does not tempt anyone as the Letter of James (1:13) indicates. But in the same Letter we do find that God tests our faith for the purpose of strengthening it (1:3).

Temptations, on the other hand, are designed to make us fail, but they do not come from God: they come from Satan (Matthew 4:1), his evil angels (Ephesians 6:12), or from ourselves (Ephesians 2:1-3; James 1:14-15; Romans 13:14; Galatians 5:13). God allows us to experience them, and they are allowed for our benefit: we should rejoice that our faith is tested because it builds the character of Christ within us. The Apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10:12-13 that being tempted or tested is normal, and we should be careful not to fail, aware of our weakness. He continues with a promise that God will not test us beyond our ability and that there will be a way out (2 Corinthians 12:9).

There is a reason why a more contemporary translation of the Lord's prayer (Mt 6) has us pray "Save us from the time of trial" instead of the more traditional "Lead us not into temptation."

So, Jesus knew temptation as a human being. He was presented with the common tendency of turning true faith into a magic act and God into a dispenser of goods. His identity was doubted, and he was challenged to prove himself along with the worthiness of his filial relationship to God. When doubt about us is sawn in our mind, we count on ourselves only, we get separated

¹ https://www.ncronline.org/feb-26-2023-first-sunday-lent?utm_source=NCR+List&utm_campaign=7c4673e84d-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2023_02_16_06_28&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_6981ecb02e-7c4673e84d-%5BBLIST_EMAIL_ID%5D

from God and one another. A life of comfort is attractive. Worldly possessions and the promise of gaining control over life and the respect (submission?) of other people may be alluring. This temptation disregards personal internal (moral, psychological, spiritual) power for the purpose of seeking external power to affirm oneself.

But by living his humanity to the fullest splendor and in clear awareness of his identity and in total obedience to his internal compass, Jesus did not succumb to temptations and modeled for us a way to follow. He was true to himself and did not recant on his relationship with the Father.

That's what temptations produce: a deviation off our spiritual path, a negation of our identity, a challenge to our trust in God. Temptations disturb our relationship with our Creator, manipulate reality, distort information, and create doubt in our minds. We become governed by fear, and we take life into our own hand...or give up our power to the strongest deceiver.

His identity came clear to Jesus at his baptism, a story reported immediately before today's section of the Gospel of Matthew. During that extraordinary spiritual event, Jesus was revealed and claimed as God's "Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:17)

So, Jesus was led by the Spirit to the desert, the training ground for spiritual battles. He did not avoid but welcomed his time in the desert. It was strenuous but necessary. One better be clear about one's dignity and destiny. Short of that, one faces the world alone or falls to the temptation to make the best of it and wiggle one's own way out of chaos and opportunity. Left to our own devices, we resort to figuring out how to better use our resources often at the expense of others.

But one thing we need to keep in mind is that the Spirit led Jesus into the desert. The Bible does not say the Spirit dropped him off there and went Her own way. We must assume the Spirit never left him. In our trials and temptations, let us never forget we live in the presence of the Spirit of God, we may lean on Her, we may count on Her power. Our existence is in God.

The word "lent" is borrowed from the Old English word *lencten* (related to "lengthen," referring to the lengthening of days) that simply referred to the season of spring. It is a time of preparation, a time to return to the desert where Jesus prepared for his ministry. Those who follow him, use this time to re-orient ourselves on our Christian journey.

Lent is traditionally associated with penitence, fasting, almsgiving, and prayer. We think of Lent as a time for giving things *up* balanced by giving things *to* those in need. Yet, "Lent should never be morose, an annual ordeal during which we begrudgingly forgo a handful of pleasures. Instead, we ought to approach Lent as an opportunity, not a requirement. After all, it is meant to be the Church's springtime, a time when, out of the darkness of the sin's winter, a repentant, empowered people, emerges...Put another way, Lent is the season in which we ought to be surprised by joy." In Lent we "focus on our heart's deepest longing: unity with Christ."²

Led by the Spirit of Jesus, we walk every day by faith, identifying our strengths while at the same time being aware of our weakness. Renouncing spiritual arrogance and vainglory, we prepare for the work of the Spirit in us, we progress on the journey towards resurrection, the "happy exchange" of our sin with Jesus' righteousness.³ Thus Martin Luther explains:

² Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter, XVI.

³ https://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/content/pdfs/20-3_Galatians/20-3_Hultgren.pdf

“That is the mystery which is rich in divine grace to sinners: wherein by a wonderful exchange our sins are no longer ours but Christ’s and the righteousness of Christ not Christ’s but ours. He has emptied Himself of His righteousness that He might clothe us with it and fill us with it.”⁴

May Lent be a joyous season of deeper awareness of the presence of the Spirit and deeper fellowship with Jesus. May we walk in gratitude towards our resurrection in Christ. Amen.

⁴ Luther, WA 1883, 5: 608