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Matthew 4:1 - 4:11 Introduction



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this teaching, Steve Gregg examines the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness from Matthew 4:1-11. Jesus fasted for 40 days before being confronted by Satan, who attempted to entice Jesus to sin. Gregg emphasizes the importance of correctly understanding and applying scripture, citing Psalm 91:11 as an example of Satan distorting the Word of God. He concludes by noting that Jesus ultimately resisted all of Satan's temptations and received affirmation from God as the beloved Son.

Transcript

Today we'll be looking at Matthew chapter 4 and we'll be studying the temptation of Jesus. The story of the temptation of Jesus is found in detail both in Matthew 4 and in Luke chapter 4. It is spoken of very briefly in a single verse in Mark chapter 1, but the details are given to us here in Matthew, one of the fullest accounts. Now, the story of the temptation of Jesus is probably a unique story in the Gospels in this respect.

Nobody was there with Jesus when he had this experience. Therefore, the only way the Gospel writers could know about it is if he told them the story. You see, most of the stories about Jesus that you read of in the Gospels are stories that the apostles were with Jesus, or at least somebody was with Jesus, and the apostles were able to get the information through ordinary means.

They would not even have to ask Jesus about it. They would be witnesses of it. But here is a story of something that happened when Jesus was all alone.

Well, not entirely all alone, but he was not with any other human companions. And therefore, there were no human witnesses. And therefore, the information must have been communicated to Matthew by Jesus himself.

And that is unusual. Very few stories in Matthew would fall into that category. In fact, this may be the only one.

Let me read the entire story, and we'll go back and pick up pieces of it. The first 11 verses of Matthew chapter 4. Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to

be tempted by the devil. And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward he was hungry.

Now, when the tempter came to him, he said, If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread. But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. Then the devil took him up into the holy city and set him on a pinnacle of the temple and said to him, If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning you.

In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone. Jesus said to him, It is written again, You shall not tempt the Lord your God. Then again the devil took him up on an exceedingly high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in their glory.

And he said to him, All these things I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me. Then Jesus said to him, Away with you, Satan, for it is written, You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve. Then the devil left him, and behold, the angels came and ministered to him.

Now this temptation took place, according to Mark's gospel, over a period of forty days. Or at least some temptation did. These three temptations in particular may have occurred at the end of that period.

Because it says Jesus had fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was hungry. And that, of course, set the tone for the first temptation. The first temptation being to turn rocks into bread.

Jesus had been fasting, and fasting means he had not been eating. Now normal fasting involves not eating, but it does involve drinking water. Jesus was out in the desert.

We don't know where he may have found water. But there's no reason to believe that he went without water these forty days. It would take a miracle to keep a man alive without water.

And of course miracles were not lacking in Jesus' ministry. But the Bible does not say that he went without water. In fact, it says after forty days he was hungry.

It doesn't say he was thirsty. We do have cases in the Old Testament where Moses and Elijah, both on separate occasions, fasted without water or bread for forty days. But this can only be attributed to special miracles wrought in their case, because the average human being cannot really live more than three or four days without water, unless God intervenes.

Moses was forty days on the Mount Sinai without water or food. And then he came down,

broke the tablets, went back up for another forty days without water or food. That's quite a weight loss plan.

I don't know that very many people would be able to do that. But I would imagine he didn't weigh very much when he came back down. In any case, Jesus is never said to have been without water.

And it should be thought that Jesus was probably not given supernatural assistance in going through this fast. This fast he went through just like you or I would. And therefore he would be as hungry as you or I would be at the end of it.

As a matter of fact, those who have fasted this long, and I've known some people who have, I certainly haven't, have testified that when you fast at length, like for many weeks, the fast goes through a certain predictable cycle. Basically, you have quite a strong hunger for the first several days of the fast. But after the third or fourth day, according to many, the hunger actually goes away, although it is replaced with a feeling of real weakness, physical weakness, where it's very difficult to be motivated to move or get up or do anything.

And you have to be very deliberate in your actions because your body is so tired until maybe about the tenth to the fourteenth day of the fast. But after that point, about two weeks into the fast, both the hunger and the weakness are gone and remain gone for several weeks. I've talked to a number of people who've been through this, and I've read books about it as well, that there is a period in the middle and near the end of the fast where after you've gone through the period of hunger and of weakness, you feel neither hunger nor weakness.

You're energetic, you feel good, you feel healthy, you feel strong. And I've heard that you even wonder whether you would ever want to eat again because you just feel so great. However, during that time, your body is consuming lots of stuff that's in there, stuff that's in your colon and stuff that never really gets cleaned out most of the time.

And your body is burning all that stuff and releasing a lot of toxins into your body too, by the way. But at the end of the fast, after approximately 40 days usually, the hunger returns. And when it does, it is because the fast is gone as far as it can.

The body has burned everything that it has in it to burn except its own tissue. And if you do not break a fast at that point, then you can die because your body is no longer burning anything else that begins to burn itself up. And that is a sign when you've gone 40 days and your hunger returns, that you are about ready to starve to death.

Now, by the way, if you ever try a fast like that, you ought to do some research on it before doing so because if you break a fast like that too suddenly, you can die from breaking it. Your body has to be eased back into eating as well. But what the point I'm

making is that Jesus was fasting 40 days and it says He was hungry, which means He'd gone through all those stages of His fast and now the hunger had returned and He was now starving to death.

It was at that point that the devil came to Him and said, If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread. Now, if the devil tempted me to do that, it would be no temptation at all. Even though I am a child of God, I don't have the capacity to turn stones into bread, at least not at a whim.

I mean, if God wanted me to do so, He could give me that ability. But just because I would want to, just because I'm hungry, I can't just go around turning stones into bread. Jesus, though, we must assume could do that.

He was indeed the Son of God. Now, when Satan said, If you are the Son of God, interestingly enough, he was alluding to something that had happened in the previous chapter. When Jesus was baptized, a voice from heaven said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I'm well pleased.

And so Jesus had received affirmation from God Himself verbally that He was His unique Son. And now the devil comes challenging that. Yeah, if you're the Son of God, then let's see you show it.

Let's see you prove it. Why don't you turn these rocks into bread? Now, I'm sure that the temptation to prove that He was the Son of God was not as great as simply the temptation to eat when He was physically starving to death. But Jesus answered, as is the best way to answer any kind of temptation, by citing the Word of God.

The Bible says that the Word of God is a sharp, two-edged sword. It is the sword of the Spirit, according to Ephesians chapter 6 and verse 17. And in Hebrews chapter 4 and verse 12, it says, The Word of God is alive and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword.

And in spiritual warfare against temptation and the devil, one must be ready with the Scriptures. It's interesting that Jesus, though He was operating under the handicaps of an ordinary man, He had known, He had learned the Scriptures quite well. Enough that He could not only quote Scriptures, but He could quote the right Scripture for the right temptation.

This takes more than a little knowledge of the Scriptures. Jesus said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. Now, not only was it quite spiritual of Jesus to resist the temptation and to quote Scripture instead, it's quite impressive that the Scripture He had at hand was perfect for the particular temptation.

The devil was essentially saying, You're going to die if you don't eat some bread soon, so

turn these rocks into bread. And Jesus said, The way that a man dies from eating bread is not as important as something else. Man doesn't only live by bread alone.

He doesn't only have a physical life to sustain. He also must live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. Now, Jesus was saying more than simply making the point that the Word of God is spiritual food to us.

That is true, of course. It is spiritual food to us. We must not only nourish our bodies, but also our spirits by the Word of God.

But the statement, A man must live by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God, was very fitting to the situation because Jesus had not gone on this fast on His own bidding. In Luke's Gospel, it tells us that Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit and He was driven into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit to be tempted by the devil. His fast and His sojourn in the wilderness and His temptation was all part of what God was telling Him to do and requiring Him to do.

Now, He could not break His fast until the God who ordered Him to fast ordered Him not to. When God said fast, Jesus could not just decide to stop fasting whenever He wanted to. He would live by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.

And God was not saying, Break your fast at this time. The devil was, and he was appealing to Jesus' flesh in the matter because Jesus' flesh craved food. Well, of course He would crave food, but He was going to wait on God and wait for a word from His Father about this.

A man doesn't live by bread only. He lives by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. And this is true of no one so much as of Jesus because He lived truly by every word that proceeded from the mouth of God.

He did nothing on His own initiative but only what His Father showed Him to do and told Him to do. This is affirmed by Him many times in the Gospel of John. So, we have Jesus saying, Essentially, I'm not going to act on my own initiative here.

I'm going to wait on a word from my Father. Now, some people, in trying to decide why it would have been a sin for Jesus to turn these rocks into bread, some have tried to explain that it would have been a sin for Him to use His miraculous power to feed Himself when in fact His miraculous power was for the help of others. I do not agree with this interpretation.

I don't think anywhere in the Scripture that it says it's wrong for Jesus to use His miraculous power to help Himself. And there was an occasion when to pay His own and Peter's temple tax. He apparently worked a miracle of causing Peter to find a coin in a fish's mouth in Matthew chapter 17.

This covered Jesus' obligations as well as Peter's. So, I mean, there's a miracle that Jesus worked to cover His own financial obligations. But the real problem here, the reason it would have been a sin for Jesus to break His fast in this manner is because it was not on His own volition that He fasted and it could not be on His own volition that He would break His fast.

He must do only what His Father said and that's what He Himself mentioned. I must live by only every word that proceeds from the mouth of My Father. And so He would not break His fast until the Father said so.

Well, when you answer the devil with Scripture, don't be surprised if he decides to use Scripture against you as well. The second temptation in Matthew, by the way, the latter two temptations are in reverse order in Luke. Luke has them in reverse order.

I believe that Matthew's order is the proper order for various reasons. I don't have time to go into. But the second temptation here in Matthew was when the devil took Him to the Holy City, that's Jerusalem, and set Him on the pinnacle of the temple.

And he said to Him, If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down, for it is written. And now the devil himself quotes Scripture. The Scripture he quotes is from Psalm 91, which says, He shall give His angels charge concerning You.

And in their hands they shall bear You up, lest You dash Your foot against a stone. Now, the Scripture seemed to be given a promise that if a man of God, and Psalm 91 is written to the righteous in general, it was not written to the Messiah, but simply to righteous people, those who fear the Lord. It is promised that He has given His angels charge over such people, and that they'll be upholden by the angels lest they dash their foot against a stone.

The implication was that if Jesus would jump down from this high place in the temple, that He would not be hurt because the angels would support Him. Now, what would be the reason for the devil suggesting this? Well, it's not really clear why the devil would want Him to do it, but it is thought that He may have been appealing to Jesus' ego, to Jesus' pride, because there were no doubt multitudes down in the courts of the temple in the middle of the day at that time. If Jesus had jumped down into their midst from one of the high pinnacles of the temple, they would have no doubt had to see Him, and the angels bringing Him down softly to the ground would have certainly made an impression and would have immediately convinced people that Jesus was a man from heaven and the Messiah and all of that.

And therefore, Jesus could by doing so make an impression on the people very quickly and get their respect and their honor, and yet Jesus did not do so. He did not follow it as a big mistake, and He did not follow it. Now, what's interesting here is that even though Satan quoted Scripture, Jesus did not follow Satan's suggestion because He saw that

Satan was misapplying Scripture.

Actually, when Satan quoted the verses from Psalm 91, he left out one important phrase. It's in Psalm 91-11. It says, He shall give His angels charge concerning you to keep you in all your ways.

Now, Satan, when he quoted it, left out the phrase to keep you in all your ways. In the Psalms, your ways are the ways that God has ordained for you to go. The angels will keep you as you are going in the way that God has ordained for you to go.

The devil left that part out, and he spoke it as if it was an unconditional promise that no matter what you do, however foolhardy, jumping off a cliff, for example, you will be nearby enough so that you won't hurt yourself. Well, that's not what the promise is. Satan was implying that that promise was unconditional like that, and that if Jesus would just throw Himself off the pinnacle, that God would have to save Him by sending the angels.

But Jesus knew that's not what the Psalm taught. So, it's not enough simply to quote Scripture. You need to know what the Scripture means and whether it's relevant or not.

So, Jesus says, well, Jesus said to him, it is written again, you shall not tempt the Lord your God. I'm sorry, that's Deuteronomy 6.16. And so, Jesus interpreted the action that Satan was suggesting as tempting God. Now, this raises an interesting question.

What is tempting God? There are people who do, who step out in faith more than others. Sometimes they'll go into spiritual fields where there's great danger to them. Or sometimes they will commit their health or their finances to God in a way that makes other people somewhat frightened because it seems irresponsible.

And when people do things that call for a greater degree of faith than the average person wants to exercise, many times critics will say you're tempting God. That it is written, and they could have said that to Jesus, of course, on this occasion, they would have been right. If he had jumped off the temple there, he would have been tempting God by his own statement, he tells us that.

But is every act of dangerous faith a case of tempting God? Obviously not. When then is an action that is risky and perilous tempting God, and when is it not? It comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. If God has told you to do something, and God has promised that he will take care of you in that situation, then it is not tempting God for you to trust in his word, for you to take him seriously and act as if he has told the truth.

That is not tempting God. What is tempting God is when you act on your own initiative and then ask God to come to your rescue in such a situation. That is what we would call presumption, not faith.

There are many people, for example, when their children have diabetes, who have felt that God should heal their child rather than them giving insulin. There have been more than a few cases where parents have withheld insulin from diabetic children or from themselves when they were diabetic, and they have died. Now, were they tempting God or were they trusting God? Well, that depends.

Did God ever say that he would heal them of diabetes? Some people say yes, some say no. We would have to look carefully at the scriptures that are used by both sides of that before we would know. But let me just say this.

I don't believe the Bible teaches that a person can have a healing of any sickness he wants just as soon as he wants it. I do believe that God heals, but I don't believe that God has given us the instructions to throw away our medicine before he has healed us. And in that, I disagree with some Christians who hold another view, but I believe it is tempting God.

If you have a sickness that you must have some life support systems to sustain your life, if you just say, well, I'm trusting that God's going to heal me, I'm throwing off these systems. Well, God hasn't said that he's going to heal you at that moment necessarily. And therefore, you may be tempting God in a case like that.

If God said he would heal you, then it would not be tempting God. It would be faith because faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God. You have faith when you put your trust in something God has actually said.

God had not told Jesus to jump off the pinnacle of the temple, and he did not say that if Jesus did so on his own volition, that he would send his angels to help him. What the scripture did say was that God's angels will keep you when you are in the right way that God wants you to go. The last temptation came to him.

The devil took him on an exceedingly high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in their glory. And he said to him, All of these things I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me. Isn't it amazing to think that Jesus actually encountered the temptation to worship Satan? And Satan suggested it to him.

Fall down and worship me. Then Jesus said to him, Away with you, Satan, for it is written, You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve. Then the devil let him go, left him, and behold, the angels came and ministered to him.

In all likelihood, the angels actually brought sustenance to Jesus because he was near death. But you know, when he was tempted to turn rocks into bread, he didn't know how soon that deliverance from God would come. All he knew, it wasn't time yet.

And he had to wait and wait and just trust God that in the right time he would tell him to quit his fast. Satan tempted Jesus to worship him in order that he might give him all the

kingdoms of the world in their glory. Satan said he had the power to do that.

Is that true? Well, in the temporal sense, it is. Satan does seem to have authority over men since the fall. But the Scripture still says the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof.

And Jesus did not want to receive the kingdoms of this world or their glory from the hand of Satan. Jesus will receive them soon enough in God's own time. The Scripture says a time will come when the kingdoms of this world will have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ.

And he will reign forever and ever. Unfortunately, we've run out of time for today's broadcast. So I'm going to have to wrap this up.

We will continue our study in the Gospel of Matthew and the life of Christ next time. And I hope that you'll be able to join us at that time as well. We may make a few more observations about this temptation story as well as going on to further points in the chapter.