

The Lord's temptations

A close-up photograph of a person's hand, wearing a white shirt cuff and a grey suit sleeve, resting on the cover of a dark brown leather-bound Bible. The Bible is placed on a wooden surface. The lighting is warm, highlighting the texture of the leather and the skin of the hand.

Rev. Ian A Arnold
Nov. 2025

Please read beforehand: **Matthew Chapter 4: verses 1 to 11**

It is not generally known in the wider Christian world that from the time He was a boy , right through to what is known as “the passion of the cross”, **Jesus underwent countless temptations, brought on by the devil** or - what is meant the devil - the power of evil from hell. The power of evil from hell had become so strong that it was controlling people’s lives. We read of a spiritual gloom and darkness which had rolled in over the human race during the centuries beforehand, the result of which is powerfully captured for us in words such as in Isaiah’s prophecy: “We look for light, but there is darkness! For brightness, but we walk in blackness! We grope for the wall like the blind, and we grope as if we had no eyes; we stumble at noonday as in the twilight; we are as dead men in a desert place.” (Chapter 59:9,10)



It is difficult for us today to really appreciate the impact of this darkness. What we do know is that the people who could do something about alleviating the suffering of others **had become de-sensitized and no longer cared**. People flocked to the Roman coliseums to be entertained by gladiators killing each other or being mauled to death by wild animals. Unwanted babies were simply left out in the open, exposed to the cold, and left to die. And there was no limit to what people in power could do. We have an example of this in the Gospels, how Herodias, the wife of Herod, ordered the beheading of John the Baptist (Matthew 14:1-12)



In a way it is not only challenging but quite chilling to read the prophets of the Old Testament where the sinfulness of people is highlighted. People who should have known better, because they had the Scriptures, **unashamedly lusted after what was sinful**. They had come to call evil good and good evil; they put darkness for light, and light for darkness. They had become a people "wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight", because they had "rejected the law of the Lord of hosts and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel." (Isaiah 5:20, 21 & 24)

In the midst of this darkness promises were made that when the Messiah came this would change. It was given to Isaiah to say: "And in this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all people, a feast of choice pieces, a feast of wine on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of well-refined wine on the lees. And He will destroy on this mountain the surface of the covering cast over all people, and the veil that is spread over all nations. He will



And I wonder if you remember the magnificent promise we find a little later in Isaiah: “Arise, shine; for your light has come! And the glory of the LORD is risen upon you. For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and deep darkness the people, but the LORD will arise over you, and His glory will be seen upon you.” (Chapter 60:1, 2)

These were promises that gave good people hope and prevented them succumbing to compete despair. These were promises which kept alive the flickering flame of faith and anticipation with the likes of such people as the aged Simeon; a Just and devout man, who had been “waiting for the consolation of Israel” and to whom it had been revealed by the Holy Spirit “that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ.” (Luke 2:25,26)



Why God didn't intervene earlier

We may wonder why God didn't intervene earlier. The teaching from the Doctrines of the New Church is that the Lord knew it was important to wait until this process of decline had reached "rock bottom". **There had to be a total emptying out of what had been in order to make possible a completely new start.** Had God in Jesus come on earth sooner, and taught, then – yes – people would have rallied to Him. But only for a relatively short while; and then they would have turned and profaned what He had taught. It was better for Him to make His Advent at a time when His teaching would be rejected outright, from the outset, rather than being first received and then profaned.

As is the teaching given in the Writings, it was because of the danger of profanation that "the Lord did not come into the world and reveal the internal features of the Word until the time when no good at



The challenge

The challenge for God, in Jesus, when He came on earth, was **to restore the balance between the influences** from heaven reaching people here on earth and influences reaching people here from hell.



Theoretically He could have done this by intensifying His divine presence in hell. But such an intensification of His presence in this way would have resulted in the annihilation of people in hell. God needed to find a way to come face to face with those in hell without destroying them. And the way He chose to do so was by becoming incarnate, so **“veiling over” His divinity; “tempering” it; so that its power and brightness was dimmed.**



Even on a physical level, when we have been in darkness, it can be too bright; even overwhelmingly bright; to come out of that darkness into a room full of light.

It is easy for us to miss this point that God is not about destroying anyone and that He loves people in hell equally with people in heaven. As is His well known teaching, "He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." (Matthew 5:45)

This is powerful teaching, that it was out of His love for people in hell that God chose to come on earth in the person of Jesus.



Restoring the imbalance

How then was God, in Jesus, going to break the hold and the control which hell had come to have over people? Let's be sure of this that the human race, at that time, was – as it were – on the very edge of a cliff and if He had not intervened the human race would have tumbled forward and down into eternal death and damnation.

The answer is that God knew He needed to confront the power of evil, and feel its power, **by putting on human nature**, as He did, **in the person of Jesus**. He would feel the power of evil, **He would resist it in temptation battles against it, and He would overcome it.**

And so we come to the very heart of His work on earth; the reason for His Coming; the purpose behind it all; His focus every moment.

The devil – or, as we know the devil to be, the power



The intensity of those temptations

You and I will never know the intensity of the temptations the Lord experienced. The things is, the more we love something the more anguished and horrified we are at the prospect of losing it.

The love which was the very soul of Jesus was His love for the salvation of the whole human race. And so anything which brought this into question was horrifying to Him beyond our imagining.

However, step by step, as Jesus successfully overcome each of the sins we are all capable of committing, and so reduced their power to control us, **order was restored and our freewill;** our ability to make free choices between good and evil or between truth and falsity; **was returned to us.**

This was His work of salvation. This is what saved the human race from eternal damnation.



Tempted in all points as we are

The apostle Paul, in his epistle to the Hebrews, famously taught about Jesus that **“He was tempted in all points as we are, yet without sin.”** (Hebrews 4:15)

You know, and I know, that we are tempted in a multitude of ways, some obvious and others not so obvious.

Blasphemy, dishonesty, fraud, conceit, unjust and uncalled for judgement of others, jealousy, complaint, contempt, claiming as our own what is really the Lord's, hardness of heart, impatience, licentiousness, covetousness, and evil speaking of others, are just some of these ways we sin. And Jesus will have been tempted by all of these things.



We can imagine Him being tempted by despair at the people who brought to Him the woman caught in the act of adultery (John 8: 3-5). And it is possible that He was tempted to become angry with the Pharisees who criticized Him for healing a woman on the Sabbath day (Luke 13:10-14) and, on another occasion, for finding fault with Him because He did not insist His disciples should wash their hands in a special way before eating (Mark 7:7).

However, what we need to do is look at the larger and deeper issues out of which such temptations arose.

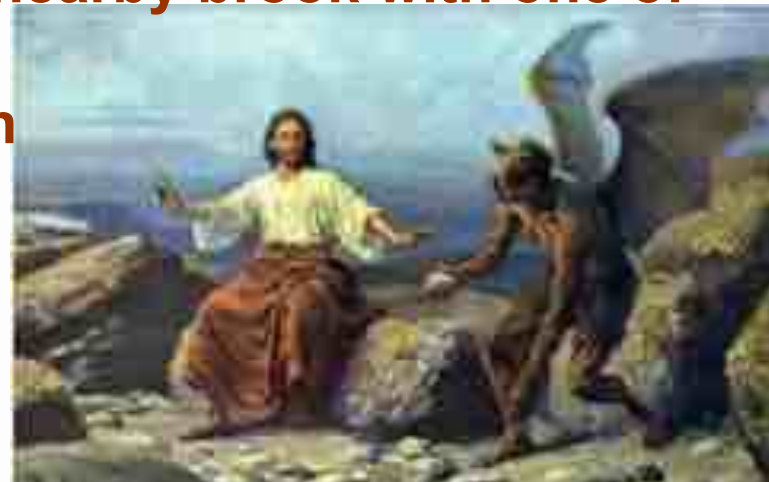


The Lord's three temptations in the wilderness and immediately before He commenced His public ministry.

God's great objective in coming on earth in the person of Jesus was the salvation of the human race. And **there were three types, or categories, of sin and evil** by which He was attacked. And these different ways, or strategies the devil used were appeals to Him to,

Firstly, to turn stones into bread.

Stones represent hard and reliable truths from the Word. Do you remember how the young David choose five smooth stones from a nearby brook with one of which he killed the giant Goliath? But truth can seem hard and rigid and people don't always like to hear it or know about it.



And so what is highlighted here is the temptation Jesus continuously faced to **make the truth more digestible**; to turn truth into something **people would like and not be offended by**. Clearly, Jesus could have had a much larger following if He had turned to saying only things which people liked to hear. But He resisted doing so. Following much plain speaking about Himself, that He is the Bread of life, “....from that time many of His disciples went back, and walked with Him no more.” (John 6:66). Jesus could have been popular, and well liked, even by the scribes and Pharisees, but He was not interested in being popular or in having a large following; not if it meant Him abandoning His unswerving commitment to witness to the truth.

Jesus' **second temptation** is described as being the devil taking Him up into Jerusalem, setting Him down on a pinnacle of the temple, and **challenging Him to cast Himself down**.



Already, and as a boy of twelve years old, Jesus had mightily impressed the learned scholars and teachers who were associated with the temple in Jerusalem and who were, we are told, “astonished at His understanding and answers.” (Luke 2:47).



We know that He loved the Word and He would not easily have become wholly absorbed in it, tempted to think that equipped with His impressive knowledge and insights He could effectively demolish the false teaching so widely taught and, in this way achieve His objective of saving humankind. But **knowledge, and endless discussions and arguments, would not be the way to achieve His objective.** False thinking was too entrenched. And, in any case, it was the loves which people had chosen to rule their lives which were the real issue and which He most needed to challenge.



And this brings us to **the third temptation:**

Throughout Jesus's ministry there were the people's hopes and expectations, including the hopes and expectations of His disciples, that He - the Messiah - would raise an army and drive out the Romans who had conquered the Holy land and exercised lordship over it. As the two disciples returning to their home in the village of Emmaus said on the afternoon of Jesus's resurrection, "But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem (set free) Israel." (Luke 24:51)



You will remember how it was that the devil took Jesus up on an exceedingly high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world. “All these things”, the devil said, “I will give you if you will fall down and worship me.” (Matthew 4:9)

It must have been hard, at times, for Jesus to hold out against this temptation. At a fairly early stage in His ministry an enthusiastic crowd of people “were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king.” (John 6:15). But “He departed again to a mountain by Himself alone.”



We can imagine how Jesus would have been tempted to think that by raising an army and leading a rebellion He would more quickly achieve His objective. Additionally, such enthusiasm to make Him a king was flattering and an appeal to any inclination within Him to love and promote Himself. **But Jesus would have none of it!** “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.’” (Matthew 4: 10)

Jesus was besieged by three classes, or types, of temptations in His resolve to save the human race and to make possible the establishment of His kingdom in the hearts and minds of people.



In summary

◆ **the first** to just be a nice, well-meaning, itinerant preacher and healer, so taking the softer and **easier** way;

◆ **the second** to think He could so impress people and win them over **by His impressive knowledge and insights**;

◆ and **the third** by **promoting Himself** as a famous leader of people **in a worldly way**.

And so it is with us as we strive for the establishment of His kingdom in our hearts and minds.

It takes courage to stay true to what the Lord teaches us, and to keep to the clearly marked pathway of peace and righteousness which leads to heavenly life in this world and life in heaven after we die.



There will be many times when we will be tempted to take the easy, “soft”, option; to turn stones into bread. The devils tell us that it is enough just to be nice and neighbourly and courteous and respectful, notwithstanding what is in our hearts. This is the devil trying to persuade us that a life of natural good is fine and sufficient. But it is not. “It is written”, said Jesus, **“Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”**



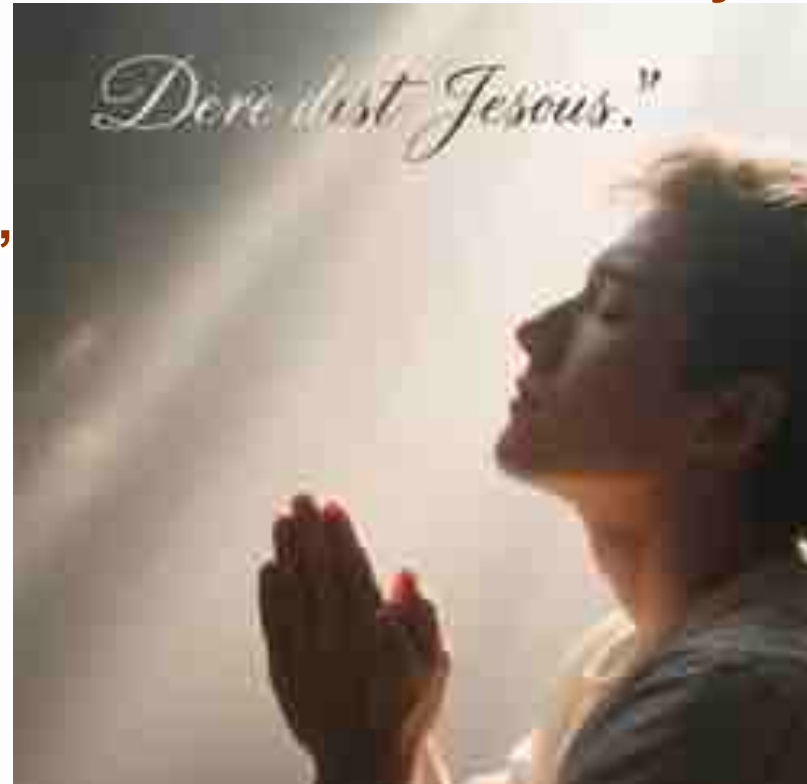
But this is not the only way the devil tries to catch us out and cause us to fall short. And this brings us to the second temptation, symbolized by casting ourselves down from the pinnacle of the Temple and **having blind faith that the angels will rescue us.**

Most of us live by good moral principles. We wouldn't dream of stealing, murdering, or committing adultery. We tell ourselves that affirming such values and principles is all that we need to do and that if we fall the angels will save us from any harm. But "No"! **There is real work to be undertaken if the Lord's kingdom is to be established within us.** Spiritual life can never be of our head only. It must be **both head and heart.** And for it to be both head and heart there is so much that needs to come to the surface, needing to be challenged, and overcome in temptation battles. We cannot sit back, thinking the Lord can do all the work for us, having some sort of **blind faith that He will, in the end, rescue and save us.**



And then we come to the really hard part and the greatest challenge, which is the third temptation:

Who, or what, are we going to worship? This is the question posed. Is it ourselves? Is it our reputation? Is it money and wealth? And are we prepared for the wars we must wage against the love of self; self-importance; the desire to impose our opinions on others; conceit; self-righteousness and contempt of others? “Then Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan! For it is written, You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve.’”



As the apostle Paul wrote, “Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.” (Ephesians 6:10-13)

Amen



Readings

Psam 24:7-10

Luke 10:17-20 and John 16:33

Arcana Caelestia 1675 & 1690

“It is an eternal truth that unless the Lord had come into the world and by means of the temptations which He suffered had overcome and conquered the hells, the human race would have perished, and that if He had not done so none who have lived on this planet from the time of the Most Ancient Church could have been saved.....

The fact that the Lord's life from earliest childhood right through to the last hour of His life in the world consisted in constant temptation and constant victory is clear from many places in the Old



Testament Word; and the fact that it did not end with His temptation in the wilderness is clear from the following, in Luke,

After the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from Him for a time.””(Luke 4:3)

As well as from His undergoing temptations right through to His death on the Cross, and so to the last hour of His life in the world. From these considerations it is evident that the whole of the Lord’s life in the world from earliest childhood consisted in constant temptation and constant victory. **The last when on the Cross He prayed for His enemies, and so for all people in the whole world.**



THE END

