

Making Sense of Jesus - Jesus' Temptation

BOB HEERSPINK

There are a lot of things that change with the passing of the years, but there is one thing that never changes and that is temptation. In fact, temptation actually changes with the times. It adapts itself to each individual person. Not even Jesus was free from temptation's reach. So, what is really behind temptation? What makes it so resilient that we cannot get rid of it? How do we fight temptation in our own lives? Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From ReFrame Media and Words of Hope, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I am Bob Heerspink. Dave, you know, if there is one person who isn't taken very seriously in the world today it is the devil. You know, I think of the way the devil is portrayed, say around Halloween, and he is kind of a joke. He is this character in red tights who runs around with a pitchfork. Nobody wants to take him seriously anymore.

DAVE BAST

Yes; people dress up in devil costumes. We see it in advertising all the time, too. You know, the good angel on one shoulder and the demon on the other shoulder, and which one are you going to vote for?

BOB HEERSPINK

And you know, the devil really likes it that way. *The Screwtape Letters*, one of my favorite reads by C. S. Lewis, Screwtape is writing to a young devil telling him how to go about tempting his victims, and what he really says is, try to be under the table. Be incognito in the way you go...

DAVE BAST

Fly under the radar, yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; don't let them really know what is going on.

DAVE BAST

Yes; Lewis says in the introduction to that book something very interesting: We tend to either make fun of the devil and think he is not at all real or serious or any kind of threat, or we take him so seriously that we see a demon behind every bush; and the healthy way is sort of the middle way; but temptation is a very real thing in our lives. You mentioned in the outset of the program – in the intro – that it changes with the times. It can adapt itself to new circumstances, but the thing itself is always the same, I think; and I am struck by the fact that we still feel it all the way through life. I mean, maybe the temptations change a little bit from your youth to your more mature age, but the thing itself is always there.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; temptation is so much deeper than what we sometimes think. An older person might say: I am being tempted so much today; and a young person would say: I don't even know how that is possible. They are not

struggling with the temptations *I* am struggling with say at the age of 20; but the temptations have become deeper. I think they have become more actually... people become more aware of the devil's attacks as the years go on.

DAVE BAST

Well, that can be a good thing...

BOB HEERSPINK

It is.

DAVE BAST

I believe it is because I think when we are young we tend to make too light of it. You know, there is a famous line... The wit, Oscar Wilde, the playwright of the late 19th Century once said flippantly: I can resist anything except temptation; and I think when we are young we tend to make a joke out of it more; but it is a real threat to our wellbeing.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I think we have to recognize that temptation is simply part of the Christian life. It was part of Christ's own experience. You know, sometimes we make it out that temptation itself is sin, but that is not really true. It says in the scriptures that Jesus was tempted as we are yet without sin.

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is from Hebrews 4, a very famous passage. He can sympathize with us, it says. He can identify with us because he knows what it is to be tempted. Well, here is the story. Let me read it from Matthew 4. It is a bit long, but I think it is worthwhile to just consider this. So, Matthew writes that

¹Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." ⁴Jesus answered, "It is written, people do not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." ⁵Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the Temple. ⁶"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." ⁷Jesus answered him, "It is also written, do not put the Lord your God to the test." ⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. ⁹"All this I will give you," he said, "If you will bow down and worship me." ¹⁰Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'" ¹¹Then the devil left him and angels came and attended him.

BOB HEERSPINK

So here is Jesus right at the beginning of his ministry, and the first thing he really experiences after his baptism is temptation.

DAVE BAST

It is almost as though he is led into that as though that is the purpose. I mean, this passage begins with the words: Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted. Now that is a very curious thing. Did God tempt him or did the devil tempt him? That is something we struggle with.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; the word tempted actually in the Greek can mean both tested and tempted; so I would say the Spirit was testing him; the devil wanted to turn it into a temptation.

DAVE BAST

So there is a difference between a test or a trial in the biblical sense, and a temptation?

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; I think at the root of it, the devil wants to take testings and inject his demonic lies into the situation. In fact, I think that is what is happening here. We are going to have to explore that a little bit more in the program, but the devil comes along and sometimes I have said to people, he comes with stinkin' thinkin'. You know, he wants us to believe lies about his own role in the world.

DAVE BAST

So, part of the difference is the motivation, maybe, of the person behind the test or the trial.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right, that is part of it, too.

DAVE BAST

The Spirit... It could be the same experience or the same environment. Jesus is hungry. He has been fasting for forty days and forty nights. It is a time, presumably, of prayer for him and waiting on God and listening to the Spirit – reflecting on the word; and God is using that experience to test him, build him into faith...

BOB HEERSPINK

To make him grow.

DAVE BAST

And then the devil comes and wants to use that same experience in a very different way.

BOB HEERSPINK

Let's destroy the Messiah. Right here and now, let's simply wipe out this whole Messianic plan.

DAVE BAST

So, trial versus temptation. It may be the same physical set of circumstances, but God has one purpose and Satan has a very different purpose.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; and what those purposes are we are going to have to explore when we come back after a break.

DAVE BAST

Yes; let's dig into those three temptations when we come back after this break.

Segment 2

BOB HEERSPINK

Welcome back to our *Groundwork* conversation. Dave, right before the break we were talking about the difference between testing and temptation, and how the devil really takes trials – he takes testings – and uses them – he tries to use them, at least – to destroy us, to get us off track as disciples of Christ.

DAVE BAST

Right; and I think we are sometimes misled on this whole thing by the traditional wording of the Lord's Prayer. It says: Lead us not into temptation; temptation is one of the big subjects that Jesus told us to pray about; but God does not tempt us. The Bible says that clearly in the book of James. It might be better to say: Deliver us from the time of trial; that is how some translations of the Lord's Prayer put that phrase, because God may use circumstances and experiences to test our faith, but he does not tempt us the way Satan does, wanting us to fail.

BOB HEERSPINK

Don't give us more than we can bear.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly; but Satan really wants us to disobey. This is serious business. He is playing for keeps. You know, we think about temptation: I am tempted to have a second piece of cake, or I am tempted to go off my diet or something like that; but the real thing is deadly serious and dangerous to us spiritually. Satan wants to turn us away from God; he wants to turn us into worshipers of himself.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; and he has had a great run up to this point. There has not been anyone that he has not been able to tempt without at least some success.

DAVE BAST

Exactly; and that is where Jesus comes on the scene here. This is really at the outset of his ministry. It is Matthew Chapter 4, from which we read this story. He has just been baptized; he has had this incredible experience of the heavens opening and the Spirit descending and the voice of the Father says, "This is my Son. You are the Son of God."

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, this is really his high; and sometimes I think the greatest temptations come to us right when we are coming off those spiritual [mountaintops]...

DAVE BAST

Right after the high, exactly. From the mountain to the valley, and it can happen like this, (finger snap) you know.

BOB HEERSPINK

I was reading a while back about how people who are placed in positions of power and authority are immediately tempted to think about their power as being given to them by them. You know, they might have had good intentions for the broader organization, but now it is so tempting to say: It is about me and my success. It is so easy to take those highs and experience temptation out of them.

DAVE BAST

Well, and then we think about the original son of God – the very first son of God – the first man God created, Adam, and his experience with temptation. Well, now here comes a second Adam.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, Adam failed; now the question is will the second Adam stand firm?

DAVE BAST

Right; he is going to do it himself now; the Lord is going to take on himself as a man to keep perfect obedience to the will of God in order to bring salvation for all of us.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, and I think if you look at the flow of the temptations, there is also a real strong parallel to Israel. Israel is led into the wilderness; Israel is called to be the servant of God; Israel keeps failing, failing, failing. Now Jesus appears. He is really the true Israelite, and the question is, is he going to succeed when Israel has failed?

DAVE BAST

Well, look at the number forty...

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

He is there forty days; Israel wandered in the wilderness forty years; they were hungry; Jesus is hungry and thirsty; the Israelites were fed miraculously with bread from heaven, and the first temptation – the very first thing Satan does is come very plausibly in a sense and say: Look, you are hungry; you've got needs; why don't you turn these stones into bread? If you are the Son of God, you could do it, couldn't you?

BOB HEERSPINK

Simple thing. I am hungry; I have the power to do it; let's not wait on the Father's gift of sustaining grace or his gifts, I can do this myself.

DAVE BAST

Yes; sort of do-it-yourself salvation. Doesn't God help those who help themselves? Isn't that one of the great texts in the Bible?

BOB HEERSPINK

No, that is not one of the great texts of the Bible; that is the great temptation of Satan...

DAVE BAST

Yes, okay.

BOB HEERSPINK

But this temptation really is tempting us to think that somehow God can sustain us spiritually, but physically we are on our own.

DAVE BAST

Or maybe we could put it this way: The first temptation is to put yourself first. That is what Satan is really saying to Jesus: Look, you deserve to use your power to meet your own needs. We all have needs; we have to take care of number one; why don't you go ahead and do that? And Jesus says: No, no; I am depending on the Father. Man does not live by bread alone.

BOB HEERSPINK

And then that second temptation gets us really into: Can you really trust him? Can you really trust God? Jump down from the Temple; see if God catches you; see if the angels come and rescue you.

DAVE BAST

It is the temptation to do something spectacular; to become a showman to kind of impress the crowd. You know, that pinnacle of the Temple – the very top of the colonnade, where Satan took Jesus... and it might not have been literally or physically; it might have been kind of in his mind and imagination; but that was 450 feet from the top of that to the bottom of the Kidron Valley. That really would have been kind of a spectacular descent. Imagine Jesus taking a swan dive as all the people are standing in the courtyard of the Temple watching, and then miraculously the angels come out and lift him up and drop him gently. That would have gotten a following for him right there. They would have crowned him the Messiah, right?

BOB HEERSPINK

So there is something here in this temptation also regarding: Do you really have to go to the cross? Do you really have to suffer to get where you want to go in life?

DAVE BAST

Yes; what is the way of Messiahship for you, Jesus? Is it going be the way of the suffering servant? You know, as we look through the course of the Gospels we see over and over the disciples misunderstanding this

very basic point. Jesus keeps telling them that the way of salvation for God and for God's Messiah is the way of suffering; and there is no shortcut around that or through that; and incidentally, the same thing is true for followers of Jesus: First the cross and then the crown.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; and then the last temptation... I think that is where the devil really says: Let's stop playing games, Jesus. Let's just cut right to the chase. Fall down, worship me, and this kingdom, which you see all around you – it belongs to me – I will give it to you.

DAVE BAST

And of course, that is the ultimate, isn't it, to worship something other than God? I was just listening to somebody talking the other day, and they said: You know, the one thing we are really good at is idolatry. We can worship almost anything, but behind all those idolatries – all the various things that we give our hearts to – is the one arch enemy of God, who simply wants to turn us away from him. It doesn't really matter what it is; and of course it is a lie. He doesn't own the kingdoms of the world...

BOB HEERSPINK

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

Not really; they belong to Christ by right. He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords; but Satan will give any lie that he can to just turn us away.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I think the way in which this temptation plays out in our own lives today, Dave, is a little bit more subtle. It is really a call to compromise. You know, that is really what is behind so much idolatry in the First Century. The Christians were so tempted to avoid persecution simply by just giving a little bit of worship to the emperor. They would give a little worship to the emperor then they can go worship Christ the rest of the year; there is no compromise for a disciple of Jesus Christ. The Church went to its own cross, so to speak, because they understood that any kind of compromise was falling before the feet of the devil and worshipping him.

DAVE BAST

Well, we want to really sort of apply all of this to our lives like that, and figure out exactly what it is that Jesus did to deflect this temptation, but we need to take a break right now for just a moment, and then we will come back and pick it up there.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

Welcome back to *Groundwork*. I am Dave Bast, along with my partner, Bob Heerspink. Bob, we were just talking about the three temptations that Jesus experienced in the wilderness with the devil. The first was to turn stones into bread and then to throw himself off the Temple, and finally to literally bow down and worship Satan; and really, those are all temptations in a way to doubt God...

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

It seems to me that is the common theme that runs through it. Will God take care of me? Will he feed me? Will he give me what I need for my body as well as my soul? Is God with me? Can I do something to make God prove that he is real; put him to the test? And is God enough for me? Can I give my heart to him and experience the fullness of what I am looking for, or do I need to worship something else?

BOB HEERSPINK

So, at the heart of every temptation is the issue of will I trust my God?

DAVE BAST

Yes; I think what is being tempted and tested is our faith, you know. It is not our willpower. Oscar Wilde again; I quoted him early on. He again quipped: The only way to get rid of temptation is to give in to it. But no, no; the way to overcome temptation is through faith.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; because it is not enough merely to identify temptation. We asked the question on the Web... We asked: How do you fight temptation? And somebody posted a response which said: I can't fight it myself. And that is the reality of it. Even Jesus here didn't simply fight it himself, even though he is the Son of God. He has a weapon that he uses to resist.

DAVE BAST

Yes, but I think it is important at the outset... We want to talk about how do you fight temptation, right; what are we supposed to do? How can we overcome it? But we need to make the point, I think, at the outset that Jesus overcame temptation as a man, not as God. It was a very human battle that he was engaged in. That is why Hebrews says: He was tempted like we are...

BOB HEERSPINK

This is a real temptation.

DAVE BAST

Yes; he was tempted like we are.

BOB HEERSPINK

He knows what we go through. He knows that inner churning, so to speak, when we are tempted.

DAVE BAST

In fact, we could argue that he was tempted *more* than we ever are because he didn't give in to it. It is when the bridge snaps and collapses that you have reached your limit; but for him it held firm.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I think that what we so often tend to do is just rely on willpower. I have to be a better Christian; I have to fight this; when Jesus fought it by always going back to the word of God. Three times he quotes, of all books, Deuteronomy. I don't think of Deuteronomy as a book that I would rely on to fight temptation; but each of these temptations that emerge out of the wilderness experience, first of all, he goes right back to the Bible – to Deuteronomy – and says: Right here is the answer to resist.

DAVE BAST

And he does so again in contrast to the people of Israel in the wilderness. I think it is very telling that it is Deuteronomy because that is kind of the summary and climax of the whole Exodus experience. You know, it goes through Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers, and that is those forty years; but they get to the verge of the Promised Land and now Moses gives them Deuteronomy, where he kind of sums up and repeats; and all of their failures Jesus reverses and triumphs in those same situations.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, Jesus' reliance on the word of God to me is countercultural to what we see happening today because people today say: Words don't count much. I find that even Christians sometimes say: It is all about deeds; it is not about words; but *this* word – the word of God – has power to really change us.

You know, I have said to people: If you spend a year just in the word of God – just reading the word of God every day – you will not be able to resist the power of the word of God to change you; and right here there is evidence that the word of God cannot be resisted even by the devil himself; the devil has to flee from it.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I just saw a little news story that the Catholic Church is talking more about exorcism these days, and they are training certain priests...

BOB HEERSPINK

I saw that, too.

DAVE BAST

Yes, in how to do exorcism; and I think it was Al Mohler, who is a renowned Southern Baptist leader and Reformed theologian, said: Well, you know, as Protestants we don't think we need priests to do exorcism. We've got the power of the word and the power of the Spirit; and any Christian can make Satan flee simply by, in faith, invoking the name of Jesus and the power of the word of God. So, do you know scripture? That is one very practical lesson, I think, to take away from here.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; there was a very famous Church leader in ancient Britain called the Venerable Bede, and some of his colleagues would say: Aren't you ever tempted, the kind of life you live is so Christlike; and he would say: Well, yes; the devil comes knocking on my door, too; but I just say this place is occupied, and the devil flees; and it was occupied by Christ and his word.

DAVE BAST

Just to go over those three temptations and to see how Jesus responds by quoting the scripture in such an appropriate way; so again, are you hungry? Put yourself first; and Jesus says: No. Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from God. We *do* live by bread, but not by bread alone; spiritual needs come first and that is where our faith engages. And again, throw yourself down; put God to the test; and Jesus says: No, we don't test God; he tests us, we do not test him.

BOB HEERSPINK

And then that last one, where the temptation is to fall down and worship the devil as though he is God, and the word comes from Deuteronomy: You shall not go after other gods; the gods of the people who are around you. So, Jesus keeps going back to the basic truths of scripture and saying: This is what I hold onto; even as the Son of God I go back to the word.

DAVE BAST

Well, there is great incentive for us to memorize the Bible and just to let it fill our hearts and our minds in times of testing, but I want to make one last point, I think, Bob, that is equally important. We have another resource in addition to the word, and that is Jesus himself. The word and the Spirit go together and the Spirit of Christ indwells us as believers, and that, too, gives us power.

BOB HEERSPINK

He is the incarnate word, and he is the one who is beside us in any temptation that we fight.

DAVE BAST

Well thanks for joining us. We are out of time once again in our *Groundwork* conversation; but don't forget it is listeners like you that participate with us in order to keep our topics relevant. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing and suggest to us passages or ideas or subjects you would like us to address on future *Groundwork* programs. Just visit us online at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/making-sense-of-jesus-jesus-temptation>

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