The Temptation of Jesus

Matthew 4:1-11

Key Verse:4:4 “Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

It is not too much to say that human history is the history of temptations. The first challenge to human beings in the Garden of Eden was a temptation. Adam failed to Satan’s temptation and the misery in human history started. The first challenge to Abraham was also a temptation for safety in Egypt. Abraham failed to the temptation and paid the price of his mistake. Joseph was also sexually tempted when he was in Egypt, but he overcame the temptation. Jesus was also tempted just before he started his work as the Messiah. He defeated the temptation and taught us how to overcome temptations and live victorious lives. We are also tempted every day from every place, and from everyone. While we study this passage, we may learn Jesus and experience spiritual victory over temptations.

Look at verse 1. “***Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.***” Someone may ask, “Why was Jesus tempted? He could have worked without any temptation because he is the Son of God!” Yes! He is the Son of God who does not need to be tempted. (Jas 1:13) He is also the Son of Man like one of us who is tempted. He was tempted to be fully human as a high priest who intercedes between God and men. The Messiah had to be fully human who is tempted like one of us. Hebrews 2:16-17 says, “*For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people*.” Hebrews 4:14 continues, “*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are–yet he did not sin*.” Jesus was tempted in every way as we are.

Jesus was also tempted to restore Adam’s failure. Adam failed to Satan’s temptation and dishonored God. But the second Adam, Jesus, who is tempted in the same way, will restore Adam’s failure to glorify God. So, Paul said, “*For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.*” (1 Co 15:22) Jesus came to this world not only to save, but also to restore.

What was Satan’s first temptation? Look at verses 2-3. “***After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread***.” Satan lied to Jesus in his first temptation by saying, “*If you are the Son of God*.” Jesus IS the Son of God whose identity does not need to be tested. Satan also tempted Jesus to use his power to make stones to bread. Of course, Jesus can make stones to bread because he is the Creator God. But Jesus is not a magician who obeys Satan’s words to please Satan. How did Jesus respond to Satan’s words? Look at verse 4. “***Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God***.” In Jesus’ answer we learn several lessons. First of all, man is a spiritual being who needs spiritual food, which is the word of God. Man needs physical food to feed our physical body. Man also needs spiritual food to feed our soul. We are created into God’s image who is spirit. If a man only seeks for physical food, he is not much different from other animals. So Jesus said, “*Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.*” (Jn 6:27) We eat daily bread and pray every morning before we eat breakfast. We care for our soul as we do our body. This is the reason our faith grows when we study the Bible and teach others. The word of God makes our spiritual life grow and become fruitful. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 says, “*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work*.” Amen!

 Satan’s first temptation was about the most essential and urgent need, which is ‘food’. In human history most people failed from this temptation which is about food, or money, hunger, or poverty, or famine. Eve failed from desire to eat the fruit of the tree. Abraham went to Egypt to solve the famine. The Israelites received God’s discipline for 40 years to fully trust in God who would provide food for them.  Even today many people fail when they face this most essential and urgent temptation. It is the temptation about security. One young man was extremely poor when he was a child. His mother lost her job and lost her dead husband’s benefits. They ate only beans for several weeks. Once they went to a Chinese restaurant and opened a fortune cookie, which said, “Unexpected fortune will come to you.” His mother believed the word. Soon, she received an unexpected check from the government. She believed that the word of the fortune cookie came true. But, a few days later, the government took the money back from her saying that it was their mistake. She had to depend on God’s word instead of the fortune cookie, even in her extreme poverty.

 How about Jesus? Jesus was also very hungry after fasting forty days and forty nights. According to the one who went through 40 days of fasting, all things looked like food to him. Jesus could have changed stones into bread immediately if he had thought about his physical condition. But Jesus did not use his power to meet his needs, but trusted in God.

Jesus defeated the first temptation by quoting the word of God, Deuteronomy 8:3. In the desert the Israelites sought for food and water. But God taught them that they needed not only food and water, but also the word of God. Now we need Jesus, who is the Word. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. (Jn 1:14) We need Jesus every day, and when we have Jesus, we become full and experience the kingdom of heaven. So, Jesus said in Matthew 5:6, “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled*.” Amen! What is righteousness?  Yes, the righteousness in the Bible is Jesus Christ.

What was Satan’s second temptation? Look at verses 5-6. “***Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “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.”***  How does this become a temptation to Jesus? We have an answer through Jesus’ reply. Jesus answered in verse 7. “***Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.***’” According to Jesus’ answer, Satan tried to test Jesus’ faith about God’s love. Our God is not the one who is tested by anyone. His love does not need to be proved, either. He is the Almighty and loving God. Satan’s strategy was to plant doubt about God’s love in Jesus’ heart. It was not the first time for Satan to tempt men about God’s love. In the Garden of Eden Satan tempted a woman to doubt God's love by asking her, "*Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?*” (Ge 3:1) When the woman doubted God’s love, she failed the temptation. But now it did not work for Jesus. Jesus resisted Satan’s temptation with the word of God. Jesus had absolute faith in God’s love. Satan tempted Jesus by quoting Psalm 91:11,12, and Jesus defeated him by quoting Deuteronomy 6:16. It is very important for us to know the word of God correctly and use it properly in spiritual battle. If not, we are easily misled by Satan who distorts the word of God. So Paul said in 2 Timothy 2:15, “*Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth*.” Amen!

As Satan tempted Jesus about safety and security matters, he also tempts us today with the same issues. When we are in a difficult situation physically, mentally, or financially, Satan plants doubt God’s love in our hearts. We believe that our God is absolutely good and loving that he will provide us and protect us no matter what. But Satan whispers, “Did God really love you and take care of you? Then, why are you suffering in this way?” Satan planted the same doubt to the hearts of the Israelites. Whenever they saw their enemies in the promised land, the Israelites became fearful. Then they complained toward God who had brought them out of Egypt. They completely forgot the sufferings which they went through in Egypt. If we forget how God saved us and led us thus far, we are tested with this second temptation. Instead, we must shout, “*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?...Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine…No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us*.” (Ro 8:35-37) Amen!

Jesus defiled Satan’s second temptation. But Satan did not give him up. Satan tempted Jesus a third time. Look at verses 8-9. “***Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.***” Satan promised Jesus to give all the glory of the world in the condition that Jesus worshiped him. Satan is a liar. The kingdoms of the world are not his, but God’s. God is the owner of the whole universe. Jesus said about Satan in John 8:44 , “*When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.*” Satan lied to the woman in the Garden. Satan lied to her that she would become like God if she took the fruit. But she did not become like God. Instead, she became the slave of Satan. She was deceived by Satan’s lie. Satan lied to Jesus saying that he would give all the kingdoms and their splendor to Jesus. The kingdoms of the world and its glory belong to God the Father, not to Satan.

In the third temptation there is a more hidden and significant plan than the possession of the world. Satan asked Jesus to bow down and worship him. Satan got the wrong person to tempt. Jesus is the Son of God, who is very in nature God, and the representation of God the Father. He is not the one who worships others, but the one who should be worshiped. Jesus defeated Satan again by quoting the word of God, which is Deuteronomy 6:13. Let us read verse 10 altogether. “***Jesus said to him,*** “***Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only***.” Then why was it the third temptation to Jesus? It was related to Jesus’ messianic work. Jesus came to this world to die on the cross as an atoning sacrifice. He had to die and shed his blood to cleanse our sins. Hebrews 9:22 says, “*without the shedding blood there is no forgiveness.*” Jesus had to be the Lamb of God who takes away for the sin of the world. But Satan tried to stop Jesus’ way of the cross. Satan tempted Jesus to go the easy way, not the way of the cross. But Jesus didn’t listen to him. Jesus was determined to obey the way of the cross.

Satan often tempts us to go an easy way, not the way of Jesus. Following Jesus often feels like entering narrow doors. Satan whispers to us to stop following Jesus by putting down the cross aside. But we must answer as Jesus did, “Away from me, Satan! It is written: Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God. It is written: Do not put the Lord our God to the test: For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord our God, and serve him only.” Amen!

Look at verse 11. “***Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him***.” Satan, the devil left Jesus. It did not mean that Satan gave up Jesus. Satan tempted Jesus every single moment while Jesus was serving God. Satan tempted Jesus even while he was hung on the cross. “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross and save yourself.” (Mt 27:40). But Jesus endured the cross to the end. Satan’s temptation continues until Jesus comes again and destroys him. Until then we must alway keep watch and pray so that we may not fall into temptation. When we are tempted, we must overcome the temptation as Jesus said, “Away from me, Satan!”. Amen!