



**Temple Baptist Church**  
**Wilmington, North Carolina**  
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**What Kind of Messiah?**  
**Matthew 4:1-11**

When the Lord God delivered the Israelite people—his people—from Egypt by the hand of his servant Moses, he brought them to the edge of the Red Sea. As they camped there, Pharaoh and his army set out to pursue them and were about to overtake them.

When the Israelites saw Pharaoh's army coming, they complained to Moses that he had led them out to be killed in the wilderness. He told them not to fear, to stand firm, and the LORD would fight for them.

And indeed the LORD did! The angel of his presence that was going before them in the cloud and fiery pillar moved behind the Israelites between them and the Egyptian army. The LORD sent a strong east wind all night that divided the waters of the sea. The people went through on dry ground, and when Pharaoh's army tried to follow them, the waters closed back in on them and drowned them.

Moses led the people on to Mount Sinai, where the Lord gave them his law and entered into covenant with the Israelites as his people. But it wasn't long before they were grumbling against Moses and God, doubting him, testing him, and forsaking him for idols.

To make a long story short, they ended up wandering in the wilderness for forty years. Those forty years were a time of testing. And the Israelites often failed the test. They murmured and grumbled and complained against Moses and against God over and over again. But after the forty years, God led them by the hand of Joshua to enter and conquer the Promised Land.

Now you may be asking, what does all that have to do with Jesus' temptation in the wilderness?

***Matthew's telling of Jesus' temptation***

Well, when we look at how Matthew, Mark, and Luke relate the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, we see some different emphases. My teacher Charles Talbert deals with this in his commentary on this passage, which I'm drawing on here.

Mark's account is very brief. He simply states that after Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, the Holy Spirit descended on him and a voice came from heaven declaring, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well-pleased" (Mark 1:11).<sup>1</sup> Then Mark tells us that the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness for forty days, where he was tempted by Satan (Mark 1:12-13).

Matthew and Luke also tell about Jesus' baptism just prior to his temptation, except that Luke gives a genealogy of Jesus between the two events. Matthew gives Jesus' genealogy at the very beginning of his account of the gospel, and traces Jesus' ancestry through the exile to David to Abraham. Luke, on the other hand, traces it all the way back to Adam, and ultimately to God.

Luke's account of the temptation is a lot like Matthew's except that he gives the second and

third temptations in reverse order from Matthew. This kind of thing was not uncommon in various accounts in ancient biographical or historical writing. So if we judge the ancient documents that the Scriptures are by ancient standards of accuracy rather than modern, this isn't a contradiction, but rather a fully acceptable practice.

This different order is probably based on the backdrop against which Luke is writing. His original audience was much wider—the Gentile world—while Matthew's telling of the gospel was geared more toward Jews. So Luke tells of Jesus' temptation and victory over the devil in the wilderness against the backdrop of the temptation and fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, where the fruit was good for food, delightful to the eyes, and desired to make one wise.

Matthew, on the other hand, tells the story against the backdrop of Israel's wandering in the wilderness after coming through the sea. They doubted God because of their hunger (Exodus 16), tested him (Exodus 17), and forsook him for the golden calf, committing idolatry (Exodus 32). So Matthew gives the temptations Jesus faced in a similar order. In his overcoming those temptations, Jesus reverses Israel's failure.<sup>2</sup>

### ***A clear sense of identity***

Jesus knew who he was, and the voice from heaven at his baptism had confirmed it. He was the Son of God.

Moses had spoken of a prophet like himself who would arise, and David was promised a descendant who would rule over his kingdom forever. The prophets had spoken of this one who would come as well, promising a deliverer that God would send to rescue and rule his people. Through the centuries, God's people came to call him "the Messiah" in Hebrew or "the Christ" in Greek, both of which mean God's "Anointed One."

And now he had come. *The people* didn't know it, but *he did*, and so did *the devil*. And the devil thought he could derail this Messiah, just as he had Adam and Eve and the Israelites in the wilderness and a host of God's people and servants through the centuries. He would tempt him and test him, appealing to the most basic need and the most basic depravities of human nature.

### ***The devil's challenge***

Now, with the Holy Spirit resting on him, Jesus had been in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights, being led there by the Holy Spirit. During this time he ate nothing. As you can imagine, when those forty days were over, Jesus was famished.

So the devil came to him and challenged him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread" (4:3). In size and shape, the stones probably resembled a loaf of bread, making the temptation even more intense.

Imagine it—Jesus has been without food for forty days. He's starving! He has the power to do it. The stones remind him of loaves of bread. The people were expecting the Messiah to provide manna as Moses did. To make it even worse, the devil puts it in the form of a *challenge*: "If you are the Son of God, use your power to turn these stones into bread. After all, you're hungry, and you have the power to do something about it!" How easy would it have been to yield to that? You have the need; you have the power. Makes sense, doesn't it?

But Jesus, depending on the power of the Spirit, drew on Scripture from Deuteronomy 8:3 for his reply: "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God'" (4:4).

And so it was settled. He would not use his power as the Messiah, the Son of God, for his own benefit.

So the devil came at him from another angle. He took Jesus to Jerusalem, and had him stand on the pinnacle, the highest point, of the temple. Then the devil *misused* Scripture (Psalm 91:11-12) to challenge Jesus' identity and his relationship to God (4:6): "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down, for it is written,

'He will command his angels concerning you,  
and  
On their hands they will bear you up,  
lest you will strike your foot against a stone.'"

Talk about throwing down the gauntlet!

You see, there was an expectation among some of the Jews that the Messiah would suddenly appear at the temple. What more dramatic appearance could there be than floating down from the pinnacle of the temple?

Yet again, without hesitation, Jesus answered from Scripture in Deuteronomy 6:16, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test'" (4:7).

The appeal for Jesus to use his power for personal benefit and gain had failed; so had the temptation to use the spectacular to validate his claims as God's Son. So the devil tried one more tactic.

Knowing it was promised and prophesied that as the Messiah, Jesus would one day rule all the kingdoms of the world, the devil took Jesus "to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory." Then he turned to Jesus and said, "All these I will give you, if you fall down and worship me" (4:9).

Think of it—it was Jesus' ultimate destiny to be Lord of all nations, and here was a way to get to it quickly and without the suffering and the cross that lay before him.

But without hesitation, Jesus again drew on Scripture in Deuteronomy 6:13 and replied, "It is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve'" (4:10).

Helmut Thielicke has expressed it powerfully:

(Jesus) rose up from the place where the kingdoms of the world shimmered before him, where crowns flashed and banners rustled, and hosts of enthusiastic people were ready to acclaim him, and quietly walked the way of poverty and suffering to the cross.<sup>3</sup>

The appeal to take the shortcut to his ultimate destiny had failed as well.

### ***What these temptations were really about***

Now were these temptations simply about eating, about power, about proving that he was the Son of God? Or were they about something much more crucial, more fundamental, more at the root of it all?

Didn't it all boil down to this: *What kind of Messiah would Jesus be?* Would he be a Messiah who would use his power as the Son of God for his own benefit and pleasure? Would he be a Messiah who would try to blackmail God, put God to the test to demonstrate that he was God's Son by deliberately placing himself in harm's way yet expecting God to protect him? Would he be a Messiah who would take the easy way, the shortcut, to achieve his rule over the kingdoms

of the world—a Messiah for whom the ends justified the means? Would he be a Messiah who would insist on doing things his own way, and all for his own benefit?

*Or* would he be a Messiah who humbly submitted to his Father’s will—refusing to use his awesome power for his own benefit; refusing to put God to the test to show who he was; refusing to take the devil’s shortcut to his destiny to rule all nations?

There he was, tired and hungry, yet *standing firm in his commitment to the Father’s will and the Father’s way of being the Messiah*. Knowing what it would cost him, he settled it *from the start*. By the power of the Spirit and the words of Scripture rightly interpreted, the devil would leave him for now.

There would be other temptations. But Jesus had already settled it in the wilderness. And throughout his ministry and even on the cross, he refused to let the devil, either directly or through the expectations or challenges of others, draw him away from *his commitment to be the kind of Messiah God had sent him to be*. He was faithful and obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross.

### ***Following this Messiah***

If there had been any question about it before, his faithfulness even to the point of death would make crystal clear what he had meant when he told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24).

He meant dying to self, to self-centeredness, to self-service, to self-preservation. As Charles Talbert puts it, “the cross was not a burden but an instrument of death.” To take up one’s cross is “to live daily as a condemned person . . . one who has been stripped of every form of worldly security, even physical existence.”<sup>4</sup>

And so, my brothers and sisters, as we think of all our Lord Jesus Christ has done for us, and of what kind of Messiah he was and is—I can’t help but ask myself: *What kind of disciple will I be?*

And what kind of church will we be?

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<sup>1</sup> Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®.

<sup>2</sup> Charles H. Talbert, *Matthew* in the *paideia* Commentaries on the New Testament series (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 60-61.

<sup>3</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *Leadership*, Vol. 1, no. 3; <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/1996/november/391.html> (accessed 3/2/17).

<sup>4</sup> Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel*, rev. ed. (Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 112.