

LESSON I

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. (Matthew 3:13-15).¹

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

(Matthew 4:1-4)

Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD (Deuteronomy 8:2-3)

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

'He will command his angels concerning you,'
and 'On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" (Matthew 4:5)

If you say, "The LORD is my refuge,"
and you make the Most High your dwelling,
no harm will overtake you,
no disaster will come near your tent.
For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways;
they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.
You will tread on the lion and the cobra;
you will trample the great lion and the serpent (Psalm 91:9-13).

Jesus said to him "Again, it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test'"
(Matthew 4:7)

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Do not put the LORD your God to the test as you did at Massah (Deuteronomy 6:16).

The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. So they quarreled with Moses and said, “Give us water to drink.”

Moses replied, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the LORD to the test?”

But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?”

Then Moses cried out to the LORD, “What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me.”

The LORD answered Moses, “Go out in front of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink.” So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the LORD saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?” (Exodus 17:1-7).
(Massah means *testing*)

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” (Matthew 4:8-10)

Be careful that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. Fear the LORD your God, serve him only and take your oaths in his name. Do not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples around you; (Deuteronomy 6:12-14)

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him. (Matthew 4:11)

COMMENTARY

In Matthew 5:17-18, Jesus says that He hasn't come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but to fulfill them. The Law and the Prophets are the whole Hebrew Scriptures, or as Christians call them, The Old Testament. We see an example of this in the way Jesus responds to the devil, in Matthew 4. For every temptation the devil gives Jesus, Jesus responds with a citation from Hebrew Scriptures—the Law and the Prophets. There are three temptations.

The first temptation is the most basic: hunger. Jesus has fasted for 40 days and Matthew tells us He was famished. The number 40 appears a lot in the Bible. Numbers in the Bible are not quantities, they are qualities. The number 40 appears during times of trial or temptation. When the flood came, it rained for 40 days and 40 nights. When Israel was investigating the peoples in the Promised Land, the spies took 40 days to complete their intelligence gathering. When the Israelites doubted God's power after the Exodus, they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. During the period of the Judges, when the Israelites turned away from God they were persecuted by the Philistines for 40 years. In the battle of David and Goliath, the Philistines taunted the Israelites for 40 days before David came and slew Goliath. And in the story of the temptation of Jesus, Jesus fasts for 40 days.

In His hunger, Jesus is tempted to turn stone into bread. Jesus responds by citing the book of Deuteronomy. The Deuteronomy passage Jesus cites is itself about temptation.

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God fed the Israelites with a bread-like food that came from heaven with the dew, called "manna." The passage in Deuteronomy concludes with the line,

He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD (Deuteronomy 8:3).

In Jesus's first temptation, He refers to a passage about temptation in the Hebrew Scriptures, with the emphasis that God's Word is what sustains a person spiritually.

The second temptation is subtler and more internal. The devil tells Jesus to jump from a high pinnacle of the temple. If He is truly Son of God, the angels will save Him. The devil is testing Jesus to prove He is God. Accordingly, Jesus' citation from the Hebrew Scriptures is about testing God. Jesus' response refers to the time when the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness after the Exodus. They thirst and complain to Moses. This is interpreted as a test of God. It shows doubt about God's real presence, "the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the LORD saying, 'Is the LORD among us or not?'" (Exodus 17:7). This happened at a place they named "Massah." Jesus cites a Deuteronomy passage about Massah, "Do not put the LORD your God to the test as you did at Massah" (Deuteronomy 6:16).

The final temptation is the most internal temptation. The devil promises that he will give Jesus all the kingdoms in the world if Jesus will worship the devil. Worshipping the devil is the opposite of worshipping God. The bribery of all the kingdoms of the world in exchange for abandoning God and worshipping the devil is forcefully rejected by Jesus. In this temptation he actually sends the devil away, citing Deuteronomy again, "Fear the LORD your God, serve him only" (Deuteronomy 6:13).

By using Bible quotes to resist the devil's temptations, Jesus is demonstrating that He has come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets. Christians call their Scriptures the "New Law," to suggest that the "Old Law," or the Hebrew Scriptures have been nullified by Jesus' coming and Jesus teachings. However, we see in the temptation of Jesus that the "Old Law," or the Hebrew Scriptures are powerful and very much alive. Jesus doesn't abolish the Law and the Prophets. He gives them new life in His own life, and by interpreting them as a rabbi in language that the people of his own age could understand. In fact, that people through all the ages can understand. I have a personal belief, and considerable evidence for it, that Jesus taught nothing new. Rather, He sifted through the Hebrew Scriptures and emphasized those parts which were at the heart of the Law and the Prophets.

For Swedenborgians, the devil symbolizes all of the power of hell. In Swedenborg's theology, there is no power but God. There is no anti-God who has the power to oppose God. There is only

lack of God. Those who lack God have turned their backs against God. Their only power is twisted love into depravity, and twisted truth into lies. There is an appearance of power in depravity and lies, but no real power in it. The only power is God's truth and love.

In our lives, we are tempted from time to time. Some of us need to outgrow unhealthy coping skills we acquired in our upbringing. All of us need to change a self-interested outlook into an other-interested outlook. Many of us begin life trying to get. If unchecked, we want to get all the kingdoms of the world, as in the Jesus story. Some will do anything to get more and more money and power, and in a real sense, worship the devil symbolically. But spiritually-minded people grow spiritually and resist the allurements of self and worldly greed. In our own struggles to grow into heavenly personhood, we may find that Bible passages lead us and can be cited to fend off unhealthy impulses—temptations—that would lead us away from a life of love.