

## Mount of Temptation: A Reflection on Spiritual Confrontation

*Read Exodus 17: 8-16 & Matthew 4: 1-11*

Today we are in the barren and inhospitable Judean wilderness; a rugged, rocky, and arid mountainous geographical area – the area where Jesus was led by the Spirit before his ministry even began. (4:1) We are ascending the Mount of Temptation, or at least the mountain which is traditionally thought to be the place of Jesus's encounter with the devil.

Here is that mountain. (Picture 1) Its name is **Jebel Quruntal**, also known as *Mount Quarantania*, which comes from the Latin Quarentena, meaning 40 days. It overlooks the nearby ancient city of Jericho, and blesses visitors with panoramic views of the Jordan valley. On a clear day you can see the Dead Sea across the terrain to the south which is barren and hostile. It is situated in the West Bank, Palestine, and is also famous for the Monastery of Temptation, a Greek Orthodox Monastery built into the mountain and hanging from the cliff face. (Picture 2) There is therefore a place of prayer built into this mountain which seems very fitting. The Monastery dates from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (1895) but the caves in the mountain have been used as prayer cells and for shelter for centuries. It is 1200 feet high.

It is very important for any follower or would-be follower of Jesus to understand the significance of this place and what happened here. What it teaches us about Jesus, his encounter with the devil, the temptations he faced, and how he overcame the arch enemy of God before embarking on his ministry. If Mount Ararat (which we considered last week) symbolises 'God's resting place,' then the Mount of Temptation stands **as a symbol of confrontation, of spiritual battle and spiritual warfare.**

**Many stories in the bible involve battles and confrontations on mountains.** Elijah and the prophets of Baal facing each other on Mount Carmel is perhaps the most memorable. (1 Kings 18:19-20) Joshua and the Amalekites is another, with Moses looking down from the mountain accompanied by Aaron and Hur. (Exodus 17: 8-16). King Saul died on Mount Gilboa after he and his army were overpowered by the Philistines. (1 Samuel 31:1 f) Jesus engaged in battle on this mountain.

As Christians, we are immediately met by the challenge that **our faith involves conflict** – a conflict with evil and the one who actively stands behind and promotes all evil in this world – the evil one – the devil. The Lord's prayer encourages us to pray that we might be delivered from the evil one, a powerful malevolent spiritual being who has dominion over this present evil age. (Ephesians 2:2)

Spiritual warfare is a common theme in the bible, yet many Christians seem content to ignore or play down the subject. Some completely misunderstand the call to contend and confront evil in the name of Jesus and in the power of the Holy Spirit. This quotation from the late Christian leader John Wimber clearly illustrates the point. In his ground breaking book 'Power Evangelism' Wimber wrote;

*Entering the kingdom is like enlisting in the navy. But often the kingdom is likened to a Caribbean cruise on a luxury liner. So, people change into their leisure clothes, grab their suntan lotion, and saunter down to the docks. What a shock it is when they see a large grey ship with numbers painted on the side! Even more shocking is learning that the ship is loaded with guns, cannons, jets, and helicopters. It is a warship, not a luxury cruise liner. The same is true of the kingdom in this age: it is a warship, navigating in enemy territory. (Power Evangelism p 22)*

Before Jesus began his kingdom preaching and powerful healing ministry, he entered a period of confrontation with his enemy which began with a forty day fast. The apostle Paul wrote this to the Christians in Ephesus, and it is a strong message to Christians down the ages too:

*'Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For **our struggle** is not against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. (Ephesians 6: 10-12)*

As Christians we are called and enlisted to stand against the devil and evil powers which rule this present evil age. The Mount of Temptation introduces us to this challenge. It is interesting that this period lasts forty days. After Jesus's resurrection, there will be another 40-day period before his glorious ascension and exaltation. 40 days before Jesus starts ministry. 40 days as his earthly ministry comes to an end – and then the work of the Church proclaiming the Kingdom of God begins in earnest.

The first thing to notice about this narrative which records Jesus's fasting period and temptations is that **it is instigated by God** – and specifically by the Holy Spirit. Jesus has just been anointed with the Holy Spirit and power (Acts 10:38) at his baptism. Now the same Spirit who He is equipped and empowered by *sends or leads* him out into the wilderness. (Matthew 4:1, Mark 1:12)

Filled with the Spirit, and now **sent out** by the Spirit into the mountainous wilderness. (Mount Quruntal is just a few miles from the River Jordan.). *Is that not the same for every Christian, including you and I? Are we not called to be soldiers as well as servants?* Paul writes this to Timothy: "Endure hardship with us like a good soldier in Christ Jesus." (2 Timothy 2:3) We are indeed called to be humble servants, but we are also enlisted to be well-equipped soldiers.

**Before Jesus 'goes public' he goes private.** He enters the wilderness with its wild animals entirely alone. He has nothing with him save the recent anointing of the Holy Spirit. He fasts for forty days. Then he faces the temptations presented by the devil. The devil is also referred to as 'the tempter.' He started his trade way back in the Garden of Eden in the form of a beguiling and deceiving serpent. Jesus will also refer to him as 'Satan.' That name means 'adversary' or 'accuser.' Later in his ministry, Jesus will state that the devil is the 'father of lies' whose mission is 'to steal, kill and destroy.' (John 8:44, 10:10)

The three temptations faced by Jesus are all designed to tempt him away from doing the will of the Father – the messianic servant mission to serve, suffer and die for the world. Jesus will later spell out clearly the main reason for his incarnation and mission: *For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.* (Mark 10:45) As he serves in the power of the Spirit, Jesus will release hundreds and hundreds of captives from the grip of the devil. When he dies and then rises again, Jesus will release enough power, forgiveness and love to bring endless numbers into his kingdom. The apostle John tells us why Jesus came, why he appeared: *'The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work,' and to 'take away our sins.'* (1 John 3: 8, 5)

Even before Jesus begins his life's mission, a bold and audacious attempt is made to throw him off course. But there is only going to be one winner in the opening battle on this mountain in the wilderness – Jesus, the Son of God. Unlike Saul, who fell on Mount Gilboa, Jesus will triumph and walk away victorious after physically recovering with the help of angels. (Matthew 4:11, Mark 1:13)

But how did Jesus defeat the devil? How did he overcome these subtle well-crafted temptations? How did he maintain his obedience to God's purposes? We will now consider this, and we will see that what Jesus used to defeat the devil is available to his followers, to you and I. Yes - Jesus was the Son of God, but in his humanity in the wilderness, he had no special weapons to fight the devil which are not also at our disposal.

The word for 'tempt' can be understood in two ways. It can be understood as 'testing' or 'tempting.' Each biblical context will determine the meaning.

As Christians we are both **tested** and **tempted**. We are sometimes 'tested' by God as Abraham was on Mount Moriah when he was asked to slay his son Issac. We are regularly 'tempted' by the devil to disobey God and turn away from his holy and loving ways. Frederick P Wood wrote: *'Temptation is not sin; it is the call to battle.'*

Our Father in heaven may choose to test us, but only the devil tempts us. This is made clear in James 1:13-15: *'When tempted, no-one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.'* The apostle Paul also gives us this word about temptation in 1 Corinthians 10: 13: *'No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.'*

Why was Jesus triumphant against the devil on this mountain? How can his followers 'resist the devil' and cause him to 'flee?' (James 4:7) Firstly we must take note what happened **before** Jesus was tempted. What had He received and how He had prepared? Remember the temptations come at the end of the forty days of fasting, so what happened in the build up to this encounter with the devil?

Firstly, Jesus has been **anointed and filled with the Holy Spirit**. And this is the first reason why Jesus was able to defeat the devil. The power he had *within him* was greater than the devils. Anointed powerfully as he was in the Jordan with the Holy Spirit, Jesus entered the wilderness, climbed the mountain, fasted, and then met the devil face to face in the mighty power of the Spirit.

Never forget friends, that we Christians, every single one of us, have been baptised, filled, and equipped with *the same Spirit* Jesus received at his baptism. 'Greater is he who is within us than he who is in the world.' (1 John 4:4) We do not inherit a lesser power or a different Spirit. As children of God, we receive the Holy Spirit as a gift to empower and enable holy and faithful living. We are now able to walk in the Spirit's power and not gratify the desires of our sinful nature. (Galatians 5: 16f) We must though pray each new day to be freshly filled with the Spirit that we may be ready to do battle. We are, as the apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 6:10 to be strong in the Lord and in 'his mighty power.' Follow the way of the Master. Be filled with Spirit! (Ephesians 5:18)

Secondly, Jesus fasted for 40 days. This means that Jesus not only ate nothing, but it means that he engaged in many days of **prayer** with His Father. In the bible, fasting and praying always go together, and so we know that Jesus prayed as well as fasted. Fasting helped Jesus to be more focused in prayer, and so this was a time of intense prayer and of receiving revelation from the Father. We too overcome temptation and meet all kinds of trials with the strength that comes with prayer. Prayer is our great spiritual consolation and weapon.

When tempted in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus instructed his sleepy disciples with these words: *'Pray that you will not fall into temptation.'* (Luke 22:40, 46) If we do not follow Jesus's example and seek God in prayer, we will fall even before the battles commence. Prayerless Christians are ripe for failure. Through prayer we gain access to the inner strength and power that will enable us to 'stand in the evil day.' (Ephesians 6:13) Whilst Moses' hands were held high in prayer – the Israelites triumphed. When lowered, losing the battle became real. With prayer, we carefully and consciously clothe ourselves with God's armour, ready to block and rebut 'the flaming arrows of the evil one.' (Ephesians

6:16) Jesus was praying 40 days before he faced Satan. How is it that Christians cannot even manage 40 minutes in prayer? Follow the way of the Master. Devote yourselves to prayer. (Colossians 4: 2)

Then thirdly and finally, when the confrontation began, Jesus took out what was the deadliest weapon in the devil's eyes. **Jesus unleashed the Word of God.** *'It is written. It is written. It is written!'* This is the sword of the Spirit – which is the word of God. (Ephesians 6:17). We fight back with the Word of God as Jesus did – for Satan cannot defeat the truth, power, and purity of the Word. And we fight with a sword that has been dipped, as we have, in the blood of the Lamb. This was the weapon that Jesus used to repel and send Satan away. We can do the same.

However, we must be those who know and love the Word. We must be ready to draw and use the sword of the Spirit. And remember, Jesus was not carrying a copy of the Torah (containing the Book of Deuteronomy) under his arm up that mountain. The Scriptures he used were hidden in His mind and heart. He had memorised the Word of life and power. How well do we know the Word of God? Is it hidden in our hearts ready to unleash when most needed. (Psalm 119:11) It is up to you, to read, meditate and memorise the Word. Follow the way of the Master. Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from God. (Matthew 4:4, Deuteronomy 8:3)

Jesus is victorious on the mountain of temptation because of the presence and power of the Spirit, because he had already been significantly strengthened through prayer, and because he wielded the pure and mighty Word of God. Once Satan was gone – angels, ministering spirits (Hebrews 1:13) came to Jesus's aid, to help and to enable his physical recovery.

May our faithful God be with us in every battle, in all our trials and temptations. May we humbly submit to God so that the devil will be forced to flee from us. (James 4:7) I close with the exhortation given by the apostle Peter to the persecuted Christians scattered around Asia Minor (Turkey):

*Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of suffering. And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory, after you have suffered a little, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm, and steadfast. To him be the power forever and ever. Amen (1 Peter 5: 8-11)*

(Revd Peter J Clarkson 18.1.26)