THE TEMPTATION OF JESUS

Luke 4:1–13

Key Verse: 4:4

“And Jesus answered him, ‘It is written: Man shall not live by bread alone.’”

Who can you trust? There’s a popular slogan: “Trust No One.” In life, the best people often are the ones who disappoint us the most. The good things they say don’t match the things they do. Why don’t we trust anyone? Because we’ve been disappointed or hurt. It makes us cynical. We think everyone is just out for themselves. Today’s passage records Jesus’ temptations before beginning his ministry. We’re all familiar with temptations, but the ones in this passage aren’t so relatable. So what’s the point? It’s not to give us a manual on avoiding life’s temptations; Luke is out to show us that Jesus is the one we can really trust. How does this passage prove this? And why is it so important to trust him? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

Look at verse 1. The Holy Spirit is mentioned twice here. Why was Jesus so full of the Holy Spirit? It happened after he was baptized by John. That baptism expressed his commitment to obey the Father’s will for his life. When Jesus surrendered his life to God’s will, God filled him with his Spirit to accomplish it. Now it was the Spirit who led Jesus in the wilderness.

For what purpose? Look at verse 2. It was to be tempted by the devil. It was no accident; it was all part of God’s plan. God had promised that one day he would send the offspring of woman to defeat the serpent who tempted Adam and Eve (Ge3:15). Now Jesus was about to fulfill that plan. God had sent him to this world to be our Savior (2:11), to save us by forgiving our sins and giving us his power to live a new life (1:69,77; 2:30; 3:6; 19:9). But it would not be easy. Jesus first had to do battle with the one who deceives all people with his clever temptations. Only after defeating this diabolic enemy could Jesus carry out God’s plan for us (11:20–22). So the Spirit was the one who led him to do it. Luke tells us that eventually his days of temptation “were ended” (see also verse 13). The Greek word for this suggests again that God’s ultimate plan was being fulfilled.

This opening description in verse 2 also highlights the hardships Jesus endured. To the Hebrews, the number 40 represented much suffering. Forty days in the wilderness being tempted by the devil was really intense. Added to that, it says that Jesus “ate nothing” and “was hungry.” The NET Bible translates this word as “famished.” It was beyond what most people will ever have to endure.

It was at this time of weakness that the devil came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread” (3). It was temptation on the physical level, something all of us can readily understand. Sometimes our physical urges can be so strong we’ll do anything to satisfy them. But there was more to this temptation than that. For Jesus it was a temptation to use his power as God’s Son to take care of his own needs. In this sense it was also a temptation to doubt that God would provide for him. The situation God had allowed Jesus to endure had become so bad, it seemed reasonable for Jesus to take matters into his own hands instead of relying on God. When we are in dire straits, the devil still tempts us to put making money as our first priority.

How did Jesus respond? Read verse 4. It’s a quote from Deuteronomy 8:3. God led the Israelites to hunger in the wilderness to test them and humble them and teach them “…that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.” So what does Jesus’ quoting this verse mean to us? In a sense, he’s teaching us not to give in to our strong physical desires and material suffering, but to keep holding onto God’s word and depending on him. In another sense, he’s refusing to use his power as God’s Son to excuse himself from our most common human sufferings. By enduring such great hunger and material hardship to the end, he’s identifying with all the ordinary people of this world who suffer. Jesus refused to deviate from being our suffering Servant, the Son of Man. This is one reason we can trust him.

This first temptation was like round one in a boxing match. The devil was just getting started. Look at verse 5. This was like a vision. It represented every kingdom on earth in every time and culture. And the devil describes it further. Read verse 6. “All this authority and their glory” was very different from the first temptation. This was a temptation for personal glory through gaining the top position in an earthly kingdom. We shouldn’t underestimate the power of this temptation. People who could overcome intense physical or material temptations have succumbed to this one. Such a position of power and glory in and of itself isn’t wrong, just as there’s nothing inherently wrong with eating bread. The problem is how one gains it. In history so many good people gave in to the temptation to grab a position of power and glory by dubious means.

Look at verse 7. The devil is saying he’s the only one who can give it. His words are a mixture of truth and error. He says all Jesus need do is compromise with him just a bit, worship him just once. It still seems impossible to get what we want in this world without some kind of little compromises. We might not be tempted by such a lofty ambition for “all the kingdoms of the world,” but we all *are* tempted to enjoy personal glory in this world on some level. It might come in the form of an opportunity that takes us away from our spiritual commitments. And it still takes just a little bit of compromise to gain it.

How did Jesus respond this time? Read verse 8. The word “worship” in Greek literally means to “bow down before” someone. Quoting again from the Bible, Deuteronomy 6:13, Jesus made it clear he would give such allegiance to God only. He would bow down only to God, and he’s teaching us to do the same. We should never compromise a decision to serve God by giving in to some worldly idol. In resisting this temptation so clearly, Jesus again refused to give in to gratify his own desires. He kept his commitment to God, to live as his suffering Servant, with no glory here on earth whatsoever. To obey the Father he was born in a manger and would end up on a cross. It’s another reason we can trust him.

It was on to the final round. Read verse 9. In Matthew’s version (Mt4:1–11), this temptation was second. But Luke puts it last, in line with his overarching theme of the importance of Jerusalem (9:53; 17:11; 18:31; 19:11). Jerusalem was the place where God would fulfill all his promises. Jerusalem also was where Jesus would face his most daunting temptation to save himself from the cross (22:40–44; 23:35–37,39). But here, before his ministry began, this third temptation was basically to put God’s care and protection to the test. People who get involved in ministry have often taken it to extremes. In a sense they challenge God to take care of them even as they recklessly put themselves at risk. It also was a temptation to make use of God’s word to justify what he was doing. Read verses 10,11. Here the devil is quoting from Psalm 91:11,12. Jumping from the temple here would make everything so much easier. People would likely see it and believe in Jesus right away. It was a very subtle temptation to twist God’s word to our own advantage, even to excuse ourselves from all suffering.

How did Jesus respond? Read verse 12. It’s another quote, this tine from Deuteronomy 6:16. Jesus knew exactly what the devil was tempting him to do—to test God—and he refused absolutely. Instead of testing God, we need to trust God like he did. Jesus resisting this temptation is yet another reason to trust him.

In facing these temptations, Jesus didn’t debate the devil with his own clever intellect or skill. In each case he resisted simply and firmly by quoting from God’s word. It shows how he really knew the whole Bible. More than that, it also shows his commitment not just to know it but to obey its teachings. As followers of Christ, we all face a spiritual battle in this world with the evil one. Our adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour (1Pe5:8). We need to face this reality soberly and humble ourselves to put on the full armor of God. Paul called the Bible our only offensive weapon, the sword of the Spirit, the word of God (Eph6:17). As we study the Bible carefully, we need to learn to rely on the power of God’s word, just as our Lord Jesus did, to resist the devil’s subtle temptations.

What happened when Jesus was so clear? Read verse 13. The devil had to give up for now. But he would definitely be back. It shows us how the devil tempts those who are trying to obey God and about to get involved in serving him. He won’t give up trying to derail us, right to the very end.

So why was Jesus tempted in these ways? Hebrews 2:18 says, “For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.” We can receive his help with our own temptations not just by learning from his example but when we rely on him in prayer. If we try to defeat temptations on our own, we will get badly beaten up by the devil. Instead of rationalizing our weaknesses, we need to remember that Jesus has been tempted in every respect as we are yet was without sin (Heb4:15). When we’re tempted, our solution is not to compromise, not to give in and become hopeless; it’s to really trust Jesus. By faith we can draw near his throne of grace with confidence to receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Heb4:16).

To the Hebrews, the number 3 represented perfect. Jesus resisted all the devil’s temptations perfectly. As we think about these three temptations, we see a common factor. The devil was trying to get Jesus to be self-seeking. But Jesus never did. He remained utterly loyal to his Father God and to the task God was giving him. In the world we see so many people who give in to some kind of self-seeking temptation. But we praise our Lord Jesus who suffered the devil’s temptations and resisted them all, in order to save us. He’s the one who can save us from all our sins, all our selfishness, and make us useful to God.

Through our study of Luke’s Gospel may God deepen our trust in our Lord Jesus and fill us with his Spirit and his word. May he give us the insight and strength to discern the devil’s temptations and resist them. May he help us share this good news of Jesus with people who have lost hope and feel powerless.