

Matthew 3:13 - 4v 11

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 23 November 2014

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] How did you get on last week in your battle with temptation?

Did you listen and heed to God's warning? Did you rise to the challenge to be careful lest you fall? Did you cling to the promise of God to sustain you in the midst of temptation?

Or did you fall, and perhaps often? Now, if you weren't here last Sunday evening, you are in a measure excused. But for those of us who were, there really is no excuse.

Last Sunday evening, we heard these three words from God, as they're recorded in the 10th chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

His warning from the past, as we consider the experience of the Israelites in the wilderness. His challenge for the present, be careful lest you fall.

[1 : 11] And His promise for the future, for the immediate future, that He will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we are able to endure. Words from God to help us not fall when we are tempted.

But we need to listen, and we need to pay heed. But we don't only have in the Bible a word from God to help us. We also have the example of God in the person of His own Son.

Jesus was tempted in all ways, as we are, yet without sin. And what I want to think about a little bit this evening is, how did He do that?

And can we learn from the example of Jesus in this matter? Last week, we listened to God, and this week, we're going to look to Jesus, as we consider how He resisted temptation.

And our focus is going to be on the classic occasion when Jesus was tempted in the desert. And we're going to consider the passage through the lens of one very specific question.

[2 : 28] And the question is this, why was it that Jesus was able to resist temptation? Why was it that Jesus was able to resist temptation?

How did He do it? And I want to suggest, as we turn to the passage, I want to identify five answers to that question.

Why was it that Jesus was able to resist temptation? So let me just outline what those five answers are, and then we'll look at each in turn and see if we can actually find that answer in the passage that we've read.

So the five answers that I'm suggesting together help us understand how it is that Jesus was able to resist when He was so grievously tempted.

The five answers are these. First of all, He was assured of His identity in God. He was assured of His identity in God.

[3 : 31] But also, He was led by the Spirit of God. Thirdly, we'll notice that He was shaped by His communion with God. He was also saturated in the Word of God.

And finally, He was gripped by the worthiness of God. And these things together, I think, answer our question. Why was it, or how was it, that Jesus was able to resist temptation?

Well, it's all fine me suggesting these are the answers, but we have to find if indeed we can discover these answers in the passage in the Bible. So let's think of them each in turn and see where we find them, if indeed we can find them in the passage that we've read in Matthew's Gospel.

The first thing, then, that I'm suggesting answers the question, why was it that Jesus was able to resist temptation, is that He was assured of His identity in God.

And here, we need to be conscious of what it is that immediately precedes the temptation. We read just a few moments ago from Matthew chapter 3, and we began our reading in verse 13, where we have the baptism of Jesus.

[4 : 49] And then immediately there follows His temptation in the desert. And it is surely significant that in the Father's providence, the time of testing and temptation that Jesus had to endure immediately followed His baptism.

And particularly, the words of His Father directed to Him from heaven. Now, of course, we know that this was not the only occasion when Jesus was tempted.

Indeed, in Luke's Gospel, we're told explicitly that the devil left Him until an opportune time. So, it's very clear that his life was marked by temptation throughout his life.

Nonetheless, there is this particular occasion when he is tempted, and it immediately follows his baptism. And our focus particularly is on the words of the Father directed to him as he was baptized or following his baptism.

And what is it that the Father said to him? Well, we have that in verse 17. A voice from heaven said, This is my Son, whom I love. With Him I am well pleased.

[6 : 05] And with these words, we have the opportunity for Jesus to be reminded or to discover perhaps in some sense who He is, His identity in God.

This is my Son. And as Jesus hears these words, He's able to be clear as to who He is, His identity. He is the Son of God.

This is my Son, whom I love. As the Son of God, He is loved by His Father. He is deeply loved. And the Father declares His love to all who would hear. And the Father goes on, With Him I am well pleased. And of course, Jesus knows that the reason why the Father is well pleased with Him is that He is the obedient Son, the loyal Son, the Son who is doing the will of the Father.

And as such, He is the object of the Father's delight. The Father is well pleased with Him. And it is with these words ringing in His ears and resting in His heart and consciousness that He has led to the desert to be tempted.

[7 : 24] He knows who He is. And that knowledge will serve Him well in the face of temptation. And as we turn to the temptations, it's striking that two of the three temptations begin with the words of the devil, If you are the Son of God.

If you are the Son of God. We see that in verse 3. If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become great. And then again in verse 6. If you are the Son of God, He said, throw yourself down, for it is written.

And then the passage continues. Now, it's interesting to actually ponder on what is in view here. What does the devil have in mind?

By introducing what he has to say with these words, If you are the Son of God. Was he seeking to sow doubt in the mind of Jesus concerning His identity?

Or was he rather tempting Him on the basis of His identity, on the basis of His sonship? But if that's the case, the sense would be, Given that you are the Son of God, do this or do that.

[8 : 38] You can see the distinction. Is he trying to sow doubt? Or is he rather saying, well, given that you are the Son of God, Well, you can do this or you could do that. You're the Son of God after all. I'm not altogether sure how we are to understand the devil's words here, If you are the Son of God.

But what I am sure of is that Jesus' assurance as to His own identity protects Him in the face of temptation.

As the Son of God, as He has just heard declared from heaven itself, Sin will have no hold on Him. As the one loved by God, the experience and the reality of that love so surpasses anything that sin can even claim to offer, Let alone deliver.

He is strengthened in resisting what sin would offer and what the devil would lure Him with.

The love of God is so much more precious and of so much more value to Him than anything else that could be offered to Him. As the one in whom the Father delights, even the prospect of dimming the Father's delight is abhorrent to Jesus.

[9 : 58] How could He do anything that would sadden His Father, the one who so delights in Him? And so He is assured of His own identity in God.

And I've no doubt that as Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, in the desert, These words of the Father would have been brought repeatedly to His mind, And they would have strengthened Him in the struggle.

Now, our identity as believers, as Christians, is not equivalent to the identity of Jesus.

But we too must be assured of our identity in God if we are to resist temptation. For we are, in Christ, sons and daughters of God.

That is who you are if you are a believer. You are a son of God. You are a daughter of God. We are deeply loved by our Father. And in Christ, the Father is well pleased with us.

[11 : 12] And so all of these truths that relate to who we are and to our identity are to be embraced and to be grasped and to be held, hold firm of, that we would resist temptation.

Who you consider yourself to be will significantly determine the measure in which you are able to resist temptation. I remember on one occasion, this was many years ago, I was in a prayer meeting and somebody was praying.

And my impression of the prayer, and I hope I'm not misrepresenting this unnamed individual, but the prayer seemed to be, from beginning to end, an unremitting, really, expression of how sinful the person praying was.

Now, don't get me wrong, I think it is important for us to recognize our sinful condition, to confess our sins, to be conscious of the gravity of sin, and what a terrible thing it is to offend God by our sin. Of course, all of these things are true. But it appeared to me, and again, I may have been misrepresenting or misunderstanding, but it appeared to me that this Christian's identity was governed, was dominated by this one truth that is a truth, that he was a sinner, that he fell short, that he wasn't faithful to God.

[12 : 42] And it just seemed to me, well, if that's all he believes to be true of himself, then how will he resist temptation? It's almost as if he convinced himself that he couldn't. He was such a sinner.

And yes, we are sinners, but we're not just sinners. We're sons of God. We're loved by the Father. The Father delights in us as we are united to his Son.

And as such, and a consciousness of that reality of who we are, as it strengthened Jesus, so it will strengthen us as we would struggle with temptation.

Why was it that Jesus was able to resist temptation? Well, in the first place, because he was assured of his identity in God. But the second thing that I want us to notice and to draw from the passage is that Jesus was led by the Spirit of God.

Indeed, in the baptism, we've read of how at that moment heaven was opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him.

[13 : 53] And it's telling that all three Gospels that make reference to the temptation of Jesus all explicitly highlight the part played by the Spirit in different ways and using a different language.

In Matthew's Gospel, we read that then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert. If we turn to Mark's Gospel and chapter 1 and verse 12, different language is used, but there is this stress on the involvement of the Spirit of God.

At once, the Spirit sent him out into the desert. Some translations say drove him out into the desert. And then in Luke chapter 4 and verse 1, again, in the parallel passage, there is this explicit reference to the involvement of the Spirit of God.

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert. The Spirit of God is the one who both leads Jesus to be tempted.

That is so clearly indicated on a number of occasions in the different Gospels that this was no random event. He was led by the Spirit to be tempted.

[15 : 16] So the Spirit is involved in that sense, in that regard, but He's also the one who upholds Him in temptation. Full of the Spirit, He is led by the Spirit to be tempted.

And these two aspects of the Spirit's leading and upholding are both important. For Jesus to know that it was the Father's will that He be tempted, hence He was led by the Spirit to be tempted, grants to the experience of temptation, painful and dark though it was, purpose and meaning. And to know that this was no random event, that this was the Father's will, that the Spirit had led Him to this place for this purpose was important.

But Jesus also must have a clear sense of His own mission as the Son of God, as the Messiah, if He is to resist the temptation to abandon the Father's way and take another path.

This evening we're not going to be thinking in any detail about any one of the three temptations and their significance and what we can draw from them. We're taking a slightly different approach.

[16 : 35] But what we can say is that all of them, all three of the temptations, in one way or another, were an allurement to abandon the Father's way and go another way, to take another path.

And in order for Jesus to resist that, it was important that He be clear as to His own mission. And for that, He stood in need of the Spirit's direction and guidance.

Filled with the Spirit, to use the language of Luke, He had to retain a firm grip of the Father's will for Him and so resist any and every alternative that was presented.

He was led by the Spirit of God. And this helped Him, this enabled Him, this equipped Him to better and, as we know, to successfully resist temptation.

For us too. It is important, if we are to resist temptation, to know that God has a purpose in our temptation and to know that God has a purpose for us as His children.

[17 : 46] He has a job for us to do. He has work for us to do. And it is important for us to know what that is, that that focus and that direction would in itself grant us firmness in resisting any temptation to go another route or take another path that may seem more attractive or less demanding.

But then, also, in answering this one big question that we're trying to answer, how was it that Jesus was able to resist temptation?

We can answer the question in a third way, or we can add another element to the answer, and it is this, that He was shaped, Jesus was shaped by His communion with God.

In the passage there in chapter 4, we're told that after fasting for 40 days and 40 nights, He was hungry. And then we read, the tempter came to Him and said, and the passage continues.

Now, as we read Matthew's account and Luke's account, it's not altogether clear if it was 40 days of fasting followed by the temptations or if somehow the two were happening concurrently.

[19 : 02] It's not hugely significant, certainly not for our purposes. What I want to just focus on is this very fact that He was fasting for this period of time.

What was the purpose of fasting? Not only on this occasion, but on any occasion. What purpose did fasting serve? Well, fasting really was a means to an end.

Fasting was intended to facilitate a time of dedicated prayer and communion with God. And such prayer and communion for Jesus and for us as believers has many benefits, and one of them is precisely a greater preparedness to face and resist temptation.

Jesus not only demonstrates this by His example, but also in His instruction of the disciples, for He instructs them in these very terms.

Remember, when He was in the Garden of Gethsemane, the words that He directs to the disciples, watch and pray so that you will not fall into or under temptation.

[20 : 16] Watch and pray. That will prepare you. That will strengthen you in the face of temptation. Now, we know that spending time in prayer and communion with His Father marked Jesus' life and ministry.

He was shaped by it and so better able to endure when tempted. What about us? What about you?

We ought not to be surprised if we succumb all too easily, if we pray all too rarely.

We will succumb all too easily if we pray all too rarely. Our preparedness to face and resist temptation is directly proportional to the quality and depth of our communion with God.

The greater our communion, the greater the intimacy, the greater the love that we cultivate, the greater we will be prepared to resist temptation.

It makes sense when you think about it. Imagine the relationship between a husband and a wife.

Imagine a husband who loves his wife deeply and his love for his wife deepens and grows and develops.

[21 : 32] What chances are there that such a man would be unfaithful to his wife? Which is not impossible. But the chances are, I would suggest, very remote. You see, he loves his wife so much that the chances of being unfaithful to her decline in proportion to the love that he has for his wife.

But imagine a husband whose relationship with his wife is a distant one, a cold one, a deteriorating one. They never speak to each other. They don't communicate. Such a man is much more vulnerable.

And of course, it would be true of a woman as well, a man, a woman, the husband, the wife. In the context of such a relationship, so much more vulnerable to that particular temptation.

The more we love God, the more we cultivate our love for God, the better prepared we will be to resist temptation so as not to sadden the one we love if we were to fall in the face of temptation.

Jesus was shaped by his communion with God. But then also, he was saturated by the Word of God. This is the fourth element, the fourth aspect of the answer to the big question.

[22 : 48] Why was it that he was able to resist? He was saturated in the Word of God. Now, it's often noted, and quite properly, that Jesus resists the temptations of the devil by employing the Bible, by employing Scripture in his defense.

And as I've already suggested a moment ago, it's not our concern this evening to carefully examine how he does so on each occasion, but simply to note the importance of both a familiarity with and a capacity to correctly handle the Word of Truth, to use the language that Paul uses as he writes to Timothy in his second letter.

There's two elements I'm suggesting that are important, familiarity with and a capacity to correctly handle that which we are familiar with. Both are needed.

The second is impossible without the first. We can't correctly handle the Word of Truth if we don't know the Word of Truth. But it's also the case that the second, correctly handling of the Word of Truth, is not guaranteed by the first.

Familiarity with the Word of God, necessary and important though it is, doesn't guarantee that we then correctly handle it. The language that Paul uses as he writes to Timothy speaks of a skill that is learned by much practice and life training as we make use of the Word of God, as we turn to it to help us in times of questions and temptation and trial and discover what it has to say to us, as we become familiar with it and learn to correctly handle it so it becomes that help that we need to resist temptation.

[24 : 35] Well, Jesus was saturated in the Word of God. He is able on each occasion to bring to bear precisely a passage that is relevant to the temptation that he is being confronted with.

What about you? Are you saturated in the Word of God? Do you take every opportunity to study the Bible and hone your Bible-handling skills? This is necessary if you are to resist temptation.

You see, among the multiplicity of temptations that we can face, there can be temptations to evil that are subtle and seemingly harmless. And we run the risk of falling into sin without even realizing that this is what's happening.

And that will happen to us. We're vulnerable to that in the measure that we're ignorant of the Word of God and unable to apply it to what can be very messy and complicated moral dilemmas or challenges that we face.

If we don't know the Word, we may not even know that what we're being tempted to is the wrong thing to do. If we don't know how to apply the Word of God, we will have difficulty in challenging that which is being presented to us as such an attractive possibility or option.

[25 : 49] Jesus resisted temptation. He was successful in resisting temptation because He was saturated in the Word of God. But then finally, the fifth plank that we're identifying here is that He was gripped by the worthiness of God.

As I've already said on a couple of occasions, it's not been our concern to examine every temptation individually. But we will now draw attention to the third temptation. Well, in Matthew's account, it's the third one.

For some reason, it's really difficult to understand. Luke inverts the order of the second and the third, but that's really not of any great consequence. But in the passage that we've read, it's the third temptation.

And I want you to notice the manner in which Jesus responds to it. The temptation itself and the manner in which He responds to it. It begins there in verse 8. 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. Jesus said to him, Away from Me, Satan, for it is written, Worship the Lord your God and serve Him only.

[27 : 02] The temptation is that Jesus is being offered the kingdoms of the world in all their splendor in return for bowing down and worshiping the devil.

Now, leaving aside the matter of whether the offer the devil was making was even one that he had any authority to make or to deliver, leaving that to one side, notice what it is that lies at the heart of Jesus' robust rejection of the devil's temptation.

What is it that Jesus says as He robustly and aggressively rejects the very suggestion that the devil is making? Worship the Lord your God and serve Him only.

Even the notion, even the suggestion, even the possibility of denying the Father the worship and service that He was due is repugnant to Jesus.

Jesus is gripped by a sense of the worthiness of God. None other is worthy of His service, His allegiance, and His loyalty. And this sense of the worthiness of God underpins His resistance to the devil's temptations, and so it ought to be with us.

[28 : 23] The greater our grasp of the holiness and majesty and worthiness of God, the greater our sense of revulsion towards sin, and consequently, the greater our ability to resist temptation.

Sin becomes so much less attractive the more that we are gripped by the glory and the worthiness of God. And so in these different ways, as they combine together, I think we have an answer to the question that we posed at the beginning.

Why was it? Or why was it that Jesus was able to resist temptation? He was assured of his identity in God. He was led by the Spirit of God.

He was shaped by his communion with God. He was saturated in the Word of God, and he was gripped by a sense of the worthiness of God. And in all this, he serves as an example and a challenge to us as Christians.

We must strive to be like Him in the ways identified. But before we end, I want to just pose a final question, and the question is this. Is Jesus in this matter of His resisting temptation?

[29 : 42] Is He only to be seen as our example? He is our example. He is a challenge for us. But is He only our example?

What I would suggest to you, what I would contend, is that in resisting temptation, Jesus has not only set us an example, He has also resisted for us and in our place.

Where we fail, He has succeeded. Where we fall short, He has perfectly met the mark. And the gospel accounts hint at this, what we're suggesting, in two ways, as Jesus is implicitly contrasted with both Adam and with the people of God, the Israelites, in the desert.

How is that done? Or how do we find this contrast in the gospel accounts of His temptation? Well, in Luke's gospel, and we haven't read from Luke's gospel, so you can have a look yourself or take it on trust.

In Luke's gospel, the evangelist introduces, in between the account of the baptism of Jesus and the temptation of Jesus, the genealogy of Jesus.

[30 : 57] And it is a genealogy that connects Jesus with Adam. And so you can see for yourselves in Luke's gospel, you have the baptism, then seemingly, for no apparent reason, this genealogy, and then the temptation.

And so the question emerges, well, what's the genealogy doing here? What purpose does it serve? Well, the purpose that it serves is that it allows Jesus to be contrasted with Adam.

Jesus is the second Adam who, unlike the first, did not fall when tempted. So as we, as heirs of Adam, as sons and daughters of Adam, as we all fell with Adam, so we are all restored with Christ and gifted His perfect righteousness, His perfect resistance of temptation.

He resisted temptation for us and did that which we cannot perfectly do. So there is this contrast, I think implicit, in the very manner in which Luke orders his material.

But there's a similar contrast, and this we find in both accounts, in the manner in which Jesus, and this is something Jesus Himself does for a reason, in the manner in which Jesus, when He turns to the Bible to resist the three temptations, He does so on each occasion by turning to the book of Deuteronomy, and particularly as it relates for us, the Exodus.

[32 : 31] And why is it that Jesus turns on each of the occasions to the book of Deuteronomy and to the Exodus account? And we might say, well, the verses there were suited to the temptation He was being faced, and of course they were.

But I'm sure Jesus could have equally employed other passages or verses that would also have been suited. Why does He turn to Deuteronomy? Why does He turn to the account of the Exodus?

Well, I think the reason that He does so is that Jesus Himself, in so doing, is implicitly presenting this contrast between Himself and between the people of God and the one who led, the Moses.

When they were tempted in the desert, what happened? They succumbed. They didn't resist. They sinned. And yet here we have one who is tempted, but who does not sin.

Here we have one who is tempted and yet resists the temptation. The people of God, including Moses Himself, when tested in the desert, did not resist the temptation.

[33 : 42] But the one greater than Moses has resisted perfectly all that the devil could throw at him. And He resisted for us and in our place. He achieved what we could not achieve.

And so to draw these two themes together, our primary concern this evening has been to learn from the example of Jesus, how He resisted temptation. But as we've drawn things to a close, we've also suggested this other aspect that is important to grasp concerning the matter of Jesus resisting temptation.

And as we draw the two together, we could conclude by saying this, that in the matter of temptation, Jesus is both our example to help us that we might not fall, but also our Savior to restore us when we do fall.

To help us that we might not fall, but also to restore us when we do, when you do, and when I do.

And thank God for one who can indeed do both these things for us.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Jesus. We thank You for Your Son. We thank You for what we have been able to consider concerning Him this evening.

[34 : 52] We thank You for the manner in which He was indeed led into the desert to be tempted and for the manner in which He resisted every temptation that was presented to Him, not only on this occasion, but throughout His life.

Tempted in all ways, as we are yet without sin. We thank You that in so doing, He presents to us a challenge and an example that we might learn from Him and seek to be like Him.

But we thank You also that we who do fall, we who do fail to resist as we ought, when we fall, and when we fail to resist, we can turn to Jesus as the one who has resisted for us, the one who remains sinless for us, and who is able to give us, and indeed does give us and clothe us with His perfect righteousness.

And we thank You for this very especially, and all we pray is in Jesus' name. Amen.