

Matthew 4:1-6

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[0:00] Let's turn again to the Gospel of Matthew and the fourth chapter and the story of the temptation of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is a picture of the Lord Jesus. And in a way, I'm rather conscious of the demands that this picture makes of us as Christians.

I was at a conference this week and I was asked to speak on Christology. I spoke the first evening on the deity of Christ.

And the following morning, I had a phone call to ask me to keep it rather simpler for the following evening. And I must confess that such a request really sets me thinking.

After all, if we are Christians, then the person of Christ is central to our faith and devotion.

[1:40] And at the same time, the Bible's teaching on the person of Christ is in its own way very demanding.

Now, I've no patience with speculation. But I do feel bound to insist that the Bible is God's word for his own children.

And that those who are his children are called upon by God and equipped by God to understand his own word.

And that means that we are called upon to make the effort necessary to understand the New Testament's portrayal of the Lord Jesus.

Now, the story of the temptation has its own inherent power.

[2:56] I mean that it will make a great deal of its impression simply by itself read, listened to, and uncommented on.

And I don't want my exposition to come between you this morning and the story itself. But I do want, so far as I can, to clarify the narrative and, if possible, to sharpen its focus.

Now, the picture that Matthew has built up is one that is moved from the story of the birth of Jesus through the baptism to this moment of the temptation.

He was born and that had its own elements of mystery. He was baptized. He was baptized. And again, that had its elements of mystery.

And now, thirdly, he is tempted. And that again has its own elements of mystery. As we approach the story, I want, first of all, to focus on three or four general points.

[4:25] You will see, first of all, that the temptation comes immediately after the baptism of the Lord Jesus. And the baptism was a moment of high privilege for the Lord at the level of his own human psychology.

It was a moment of great encouragement, a moment of great personal blessing. There, God the Father, spoke that great word of reassurance.

This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. And there, too, God's Holy Spirit came in pompous and visible form, descending upon Christ in the shape of a dove.

And there, the Lord was given the great twofold assurance on the threshold of his ministry. That he was the Son of God.

And that he was fully endowed with the Spirit of God. And there he had the great warm glow of assurance.

[5:47] The assurance of God's love. The assurance of God's great good pleasure. The assurance of God's presence with him.

And then, you see, right on the heels of that moment of blessing, there comes the great moment of trial. And there is virtually no interval between the two things.

Now, sometimes we may imagine that moments of great blessing are going to give us long periods of immunity from spiritual trial and temptation.

But how false that is. And how common in the life of the church of God is this kind of sequence. Where the moment of blessing is followed by the moment of temptation.

You see that, for example, in the story of Elijah. That moment on Mount Carmel. When he overcomes the prophets of Baal.

[7:00] And when God answers, the prophets cry and shows that he, Jehovah, is the living God. It was a great moment of indication for the truth.

And for the prophet of the truth. It was, in many ways, the high point of Elijah's life. And yet it's followed almost immediately.

By a moment of great spiritual darkness and despondency and depression. As the prophet moves into the trough.

And he wishes himself dead. He lies there under the juniper tree. Lamenting and mourning and mourning before God.

Because right in the wake of the ecstasy. There comes the moment of dejection. Time and again, as I've said, we find that sequence.

[8:07] We find that Pentecost is followed by persecution. We find the reformation of the 16th century. Followed again by moment.

By great periods of incredible harassment and hardship for the church of God. And maybe you know this too in your own spiritual life.

That very, very often, just in the wake of the great blessing. When God assured us love in such wonderful ways.

And you are at peace. Your heart is suffused with the love of God. And then just in that moment there comes the calamity.

The cataclysm. The arrow in the heart that brings the moment of trial. And the moment of testing. That's the way it was.

[9:08] Even for the Lord himself. The baptism followed by the temptation. And it may be that we as a church this morning must take the principle to heart, even collectively.

The Lord has been so good to you. In recent years, you have known so much of divine blessing and divine encouragement.

You have seen so much growth. And I'm not at all sure. But that means that you are now ripe for testing.

And it certainly means that we must walk so carefully before God. Because so very, very often, this is God's sequence.

The moment of privilege followed by the moment of testing. And the second thing is this. You will see this remarkable fact.

[10:17] That the Lord was led by the Spirit to be tempted by the devil. He was led by the Spirit into the temptation.

Indeed, Matthew puts it even more strongly and suggests that he was driven by the Spirit into this moment of testing. Now, I don't pretend to understand this completely.

But what it means at least is this. That the temptation was no accident. It was part of the great plan of God.

God had planned the birth of Christ. God had planned the baptism of Christ. And God had planned the temptation of Christ.

It was all part of the Spirit's leading of our Lord and Savior. It was something that Jesus had to do.

[11:22] And something in which he himself took the initiative. He was led by the Spirit. But that means that he himself voluntarily went and confronted the devil.

And then, bear in mind that this whole story isn't a story primarily about the believer's experience. It is a story about the redemption history of the Lord Jesus.

What he did for your salvation. And one great thing he did for your salvation was voluntarily and deliberately to come into the spirits, into the devil's territory.

And once he was in the devil's territory, he didn't hide from the devil. He didn't wait for him to come to find him. But he went.

And he sought this confrontation. Now, not for a single moment am I saying to you that you must go and do the same. I am saying it of Jesus because he is the Savior and mediator.

[12:44] He has come to destroy the works of the devil. Now, the Lord is tempted. Not because Satan corners him.

And boxes him in and heaps him in. But he is tempted because he himself, led by the Spirit, goes and attacks and confronts the devil.

This is part of the redemptive attack of Jesus on the powers of the kingdom of darkness. It was the Lord himself who took this initiative.

And, of course, it's something, as many theologians have said, that the devil would have wished to avoid. Because he came off much the worst.

But here is the Lord Jesus, born into this world, invading the kingdom of darkness. And once he is in the kingdom, he goes and looks for the devil.

[13:48] He confronts him. And he wins a decisive victory in this opening skirmish of this great war between the two kingdoms of light and darkness.

So that's the second point. He is led by the Spirit, dead to this moment of testing and temptation. And the third general point is this.

That all this happened in the desert. Now, I'm not going to labor this point. But as you know, in the current preoccupation with environmental issues, there are many forces in our own civilization which are very much enamored of desert, enamored of wilderness.

And they want to create more and more wilderness. And, of course, allied to that, there is the notion that wildernesses are places with great potential for spirituality.

That in the wilderness, on the mountains, out on the moors, in solitude, that there is a special potency for communion with God.

[15:09] And there are pressures on us today to even accelerate those natural processes that themselves create wilderness.

Now, in the Bible, it seems to me that there are many suggestions to the contrary, that the wilderness and the desert is often symbolic of evil and is the location often of special temptation.

For example, the Old Testament church wandered in the desert for 40 years. And they grieved and provoked the Lord all those years.

They strayed in deserts, pathless way, no city found to rest. Now, these were not great years for the church. They were, in many ways, lost years for the church.

And here is the Lord tempted. Where is he tempted? Well, you would say it's in the desert. Well, you know, the Judean desert, as many of you know, is a magnificent place.

[16:25] It's marvelously evocative. It has a very powerful atmosphere. In that desert, little has changed over many, many millennia.

In that desert, the tiniest whisper carries for miles. And one might say that were there anywhere in the world a desert made for spirituality, then it was the Judean desert.

And yet what the Lord found there was temptation. Solitude, isolation, communion with the magnificences of nature.

These do not grant us any immunity from temptation. It was there in the solitude that the Lord found this experience of testing and this moment of temptation.

And so, we see the sequence, how it comes right after the baptism. We see how it happens on his own initiative.

[17:40] And we see how it happens in the desert. But the great and central point is this. That it happened at all.

That this person of all persons showed no temptation. Now, of course, it's a common part of our experience.

Every day, the roaring lion is tempting us. Every moment, he plies us with his own wiles, his own subtle methods of insinuating and of commanding sin.

And every day, the impulses to sin from within ourselves are prompting us to the commission of iniquity.

So, yes, this is an essential and vital part of the whole human experience. And in many ways, it is a glorious part of the gospel to know that Jesus Christ, God's Son, our Savior, that he too has shared this common human experience of temptation.

[18:58] And yet, before its great and glorious news, it is a great wonder and a great mystery. Because we have to ask, how could he be tempted?

If John was surprised, as we saw, when Jesus comes from baptism, how much more the surprise when we see the Son of God tempted?

Because in him there is no sin, there is no proclivity or propensity or tendency or impulse to sin.

There is nothing in him which inclines or biases him to sin. There is nothing in him which has any affinity with sin.

And yet, he was tempted. And those temptations were real. He was tempted here in the desert. [20:02] He was tempted by Peter. It says, the year Philippi, Peter said, with regard to the cross, Far be it from you, Lord, no cross for you.

And Jesus is so stunned by that. He says, get behind me, you Satan. He's tempted too in Gethsemane.

In that agony of spiritual struggle. He's tempted on the cross itself. Really, really tempted. In other words, the devil puts to the Savior the proposal that obedience is going to be horrendously costly.

And that disobedience is unspeakably attractive. And that temptation is put to Jesus. And that temptation speaks to Jesus.

[21:08] And Jesus overcomes it only by the end of a great spiritual struggle. And the Lord was temptable because the Lord was human.

And being human, he had certain needs through which he could be tempted. They need, for example, for bread.

And he also, as human, had certain fears. And those fears were, from many points of view, holy fears.

There is a very important sense in which the temptation moves along the line of the Savior's holiness.

Because, as a holy person, there are certain things from which he recoiled. In other words, the Lord recoiled, not simply in his humanness from the pain and horror of death.

[22:30] But the Lord recoiled from the loss of the presence of God, which was an essential part of the whole process of Calvary.

Martin Luther says almost incredibly with regard to the cross.

No man ever feared death like this man. No man was ever so afraid of dying as Jesus.

That wasn't simply because he had a normal human fear of physical pain and dissolution. It was because he knew that in the dying of Calvary, there was the curse, the loss of the fellowship of God. And he shrunk from the loss of that fellowship. Not because he was a sinner, but because he was a saint.

[23:47] Not because it mattered to him so much. In many ways, you see, an unholy being, an unholy being, would not have shrunk so vividly from the prospect of being deserted by God.

And the Lord is tempted through that very holiness itself. And so we face this great reality that Jesus was tempted.

Not from any sinful impulse or lust within himself. But by the external promptings of the tempted. Pointing out, as I said, the cost of obedience. The attractiveness of disobedience.

Working through the Lord's physical and psychological means. The Lord's human instincts. And even through the very saintliness.

[25:00] Where it shrunk from the loss of the fellowship of God. And the consequences. That as you and I stand in the crucible of temptation.

We do so of the knowledge that Jesus Christ understands. That he knows what it is to be tempted. And it's no use of saying, ah, but for him it wasn't so severe. Because that is completely fallacious. The point is this.

You and I have never experienced the full force of temptation. Because the devil has never had to do everything in his power.

Before getting you and me to sin. Very often. Just a little of what he knows is sufficient to win from the victory.

[26:15] Can you imagine the curse of Jesus. Standing against sin. Resisting to the uttermost.

And the devil having to use all his ferocity. And all his cunning. Letting everything loose.

Every single thunderbolt. In the arsenal of hell. Was let loose at Jesus. Precisely because. He didn't yield.

If he had yielded. He would never have known the full force of the temptation. But he stood there you see. You imagine you see. Somebody who is being.

Interrogated. And tortured. If that person. Quickly becomes unconscious. Or quickly dies. Then he or she.

[27:18] Doesn't experience. The full ferocity. Of the torture. It is the person. Who has the physical. And psychological.

Strength to stand. It is that person. Who is going to feel. The full force. Of the interrogation. And that's why.

The devil. Had to take. Jesus Christ. And Christ. Uniquely. To the very. Frontiers. Of temptation. To the very.

Limit. Of human. Resistance. Against sin. He knows. Temptation. He really knows.

All that hell. Can do. He knows. All that's. Wiles. All that's. Subtlety. All that's. Violence. All that's. Ferocity. Because. Against him.

[28:13] And him alone. Hell. Tried. Absolutely. Everything. And so. When you find. You're so tempted. Don't you. Turn to God.

And say. Lord. You don't. Understand. Lord. You don't. Have a body. Lord. He's never. Used. The Bible. Against you. Never. Used.

Christian. Friends. Against you. Never. Used. Illness. Against you. Never. Used. Prosperity. Against you. There is. Nothing. He hasn't. Used. Against Jesus. God's.

Own. Son. And. In Christ. God. Understands. So. There are those. General points. As I said. There is. The great. Sequence. From baptism.

To temptation. There is. The divine. Initiative. The spirit. Leads. Into the death. There is. The location. In the desert. Itself. There is.

[29:05] The astonishing. Fact. The reality. Of the temptation. Of God's. Own son. Well. Can I ask. What. Was the point.

What were the points. At which. Specifically. The devil. Aigned. In those temptations. Though I can't. Give out. Much time. This. But. Three or four points. Very quickly.

The first. Point. Of the temptation. Was this. To instill doubt. The devil. Sought. To instill doubt.

In the mind. Of Jesus. If you are. The son. Of God. In many ways. The most intriguing point.

I find here. Is this. That. The devil. Is saying. To the savior. You know. The thing. That matters. Is. Are you.

[30:03] God's son. You must. Focus. And that. I'm sure. I've spoken. On this. Here. Before. This whole. Problem. Of assurance. That.

Is. So often. Caused. Such. An imbalance. In the life. Of. Just. You. Men. And. Women. The devil. Says. To us. Look. Before.

You do. Anything. You must. Settle. This issue. Are you. God's son. Are you. A child. Of God. This. Is. A thing. That matters. And.

So. Often. Christians. Have. Spent. Their. Whole. Lives. In. This. Outer. Court. Of. Discipleship. Immersed.

In. Obsessed. By. The question. Am I. A child. Of. God. God. And. In. Many. Ways. What the devil. Wants. With Jesus. Here.

[30:57] Is this. He. Wants. To. Keep him. Enmeshed. In. Doubt. Obsessed. With. A question.

Of. His. Own. Sonship. And. To. Prevent. Him. Living. That. Life. For. Others. Which. Was. The. Mission. On. Which.

Jesus. Actually. Came. And. You see. How subtle. It is. First. Of. All. Settle. Your. Own. Sonship. And.

Then. When you've. Done. That. Then. You begin. To live. The. Life. That is. For. Others. And. I. Hope. It. Won't. Be.

Misunderstood. If. I. Say. That. If. One. Is. Asked. How. Do. You. Know. If. You. Stay. One.

[31:50] Of. The. Most. Biblical. Answer. To. That. Is. That. One. Is. Not. Very. Interested. In. That. Question. It.

Is. Not. In. Some. Ways. For. Christian. The. Most. Important. Question. Because. Immersement. In. It. Obsession. With. It. Is. Simply. A form. Of. Egoism. Of. Self. Centeredness. The.

Lord. It. Come. To. Be. The. Man. For. Others. And. There. Is. Something. Profoundly. Wrong. When. The. Needs. Of. The. World.

The. Demands. Of. Evangelism. The. Problems. Around. Us. Are. All. Ignored. Because. We. Are. Enmeshed. In. This. Struggle.

[32:44] In. This. Obsession. Ah. But. Am I. A. Child. Of. God. So. Often. That. Obsession. Has.

Paralyzed. Men. And. Women. Of. God. And. That's. Why. You. Must. Come. To. The. Point.
 Where. You. Say. Well. Whether. I. Am. Or. Not. I. Going.
 To. Forget. That. Question. I. Going. To. Live. To. The. Glory. Of. God. I. Going. To. Serve. God. I.
 Want. To. Serve. My. Fellow. Men. Regardless.
 Of. All. Those. Subjective. Questions. As. To. My. Own. Position. The. Devil. Is. Saying. To. Jesus.
 The. Only. Important. Question. Is.
 Are. You. A. Son. Of. God. And. The. Devil. Is. Saying. This. To. How. In. The. Light. Of. Your.
 Circumstances. Are.
 [33:37] You. Really. Sure. In. Other. Words. The. Devil. Is. Attacking. The. Encouragement. God.
 Had. Given. To. The. Encouragement. Was.
 This. Is. My. Beloved. Son. The. Devil. Is. Questioning. That. Encouragement. Ah. Ah. But. Are.
 You. A. Son. Of. God. I. See.
 Says. The. Devil. That. You. Have. No. Kingdom. I. See. Says. The. Devil. That. You. Have. No.
 Bread. Are. You. A. Child. Of. God. The.
 Circumstances. As. The. Devil. Don't. Bear. It. Out. And. Again. For. The. Primary. Thing. Here. Is.
 The. Devil's. Attack. On.
 Jesus. Own. Encouragement. And. In. That. Way. An. Attack. On. Jesus. Mission. An. Attempt. To.
 Divert. Him. From. His. Mission. By. Destroying.
 [34:33] The. Encouragement. Because. You. Can't. Serve. God. Without. Encouragement. Yet.
 At. The. Same. Time. There. Is. In. It. For.
 Selves. This. Too. That. Very. Often. Our. Sonship. Is. Contradicted. By. Our. Circumstances. The.
 Devil.
 Can. Say. To. You. You. A. Child. Of. God. You. Just. Failed. Your. Exam. You. Just. Lost. Your.
 Job. You.
 Just. Lost. Your. Health. You. Just. Suffered. Bereavement. You. Are. You. Child. Of. God. If. You.
 Are. The. Son. Of. God. There. Is. The. Devil. Instilling. The. Doubts. Saying. The. Circumstances.
 Seem. To. Me. He. Says.
 [35:26] To. Contradict. The. Claim. That. You. Are. A. Child. Of. God. And. Of. Of. Of. The. Bible.
 Is. Own. Answer. Is. That. We. Are. Never. Never. Never.
 To. Read. Off. Our. Status. Or. Standing. Before. God. From. Our. Indicators.
 Our. Situation. You. Cannot. Argue. From. Our. Temporal. Condition. To. Our. Relationship. With.
 God. Of.
 Course. The. Great. Biblical. Paradox. Is. That. Very. Often. It. Is. God's. Enemy. To. Prosper. And.
 God's. Children. Who. Suffer. And.
 That's. What. The. Devil. Is. Doing. Here. You. Know. In. A. Way. It's. Not. All. That. Clever. It's. An.
 Old. Old. Argument. As. The. devil's. Arguments. Often. Are. You. Are. Son.
 [36:23] Of. God. See. Your. Situation. See. Your. Circumstances. That's. What. He's. Doing. And.
 We. Must. Refuse. To. Allow. His. Love. She.
 The. Second. Point. Of. The. Temptation. Is. This. The. Remand. For. A. Sign. Ask. God. For. A.
 Sign. You. Are. God's.
 Son. Well. If. You. God's. Son. There. Must. Be. A. Sign. Some. Miraculous. Some. Supernatural.
 Sign. If.
 You. Are. God's. Son. The. devil. Says. You. Know. You. Can't. Throw. Yourself. From. The. Roof.
 And. Nothing. Will. Happen. To. You. Because.
 You. God's. Son. And. Not. Only. You. God's. Son. But. There's. A. Verse. In. the. Bible. That. Says.
 That. God.
 [37:19] Will. Protect. You. And. Send. An. Angel. And. As. You. On. Your. Way. Down. An. Angel.
 Come. And. Arrest. You. Fall. And. Nothing.
 Will. Happen. To. You. Now. If. You. Really. God's. Son. Ask. God. For. A. Sign. Ask. God. To.
 Prove.
 Something. Wonderful. Something. Miraculous. Now. On. The. Fringe. Of. The. Church. Of. God.
 There. Are. Many. Bizarre.
 And. Tragic. Examples. Of. This. All. Phenomenon. Those. Argue. That. If. You. Are. God's. Child.
 And. You. Can. Pick. Up. Snakes. You. Can. Go. Through. Fire.

You. Can. Face. Bullets. Nothing. Will. Happen. To. You. Will. We. Don't. Do. These. Things. But. Do. We. Sometimes. Ask. God. For. Science.

[38:15] Lord. If. You. Love. Me. You. Must. Answer. This. Prayer. You. Must. Open. This. Door. You. Must. Perform.

This. Miracle. To. Prove. To. Me. That. You. Love. Me. What. Does. Jesus. Say. Jesus. Says. That. You. Shall.

Not. Tempt. Or. Test. The. Lord. Your. God. Do. Not. Put. The. Lord. Your. God. To. The. Test. Yes. You. Pray. For. God. To.

God. That. He. Would. Open. Doors. And. So. There. Is. Nothing. Wrong. With. A. Prayer. But. The. Lord. Is. Saying. This. Don't. Put. Him. To.

The. Test. He. Is. Saying. Basically. God. Has. Nothing. To. Prove. If. You. Say. To. God. Lord. Prove. That.

[39:07] You. Love. Me. What. Are. You. Say. You. Are. Saying. Lord. There. Is. No. Sign. In. My. Life. That. You.

Love. Me. You. Stand. Amed. All. The. Blessings. Of. God. And. You. Dare. To. Say. Lord. Prove. That. You. Love. Me. That. Petulance.

That. Childish. That. Arrogance. You. Putting. The. Lord. To. The. Test. And. Jesus. Says. Quite. Simply. Don't. Do. It.

The. Third. Point. Is. This. The. Quest. For. Worldly. Power. I. Will. Give. You. All. The. Kingdoms. Of. This. World. Again. Fundamentally. It's. An. Attempt. To. Divert. The. Lord. From. His. Task.

[40:00] He. Has. Come. To. Set. Up. A. Spiritual. Kingdom. The. Devil. Says. Look. It's. Very. Very. Difficult. To. Establish. A. Spiritual. Kingdom.

It's. Going. To. Cost. You. A. Great. Deal. To. Establish. A. Spiritual. Kingdom. It's. Going. To. Cost. You. Great. Sufferings. Going. Cost. You. Pay. Going. To.

Cost. You. Death. Going. To. Cost. You. The. Accursedness. Of. The. Cross. But. I. Can. Promise. You. Power. Real. Power. Worldly. Power. Here. And. Now.

Power. That's. What. I. Can. Promise. An. Attempt. To. Divert. The. Lord. From. His. Mission. And. Of. Course. The. Devil. Could. Say. Very. Plausibly.

To. Jesus. Jesus. Just. You. Think. What. You. Could. Do. With. Worldly. Power. If. You. Had. The. Power. You. Could. Change. So.

[40:53] Much. You. Could. Demolish. All. The. Slums. You. Could. Introduce. Great. New. Health. Programs. And. Great. New. Educational. Programs.

And. Great. New. Employment. Programs. And. Do. So. Much. Good. If. You. Are. The. Worldly. Power. Even. If. You. Are. To. Get. It. By. Satanic. Means. Now.

Of course. It's. Easy. To. See. The. Application. At. Some. Levels. How. The. Church. Itself. Has. Become. More. Interested. In. Worldly.

Power. Than. Spiritual. Power. But. At. The. Personal. Level. Is. It.

Not. Also. A. Possibility. A. Much. More. Subtle. Possibility. Our. Lives. Began. As. Christians. With. Seek. Ye. First. The.

[41:47] Kingdom. Of. God. And. Then. Maybe. Before. I. Know. Where. I. Am. I. Have. Subtly. Changed.

The. Agenda. I. Am. Looking. For. A. Worldly. Substitute. And. Of. Course. I. Am. Saying. Ah. But. All. The. Good.

I. Could. Do. With. It. If. I. Had. The. Money. If. I. Had. The. Status. If. I. Had. The. Prestige. And. The. Power. All. I. Could. Do. With. It. We.

Are. Thinking. See. Again. In. Terms. Of. The. Kingdom. Which. Belongs. To. This. World. Is. It. Fair. To. Suggest. That.

The. Greatest. Problem. We. Face. In. The. Church. Today. Is. The. Problem. Of. World. In. This. Defined. Not. So. Often. Not. As. It. Is. Often.

[42:40] Terms. Of. Entertainment. Worldly. Entertainment. But. In. Terms. Of. Mammon. The. Kingdoms. Of. This. World. I.

Will. Give. You. Says. The. Devil. A. Worldly. Good. A. Worldly. Good. With. Which. You. Can. Do. Much. Good. Because. It. Has.

But not for such a star as the sight of their crooked way, God shall lead forth with wicked men, all Israel it shall save.
Now may grace, mercy and peace from God be upon each one of us today and evermore.
Amen.