



# The Investigator's Gospel

## Session 5 – Chapter 4 – The Temptation and the Rejection

### The Temptation in the Desert

In biblical thought “to tempt” means “to test something or someone in order to determine or demonstrate worth or faithfulness.” Temptation also refers to “an attempt, often by Satan, to incite a person to sin.”

As told in Luke 4, Matthew 4 and (briefly) Mark 1, God’s Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness, not to punish Him or expose His weaknesses, but that in the crucible of testing, certain essential qualities might be displayed and shown to be genuine.

Three Hebrew words are translated “test” in the NIV translation of the Old Testament:

- “Nasah” is found 36 times in the OT and indicates an attempt to prove the quality of someone or something (Ex. 16:4; Deut. 8:16).
- “Sarap” which means to smelt or refine, suggests a process of purification. Seven times in the OT this word is translated as “test” (Ps. 17:3; 119:140; Jer. 9:7).
- “Bahan” is a test intended to demonstrate the existence of some quality. This word is found 29 times in the OT (Gen. 42:15-16; Ps. 7:9; Prov. 17:3; Jer. 6:27; Mal. 3:10, 15).

The Greek word “periazō,” which is translated as both “tempt” and “test” in the NT, is used in the Septuagint to render the Hebrew “nasah” – to “prove quality”. It can be used in a positive sense, as when Jesus tests his disciples (Jn 6:6), as well as in a negative sense, as when the Pharisees try to entangle Jesus in his conversation (Mt 22:15-22). In the rabbinic literature the theme is maintained that God tests and disciplines those whom he loves (Ps 11:5; Prov 3:12). The intent of Jesus’ temptation, then, was to test and prove the existence of qualities essential to His mission as Messiah.

The opening words of the temptation story in all three Synoptic Gospels are remarkably similar to Deuteronomy 8:1-5. The importance of Deuteronomy and the Exodus theme in understanding the temptation of Jesus is therefore suggested from the beginning.

*Be careful to follow every command I am giving you today, so that you may live and increase and may enter and possess the land the Lord promised on oath to your ancestors. 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. Your clothes did not wear out and your feet did not swell during these forty years. Know then in your heart that as a man **disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you.**** (Deuteronomy 8:1-5)*

Each of the temptation scenes in the Gospels recalls aspects in the Exodus story when the Israelites failed to remain faithful to God. By contrast, Jesus remains the obedient Son. As the forty years in the wilderness prepared and confirmed that the Israelites were God's chosen, so in his 40 day experience in the desert Jesus is prepared and confirmed to be God's Son.

### **Temptation 1 – Stones into Bread**

Jesus is famished, not having eaten for 40 days. His frail humanity is at its weakest point, and it is at this point of greatest vulnerability that he is first tested. He has the divine power to miraculously solve his problem, but refuses to use his divinity to meet his own human need. This remains a theme throughout his ministry: Jesus never uses his miraculous capacity for his own ends, but always to meet the needs of others.

Note the wording of the temptation: *“If you are the Son of God.”* Not, *“If you are hungry.”* Jesus consistently rejected requests for miracles solely as miraculous proof of his divinity (*Matthew 16:1 - The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven*). Was Satan suggesting that Jesus needed to prove his Sonship to himself?

The testing of the Hebrew nation had provision of food at its core; the daily provision of manna was to teach dependence upon God. Jesus is resolved to trust his Father for his needs, and to highlight the concept that we are more than our physical needs. It is no coincidence that in the Lord's Prayer, the *“give us this day our daily bread”* is juxtaposed with *“lead us not into temptation.”*

### **Temptation 2 – The Kingdoms of the World**

The context of this temptation is both the 40 years in the desert experienced by the Hebrew nation, and Psalm 2. In the Exodus story, there is a struggle between the worship of idols and the worship of the One True God, which culminates in the manufacture and worship of the Golden Calf. Worship the calf, it was thought, and the riches and splendour of Egypt would be theirs. This was, of course, a lie, as is this temptation.

Psalm 2 reflects the declaration of God at the Baptism of Jesus (*Luke 3:22 - You are my Son, whom I love*): *Psalm 2:7-8: He said to me, “You are my son; today I have become your father. Ask me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession.”* The nations are not Satan's to give; they belong properly to God, who gives them to Jesus, on the basis of obedience and love. Any other basis of power is doomed to fail.

The worship of power and success is itself a form of idolatry, and so Jesus answers, *“Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.”* This is a quotation from Deuteronomy 6:13-14: *“Worship 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.”* And the result of this pledge? Deuteronomy 6:18 – *“Do what is right and good in the Lord's sight, so that it may go well with you and you may go in and take over the good land the Lord promised on oath to your ancestors”*

### **Temptation 3 – Putting God to the Test**

Jesus, vulnerable and famished, is tempted with invulnerability. The Jesus story will culminate with a demonstration of vulnerability and suffering, as Jesus is ultimately crucified – the ultimate example of vulnerability. “God won’t let anything bad happen to you,” is the nature of the temptation – also a point of contention for those who cannot conceive of a suffering Messiah. Satan even quotes the Scriptures to make his point (Psalm 91:11-12).

Jesus responds with a quotation of his own: *“Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”* Another quotation from the same Deuteronomy passage from which Jesus just quoted: 6:16 – *“Do not put the Lord your God to the test as you did at Massah.”* What happened at Massah? Exodus 17 tells the story of the nation encamped in the desert. They panic because there is no obvious source of water; they rebel against Moses and God. Moses says to them, *“Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the Lord to the test?”* ...*And Moses called the place Massah (testing) and Meribah (quarrelling) because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the Lord saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?”*

In the context of this quotation, Satan is effectively saying, *“test God to see if the Lord is really with you.”* Jesus is effectively responding, *“I don’t have to do something foolish like throw myself from the Temple to prove that God is with me. I know God is with me.”* Ironically, Jesus’ brother James, many years later, will be killed by being thrown from the Temple, and, the fall not proving immediately fatal, clubbed to death.

### **The Temptation Summary**

Jesus is subject to physical weakness and spiritual temptation. He resists temptation through the application of Scripture, through knowing his relationship with God, through obedience to God, and though the certainty that God is with him, no matter the circumstances.

### **The Rejection at Nazareth**

Luke introduces the ministry of Jesus with this brief statement (Luke 4:14-15): *Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.* So he and his ministry are already well-known before he returns home to Nazareth. Luke doesn’t tell us how much time has actually passed.

Luke’s description here and in Acts 13:14-48 represent the oldest written accounts of Jewish synagogue services. Agreements with later rabbinic sources suggest a relatively fixed order of service. This would include the recitation of the Shema (Deut. 6:4–9), various prayers, readings from the Law and (generally) the Prophets, an oral targum (an Aramaic paraphrase for those who could not understand Hebrew), a homily or sermon on the text or texts for the day, and a closing benediction. Psalms may also have been sung (Mark 14:26). Any qualified male might be invited to read the Scripture and give instruction (as, later, the Apostle Paul frequently was invited to do in various synagogues).

Things begin well; Jesus, as a visiting Rabbi, is given the honour of reading from Isaiah. He chooses the following (Isaiah 61:1-2): *“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”* This is part of a larger passage, concerning the coming of the Messiah, and the restoration of the Kingdom.

Jesus sits down (there is a seat at the front of the synagogue called the Moses Chair from which commentary is given) – and says, *“Today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”* This, and whatever other words he gave, were well received. *“Isn’t this Joseph’s son?”* they ask, which could be understood to mean, *“This is our boy! He’s from here!”*

It is significant that the Nazareth community was established by those expectant of the coming of the Messiah, who would be from the Davidic line – perhaps (as their town’s name implies) even from their very midst. And here is one of their own, proclaiming this very thing! They are the Special Ones, and God’s blessing will surely shower upon them!

But Jesus quickly turns the tables. The people expect signs and wonders, as had happened in Capernaum, but Jesus rejects this expectation. Worse yet, giving two examples from the Old Testament, he implies that the blessings will be enjoyed not exclusively by them, but by non-Jews – quite the opposite of what the people had hoped.

A paraphrase might be helpful: *“The Messiah has come! The Kingdom is right here! But don’t think you’re special just because I’m from your tribe and town, or that God’s blessings are for you more than for anyone; God loves all people, and, as in the past, will bless even those outside the faith. The Messiah is for all people, not just for you. And you’ll reject me for this.”*

In a stunning act of rejection, which implies that his audience considered his words as blasphemous, they take him to the edge of town to throw him from the steep cliff (known today as Mount Precipice). Mysteriously, however, it says *“he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.”* Such escapes are told elsewhere (*John 8:59 - At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds*).

The theme of God’s love, favour and blessings being extended to all, and not just to one exclusive group or another, is one of the primary difficulties the opponents of Jesus had with his message – Pharisees, Sadducees, and others. But for Luke, himself a non-Jew who witnessed the impact of the Gospel in non-Jewish areas in his travels with Paul, this is an important and central theme.

The chapter ends with Jesus returning to Capernaum, which, rather than Nazareth, becomes the home base of his ministry. Miracles of deliverance and healing ensue (some of which probably predate the Nazareth rejection). However, not even Capernaum would have an exclusive claim; Jesus tells them, *“I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.”* And he kept on preaching in the synagogues of Judea.