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# Tests of Sonship

Bible quotations are taken from the NIV or retranslated

They went ahead, but it was a pathway, as in the book of Proverbs, seeming right to man, whose end was death.

Currently I believe the whole creation is groaning and travailing, awaiting the manifestation of the sons of God. They will be people as described in Revelation 5: 1-5, who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They will have been tested, as he was, and found fit to share his throne. They will not be those who have climbed their way to the top of the world system and are zealously trying to reform it. That whole system, religious, political and economic, may soon come crashing down. The further you have climbed it, the further you have to fall. Nebuchadnezzar's vision of Daniel chapter 2 is moving towards its fulfilment. The stone that is to become God's kingdom is now being cut out without (human) hands (by God alone), and prepared to smite and destroy the great image. May we be part of that stone and not that image.

## What Followed

After Satan had finished testing Jesus in the wilderness, angels came and served him. He then returned in the power of the Holy Spirit to begin his public ministry. The tests he had met in the wilderness were repeated throughout his ministry. He was hungry again beside the well in Samaria, but did no miracle to supply his need. He was pressed for unneeded miracles to prove his Messiahship or Sonship, but he never complied. When the multitudes wanted to make him king, he retreated to the mountains to be alone with God. Many times, in fact, he turned away from the crowds and what their adulation could have offered him. The same principle that had carried him victorious through the wilderness tests continued to rule the subsequent 3 years of his ministry and his pathway to the cross: **he did his Father's will.**

The choices he had made in the wilderness, and then lived out in his ministry, he confirmed in his sufferings and death. Once more he said yes to his Father and no to his flesh. He pioneered a pathway alone through death with a faith that is beyond our comprehension. In his steadfast obedience to God, he closed his mind to every alternative route that he might so easily have taken. Thus the firstborn Son of God overcame sin, death and Satan and received a name which is above every other name. Those who share his throne will be those who follow him.

**'Let us then run with perseverance the race that is set before us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.'** (Heb 12: 1, 2)

## Introduction

The wilderness temptations or testings of Jesus are described for us in the fourth chapters of the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Every experience in the life of Jesus is of interest to all his true followers, and any increase in understanding brings joy to our hearts. However the subject of his temptations has a further reason for claiming our attention. If we tread the pathway of sonship, we will meet with the same trials ourselves. Their outward form may be different, but their inward essence will be the same. Some people, I believe, at this present time are meeting these temptations and standing firm; others are falling prey to Satan.

Let us then pray as we study this subject that we will overcome our temptations and in this as in all things prove to be followers of the Lamb of God.

## The Baptism of Jesus

The first thing we must notice about the temptations of Jesus is their timing. They occurred between his baptism, and the commencement of his public ministry. Before we consider them in detail, we will therefore look at what took place at his baptism. Until Jesus' baptism, his life had been mainly private. Little detail is recorded, but as far as we know he worked quietly at his trade, earning his living like any other person. All this was now to change. The time had come for him to enter his public ministry.

Under the old law Moses consecrated Aaron as high priest. This was an event of great event. It was even more important and significant than the coronation of a king. Important as it was to the Israelites however, in the sight of God it only pointed to the consecration of the true high priest that took place at the river Jordan. First Aaron was washed, just as Jesus was in Jordan; then Aaron was anointed with oil, as Jesus was with the Holy Spirit. Then, after all the various sacrifices were completed Aaron remained in the tent of meeting for seven days to complete his ordination.

After the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus, a voice came from Heaven saying, **'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.'** No longer was he Mary's son. Joseph and Mary had served faithfully as foster parents to him. Now his true Father made his claim. Now he must set about his Father's business and manifest the fullness of his sonship to the world.

God ordained his firstborn son with washing and anointing with the Holy Spirit. This is the only qualification for his service, and the same for all who follow in his footsteps. No ecclesiastical training or ceremony can make people into priests and sons of God. They must be washed and anointed with the Holy Spirit.

## Testing

After his baptism we read that Jesus was led into the wilderness to be tempted or tested by the devil. The Greek verb *peirazo* (πειραζω) primarily means to test. This is also the original meaning of the English verb to tempt. Similarly the Greek noun *peirasmos* (πειρασμος) primarily means testing rather than temptation. It is an enlightening exercise to take a Greek or Greek-based concordance and go through the New Testament re-translating these two words in this way.

In the wilderness, then, Jesus was tested. Testing is a familiar process. Drivers are tested before they are allowed freely on the roads. Doctors are examined thoroughly before being allowed into practice. Electronic parts are tested rigorously and in some cases up to 90 per cent rejected to maintain the standards of perfection required. So also the Son of God was tested before his ministry began.

God himself does not test, according to James 1:13, but he has a tester - better known as the tempter. Satan comes into prominence only twice in the Old Testament, and both times it is as tester. He tested two people before he tested Jesus. The first failed and the second passed!

## Adam and Job

God created Adam to have fellowship with himself and rule over his creation. He was in fact God's first son. He is described as a son in Luke 3:38. (The word son is absent but implied in the Greek.) God gave him only one command: 'Do not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil' This was a straightforward test of his obedience. Adam was to rule over the creation in union with and in obedience to his Creator. But first his obedience must be tested. Was he willing to do his Father's will, or would he choose to do his own?

He failed in his one simple test and thus forfeited his sonship. Instead of ruling he had to work. 'Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life ... By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread ...' His wife Eve became a servant to him. Bible chronology tells us that Adam like Jesus was tempted over a period of 40 days before he fell. Adam and Eve were in a beautiful garden with every good thing they could want. Jesus was alone except for the wild animals in the Judean desert and weak through fasting 40 days. The temptations were similar as we shall see; but Jesus overcame where Adam fell. He was the first perfected Son, and others will surely follow.

God's way of effecting the transfer of world dominion from Satan to Jesus, is a long pathway of self-denial, suffering and death both for Jesus and for those who follow him. His trials in the wilderness were only a foretaste of what was to come. Satan's method of gaining world dominion seemed short and easy. Was this pathway of suffering really the will of the Father who had recently acknowledged him as his beloved son? For Jesus all was settled by the words of Scripture: 'Begone, Satan! For it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only."'

The first commandment says: 'I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. Have no other gods besides me.' Anyone familiar with the subsequent history of Israel till their eventual departure into captivity, will know that if there was one sin against which the prophets continually cried out, it was the breach of this first commandment. Again and again the children of Israel turned away and served other gods. Yahweh had delivered them from slavery in Egypt and established them as a nation, it was true, but other gods were much less demanding morally and seemed to make better offers for the present and the future.

We, from our safe position in a different time and culture, can see their sins and say we would have never done such things ourselves. In this we can be just like the Pharisees who read their own history and said that they would never have shed the blood of the prophets. Instead they put Jesus to death. We don't worship false gods like the ancient Israelites did, but can we even recognise their modern counterparts?

For Jesus, the path to world rulership lay through obedience, suffering and death. To follow that way was to worship God. The other way to secure his kingdom was to use the system of the world. That would have been bowing to Satan. He could have climbed the political and religious ladders of his day. He had the gifts and power to do it. His grasp of the scriptures could have brought the Pharisees to his feet. His gifts of leadership could have united his people and set them free from the Roman yoke. He could have been another Moses, David and Solomon and many others beside all rolled into one. He could have filled history books with his deeds, or many volumes with his wisdom. He could have accumulated great riches and used them to do much good for mankind. A multitude of other things he might have done, but all would have been no more than bowing to Satan. They were not his Father's will.

Adam and Eve thought they saw a short pathway to their appointed destiny. Right in the middle of the garden stood a tree which could make them wise. What could be more appropriate or necessary for those called to rule God's creation? There was only one problem: God had said no. It was not his will or his way.

church have followed the same pathway. Others, who might well scorn such idolatry, look for supernatural signs. A few miracles of healing and they believe they must be in the very centre of God's will. If they cannot see the hand of God visibly at work, they begin to doubt that he is still with them. Jesus did not. By human standards he might well have done. When the body is weak through illness or fasting God can seem far away. The life of Jesus was built on that essential quality that is pleasing to God. He had faith. 'Without faith it is impossible to please God' (Heb 11:6). This is why his Father was well-pleased with him.

Later the Pharisees asked Jesus for a sign, but he had already met this temptation himself in much harsher circumstances and overcome it. 'A wicked and adulterous generation seeks for a sign,' he told them, 'and no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.'

Jesus answered Satan from Deuteronomy 6:16, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.' In context this referred to the incident at Massah (a Hebrew word which means testing) when the Israelites asked the question, 'Is the Lord among us, or not?' (Ex 17:7). They had already seen many miracles, but when adversity came their way, they immediately began to doubt God. We read in 1 Cor 10: 5 that 'with most of them God was not well-pleased.'

Sons of God must learn to live by faith. For Jesus, it was enough that God had said, 'This is my beloved Son ...' He needed no sign to prove it. Signs will certainly follow those who believe, but those signs will be for the benefit of others who need them, not for them themselves.

## The Third Test

In the last temptation (again in Matthew's order) Satan took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. 'All these things I will give you,' he said, 'if you fall down and worship me.' The prize offered was enormous. The condition required appeared very small: just a momentary inflection of the body. The two pathways before Jesus led apparently to the same destination. Satan was only offering to Jesus what rightfully belonged to him any way. The kingdoms of this world were his by right, and Satan was only a usurper. At that time though they were, and still are, under his power. (If you doubt this, read 1 John 5:19, John 12:31, Gal 1:4 or any newspaper). In Revelation 11:15 we read prophetically, 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he will reign for ages of ages.' That is certainly how it is going to be.

Job's story also had similarities with that of Jesus. Job 1:6: 'One day the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came with them.' As with Jesus it was a question of sonship. Job 1:8 'The LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no-one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil."' How similar to God's words regarding Jesus: 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.' As with Jesus, Job was rigorously tested and then, in his own words, 'came forth as gold.'

Job's testings were severe, and he passed, but I believe Jesus experienced the ultimate testing. Significantly the two gospels that record his testings also record the prayer he taught his disciples, 'Do not lead us into testing, but deliver us from evil (or the evil one).' Have you ever noticed how that prayer echoes the words, 'He was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil'? He could never wish for his disciples to suffer what he had suffered. When he agonised again in Gethsemane, he said, 'Arise and pray that you may not enter into testing'. We cannot easily understand his experiences, just as a child cannot comprehend the problems of adult life. They are very far above us. But if we press on towards sonship we ourselves will begin to meet with testings of the same nature.

In Luke's account we find the genealogy of Jesus between his baptism and his temptation. Unlike Matthew's this genealogy goes back up all the way to Adam (whose name means man), thus emphasising that Jesus was fully human. We cannot then dismiss his temptations as irrelevant to ourselves. 'He was in all things tempted as we are' (Heb 4:15).

## The Fast

So Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted (or tested) by the devil. Our minds turn to Romans 8:14, 'For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God'. The great difference between sons of God and other people is that sons of God do the will of their Father while others follow their own will, or someone else's. Jesus simply and continually did the will of his Father. Adam did the will of Eve, which was ultimately his own will aligned with Satan's. People who want to do their own will, or follow others, simply cannot reign with Christ.

Earlier in the same chapter of Romans we read that 'those who are in the flesh cannot please God'. God was pleased with Jesus because he walked in the spirit.

In the wilderness Jesus fasted. Like Moses and Elijah before him, he fasted 40 days. Fasting is death to the flesh. It brings us to the end of our human resources. It brings the body into subjection and the spirit into lordship. In scripture we frequently find it in the context of preparation phase of ministry or service. Man declares and feels his own impotence and dependence on God. At Antioch the church leaders fasted when Paul and Barnabas set out on their evangelistic travels. When Paul appointed elders in the churches, he and they fasted. When Moses fasted he received from God a revelation that occupies much of the first five books of the Bible and has had an immeasurable influence on the whole human race.

After some years of itinerant preaching, the Indian apostle Sundar Singh was struck with the fact that, unlike Jesus, he had not begun his ministry with fasting. He resolved to put this right, and set out on a 40 day fast. How long he fasted is unknown, as he was discovered unconscious in the jungle and then carried to a local hospital where he slowly recovered strength. Those who knew him considered him more like Jesus than anyone else they had ever met.

Our modern materialistic western culture does not have much time for fasting. We are advised to promote and project our own personalities, rather than to humble ourselves and experience the power of God. We are spiritually poorer for that fact. Let us learn not to be bound by the demands of our stomachs and the opinions of those around us, and to follow Jesus to the extent that he leads us in this pathway.

## The First Test

For 40 days, then, Jesus fasted, and ‘when they were ended, he became hungry’. This statement is physiologically correct. Healthy people can fast for a considerable time without feeling hungry at all. What we normally call hunger is nothing more than the body complaining that it has not had its regular expected meal. Only after the body has used up all its spare tissues, so I have read, do real hunger pangs set in. Probably this is what happened with Jesus after 40 days. At this stage Satan came to him with the test, ‘If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.’

As with Adam and Eve, there was an implied question, ‘Has God said?’ Was the voice that he had heard six or seven weeks before, ‘This is my beloved Son’, an imagination or a reality? Had God really spoken those words? Would a father who loved him really send him to suffer hunger, loneliness and hardship in this miserable wilderness? Was it really the Spirit of God that had led him here? How easily he could have asked these questions.

As with Adam and Eve there was a temptation to feed the body. For them it was unnecessary; they had all they required. For him it could have been life or death. By now he was in a state of extreme physical weakness. Could he survive these hunger pangs, or were they a sign of his approaching end? The saints in Revelation 12:11 overcame Satan ‘by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives even to death.’ Jesus overcame in the same way. He prized obedience to his heavenly Father much more than the preservation of his earthly body.

Hebrews chapter 2 verses 14 and 15 speak of Jesus delivering those who ‘through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives’. That is exactly the condition of the natural man: a slave all his life through fear of death. At first sight this seems an exaggeration, but when we think about it we see it is the truth. Most of our time is spent directly or indirectly in the preservation of our bodies and all that pertains to them. Alternatively by extension of ourselves we preserve and promote our offspring. Jesus, like Paul, was ready to stay on this earth or to depart. The threat of death to his body held no power over him.

The sons of God will be the same. They will not be motivated by their personal needs. They will have learnt to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and leave God to provide for their physical needs. They will not be slaves to their temporal work. Neither will they be slaves to their “spiritual ministries.” They will have no need to please man in either case, as they will not be depending on man. Their lives will be totally tailored to God’s requirements. I believe there is a deliverance yet to come from the economic, political and religious bondage in which to a large extent we are at present compelled to live.

## The Second Test

The second test in Matthew’s gospel (the order is different in Luke’s) was for Jesus to test God. Satan took him to the holy city and had him stand on the pinnacle of the temple.

Once again Satan challenged his sonship: ‘If you are the Son of God ...’ and suggested that he prove it. ‘... throw yourself down; for it is written, “He will give his angels charge concerning you ...”’ Jesus had already shown that he was not concerned to preserve his physical life. He would not fear the obvious risk to his life of jumping from the temple. Why not prove God with this scriptural test? Did not Gideon put God to the test before he set out to fight the Midianites?

The natural man has a strong desire to live by signs. He wants something his eyes can see. The ancient Israelites were continually tempted to turn from their invisible Yahweh to the visible idols of the heathen. Large portions of the