

Opinion Essay: The Temptation of Christ (NIV based)
by
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INTRODUCTION:

When thoughtful consideration is given to the temptation of Christ, some interesting insights and intriguing questions arise as to the nature of this event, Christ's ability to sin, the reality of His temptations, and what this event means for true believers today. The most straightforward and plausible answers to potential problems associated with the temptation of Christ can be adequately and sensibly ascertained from the Scriptures themselves through close examination and thoughtful reflection.

THE TEMPTATION EVENT: A COSMIC STRUGGLE

The event that is commonly referred to as 'The Temptation Of Christ' is the Biblical account where Jesus is led into the wilderness to fast for 40 days and to be tempted by Satan (Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13). The temptation event includes dialogue between Jesus and Satan, and was not just a chance encounter. For clearly, God the Father purposely empowered and directed Jesus Christ into the wilderness to engage in a cosmic struggle with the Prince Of Darkness, Satan, whose primary goal was to tempt Jesus Christ into sin (Banks p.24; Best p.18; Matthew 3:16-4:10).

CHRIST'S ABILITY TO SIN: YES OR NO?

It seems apparent that the baptism of Jesus is inseparably linked to the temptation event and is crucial to its understanding. From the baptism account in Matthew 3:13-17, an important fact to be considered is that Jesus is empowered by the Holy Spirit, which means that the Holy Spirit directly participated in the inauguration of Christ's earthly ministry with His empowering and anointing for service (Banks p.22). A search of the gospel accounts reveals that there are no other recorded events of a direct confrontation between Christ and Satan prior to this temptation event. Therefore, the empowering of Jesus by the Holy Spirit to engage Satan could suggest that Christ had the ability to sin, but He was withheld from intense temptation until He was empowered to resist. This appears to be supported by Scriptures that Christ became dependent and obedient to God the Father to the extent that Christ could do nothing of Himself - even engage Satan in intense direct temptation without the Father (John 5:19,30; 8:28; 12:49; 14:10).

From this hypothesis of Christ's ability to sin comes the central issue of how do the human nature and the divine nature of Christ interact or co-exist. Of foremost importance is the fact that Christ had no sin or sin nature (2 Corinthians 5:21). Yet, it would still be possible for Him to sin when He took on a human nature if He voluntarily set aside the use of His divine powers and glory (Philippians 2:6-8). "The area of testing and the potential for falling were in His humanity" (West p.26). This in no way diminishes His divinity nor His humanness but suggests or constitutes a self-humbled-ness on Christ's part (West p.4). So, in effect, Christ voluntarily became vulnerable to sin and humanness with their subsequent weakness, temptation, and even death while still possessing the divine nature, authority, and power of God to the fullest extent - which He chose not to use or display.

IS THIS TEMPTING AUTHENTIC AND REAL AND VALID?

The argument can be reasonably made that in order for the tempting of Christ to be authentic, Christ would have to be able to give into those temptations. And, the biblical accounts of the temptation of Christ clearly give the impression that Satan extended substantial, very desirable, and authentic temptations, and that Christ was very susceptible to giving into those temptations due to His weakened condition from enduring 40 days without food. Yet, the argument can also be reasonably made that this temptation event was not authentic because "...God cannot be tempted by evil" (James 1:13). From Luke 4:1, it becomes obvious that Satan thought that Jesus Christ could be tempted to sin because Satan repeatedly engaged Jesus in temptation. Furthermore, if Jesus could not sin, then He could have told Satan right at the beginning, "Satan, you are wasting your time because God cannot be tempted."

An argument can be raised here that Satan was not sure if Jesus was truly God. But, God the Father had supernaturally confirmed Jesus as unique at His baptism when the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus in visible form. Also during Christ's baptism, God audibly announced to the world that Jesus is His Son, and thus God the Father made known to the world and to Satan the true identity of Jesus Christ and God's approval of Him (Matthew 3:17; Banks p.22). It seems probable that Satan knew this and may have thought that "if Jesus fell morally while acting independently of God, then He would also fall physically" (as in the temptation where Jesus is to throw Himself down from the highest point of the temple) (Banks p.65; Luke 4:9). Additionally, Satan's offering of his entire kingdom to Jesus in Matthew 4:8 supports the probability that he had knowledge of who Jesus was because it seems implausible that Satan regularly offers his entire kingdom to plain, ordinary humans.

Another argument against the reality of these temptations states that it is impossible for Satan to transport Christ and to show Him the world's glory (Banks p.40). However, Satan is a supernatural being with supernatural power and unquestionably, God's plan included giving Satan opportunity to entice Christ to sin (West p.20). The passing of this test would provide further evidence that Christ is the Son of God (Banks p.40). Indeed, Christ "... has been tempted in every way, just as we are -- yet was without sin" - Hebrews 4:15. And in order for that claim in Hebrews 4:15 to be true that Christ was tempted "just as we are", and in order for those temptations to be authentic, and real, and valid tests, at some level or in some manner or to some degree Christ had to be able, or perhaps capable, or perhaps free to choose to give into each of every temptation that He encountered or was presented with during this time.

VALUE FOR TRUE BELIEVERS TODAY:

There are several lessons that can be drawn from the account of this temptation of Christ. Firstly, Christ's "intercession for us is with greater understanding" and He can "sympathize with our weaknesses" (West p.20; Hebrews 4:15). Secondly, God desires for men to be dependent upon the Holy Spirit and to use the Word of God as an effective weapon of both defense and offense in the time of trial and testing (Banks pp.26,80). Along with the Word of God is Christ, who "...is able to help those who are being tempted" (Hebrews 2:18). Thirdly, true believers must realize that sometimes they are caught-up in a spiritual battle and must be aware of the enemy's wiles and tactics (Banks

p.51). One such tactic is when the devil is defeated, he retreats to form an attack for a later and more opportune time (Gordon p.212). Another tactic is that Satan's main strategy is to get "people to act independently of God," which he may promote by twisting Scriptures or by convincing a person to use a proper thing in an improper way (Gordon p.203). Obviously, true believers must remember these lessons and tactics in order to stand firm against the devil's schemes.

CONCLUSION:

The temptation of Christ can and should be interpreted literally as recorded in the gospels. In consideration of all Scriptures, this temptation account can be sensibly constructed theologically without diminishing the divinity and the humanness of Jesus Christ nor reducing the account to pure conjecture or unreality. The temptation of Christ was a real cosmic struggle in which Christ had the ability to sin but did not. Many important lessons for true believers have been gleaned from Christ's temptation. With hopefulness, joy, and confidence, true believers can rest upon the assurance that Christ's success and superiority over Satan is a "foreshadowing of the victory and ultimate defeat of the adversary of our souls" (Banks p.51).

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File name: TheTemptationOfChrist-Essay.____ (.htm, .rtf, .doc, .pdf)

Translation used: NIV, quoted or referred to in various places within this document

Source: www.BelieverAssist.com