

Jesus' Temptation

"Follow Me as Savior" Series, October 12 & 13, 2024 | Mark 1:12-13, 21-28

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What does temptation look like?

Athanasius paints a vivid picture of temptation in *The Life of Antony*.

Athanasius was the Bishop of Alexandria in Egypt in the 4th century AD. Antony was a monk in Egypt who died in the middle of the 4th century.

Antony came from the tradition of monks who went out into the desert to live lives of solitude and contemplation. They engaged in spiritual warfare and practiced extreme self-denial.

Athanasius wrote Antony's story down after the monk died, and it became an instant classic.

Antony grew up privileged and Christian but left his old life behind for the desert.

In contemplating his decision, Antony was plagued by thoughts placed there by the devil like the thought that such a life meant leaving behind intimacy with women. Antony was said to have seen visions of the devil as a woman luring him to stay in his old life.

Eventually, Antony left town and had a friend close him inside a tomb where he could fight the devil. It sounds strange, and it is. But this is where Antony saw visions in the night.

One night, Antony sensed the devil physically beating him. The next night, he saw visions of demons shaking the tomb, appearing as violent wild animals like lions and bulls and snakes.

Terrified and hurting, Antony confessed his faith, God helped him, and the demons fled.¹

That's a strange picture of temptation, but it's strangely familiar because we all face temptation.

We may not see actual visions or hear voices, but we face temptation.

We feel the pull of evil; we are drawn to think evil thoughts, say evil words, and do evil things.

What does temptation look like for you? Is it the temptation of lust? Or how about pride? Or maybe envy and greed? Or sloth? What tempts you?

Sometimes we fight temptation hard, and sometimes we win. But sometimes we give in.

How is your battle with temptation going?

What is Temptation?

Enticement to do evil.

Temptation is not sin. Sin is doing evil. It's giving in to temptation.

Temptation is the enticement to do evil.

It may surprise you to learn that Jesus faced temptation.

Jesus faced the devil, evil, and temptation.

¹ Athanasius of Alexandria, *The Life of Antony*, The Classics of Western Spirituality edition (1980), pp. 33-39.

In that sense, Jesus is just like us. We all experience temptation.

Jesus' battle with temptation shows us how to face temptation more successfully.

That's what we want—to stand successfully against temptation.

Jesus shows us how.

Jesus faced Satan.

Jesus faced Satan in Mark 1:12-13:

The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.

God the Holy Spirit drove Jesus to face temptation.

Immediately after Jesus was baptized, God the Holy Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness to face the devil, evil, and temptation.

Jesus didn't wander into temptation, nor did the devil lure Him there.

This encounter was intentional. God planned it and wanted it.

In these verses, we get an interesting picture of Satan's realm.

Jesus is driven by the Holy Spirit out into the wilderness. The wilderness is the place beyond civilization, a place of deprivation; there's very little of the stuff that we need to survive. And it's full of dangerous creatures. Jesus apparently experienced wild animals out in the wilderness. We're not talking about cuddly puppies either; we're talking about lions, snakes, and the like.

Out in the wilderness, Jesus faced Satan himself.

To Mark the details of the temptations are unimportant. Jesus faced Satan in the wilderness.

It's important for us to see here that there are two visions of wilderness. As we keep studying Mark, we will see Jesus repeatedly going out to the wilderness—the lonely places—to pray, rest, and connect with God. In some ways, wilderness is the place to be alone with God. Here, though, the wilderness is the place of deprivation, danger, and demons.

It's just like there are two visions of the world. In some ways, the world is the good place God created and the place where God's goodness shows and His provision rains down. But the world is also the place of sin and the whole system of powers that are opposed to God.

There are two ways to use the term "wilderness" and two ways to talk about "the world."

Behind it all, there are two realms.

In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian's battle with Apollyon reminds us that there are two realms.

The Pilgrim's Progress is a classic book written in the 17th century by John Bunyan.

It's an allegory of the Christian life starring a hero not-so-subtly named "Christian."

Christian is on a journey from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City.

Along the way, a demon named Apollyon puts itself in the path in front of Christian.

Here is Bunyan's description of Apollyon,

“He was clothed with scales like fish; ... he had wings like a dragon, feet like a bear, and out of his belly came fire and smoke, and his mouth was as the mouth of a lion.”²

Lovely, right?

Apollyon wanted to know where Christian came from. Christian truthfully admitted that he came from the City of Destruction. Apollyon concluded, then, that Christian was one of HIS subjects. The City of Destruction was part of Apollyon’s realm.

Christian said he had become a subject of the King of princes.

They argued about loyalty and who had the stronger claim to Christian.

Ultimately, their argument turned into a battle.

But it’s a good picture that points us to an important truth in Jesus’ temptation:

We are surrounded by a spiritual battle between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world.

It’s important that we know and understand this fact.

There are two realms—the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world.

God rules the Kingdom of God, and Satan rules the kingdoms of this world.

Everyone belongs either to the Kingdom of God or the kingdoms of this world.

These two kingdoms are different, and they are at war with one another.

I’m not looking to make you paranoid. I’m not wanting you to see evil and the demonic everywhere. Nor do I want you to be ignorant of this fact.

There are two kingdoms—the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world.

We are all citizens of one of these kingdoms, and they are at war with one another.

Are you aware of this battle? Or are you unaware of it?

Jesus faced evil and won.

Jesus taught with great authority.

Jesus began His public ministry and called at least four disciples.

Then they went to Capernaum, Jesus’ adopted hometown, and He taught in the synagogue.

The people marveled. They sensed that He spoke with God’s voice and authority.

Jesus faced evil again in Mark 1:23-24:

And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God.”

I want you to notice a few things. First, as soon as Jesus spoke with authority, “immediately” a man with an unclean spirit made himself known.

Then, notice that the man with the unclean spirit had been there all along. Mark is showing us that there are dark forces in people we might not expect or notice at first. Mark wants us to see the two realms and the battle clearly.

² John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, Banner of Truth edition, p. 60.

Then, notice that the demon knows who Jesus is. No one else does yet, but the demon knows Jesus clearly. He is the Son of God. And the demon knows Jesus' authority; Jesus can destroy the demon. And the demon knows its fate; it will one day be destroyed along with all the other demons, and it wonders if this is that day.

Jesus easily defeated this demonic underling in Mark 1:25-26:

But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him.

Jesus silenced the demon. The demon was using a bunch of words trying to take control of the situation and to assert power over Jesus. Jesus is not having any of it.

Jesus silenced the demon and commanded it to come out of the man.

Notice that the demon leaving shouted and convulsed the man. Satan tries to make evil look enticing—like fun and freedom. But evil is always destructive, and we can see the destructive power of evil shaking this man's world as Jesus commands evil to leave.

Jesus won this encounter.

Do you ever worry that evil is going to win?

That's one of the things we seem to worry about a lot.

We look around and see evil people doing evil things.

We see them sometimes doing great harm to the good world and to people and getting away with their evil. That's when we start worrying that evil is really going to win.

Evil frequently wins battles. There are people who choose evil. Sometimes the people we love—the people in our families, our siblings and our children and our parents—choose evil. Sometimes evil does great damage to society, to our country, even to us. Evil wins battles.

But evil will not win the war.

We are on the winning side of the battle.

Jesus was and is victorious.

Jesus spoke, the demon went silent and came out of the man. Jesus won. Jesus defeated Satan and his forces. Again. Jesus did it again and again and again. Jesus is victorious!

On the cross, evil did its worst to Jesus. As the Son of God died, evil seemed to win. But three days later, God said "no" to evil, and the Son of God rose from the dead victorious over sin, death, evil, and Satan himself.

The cross and resurrection tells the final and defining story in the fight between God and evil.

God has defeated Satan and evil. History is now just a mopping up operation.

No matter how the battles go, we are on the winning side if we are with Jesus!

We can live and act boldly now no matter what happens along the way. The victory is won!

Jesus faced temptation and won.

C. S. Lewis reminds us in *The Screwtape Letters* that temptation is more subtle than it may seem.

C. S. Lewis was a major theologian, philosopher, and author of the 20th century.

Lewis paints a very different picture of demons than Athanasius or Bunyan did before him.

The Screwtape Letters imagines a discussion by letter between a senior demon and a junior demon (who happens to be the senior demon's nephew). It's almost like correspondence between a mentor and his protégé in a large corporation.

The senior demon's name is Screwtape, his nephew's name is Wormwood.

Wormwood is learning how to tempt humans. He calls his human "The Patient." Screwtape tries to teach Wormwood how to tempt "The Patient."

"The Patient" is a man in his early thirties who has just become a Christian.

Screwtape wants Wormwood to lure "The Patient" back to their side. But how?

"The Patient" is caring for his aging mother. Screwtape wants Wormwood to resent his mother.

Later, as World War 2 begins, Screwtape encourages Wormwood to convince "The Patient" that he is a hypocrite.

Screwtape advises Wormwood to tempt "The Patient" with women.

As "The Patient" wrestles with the start of World War 2, he has to decide how he feels about it. One of the temptations Screwtape advised Wormwood to adopt is to make "The Patient" an extremist.

Screwtape writes:

Whichever he adopts, your main task will be the same. Let him begin by treating [it] as a part of his religion. Then let him, under the influence of partisan spirit, come to regard it as the most important part. – C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*

Substitute something good for the spot only God should have! What a subtle temptation!

But that's what Lewis wants us to understand. Temptation takes all kinds of forms!

We're getting to the true nature of temptation now:

Satan's goal is to harm us and separate us from God.

If we have not yet come to God, then sin can lead to shame that makes it nearly impossible for us to ever come to God.

If we are disciples of Jesus already, then sin damages our fellowship with God.

Sin always harms our relationships with other people around us as well.

Sin even harms the world; it's like a poison we release into creation that touches everything.

In **1 Peter 5:8** we read about Satan's goal:

... Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.

We're clear about Satan's intentions.

But we have seen Jesus' authority in these verses, and authority is important.

The original word in the Greek could be translated "power."

In its fullest sense, it means that Jesus has the raw power to speak and to work miracles.

He is God in the flesh, and He is filled with God the Holy Spirit and blessed by God the Father.

He is commissioned by God the Father to come to earth and announce the arrival of the Kingdom of God.

He is authorized to wage the war, defeat the enemy, claim ground, and claim souls for the Kingdom of God. Jesus has the authority and is not afraid to use it. That means...

We do not face temptation we can't defeat with God's help.

1 Corinthians 10:13 says:

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

God gives us the ability to escape or endure any temptation we face. How do we endure?

The Bible says that we have spiritual armor that protects us and helps us to fight. Paul paints a picture of this armor in **Ephesians 6:14-17**:

Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God ...

It's not literal armor that we wear. It's spiritual armor. It's truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, the Spirit of God, the Word of God. These things protect us from temptation.

We do not face temptation we can't defeat with God's help.

Face temptation resolutely with Jesus.

Strategy #1: Watch & Avoid

The Bible repeatedly commands us to watch. We read the end of **1 Peter 5:8** earlier. Let me read you the beginning:

Be sober-minded; be watchful. ...

To watch means to be awake. Look around. See what's really going on. It means that we are aware of temptation and that we are looking for temptation. We are asking ourselves, "Where am I experiencing temptation? Where am I vulnerable and don't even know it?"

As soon as we see temptation, we should avoid it. Flee. Run. Get away as quickly as you can because the longer you linger, the more powerful temptation becomes.

Strategy #2: Pray & Confess

Prayer should just be a way of life to us as disciples of Jesus, and prayer is where we are filled with the life of God, and where we are changed. Ongoing prayer is part of facing temptation.

Confession is a specific kind of prayer. **1 John 1:9** not only tells us to confess our sin to God, but it says that God will forgive us as well,

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

When we confess, not only are we forgiven, but our guilt is taken away. We are ready to stand against temptation in the future.

Strategy #3: Fast

Fasting is the practice of setting aside something for a period of time. Usually food.

The Bible assume that God's people will fast.

In fasting, we say "no" to ourselves so that we can say "yes" to God.

And in fasting, we learn to say "no" to ourselves; we're not very good at that. We like to say "yes" to ourselves, and that means saying "yes" to what we want or think we want, and that means saying "yes" to temptation. Fasting teaches us to say "no" to ourselves and temptation.

If you are fighting temptation, fasting can be an important part of your fight.

Christian finally defeated Apollyon.

After it was clear that Christian would not declare loyalty to him, Apollyon stood to fight.

Apollyon threw darts at Christian's chest, but Christian deflected them with a shield in his hand.

Christian was wounded in the battle that lasted for hours.

Apollyon wrestled Christian to the ground and looked like he would win.

Christian reached for his Sword and thrust it into Apollyon.

The demon recoiled in pain and left Christian alone. He was gone.

This is great fantasy literature, but it's more than just fantasy. It's good theology.

Christian was protected from temptation and evil by the shield of faith. And he defeated temptation and evil with the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God, the Bible. The Truth.

Christian was protected by spiritual armor and won the battle with spiritual weapons.

Christian defeated temptation with God's help.

Face temptation resolutely with Jesus.

Temptation is something we all face. You do. I do. Jesus did.

Temptation is powerful.

But temptation is not sin. We have a choice. We always have a choice.

And help. Jesus is with us. He has defeated Satan, evil, and temptation before.

With His help, we can defeat it now.