

Matthew 4:2-4

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The devil approaches Jesus with the first of three temptations. He asks Jesus to use His divine powers to turn stones to bread after Christ had fasted forty days and nights in the wilderness. Jesus uses scripture to refute the devil.

The parallel accounts of this event are found in Mark 1:13 and Luke 4:2-4.

Jesus *fasted* while He was in the wilderness. Fasting is a spiritual exercise where an individual intentionally deprives himself of some finite good (usually food) for the purpose of becoming more dependent upon the ultimate good—God (and less reliant upon finite goods.) We know in this instance Jesus *fasted* from eating food because Matthew tells us that after He was done fasting, *He then became hungry*. As a spiritual exercise, fasting requires and increases the virtues of humility and self-control. To fast of food and its sustenance in the harsh wilderness, for *forty days and forty nights* would have required substantial discipline. The hunger pangs Jesus felt would likely have been increasingly constant and severe. This was a moment where Jesus keenly felt the frailty and weakness of His humanity. In His frailty, Jesus chose humility: He trusted and relied upon God in obedience to the Spirit.

It is not without significance that Jesus's fast lasted *forty days and forty nights*. In Jewish culture *forty* is a number that symbolizes testing and discipline. Throughout the Old Testament a period of *forty days*, as well as *forty days and forty nights* occurs repeatedly.

Some references to *forty days* or *forty days and forty nights* in the Old Testament (and possible Messianic parallels) are as follows:

- The Flood – *forty days and forty nights* was the exact length of time God cause it to rain upon the earth at the flood (Genesis 7:12). God judged the world for disobedience. Jesus is the ark upon which humanity is saved from judgement.
- The Spies – *forty days and forty nights* was the exact length of time the twelve spies searched out the Promised Land (Numbers 13:25). Ten of them saw the land was good but became fearful when they also saw the difficulties ahead, and refused to trust God's promise. Satan will test Jesus by showing Him shortcuts around all the difficulties ahead for Him, trying to lead Him away from trusting God's promises.
- Elijah's Fasting – *forty days and forty nights* was the exact length of time Elijah fasted on his journey to "Horeb, the mountain of God" (Horeb is another name for Mt. Sinai, 1 Kings 19:8). Just as David was regarded by the Jews as Israel's greatest king, so was Elijah regarded as Israel's greatest prophet. Jesus's miracles parallel and even surpass the miracles of Elijah in both quantity and might.
- Ezekiel's Demonstration – *forty days and forty nights* was the exact length of time the prophet Ezekiel laid on his side to symbolically "bear the iniquity of the house of Judah" (Ezekiel 4:6). Jesus came to bear the sins of Judah (and the world) upon Himself.

- Jonah's Preaching – *forty days and forty nights* was the exact length of time the prophet Jonah preached God's warning to Nineveh (Jonah 3:4). Jesus also preached a gospel of repentance, in order to avoid destruction.
- *Forty* was the number of years that the Israelites wandered in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land (Exodus 16:35; Numbers 32:13; Deuteronomy 29:5). It was their time of preparation to enter the Promised Land. Jesus was *led up to be tempted* as a time of preparation.
- *Forty* was also the number of years that each of Israel's first three kings reigned: Saul (Acts 13:21), David (1 Kings 2:11) and Solomon (1 Kings 11:42). Jesus came as the King of the Jews.

After He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry. It was then, when Jesus was *hungry* and physically depleted that *the tempter* came to tempt Him. *The tempter* refers to the devil. Matthew's description of the devil as *the tempter* is an obvious reference to the serpent who tempted Eve to sin in the Garden of Eden. The one who tempted Eve to break God's command has now come to test Jesus.

The first notable aspect of this temptation is that *the tempter* chose a specific time for the temptation: when Jesus is physically weakened. Jesus was *hungry* after fasting for *forty days and forty nights*. Experiments have shown that human willpower is a resource which eventually depletes due to fatigue or hunger. Satan chose a time to tempt Jesus when He would likely not have had the human strength to resist. He would have to humble Himself and rely completely upon the Spirit.

As with Adam and Eve, the first circumstance the devil chose to test Jesus involved food. In Jesus's hunger, *the tempter came and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread."*

What is the actual temptation? Satan could have said "Why don't you turn these stones into bread, so you won't die?" But Satan does not focus on mere physical survival. He goes for a much deeper value—Jesus' core identity. Satan begins his temptation with a conditional phrase: *If you are the Son of God.* In the opening attack of the temptation, Satan demands that Jesus prove who He is. It seems Satan is saying "If you were really the Son of God, then you would not be here starving, you would use your power to feed yourself. You must not be who you say you are."

The devil is fully aware that Jesus is God. But he also sees that after *forty days and forty nights* of fasting, Jesus is physically weak. The tempter's suggestion is to *command that these stones become bread* to prove Jesus is the *Son of God*. The sin the devil is trying to cause Jesus to commit is to rely upon Himself to meet His needs instead of trusting His Father by following the Holy Spirit.

As the *Son of God*, Jesus had the power and authority to turn *stones* into *bread* which would satisfy His hunger. In fact, Jesus will eventually create bread in one of His miracles, when He feeds five thousand men with a few loaves (Matthew 14:13-21). When Jesus creates bread in that instance, it is not a sin. The sin Satan is coaxing Jesus to commit is to simply follow His own

way instead of following God's leading. Jesus speaks of the limitation He accepted when He took on the form of becoming human in John's Gospel:

"Therefore Jesus answered and was saying to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner'" (John 5:19).

"I can do nothing on My own initiative. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me'" (John 5:30).

Satan's temptation is to get Jesus to do just one thing apart from His Father's direction. In this case, to feed Himself. As we will soon see, God sends angels with food for His Son. The Father could have directed Jesus to turn stones to bread, but He did not. Therefore, it would have been a sin for Jesus to act on Satan's suggestion, because that was not an action directed by His Father.

The Son of God became Man to fulfill the law as a Man, and this required the Son submitting to the will of the Father and not following His own appetites and desires.

Jesus fights off the devil's temptation by using truth from scripture. Jesus *answered and said, It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.'* Jesus tells the devil that Man is not sustained only by filling his belly, but by trusting God and obeying His commands. Obedience to *every word* of God is the true source of life.

This statement testifies that men and women are more than physical bodies, and as the body needs bread for physical nourishment, their souls need the word of God for spiritual sustenance. The scripture Jesus uses to refute the devil comes from Deuteronomy, a book of Moses.

"He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord" (Deuteronomy 8:3).

The book of Deuteronomy is Moses' farewell speech before he hands over leadership to Joshua to take the Israelites into the Promised Land. In this verse, Moses explains part of God's purpose for taking the Israelites into the wilderness, where they ate manna for forty years (Exodus 16:35). In quoting this passage, Jesus declares that God is giving Him a blessing by providing Him an opportunity to learn a valuable lesson through experience.

In His humanity, Jesus learned obedience (Hebrews 5:8). His response to Satan's first temptation demonstrates three things. First, Jesus was aware that in His wilderness experience He was being given an opportunity to learn obedience. Second, Jesus chose to embrace a perspective informed by Deuteronomy 8:3 that this difficult circumstance was a blessing, an opportunity to learn and grow. And third, Jesus recognized that Satan was tempting Him to act apart from His Father's will to create His own circumstances. God the Father always chooses what is in our best interest, and for Jesus to follow His own appetite would be to reject God's leading.

Like His brethren, the Israelites, Jesus was humbled by God's Spirit in the wilderness through hunger. God provided for the Israelites with manna which miraculously and mysteriously appeared from heaven. God did this so that the Israelites would learn that their lives were sustained by obeying God. By quoting this passage, Jesus reminds the devil of this reality and He chooses the path of obedience and life rather than sin and death. Christ rejects the devil's temptation that Jesus should act as though He is self-sufficient. Instead He chooses to depend upon His Father. Jesus's humility is even more remarkable when we recall that as God, He truly was self-sufficient, but Christ set aside His self-sufficiency in obedience to His Father and trusted the Spirit to sustain Him in this time of weakness.

When He passes this temptation, Jesus shows Himself to be greater than Moses, in fulfillment of Moses' prophecy in Deuteronomy 18:15. Moses committed a sin of self-reliance when he led the children of Israel in the wilderness and struck the rock to bring forth water rather than speaking to the rock, as he was instructed. As a consequence, Moses was not allowed to lead Israel into the Promised Land (Numbers 20:2-13).

Biblical Text

4:2-4 And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry. And the tempter came and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread." But He answered and said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.'"