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The Temptation in the Wilderness

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Christ and Israel Compared and Contrasted

Reading: Deut. 8:1-3,7; Matt. 4:1-11.

These two passages represent the two temptations in the wilderness, the one Israel's, the other Christ's. There are three or four preliminary things which I would like to bring before you.

1. Under the Government of the Holy Spirit

In both cases this testing or trying was under the government of the Holy Spirit. We are told by the apostle Paul that those that came out of Egypt were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and we know that the cloud is a type of the Holy Spirit, and that the office of the cloud was to choose the way, give guidance, select the place of habitation or sojourn, and indeed to fulfil all those offices by which the people of God are brought into the inheritance, brought to the fulness of Christ. So that Israel was in the wilderness under the government of the Holy Spirit, and their trial in the wilderness was under that government.

As to the Lord Jesus, the statement is definitely made that He was led up into the wilderness of the Spirit to be tempted of the devil. So that He was there definitely under Holy Spirit government, and He was tried under that government.

2. God Allowed the Temptation

The second thing is that which is represented by this word in Deuteronomy 8: "He suffered thee to hunger." That means that no man is tempted by God, but God suffers His own to be tried and tempted. There is all the difference between being under trial, even by the government of the Holy Spirit and being tempted of God. The apostle James says that no man is tempted of God, for God tempts no man, and God Himself is not tempted with sin. God tempts no man to sin, but He suffers His own to be tempted, to be tried, by the enemy.

That was true in the case of the Lord Jesus. He was suffered to be tried or tempted.

3. The Principle and Object was Similar

The third thing is a general thing, that there is a similarity in both these temptations, in principle and in object. That we shall see as we go on.

4. The Inheritance was in View

In the fourth place the relationship of the temptations was the same; that is, the land was in view.

If you read on in Deuteronomy 8, you will see that it says: "For the Lord thy God bringeth thee into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths, springing forth in valleys and hills", and so on. The trial was in relation to the land, or, shall we say, the inheritance. It is significant and important to notice that when the Lord definitely states why He led them through the wilderness, that He might prove them, immediately after that it says: "For the Lord thy God bringeth thee into a good land...". The trial was definitely in relation to the land, or the inheritance.

When you come to Matthew 4 or to the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, you see that it has exactly the same relationship. Where does the temptation or the trial end? What is the thing which comes eventually into view, which, as I read more deeply into the story, was the hidden object of the devil throughout the temptations, but which he did not disclose until the end? "All this will I give thee...". World dominion was in view, Christ's right, the inheritance. You only have to read Hebrews 1 and 2 to see that dominion is in view: "thou puttest him in charge". The devil said: "All this will I give thee...". At the end that which the enemy is after comes out. The inheritance is in view, and the trial is related to the inheritance. You can spread that over all trials of the saints. They are all related to the inheritance.

Now those are but preliminary considerations before we actually come to these temptations of the Lord Jesus, and note:

Three Phases of the Trial which is related to the Inheritance.

1. Bread

Bread is the occasion of the temptation. There are three things which you will notice in connection with that first phase of the trial. They are represented by:

(a) The Means of Life

"Man shall not live by bread alone...". Do you notice how Deuteronomy 8 begins: "...that ye may live and multiply". So it is a question of life. As we see the setting and the background, it is undoubtedly a life which is triumphant over the whole power of death, both in the wilderness and in the land. "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God shall man *live*." The question of life, then, is in view, that life which will go right through to the fulness of the divine purpose.

We can only stay for mere fragments in this realm of such fulness, and the one thing that I want to indicate in this connection is that subjection to God under given circumstances is the way of life triumphant. Here in the case of the Lord Jesus it was subjection to God when it would seem necessary to do something oneself. It seemed necessary for Him to do something Himself. He hungered in the wilderness in the will of God. He hungered under the government of the Holy Spirit. By reason of being led of the Spirit He found Himself in a situation where He was hungry. A state of things had come about where for very life itself it seemed necessary to do something oneself. To live seemed to make it necessary to stretch out His hand and do something.

That is a very severe test in the spiritual realm. I think only the very spiritually minded will grasp the significance of that with any real value. A situation is produced by your having gone on with God where it looks as though if you do not do something you will die. If you really do not take things into your hands and get something done, that is the end. You are right up against it. Unless you do something you are finished. That was the issue which arose for Christ at this point. It was a question of life, and whether He was going to maintain His life now by His own act, or whether He was going to put the responsibility of His life upon God and remain in subjection.

That goes right home to the heart of many of the most acute spiritual problems of the Lord's people. It is just there that so many of the Lord's people have broken down. They have come to a situation like that; they have no doubt that they have been in the will of God in the way they have taken. The course they have followed has been in their hearts according to the government of the Spirit; and it has led them to a place where the whole question of life is raised in a most acute form, where it seems to be perfectly necessary for them to do something; yet they have a sense that if they do they will in a sense be breaking with God and taking things into their own hands. The question for them is: "Can I honestly, in my heart, do this without taking things out of God's hand, without pushing the door, making it open, to maintain my life?" The alternative is: "Well, I must leave the issue of my life with God, and remain obedient to Him". Subjection to God in circumstances which seem to make it necessary to do something oneself, to save one's life!

You see the course that the Lord Jesus took; "Man shall not *live* by bread alone". "That thou mightest live and go in and possess". What a powerful life it is when the enemy finds the ground cut from under his feet, and he has to change round so drastically, finding that at every point he is vanquished! What an issue of life! The Lord Jesus gives us once and for all the principle that applies to a situation like this: subjection to God, and leaving the issue with Him; obedience which means that we do not take things into our own hands when it seems that that is the only thing to do to save our lives. It is a very acute situation, not an easy one to go through, but here the way of life is shown.

(b) New Discoveries of Secret Things in God

"Fed thee with manna which thou knewest not". God has something hidden in a situation like this. It is no mere wilderness spiritually. From God's standpoint this is no desolation. To us it is, to Him it is

not. God has something which is out of sight in a situation such as we have mentioned: "...which thou knewest not, neither did thy fathers know".

This subjection and utter obedience to God in acute situations, where we decline to take matters into our own hands, means that we make discovery of secret resources which God has awaiting.

That is true to all who have any experience, that the discoveries which we have made of the secrets of God have come to us in a time of acute trial, in which by the grace of God we have not broken down, given up, cast away our confidence, but sought to stand, even though it has been in the dark. We have made a discovery of something which we did not know, and which our fathers did not know. It is something right out from the Lord to us, and when it comes to us it is as though no one else knew anything about it.

(c) Chastening unto Enlargement

"Thou shalt consider in thine heart that as a man chasteneth his son so hath the Lord thy God chastened thee." We know that the New Testament uses those words about the Lord Jesus Himself: "Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered"; "He suffered thee to hunger"; "As a man chasteneth his son...". You do not chasten your son just because it pleases you. Chastening is not punishment. Let us get the punishment element out of this. The Lord was not punishing Israel in the wilderness. The Lord was not punishing Christ in the wilderness. The Lord is not punishing us in the wilderness. Chastening is on a higher level altogether. The object of chastening is moral fulness. Chastening is instruction in experience, capacity, fitness; not always in the sense of kind, but measure. In the case of the Lord Jesus certainly not in kind. He did not need His moral nature improved in kind, but there was a coming to a place representatively of capacity and fulness, perfection perfected. You and I need to be changed, but we also need to be enlarged, and spiritual and moral enlargement come through chastening. The Psalmist said that through pressure the Lord had enlarged him. The Lord allows the devil to inflict the pressure, and then uses the very weapons and means of the devil for our enlargement spiritually and morally.

It is strange how this is attached to the Lord Jesus, that He through suffering came to glory; "...because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honour" (Heb. 2:9). It is not the changing of His moral nature, but the bringing of Him as a representative Man to a higher and full position, to the inheritance. We come the same way by chastening unto moral fitness. It is because it is dominion that is the bone of contention.

For the moment let us note that the one question in view in a temptation in the wilderness is life, which is eventually to bring to absolute dominion over all the power of the enemy. The Lord is teaching us now, through trial, testing, temptation, through the very enemy himself in all his pressure, the way of life. As we learn the secrets of the way of life so we are constituted a ministry to all the Lord's people in the question of life, against which the enemy has set himself. He knew quite well that if the Lord Jesus could have been persuaded into disobedience to the Father, taking things into His own hands, then the issue would have been the loss of the inheritance, the loss of His life. These things run very deeply beneath these temptations. That word coming up so soon in the test: "Man shall not live by bread alone..." indicates what it was that was the secret of all this testing, all this assault of the enemy, and all the experience through which we pass. It is that life which God has destined to issue in universal dominion in union with Christ.

We come now to deal with the second phase of the trial which is related to the inheritance.

2. Testing God

"Then the devil taketh him into the holy city; and he set him on the pinnacle of the temple, and saith unto him, If thou art the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written (trying to cut the ground from under the Lord Jesus in quoting Scripture), He shall give his angels charge concerning thee... Jesus said unto him, Again it is written, Thou shalt not make trial of the Lord thy God." The Lord Jesus quotes there from the Scriptures of the Old Testament, and if you go back to the place from which He quotes you will see that what He refers to is that trying or tempting of the Lord when Israel said, under trial and pressure, "Is the Lord amongst us or not?" That is the centre, the heart of the temptation here with the Lord Jesus, and it amounts to this; a temptation to do something to find out whether the Lord is faithful - experimenting with God.

A background must be allowed for a temptation of this kind to be real, to be other than a merely imaginary or fictitious thing. In both cases (that of Israel and that of Christ) the background was a real one. In Israel's case the Lord had given assurance and tokens of His presence. In the case of Christ there had been an attestation at Jordan, a voice from heaven, a declaration: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." And yet how true it is to the experience of all of us that, although the Lord may have given us countless such attestations, assurances, tokens and proofs of His being with us, although there may have been times when by reason of the realisation of the Lord's presence that which was transpiring could be accounted for on no other ground than that the Lord did it, yet we never seem to get to the place where under given circumstances of excessive pressure there is no room for a question. We never seem to get absolutely beyond the possibility of questioning the faithfulness of the Lord. That means that from time to time all those evidences disappear. Everything in the realm of our human consciousness, of our soul grasp in ourselves and around us by which assurance can be maintained disappears, and we are left in a wilderness. A wilderness is a desert, a dry, barren, desolate place, where death is never far away. When we go through fresh experiences of what is very truly and severely a wilderness, there is always very near at hand the temptation to ask questions about the faithfulness of God.

What we mean by the faithfulness of God is just this, that God is with us, that God really is associated with us. Oh, how difficult it is for this humanity to still remain triumphant, and reckoning in faith that though the fig tree does not blossom and there be no fruit on the vine, no flock in the fold and no oxen in the stall, yet the Lord is as much with us as ever He was. The temptation of the Lord Jesus (if it were a temptation at all) must mean that just then there was no evidence of the fact that had been declared: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." Alone, encompassed by the dark and dread forces of evil! Is God with you? The temptation was to put it to the test.

Much has been made of this temptation of the Lord Jesus, as to what it meant, but I think this is the heart of it: if only the Lord Jesus would have entertained this suggestion of testing God in this way, the very entertaining of the suggestion would have been the admission of a doubt. To do that would have meant: I am not sure of God! Loyalty to God, faithfulness to God, subjection to God, meant: I cannot entertain such a thought! Such a thought would be to admit that I am not sure of God and His faithfulness. That is a common temptation and here it is propped up by a false usage of the Word of God.

Beware of the Word of God in the hands of the devil, for so many of the Lord's dear children, about whom there is no question as to their relationship with Him, have been broken by taking the Scripture in the wrong way, allowing the enemy - though not recognising that it was the enemy - to influence them by a certain usage of the Word of God to their undoing. The test here is, is it a question of faith? How is faith in God affected by such a course? If I were to entertain that suggestion, turn my face towards it, consider it, allow myself to be interested by it, how would it affect my faith in God? How does it touch my faith in God? Does it open the way for a question about God? That is the test of everything, and faith never experiments with God with a view to finding out whether God is with us.

I know there is another realm that is perhaps trying to get into your mind, the Gideon realm. That is another realm, and does not come in here. If you were in Gideon's condition today, if you could be transferred to the dispensation of that time of Gideon and put into the same position as Gideon was, and then be called to do what Gideon was called to do, you might be quite right in asking for assurance by indications that that really was God's will for you. But if you were doing something to prove whether God in Himself were faithful, that is another thing. To seek in our immaturity, our spiritual childhood, those assurances from the Lord, even in tangible ways, with a certain thing to which we feel called, is one thing; but to try out God as to whether He is faithful to those to whom He has given assurance: "Lo, I am with you always", is another thing altogether.

Let us keep the line of difference clearly marked. There must be no room for experimenting with God, doing things to try God. That would involve life. God never accepts that ground, and if the Lord Jesus Himself had taken that course at the instigation of the devil, disaster must have followed because the last Adam was being tested on the same ground as the first Adam, and the consequences might have been the same.

The inheritance is always in view. Who are they who will possess the inheritance? They are those who believe God when there is a wilderness all around. That is the position to which you and I have to come. You will be in wildernesses. You have not to go very far to find a wilderness. You will find it in your own home, in your own business, perhaps in your own personal life. You may find it in some distant part of the earth where the Lord leads you, where everything is taken from you which is an evidence that God is with you and you are tempted to do something to prove God. Be careful! Your life hangs upon that moment, upon the way in which you act at such a time.

3. Dominion by Compromise

"Again, the devil taketh him unto an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; and he said unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve. Then the devil leaveth him...".

It is necessary, in order to get the value and force of Christ's words, to go back and read in the book of Deuteronomy from which the Lord quotes at this time. If you read there in chapter 6:13-15 you will see the significance of this answer and of this temptation: "Thou shalt fear the Lord thy God; and him shalt thou serve... Ye shall not go after other gods... for the Lord thy God in the midst of thee is a jealous God...".

Now you have the setting for the temptation; the jealousy of God for undivided and unreserved worship, and whether that jealousy finds genuine occasion by divided worship, or worship of other gods. Then there is judgement and destruction. That temptation by the devil was a deeply laid plot. It is a terrible thing to admit as a possibility in the case of the Lord Jesus, but there it is. "Thou madest him to have dominion"; "Thou hast put all things under his feet". That is the end, that is the object. The temptation was to defeat that end, and to offer it on a certain ground.

It does seem that many have accepted the devil's offer; that is, they have sought for and obtained a measure of power and influence, position, recognition in this world and have come to eminence by compromise, by not taking the road of utterness for God. They seem to have scored; they seem to have gained. The truth, if this Scripture means anything, is, firstly, all that compromise lies under the judgement of God, and, secondly, the outworking is that they have lost the inheritance. Judgement does not always come instantly, but it comes sooner or later. Oh, how subtle this temptation! The word in Deuteronomy is: "Ye shall not go after other gods... lest the anger of the Lord thy God be kindled against thee, and he destroy thee...". The devil said: "...if thou wilt fall down and worship me". God save us from compromise with the subtle forces of the devil who would offer an easy way to success by letting go something of the utterness of our position for God.

Let us remember that all pressure from the enemy is related in some way to his demand for worship. His very pressure, the intensity of his pressure, is to get you to give way, to acknowledge him, even to be afraid of him in a wrong sense. That is worshipping him, setting him up as someone important, as high and mighty, so that he begins to block out your view of One who is still higher. He presses to beat you down to worship, to break you to worship. It is bound up with his lust for worship. And so what he cannot get (as he does with the world) by offering openly through compromise, he tries to get by sheer force of pressure and assault to bring us down before him. It is all bound up with this demand for worship, and those who most refuse him that worship will most be his enemies. That is only another way of saying that if we are going to have the Lord as the sole and utter Object of our devotion, with no compromise at all, then we shall find the enemy most set against us.

"Get thee Hence, Satan"

The final word is: "Get thee hence, Satan..." Yes, but it is not something by itself. It is the issue of all. What is power or authority over the enemy? It is seen in the position which the Lord Jesus took in these three temptations. He could never have uttered that final word and thus dismissed the enemy if He had not taken the position with God that He did in every temptation. Authority over the enemy is not taking up some phraseology. It is not using strong language at him. It is not even taking hold of the Scripture and hurling it at him. Authority over the enemy is in an established spiritual position (through trial) of subjection and utter obedience to God at whatever cost. If your life is in the balance, if your vision is in the balance, if everything is at stake, remaining true to God, true to the Father, then there is power over the enemy.