

THE CHALLENGE

1 ⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan [River]. ¹⁰Immediately after coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens being torn open, and the [Holy] Spirit descending upon him in the form of a dove. ¹¹A voice was heard out of heaven, You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased. ¹²Then the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³For forty days he was in the wilderness being tempted by Satan. He was among the wild beasts, but the angels ministered to him. (Mk. 1:9-13)

3 ¹³Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan [River] to John, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴But John would have prevented him, saying, I have need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me? ¹⁵But Jesus said to him, Permit it now: for it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness. Then he permitted him. ¹⁶After Jesus was baptized, he immediately came up out of the water; and the heavens were opened to him. He saw the Spirit of God descending in the form of a dove and coming upon him. ¹⁷There came a voice out of heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.

4 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit out into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²After he had fasted for forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³Then the tempter came and said to him, Since you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread. ⁴But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. ⁵Then the devil took him into the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple. ⁶He said to him, Since you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here; for it is written, He shall put his angels in charge of watching over you; and, They shall hold you up with their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone. ⁷Jesus said to him, Again it is written, You shall not put the LORD your God to the test. ⁸Again, the devil took him to an exceedingly high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world, and their glory. ⁹He said to him, I will give you all these things, if you will bow down and worship me. ¹⁰Then Jesus said to him, Go away, Satan: for it is written, You shall worship the LORD your God, and him only shall you serve. ¹¹Then the devil left him; and angels came and ministered to him. (Matt. 3:13-4:11)

Introduction

As the New York Giants' football team marched triumphantly into their locker room at Yankee Stadium, after defeating the Pittsburgh Steelers in the last game of the season to win the 1963 Eastern Conference title, one of them shouted, "Thank you, Mr. Pottios!"

Why was he thanking Mr. Pottios? After all, Myron Pottios played for the other team! He was a linebacker for the Pittsburgh Steelers. Had Mr. Pottios missed a key tackle? Had he made a crucial fumble? Not exactly. But he had made a big time blunder, even before the game began.

Earlier in the week, before the crucial game, Myron Pottios was the guest speaker at a football luncheon in Pittsburgh. The first words that came out of his mouth were these: "The Giants are afraid of us. They know they can't beat us." As soon as he spoke those words he stopped; he realized, all be it too late, that he had blundered. He tried to correct himself: "What I mean is that they hate to play us."

But the newspapers the next day carried his original quote. And that quote was carried all the way back to New York where it was taped to the door of the Giants' locker room. "Myron Pottios says, 'The Giants are afraid of us!'" Every time the Giants went into their locker room they saw those words challenging them, and they rose up to that challenge. (*SPORT Magazine*, January, 1965.)

A public word spoken by one football player, and that word taken as a challenge by the opposing team. What does this have to do with the Scripture text presently before us? It helps to illustrate what is going on in this passage, and what we can expect to encounter in our lives as Christians.

Notice the sequence of events. Following our Lord's baptism there is spoken a public word of approval by His heavenly Father: "*This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased*" (Matt. 3:17.) This word of commendation is immediately challenged by the devil: "*the tempter came and said to him, 'Since you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread'*" (Matt. 4:3.)

Notice one crucial difference between the case of the opposing football teams and the case before us in this passage of Scripture. In the case of the football teams, the public words of the one team were challenged and defeated by the opposing team. In the case of our Lord, He successfully met the challenge of the devil and proved the words of His Father to be true.

As we come now to study this passage, let us bear this in mind: What we find happening in the life of our Lord we can expect to be reproduced in our lives as Christians.

I. Expect to be Challenged, When You Profess Allegiance to the LORD (Mk. 1:9-11; Matt. 3:13-17)

The gospels record that the temptations of Jesus occurred immediately after His baptism. As indicated in our introduction, there is a very significant connection between the two events.

Consider, first, the significance of Jesus' baptism. Jesus' submission to baptism demonstrated His willingness and intention to completely submit Himself to His Father's will, even though the Father's will meant identifying Himself with sinners. Bear in mind that John's baptism was a baptism for sinners:

Confessing their sins, they were baptized by [John] in the Jordan River ... ¹³Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. ¹⁴But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (Matt. 3:6,13-14)

In submitting to John's baptism, Jesus was demonstrating His willingness to identify Himself with sinners even to His own shame: *"Him [Christ Jesus] who knew no sin he [God the Father] made to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him"* (2 Cor. 5:21.)

Furthermore, Jesus' submission to baptism demonstrated His willingness and intention to completely submit Himself to His Father's will, even though His Father's will meant suffering the fate of death—that is to say, being separated from the eternal fellowship of God His Father, and suffering the curse pronounced by His Father in the Father's capacity as Judge. Baptism in Scripture is identified with death: the act of coming under the water (whether by immersion or sprinkling) symbolized the coming into the realm of the dead, note, for instance, Jonah 2:3,6,

You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me ... ⁶To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever. But you brought my life up from the pit, O LORD my God. (Jon. 2:3,6)

Referring to His approaching death on the cross, the Lord Jesus declares, *"I have a baptism to undergo"* (Lk. 12:50.) In submitting to John's baptism, Jesus was demonstrating His willingness to identify Himself with sinners even to His own pain: *"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree'"* (Gal. 3:13.)

Now consider the significance of Jesus' ordeal of temptation following immediately after His baptism. What happened when Jesus came up out of the waters of baptism? There was the personal revelation that Jesus is well pleasing to God: *"And a voice came out of heaven, 'You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased'"* (Mk. 1:11)—because of His willingness to submit to His Father's will at any and all cost. At the same time, there was also the public pronouncement of that fact: *"[There came] a voice out of heaven saying, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased'"* (Matt. 3:17.)

What happened next? Jesus was immediately driven into the wilderness for the express purpose of being tested/tempted by the devil: *"And immediately the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³For forty days he was in the wilderness being tempted by Satan. He was among the wild beasts"* (Mk. 1:12-13.) What is the purpose of this? The LORD has the right to verify the faithfulness of His Son and Servant, so that His pronouncement about Him is not an empty boast, but becomes a proven, verified fact; and the LORD employs the devil, allowing him to

try his hardest, in this process of proving and verifying the faithfulness of His Son and Servant.

This is what is taking place with regard to Jesus' baptism and subsequent encounter with the devil in the wilderness. Our Lord Jesus Christ, by submitting to John's baptism, has expressed His intention to submit Himself to His Father's will. God His Father recognizes His Son's intention and obedience, and allows it to be challenged, so that it may be verified and proven genuine. The pattern we find occurring in Jesus' life is the same pattern we may expect to find being reproduced in our own lives as a Christian. Consider the example of Job:

Then Jehovah 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." (Job 1:8)

Jehovah said to Satan, "Everything he has is in your hands, but on the man himself do not lay your hand." (Job 1:12)

We may expect to be challenged, when we profess allegiance to the LORD. As the Apostle Peter informs the churches to whom he writes his epistles:

... now for a little while, since it is necessary, you have been brought to grief by all kinds of trials. ⁷[This has happened] so that the genuineness of your faith—[being of] greater value than gold that perishes—having been tested by fire, may be verified, [resulting] in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. (1 Pet. 1:6b-7)

II. Expect to be Challenged, by the Devil (Mk. 1:12-13; Matt. 4:1-11)

The gist and essence of the first temptation is this: "Take care of yourself;" or, "View your needs, instead of your obedience to God, as your number one priority."

The setting is one in which Jesus in His humanity was experiencing genuine human need: *"After he had fasted for forty days and forty nights, he was hungry"* (Matt. 4:2.) In this context the devil offers the suggestion: *"Since you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread."* He is confronting Jesus with the fact that He has a legitimate need (and a right) that requires attention and demand fulfillment. Therefore, suggests the devil, Jesus should take it upon Himself to meet that need, rather than depend upon God to do so, even if it means disobedience to God. How does Jesus reply? He reminds the devil, *"It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God'"* (Matt. 4:4.) Jesus is alluding to Deuteronomy 8:3, a passage in which Moses reminds the people of Israel,

[The LORD] humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. (Deut. 8:3)

The Old Testament context is one in which the LORD had brought His people into a state of need, and then proceeded to meet their need in a totally unexpected way: providing manna from heaven. He did so in order to teach them the lesson that, as His people, we can and should depend upon the LORD to meet our needs. The two-fold practical lesson to be learned from Jesus' response to the first temptation is this: We can trust the LORD your God to meet our needs, as the Apostle Paul testifies to the Philippians, *"my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus"* (Phil. 4:19.) But, we must make our commitment to Him our number one priority:

So do not worry, saying, What shall we eat? or What shall we drink? or What shall we wear? ³²The Gentiles anxiously seek all these things, but your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³But seek first his kingdom and its righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matt. 6:31-33)

The gist and essence of the second temptation is this: "Let yourself go;" or, "Challenge God's promises, instead of exercising confidence in them."

Whereas in the first temptation, by God's providence, Jesus found Himself in a perilous situation (He was starving in the wilderness), in the second temptation the devil invites Jesus to put Himself into a perilous situation (the devil urges Jesus to jump off of the pinnacle of the temple.) The devil's suggestion is that since Jesus is the Son of God, He should jump off the pinnacle of the temple, relying upon God's promise, as recorded in Psalm 91:11-12, *"He shall put his angels in charge of watching over you. ¹²They shall hold you up with their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."* The devil's argument is, because Jesus possesses the divine promise of God, a promise that is completely reliable, He should take full advantage of that promise, even if it means undertaking acts of folly, even if it means engaging in acts of sin. Again, how does Jesus reply? He refers the devil to another passage of Old Testament Scripture, *"Again it is written, 'You shall not put the LORD your God to the test'"* (Matt. 4:7.) This time Jesus is alluding to Deuteronomy 6:16, a passage in which Moses warns the people of Israel, *"Do not test Jehovah your God as you did at Massah."* Moses is reminding the people of the time when the LORD brought His people into a waterless wasteland (Ex. 17:1), and there they sinfully challenged Him with the question, "Is the LORD going to take care of us, or not?" (Ex. 17:7.) The practical lesson to be learned from Jesus' response to the second temptation is this: It is the LORD's divine prerogative to test us by placing us into perilous or trying situations where we must trust Him to take care of us, but it is not our prerogative to test the LORD by putting ourselves into perilous situations and then challenging Him to take care of us. The Book of Proverbs declares, *"A wise*

man fears Jehovah and shuns evil, but a fool is ... reckless" (Prov. 14:16.) The Psalmist reminds us, *"Jehovah preserves the faithful"* (Psl. 31:23a.)

The gist and essence of the third temptation may be summarized in these terms: "Don't kill yourself; or, "Take the 'easy road' to glory instead of the way of the cross."

The setting now is one in which devil shows our Lord all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. He then offers the tempting bargain, *"I will give you all these things, if you will bow down and worship me."* He is confronting Jesus with the proposition that offers Him the supposedly easy way to accomplish His work. In effect, the devil says to the Lord, "Your Father says He will give it all to you if you resist me; but you will have to resist unto death, even the death of the cross. I say that I will give it all to you if you don't resist me; all I am asking you to sacrifice is your commitment to God your heavenly Father." Once more, how does Jesus reply? For the third time He replies by quoting a passage of Old Testament Scripture: *"Go away, Satan: for it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve'"* (Matt. 4:10.) This time Jesus is alluding to Deuteronomy 6:13, a passage in which the LORD gives to His people, through His servant, Moses, the commandment, *"Fear Jehovah your God, serve him only."* The people of Israel are commanded to render worship and allegiance to the LORD alone, and not to offer that sacred ministry to any other god, for the LORD is a jealous God, not tolerating any rival to receive what rightfully belongs to Him alone:

Fear Jehovah your God, serve him only and take your oaths in his name. ¹⁴Do not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples around you; ¹⁵for Jehovah your God, who is among you, is a jealous God and his anger will burn against you, and he will destroy you from the face of the land. (Deut. 6:13-15)

The practical lesson to be learned from Jesus' response to the third temptation is this: To whomever we yield our will and our allegiance, that person or thing is our "master," as the Apostle Paul points out to the church at Rome,

Do you not know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as servants, you are slaves to the one whom you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? (Rom. 6:16)

The one and only true God is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. To Him alone, and to none other, must we render our worship and allegiance. In the final analysis, the kingdom and the glory belongs to Him, they are His to give, and He gives them to those who worship and serve Him and His Son, Jesus Christ, *"Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me"* (Jn. 12:26.)

We may expect to be challenged, by the devil—and expect that challenge to come in the same way (sometimes subtle, sometimes blatant) as it came to our Lord Jesus Christ.

III. Expect to be Challenged, and Look to Christ to Meet that Challenge

Look to Christ's example. He confidently and obediently submitted Himself to His heavenly Father, we are called to do the same: *"Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you"* (Jas. 4:7.)

Look to Christ's presence. We dare not face the tempter by ourselves, we must avail ourselves of Christ's gracious presence: *"I am with you always, even to the end of the age"* (Matt. 28:20.) As the writer to the Hebrews assures us, *"Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted"* (Heb. 2:18.)

Look to Christ's victory. As Martin Luther's hymn expresses it, "Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing." Christ has won the victory at Calvary: *"having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross"* (Col. 2:15.) When facing temptation, we must surrender our will unto the Holy Spirit and trust Him to apply the victory of Jesus unto us.

Conclusion

Following their victory over the Pittsburgh Steelers, the New York Giants shouted, "Thank you, Mr. Pottios!" As Christians, this is our victory shout: *"Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ"* (1 Cor. 15:57.)