

January 26, 2020
The Second Temptation of Christ: God HAS To Do It For ME
Matthew 4:5-7, Psalm 91

A person can pull a verse out of context to make the Bible appear to say what it doesn't actually mean. By picking and choosing verses out of context, you can come up with bizarre interpretations of Scripture, twisted rationale for endorsing (or prohibiting) certain things, support for strange doctrines, and so on. That is exactly what Satan does. The devil's second temptation comes from Psalm 91. Interesting: Satan uses Scripture to tempt Jesus.

As an aside, be careful only reading one verse out of context. When you read Scripture ...

1. Always read the context (it's always good to read a whole chapter or close to it);
2. Think about the historical or cultural context – what influence does that have?
3. Think about the type of writing – poetry, history, letter—that affects it.
4. Ask, "What did this mean to the first people who read this?"
5. Then ask, "What does this mean to me today?"

Following those guidelines, we know Psalm 91 is a poem and prayer about God's protection. As a poem, it uses imagery to describe God (He is not literally a bird. [v.4]; we are not literally to walk on poisonous snakes or lions [v.13]). It does NOT promise God's protection if we do stupid things like jumping off a building.

It does state, with brutal honesty, there are a lot of evils in the world we cannot avoid. But God will be with us, He will be our refuge and strength, through these difficulties. We may be attacked by illness, enemies, violence, accidents, etc., but God will get us through.

This psalm is wonderful encouragement to trust in God – first, foremost, and always. This care flows out of our relationship with God. *"He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty"* (v.1). *"Because he loves me,"* says the LORD, *"I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name. He will call upon me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honour him"* (91:14-15). These are wonderful promises. But notice the key phrase: *"Because he loves me ..."* Eugene Peterson translates 91:14 - *"If you'll hold on to me for dear life,' says God, 'I'll get you out of any trouble. I'll give you the best of care if you'll only get to know and trust me.'"*

Knowing Better than God

This context helps us understand Jesus' words in Matthew 4:7. Satan is tempting Jesus to put God's loving care to the test – by forcing God to act according to Jesus' (really, Satan's) agenda. If God is forced into the corner, surely He would rescue Jesus. So let's see ...

Jesus responds to the devil with Deuteronomy 6:13-19. The background for this passage (*"Do not test the LORD your God as you did at Massah"*) is found in Exodus 17:1-7. God had led the Israelites out of Egypt miraculously (the Passover, crossing the Red Sea, providing manna and quail). God was providing for them miraculously day in day out. But the people still grumbled: *"the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD saying, 'Is the LORD among us*

or not?" (Exodus 17:7). The Israelites had seen miracle after miracle; they know God's care first hand every day. In Deuteronomy 6, Moses is reminding the Israelites of how quickly they can forget God's loving care in past and are missing His loving care every single day.

This Old Testament background helps us understand what Jesus is saying: yes, God has and will care for His people when we are living for Him and doing His will – when we love Him – when we are trying to be obedient to Him – when we hold on to Him for dear life (as in Psalm 91). Not when we test Him or try to force him to do what we want Him to do.

Jesus emphasizes God will ALWAYS care for His people when **He – God – leads** them into a trying situation (as with the Israelites in the wilderness). Not necessarily when **I, myself, choose** to try to get my way with God or force God's hand.

Like the Israelites in the wilderness, do we ever ask: *"Is the Lord with me or not?" "Is God really there?" "Does He really care?" "Does He hear my prayer?" "Why isn't He answering?" "Lord, give me _____. I've asked – why don't you answer my prayer."* We each have experienced blessings in the past – we are blessed every day. Do we ever still grumble?

Do you ever try to "test God"? Perhaps we think we know better than God how He should be handling things. Perhaps, if things are not going our way, we think, *"If we put get ourselves in a really tight spot then God will have to act ..."* We think we know better than God. We try to manipulate God, forcing Him to act how we think He should. We bargain, *"If you just get me through this one tight spot, I'll go to church every Sunday for the rest of my life ..."*

If we love our spouse, we don't act as if we know best and try to manipulate them to go along with our will (I hope). If we love our children, friends, parents, we don't try to force them to do what we want them to do because we know best (I hope).

If we love God, honour God, and actually believe that the God who created the universe and everything it, who created us in all our diversity and complexity, might KNOW BETTER than we do what is best, then, in healthy humility we listen to Him and we obey Him.

Just Being Dumb

How do I know if my spouse loves me? How do I know if my friend is really a friend? Maybe I should climb up on the High Level Bridge, and if that person gets a big net and spreads it below so I don't kill myself, then I'll know the relationship is genuine ... Is that smart?

We don't test people we love. We don't test our spouse. We don't test our children. At our best, we don't test our parents ... We work with those we love. We seek to please them. We do what's best for them. We honour them.

Jesus is modelling that we don't test God either. God calls us into a personal relationship. We love Him. We hold on to Him for dear life. When we genuinely seek to know and love God, we are "in sync" with His Spirit we seek to live lives that please Him.

Then hopefully we don't do (too many) dumb things. But sometimes we still do ...

- We push ourselves beyond what our abilities safely allow, then pray for help ...
- We brag about things we've never done to look good or put on a "false front" to present ourselves well, then pray for protection when the truth comes out ...
- We stretch ourselves over the limit of our financial means, then pray, "God help me ..."
- We get into relationships we know are not healthy, then pray for deliverance ...
- We do things we know are wrong. "*For anyone else it would be wrong, but in my case, God is making an exception*" (to quote a person from a previous church putting herself and her son into a toxic situation with a dangerous partner).

If God allows some of the natural consequences of our poor decisions to play out, we get angry with God. We blame God. Why didn't He save us?

God calls us into a personal relationship where we hold onto **Him** for dear life – and in so doing we avoid making some of those foolish choices that get us in so much trouble.

Hey! Look at Me!

Why do we do these dumb things? There are all sorts of reasons ...

- we really do think we know better than God
- it feels SO good
- everyone else is doing it
- we want to make an impression and be noticed

Part of Satan's temptation of Jesus on the roof of the temple was to make an impression, an appeal to His ego. The devil took Jesus to the highest point, in the central part of the city, where everyone could see. Here was an opportunity to put on a show. Imagine the headlines: "*Jesus Takes Flight*"; "*Miracle Man.*" "*One Giant Leap for Jesus.*" What a golden opportunity. It would have been great public relations. Great for Jesus' image – and ego.

Pride can be healthy. We can feel a healthy pride in good accomplishments. But it can become an overdeveloped sense of self-worth. In the Catholic tradition, pride – in this over-inflated sense – is the most serious of the seven deadly sins, because it is the source of many other vices in our lives. Augustine defines pride as "*the love of our own excellence.*" That kind of pride, he argues, leads us into other sins like adultery, theft, murder, etc. Striving for excellence is good, but if we are "in love" with our own excellence, we have a problem. "*Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall*" (Proverbs 16:18).

Do I ever try to impress people with what I've done (or what I'd like people to think I've done)? Do I need to be the centre of attention? Do I love it when people praise me and get annoyed when I feel overlooked? Am I pretty sure I'm a bit smarter than most of the other people around me? If only people would do what I think they should do ...

For Jesus, jumping might be a public relations coup – but for all the wrong reasons. His

mission was not to show off how wonderful He was. When He used His power, it was always to meet a need, to be a blessing to people. Yes, the miracles He performed were signs of the power and presence of God, but they also blessed, healed, comforted, provided for, released, or empowered people for the Kingdom of God.

God calls us into that personal relationship where we hold on to Him for dear life – and find our true affirmation from Him, not from trying to “wow” or impress, or show off for other people, but in caring for other people, loving other people, raising up other people ...

Let GOD define and heal you ...

We wrestle with a healthy balance between

- a healthy self image (We are to “love our neighbour *as ourselves*,” with a healthy “love of self”) and a healthy pride (in the sense of satisfaction when we do things well), and
- unhealthy pride (in the sense of feeling superior to others) through which we love ourselves too much and have an over-inflated image of ourselves ...

You are not what you do. Jesus reminds the Jewish teachers (people who felt they really were GOOD people whom everyone should respect), that putting on a good show on the outside – when we’re not right with God and other people on the inside – doesn’t work (Mark 7:20-22). Being “religious” doesn’t make you right with God; doing good deeds doesn’t save you. You are not your grades at school, or your position on the basketball team. You are not ____ (whatever profession you are). You ARE God’s beloved. We can learn wisdom from Him.

You are not what you have. You are not your car, home, or wardrobe. You are not even your looks or your body. If we do depend on these for our identity, it can be devastating when things change. There is a beautiful, liberating humility that comes from knowing that who we are – at the foundation of our lives – is God’s beloved child. We don’t need to impress anyone. We simply need to hold on to Him for dear life. And follow His wisdom.

You ARE who God says you are. You are His beloved child, in whom He is well pleased. Look at yourself in the mirror. Who is that? Imagine Jesus at your side, also looking at you in the mirror. How does he see you? He sees you as His beloved. He loves you, not because of your looks or poverty or power or friends, but because you are His sister, brother, a child of God. Nothing and no one can ever take that from you. That is enough.

Our root identity is this: we are those whom God loves, for whom Jesus died, in whom the Holy Spirit lives. Nothing can change that. A healthy, positive self-identity comes from knowing we are people, created and beloved by God. When we know we are God’s children, loved by Him no matter what, we don’t need to define ourselves by accomplishments, profession, or possessions. In healthy humility, we also recognize God knows best. We can trust His wisdom. We can trust His strength. He will get us through.