

## The Tested Son. Matthew 4:1-11

### Familiar, but strange

The verses of Matthew you heard read, the story of the testing of Jesus, sound both familiar and strange to us.

Familiar, for we all know what it is to know what we should do and be drawn to do something else, be tempted to take an alternative path, to feel the pressure of desire and the resistance of duty.

And strange – for none of us, for example, can even imagine going without food for forty days or expecting angels to save us from our own reckless decisions, let alone going toe to toe with the devil.

And as well as being strange and familiar, we also probably sense the importance of what is recorded here – a personal confrontation between Jesus and the devil – but are not sure why it is so important. Why does it matter that we get a glimpse of Jesus' internal struggles? That it is here in the gospel tells you Jesus thought it important for us to get that glimpse.

But why?

It is because this passage is about far more than Jesus being a model for us of how to deal with temptation.

It is about Jesus being qualified by the character of His relationship with God His Father to be the Saviour of His people, to be our Saviour.

If Jesus stumbles here, all is lost

And Victory here tells us Jesus is the Saving Son God declares Him to be when He is baptised, the Son who can bring God's Kingdom, who can bring God's light and life to our world.

### The beloved Son [Ps. 2, Isaiah 42:1-9]

It all starts with God's declaration of Jesus as His beloved Son at His baptism.

*<sup>16</sup> And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; <sup>17</sup> and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." <sup>4</sup> Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.*

Just like Jesus' birth, the declaration from heaven, from God, is full of promise.

The beloved Son recalls Psalm 2 where God declares of the One who will rule the nations "You are my son" [Ps. 2:7].

And it also recalls Isaiah 42 where God calls His servant 'His chosen, in whom His soul delights'. That servant will be a light to the nations and the One who will rescue the Lord's people from judgement, rescue them from the consequences of their sin.

The declaration of Jesus as the beloved Son promises a work that will restore the world to God, establish His reign over all, bring light to a people in darkness, release for those in bondage, forgiveness for those dying under judgment

A work based on a relationship – You are my Son.

But is Jesus truly that Son?

Does He have the relationship with God His Father that means He can accomplish that saving work?  
What does that relationship look like?

That is what the testing in the wilderness will reveal

You see God has had other sons who failed, whose hearts were not true to God

The people of Israel were called God's son

*Exodus 4: 22 Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, 23 and I say to you, "Let my son go that he may serve me." If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.'*

They were meant to be a holy nation, to show to the world how good God's rule was by their own life in obedience to God –

But they failed in the wilderness – failed to trust and obey, grumbled, complained, put the Lord to the test, went and worshipped other gods [e.g. golden calf, Ex. 32, Baal-peor Num 25].

And before them Adam, entrusted with the rule of creation, with establishing God's rule over His world by living in obedience to God, Adam called son of God in Luke 3:37, had failed and brought the world into misery, failed because he did not believe God's word, followed his own desire.

Will Jesus, declared to be the saving Son by God, be that Son?

Does He have the relationship with God that means He will establish God's good reign over the earth, bring God's promised salvation to a world enslaved to sin and death?

This is what is demonstrated in the wilderness, demonstrated before Jesus undertakes His public ministry.

Here we will see the foundation of that ministry to come, the heart of that ministry to come, Jesus' relationship with His heavenly Father.

And it is as significant for the world as the events of the garden of Eden

### **The unique Son 4:1-11**

*4 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.*

What follows comes about by God's express purpose. God through His Spirit is directing affairs here.

And the purpose of His going to the wilderness, that place of Israel's failure, is to be 'tempted by the devil.'

The same Greek word can be translated tested or tempted [Jesus in John 6:6 asks Philip a question to test him; in 2 cor. 13:5 Paul urges his readers to 'test themselves'].

God is sending Jesus into the wilderness to be tested, and the means He will use is the devil's tempting of Jesus.

Testing has as its goal the demonstration of the suitability of something or someone for the task they are to perform.

People used to test bridges by putting heavy loads on them – not to make them break, but to demonstrate they would not break under those loads.

Professional groups like doctors or accountants test those joining their ranks not with the purpose of failing their candidates but to demonstrate the adequacy of those who pass the test for their professional role.

Having declared Jesus to be His beloved Son God is now testing Jesus, testing Him in the integrity of His relationship to His Father, His commitment to His Father, to demonstrate that Jesus is suitable for the work the Father has given Him

And the means God will use is the devil's tempting of Jesus. Tempting is testing with malicious intent, testing with the aim of making someone fail. That is what the devil – [here described as v. 'the tempter' and in v. 9 as Satan – which is the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek Devil, both meaning the accuser or opponent] – acting true to his character, desires. To make Jesus fail.

But the devil, though powerful and cunning, called the prince or ruler of this world [John 14:30, 16:11], is a creature, and here his malice, as it does at the crucifixion, will only serve God's good purpose.

And as we come to look at these temptations, recognise that they are unique – unique in their intensity, unique in their specific content, temptations only the true Son could face. A unique testing to demonstrate that Jesus is uniquely that Son

*<sup>2</sup> And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. <sup>3</sup> And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." <sup>4</sup> But he answered, "It is written,*

*"Man shall not live by bread alone,  
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."*

Forty days and forty nights! That has echoes of Israel's forty years in the wilderness, of the experience of Moses and Elijah – but its main point is to bring home Jesus' extreme hunger, to allow us to feel the pressure Jesus is under.

Not many of us will be seriously tempted to believe we could do a spectacular miracle or rule the world, but we all know hunger. Hunger is pre-occupying, compelling, driving everything else out of our minds.

Perhaps some of us fast – practice that diet where we fast two days a week or something like that. But to go more than a day without food, a week.

It wouldn't be a question of trying to get me to change bread into stones if I could – it would be trying to stop me.

Every cell of Jesus' body was saying – we have to have food. We are dying to eat. Jesus is being tested in a way that is far more intense than anything we have or will face

And the devil comes along and says 'If you are the Son of God' – Better – since you are the Son of God.

The question is not whether Jesus is Son. God has just declared Him to be Son.

The question is what does it mean for Jesus to be Son of God, what does Jesus think it means to be the beloved Son.

The Devil is suggesting that being Son is about taking initiative to use your powers to save your own life by satisfying your hunger, your appetite for life. That being son is about being able to keep yourself alive by your own actions.

But Jesus is the true Son.

He has embraced the purpose of God testing his Son Israel in the wilderness, and that purpose is to learn that

*<sup>4</sup> But he answered, "It is written,*

*"Man shall not live by bread alone,  
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."*

Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 8:3

Jesus is guided in his relationship with the Father by the word of God, and that word teaches Him that HE is to depend on His Father to sustain and keep His life; to not focus on bread, on pursuing the tangible, material sources to keep Himself alive.

Being Son is to focus on the Word as the source of life

On living by trusting and obeying His father.

Jesus understands that being Son is having a heart [Deut. 8:2] that keeps the Father's word, and that being directed by the word of God is his life.

And so the devil moves on to the second temptation.

*<sup>5</sup> Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple <sup>6</sup> and said to him,  
"If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written,*

*"He will command his angels concerning you,"*

*and*

*"On their hands they will bear you up,  
lest you strike your foot against a stone."*

*<sup>7</sup> Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'"*

Like the next temptation this is likely some kind of visionary experience. The Devil has twiggled to the role the word of God has in Jesus' life and so he seeks to destroy him through the word, here quoting Psalm 91:11-12, a Psalm that speaks of God's protection of those who take refuge in Him.

Being Son, says the devil, is dictating to God the how and the when of God keeping his promises. The Devil is an advocate of the 'name it and claim it' school but at least the devil does not cloak his corruption in the language of faith.

Jesus, the one most entitled to think Psalm 91 spoke of Him, exposes and rejects the devils misuse of Scripture by again quoting Scripture, and again Deuteronomy – here Deut. 6:16

<sup>7</sup>*Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'"*

The generation of Israelites that left Egypt had put the LORD to the test, but the true Son does not.

To put the LORD to the test is to demand that the LORD should meet your needs in your way when you demand. It is to say that the LORD must prove His commitment to His people, His power and His faithfulness by doing what you want, when you want, in the way you want.

It springs from a lack of trust in God, and reverses the order of the relationship between the LORD and His people. In putting the LORD to the test the people are saying that they should rule, and the LORD should serve them. But the LORD is King and His people serve Him.

Testing the Lord is not more acceptable be being cloaked in biblical language. It is, like Adam's sin, rebellion that springs from unbelief.

But Jesus is the true Son. He will serve, not dictate. He will do things God's way, in God's timing, because HE trusts His Father.

So the devil tries again with a temptation only Jesus could really feel the full force of.

<sup>8</sup>*Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. <sup>9</sup>And he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."*  
<sup>10</sup>*Then Jesus said to him, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written,*

*"You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve."*

<sup>11</sup>*Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.*

The Son is the one entitled to the rule of the nations. This is His birthright.

And He alone is really equipped to see and feel the grandeur of that rule – the treasures of China and India, the wealth of Rome, the achievements of their cultures.

And here the devil holds all this before Jesus and says it can be His – with no arduous obedience, no suffering.

Just worship him – acknowledge that he is Jesus' superior and give him service, believe his word and depend on him for his rule.

This has worked before. He held out to Israel prosperity in the land of promise if they would worship other gods – and they did.

HE held out to Adam the prospect of being like god, being godlike in the world, if Adam would believe him – and he did.

Jesus' doesn't quibble with the devil's capacity to fulfill his offer or challenge the devil's truthfulness.

He is the Son, and the Son serves the Father only and relies on Him to give all that He has promised.

He dismisses the devil

'Be gone Satan'

And again he quotes Deuteronomy 6

*For it is written,*

*“You shall worship the Lord your God  
and him only shall you serve.”*

Where other sons failed, Jesus, uniquely, is the true Son

The true Son in perfect relationship with God His Father.

The one who will be directed always by His word, His word alone – depending on it for life itself.

The one who will trust the Father by leaving it to the Father to fulfill His promises His way and in His time

The one who will serve only the Father, give Him his exclusive loyalty, and receive His exaltation to His rule, to the inheritance the Father has promised, as the Servant of the Father, not as a rival or one who seeks to rule independent of the Father.

Jesus in testing demonstrates He is the Son who loves the Father with all His heart, mind, soul and strength, the servant Israel who will do the Father's will, and this relationship with His Father is the foundation of all that will follow.

And in being the true Son Jesus is uniquely, the one and only, saving Son who can complete the work the Father has entrusted to Him.

### **The Saving Son**

This is what we see in the rest of the gospel,

Jesus teaches, does His mighty works, dies – always as the obedient Son of the Father, conforming His life and ministry in every aspect to His word

Which is why we can be sure His words are the Father's words, God's words

His work the Father's work, the picture of the rule of God

His salvation, the Father's, God's salvation.

This love of and humble dependence on the Father is what we are reminded of at key points in the gospel where these temptations are recalled.

When Peter objects to Jesus doing the Father's will, saving His people by His rejection, mocking, death – and resurrection

*Matthew 16: <sup>21</sup> From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. <sup>22</sup> And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." <sup>23</sup> But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."*

He turns to Peter and says "Get behind me Satan", literally 'Be gone behind me Satan'

Jesus recognises in Peter's words Satan's temptation to come to His kingdom in some way other than God's way, and again, at this key moment, decisively rejects it.

He will serve the Father only, not human expectation.

When He is being arrested He knows that He could call for legions of angels to protect Him

*Matthew 26: <sup>53</sup> Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? <sup>54</sup> But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?"*

But how then He says v. 54 should the Scriptures be fulfilled.

He will do God's work God's way, and not put the Lord to the test.

And as He hangs on the cross He is mocked with the very words the devil used to address Him

*Matthew 27: <sup>40</sup> and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." [cf. 27:43]*

Even on the cross as every cell of His body longs for life and relief from the pain He will not take action to save His own life, He continues to reject the idea that being Son of God would be demonstrated in using His powers to save Himself.

He will trust the Father and will save us by being the Son who lives by the Word of God, who will trust God to fulfill His promises His way and in His time, who will serve Him only.

The Son he is seen to be in the wilderness is the Son HE is throughout His ministry, the Son He is on the cross

And being this Son, the unique Son who loved the Father perfectly, who trusted the Father and so fulfilled His word perfectly, HE comes to His inheritance.

The devil offered Him the world

But the resurrected Son says 'All authority in heaven and earth is given to me'

The Father is faithful, and the Lord Jesus comes to what the devil could never give

And He becomes uniquely, the one and only, Son with authority to forgive and judge

With authority to declare all who believe in Him to be children of God, to include them in God's people, the Israel who will inherit God's kingdom

Who will know forgiveness and peace with God

Not yet a believer.

There is no-one else like Jesus – the true Son of God

He is victorious where all others have failed.

Includes you - You have failed to be rightly related to the living God, to trust Him as He deserves.

Might not trouble you

Can't see why all this matters

Might find Jesus responses, His commitment to die to do God's will

Frankly puzzling

That means you are so ensnared to the devil's lies

So used to looking after yourself first

So accustomed to living having your decisions guided by your own desires

That you've Lost sight of God

Lost sight of your dependence on Him for life

Lost sight of His rule of the universe

Lost sight of His justice that will call you to account in judgment

Our world calls that insight, but it is blindness

For this is God's world, and the nations – you and I – will bow to God's true Son and acknowledge His rule

God calls us to listen to His Son

To believe Him when He says all authority is His

That HE teaches the truth

That He is to be followed, and that in following Him we will find life

No one else can give this life,

All others that you might be tempted to put your trust in are already enslaved to the devil's lies

That they can have rule by worshipping the creature not the Creator

To thinking they can make and shape God to serve them

To using what they have been given to keep themselves alive apart from God



In the end, whomever you turn to, if it is not the Son, the Lord Jesus, all you are left with are their lies and their death

There is no one else like Jesus who, committed to the Father's will who speaks God's words, exercises God's rule, and brings God's life

Turn to Him – He lives

Get to know Him – from His word

Trust Him

Talk, or sign up for Christianity explored

### **The Son we learn from, the Son we rely on**

But if you are a believer

You know that trusting Jesus the true Son

We have been adopted as God's children

That is the amazing promise of God's word

*John 1: <sup>12</sup> But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, <sup>13</sup> who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*

Or the apostle Paul

*Galatians 4: <sup>4</sup> But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, <sup>5</sup> to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. <sup>6</sup> And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" <sup>7</sup> So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.*

As God's adopted children we can learn from this passage not only to trust the true Son -which is its first and primary point – that Jesus is the unique Son, equipped to bring the promised saving reign of God

We can also learn a little of what it is to be a child of God, can be equipped to live as God's children through our own testing

That testing will come

We are in a spiritual battle [Ephesians 6:10-12]

The devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour [1 Peter 5:8]

[Testing will come through the world, through society organised in its desire to live independent of its Creator, following its own judgements, in love with its own power

the flesh – our own sinful desires that clamour for satisfaction

and the devil, the lies and hatred he still peddles]

What we learn here is that we will win or lose in that testing in our hearts. It is our minds and wills that are the battleground.

There was hunger, Real hunger which is more powerful at engaging our attention than sexual desire [Primo Levy]

– but the appetite alone, the need alone, did not determine the action

There still had to be a decision made

A decision to be guided by God's word, or not.

The battle against temptation is not won or lost by our circumstances.

It is won and lost in our hearts, our wills – whether they will be directed by trust in and obedience to God's word, or not

Porn is not a habit before it is a decision – a decision that you will find life, relief, satisfaction, by using what you have, that computer or phone, to satisfy your desire – even though God forbids it

Angry words are not just an emotion, they are a decision. It may be one you have made so many times that you don't notice you are making it. But it is, a decision in your will that you will get what you want, what you think will give you life, improve your life, by expressing your anger in hurtful and painful words, even though God forbids it.

Grumbling against God is not the inevitable outcome of hard circumstances, but a decision, a decision that you know better how God should act, a decision to disbelief His promises

The battle against temptation is waged and won or lost in our hearts, our wills

And we see here, secondly, that temptation, testing, will always focus on our relationship with our Father – for that is always what is at stake. The devil didn't care whether Jesus ate or not. He cared about whether He would be guided by God's word, or not

Rescue by God belonged to Jesus - the question was whether He would humble Himself and trust God to rescue Him in the Father's own time and way

The rule of all the nations and all their glory was Jesus', His birthright – the question was whether He would come to it God's way, serving Him – or abandon serving God, to have the gift without the giver.

The focus of our temptations is always on our relationship with God.

You might have been gifted by God with great sporting talent. What you long for, what you train for, is sporting achievement. You may be qualified for that. But the issue is not the achievement. It is whether you will come to that achievement trusting and obeying, worshipping, the God who gave me this ability, or will you come to it some other way – believing the devil's lie that he can give me my heart's desire if you abandon God to worship him.

That will be the issue

And it will play out in whether you start to ignore what God commands to get to your goal – whether that is prayer, or meeting with His people, or respecting your parents, or even honesty.– Like Floyd Landis, raised in a Mennonite home but stripped of his 2006 Tour de France win for doping offences. Who will you serve?

You might be gifted by God with academic ability – but will you gain the prominence and promotion in the academic world you desire, are qualified for, by going quiet on God being the Creator of all by His word. Who will you serve?

Or what you desire, feel entitled to, may be a happy and harmonious home. Do you think you can gain it by going quiet on what is involved in following Jesus - his standards, changing patterns of life shaped by God's word – to avoid conflict with your children who are being guided by another god.

The focus is always on our relationship with God – whether we will trust and obey His word, serve Him only, look to Him to give us what He has promised in His time, or believe the devil's lies that we should be in control or that He can give us what we desire – whether it is relationship, or fortune, or accomplishment, without honouring the living God, without the inconvenience of serving Him

And the sad thing is the devil is a liar.

What the devil gives, he also promises to others. Being number one in your sport will only last a moment, number one in your field until another comes along,

There is no security in what the devil gives, only fear and emptiness, or the lies that come with trying to prevent losing what you will always lose, for the devil cannot give life, and it will all be lost in death.

The focus of our temptations is always on our relationship with God. Will we be true children who trust the Father and serve Him, or not?

And temptation is overcome, Resisted, by holding fast to the word of God, understood, trusted and humbly received.

The word, not as a magic text or mantra

The word, not corrupted by our own selfish desires, made to serve our own plans and ambitions

And not just the word on a page, but stored in our hearts, so we can bring it to bear on what we are thinking about, what we are turning over in our minds in the wakeful small hours or the choices we are considering in the daylight

And if that word is to help we don't need to just know it, we need to know that we trust the God who speaks it.

That the God who commands that I control my tongue, or who commands my sexual purity, or who tells me to meet with other believers – wants my best, tells me the truth, and can be trusted.

And that conviction is cultivated only one way - by thinking about Jesus, and what God has done for us in Christ

By confessing the reality that you are a sinner – deserving condemnation but saved by grace, the grace that gave the Son to die for you, and the power that raised Him from the dead.

Thinking about the gospel helps you answer the questions you should always ask when tempted –

Does my heavenly Father love me?

Does my heavenly Father know and desire what is best for me?

Do things, whatever happens, always work out His way?

And that same gospel tells you that Jesus lives now as the One to whom you can always draw near for help, who because of His own testing will always be merciful and compassionate and able to help those under trial.

This is what the author of Hebrews says

*Hebrews 2: <sup>18</sup> For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.*

*Hebrews 4: <sup>15</sup> For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. <sup>16</sup> Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

The devil wants to make us fall.

He wants to separate us from God, and he is both bold and cunning.

But we are not alone when we are tested.

We have the word, we have the Spirit who directs our heart to the Father, and we have a Saviour who knows what it is like to be tempted

Who has felt the pressure

The pressure of an unsatisfied appetite, of feeling that we will die if we do not act to satisfy that hunger – whether for love, or recognition, or success

The pressure of wanting to be in control, to have God's promises fulfilled when we want, in the way we want

The pressure of a longed for goal and of being able to possess without having to do things God's way, what seems the hard way

Felt it far more intensely than us

He knows what we need at those times

And He is merciful

He can give us the help we need to keep living as God's children – to the end, so that we come to what our Father has promised us

Resurrection in the new heaven and earth.

“This is my son, whom I love.”

Praise God for sending His true Son to give us eternal life

Praise the Son – for He has overcome where all else have failed

Turn to Him for grace to live now as His adopted children

Living by the word of God

Living trusting His goodness, might and faithfulness

Living serving Him, the life giving God who always keeps His word, serving Him, worshipping Him alone