

Matthew 4:1-11

Aim of Lesson

To show how Jesus overcame temptation through his faith in God and his knowledge of scripture.

Background study

Deuteronomy 6:13 and 16; 8:1-3; Psalm 91:11-12; Luke 4:1-13; 1 Corinthians 10:13; Hebrews 2:18; 4:15-16; James 1:12-15.

Suggested outline of lesson

Ask the children what they think temptation means. Explain the idea that thoughts which suggest wrong actions come into one's mind from time to time. Discuss examples which are common to the children's own experiences, such as the temptation to deny the responsibility for accidents, to take things belonging to other people, to disobey parents' instructions in order to go along with friends, etc. The children will realise that temptation comes from within and presents a personal challenge to everybody. Point out that such temptations have their roots in self-interest. This preliminary discussion will pave the way towards a realistic approach to the experience of Jesus and help to obviate any misunderstanding about an outside tempter.

Explain that Jesus was about to embark upon his great work of teaching people, having just been baptised and endowed with special power from God. As so often happened in his life, he felt compelled to withdraw from other people in order to give his whole attention to praying to God and preparing himself for the hard years that were ahead. Explain to the children the physical nature of the wilderness - a dry, barren, rocky area where no one lived and very little grew. It would be hot in the day and cold at night; a very uncomfortable place and devoid of anything to eat. To fast was not an uncommon practice as an aid to meditation and spiritual awareness, and this should be explained to the children. This was Jesus' intention as he concentrated his whole being, without distraction, on the purpose that God his Father had sent him to fulfil. Try to impress upon the children that to spend six weeks in complete solitude, in a wild place and without food, must have been a tremendous ordeal.

Jesus must have been very hungry and physically weak at the end of this period, and it was at this point that he experienced temptation. He was keenly aware of the power he had from God. He knew that, if he wished, he could make stones turn into bread and that bread would satisfy his hunger. He also knew that God's power had not been given to him for selfish reasons but was to be used in his work for God. His love for God was stronger than his love of self, so he dismissed selfish desires and sought strength to obey his Father. The words of scripture sprang immediately to his mind and the matter was instantly resolved.

Having made use of his knowledge of scripture to conquer the first temptation, a second temptation presented itself to Jesus, and this was actually taken from scripture. His knowledge of scripture assured him that God's angels could be called upon to keep him from harm. In his mind, he imagined a situation in which he would be able to perform a spectacular proof that he was God's son, with power, and so enable him to attract the crowds to hear his message. Again Jesus recognised the human element of self-gratification, but he knew that God had not commanded him to do this. Had he succumbed, the act would have been one of self-will, not God's will. To cast himself needlessly into danger, and then to trust in God to rescue him, would have been to tempt, i.e. dare to test, God. But once again the deeply instilled commands of God were drawn upon to overcome his human reasoning.

The third temptation was less subtle and more searching than the preceding one, and constituted a battle of wills. The decision of Jesus at that moment was critical to the salvation of the world. Jesus wrestled with the opposing forces of his own human desire for immediate power and recognition, and humble submission to the will of his Father. He knew that he was destined to be king over the earth, but he recognised that the honour could only be granted by God as the culmination of a great plan, which first necessitated his coming to the world as a servant and as a pattern to show men how to worship and obey the Lord God.

Having brought the powerful word of God to his aid once again, the voice of temptation was silenced, and Jesus received the comfort and knowledge of the presence of angels to strengthen him. In order to prepare the children for their own Bible reading, it will be necessary to explain that the voice of temptation is personified and termed "the devil" in the scripture passage.

Relevance to the children's lives

It is easier to give in to temptation than to fight it, because we all like to please ourselves. But is what we want what is really best for us? Have you ever wanted very much to do something wrong, but managed not to give in to that temptation? What made you do what was right? (This discussion will need sensitive handling in order to allow for freedom of expression without undermining any child's security.)

Worksheets

These should be self-explanatory.

Prayer

Dear Lord God, please help us to know what is right and what is wrong. When we are tempted, help us to remember Jesus and his trials, and make us strong to do what will please you. Amen.

Memory verse

"It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God'" (Matthew 4:4).