

Aim of lesson

To study what happened when Jesus was tempted and how it prepared him for later temptations.

Bible background

Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:13; Luke 4:1-13

Preparation required

Compare and contrast the different narratives, considering how each temptation prepared Jesus for future conflicts. The use of the students' notes is included in further suggested activities so you should decide whether you are going to use these.

Suggested outline of lesson

The purpose of the temptations

The temptations follow Jesus' baptism by John. This was God's public introduction of Jesus to the nation as Son of God and their Messiah. By the age of 30 - his baptism - he had learned to control sin. Now he received the Holy Spirit without measure. He had to learn not to use it for his own benefit. Jesus knew all the prophecies he was to fulfil - the honour of being Son of God and King of Israel. He also knew the prophecies about how he was to suffer and die to bring salvation to many. There would be tremendous mental and spiritual conflict during those 40 days as he considered the work he was to carry out.

The temptation to turn stones into bread

There is sometimes debate as to whether the temptations were actual or imagined. In the case of the first temptation, having fasted for 40 days and 40 nights and having endured intense mental concentration and spiritual conflict, the desire to turn stones into bread was immediate and obvious. The wilderness stones even looked like the little loaves he was now longing for. Jesus didn't need an outward supernatural being to tempt him to make the stones into bread for his own self-gratification. His own inward desire to sin would be extremely strong. He was the Son of God wasn't he? God had declared it at his baptism. God had given him unlimited power. He was in urgent physical need - surely his own Father wouldn't mind him satisfying that need? In fact he said so later in Matthew 7:9.

Jesus responded by quoting from Scripture - Deuteronomy 8:3. God had made Israel suffer hunger before he fed them manna in the wilderness so that they might learn the same lesson Jesus himself quoted. God's word is more important than natural food. He refused to satisfy the natural desire of hunger by using God's power. He relied on God's word and overcame temptation.

The temptation to throw himself down from a pinnacle of the Temple

Matthew and Luke give a different order of the 2nd and 3rd temptations. Strict chronological order is not always followed in the Bible records. This should not be seen as a difficulty. It is quite possible that during the 40 days Jesus had faced these temptations over and over again and that the Bible record is a summary of what he had gone through. Traditionally it was thought that Messiah would proclaim himself from the pinnacle of the temple. In his mind's eye Jesus could imagine attracting attention to himself by appearing on this spot and then going through the stunt of throwing himself from this great height without being hurt. Jesus' inner conscience even quoted Scripture to convince himself to sin - Psalm 91:11-12. Jesus' quick reply is again a quotation from Scripture - Deuteronomy 6:16.

This temptation soon became a reality - Luke 4:29-30. This was the occasion when Jesus preached in the synagogue at Nazareth and his hearers were so incensed that they took him to the brow of a hill outside the town in order to push him over the cliff. He was miraculously saved by passing through the midst of them. This was less spectacular than letting them push him over the edge to have a host of angels save him.

The temptation to be king of the world now.

Like the 2nd temptation, this 3rd temptation to have power over the whole world was imagined rather than real. There isn't actually a mountain that is physically that high! Jesus knew that ultimately, as Messiah and Son of God, the kingdoms of the earth would be under his rule. He knew his scriptures: "Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession", Psalm 2:8 (NIV). The temptation was to be ruler of the world without having to go through the agony and humiliation of the Cross. However, this would be a rejection of God's power and the victory over human nature. Jesus reacted instantly with another quotation from Scripture to 'fear the Lord and serve him only', Deuteronomy 6:13 (NIV). The imagined temptation became a reality after the feeding of the 5,000 when, because of the miracle, they recognised who he was and Jesus quietly went away because they wanted to force him to be King.

Christ victorious

After the temptations we are told "the devil" departed for a season. Although victorious over this set of temptations, Jesus was not free from the temptation to sin for the rest of his life. We are told that we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are - yet was without sin, Hebrews 4:15. We can be sure he suffered from constant recurrence of temptation. Unlike us, he had the added temptation to use the power of the Holy Spirit for his own ends. Unlike us, he never gave in to temptation.

Relevance to our lives

Coping with temptation is a subsequent topic so don't go into too much detail on this aspect of the lesson. The main points of relevance are:

- Jesus knows how we feel when we are tempted. He has been there.
- Jesus knew his Scriptures so well that they were a great strength to him in difficult situations.
- It is a good idea to think through areas of temptation and what our reaction should be before they occur.

Prayer

Assure the students that when we present our prayers to God asking not to be led into temptation, or asking for forgiveness, he hears us. Jesus understands about temptation and so does God when we offer our prayers in Jesus' name.

Other suggestions for activities

You could ask the young people to think about the questions in their book.

Human Lusts

The 3 categories of temptation listed in 1 John 2:16 can be directly linked with the temptations of Jesus:

- Fleshly appetites - the desire to satisfy his hunger by turning stones into bread
- The desire for what the human eye can see - to become King of the world spread out before his eyes
- Human pride - the temptation to throw himself down from the temple in front of an admiring audience, knowing he wouldn't be hurt.

The Crucifixion of Christ

If you study Matthew 27 carefully you will find the following elements common to both the crucifixion and temptation of Jesus:

- verse 42 - 'he saved others but can't save himself' - there is perhaps a hint here of the 1st temptation. Jesus was able to feed others and save them from starvation by providing bread but could not, if he was going to fulfil his Father's will, save himself.
- verses 40 & 43 - 'Come down from the Cross ... let God rescue you if you are his son' has overtones of throw yourself from the pinnacle of the temple and God will send his angels to take care of you.
- verses 37 & 42 - His Cross proclaimed him as King and he was taunted to come down if he really was. This is connected with the temptation to rule over all the kingdoms he could see without going through the agony of the Cross. Matthew 26: 53 'Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal

more than twelve legions of angels?' must have been a real temptation.

To a greater or lesser degree it appears that Jesus endured the temptations all over again as he hung on the Cross.