

1 The authority of the believer
Matthew 4:1-11

David Campbell

Resource: R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, 2007)

The first question we have to deal with is obvious. This passage deals with the testing of God's Son. Why would we understand it to deal with the authority of the believer? The answer will unfold as we proceed, but we can lay the following groundwork.

First, because the passage deals with the testing of Jesus, it also deals with our testing as believers. Jesus, as God's unique Son, models what it means to be a son or daughter of God. The verses immediately preceding these relate how Jesus submitted to John's baptism of repentance in order to identify with us sinners (Matt. 3:13-17), even though He Himself was without sin (Heb. 4:15). He is not ashamed to call us brothers (Heb. 2:11). He became like us in all things, so that through His sinless self-sacrifice He could satisfy the anger of God against our sin (Heb. 2:17). What Jesus experienced as God's Son is meant to open the door for us to come into the experience of sonship, even though we are not God's unique Son in the way Jesus was. That is why we can cry "Abba, Father" the same way Jesus did at Gethsemane (Mark 14:36): "*And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba, Father' "*" (Gal 4:6, see likewise Rom. 8:15). And that is also why Hebrews says: "*Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God*" (Heb. 12:1-2). Therefore, if this passage deals with the testing of Jesus, the same testing will be played out in our lives, even though it may not be exactly the same as what Jesus experienced.

Second, the passage reveals it was the testing of Jesus that released His authority, and the same is true for us. The first thing that happened when the testing concluded was that Jesus began for the first time to preach that the kingdom of God had come (Matt. 4:17), and the results are described as follows: "*And He went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people*" (Matt. 4:24).

As soon as Jesus was revealed at the Jordan as the Son of God and the Spirit came down on Him in power, He was launched into confrontation with the enemy: "*Then Jesus was taken up into the wilderness by the Spirit to be tested by the devil*" (verse 1). This passage is traditionally referred to as the temptation of Jesus. The thought is that the devil has been given some measure of temporary control or power to attempt to draw Jesus away from the Father. There are two problems with this. First, while it is true that there was an encounter between the devil and Jesus, the whole incident took place under the sovereign hand of God. The devil has been given too much credit here. It was God who took Jesus up into the wilderness by the power and leading of His Spirit. Remember that the wilderness is not some kind of dreadful place inhabited by demons. The wilderness is the place of God's dealings with His people, the place where He taught them dependency on Him. The devil does not appear in the wilderness because

the wilderness is a bad place. He appears because he has a critical role in a process that was designed by God and is being controlled by God. The devil does not control the events of human history. He may and does use the consequences of our sin and rebellion against God to introduce suffering and hardship, but through all of it God is working out a greater purpose, to drive us back to Himself through the experience of our own inability and failures.

The second problem with the idea that this is all about the temptation of Jesus is that the Greek word for “tempt” is also the word for “test”. There is no doubt that the devil tempted Jesus, but if that is all we see, we miss the bigger picture. Even the devil must stand under the sovereignty of the God who rules over all. The devil tempts, but who tests? The Bible is clear: there is only One who tests our hearts, and that is God Himself. We begin to understand the significance of what happened here by going back to Deut. 8:2: *“And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not.”*

What was God doing in the wilderness? Testing the hearts of His children. Moses continues: *“Thus you shall know in your heart that the Lord your God was disciplining you just as a man disciplines his son”* (Deut. 8:5). The Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament uses a variation of the same verb for “test” as Matthew uses here. It is in the place of wilderness that our hearts are tested and revealed. That is the place of stress and hardship, the place where things are difficult, where we have the choice of stepping out in faith to trust God in spite of circumstances or of becoming bitter and turning away from Him to make ourselves secure through our own efforts. The children of Israel, for the most part, failed the test. Why did Jesus have to be tested? The same reason He had to be baptized – it was part of His identification with us as sinners. But when God had tested the heart of His Son and found Him obedient, the accusation and power of the enemy which had prevailed against Israel would come crashing to the ground.

Now it becomes clear why Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness. The forty days stand for the forty years of Israel’s sojourn in the desert. A parallel is being drawn. During the testing, Jesus quoted three verses from the Bible to oppose and confound the enemy. All three quotations come from Deuteronomy 6-8, the same place where God through Moses spoke to the Israelites about His testing of their hearts. There are three tests which Israel failed but Jesus passed, and these are revealed as Satan attempts to draw Jesus away from His obedience to the Father. Each test was essential for the fulfilment of Jesus’ destiny and mission as the Son of God. Each test was critical for the ultimate release of God’s power in His life.

First, Satan said to Jesus, *“If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread”* (verse 3). Satan was not questioning the fact that Jesus was the Son of God. He was attempting to draw Jesus into a wrong understanding of His privileges and responsibilities as that Son. ***The first testing dealt with the issue of provision.*** Like Israel, Jesus was hungry. Looking around at the stones on the ground, Satan was reminding Jesus of the manna God provided. If the Israelites could pick up manna off the ground to satisfy their hunger, and if God had provided for them, what would be wrong with Jesus simply producing His own manna? As the Son of God, why should Jesus be subject to the hardship or indignity of hunger? In reply, Jesus quoted Deut. 8:3: *“Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.”* Both Jesus and Satan knew what the first half of that same verse said: *“And He humbled you and*

let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live...” God had allowed Israel to be hungry so that they might learn to live by higher values than simply their physical needs. If God the Father allowed Jesus to be hungry in the wilderness, it was part of God’s plan and Jesus had to submit to it. Though He did not need to learn the lesson the Israelites were taught, He submitted to it anyway. Why? Because He wanted to demonstrate His obedience to the Father in everything. Israel complained until God sent the manna, then was not satisfied with it. Jesus never complained. Obedience to the will of God always takes priority over our needs – even apparently basic ones. Will God leave us to starve? No – and He did not leave Jesus to starve either. He merely established priorities – and Jesus was obedient to them. What we do not understand is that it is because Jesus denied Himself access to what He could have had through His own strength that God opened up for Him far greater resources in the supernatural. The day came when Jesus fed not only Himself but thousands of others through a few small loaves and fishes. If that was true for Jesus, how much more so for us? How often do we spend so much time and effort to get what we want? The disciples, seeing the crowds coming for food, were more concerned about safeguarding their own lunch, and wanted to send them off to get something for themselves. But what if we spent our efforts just obeying God instead, and so releasing Him to supply us so much more abundantly than we ever could ourselves? Jesus fought and won the battle of provision that day in the desert. Because of that, He became the One who said, *“I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness and they died. This is the bread that comes down out of heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he shall live forever”* (John 6:28-51). To produce His own manna would have fed Himself. Trusting God made Him the manna for the whole world. Seeking your own provision may get you lunch. Seeking God’s provision will get you life, and life that will feed a whole hungry world around you.

The second testing involved Jesus being transported by a vision to Jerusalem and taken to the top of the temple (verse 5). There, Satan challenged Jesus that, if He was the Son of God, He should cast Himself down, for surely it was part of His right as the Son of God that the promise of the ninety-first Psalm (that God would send His angels to keep the believer from falling) would apply to Him. ***The second testing dealt with the issue of protection.*** Note that even Satan can quote the Word of God, though always distorting its meaning, in order to lead believers astray. The same still happens today. That is why we need both to study and be taught God’s Word in such a way that we are not, in Paul’s words, *“blown about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming”* (Eph. 4:14). Jesus answered the devil by quoting Deut. 6:16, *“You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.”* That verse concludes, *“as you tested Him at Massah.”* Massah was the place where Israel grumbled against God and demanded that He provide water for them (Exod. 17:1-7). It was also the place where Moses was disqualified from entering the Promised Land because, in God’s sight, he sided with the people instead of trusting God. Note that Jesus is not denying either the desire or the ability of God to keep His children from falling or to fulfil the promises of His Word. What He is saying is that we cannot make demands on God out of fear or insecurity, but must instead submit to Him in trust. The Israelites were fearful of dying in the desert, became angry with God for His apparent lack of protection, and demanded that He care for them, regardless of their wrong attitude. They had a culture of entitlement. They were God’s people. God had put them in this

desert, and it was God's responsibility to protect them. What they should have remembered is that God had mercifully saved them from the Egyptians and had always provided for them in spite of their unfaithfulness and grumbling. Their response should have been to obey Him, and trust that He would look after them so long as their heart and conduct was right.

The devil was trying to make Jesus fall into the same trap. And the trap was this: man becomes God and feels he can compel God to act on the basis of his faith. Much faith teaching, whether intentionally or not, gives people the impression that if they only believe, they can force the hand of God to give them what they want. But then who is God – us or Him? God does not respond to this kind of pressure anyway, and so people become disillusioned and turn away from the God who apparently did not look after them. But much so-called faith teaching arises not out of faith, but out of fear. And the fear is that somehow God will fail to protect us in distress. At the first sign of trouble, we name and claim the protection of God. But to begin with, we fail to realize how often our own disobedience to God's Word has landed us in health, relational or financial problems, and that God is often using those problems to call attention to our disobedience, and to help us put things right. Often we do stupid things, then claim God's protection for the consequences. Jesus took a different path. He knew that God would protect Him, but He equally knew that first He had to walk in obedience to avail Himself of that protection. We look for protection, God looks for obedience. We act foolishly, then scream for protection. God says, "Obey me, and trust that I will protect you". And there are difficult situations, not of our own making, such as those the Israelites found themselves in at that day at Massah, where we face a choice. We are not there because of disobedience, but because we have obeyed God. We cannot control the circumstances, but we can control our response. Even if we are suffering and apparently unprotected, can we continue to obey in the trust that God, having worked His greater purpose out, will in the end look after us? Another day, several years later, voices again told Jesus to come down, not from the mountain, but from the cross. He could have been like the Israelites at Massah and demanded that God take Him down. Instead, He sought obedience, not protection, choosing to trust Himself to the Father's will. Coming down from the cross would have involved a miracle. But Jesus obedient trust obtained something much greater: a resurrection – and the salvation of His people.

True faith submits and trusts God for His promises, serving Him whether there appears to be any immediate protection or not. That is the faith that took Jesus to the cross. True faith declares "*Not my will but yours be done*", and places our lives in God's hands. Moses never entered the Promised Land. Jesus succeeded where Moses failed, and as a result not only He, but all the rest of us, will enter that Promised Land as well. It is amazing to consider how much depended on Jesus' decision to obey and trust God for His protection. We can do what we want, then cry out to God for help, and spend a lifetime spinning our wheels. Or we can follow Jesus' example, go through difficult tests and struggles, but in the end see God build in us a strong faith which has at its heart the desire to obey rather than the demand to be protected. That is the kind of faith that will shake open the gates of hell and bring in His Kingdom. And in the end, God will look after us as well.

The third and final testing involved a vision in which Jesus was taken to a mountain where He could see all the kingdoms of the earth (verse 8). Old Testament prophecy had declared that the Messiah would receive dominion over all peoples: "*Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as your inheritance, and the very ends of the earth as your possession*" (Psalm 2:8, see also

Psalm 72:8-11, Dan. 7:13-14, Zech. 9:10). Jesus knew this was part of His inheritance. Yet the condition for the offer was unacceptable: *“If you bow down and worship me”* (verse 9). ***The third testing dealt with the issue of power.*** The devil did not bother this time to preface his address with the words *“If you are the Son of God”*, for he knew that accepting his offer could not be reconciled with Jesus’ retaining allegiance to His Father. Jesus knew that the path to His inheritance lay through the cross. The devil’s offer short-circuited the process and took the pain out of it. The Israelites wanted to enter the Promised Land without having to face the giants. All gain, no pain. Now Jesus could have all He wanted without having to pay the price – so at least Satan said. Jesus was not willing to take that path – or believe that lie. And because He didn’t, the day came when He stood on another mountain and declared that He now possessed all authority not only on earth but also in heaven (Matt. 28:18) – an authority the devil could not offer. How often are we tempted to sell our birthright in search of quick and easy gain? We want power and control. It may come through accumulation of money, through acquiring of position or through exercise of abilities. It may be inside the church or outside it. Whatever the exact detail, the bottom line is we want power without having to pay the price. Power without integrity is the character description of Satan, and that is what was on offer to Jesus that day. How often do we suppose that God’s authority can be gained through a way other than that of the cross? Jesus understood that, and that is why He turned away from the enemy. Sadly, many believers have fallen for the enemy’s deception. Not only have they forfeited the grace that could have been theirs, they have found that all the enemy really has to offer is slavery, bankruptcy and fear. God wants us to be leaders. He wants us to be people who exercise influence, who change the atmosphere in which we live, whether it be at home, church, school, place of employment or community. He wants us to be the head, not the tail (Deut. 28:13). But there is always a price to be paid to gain the authority God has for us. Grace is free, but it is not cheap. But the price – the surrender of our lives – is always worth paying. Quoting Deut. 6:13, Jesus replied, *“You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him alone”* (verse 10). With that, the discussion was over – *“Away with you!”* Jesus ended the interview – and sent the enemy on his way. And the angels came and ministered to Him (verse 11). Yes, the promise of the ninety-first Psalm, so deceptively quoted by Satan in the second testing, came true. The provision He refused in verse 4 now came by the hand of those God had appointed to care for Him. There are times when it seems God has deserted us, times when spiritual warfare leaves us exhausted. Yet God never really leaves us. Often the darkness is greatest before the dawn, and so it was with Jesus in the desert. At the end of forty days of testing, alone, exhausted and hungry, He was indeed at the end of His tether. Yet at that very moment, God showed up and fulfilled the promises of His Word. And so He will for you and I. The question, as ever, is not whether God is faithful. It is whether we will pass the test. And by His grace, we will.