

**Matthew 4:5-7**  
**(Deuteronomy 6:16-19; James 1:12-15)**  
**“Understanding God’s Word”**

## **Introduction**

We are challenged every day to deny what we believe, to betray those we love, to throw ourselves down from the path that we have chosen. Sadly, we don’t always recognize the temptation. Many of us only see it when it is too late, remorsefully reconstructing the scene, wondering how we could have been so foolish, so terribly naive.

We are studying this passage in order to learn from Jesus, who was tempted in all ways as we are, yet never yielded to temptation (Hebrews 4:15). How did he resist? How did he keep from giving up and giving in? These are the questions we are asking? In the first temptation, we saw Jesus challenged in his area of greatest weakness: he was hungry, and was tempted to doubt his relationship with God, that God loved him and would provide for him. The second temptation takes just the opposite tack. Here he is tempted in his area of greatest strength: his love of God and of God’s Word, his absolute trust in his heavenly Father.

You and I may well understand the weakness of our flesh, our temptability in the area of our appetites. We may build a strong defense at that point in our lives. But we may also fail to realize that our second greatest area of vulnerability is at the point of our greatest strength, the very area where we trust God the most and feel invulnerable to attack. We must learn this very important lesson: when we resist temptation in an area of weakness, the next attack may well come at the very point where we feel invulnerable.

We are, in fact, always most vulnerable at the very point where we are most self-confident. Look with me at the point of attack in this second temptation, and at the true purpose of the attack. Finally, consider with me how we are to defend against this particular kind of attack and so know Christ’s victory in our own experience.

## **Body**

### **1. The Point of the Attack:**

*The attack is dangerous because it plays on Jesus’ love of God, specifically his desire to demonstrate his Father’s faithfulness: The enemy sees that Jesus is committed to show his Father’s love and faithfulness, so the enemy plays on that. Surely a loving father would not let his beloved child fall to his death. Surely the best way to demonstrate God’s faithfulness is to cast yourself upon*

his love with reckless abandon, certain that he will not let anything bad happen to you. This is the implication of the enemy's words.

*The attack is also dangerous because it plays on Jesus' love of God's Word, specifically his desire to demonstrate the Scripture's truthfulness: Satan says, "So you want to live on God's Word? Fine. How about Psalm 91 and God's promise to protect all who take shelter in him? Prove that God's Word is true by casting yourself recklessly into space. Put God to the test and see whether or not his Word is trustworthy and true."*

## **2. The Purpose of the Attack:**

*To encourage presumption:* Before, Satan had tempted with the words, "If you are the Son of God," which was really a version of his original question, "Has God really said?" Now he encourages a presumptive use of Scripture that seeks to use God's Word to control God and force his hand. So Satan quotes Scripture like a believer, "It is written."

He says this to us still in a variety of ways: For example, encouraging us to refuse medical treatment because "God has promised to heal all our diseases." Or, inciting us to get over our head financially, because "God has promised to provide." Or, tempting us to get into compromising situations because "God has promised to keep us from falling."

*To create a diversion:* Satan wants to divert us from God's ordinary way of working. God's promise in Psalm 91 to guard us in all our ways is written to those who are walking in the ways of the Lord. The temptation here is to leave God's ways and plunge headlong from the precipice, presuming that God must then keep us from falling.

And, Satan wants to divert us from noting his own vulnerability, from the promises in God's Word that predict Satan's defeat. So, his quoting of Scripture is selective. He leaves out a key phrase: "you will trample the lion and the serpent." He is happy for us to remember and quote Scripture, as long as we don't remember those passages that warn us to resist him and that assure us that he will flee from us.

## **3. Defending against the Attack:**

*The Power of God, The Holy Spirit:* We must be filled with the Holy Spirit. In our strength, we will fail, for if we do manage to resist sometimes in our own strength, it will only reinforce our corrosive pride and set us up for greater failures. But in the strength of the Spirit, we have the same power at hand as did Christ as he faced down every temptation and triumphed through them.

*The Word of God, The Scriptures:* Here, Jesus does what we must always do: he compares Scripture with Scripture, interpreting the one text with another. He doesn't say of Scripture, "No, that's not true." But he interprets carefully, and shows that the verses have been taken out of context and misused. So, now, he quotes from Deuteronomy six a verse that reminds us the great events that framed Moses' ministry, and that reminds us of the difference between trusting God and testing God, the difference between faith and presumption. [Relate the events of the wilderness of Sin (Exodus 17), and the wilderness of Zin (Numbers 20), as interpreted by the apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 10:1f).]

## **Conclusion**

The temptation to test God was always an affront to Jesus. When he was asked for a miraculous sign to prove that he was God's son, he replied, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah" (Matthew 12:39). In other words, if people do not believe in the resurrection, nothing else will convince them that Jesus is God's son. And if we do not yet recognize that he is God's Son, then we cannot yet realize the wonder of what God offers us through faith in Jesus. As the gospel of John puts it, "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12).

The gospel always comes back to this: we are not merely offered forgiveness of sin, but are given the invitation to be sons and daughters of the living God. Sons and daughters who do not test, but rather trust their Father to carry them through the hour of temptation and trial, and to give them an eternal inheritance of life and joy in his presence forever.

© John M. Wood, all rights reserved