

The Temptation in the Wilderness

by George MacDonald

George MacDonald's sermon explores the significance of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness as a profound lesson on reliance on God's word and the nature of true worship.

Scripture: Matthew 4:1-10, Luke 4:13

Topics: "Temptation Of Christ", "Obedience To God"

Description

George MacDonald delves into the profound narrative of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, exploring the origins of the story and the significance of the temptations faced. He emphasizes the internal struggles and divine revelations experienced by Jesus during this time, highlighting the importance of obedience to God's will over personal desires or worldly power. MacDonald reflects on the deeper meanings behind each temptation, illustrating how Jesus' responses reveal his unwavering commitment to fulfilling the Father's plan for redemption and the establishment of the kingdom of heaven on earth.

Transcript

Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness, to be tempted of the devil. And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungered. And when the tempter came to him, he said, if thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread. But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God. Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, and saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down; for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee, and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. Jesus said unto him, It is written again, thou shall not tempt the Lord thy God. Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them: and saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan; for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve. Then the devil leaveth him; and, behold, angels came and ministered unto him.--Matt. iv. 1-11.

This narrative must have one of two origins. Either it is an invention, such as many tales told of our Lord in the earlier periods of Christianity; or it came from our Lord himself, for, according to the story, except the wild beasts, of earthly presence there was none at his Temptation.

As to the former of the two origins: The story bears upon it no sign of human invention. The man who could see such things as are here embodied, dared not invent such an embodiment for them. To one in doubt about the matter it will be helpful, I think, to compare this story with the best of those for which one or other of the apocryphal gospels is our only authority--say the grand account of the Descent into Hell in the Gospel according to Nicodemus.

If it have not this origin, there is but the other that it can have--Our Lord himself. To this I will return presently.

And now, let us approach the subject from another side.

With this in view, I ask you to think how much God must know of which we know nothing. Think what an abyss of truth was our Lord, out of whose divine darkness, through that revealing countenance, that uplifting voice, those hands whose tenderness has made us great, broke all holy radiations of human significance. Think of his understanding, imagination, heart, in which lay the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Must he not have known, felt, imagined, rejoiced in things that would not be told in human words, could not be understood by human hearts? Was he not always bringing forth out of the light inaccessible? Was not his very human form a veil hung over the face of the truth that, even in part by dimming the effulgence of the glory, it might reveal? What could be conveyed must be thus conveyed: an infinite More must lie behind. And even of those things that might be partially revealed to men, could he talk to his Father and talk to his disciples in altogether the same forms, in altogether the same words? Would what he said to God on the mountain-tops, in the dim twilight or the gray dawn, never be such that his disciples could have understood it no more than the people, when the voice of God spoke to him from heaven, could distinguish that voice from the inarticulate thunderings of the element?

There is no attempt made to convey to us even the substance of the battle of those forty days. Such a conflict of spirit as for forty days absorbed all the human necessities of The Man in the cares of the Godhead could not be rendered into forms intelligible to us, or rather, could not be in itself intelligible to us, and therefore could not take any form of which we could lay hold. It is not till the end of those forty days that the divine event begins to dawn out from the sacred depths of the eternal thought, becomes human enough to be made to appear, admits of utterance, becomes capable of being spoken in human forms to the ears of men, though yet only in a dark saying, which he that hath ears to hear may hear, and he that hath a heart to understand may understand. For the mystery is not left behind, nor can the speech be yet clear unto men.

At the same moment when the approaching event comes within human ken, may from afar be dimly descried by the God-upheld intelligence, the same humanity seizes on the Master, and he is an hungered. The first sign that he has come back to us, that the strife is approaching its human result, is his hunger. On what a sea of endless life do we float, are our poor necessities sustained--not the poorest of them dissociated from the divine! Emerging from the storms of the ocean of divine thought and feeling into the shallower waters that lave the human shore, bearing with him the treasures won in the strife, our Lord is straightway an hungered; and from this moment the temptation is human, and can be in some measure understood by us.

But could it even then have been conveyed to the human mind in merely intellectual forms? Or, granting that it might, could it be so conveyed to those who were only beginning to have the vaguest, most error-mingled and confused notions about our Lord and what he came to do? No. The inward experiences

of our Lord, such as could be conveyed to them at all, could be conveyed to them only in a parable. For far plainer things than these, our Lord chose this form. The form of the parable is the first in which truth will admit of being embodied. Nor is this all: it is likewise the fullest; and to the parable will the teacher of the truth ever return. Is he who asserts that the passage contains a simple narrative of actual events, prepared to believe, as the story, so interpreted, indubitably gives us to understand, that a visible demon came to our Lord and, himself the prince of worldly wisdom, thought, by quoting Scripture after the manner of the priests, to persuade a good man to tempt God; thought, by the promise of power, to prevail upon him to cast aside every claim he had upon the human race, in falling down and worshipping one whom he knew to be the adversary of Truth, of Humanity, of God? How could Satan be so foolish? or, if Satan might be so foolish, wherein could such temptation so presented have tempted our Lord? and wherein would a victory over such be a victory for the race?

Told as a parable, it is as full of meaning as it would be bare if received as a narrative.

Our Lord spake then this parable unto them, and so conveyed more of the truth with regard to his temptation in the wilderness, than could have been conveyed by any other form in which the truth he wanted to give them might have been embodied. Still I do not think it follows that we have it exactly as he told it to his disciples. A man will hear but what he can hear, will see but what he can see, and, telling the story again, can tell but what he laid hold of, what he seemed to himself to understand. His effort to reproduce the impression made upon his mind will, as well as the impression itself, be liable to numberless altering, modifying, even, in a measure, discomposing influences. But it does not, therefore, follow that the reproduction is false. The mighty hosts of life-bearing worlds, requiring for the freedom of their courses, and the glory of their changes, such awful abysses of space, dwindle in the human eye to seeds of light sown upon a blue plain. How faint in the ears of man is the voice of their sphere-born thunder of adoration! Yet are they lovely indeed, uttering speech and teaching knowledge. So this story may not be just as the Lord told it, and yet may contain in its mirror as much of the truth as we are able to receive, and as will afford us sufficient scope for a life's discovery. The modifying influences of the human channels may be essential to God's revealing mode. It is only by seeing them first from afar that we learn the laws of the heavens.

And now arises the question upon the right answer to which depends the whole elucidation of the story: How could the Son of God be tempted?

If any one say that he was not moved by those temptations, he must be told that then they were no temptations to him, and he was not tempted; nor was his victory of more significance than that of the man who, tempted to bear false witness against his neighbour, abstains from robbing him of his goods. For human need, struggle, and hope, it bears no meaning; and we must reject the whole as a fantastic folly of crude invention; a mere stage-show; a lie for the poor sake of the fancied truth; a doing of evil that good might come; and, with how many fragments soever of truth its mud may be filled, not in any way to be received as a divine message.

But asserting that these were real temptations if the story is to be received at all, am I not involving myself in a greater difficulty still? For how could the Son of God be tempted with evil--with that which must to him appear in its true colours of discord, its true shapes of deformity? Or how could he then be the Son of his Father who cannot be tempted with evil?

In the answer to this lies the centre, the essential germ of the whole interpretation: He was not tempted with Evil but with Good; with inferior forms of good, that is, pressing in upon him, while the higher forms of good held themselves aloof, biding their time, that is, God's time. I do not believe that the Son of God could be tempted with evil, but I do believe that he could be tempted with good--to yield to which temptation would have been evil in him--ruin to the universe.

But does not all evil come from good?

Yes; but it has come from it. It is no longer good. A good corrupted is no longer a good. Such could not tempt our Lord. Revenge may originate in a sense of justice, but it is revenge not justice; an evil thing, for it would be fearfully unjust. Evil is evil whatever it may have come from. The Lord could not have felt tempted to take vengeance upon his enemies, but he might have felt tempted to destroy the wicked from the face of the earth--to destroy them from the face of the earth, I say, not to destroy them for ever. To that I do not think he could have felt tempted.

But we shall find illustration enough of what I mean in the matter itself. Let us look at the individual temptations represented in the parable.

The informing idea which led to St Matthew's arrangement seems to me superior to that showing itself in St Luke's. In the two accounts, the closes, while each is profoundly significant, are remarkably different.

Now let us follow St Matthew's record.

And we shall see how the devil tempted him to evil, but not with evil.

First, He was hungry, and the devil said, Make bread of this stone.

The Lord had been fasting for forty days--a fast impossible except during intense mental absorption. Let no one think to glorify this fast by calling it miraculous. Wonderful such fasts are on record on the part of holy men; and inasmuch as the Lord was more of a man than his brethren, insomuch might he be farther withdrawn in the depths of his spiritual humanity from the outer region of his physical nature. So much the slower would be the goings on of that nature; and fasting in his case might thus be extended beyond the utmost limits of similar fasts in others. This, I believe, was all--and this all infinite in its relations. This is the grandest, simplest, and most significant, and, therefore, the divinest way of regarding his fast. Hence, at the end of the forty days, it was not hunger alone that made food tempting to him, but that exhaustion of the whole system, wasting itself all the time it was forgotten, which, reacting on the mind when the mind was already worn out with its own tension, must have deadened it so, that (speaking after the experience of his brethren, which alone will explain his,) it could for the time see or feel nothing of the spiritual, and could only believe in the unfelt, the unseen. What a temptation was here! There is no sin in wishing to eat; no sin in procuring food honestly that one may eat. But it rises even into an awful duty, when a man knows that to eat will restore the lost vision of the eternal; will, operating on the brain, and thence on the mind, render the man capable of hope as well as of faith, of gladness as well as of confidence, of praise as well as of patience. Why then should he not eat? Why should he not put forth the power that was in him that he might eat? Because such power was his, not to take care of himself, but to work the work of him that sent him. Such power was his not even to honour his Father save as his Father chose to be honoured, who is far more honoured in the ordinary way of common wonders, than in the extraordinary way of miracles. Because it was God's business to take care of him, his to do what the Father told him to do. To make that stone bread would be to take the care out of the Father's hands, and turn the divinest thing in the universe

into the merest commonplace of self-preservation.

And in nothing was he to be beyond his brethren, save in faith. No refuge for him, any more than for them, save in the love and care of the Father. Other refuge, let it be miraculous power or what you will, would be but hell to him. God is refuge. God is life.

"Was he not to eat when it came in his way? And did not the bread come in his way, when his power met that which could be changed into it?"

Regard that word changed. The whole matter lies in that. Changed from what? From what God had made it. Changed into what? Into what he did not make it. Why changed? Because the Son was hungry, and the Father would not feed him with food convenient for him! The Father did not give him a stone when he asked for bread. It was Satan that brought the stone and told him to provide for himself. The Father said, That is a stone. The Son would not say, That is a loaf. No one creative fiat shall contradict another. The Father and the Son are of one mind. The Lord could hunger, could starve, but would not change into another thing what his Father had made one thing.¹

1 There was no such change in the feeding of the multitudes. The fish and the bread were fish and bread before. I think this is significant as regards the true nature of a miracle, and its relation to the ordinary ways of God. There was in these miracles, and I think in all, only a hastening of appearances; the doing of that in a day, which may ordinarily take a thousand years, for with God time is not what it is with us. He makes it. And the hastening of a process does not interfere in the least with cause and effect in the process, nor does it render the process one whit more miraculous. In deed, the wonder of the growing corn is to me greater than the wonder of feeding the thousands. It is easier to understand the creative power going forth at once--immediately--than through the countless, the lovely, the seemingly forsaken wonders of the corn-field. To the merely scientific man all this is pure nonsense, or at best belongs to the region of the fancy. The time will come, I think, when he will see that there is more in it, namely, a higher reason, a loftier science, how incorrectly soever herein indicated.

If we regard the answer he gave the devil, we shall see the root of the matter at once: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." Yea even by the word which made that stone that stone. Everything is all right. It is life indeed for him to leave that a stone, which the Father had made a stone. It would be death to him to alter one word that He had spoken.

"Man shall not live by bread alone." There are other ways of living besides that which comes by bread. A man will live by the word of God, by what God says to him, by what God means between Him and him, by the truths of being which the Father alone can reveal to his child, by the communion of love between them. Without the bread he will die, as men say; but he will not find that he dies. He will only find that the tent which hid the stars from him is gone, and that he can see the heavens; or rather, the earthly house will melt away from around him, and he will find that he has a palace-home about him, another and loftier word of God clothing upon him. So the man lives by the word of God even in refusing the bread which God does not give him, for, instead of dying because he does not eat, he rises into a higher life even of the same kind.

For I have been speaking of the consciousness of existence, and not of that higher spiritual life on which all other life depends. That of course can for no one moment exist save from the heart of God. When a man tries to live by bread and not by the word that comes out of that heart of God, he may think he lives, but he begins to die or is dead. Our Lord says, "I can do without the life that comes of bread: without the

life that comes of the word of my Father, I die indeed." Therefore he does not think twice about the matter. That God's will be done is all his care. That done, all will be right, and all right with him, whether he thinks about himself or not. For the Father does not forget the child who is so busy trusting in him, that he cares not even to pray for himself.

In the higher aspect of this first temptation, arising from the fact that a man cannot feel the things he believes except under certain conditions of physical well-being dependent upon food, the answer is the same: A man does not live by his feelings any more than by bread, but by the Truth, that is, the Word, the Will, the uttered Being of God.

I am even ashamed to yield here to the necessity of writing what is but as milk for babes, when I would gladly utter, if I might, only that which would be as bread for men and women. What I must say is this: that, by the Word of God, I do not understand The Bible. The Bible is a Word of God, the chief of his written words, because it tells us of The Word, the Christ; but everything God has done and given man to know is a word of his, a will of his; and inasmuch as it is a will of his, it is a necessity to man, without which he cannot live: the reception of it is man's life. For inasmuch as God's utterances are a whole, every smallest is essential: he speaks no foolishness--there are with him no vain repetitions. But by the word of the God and not Maker only, who is God just because he speaks to men, I must understand, in the deepest sense, every revelation of Himself in the heart and consciousness of man, so that the man knows that God is there, nay, rather, that he is here. Even Christ himself is not The Word of God in the deepest sense to a man, until he is this Revelation of God to the man,--until the Spirit that is the meaning in the Word has come to him,--until the speech is not a sound as of thunder, but the voice of words; for a word is more than an utterance--it is a sound to be understood. No word, I say, is fully a Word of God until it is a Word to man, until the man therein recognizes God. This is that for which the word is spoken. The words of God are as the sands and the stars,--they cannot be numbered; but the end of all and each is this--to reveal God. Nor, moreover, can the man know that any one of them is the word of God, save as it comes thus to him, is a revelation of God in him. It is to him that it may be in him; but till it is in him he cannot know that it was to him. God must be God in man before man can know that he is God, or that he has received aright, and for that for which it was spoken, any one of his words.²

2 No doubt the humble spirit will receive the testimony of every one whom he reveres, and look in the direction indicated for a word from the Father; but till he thus receives it in his heart, he cannot know what the word spoken of is.

If, by any will of God--that is, any truth in him--we live, we live by it tenfold when that will has become a word to us. When we receive it, his will becomes our will, and so we live by God. But the word of God once understood, a man must live by the faith of what God is, and not by his own feelings even in regard to God. It is the Truth itself, that which God is, known by what goeth out of his mouth, that man lives by. And when he can no longer feel the truth, he shall not therefore die. He lives because God is true; and he is able to know that he lives because he knows, having once understood the word, that God is truth. He believes in the God of former vision, lives by that word therefore, when all is dark and there is no vision.

We now come to the second attempt of the Enemy.

"Then if God is to be so trusted, try him. Fain would I see the result. Shew thyself his darling. Here is the word itself for it: He shall give his angels charge concerning thee; not a stone shall hurt thee. Take him at his word. Throw thyself down, and strike the conviction into me that thou art the Son of God. For thou

knowest thou dost not look like what thou sayest thou art."

Again, with a written word, in return, the Lord meets him. And he does not quote the scripture for logical purposes--to confute Satan intellectually, but as giving even Satan the reason of his conduct. Satan quotes Scripture as a verbal authority; our Lord meets him with a Scripture by the truth in which he regulates his conduct.

If we examine it, we shall find that this answer contains the same principle as the former, namely this, that to the Son of God the will of God is Life. It was a temptation to shew the powers of the world that he was the Son of God; that to him the elements were subject; that he was above the laws of Nature, because he was the Eternal Son; and thus stop the raging of the heathen, and the vain imaginations of the people. It would be but to shew them the truth. But he was the Son of God: what was his Father's will? Such was not the divine way of convincing the world of sin, of righteousness, of judgment. If the Father told him to cast himself down, that moment the pinnacle pointed naked to the sky. If the devil threw him down, let God send his angels; or, if better, allow him to be dashed to pieces in the valley below. But never will he forestall the divine will. The Father shall order what comes next. The Son will obey. In the path of his work he will turn aside for no stone. There let the angels bear him in their hands if need be. But he will not choose the path because there is a stone in it. He will not choose at all. He will go where the Spirit leads him.

I think this will throw some light upon the words of our Lord, "If ye have faith and doubt not, if ye shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; it shall be done." Good people, amongst them John Bunyan, have been tempted to tempt the Lord their God upon the strength of this saying, just as Satan sought to tempt our Lord on the strength of the passage he quoted from the Psalms. Happily for such, the assurance to which they would give the name of faith generally fails them in time. Faith is that which, knowing the Lord's will, goes and does it; or, not knowing it, stands and waits, content in ignorance as in knowledge, because God wills; neither pressing into the hidden future, nor careless of the knowledge which opens the path of action. It is its noblest exercise to act with uncertainty of the result, when the duty itself is certain, or even when a course seems with strong probability to be duty. 1 But to put God to the question in any other way than by saying, What wilt thou have me to do? is an attempt to compel God to declare himself, or to hasten his work. This probably was the sin of Judas. It is presumption of a kind similar to the making of a stone into bread. It is, as it were, either a forcing of God to act where he has created no need for action, or the making of a case wherein he shall seem to have forfeited his word if he does not act. The man is therein dissociating himself from God so far that, instead of acting by the divine will from within, he acts in God's face, as it were, to see what he will do. Man's first business is, "What does God want me to do?" not "What will God do if I do so and so?" To tempt a parent after the flesh in such a manner would be impertinence: to tempt God so is the same vice in its highest form--a natural result of that condition of mind which is worse than all the so-called cardinal sins, namely, spiritual pride, which attributes the tenderness and love of God not to man's being and man's need, but to some distinguishing excellence in the individual himself, which causes the Father to love him better than his fellows, and so pass by his faults with a smile. Not thus did the Son of God regard his relation to his Father. The faith which will remove mountains is that confidence in God which comes from seeking nothing but his will. A man who was thus faithful would die of hunger sooner than say to the stone, Be bread; would meet the scoffs of the unbelieving without reply and with apparent defeat, sooner than say to the mountain, Be thou cast into the sea, even if he knew that it would be torn from its foundations at the word, except he knew first that God would have it so.

And thus I am naturally brought to consider more fully how this should be a real temptation to the Son of Man. It would be good to confound his adversaries; to force conviction upon them that he was the God-supported messenger he declared himself. Why should he have adversaries a moment longer to interfere between him and the willing hearts which would believe if they could? The answer to all this was plain to our Lord, and is plain to us now: It was not the way of the Father's will. It would not fall in with that gradual development of life and history by which the Father works, and which must be the way to breed free, God-loving wills. It would be violent, theatrical, therefore poor in nature and in result,--not God-like in any way. Everything in God's doing comes harmoniously with and from all the rest. Son of Man, his history shall be a man's history, shall be The Man's history. Shall that begin with an exception? Yet it might well be a temptation to Him who longed to do all he could for men. He was the Son of God: why should not the sons of God know it?

But as this temptation in the wilderness was an epitome and type of the temptations to come, against which for forty days he had been making himself strong, revolving truth beyond our reach, in whose light every commonest duty was awful and divine, a vision fit almost to oppress a God in his humiliation, so we shall understand the whole better if we look at his life in relation to it. As he refused to make stones bread, so throughout that life he never wrought a miracle to help himself; as he refused to cast himself from the temple to convince Satan or glory visibly in his Sonship, so he steadily refused to give the sign which the human Satans demanded, notwithstanding the offer of conviction which they held forth to bribe him to the grant. How easy it seems to have confounded them, and strengthened his followers! But such conviction would stand in the way of a better conviction in his disciples, and would do his adversaries only harm. For neither could not in any true sense be convinced by such a show: it could but prove his power. It might prove so far the presence of a God; but would it prove that God? Would it bring him nearer to them, who could not see him in the face of his Son? To say Thou art God, without knowing what the Thou means--of what use is it? God is a name only, except we know God. Our Lord did not care to be so acknowledged.

On the same principle, the very miracles which from their character did partially reveal his character to those who already had faith in him, he would not do where unbelief predominated. He often avoided cities and crowds, and declined mighty works because of unbelief. Except for the loving help they gave the distressed, revealing him to their hearts as the Redeemer from evil, I doubt if he would have wrought a single miracle. I do not think he cared much about them. Certainly, as regarded the onlookers, he did not expect much to result from those mighty deeds. A mere marvel is practically soon forgotten, and long before it is forgotten, many minds have begun to doubt the senses, their own even, which communicated it. Inward sight alone can convince of truth; signs and wonders never. No number of signs can do more than convey a probability that he who shews them knows that of which he speaks. They cannot convey the truth. But the vision of the truth itself, in the knowledge of itself, a something altogether beyond the region of signs and wonders, is the power of God, is salvation. This vision was in the Lord's face and form to the pure in heart who were able to see God; but not in his signs and wonders to those who sought after such. Yet it is easy to see how the temptation might for a moment work upon a mind that longed to enter upon its labours with the credentials of its truth. How the true heart longs to be received by its brethren--to be known in its truth! But no. The truth must show itself in God's time, in and by the labour. The kingdom must come in God's holy human way. Not by a stroke of grandeur, but by years of love, yea, by centuries of seeming bafflement, by æons of labour, must he grow into the hearts of the sons and daughters of his Father in heaven. The Lord himself will be bound by the changeless laws which are the harmony of the Fathers being and utterance. He will be, not seem. He will be, and thereby, not therefore, seem. Yet, once more, even on him, the idea of asserting the truth in holy power such as he could have put forth, must

have dawned in grandeur. The thought was good: to have yielded to it would have been the loss of the world; nay, far worse--ill inconceivable to the human mind--the God of obedience had fallen from his throne, and--all is blackness.

But let us not forget that the whole is a faint parable--faint I mean in relation to the grandeur of the reality, as the ring and the shoes are poor types (yet how dear!) of the absolute love of the Father to his prodigal children.

We shall now look at the third temptation. The first was to help himself in his need; the second, perhaps, to assert the Father; the third to deliver his brethren.

To deliver them, that is, after the fashion of men--from the outside still. Indeed, the whole Temptation may be regarded as the contest of the seen and the unseen, of the outer and inner, of the likely and the true, of the show and the reality. And as in the others, the evil in this last lay in that it was a temptation to save his brethren, instead of doing the Will of his Father.

Could it be other than a temptation to think that he might, if he would, lay a righteous grasp upon the reins of government, leap into the chariot of power, and ride forth conquering and to conquer? Glad visions arose before him of the prisoner breaking jubilant from the cell of injustice; of the widow lifting up the bowed head before the devouring Pharisee; of weeping children bursting into shouts at the sound of the wheels of the chariot before which oppression and wrong shrunk and withered, behind which sprung the fir-tree instead of the thorn, and the myrtle instead of the brier. What glowing visions of holy vengeance, what rosy dreams of human blessedness--and all from his hand--would crowd such a brain as his!--not like the castles-in-the-air of the aspiring youth, for he builds at random, because he knows that he cannot realize; but consistent and harmonious as well as grand, because he knew them within his reach. Could he not mould the people at his will? Could he not, transfigured in his snowy garments, call aloud in the streets of Jerusalem, "Behold your King?" And the fierce warriors of his nation would start at the sound; the ploughshare would be beaten into the sword, and the pruning-hook into the spear; and the nation, rushing to his call, learn war yet again indeed--a grand, holy war--a crusade--no; we should not have had that word; but a war against the tyrants of the race--the best, as they called themselves--who trod upon their brethren, and would not suffer them even to look to the heavens.--Ah! but when were his garments white as snow? When, through them, glorifying them as it passed, did the light stream from his glorified body? Not when he looked to such a conquest; but when, on a mount like this, he "spake of the decease that he should accomplish at Jerusalem"! Why should this be "the sad end of the war"? "Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve." Not even thine own visions of love and truth, O Saviour of the world, shall be thy guides to thy goal, but the will of thy Father in heaven.

But how would he, thus conquering, be a servant of Satan? Wherein would this be a falling-down and a worshipping of him (that is, an acknowledging of the worth of him) who was the lord of misrule and its pain?

I will not inquire whether such an enterprise could be accomplished without the worship of Satan,--whether men could be managed for such an end without more or less of the trickery practised by every ambitious leader, every self-serving conqueror--without double-dealing, tact, flattery, finesse. I will not inquire into this, because, on the most distant supposition of our Lord being the leader of his country's armies, these things drop out of sight as impossibilities. If these were necessary, such a career for him refuses to be for a moment imagined.

But I will ask whether to know better and do not so well, is not a serving of Satan;--whether to lead men on in the name of God as towards the best when the end is not the best, is not a serving of Satan;--whether to flatter their pride by making them conquerors of the enemies of their nation instead of their own evils, is not a serving of Satan;--in a word, whether, to desert the mission of God, who knew that men could not be set free in that way, and sent him to be a man, a true man, the one man, among them, that his life might become their life, and that so they might be as free in prison or on the cross, as upon a hill-side or on a throne,--whether, so deserting the truth, to give men over to the lie of believing other than spirit and truth to be the worship of the Father, other than love the fulfilling of the law, other than the offering of their best selves the service of God, other than obedient harmony with the primal love and truth and law, freedom,--whether, to desert God thus, and give men over thus, would not have been to fall down and worship the devil.

Not all the sovereignty of God, as the theologians call it, delegated to the Son, and administered by the wisdom of the Spirit that was given to him without measure, could have wrought the kingdom of heaven in one corner of our earth. Nothing but the obedience of the Son, the obedience unto the death, the absolute doing of the will of God because it was the truth, could redeem the prisoner, the widow, the orphan. But it would redeem them by redeeming the conquest-ridden conqueror too, the stripe-giving jailer, the unjust judge, the devouring Pharisee himself with the insatiable moth-eaten heart.

The earth should be free because Love was stronger than Death. Therefore should fierceness and wrong and hypocrisy and God-service play out their weary play. He would not pluck the spreading branches of the tree; he would lay the axe to its root. It would take time; but the tree would be dead at last--dead, and cast into the lake of fire. It would take time; but his Father had time enough and to spare. It would take courage and strength and self-denial and endurance; but his Father could give him all.

It would cost pain of body and mind, yea, agony and torture; but those he was ready to take on himself. It would cost him the vision of many sad and, to all but him, hopeless sights; he must see tears without wiping them, hear sighs without changing them into laughter, see the dead lie, and let them lie; see Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted; he must look on his brothers and sisters crying as children over their broken toys, and must not mend them; he must go on to the grave, and they not know that thus he was setting all things right for them.

His work must be one with and completing God's Creation and God's History. The disappointment and sorrow and fear he could, he would bear. The will of God should be done. Man should be free,--not merely man as he thinks of himself, but man as God thinks of him. The divine idea shall be set free in the divine bosom; the man on earth shall see his angel face to face. He shall grow into the likeness of the divine thought, free not in his own fancy, but in absolute divine fact of being, as in God's idea. The great and beautiful and perfect will of God must be done.

"Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve."

It was when Peter would have withstood him as he set his face steadfastly to meet this death at Jerusalem, that he gave him the same kind of answer that he now gave to Satan, calling him Satan too.

"Then the devil leaveth him, and behold angels came and ministered unto him."

So saith St Matthew. They brought him the food he had waited for, walking in the strength of the word. He would have died if it had not come now.

"And when the devil had ended all the temptation, he departed from him for a season."

So saith St Luke.

Then Satan ventured once more. When?

Was it then, when at the last moment, in the agony of the last faint, the Lord cried out, "Why hast thou forsaken me?" when, having done the great work, having laid it aside clean and pure as the linen cloth that was ready now to infold him, another cloud than that on the mount overshadowed his soul, and out of it came a voiceless persuasion that, after all was done, God did not care for his work or for him?

Even in those words the adversary was foiled--and for ever. For when he seemed to be forsaken, his cry was still, "My God! my God!"

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/george-macdonald/the-temptation-in-the-wilderness/>

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