

The Call and the Temptation

by Harris Franklin Rall

The sermon explores Jesus' early life, his baptism, and the temptations he faced, emphasizing his unwavering obedience to God's will.

Scripture: Psalm 91:11, Matthew 4:1, Matthew 27:42, Mark 1:10, Mark 14:32

Topics: "Jesus' Baptism", "Temptation Victory"

Description

Harris Franklin Rall preaches about the early years of Jesus, highlighting his moral integrity, close fellowship with God, and passion to do God's will. Jesus' baptism marked the beginning of his life's calling as the Messiah, affirmed by God as His beloved Son. Following his baptism, Jesus faced temptations in the wilderness, revealing his spiritual insight, moral victory, and human struggle against the forces of evil, always trusting in and obeying God.

Transcript

Among the hearers of John there had been many who came down from Galilee. Jesus had been among that number. It was John's word that called him forth at last from the quiet of Nazareth to begin his life task. He was about thirty when that work began. What had taken place in these years of boyhood and young manhood? Of all that time since he was twelve we have no record of a word. The life that we do know, however, seems to make some things clear about these earlier years.

In the first place, Jesus' life shows no sign of any moral break in it. If we turn to great leaders like Paul and Augustine and Luther, we get a very different picture. Their Christian life stands forth from an earlier background of doubt and sin. They bear the marks of struggle and the scars of past defeat. That is true of all the great spiritual leaders--except Jesus. The spirit that is shown in the boy in the temple filled his young manhood: the sense of a close fellowship with his Father, and the passion to do God's will. With these two there was a third: the growing conviction as to the deliverance that Jehovah was to bring his people. He shared that hope with the rest of the nation, but with one great difference: with them it was the deliverance from the rule of Rome, while Jesus saw that it was the rule of evil in men's lives that was to be overthrown. How often at dusk or dawn had he looked out from the hill above Nazareth and asked what his part was to be in God's plan.

No wonder that the news of John's work found a response in him. "The kingdom is at hand." John was preaching not the overthrow of Rome but repentance for sin. And the people were answering to the call. This was God's doing. To Jesus it was a call to be about his Father's business. And so he joins John's

hearers and offers himself for baptism. Many have wondered how Jesus could offer himself for a baptism of repentance. But we have seen that this was not the only or the final meaning of the rite. John was another Elijah, summoning the people to stand for this coming Jehovah or against him. Jesus was ready to stand with John and with them, only it did not mean for him repentance from an evil past as it did with them. He was but showing in public the pledge of allegiance which had ruled his whole life.

Mark's account of what happened at the baptism is the simplest as it is the oldest. "And straightway coming out of the water, he saw the heavens rent asunder, and the Spirit as a dove descending upon him: and a voice came out of the heavens, Thou art my beloved Son, in thee I am well pleased" (Mark 1:10, 11). A young man's greatest question is that of his life calling. Not till he was thirty had the answer come to Jesus, for there is no sign that he knew before this time that he was to be the deliverer of the people. He had heard John's stirring words, had looked at the throngs that bent under them, and had realized that the day of deliverance was at hand. Now as he came out of the water he heard his call, "Thou art my beloved Son." These words are taken from the second psalm. It was a Messianic psalm for the Jews, and the Son meant the Messiah. It was the Father's call to him: "The kingdom is at hand, and thou art my Son; thou art to be the deliverer, the Messiah."

Jesus had always lived in fellowship with God. Now there came a new sense of God's presence to his soul, stirred to its depths at the same time by the sense of what his life was to be. He must find solitude to meditate. Mark says that he was "driven" by the Spirit into the wilderness. It was the same need that drove him again and again in later days to places of quiet. When he chooses his disciples, in the hour before his arrest, and at other great turning points of his life, we find him on the mountainside or beneath the trees in prayer. So at this time he goes forth to gather strength and to meditate upon the work he is to do.

Out of this last comes his temptation. We have it in strange picture form. The devil appears to him. He bids Jesus turn stones to bread, lest he perish from hunger. He carries him to a temple pinnacle and bids him cast himself down. He shows him from a mountain the kingdoms of the world and offers them to Jesus if he will worship him.

First of all we must remember that this story could come only from Jesus himself. It is not unlikely that he told it to his disciples in those last days when he had set his face to go to Jerusalem. They saw his danger from his foes. He was teaching them that death might come, that it was his duty simply to do God's will, and that it was such self-sacrifice that was to bring in the kingdom and not any outward triumph. At such a time he may have told them the story of his own first period of temptation. Studied thoughtfully, it is a story of supreme value for our understanding of Jesus' life and work. It is a bit of autobiography in which Jesus reveals his inmost self.

We must remember, in the second place, that it is a picture form which Jesus uses. This picture language was Jesus' common method as a teacher, and he uses it not simply in the parables. He speaks of the devil here just as when he says to Peter, "Get thee behind me, Satan," and for the same reason, for he sees in Peter's suggestion the same evil that he discerned in the tempting thoughts that came to him in the wilderness. Thus, at another time, when he welcomed back the disciples who had been out preaching and healing, Jesus did not say, "This is the beginning of the overthrow of evil." He said, "I beheld Satan fallen as lightning from heaven." The significant fact is not that there was a literal bodily Satan whom Jesus allowed to carry him to temple and mountain, but that Jesus in the thoughts and conflicts of those days saw through many of the ideas which the people held as to the Messiah, and knew that they were evil.

What, then, was the conflict? The question which concerned Jesus in those days was this: What is the nature of the kingdom to be, and how shall the Messiah do his work? What the people expected we know. The enemies of Israel were to be cast down. Israel was to be delivered from want and oppression. She was to have her place of rule and glory, and the nations were to bow down before her. This was not the picture in the heart of Jesus. It was not this that attracted him to John. The kingdom of God, or the kingship of God, meant God's rule in the hearts of men, as well as the overthrow of all evil and suffering and wrong in the world. But in one point he agreed with them: God was to establish this kingdom and the Messiah was to proclaim it and bring it in. And so the personal question came at the end of his meditation: How was the Messiah to do his work and what was to become of him?

The order of the temptations we do not know. Matthew and Luke differ. Both Matthew and Luke suggest that the temptation as to the bread came at the end of the forty days. We will put this last and follow Matthew in the other two. If such be the order, then the first question was this: How shall I announce myself to the people? If I am to preach to them and lead them, I must prove that I am the Messiah. Is it not written of the Messiah, that Jehovah's angels will keep him, lest he dash his foot against a stone? (Psa 91:11, 12.) Why not cast myself down from a temple pinnacle before the multitudes? They will see that I am the Messiah and follow me. But Jesus' clear vision sees that such a plan is of the Evil One. That would be tempting God, not trusting him. It would be gaining an outward following, not a spiritual allegiance. Jesus refused to be a mere miracle-worker. He used his power to help men, not to dazzle them.

The next question also concerned the method of his work. How could God's kingdom be established in the world if all the power of the world were against it? Why not make some concessions at the beginning, perhaps make some sort of alliance with the regular leaders of the people? Or it might be possible to enlist the thousands who were ready to follow a leader if they saw it meant Israel's triumph. Once gained, it would be time enough to teach them the higher spiritual truth of the kingdom. Many leaders have yielded to this temptation of compromise. Not so Jesus. He saw that this was simply the prince of the world offering him its kingdoms if he would fall down and worship. "Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God," was his answer, His trust would be absolutely in God, and in God only.

These temptations must not be conceived as coming at one time. They were at the heart of the whole matter which filled his mind in those forty days. The third temptation, we are told, came at the close of this period. He had forgotten about food. Now he was seized with sudden weakness and hunger. If he were the Messiah, why not turn these stones to bread? What would become of the kingdom if the deliverer should perish? Was it not his first duty to preserve himself? Here too he conquered. No, the first duty was not to preserve himself; it was to do the will of God. That in the end is what man must live by, not bread but the "word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." It was the same answer as before, obedience and trust, and this too Jesus carried through his life. He knew his power and he used it, but always for others, never for himself. They taunted him when he was on the cross, "He saved others; himself he cannot save" (Matt 27:42). But that was what he had been doing all his life--saving others, not himself.

Three things are made clear by this story. (1) The spiritual insight of Jesus. How clearly he sees the principles at stake. What all other men are saying does not confuse him or lead him astray. (2) The moral victory of Jesus. Whatever powers may oppose him, whatever danger or apparent defeat may threaten, he trusts only in God and will obey him alone. (3) The human life of Jesus. He is victorious in temptation, but he is not untempted. There is real fighting here, and it comes not once but again and again.

Directions for Reading and Study

Mark 1:9-13; Matt 3:13 to 4:11; Luke 3:21 to 4:13. Compare carefully the three accounts of the baptism and note the differences, observing that Mark is the oldest. Is the tendency to literalize figures of speech modern or ancient?

Are there any moral difficulties in the way of literalizing the story of the temptation? Would it have been a real temptation if a literal Satan had stood before him, or had carried him physically to a temple pinnacle?

Read the story of Gethsemane in Mark 14:32-42. Note the nature of the temptation and the way Jesus met it. Is there any analogy in these two points between this and the wilderness temptation?

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