

George Whitefield

Sermon 17

The Temptation of Christ

Matthew 4:1-11, 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 you 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 proceeds out of the mouth of God. Then the devil took him up into the holy city, and set him on a pinnacle of the temple, And said unto him, If you are the Son of God, cast yourself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning you: and in [their] hands they shall bear you up, lest at any time you dash your foot against a stone. Jesus said unto him, It is written again, You shalt not tempt the Lord your God. Again, the devil took him up into an exceeding high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; And said to him, All these things will I give you, if you will fall down and worship me. Then said Jesus to him, Get hence, Satan: for it is written, You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shalt you serve. Then the devil left him, and, behold, angels came and ministered to him.

Dearly beloved, today you are invited to take a walk into the wilderness, to behold, sympathize with, and get instruction and comfort from a Savior tempted. In the conflict, he approves himself to be God's beloved Son; and the Father gives demonstrable evidence, that with, and in him he is indeed well pleased. Let us with serious attention consider when, where, and how, our great Michael fought with and overcame the dragon. The Evangelist Matthew is very particular in relating the preparations for, the beginning, process, and issue of this glorious and important combat.

"Then was Jesus led up of the spirit into the wilderness, to be tempted of the devil." In the close of the foregoing chapter we are told, that the blessed Jesus had been publicly baptized, and was also solemnly inaugurated in his mediatorial office, by the opening of the heavens, by the Spirit of God descending on him like a dove, and by a voice from heaven, saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased;" and then it was, when he came from the solemn ordinance of baptism; when he was about to show himself openly unto Israel; when he was full of the Holy Spirit (Luke 4:1); even then was he led, with a holy unconstrained violence, as a champion into the field, to engage an enemy, whom he was sure to conquer. But whither is this conqueror led? Into a lonesome, wide, howling wilderness; probably, says Mr. Henry, into the great wilderness of Sinai; a wilderness, not only lonesome, but inhabited by wild beasts, Mark 1:13. Hither was our Lord led, not only that he might prepare himself by retirement and prayer, but also that he might be alone, and thereby give Satan all the advantages he could desire. In

this combat, as well as that of his last agony, "of the people, there was to be none with him." Neither does he content himself with praying, but he fasts also, and that "forty days and forty nights," (verse 9): as Moses and Elias had done, many years before, it may be, in the very same place. All these fasts were miraculous; and therefore, though we are taught hereby, that fasting is a Christian duty, yet, to pretend, in an ordinary way, to imitate them, by fasting for so long a term together, in no doubt superstitious presumptuous, and sinful; but few people, I believe, need such a caution.

During these forty days, we may suppose, our Lord felt no hunger; converse with heaven, to him was instead of meat and drink; but "afterwards he was an hungered:" exceedingly so, no doubt. And now, the important fight begins. For, then "the tempted," emphatically so called, because he first tempted our first parents to sin, and has ever since been unwearied in tempting their descendants; then the tempter, who in an invisible manner had been attacking our blessed Lord all the whole forty days, when he saw him hungering, and in such distressing circumstances, came to him, as it should seem, in a visible shape, and probably transformed into the appearance of an angel of light. And what does he tempt him to? To nothing less, than to doubt of his being the Son of God. "If you be the Son of God." What! Put an if to this, Satan, after the glorious Jesus had been proved to be God's son, and repeatedly too in such a glorious manner? Surely, you yourself could not but see the heavens opened, and the Spirit descending; surely, you did hear the voice that came to him from heaven, immediately after his baptism, saying, "This is my beloved Son:" And do you now say unto him, "If you be the Son of God." Yes; but Satan knew, and believed he was full well; but he wanted to make our Lord to doubt of it. And why? Because he was in such a melancholy situation. As though he had said, "If God was your father, he would never suffer you to starve to death in a howling wilderness, among wild beasts. Surely, the voice you lately did hear, was only a delusion. If you are the Son of God, especially his beloved Son, in whom he was so pleased, you would be taken more care of by him." Thus he attacked our first parents, by suggesting to them hard thoughts of their all-bountiful Creator: "Yea, has God said, You shall not eat of every tree in the garden?" "Has he placed you amidst such a variety of delicious fruits, only to tease and make you miserable?" And how artfully now does he labor to insinuate himself into our Lord's affections, as he then did to ingratiate himself with our first parents. "If you be the Son of God, says he, come, prove it, by commanding these stones (a heap of which, probably, lay very near) to be made bread: this will demonstrate your divinity, and relieve your pressing necessity at the same time." Thus, as in all his other temptations, Satan would fain appear to be his very kind friend; but the holy Jesus saw through the disguised enmity of his antagonist; and scorning either to distrust his righteous Father on the one hand, or to work a miracle to please and gratify the devil on the other, although he had the Spirit of God without measure, and might have made use of a thousand other ways, yet answers him with a text of scripture: "It is written, that man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God." This is a quotation from Deuteronomy 8:3, and contains a reason given by the great God, why he chose to feed the Israelites with manna; that they might learn thereby, man does

not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. This our blessed Lord here applies to himself; and his being in the wilderness, made the application of it still more pertinent. Israel was God's son: out of Egypt was he called to sojourn in the wilderness, where he was miraculously supported. And therefore our Lord, knowing that he was typified by this Israel, and that, like them, he was now in a wilderness, quotes this scripture as a reason why he should not, at Satan's suggestion, either despair of receiving help from his Father in his present circumstances, or distrust the validity of his late manifestations, or make use of any unwarrantable means for his present relief. For as God was his father, he would, therefore, either in an ordinary way spread a table for him in the wilderness, or support and sustain him, as he did his Israel of old, in some extraordinary way or other without it: "For man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God."

Thus is the tempter foiled in the first onset; but he has other arrows in his quiver, with which he will farther strive to wound the immaculate Lamb of God. Since he cannot draw him in either to distrust, or despair, he will not try if he cannot prevail on him to presume. In order to effect this, "He took the blessed Jesus up into the Holy City," or Jerusalem, called by our Savior, the city of the Great King, and here called holy, because the holy temple was in it, and, we would hope, many holy people. This was a populous place, and therefore, would greatly befriend the devil's design. And not only so, but "he set him on a pinnacle," a battlement or wing, "of the temple," the top of which was so very high, that, as Josephus observes, it would make a man's head run giddy to look down from it. And some think this was done at the time of public worship. How the holy Jesus suffered himself to be taken hither; whether he was transported through the air, or whether he followed Satan on foot, is uncertain; but certainly it was an instance of amazing condescension in our Lord, that he would permit so foul a fiend, to carry or lead his holy body about in this manner. Well! Satan has now gotten him upon the pinnacle of the temple, and still harping upon this old string, "If you be the Son of God, (says he) cast yourself down," and thereby show to this large worshipping assembly, (who will assuredly then believe) that you are God's beloved Son, under the special protection of heaven, and are the Messiah, "who was to come into the world." This was artful, very artful. But he seems to improve in cunning: for he brings his Bible with him, and backs his temptation with a text of scripture; "For it is written, (says he) he shall give his angels charge concerning you, and in their hands they shall bear you up, lest at any time you dash your foot against a stone." But is Saul also among the prophets? Does the devil quote scripture, yea, and seemingly such a very appropriate one too? I suspect some design, without doubt: for herein, he would mimic our Lord, who, he perceived, intended to fight him with this weapon; and not liking the sharp edge of it, he thought that if he quoted scripture, the Lord Jesus would not employ it against him anymore. "It is written, (therefore said he) he shall give his angels charge concerning you, and in their hands they shall bear you up, lest at any time you dash your foot against a stone: and therefore, since you are sure of such protection, you need not fear to cast yourself down." This was plausible, and by the length of it, one would be apt to imagine, it was a fair quotation; but

Satan takes care, not only to misapply, but also to maim it, purposely omitting these important words, "in all your ways." It is true, God had given charge to his angels, concerning his children in general, and his beloved Son in particular, that they should keep him in all his ways; but, if our Lord had at this time, at the devil's request, and to gratify pride, thrown himself down from the pinnacle, and thereby unnecessarily presumed on his Father's protection, he would not have been in God's way, and therefore, would have had no right to the promised protection at all. Satan was aware of this, and therefore fitly left out what he knew would not suit his purpose. But is scripture the worse, for being abused or perverted by the devil, or his emissaries? No, in no wise. Our Lord, therefore, lets him know, that he should not throw aside this important weapon upon this account, but puts by this home thrust, with another scripture: "It is written again, You shall not tempt the Lord your God." Still our Lord quotes something out of the book of Deuteronomy, and has his eye upon Israel in his wilderness state. Originally these words were directed to the Israelites in general, and accordingly are in the plural number; but here our Lord, as before, makes a particular application of them to himself: Satan bids him cast himself down, assuring him, God had promised in his word, to order his angels to take care of him. Now, says our Lord, "It is written in another part of his word, that the Israelites should not tempt the Lord their God, by distrusting his goodness on the one hand, or presuming on his protection on the other. And, therefore, as I would not command the stones to be made bread, needlessly and distrustfully set up to provide for myself; neither will I now presume unnecessarily upon God's power, by casting myself down, though placed by you in such a dangerous situation.

Thus our great Michael comes off conqueror in the second assault. And does not the serpent feel his head bruised enough yet? Not at all: on the contrary, being more and more enraged at such unusual opposition, and want of success, "He again took him up into an exceeding high mountain, (what mountain is not very material) and showed him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them," St. Luke adds, "in a moment of time:" which confirms the common conjecture, that Satan did not show our Lord really the kingdoms of the world, (for that must have taken up more time) but only took him up into an exceeding high mountain to humor the thing, and by exerting his utmost art, impressed on our Lord's imagination all at once, a very strong, and to any but innocence itself, a very striking prospect of the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; not the cares: that would not serve Satan's turn. He showed our Savior crowns, but never told him those crowns were gilded with thorns; "He showed him, (says Mr. Henry, my favorite commentator) as in a landscape, or airy representation in a cloud, such as that great deceiver could easily frame and put together, the glorious and splendid appearance of princes, their robes and retinue, their equipage and lifeguards; the pomps of thrones and courts, and stately palaces; the sumptuous buildings in cities; the gardens and fields about the country feats, with the various instances of their wealth, pleasure, and gaiety; so as might be most likely to strike the fancy, and excite the admiration and affection. Such was this show." Our Savior very well knew it, only lets Satan go to the full length of his string, that his victory over him might be the more illustrious. And now, says the devil,

"All these things (a mighty all indeed; a mere imaginary bubble!) will I give you, if you will fall down and worship me." He would fain have it taken for granted, that he had succeeded in the two preceding temptations: "Come, you see you are not the Son of God, or if you are, you see what an unkind Father he is; you are here in a starving condition, therefore take my advice, disown your relation to him, set up for yourself, call me father, ask of me blessings, and all these will I give you; while all that I desire in return, is but a bow, only fall down and worship me." Here Satan discovers himself with a witness: this was a desperate parting stroke, indeed. It is not high time for you, O you enemy of souls, to be commanded to depart! Filled with a holy resentment at such hellish treatment, and impatient of the very thought of settling up for himself, or alienating the least part of his heart and affections from his Father, or dividing them between his God and the world; "Then said Jesus unto him, Get you hence, Satan, (I know who you are, under all your disguises) get you hence, you grand adversary; for it is written, You shalt worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve; this is the great commandment of the law; this is the commandment my Father gave unto his Israel of old, and would you have me, who came to fulfill the law and the prophets, thus shamefully be a transgressor of it? Get you hence, I will bear your insolence no longer: your other temptations were hellish, like yourself, but this intolerably so; get you therefore hence, Satan: my heavenly Father is the Lord my God, and him only will I serve."

And now the battle is over; the important combat is ended; Jesus has won the field: Satan is routed and totally put to flight. "Then," when the devil found that Jesus could withstand even the golden bait, the lust of the eye and pride of life, in the two last, as well as the lust of the flesh in the first temptation, despairing of the least success, and quite stunned with that all-powerful GET YOU HENC, SATAN, "he left him."

Hell, we may well suppose, like the Philistines of old, was confounded, and gave a horrible groan, when they saw their great Goliath, in whom they had so long trusted, thus shamefully and totally defeated in no less than three pitched battles. The first Adam was attacked but once, and was conquered; but the second Adam, though thus repeatedly assaulted, comes off without the least sin, not only conqueror, but more than conqueror. Think you not, that there was joy, joy unspeakable in heaven, upon this glorious occasion? Think you not that the angels, those sons of God, and the multitude of the heavenly host, who shouted so loud at our Lord's birth, did not repeat, if possible, with yet greater ecstasy, that heavenly anthem, "Glory be to God in the highest"? For a while they were only spectators, orders, we may suppose, being issued out, that they should only wait around, but not relieve their praying, fasting, tempted Lord; but now the restraint is removed: Satan departs, and "behold, angels came and ministered unto him;" they came to administer to his bodily necessities, and to congratulate him upon the glorious and complete victory which he had gained: some of them, it may be, had done this kind office for Elijah long ago; and with unspeakably greater joy, they repeat it to the Lord of Elijah now. His Father sends him bread from heaven; and by this lets him know,

that notwithstanding the horrid temptations with which he had been attacked, he is his own beloved son, in and with whom he was well pleased.

And was there joy in heaven on this happy occasion? What equal, and if possible, what infinitely greater joy ought there to be among the children of God here on earth? For we should do well to remember, that our blessed Lord in this great fight with, and conquest over the dragon, acted as a public person, as a federal head of his mystical body the church, even the common representative of all believers. We may therefore from this blessed passage gather strong consolations; since by our Lord's conquest over Satan, we are thereby assured of our own, and in the meanwhile can apply to him as a compassionate High Priest, who was in all things tempted as we are, that he might experimentally be enabled to succor us when we are tempted.

Who, who after hearing of or reading this, can think themselves hardly used, or utterly cast off by God, because they are tempted to self-murder, blasphemy, or any other horrid and shocking crimes? Who can wonder at wave being permitted to come upon wave, and one trial to follow upon the back of another? Who can admire, that Satan follows them to holy ordinances, and tempts them to doubt of the reality of all their manifestations, and of their being God's children, even after they have enjoyed the most intimate and delightful communion with their heavenly Father? Was not our Lord treated thus? And "shall the servant be above his Lord, or the disciple above his Master?" No, it is sufficient that the servant be as his Lord, and the disciple as his Master.

But not to dwell on a general improvement, let us see what particular lessons may be learned from this affecting portion of holy writ.

And FIRST, was our Lord thus violently beset in the wilderness? Then we may learn, that however profitable solitude and retirement may be, when used in due season, yet when carried to an extreme is hurtful, and rather befriends than prevents temptation. Woe be to him that is thus always alone; for he has not another to lift him up when he falls, or to advise with when he is tempted. As a hermit in America once told me, when I asked him whether he found that way of life lessened his temptations: "Do not you know, friend, (said he) that a tree which grows by itself, is more exposed to winds and storms than another that stands surrounded with other trees in the woods?" Our Lord knew this, and therefore he was LED BY THE SPIRIT into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. Lord, keep us from leading ourselves into this temptation, and succor and support us whenever led by your providence into it! Then, and then only, shall we be safe amidst the fiery darts of the grand enemy of our souls.

SECONDLY, Did our Lord by prayer, fasting, and temptation, prepare himself for his public ministry? Surely then, all those who profess to be inwardly moved by the Holy Spirit to take upon them the office and administration of the church, should be prepared in the same manner. For though the knowledge of books and men, are good in their

places, yet without a knowledge of Satan's devices be superadded, a minister will be only like a physician, that undertakes to prescribe to sick people, without having studied the nature of herbs. And hence, it is to be feared, many heavy laden and afflicted souls have been sent by certain ministers, to surgeons, to be blooded in the arm, instead of being directed to apply to the blood of Christ to cleanse their hearts. Hence, conviction is looked upon as a delirium, and violent temptations censured as downright madness. Hence, souls that are truly and earnestly repenting of their sins, and as earnestly seeking after rest in Christ, have been directed to plays, novels, romances, and merry company, to divert them from being righteous over-much. Miserable comforters are such blind guides! Surely, they deserve not better titles than that of murderers of souls! They go not into the kingdom of heaven themselves, and those who are entering in they would by this means hinder. Go not after them, all you young men who would be able ministers of the New Testament; but on the contrary, if you would be useful in binding up the broken hearted, and pouring the oil of consolation into wounded souls, prepare yourselves for manifold temptations. For as Luther says, "prayer and meditation, reading and temptation, make a minister." If now exercised with spiritual conflicts, be not disheartened, it is a good sign that our Lord intends to make use of you. Being thus tempted like unto your brethren, you will be the better enabled to succor and advise those who shall apply to you under their temptations. What says the apostle Paul? "If we are afflicted, it is for your sake." And if you are afflicted, it is only that you may save your own souls, and help to save the souls of those who shall be committed to your charge. Be strong therefore in the grace which is in Christ Jesus, and learn to endure hardness, like good soldiers, that are hereafter to instruct others how they must fight the good fight of faith.

THIRDLY, Did the tempter come to Christ when he saw him an hungered? Let those of you that are reduced to a low estate, from hence learn, that an hour of poverty is an hour of temptation, not only to murmuring and doubting of our sonship and the divine favor, but also to help ourselves by unlawful means. "If you be the Son of God, said Satan, command that these stones may be made bread." This is what Agur dreaded, "lest I be poor and steal." Learn, you godly poor, to be upon your guard, and remember that poverty and temptations are no marks of your being cast off by God. Your Lord was an hungered; your Lord was tempted on this account to doubt his sonship, before you. Learn of him not to distrust, but rather to trust in your heavenly Father. Angels came and ministered unto Christ; and he who is Lord of the angels, will send some kind messenger or another to relieve your wants. Your extremity shall be the Redeemer's opportunity to help you. Make your wants known unto him, he cares for you. Though in a desert, though no visible means appear at present, yet you shall in God's due time find a table spread for you and yours; "For man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God."

And may not such among you, who are exalted, as well as those who are brought low, from Satan's taking the Lord Jesus, and placing him upon a pinnacle of the temple, learn also a lesson of holy watchfulness and caution. High places are slippery places, and are

apt to make even the strongest heads and most devout hearts to turn giddy. How necessary therefore is that excellent petition in our Litany, "in all time of our wealth, (as well as in all time of our tribulation) good Lord deliver us!" Agreeably to this, Agur prays as much against riches as poverty; if he was poor, he feared he should be tempted to steal, if rich, that he should trust in uncertain riches; and say, who is the Lord?

I charge, therefore, all of you, who are rich and high in this world, to watch and pray, lest you fall by Satan's temptation. Those especially of you, that are placed as on the pinnacle of the temple, exalted above your fellows in the church of God, take heed in an especial manner unto yourselves, lest by spiritual pride, vanity, or any other sin that does most easily beset persons in such eminent stations, you cast yourselves down. This is what Satan aims at. He strives to make us destroyers of ourselves. And he has a particular enmity against such as you; he knows, that your name is Legion; and that if you cast yourselves down, he shall gain a great advantage over many others; you cannot fall alone. O that it may be said of us, as the papists use to say of Luther, "That German beast does not love gold." May the fire of divine love burn up all the love of this present evil world, and pride of life, out of your hearts! This, Satan reserved for his last, as thinking it was the most powerful and prevailing temptation, "He took our Lord up into an exceeding high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them." He cares not how high he exalts us, or how high he is obliged to bid, so he can but get our hearts divided between God and the world. All this will he offer to give us, if we will only fall down and worship him. Arm us, dear Lord Jesus, with your Spirit, and help us under all such circumstances, to learn of you, and say unto the tempter, "Get you hence, Satan; for it is written, you shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve."

FOURTHLY, Whether beset with this or any other temptation, let all us learn of our Lord to fight the devil with the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Though he had the Spirit without measure, yet he always made use of this. We pray say of it, as David did of Goliath's sword, "none like this," none like this. And supposing Satan should be permitted to transform himself into an angel of light, and by false impressions, and delusive applications of misquoted texts, attempt to turn this weapon upon us against ourselves; let us not therefore be prevailed on to let go, but by comparing spiritual things with spiritual, as our Lord did, find out God's mind and our duty. Had Christ's children and ministers only observed this one lesson, how much strange fire would quickly have been extinguished? How much real enthusiasm been easily stopped? How many imaginary revelations had been detected? How many triumphs of Satan and his emissaries been prevented? And how much more would the comforts of Christ's people and ministers been continued and increased, not only in this present, but also in every age of the Christian church? But let us not be discouraged or think worse of Christ, his cause, or his word, because through Satan's subtlety, any of us, or others, may have been drawn in to make some wrong applications of it; others have been thus tempted and mistaken before us. However, let us be humbled before God and man, and be excited by our past

ignorance of Satan's devices, to adhere more closely to the written word, and to pray more earnestly for God's holy Spirit to give us direction by it. "Then will it still be a lantern unto our feet, and a light unto our path;" we shall yet be enabled to behave more skillfully under all our future trials. Many we must yet expect; nay, perhaps our severest temptations are yet to come; Satan left our Lord, after his attacking him in the wilderness, "only for a season," as St. Luke has it, until the season of his death and passion. And thus he may be permitted to deal with us. We are not yet come to our complete rest; the King of terrors is yet to be grappled with, and the valley of the shadow of death to be passed through; long before that, we may be called to endure many a fiery trial, and be beset with manifold temptations, under which we may be as ignorant how to behave, as under those with which we have already been visited. Alas! we know not what remaining corruptions are in our hearts, which time and temptation may draw out and discover. Perhaps Satan has not yet attacked us on our weakest side; when he does, if left to ourselves, how weak shall we be? It is said of Achilles, that he was invulnerable, except in the heel, and by a wound in that, at last he died. Let not him, therefore, that puts on the harness, boast as though he had put it off. Neither, on the other hand, let us be faint-hearted or dismayed. Satan may tempt, but cannot force; he may sift, but Christ will pray. He who has helped us already, will help us to the end. He who conquered for us in the wilderness, will ere long make us also more than conquerors over all trials and temptations, inward and outward, and over death and hell itself, through his almighty, everlasting and never-failing love. We now sow in tears; in a very little time, and we shall reap with joy; we may now go on our way weeping, by reason of the enemy oppressing us; but, ere long, angels shall be sent, not to minister to us in this wilderness, but to carry us to an heavenly Canaan, even to Abraham's bosom. Then shall we see this accuser and tempter of our Lord, of our brethren, and of ourselves, cast out: this wicked one, as well as the wicked world, and wicked heart, will no more be permitted to vex, disturb or annoy us.

"But woe unto you that laugh now; for you shall then lament and weep." Woe unto you, who either believe there is no devil, or never felt any of his temptations. Woe unto you that are at ease in Zion, and instead of staying to be tempted by the devil, by idleness, self-indulgence, and making continual provision for the flesh, even tempt the devil to tempt you. Woe unto you, who not content with sinning yourselves, turn factors for hell, and make a trade of tempting others to sin. Woe unto you, who either deny divine revelation, or never make use of it but to serve a bad turn. Woe unto you who sell your consciences, and pawn your souls for a little worldly wealth or honor. Woe unto you who climb up to high places, when in church or state, by corruption, bribery, extortion, cringing, flattery, or bowing down to, and soothing the vices of those by whom you expect to rise. Woe unto you! For whether you will own the relation or not, surely you are of your father the devil; for the works of your father you will do; I tremble for you. How can you escape the damnation of hell?

But I have not time to follow such as you any farther. This discourse, and the present frame of my mind, lead me rather to speak to those, who by feeling Satan's fiery darts, know assuredly that there is a devil. Comfort you, comfort you, these afflicted ones, O Lord. O you all-merciful and all-bountiful God, and you compassionate High-Priest, you once tempted, but now triumphant Savior, as you once did not disdain to be ministered unto by angels, bless we pray you this discourse, to the support and strengthening of your tempted people, though delivered by the meanest messenger you did ever yet employ in your church!

I add no more. The Lord bless you and keep you! The Lord lift up the light of his countenance, establish, strengthen, and settle you, and bring you to his eternal kingdom!