

Lessons from Christ's Wilderness Experience

In my last presentation, we looked at some lessons from Christ's baptism. Today we will look at some lessons from Christ's experience in the wilderness and the temptations of Satan. We have looked at these passages in some detail many times already, but I find there is always something different to see, particularly as I am now looking at the Scriptures through new lenses.

Only the three Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, record the baptism of Christ and the wilderness experience. All three Gospels record that immediately following his baptism, Christ went into the wilderness. What is interesting is the way each Gospel expresses it.

- Matthew 4:1 Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil.
- Mark 1:12 And immediately the Spirit driveth him into the wilderness.
- Luke 4:1 And Jesus being full of the Holy Ghost returned from Jordan, and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness,

How do you understand what is going on here? How do others read this?

Here is one person's perspective

- *The baptism of Jesus was followed immediately by his temptation: "Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil" (Mt. 4:11). Here was the immediate inevitable clash between the two natures in the Son of God. The phrases "led of the Spirit" and "tempted of the devil" use the same preposition, as though emphasizing these two natures in him.*

Difficult as the idea may seem, this was the first conscious guidance the Holy Spirit provided. Mark's word is very strong: "Immediately the Spirit driveth him into the wilderness." It may perhaps imply some reluctance on the part of Jesus (as in Gethsemane), because he knew already how strenuous the test would prove to be.

<http://www.christadelphianbooks.org/haw/sitg/sitg19.html>

Here is another person's understanding.

- *Temptation here is in the Divine plan and purpose. Jesus went into the wilderness under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to find the devil. My own conviction is that if the devil could have escaped that day, he would have done so. It is a very popular fallacy that the enemy drove Christ into a corner and tempted Him. But the whole Divine story reveals that the facts were quite otherwise. God's perfect Man, led by*

the Spirit - or as Mark in his own characteristic and forceful way expresses it, driven by the Spirit - passes down into the wilderness, and compels the adversary to stand out clear from all secondary causes, and to enter into direct combat. This is not the devil's method. He ever puts something between himself and the man he would

- *tempt. He hides his own personality wherever possible. To our first parents he did not suggest that they should serve him, but that they should please themselves. Jesus dragged him from behind everything, and put him in front, that for once, not through the subtlety of a second cause, but directly, he might do his worst against a pure soul.*

Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. He was tempted of the devil during forty days, during the whole of which period He was still led by the Spirit. The Spirit took Him to the place of temptation, and was with Him

- *through the process of temptation. Not in His Deity did He resist, but in His perfect Manhood. Manhood is however never able to successfully resist temptations of the devil save when fulfilling a first Divine intention, that, namely, of depending upon God, and thus being guided by the Spirit of God. Thus the Man Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, and was led by the Spirit through all the process of temptation.*

<https://www.christianity.com/jesus/life-of-jesus/youth-and-baptism/what-was-the-significance-of-the-temptation.html>

James White read these texts differently. This is the meaning he saw in them.

- *The Holy Spirit led the Son of God into the wilderness, to be tempted of the devil. **This was a part of the great plan necessary to the salvation of sinners. The temptation must occur as truly as the crucifixion, the resurrection, the ascension, or the second advent.** The crucifixion of Christ and his intercession for sinners are subjects of very common and popular discussion in the pulpit and by the religious press; but the temptation of Christ in the wilderness, though holding an important place in the great plan, is passed over as having little more significance than if it were an accidental occurrence, – as if Christ chanced to be in the wilderness just then, and Satan seized upon the opportunity to annoy him. But mark well the strong expression of Luke: "Jesus being full of the Holy Ghost returned from Jordan, and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness." {1890 JW, BHY 204.2}*

This is a very important point James White makes here. Christ's baptism and the wilderness experiences were not random events but were as vital to the salvation of men as is the cross. The reason is given to us in Romans 5:10.

- *Romans 5:10 For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, **we shall be saved by his life.***

There is a greater depth of meaning in these words than we can canvass today. In his study series on Romans, EJ Waggoner said this about these words “saved by his life”.

- *By What Life? – By the life of Christ, and He has but one. He is "the same yesterday, and to-day, and forever." Heb. xiii. 8. **It is by His present life that we are saved, that is, by His life in us from day to day. But the life which He now lives is the very same life that He lived in Judea eighteen hundred years ago. He took again the same life that He laid down.** Think what was in the life of Christ, as we have the record in the New Testament, and we shall know what ought to be in our lives now. If we allow Him to dwell in us, He will live just as He did then. If there is something in our lives that was not then in His, we may be sure that He is not living it in us now. {October 11, 1894 EJW, PTUK 645.3}*

So, putting Waggoner's thoughts and James White's thoughts together, since we are saved by the life of Christ which is the life Christ lives in us today, and this life is the same life he lived on earth, then everything that happened in the life of Christ on earth must, as James White said, be for our salvation.

We saw in my last presentation what Christ did in preparation for his baptism.

- *Let us remember this, after Christ had taken the necessary steps in **repentance, conversion, and faith in behalf** of the human race, he went to John to be baptized of him in Jordan. {GCB April 4, 1901, Art. A, par. 15}*

Hebrews 5:7 tells us how he did this.

- *Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up **prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears** unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared;*

The *necessary steps in **repentance, conversion, and faith*** were undertaken *in **behalf** of the human race* meaning they were done for our salvation. Christ, then, was baptised for our salvation. The anointing of Christ with the Spirit of his Father was for our salvation. Likewise, as James White said, the wilderness experience *must occur as truly as the crucifixion, the resurrection, the ascension, or the second advent.*

This now gives us context for Matthew and Luke's "led by the Spirit" and Mark's "driven by the Spirit". The Greek word translated as "driven" can mean "to send out" or "to draw out" when used in a non-violent context which is the case here. There was no coercion on the part of the Father and likewise there was no hesitation on the part of Christ. This was in accordance with the plan laid down before the world began for the salvation of men. The Spirit of God went with Christ. Just moments

before, the light directly from the Father had manifested on Christ in the form of a dove and the voice of God said "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." Christ was filled with the Spirit of his Father. This is what Luke clearly said.

Luke 4:1 *And Jesus being **full** of the Holy Ghost returned from Jordan, and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness,*

Whether Christ was led or driven, in the context of sent out or drawn out, by the Spirit of God, the Spirit of His Father was with him and filled him. Luke said, *And Jesus being **full** of the Holy Ghost...* Father and Son were united in the same way we and Christ are united by *His life in us from day to day* as Waggoner stated it.

We looked at James White's view and now we will look at two statements that his wife, Ellen White, wrote.

- *After the baptism of Jesus, he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. When he came up out of Jordan, he bowed and plead with the great Eternal for strength to endure the conflict with the fallen foe. The opening heavens and the descent of the excellent glory attested his divine character; and the Father's voice declared the close relationship of Christ to his Infinite Majesty: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." **The mission of Christ was now about to begin; but he must first withdraw from the busy scenes of life to a desolate wilderness for the express purpose of bearing a three-fold temptation in behalf of those whom he had come to redeem.** {2SP 85.2}*

Why did Christ bear a *three-fold temptation*? For the same reason he *had taken the necessary steps in repentance, conversion, and faith*. He did it all ***in behalf of those whom he had come to redeem***. This is the point James White made that these things *must occur as truly as the crucifixion, the resurrection, the ascension, or the second advent*. The whole plan of salvation is in behalf of fallen man.

Interesting words here – ***for the express purpose of bearing a three-fold temptation in behalf of those whom he had come to redeem***. How do you read? Was this a test to see if Christ was ready to undertake his mission? Was this arranged? Was Satan waiting and ready for him? How do you read this?

When we apply what we have learned of the loving, non-violent, ever merciful character of our Father, we immediately conclude that this was not a set-up because our Father is not like that. We also know that God gives all the freedom to choose what they do. And herein lies the answer.

- *When Jesus was led into the wilderness to be tempted, He was led by the Spirit of God. **He did not invite temptation. He went to the wilderness to be alone, to***

contemplate His mission and work. By fasting and prayer He was to brace Himself for the bloodstained path He must travel. But Satan knew that the Saviour had gone into the wilderness, and he thought this the best time to approach Him. {DA 114.2}

Why did Christ go into the wilderness? *He went to the wilderness to be alone, to contemplate His mission and work.* How was he going to *contemplate His mission and work?* *By fasting and prayer He was to brace Himself for the bloodstained path He must travel.* He did not go into the wilderness to battle Satan. Satan chose to go into the wilderness after him hoping to bring about his downfall when weakened by fasting.

How do we reconcile this to the previous statement that Christ withdrew to the wilderness *for the express purpose of bearing a three-fold temptation in behalf of those whom he had come to redeem?* Well, how did Christ prepare for the three-fold temptation? *By fasting and prayer He was to brace Himself for the bloodstained path He must travel.* Both Matthew and Luke tell us that the three-fold temptation came AFTER Jesus had fasted for forty days. So, we can see the two statements are in harmony.

That brings us back to our Scripture.

- Matthew 4:2 *And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungred.*
Mat 4:3 *And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread.*

This reads as though the wilderness experience was compartmentalised – Jesus fasted 40 days and then he was tempted. But Mark gives us some more details.

- Mark 1:13 *And he was there in the wilderness **forty days, tempted of Satan;** and was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered unto him.*

Here we see that Satan had been tempting Jesus throughout the 40 days and, being unsuccessful, kept the three big guns until Jesus was at his weakest.

Luke's account has elements of both.

- Luke 4:2 *Being forty days tempted of the devil. And in those days he did eat nothing: and when they were ended, he afterward hungered.*
Luk 4:3 *And the devil said unto him, If thou be the Son of God, command this stone that it be made bread.*

There is not a lot of detail in these few verses. What happened in the wilderness? We know Jesus fasted and prayed and was with wild animals and was ministered to by angels and was tempted by Satan. But we have no details compared to so many other events in his life that are well detailed. Why did Jesus fast for 40 days? Why not 10 days or 20 days or 30 days? In his great providence for us, our Father has provided us with more details through the inspired writings of Ellen White.

Here is one such passage from 2SP 89.

- *When Christ entered the wilderness his countenance was changed, its glory had departed, the weight of the sins of the world was pressing upon his soul, and his features expressed unutterable sorrow, a depth of anguish that fallen man had never realized.*

Why had sinful man never realised it? Because sinful man does not understand the sinfulness of sin. Sin grieves God at his heart.

- *Gen 6:5 And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.
Gen 6:6 And it repented [to be sorry, be moved to pity, have compassion] the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved [to hurt, pain, grieve] him at his heart.*

The knowledge of what man is doing to himself through sin hurts, pains and grieves our Father and his Son to their hearts. How can fallen man have such an understanding of the sinfulness of sin when the carnal mind is enmity against God? It is our Father and his Son who bear this grief. We have no capacity to contemplate it without their help and even then, it is only what we can bear.

Now we come to the reason why Christ fasted for 40 days.

- *The indulgence of appetite had increased with every successive generation since Adam's transgression, until the race was so feeble in moral power that they could not overcome in their own strength. **Christ in behalf of the race was to conquer appetite, by enduring the most powerful test on that point.** He was to tread the path of temptation alone, with none to help or comfort him. Alone he was to wrestle with the powers of darkness, and exercise a self-control stronger than hunger or death. **The length of this fast is the strongest evidence of the great sinfulness of debased appetite, and its power over the human family.** {2SP 89.1}*

I can't speak for everyone, but I can attest to battles with appetite. However, this brings it to a whole new level.

Here is a passage from RH September 1, 1874.

- *The humiliation and agonizing sufferings of Christ in the wilderness of temptation were for the race. In Adam all was lost through transgression. Through Christ was man's only hope of restoration to the favor of God. **Man had separated himself at such a distance from God by transgression of his law, that he could not humiliate himself before God proportionate to his grievous sin.** The Son of God could fully understand the aggravating sins of the transgressor, and in his sinless character he alone could make an acceptable atonement for man in suffering the agonizing sense of his Father's displeasure. The sorrow and anguish of the Son of God for the sins of the world were proportionate to his divine excellence and purity, as well as to the magnitude of the offense. {RH September 1, 1874, par. 1}*
- *Christ was our example in all things. As we see his humiliation in the long trial and fast in the wilderness to overcome the temptations of appetite in our behalf, we are to take this lesson home to ourselves when we are tempted. **If the power of appetite is so strong upon the human family, and its indulgence so fearful that the Son of God subjected himself to such a test, how important that we feel the necessity of having appetite under the control of reason. Our Saviour fasted nearly six weeks, that he might gain for man the victory upon the point of***
- ***appetite.** How can professed Christians with an enlightened conscience, and Christ before them as their pattern, yield to the indulgence of those appetites which have an **enervating** influence upon the mind and heart? It is a painful fact that habits of self-gratification at the expense of health, and the weakening of moral power, is holding in the bonds of slavery at the present time a large share of the Christian world. {RH September 1, 1874, par. 2}*
- **Enervating** = causing one to feel drained of energy or vitality
- *Many who profess godliness do not inquire into the reason of Christ's long period of fasting and suffering in the wilderness. His anguish was not so much from enduring the pangs of hunger as from his sense of the fearful result of **the indulgence of appetite and passion** upon the race. **He knew that appetite would be man's idol, and would lead him to forget God, and would stand directly in the way of his salvation.** {RH September 1, 1874, par. 3}*

If, like me, you have never really considered how deadly is the indulgence of appetite, these passages are a big wake-up call. Notice also, the indulgence of appetite is not just about food. It is also about passion. What is meant by passion?

Here is the definition from Webster's 1828 Dictionary. It is a long definition so I have included only the relevant parts.

- **PASSION**, n. [L. *passio*, from *patior*, to suffer.]
4. The feeling of the mind, or the sensible effect of impression; excitement, perturbation or agitation of mind; as desire, fear, hope, joy, grief, love, hatred.

5. *Violent agitation or excitement of mind, particularly such as is occasioned by an offense, injury or insult; hence, violent anger.*
6. *Zeal; ardor; vehement desire.*
7. *Love.*
8. *Eager desire; as a violent passion for fine clothes.*

We can see that the indulgence of passion is the indulgence of desires and emotions. This is as deadly as the indulgence of appetite. Left to our own devices, how much trouble are we in when it comes to controlling appetite and passions? Jesus knew our helplessness and he suffered this, forty days without food, that is, nearly six weeks without food and being in the desert, we have no idea how much water he had. And he did this in our behalf.

We will now look at some of the ways Satan tried to deceive Christ, particularly towards the end of the forty day fast.

- *He told Christ that one of the exalted angels had been exiled to the world, and that His appearance indicated that, instead of His being the King of heaven, He was the angel fallen, and this explained His emaciated and distressed appearance. {1SM 274.2}*
- *Satan told him that he was to set his feet in the blood-stained path, but not to travel it, that, like Abraham, he was tried to show his perfect obedience. He claimed to be the angel who stayed the hand of Abraham, as the knife was raised to slay Isaac, and that he had now come to save the life of the Son of God, deliver him from a painful death by starvation, and assist him in the plan of salvation. {2SP 90.1}*
- *Foiled at one point, Satan now tried another expedient. Believing that the angelic character he had assumed defied detection, he now feigned to doubt the divinity of Christ, because of his emaciated appearance and uncongenial surroundings. {2SP 90.3}*
- *Satan urged that if he was indeed the Son of God he should give him some evidence of his exalted character. He suggested that God would not leave his Son in so deplorable a condition. He declared that one of the heavenly angels had been exiled to earth, and his appearance indicated that instead of being the King of Heaven he was that fallen angel. He called attention to his own beautiful appearance, clothed with light and strength, and insultingly contrasted the wretchedness of Christ with his own glory. {2SP 91.1}*
- *He claimed direct authority from Heaven to demand proof of Christ that he was the Son of God. He taunted him with being a poor representative of the angels, much less their high Commander, the acknowledged King in the royal courts; and insinuated that his present appearance indicated that he was forsaken of God and*

man. He declared that if he were the Son of God he was equal with God and should evidence this by working a miracle to relieve his hunger. He then urged him to change the stone at his feet to bread, and agreed that if this were done he would at once yield his claims to superiority, and the contest between the two should be forever ended. {2SP 91.2}

When Satan's temptations failed, he departed. Christ had fasted and suffered for forty days and he was in a dreadful state.

- *After Satan had ended his temptations he departed from Jesus for a little season. The foe was conquered, but the conflict had been long and exceedingly trying. And after it was ended Christ was exhausted and fainting. He fell upon the ground as though dying. Heavenly angels who had bowed before Him in the royal courts, and who had been with intense, yet painful, interest watching their loved Commander, and with amazement had witnessed the terrible contest He had endured with Satan, now came and ministered unto Him. They prepared Him food and strengthened Him, for He lay as one dead. Angels were filled with amazement and awe, as they knew the world's Redeemer was passing through inexpressible suffering to achieve the*
- *redemption of man. He who was equal with God in the royal courts, was before them emaciated from nearly six weeks of fasting. Solitary and alone He had been pursued by the rebel chief, who had been expelled from heaven. **He had endured a more close and severe test than would ever be brought to bear upon man.** The warfare with the power of darkness had been long and intensely trying to Christ's human nature in His weak and suffering condition. **The angels brought messages of love and comfort from the Father to His Son, and also the assurance that all heaven triumphed in the full and entire victory He had gained in behalf of man.** {1SM 288.3}*

We cannot begin to imagine or understand what it cost Christ to endure and gain this full and entire victory in behalf of man and which nearly killed him. We cannot begin to imagine the suffering of his Father as he watched the suffering of his dearly beloved Son. I am just so thankful for what he did for me. I am just so thankful that he understands what I am going through, that he picks me up when I fall, that he forgives fully and freely and he gives me the victory he gained in my behalf.