

The Gospel According to Mark, 1:12-13: The Temptation of Jesus

¹² The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³ And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him. (Mark 1:12-13, ESV)

At his baptism Jesus was anointed the Davidic king to re-establish the rule of God. Immediately he is put to work in his double-duty: 1) Suffer temptation at the hand of Satan to equip him as high priest of the people he will redeem from Satan's kingdom; 2) Confront and weaken the ring-leader of the opposition to the rule of God, Satan. Only then can Jesus announce that the kingdom of God is at hand (1:14).

I. Jesus Must Be Tempted

1. The Necessity of the Temptation

The verb “drove” is actually present tense to give a sense of immediacy to the narrative. It is a strong word that usually implies force. It is used, for example, of the expulsion, the casting out of demons. There are no grounds to suppose that Jesus was unwilling to follow the Spirit and had to be compelled; the emphasis is on the necessity of the action. Jesus must go. He must be tempted and confront the enemy. Notice the same sense of necessity regarding the tempting of Jesus in the epistle to the Hebrews:

“Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted (Heb. 2:1-18, ESV).

When translating the word with Jesus as the subject, the United Bible Societies' “Translator's Handbook” cautions: “*Tempted* is a difficult term, for though it means ‘to tempt to evil’ or ‘to try’ (or ‘test’), in this context it obviously must not be rendered in such a way as to imply that Jesus succumbed to the temptation.” ⁽¹⁾ Our Confession states that the eternal Son of God did “take upon Him man's nature, with all the essential properties, and common infirmities thereof, yet without sin” (VIII.2). Also, “He was made under the law, and did perfectly fulfil it” (VIII.4).

2. The Equipping of Our High Priest

We saw in Mark 1:10 that Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit to equip him for the divine purpose. To quote the Confession again, “The Lord Jesus, in His human nature thus united to the divine, was sanctified, and anointed with the Holy Spirit, above measure, having in Him all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge; in whom it pleased the Father that all fullness should dwell; to the end that, being holy, harmless, undefiled, and full of grace and truth, He might be thoroughly furnished to execute the office of a Mediator and Surety” (VIII.3)

But Jesus also must experience first-hand the weakness and suffering of the people he would redeem and ever live to intercede for. Having a High Priest who has endured temptation gives us the confidence that we will receive mercy from the throne of God:

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:15-16, ESV).

3. According to Pattern

Mark may have several Old Testament parallels in mind:

a. Israel – The Lord commanded Moses to assemble a team to reconnoiter the land of Canaan for forty days. The mission brought back reports of mighty warriors and fortified cities. This put fear into the people, who wanted to forsake the Lord and return to Egypt. (Num. 14:34). The Lord sentenced the people to wander forty years in the wilderness for disobedience, a year for each day the land of Canaan was spied out.

Matthew's account of the temptation even more clearly alludes to the wilderness testing of Israel than does Mark's. Jesus was tempted by Satan with hunger, doubting God's protection, and false worship, all things which caused Israel to stumble. Jesus answered every temptation with a quote from Deuteronomy, the law revealed to Israel in the wilderness. Jesus obeyed where Israel failed.

b. Moses – Moses was on Mt. Sinai with the Lord for 40 days, fasting and receiving the law (Exo. 34:28). When he came down from the mountain and saw that the people had sinned, Moses interceded for them by fasting and praying and lying prostrate before the Lord for 40 days (Deut. 9:18-20)

c. Elijah – Elijah, fleeing Jezebel's sentence of death, was succored by an angel in the wilderness. Thus strengthened, he travelled forty days to Mount Horeb to converse with God (1 Kings 19:1-8).

So which parallel did Mark have in mind? Maybe a little of each. Like Israel, Jesus was tempted (but obeyed), like Moses Jesus fasted for forty days, and like Elijah Jesus was ministered to by angels in the wilderness.

II. Satan Must Be Confronted

“The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8, ESV).

“But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. Then indeed he may plunder his house” (Mark 3:27, ESV).

1. The Last Adam

We saw that the word translated **“drove”** in the Mark 1:12 in the ESV implies force, and is used of the casting out of demons in Mark. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the same word is used of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden into the wilderness. Jesus, like Adam, is thrust out into the cursed wilderness. He is not thrust out because of disobedience, but that he might through his obedience begin to countervail the curse laid upon us. In Eden the animals were subjugated to Adam, but not so outside the gates. Jesus enters the wilderness as the New Adam (Rom. 5:12-20), to endure the hostile surroundings of a cursed land and trample the serpent who had brought death into the world.

“Why should Mark (alone) mention that Jesus was with ‘wild animals’ (v. 13)? Jesus Christ came to be what Paul called the last Adam and the second man (1 Cor. 15:45, 47). He came to undo what Adam had done by his sin and fall. But if he was to reverse what Adam had done, he needed to enter into the world not as Adam found it but as Adam had left it. So when he was tempted, he was not in a garden like Adam. He was not, like Adam,

surrounded by animals over which he had dominion (Gen. 1:28). It was in a fallen, broken, sinful, disintegrating world that Jesus faced temptation and the powers of darkness, in order to win for his people a way back to the Tree of Life.”⁽²⁾

It is interesting that Psa. 91:11-12, which Satan quoted to tempt Jesus in Matt. 4:5-6, is followed immediately by this:

“You will tread on the lion and the adder;
the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot” (Psa. 91:13, ESV).

Satan is, of course, “that old serpent” (Rev. 20:2, NLT), who “prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8, ESV).

Christ’s shoes were shod with righteous, unswerving submission to the will of God, as he entered Satan’s house and trampled all over him. He continued to tread on Satan and his minions from Galilee to Jerusalem, obeying his Father every step of the way to the point of death on the cross. Though “by the one man’s [Adam’s] disobedience the many were made sinners,” even so “by the one man’s [Jesus’s] obedience the many will be made righteous” (Rom. 5:19, ESV).

“The first Adam fell into sin in an environment that was perfect and harmonious. The Last Adam maintained his sinlessness in an environment that was hostile.”⁽³⁾

2. Cosmic Conflict

The temptation in the wilderness is but a foretaste of the complete destruction Christ will make of every foe. Mark’s entire gospel is a study in conflict. Jesus set himself, not only against the Jewish and Roman authorities, but against Satan himself, and “against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12). Through the cross “He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.” (Col. 2:15). Christ faced every power hostile to the rule of God and defeated them all. But though the victory has been won, the outcome made certain, yet there is a progression in the destruction of the Satanic kingdom even as there is a progression in the establishment of the kingdom of God (Dan. 2:31-45; 1 Cor. 15:22-28).

“The victory of Christ is past, continuing, and future. It is made real in the daily life of the believer in victory over the world. This is accomplished through the rule of the word of God and the appropriation of the benefits of Christ’s victory on the cross.”⁽⁴⁾

Because Jesus defeated Satan, we are enabled through faith in him to share in that victory: “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (Jas. 4:7, ESV). This we can only do as we abide in Christ, and Christ in us (John 15:4-5).

“When Martin Luther was asked how he overcame the Devil, he replied, ‘Well, when he comes knocking upon the door of my heart, and asks, ‘Who lives here?’ the dear Lord Jesus goes to the door and says, ‘Martin Luther used to live here, but he has moved out. Now I live here.’ When Christ fills our lives, Satan has no entrance.”⁽⁵⁾

Notes:

- 1) Bratcher and Nida - A Translator’s Handbook on the Gospel of Mark, p. 34.
- 2) Ferguson, Sinclair – Let’s Study Mark, pp. 7-8.
- 3) Wuest, Kenneth S. – Wuest’s Word Studies from the Greek New Testament, Vol. 1, p. 26.
- 4) Wells, Paul – Cross Words: The Biblical Doctrine of the Atonement, p. 118.
- 5) Hughes, R. Kent – Mark, Vol. 1: Jesus, Servant and Savior [Preaching the Word], p. 32.