

Matthew 4 Commentary-C H Spurgeon

PREVIOUS

NEXT

MATTHEW 4:1-11 THE KING BEGINS HIS REIGN BY A COMBAT WITH THE PRINCE OF DARKNESS

Matthew 4:1. THEN was Jesus led to of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil

No sooner anointed than assailed. He did not seek temptation, but was “led of the Spirit .” The time selected was immediately after his Sonship had been attested, when we might have thought that he was least likely to be attacked upon that point. Times of hallowed enjoyment verge on periods of temptation. Our Lord was led “into the wilderness ”: the place was one of great solitude, where he would be alone in the conflict. The devil himself came to the spot and plied his diabolical arts upon the man ordained to be his Destroyer.

Let me be ever on my watch-tower, and particularly during seasons of great enjoyment; for then is Satan most likely to assail me. Lord Jesus, be thou with me in the hour of my testing; for thou knowest how to succor the tempted.

Matthew 4:2. And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights he was afterward an hungered.

Throughout the long fast he was miraculously sustained; but at the close of it hunger began to try him. We are more in danger when our labor or suffering is over than during the time of its continuance. Now that the Lord is drained dry by his long fast, and is made faint by hunger, the enemy will be upon him. The devil is a great coward, and takes a mean advantage of us.

Lord make me a match for the enemy!

Matthew 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.

He adapted the temptation to the circumstances: he tempted a hungry man with bread. He put it very cunningly. Only one single word, and the hard stone of the desert would be biscuit: let him undertake to be his own provider, and use his miraculous power as “Son of God ” to spread a table for himself. The tempter begins his suggestion with an “if ”, an “if ” about his Sonship: this is his usual fashion. He bids the Lord prove his Sonship by catering for himself; and yet that would have been the surest way to prove that he was not the Son of God. A true son will not doubt his father, and undertake to provide his own bread: he will wait to be fed by his father’s hand. The evil one would have the only-begotten Son cease to depend on God, and take matters into his own hands. Temptations to unbelieving self-help are common enough, but very dangerous.

Matthew 4:4. 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.

Out flashed the sword of the Spirit: our Lord will fight with no other weapon. He could have spoken new revelations, but he chose to say, “It is written.” There is a power in the Word of God which even the devil cannot deny.

Our life and its sustenance are not dependent upon the visible, though the visible is ordinarily used for our support: we “live not by bread alone ”, though it is the usual means of our support. He who sustained the Savior fasting for forty days could still keep him alive without bread. The secret influence of the word of Omnipotence could keep the vital forces in action even without bread. Bread owes its power to nourish our bodies to the secret agency of God, end that divine agency could work as surely without the usual means as with them. The word of the Lord which made the heavens can assuredly support all that it has made. Our Lord Jesus, in fact, told the tempter that he would not distrust the providence of God, but would wait his Father’s time for feeding him, and would by no means be driven to an act of unbelief and self-reliance.

Matthew 4:5, 6. 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.

This second temptation is a cunning one: he is persuaded rather to believe too much than too little. He is not now to take care of himself, but recklessly to presume, and trust his Father's promise beyond its meaning.

The place was cunningly chosen; temple-pinnacles are not safe standing; high and holy places are open to temptation. The posture was advantageous to the tempter, for nature feels a tendency to fall when set "on a pinnacle." The aim of the fiery dart was at our Lord's Sonship: "If thou be the Son of God." If the enemy could have hurt our Lord's filial confidence, he would have gained his design.

Satan borrowed our Lord's weapon, and said, "It is written"; but he did not use the sword lawfully. It was not in the nature of the false fiend to quote correctly. He left out the necessary words, "in all thy ways": thus he made the promise say what in truth it never suggested, and then boldly prescribed a course which the law of God would condemn, saying, "Cast thyself down." We are to be kept in our ways, but not in our follies. The omission of a word may spoil the meaning of a Scripture; verbal inspiration makes accurate quotation to be a duty, as the omission of a word or two entirely alters the sense. What reliable inspiration can there be except that which suggests words as well as ideas?

Hear how the devil talks about angels, their Lord, their charge, their care, and their diligence: a man may handle holy subjects with great familiarity, and yet be himself unholy. It is ill to talk of angels, and yet to act like devils.

See how the fiend passes from a temptation about humble bread to one of an ambitious and daring character: he hopes by a sudden change to catch the Lord in one way, even if he escaped from him in another. But our Lord was ready for him. His sword was on guard for all kinds of strokes. May his grace keep us in the same manner well armed against the foe! Though the enemy alters his tactics, we must not cease our resistance, or change our weapon.

Matthew 4:7. Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the lord thy God.

"It is written again." One text must not be looked at alone, and magnified out of proportion, as if it were the whole Bible: each utterance of the Lord must be taken in connection with other parts of Scripture. There is a balance and proportion in divine truth. "It is written" is to be set side by side with "It is written again." How short and decisive was the stroke of our Lord upon the great enemy!

He meets a falsely-quoted promise with a plain precept, forbidding us to presume. "Thou shalt not" from the mouth of God is the shield of conscience against a foul temptation. Our rule of action is neither a promise nor a providence; but the clear command of the Lord.

Presumption is a tempting of God; and to "tempt the Lord" is not to be thought of for a moment. Remember, believer, he is "thy God", to be trusted, not to be tempted. The second time the adversary was so completely, baffled that he made no reply, but changed his line of warfare.

Lord, suffer me not to sin presumptuously, nor to act rashly! I see that faith is for ways of obedience, not for flights of fancy. Let me not cast myself down, and so throw myself out of the range of thy promised keeping.

Matthew 4:8, 9. 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.

Wretched traitor! None of these kingdoms were really his own; they were in truth the rightful heritage of the Lord to whom he pretended he could give them. How he opened his mouth and said, "All these things will I give thee"! A poor all after all; and it would only have been a stolen gift had he bestowed it. Yet it would have been to any of us a very dazzling and fascinating sight; for the glories of even one kingdom make hearts beat, and eyes glisten, and feet slip. The bait is sweet, but the hook lies under it.

The glittering glory would be bought too dear by that demand — "fall down and worship me. " If Jesus would have adopted carnal means, he would soon have had "the kingdoms of the world " at his feet. A little tampering with truth, and a little flattery of prejudice, and he might have had many men around him, irresistible in their fanaticism. By their enthusiastic efforts he would soon have been able to wield a mighty power, before which Rome would have fallen. Our holy Lord disdained to use the help of evil, though the master of wickedness promised him success. How could he bow down before the devil? It was the height of impudence for the false fiend to invite worship from the perfect One. Christ at the devil's feet! It reminds us of religion supported by theatricals and raffles. What gift of the foul fiend could tempt the Son of God to be the servant of evil? The tempter does not dare to mention Sonship in this case; for that would have laid the blasphemous suggestion too bare. No son of God can worship the devil.

O Lord, grant that if over we should hunger and be in poverty, like our Lord, we may never yield to the temptation to do wrong to gain wealth and honor, or even the supply of pressing need! May thy Church never yield to the world with the idea of setting up the kingdom of Christ in a more easy and rapid manner than by the simple preaching of the gospel!

Matthew 4:10. Then said Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve .

The Lord spake strongly to the tempter. Satan had betrayed his own character, and now he gets his proper name, and is ordered into his proper place. How that word staggered him — "Get thee hence " ! This was the final word which banished him from the Lord's presence. How he slunk away He hastened off ashamed, like a dog who is sent home.

Our Lord gave him a parting stroke with the sword of the Spirit: again he said, "It is written. " God's command, which demands all worship and service for Jehovah, the covenant God only, was a word for Satan to remember when he dived hastily into the nether deep to hide his head in confusion at his complete defeat. He, too, is under law to God, and cannot cast away his cords from him. Oh, that we may own the power of this precept, and feel that we have nothing to do with winning even the whole world and its glory, but are to give our entire lives to the service of the one Lord! Idolatry of the creature withers under the scorching heat of this imperative law of the Highest. We must not pay even a shade of deference to evil, though the whole world should be the reward of a single act of sinful submission to it: "Him only shalt thou serve. " Ours it is to choose Jehovah for our God, and then to live alone for his praise and service.

It is noteworthy that all the passages quoted by our Lord are from the Book of Deuteronomy, which book has been so grievously assailed by the destructive critics. Thus did our Lord put special honor upon that part of the Old Testament which he foresaw would be most attacked. The past few years have proved that the devil does not like Deuteronomy: he would fain avenge himself for the wounds it caused him on this most memorable occasion.

Matthew 4:11. Then the devil leaveth him, and, behold, angels came and ministered unto him.

The enemy left him when he had shot his last bolt; but even then he left him only for a season, minding to return at the first opportunity. Only when he has tried his utmost will the tempter let a child of God alone, and even then he will watch for another opportunity.

So soon as the evil one had departed, angels appeared to fulfill a ministry for which they eagerly longed, but which the presence of the devil hindered. No doubt they had been hovering near, waiting their opportunity.

These holy beings might not come upon the scene while the battle was being fought, lest they should seem to divide the honors of the day; but when the duel was ended, they hastened to bring food for the body, and comfort for the mind of the champion King. It was a battle royal, and the victory deserved to be celebrated by the courtiers of the heavenly King. Let us behold, these angels, learn from their example, and believe that they are also near to all the warriors of the cross in their hour of conflict with the fiend.

O Tempted but Triumphant King, thy servants worship thee, and ask permission and grace to minister to thee as angels did!

MATTHEW 4:12-25 THE KING SETTING UP

Matthew 4:12. Now when Jesus had heard that John was cast into prison, he departed into Galilee.

The history is not consecutive, for it was not Matthew's design to make it so. He leaves out much that others record, because not suitable for his purpose. Possibly John was put in prison more than once. It seems that the imprisonment of John called our Lord away from the immediate scene of persecution to the more rustic region of Galilee. He became the more publicly active when his forerunner was laid aside. As the morning star is hidden, the sun shines out the more brightly. His departure was not caused by fear, nor by desire of self-pleasing; but he moved under the guidance of the Lord God who sent him.

Matthew 4:13-16. And leaving Nazareth, he came and dwelt in Capernaum, which is upon the sea coast, in the borders of Zabulon and Nephthalim: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Esaias the prophet, saying, The land of Zabulon, and the land of Nephthalim, by the way of the sea, beyond Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles; the people which sat in darkness saw great light; and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death light is sprung up ,

Note how the movements of our King are all ordered according to divine prophecy. "Leaving Nazareth, he came and dwelt in Capernaum " to fulfill a passage in the book of Isaiah. There was an ancient program which settled from of old the track of his royal progresses. He went where the foreknowledge and predestination of Jehovah had declared his way.

He went, moreover, where he was needed, even to "the borders of Zabulon and Nephthalim. " The "real light " encountered the great darkness; the far-off ones were visited by him who gathers together the outcasts of Israel. Our Lord courts not those who glory in their light, but those who pine in their darkness: he comes with heavenly life, not to those who boast of their own life and energy, but to those who are under condemnation, and who feel the shades of death shutting them out from light and hope. "Great light " is a very suggestive figure for the gospel, and "sitting in the region and shadow of death " is a very graphic description of men bowed under the power of sin, and paralyzed by fear of condemnation. What a mercy that to those who appear out of the reach of the usual means, to those who dwell "by the way of the sea, beyond Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles ", Jesus comes with power to enlighten and quicken!

If I feel myself to be an out-of-the-way sinner, Lord, come to me, and cause me to know that "light is sprung up" even for me!

Matthew 4:17. From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

He continued the warning which John had given: "Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. " The King exceeds his herald, but he does not differ from him as to his message. Happy is the preacher whose word is such that his Lord can endorse it! Repentance is the demand of the Law, of the Gospel, and of John, who was the connecting link between the two.

Immediate repentance is demanded because the theocracy is established: the kingdom demands turning from sin. In Christ Jesus God was about to reign among the sons of men, and therefore men were to seek peace with him. How much more ought we to repent who live in the midst of that kingdom! What manner of persons ought we to be who look for his Second Advent! "The kingdom of heaven is at hand ", let us be as men that look for their Lord. O my gracious King and Savior, I pray thee, accept my repentance as to past rebellions as a proof of my present loyalty!

Matthew 4:18, 19. And Jesus, walking by the sea of Galilee, saw two brethren, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers. And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.

Our Lord not only preached the kingdom, but he now began to call one and another into its service, and I privilege. He was "walking by the sea ": and there and then he began his converting, calling, and ordaining work.

Where he found himself living, there he put forth his power. Our sphere is where we are.

Jesus had a special eye for fishers. He summoned to his side the fishing:, brothers whom he had chosen from of old. He had previously called them by grace, and now he calls them into the ministry. They were busy in a lawful occupation when he called them to be ministers: our Lord does not call idlers but fishers. His word was imperial — "Follow me", his work was appropriate to

their occupation as fishers; it was full of royal promise — “I will make you fishers of men ”; and it was eminently instructive; for an evangelist and a fisher have man, points of likeness. From this passage we learn that nobody can make a man-fisher but our Lord himself, and that those whom he calls can only become successful by following him.

Lord, as a winner of souls cause me to imitate thy spirit and method, that I may not labor in vain!

Matthew 4:20. And they straightway left their nets, and followed him.

The call was effectual. No nets can entangle those whom Jesus calls to follow him. They come straightway; they come at all cost; they come without a question; they come to quit old haunts; they come to follow their leader without stipulation or reserve.

Lord, cause me ever to be thy faithful and unhesitating follower as long as I live! May no nets detain me when thou dost call me!

Matthew 4:21, 22. And going on from thence he saw other two brethren, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in a ship with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and he called them. And they immediately left the ship and their father, and followed him.

Our Lord delighted in fishermen: possibly their bold, heart-, outspoken character fitted them for his service. At any rate, these would be the briars upon which he could graft the roses of his grace. Some he calls to preach when casting their nets. and some while mending them; but in either case they are busy. We shall need both to cast and mend nets after we are called unto our Lord's work. Note how our Lord again calls two brethren. Two together are better far than one and one acting singly. The Lord knows that our nature seeks companionship; no companion in work is better than a brother.

This second pair of brothers “left their father ” as well as their fishery; the first left their nets, but these “left the ship ”; the first have no relatives mentioned, but these quitted father and mother for Christ's sake; and they did it as unhesitatingly as the others. It did not seem much of a prospect, to follow the houseless Jesus; but an inward attraction drew them, and they followed on, charmed to obey the voice divine. Zebedee may have thought his sons' going was a great loss to him; but it is not recorded that he expressed any objection to their doing so. Perhaps he gladly gave up his boys for such a service; we feel sure that their mother did. In the service of Jesus we are not to be restrained by ties of kindred: he has a higher claim than father or husband.

Lord, call me, and my brother, and all my family into thy grace, if not into thy ministry!

Matthew 4:23. And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people.

Our Lord was ever on the move: “he went about all Galilee. ” The Great Itinerant made a province his parish. He taught “in their synagogues ”, but he was equally at home in their streets: he cared nothing for consecrated places. Teaching and preaching go well with healing; thus soul and body are both taken care of. Our Lord's great power is seen in the universality of his healing energy: healing “all manner of sickness and all manner of disease. ” Dwell on those words, “all manner. ” But our Lord was not content with miracles for the body, he had the gospel for the soul, that gospel which lies in his own person as King, in his promise of pardon to believers, and in his rule of love over those who are loyal to him. He preached “the gospel of the kingdom ”, a right royal gospel, which made men kings and priests. To this gospel the miracles of healing were so many seals. At this day the healing of souls is an equally sure seal of God upon the gospel.

Lord, I know the truth and certainty of thy gospel; for I have felt thy healing hand upon my heart; may I feel the rule and power of thy kingdom, and joyfully yield myself to thy sway!

Matthew 4:24. And his fame went throughout all Syria: and they brought unto him all sick people that were taken with divers diseases and torments, and those which were possessed with devils, and those which were lunatics, and those that had the palsy; and he healed them.

Of course, men told one another of the great prophet. Even the regions beyond began to hear of him. Syria heard again that there was a God in Israel who could recover a man of his leprosy. Now the worst cases are brought to him; epileptics, the possessed, and the mad were led to him, and were not led in vain. What a bill of diseases we find in this verse! Diseases, torments, devils, lunacy, palsy , and so forth. And what a receipt at the foot: "and he healed them " ! Oh, that men were eager to bring their spiritual ailments to the Savior! It would lead to the same result: in every case we should read, "he healed them. " Our King surrounded himself with the spiritual pomp of gratitude by displaying his power to bless the afflicted. Some kings have pretended to heal by their touch, but Jesus really did so. Never king, or prophet, could work such marvels as he did. Well might "his fame " be great!

Matthew 4:25. And there followed him great multitudes of people from Galilee, and from Decapolis, and from Jerusalem, and from Judea, and from beyond Jordan.

Such a teacher is sure to have a following. Yet how small his spiritual following compared with the "great multitudes " who outwardly came to him! Our King has many nominal subjects; but few there are who know him as their Lord, so as to be renewed in heart by the power of his grace: these alone enter truly into his kingdom, and it is foolish and wicked to talk of including any others in his spiritual domain. Yet is it a hopeful sign when there is a great inquiry after Jesus, and every region and city yields its quota to the hearing throng.

Now we shall hear more from the blessed lips of him who was King in Jerusalem, and also Preacher to the people.