

## Luke 3:21-23, 4:1-13 A Call to Focus

### Introduction

It is all too easy to switch off for those few vital seconds. A car driver momentarily dozing at the wheel; it can be of no consequence when no other vehicles are around, but in heavy traffic and at speed it might be fatal. In a hospital if a member of staff writing down the dosage a patient needs to receive puts a decimal point in the wrong place, a patient might die or receive medication too weak to effect a cure. We can all insert appropriate examples from our own lives that fit this scenario to remind ourselves of the need to stay alert! Most decent people want to do the right thing, but how many have the determination to stay focussed consistently over the longer-term? Jesus, our role model, demonstrated a willingness to obey His Father's will and face the consequences of that obedience through opposition from the devil and other people. How do you respond to the voice of the Holy Spirit prompting you to take action? How do you handle the temptations that are part of our every day experience of life? Many people want to be good, they've got good intentions, but when temptation comes along they give up without a fight. Most people who make an effort to do what is right often find themselves struggling with one specific sin that they just can't seem to shake off. We remember Jesus' words in the Disciples prayer in Matthew 6:13 *And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one* – a prayer to ask God for the strength to resist temptation and to be kept out of its sphere of influence. What is temptation? How do I understand it as a Christian? German pastor and martyr under the Nazi regime Dietrich Bonhoeffer described it in this way: 'At this moment God is quite unreal to us, he loses all reality, and only desire for the creature is real; the only reality is the devil. Satan does not here fill us with hatred of God, but with forgetfulness of God ... The lust thus aroused envelops the mind and will of man in deepest darkness. The powers of clear discrimination and of decision are taken from us.' (Quotation from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*). For the believer Satan does not make us think the vilest of thoughts often either lesser views of God doubting His goodness or in some way implying that He is less generous to us as His children than He really is. Or at other times minimising the impact of participating in the sinful thought, word or deed. It is interesting that it was reported by readers in a survey some years ago in the American magazine the *Discipleship Journal* (Nov/Dec 1992) that temptations were more potent when they had neglected their time with God (81 percent) and when they were physically tired (57 percent). Resisting temptation was accomplished by prayer (84 percent), avoiding compromising situations (76 percent), Bible study (66 percent), and being accountable to someone (52 percent). What kind of things do you struggle with? Don't mention out loud –silently reflect for a moment then ask yourself what strategies do I put in place for overcoming these problems in order that I may be victorious over them?

### **1. The Big Call regarding Baptism** (Luke 3:21-23)

(a) **A Step of obedience** (Luke 3:21)<sup>21</sup> *When all the people were being baptised, Jesus was baptised too.* In Matthew's account of Jesus' baptism there is a major focus on this event and its significance, both to John the Baptist and Jesus. However, Mark and Luke, although recording the basic details of this event point beyond it to the launching of God's kingdom (Mark) and the powerful temptations in the desert (Luke). In fact Mark, after the account of Jesus' baptism, records this of the time of

testing: ***At once the Spirit sent Him out into the desert and He was in the desert for forty days, being tempted by Satan*** (Mark 1:12). Taking a step of obedience in your Christian life does not mean life will get easier; on the contrary it might become significantly harder! We can tend to assume that if we are good for God then He will 'look after us' and help us avoid the hard times other people face! Nothing could be further from the truth. If this was the case here for Jesus who faced His greatest tests on earth, so far, in this time of temptations in the desert, then we must assume that the devil will act in a similar way with us as well. Luke places a great deal of emphasis on the humanity of Jesus and His prayer life and hints that this will be a similar pathway for us to follow, if we want to catch a glimpse of God at work in our lives. Jesus' decision to be baptised upon profession of faith by John was also an act of solidarity with the ordinary people who were willing to stand up and commit their lives to follow God's way, under the preaching of John. *When all the people were being baptised, Jesus was baptised too* (Luke 3:21); He identified with humanity in wanting to be in fellowship with God and had the humility to stand in line behind the ordinary Galilean workers and their families who had stood to profess their trust in the God who had called them to repentance and faith. Taking a stand for God in whatever situation we find ourselves can be a lonely place, even in a crowd.

(b) **A Sound of confirmation** (Luke 3:22-23) *And as He was praying, heaven was opened<sup>22</sup> and the Holy Spirit descended on Him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.<sup>23</sup> Now Jesus Himself was about thirty years old when He began His ministry. He was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph...* Only after Jesus had completed this step of faith and obedience was God the Father's blessing conferred on His conduct in this situation. We would naturally prefer to have some signs of guidance in advance of such steps yet God expects us to accept what His Word says and act upon it without requiring further prompting. It is important to note that the blessing came when Jesus was engaged in a time of prayer. There is no substitute for setting apart time individually for prayer and the reading and reflecting on God's Word. We have plenty of Bible reading schemes that can assist us in planning our devotional schedules; the important step is creating and safeguarding that time. God delights to honour the obedience of His servants. Is there some step of obedience Jesus wants you to take today? Most obviously, if you have never committed your life to Jesus then this is the essential starting point, but only the start of a faith journey with the Lord.

## **2. The Big Picture regarding Temptation**

(a) **It is not a sin to be tempted** (1 Corinthians 10:13) This verse tells us that: *No temptation had seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.* This verse points out that everyone will be tempted which is a test for us all to see if we really mean in practice what we say we believe. We are all individuals –something that is no problem at all to your neighbour may be a real problem for you. Something you have never experienced may be a major issue for them. Sometimes a person can be on their guard in an area of weakness but fall with respect to areas they thought strong and took chances that were unwise. After all temptations are only that if there is an attraction in the potential sin to us. Temptation is having a desire to do something wrong; to be willing to step over the line and take a chance with respect to the consequences. Luke gives draws attention here to the humanity of Jesus. In his genealogy of Jesus in Luke 3 he

concludes in 3:38: *the son of Adam, the son of God*. It is as a human being, in his human nature that Jesus experienced temptation just as you and I experience it. Yet Hebrews 4:14-16 record some amazing words. *Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are –yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.* What an encouragement to us to know that Jesus understands our weaknesses and our struggles. Sin is only a temptation to us because it is attractive on the surface and we find pleasure in entertaining such thoughts at least some of the time. Martin Luther once made the following remark: “You cannot prevent birds from flying overhead; you can prevent them from nesting in your hair.

(b) **No Sin is Irresistible** Temptation may be inevitable, but giving in to temptation isn't. Remember I Corinthians 10:13: *No temptation had seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.* To illustrate that what people believe or say is inevitable isn't always the case, comes from the story of a man whose house was the only one in an area to withstand Hurricane Andrew on 24 August 1992 in southern Florida, because he was the only one to build his home in the area in line with the recommended building code in the period before it became mandatory. Scott Barry, away at University in Oklahoma, called home to Florida and found out that neighbour Leonard Greer had the only complete house left standing in the area. This house had been the one most exposed to the wind in the neighbourhood, yet it was in so much better shape than others nearby. What was the reason? He had built his house himself of local Pine wood and had fastened additional supports to the wood to stand in the face of hurricanes many years earlier. He explained that when he and his wife Nelly were in their small living room, he could literally see his south wall breathe in and out and moving back and forth during the peak of the hurricane (This storm had winds in excess of 175 mph). He announced that it was the most incredible sight he had ever seen. Though his south wall oscillated back and forth throughout the storm the house remained intact, while neighbours' properties were obliterated or at least put beyond use. Hurricane Andrew later landed in south central Louisiana causing damage in that state. It was the most expensive natural disaster in history, up to that date, with estimated damages exceeding \$20 billion. More than sixty people were killed and approximately two million people had to be evacuated from their homes. Leonard and Nelly Greer and their home stood the test. As Christians God can help us stand firm in the time of trials. Through the power of God's grace you can experience victory over temptation.

(c) **God will help you resist temptation** Remember 1 Corinthians 10:13 *No temptation had seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.* Here is a promise from God: If we look to God for deliverance, He will show us a way out. We never need to sin. We must also remember that God is not the source of temptation – James 1:13-14: *Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. 13 When tempted, no-one should say, God is tempting me. For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; 14 but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. 15 Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.*

Remember I John 4:4: *He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world* (NKJV). Hallelujah! Peter warned Christians to stand firm in I Peter 5 giving us this challenge: *Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that He may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you. Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith...* (I Peter 5:6-9a).

### **3. The Big Challenge resisting Temptation**

(a) **The Temptation to be different from what God has called us to be** (Luke 4:1-4) *Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, 2 where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry. 3 The devil said to him, If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread. 4 Jesus answered, It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone'. Here is a challenge to the boundaries given by God and takes us back to Eden and the restriction on eating from the tree in the centre of the Garden. To Adam and Eve Satan asked: 1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, **Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?** 2 The woman said to the serpent, We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, 3 but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.' 4 You will not surely die, the serpent said to the woman. 5 For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil. 6 When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. 7 Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realised that they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. 8 Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. 9 But the Lord God called to the man, Where are you? 10 He answered, I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid. 11 And he said, Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree from which I commanded you not to eat? 12 The man said, The woman you put here with me— she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it. 13 **Then the Lord God said to the woman, What is this you have done?** (Genesis 3:1-13) To Jesus Satan does not bother trying to get Him to question the goodness of God –by contrast he urges Jesus to exercise the independent use of His divine powers –something (Phil.2:6-8) He had given up when He took human flesh and came to earth. Adam could not alleviate hunger by such a miracle; Jesus in His human nature alone could not do so either. Would Jesus take the easy option and sacrifice His solidarity with us –even before His ministry had begun? Jesus determines to live in a manner appropriate for the second Adam, being victorious where the first Adam failed. How does He respond? By quoting Scripture; **It is written** from Deuteronomy 8:2-3: *Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. 3 He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.* Can we trust God to work in our lives His way? This applies across the whole of church life from evangelism to discipleship; worship and relationships – can I trust God enough to lead me and guide me in the right way? Or do I have the option of being a spiritual ‘Del-boy’ or ‘Arthur Daly’ –bending the rules –just a little bit. Remember **It is written!***

**(b) The Temptation to exercise authority in the wrong way (Luke 4:5-8)**

5 *The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world.* 6 *And he said to him, I will give you all their authority and splendour, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to.* 7 *So if you worship me, it will all be yours.* 8 *Jesus answered, It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.* The question here was not about who Jesus was as in the first temptation, but on the nature of the authority which the devil claimed to exercise. Now the devil is very powerful; Revelation 13:2 states: *The dragon gave him his power, his throne and great authority.* This is a reference to the Anti-Christ (the Beast) in the end-times exercising powers given by Satan. What was on offer here *all their authority and splendour for it has been given to me.* Had it been given to Satan? If Jesus was tested first to exercise faith in God to provide for His earthly needs; here He was tested on the question of whom did God desire to have spiritual authority on earth? Daniel 7:18 *But the saints of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it for ever, yes for ever and ever.* Had God gone back on His word or had Satan stolen this authority? Would Jesus offer a little compromise 'serving God and mammon'? watering down His principles? Is He really confident that God has everything under control –or will He yield to the voice in His ear- *Do it my way and it will all be yours.* God's work has to be done God's way to get the blessing. His response: *Jesus answered, It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only* (Deuteronomy 6:3a); To go against this principle Deut.6:15 *For the Lord Your God who is among you is a jealous God and His anger will burn against you, and He will destroy you from the face of the land.* A Christian who lives a life outside God's will must forfeit the blessings He has for them. An unholy church will have its witness removed and ultimately its doors closed. Where are your eyes fixed this morning? Unless we are a God-centred Christ exalting Spirit empowered people we are nothing and will achieve nothing. *Apart from Me,* Jesus said, *you can do nothing* (John 15:5)

**(c) The Temptation to test God rather than trust Him (Luke 4:9-13)** *The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. If you are the Son of God, he said, throw yourself down from here.* 10 *For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; 11 they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.* 12 *Jesus answered, It says: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.* 13 *When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.* There is a place for practising what we preach? As a Christian we are called to exhibit the fruit of the Spirit in our lives? Called to demonstrate our calling – in the words of II Peter 1:10 *Therefore my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure.* However, we are not to put God to the test and presume on particular blessings or answers to prayer that is not in accordance with His will. This is a fine line to tread –at stake is the witness of the Holy Spirit. God did not want Jesus to do this stunt –nor does He want His followers today to do things to impress other people. To jump off the temple would have forced God to act to prevent the mission of Jesus ending before it had really begun. However, to have carried out this act would have been to follow Satan's agenda. The hardest temptations to resist are not ones inviting us to commit gross sin, rather to do legitimate and lawful things that are outside the will of God for us, individually and collectively. What was Jesus' response again? ***It is written: Do not put the Lord your God to the test*** (Deuteronomy 6:16).

The devil was subtle not stupid. The first test appealed to a legitimate need for food. The second was to question who had the authority on earth and to challenge who He really is - God the Son. The third is an apparent biblical invitation to take

God up on an apparent Old Testament promise. Satan is quoting the Bible (Psalm 91:11-12)! The temptations were deceptive, appearing legitimate. Ephesians 6:11 warns us to *take your stand against the devil's schemes*. Praise God Satan was defeated however v13 warns us that *he left him **until an opportune time***.

Jesus modelled God's call to focus in His life. He knew and accepted that life would not be easy when He travelled the road to the cross. In His case baptism, in ours it may be something else? Whatever the Lord has placed on our hearts may we listen to that inner voice of the Spirit and respond with obedience. Praise God for the victories you and I have, but be on your guard the devil will be back. However remember the words of James 4:7: *Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Amen*