

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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CHAPTER SIX

MATTHEW 4:1-11

WE have now to consider the King in His relation to the great under-world of evil, and to its god, **“the prince of the power of the air.”**

The King has come, not merely to reign. There is an initial work devolving upon Him that of subduing the Kingdom to Himself. He does not enter into a Kingdom waiting for Him, responsive to His claim. He comes to a Kingdom characterized by anarchy and rebellion.

In God's economy of the Kingdom, a Man is to be King. But this Man, if indeed He is to receive the Kingdom, and reign over it, must be demonstrated as personally victorious over these forces of antagonism, by victory over the master foe. The King has been attested as being in perfect harmony with the order and beauty of the heavens, in the word that God spoke at His baptism, **“This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased.”** But He is now to face the disorder and the ugliness of the abyss. Goodness at its highest He knows, and is. Evil at its lowest He must face, and overcome.

The subject reveals Him to us in three ways:

- First, as perfect Man;
- Secondly, as Man demonstrated perfect through testing; and
- Finally, as Man victorious, and therefore fitted for supremacy.

I. In this story of the temptation, the King is revealed as perfect Man

Turning our attention for a moment from the enemy and his method, and fixing it upon the Person of Jesus, we see in the background, not distinctly described, but most evidently present, God's ideal of humanity.

This is brought out in the threefold movement of temptation.

This temptation is an orderly temptation, if we may use such a word in speaking of any method of hell; it is utterly disorderly in the profounder sense; but it is a scientific and systematic attack upon a Man. It is this we need to see. These temptations are not the swift, sudden, subtle, insidious temptations that sweep upon men. Our Lord faced such also; but these constitute an organized and systematic attack upon a man in every department of his life.

Mark in one brief glance the order of the temptations.

- First, an appeal to the physical nature - bread;
- Secondly, an appeal to the spiritual nature - trust in God;
- Finally an appeal to the vocational purpose - Here are the Kingdoms of the world for which Thou hast come, take them from me.

In that glance there stands revealed in all the somber shade, and yet the vivid light of the wilderness, God's Man. What is man? Physical and spiritual in being; yet existing, not merely for the sake of existence, but for a purpose. Material, spiritual, vocational. In this order Matthew records the temptations.

We see Jesus in this first temptation as of the earth. He is of the material order, consciously realizing all the facts of the material life, its limitations and its necessities. He depends upon the material for the sustenance of the material side of His nature; He is a Man Who fasts for a long time, but afterwards becomes conscious of His hunger. Superior, in His material nature, to all the material order; able for a period not to eat; yet needing to eat eventually in order to the sustenance of His life.

That is the first fact about man, any man. There are differences between this Man and other men, because others are not perfect men; they are members of a ruined and fallen race. This Man is a perfect Man according to the Divine pattern, but in the essential facts of being - He is our Kinsman.

We are children of the earth, and the first thing we come into contact with, if we meet each other, is the material. We do not know the spiritual fact of the man we meet in the street. We must get nearer to him before we can know that.

Here in the wilderness is Jesus of Nazareth of the dust, but crowned and glorified; yet, dust as every man is. Man on his physical side is the highest and final fact in God's material creation, superior to everything else; rising over every form of life, master of the rest, regnant in the midst of a magnificent creation, of which he is the consummation and culmination. The physical side is temporal, transient; but it is essential to this strange and marvellous thing which we speak of as human nature.

In the second of these temptations we see Jesus, no longer of the earth, material; but of the infinite, spiritual.

In that spiritual nature He is conscious of God, seeks to know the will of God, is submissive to the spiritual order, yields to the law of God.

- On the material side He is of the earth, and something of the earth is needed to sustain Him: bread.
- On the spiritual side He is of the infinite, and something of the infinite is needed to sustain Him.

Thus here we see a Man, physical and spiritual, but the spiritual is the deepest fact in His life, as it is the deepest fact in every life. The physical is temporary, transient, and passing; the spiritual is the abiding and the supreme.

Then once again, in the third temptation, Jesus is seen as existing for a purpose. He was born to serve. He was equipped in His being for service. He knew that service could only be rendered as He worshipped God. **“Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve.”**

Here, then, is revealed the Man Whom God ordained to be King God’s archetypal Man, the perfect Man and as we look at Him we see that the supreme end of life is vocation; that the essence of life is spiritual; that the present expression of the spiritual fact and vocation is physical.

Temptation commences in the external, which is physical; passes to the internal, which is spiritual; attacks finally the vocational, which is the supreme thing in the life of every man.

This is the picture of human life, according to the purpose of God.

The government of such beings is placed by God in the authority of One of them; but the King must be unimpaired in realization of the Divine Ideal.

- A man who has failed at any point cannot govern men. He cannot govern those who have not failed, and he certainly cannot redeem those who have failed.
- A man who has prostituted his physical nature to base uses;
- A man who has silenced and stifled and dwarfed his spiritual nature;
- A man who has failed to realize his vocation, cannot be king.

An imperfect being cannot demand our loyalty; we cannot be loyal to inferiority; we cannot bow the knee and worship in the presence of anything other than perfection. That is only one side of the great story.

See it from the other side, and in view of the fact with which we commenced this study that the King has first to subdue to Himself a Kingdom full of anarchy and rebellion. He cannot do it if there be anarchy in His own personality. If there be failure in His own life, His arm is paralyzed, His heart lacks courage, and He cannot redeem. There must be the perfection of humanity in order to reign over humanity.

II. Therefore, in order to reign, the perfect One must be demonstrated perfect through testing

Here we touch the deepest mystery and majesty of human nature. The awful and yet magnificent responsibility of choice is imposed upon every individual. Man stands in his probation between two possibilities. He can use his whole nature in response to evil, or to good, both in the material and spiritual realms, for evil and good assault and woo him.

Again we are bound to pause and make a distinction between the perfect Man and ourselves. It is still true that we are called to choose between evil and good, but we start in life, and find that when the choice is presented to us we would do the good, but evil is present with us; and that perpetually in our life, we want to choose the good, and would choose it, but the force and passion of evil and the feebleness resulting therefrom are in us, and we cannot.

Some man says, That is exactly the truth. That is what I want explained in my case. What am I to do? In answer “**Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound,**” and while in our own unaided strength, the strength of the nature into which we were born, we cannot do good; in the strength and victory that this Man won, and the work He did, we can choose and do the good if we will, and there is no reason why any man should continue in sin.

But let us get back to Jesus in the wilderness. He stood alone. There were no forces burning within Him which He could not overcome. He occupied the position which was occupied by the first Adam before he failed. Standing there, with a perfect Manhood in the presence of temptation, He must be tested, and make His choice between the good and the evil.

The first purpose of the enemy is the spoiling of the instrument of expression. He appeals to the physical, he appeals to the material, he appeals to that external fact in the Person of Jesus, through which impressions are received by the spirit, and through which the spirit for a while is to express itself.

The occasion of the testing is the proper desire for sustenance. This Man felt the clamant cry of the physical, for material sustenance. Here was His infirmity.

What is an infirmity? We are told by the writer of the letter to the Hebrews that “**we have not a high priest that cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities.**” What are these infirmities? A man with an atrociously bad temper says, That is my infirmity. That is not so; that uncontrolled temper is sin. A man with some evil habit, for which he blames his father, says, That is my infirmity. It is not; it is sin.

An infirmity is a weakened power that requires strengthening.

You go forth to toil and work, and presently there comes to you the sense of hunger. That is an infirmity. Oh, you say, I always thought hunger was a sign of strength. No, it is a sign of weakened strength, a beneficent, beautiful sign, a sign that you are in health, a sign that God is still governing your life, at least on the physical side.

Your hunger is the voice that says, Supply sustenance, and the thing that makes you need sustenance is that the physical part of you is weakened for the moment. That is your infirmity. That weakening is the avenue through which temptation comes; it presents itself to the clamant cry of a weakened power, properly weakened through exercise. And a man who never weakens his powers is wasting his life; a man who never takes the force that is in him and uses it until it grows a little flaccid and nerves give way, is wasting his life. Yet that weakened power is the opportunity of temptation.

Now, what is the testing? It is as though the enemy had said: There is an inter-relation between the two sides of Thy nature. The physical is hungry; but Thou art the Son of God, Thou art offspring of God, Thou art kin of God; there is in Thee this spiritual entity. Turn Thy spiritual nature into a means of satisfying Thy material need without reference to the will of God. If Thou art the Son of God, if Thou hast a spiritual nature, use that power in order to turn stones into bread, and satisfy Thy physical need. Act for Thyself, prove Thy Sonship by Thy independence.

The perfection of the Man Jesus is demonstrated in His refusal.

Hunger was not wrong; bread was not an improper thing; but Jesus stands for evermore in the isolated splendor of the wilderness saying to man; It is better to be hungry than to be fed without reference to the will of God. I cannot, He says, take hold of a spiritual capacity, and use it for the supply of a proper physical need, without reference to the will of My Father. I cannot act in independence as a Son; the essence of Sonship is obedience; and if for the moment the circumstances into which the Spirit has led Me necessitate My hunger, then I will do nothing to alter the Divine condition and surrounding. I do not live only by bread; man lives also by the word of God that which conditions His life. And so in the first temptation against the physical He is victorious.

Next came the test of the spiritual.

What is the purpose here? If, in the first, it was the spoliation of the instrument, here it is the ruin of the essential.

The occasion of the test of the spiritual is the strain which has just been put upon the spiritual relationship by the choice made to suffer hunger by faith in God. The material victory was a spiritual victory. And in the moment of that victory what happened? A Man feeling all the pangs of hunger, all the weariness of weakness, said; I choose the hunger, and choose the weakness, because, essentially, I am not material, but spiritual. And the hunger continues, and there is a strain put upon relationship; and as the strain is put upon relationship the tempter comes again, and says, "**If Thou be the Son of God.**"

The suggestion is that He should make improper use of the relation between the spiritual essence, and the physical mode of expression; that He should take the instrument, and venture something heroic in demonstration of the perfection of His spiritual nature.

It is as though the enemy had said to the perfect Man, You have declared your allegiance in response to my first temptation; you have declared your trust in God; very well; if you do trust Him, venture something on your trust; do something heroic; do something splendid; show how much you trust in God by flinging yourself from the pinnacle of the temple.

- The moment a man begins to tempt God, to prove trust; he proves that he does not trust.
- The moment a man begins to do something heroic to demonstrate trust, he gives evidence that trust is lacking.

Perfect trust is quiet, and waits. Trust trembling, wants to do something heroic to make it steady. Jesus said, No, My trust is so perfect that I need to do nothing heroic to prove it. **“Thou shalt not tempt.”** The spiritual nature retained its dignity; He refused to do anything spectacular.

Finally, the temptation moved into the last realm.

Its purpose was the prevention of the accomplishment of the work of the King. Its occasion was the consciousness of victory already won, and the consequent new flaming of the supreme passion to serve. The moment you have won a great victory, in the power of the victory won, you want to be doing.

Jesus had won a victory in the physical realm, and had won a victory in the spiritual realm. Now the enemy came again and said: Well, you have won, you have not failed as an instrument; now here is your work; here are the kingdoms of the world; you have come for them; give me one moment's homage, and I will abdicate. What a lie it was!

Did he imagine for a moment that he could deceive Immaculate Purity this way? He was a liar from the beginning, and he never lied more directly. I will give Thee the kingdoms! Never would he have done so. That was the tempting bait.

Jesus saw the kingdoms, and their glory, but He saw all the permeating influence of evil and destruction, and He knew had He not consented to it in baptism? that these kingdoms could only be won by blood and suffering, and death. And with the voice of quiet authority, He said, **“Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God and Him only shalt thou serve,”** which is to say, My vocational power is assured under the Divine Government, and I abide there. I will take these kingdoms from God, in God's way.

In His answer there is a prophecy, a flaming prophecy. **“Get thee hence.”**

Thou dost offer Me the kingdoms if I will give thee homage; I will take the kingdoms by turning thee out: **“Get thee hence, Satan!”**

Thus the King is demonstrated perfect by victory.

III. The great value of all this is discovered as it is remembered that the victory was won wholly within the sphere of human life

To every assault of evil He has answered wholly as Man.

There is no obtrusion of Deity into the conflict. The law He quoted was man's law, and in human obedience to that law, He has won.

But His victory was the victory of a Man with God. Every man by original design and creation is offspring of God, and has certain claims on God. Man can urge his claim on God if he fulfills the law of God. Jesus fulfilled the law, and urged His claim, and in communion with God, He won His victory.

And yet, thank God, His victory was won not only as Man, and as Man with God, but for men. To defeat the victor is to save the vanquished, and one reads that one brief sentence at the close, that makes one's soul thrill with music "**the devil leaveth Him.**"

Thus the great personal conflict is over. There are other battles to be fought and won, but they will be in more direct sense representative and redeeming. Never again will the foe directly attack Him, and in the open. The attack was made against every vulnerable point hunger, trust, and responsibility and when these are held, there remains no other avenue through which the foe can assault the citadel of the human will. The need of material sustenance, the spirit's confidence in God, and the carrying out of a Divine commission in a Divine way, these are all the avenues. The King has held every one. His defeated foe now leaves Him, and the King in personal life, and character, and victory, holds the field.

~ end of chapter 6 ~

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