

# **The Temptation of Christ**

**Dr. Charles Vogan**

Copyright © 2003 Charles R. Vogan Jr.  
All rights reserved

Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION,  
Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used by permission of  
Zondervan Bible Publishers.

## **The Temptation of Christ**

In Matthew 4 we have the story of the temptation of Christ. The Spirit led Jesus out into the wilderness to fast for forty days, and then Satan approached him with particularly tempting offers to reveal himself to the world.

The standard interpretation of this story is that Satan knew exactly who Jesus was, and he wanted Jesus to “come out of hiding,” so to speak, and tell the world that he was the Son of God. Perhaps, we are told, if he was successful in getting Jesus to announce himself openly, he would have achieved some diabolical purpose of his. But that interpretation doesn’t seem to make sense in several respects. For one thing, the temptations that Satan offered Jesus are amazingly bold offers to be making the Son of God. Satan had already had dealings with God in the past, and he always came out the loser. What purpose would Satan have in challenging God to be almighty and powerful? Why would he come before God with a temptation? He’s not stupid; he knows who God is, and how God works, and that whatever God does will only be the undoing of Satan’s kingdom. Why would he purposely put himself within range of his enemy?

Another problem with the standard interpretation is the last temptation that Satan makes. If Jesus was the Son of God, and Satan knew that, why would he offer the world to someone who already owns the world? It’s true that Satan has power over the world; the Scripture says that he’s the “ruler of the kingdom of the air.” (Ephesians 2:2) He has all nations under his thumb, doing his will, and therefore he certainly has the authority to give power and wealth (at least the limited resources he has access to, by God’s permission) to whomever he wishes. But can he hope to tempt the Creator with only part of the Creation, and a perverted part at that? What does he hope to achieve by offering the Son of God a portion of what he is already an heir to?

In light of these perplexing aspects to the story, it seems to me that we have to take a different direction if we want to understand what’s going on here. We need to ask another question in order to open up the mystery: did Satan know who Jesus was?

### ***Did Satan know who Jesus was?***

Let’s assume for the moment that Satan *didn’t* know who Jesus was. Does the story make more sense in that light? Let’s review the facts with that assumption in mind.

- **Jesus was a man** – Let’s not forget that Jesus was a man. It may not be impressive to us; but to Satan, for God to be a man was beyond comprehension. Nothing like this had ever happened in the past, and God certainly didn’t let everybody know ahead of time what his strategy would be in sending his Son as a man. It was a complete surprise to everyone. This was the thinking behind the act of Jesus setting aside his glory: in doing so, people at first glance would miss who he really was. Satan was no exception.

In a war, it’s wise on the commander’s part to withhold certain information before the battle. After all, he doesn’t want his enemy to know all of his plans! The element of surprise is one of the most powerful weapons we can use to defeat the enemy. And when the Son of God came as a man, nobody would be expecting such a move and certainly nobody could foresee how that would affect the outcome of the battle. Satan was just as much in the dark about the key strategy of God as anybody else was. The fact that he’s on the scene, however, probing into the event should be no surprise; what would be surprising, and very unlikely, is that he would have known immediately what was going on.

- **“If you are the Son of God ...”** – It’s interesting that Satan worded it like this. If he knew that Jesus was really the Son of God, why would he be so careful and wary around his opponent? What he’s doing in this encounter, however, is probing: he’s exploring because *he doesn’t know what he’s up against yet*. He’s bold because he is dealing with a man, not God himself (at least as far as he knows at this point). He challenges Jesus, he makes irreverent interpretations of Scripture, he obviously doesn’t have any respect for God – all because he thinks he is dealing with *just* a man, not with God directly. He’s used to dealing with men and he knows what will successfully tempt them. And he’s using those same tactics here.
- **The announcement of the Son** – In order to understand what’s happening in this account, it would help tremendously if we look at the immediate context. Up in the previous chapter, we have the story of God sending his Spirit down on Jesus during his baptism. Keep in mind that all through the first three chapters of Matthew, we’ve seen many examples of how Jesus set aside his glory – he purposely put aside every outward proof of his divinity, power, majesty, anything at all that would strike people that he was God. What he did take upon himself was every possible outward appearance of weakness,

humanity, unimportance, the very opposite of what we would expect to see in God.

Then, when Jesus is in the process of identifying himself yet again with sinners (his baptism – remember John’s protest that it wouldn’t be appropriate for the Messiah to undergo such a ceremony!) God announces his Son to the world:

“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”  
(Matthew 3:17)

This is the clearest statement yet to the dark world about the real identity of Jesus. It was made in the hearing of those at the Jordan waiting to be baptized, but we can be certain that it rang through the dark corridors of Satan’s realm. It was like a trumpet blast that woke up the devil, and sent him scurrying to check out this challenger to his realm.

It’s not surprising, therefore, that Satan shows up to see for himself who this man is. Again, we need to remember that we read this story after the fact – we already know who Jesus is. Satan didn’t; he was in the dark about this man, and he struggled to understand what the Gospels have since clearly spelled out for us in detail.

- **The mystery of the Gospel** – The Gospel is the good news of the arrival of the King to take control over his Kingdom. Jesus announced it himself:

“The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15)

It’s called a mystery, however, by Paul – because on the surface it doesn’t look at all like a spiritual takeover from Heaven!

In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets. (Ephesians 3:4-5)

Physically, it looked for all the world like a poor carpenter’s son preaching morals and doing good deeds, challenging the religious authorities, and getting crucified for his efforts. The result was a band

of fishermen and laborers spreading around a new religion to take its place alongside the other religions of the world.

The truth, however, is underneath the surface. This was God's strategy: to veil the spiritual with the physical, so that it would require faith, not sight, to pick up on it. The world would never be able to understand Jesus; God's people, however, who have been given "eyes to see and ears to hear" (Matthew 13:16) would be able to understand the mystery that the world's wise men couldn't see.

Satan was running right into the brick wall of this mystery. We could say that it was Jesus' first test case. His long efforts at setting aside his outward glory in order to take on humility paid off when he met in battle his first and most formidable opponent, and yet his true identity remained undetected.

- **Satan knew God very well** – We also have to keep in mind the fact that Satan knew God, in one respect, far better than we do. He's known God since the beginning, since his own creation. He has seen God in his glory, in his majesty and power. He has had personal experience of God's power and wisdom – unfortunately, he was on the wrong end of the stick when it happened. He has seen the myriad of angels around God's throne, and has heard the oracles and commands that were issued from the throne to control the entire universe. We have seen little or none of this about God; all of our information comes from eyewitnesses, from secondary sources, not from personal experience.

So when Satan meets someone who claims to be the Son of God, he is naturally incredulous. We easily believe the story because we haven't seen the supreme height that Jesus used to occupy; Satan couldn't believe it because he *does* know God's supremacy. He can't fathom that the Master of the Universe would come, or even *could* come, down to such a low level. Satan despises humankind; he can't fathom the idea that the Creator would willingly become one of his own lowly subjects. And to make it even more of a mind-boggling conundrum, would God willingly put himself under the power and access of his old enemy the devil – right in the middle of Satan's empire of darkness? It was too much for Satan to accept right away.

The reason that Satan even tried to tempt Jesus was because he really didn't believe the claim about Jesus. His knowledge of the Almighty made him believe it to be impossible that God could become

man; so he was pretty brazen about approaching this man and settling the problem. His intentions, I believe, was to try this impostor and score another success against God's kingdom: another prophet succumbs to the devil's schemes, unable to resist the temptations of the flesh.

There's another aspect to this drama that we should be aware of. Other religions claim to know God, but all of their descriptions of him are so off the mark – that is, they contradict the Bible so badly – that they obviously aren't talking about the same God that Christians believe in. In fact, they are *lies* about God that Satan himself has been careful to spread and develop throughout most of humanity. One aspect of many of those religions is that their gods are anthropomorphic – that is, they have a human form or human characteristics. It's been a tool in the devil's bag of tricks for thousands of years. For example, the Greeks believed in man-like gods who lived on Mt. Olympus, and they have many stories to tell about the sins and foibles of their gods. After all, the Jews religiously held to the doctrine of Deuteronomy 6:4 – “The LORD our God, the LORD, is one,” and Exodus 20:4 – “You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.”

When Jesus appeared, therefore, supposedly as the Son of God in human form, Satan of course was incredulous. Such an idea was a handy tool of his own to confuse and mislead ignorant fools away from the true God! He himself, however, was too smart to fall for that old trick.

- **Nobody knew yet** – We forget that at this point of the story of Christ, almost nobody knew yet who he really was. He hasn't done any miracles yet that would be convincing proof of his nature and ministry. He hasn't even done any teaching, which we are told was proof enough for some to think he was the Son of David and a force to be reckoned with. All that has happened at this stage was that he was baptized, and God announced openly that this was his Son.

Later on in the ministry of Christ, the thought would dawn on all sorts of people that there was indeed something special about Jesus. Even the demons that possessed people would challenge him and plead for mercy from him. But all that would come after his teachings and miracles; the news would spread around like wildfire behind him, as he lived and worked among the people. Even Satan would

eventually realize his mistake in not recognizing the Son of God at the beginning.

It should be no surprise, therefore, and it is certainly something we would expect, that Satan probes at the beginning because he *really doesn't know* who this man is.

- **The proof would be a miracle** – Notice what Satan tempts Jesus to do: he wants to see a miracle. The standard interpretations of this passage imply that a miracle would be a sin on Jesus' part – as if he should do without bread! Actually the Lord was hungry, and making bread would have been no sin on his part. Satan wasn't tempting him to take care of his hunger – he was trying to draw Jesus out into the open with the one thing that would prove his claim of being the Son of God.

If Jesus really was the Son of God, then he would be able to do impossible things – things that only God can do. Ordinary men can't do miracles because they don't have that power over Creation that the Lord has. They can only work with the materials at hand; Satan knew that. It looked for all the world that Jesus was only a man, but if he could be talked into doing a miracle, then Satan would know immediately that Jesus really was the Son of God (inconceivable though it was to him) and he could take appropriate measures to deal with this new kind of threat to his kingdom.

- **The religious leaders had the same problem** – Later in Jesus' ministry, the same problem arose for the same reasons. The Sadducees and Pharisees were terribly offended at his teachings, his claim to be God's Son, his authority, and his awesome displays of power. The entire ministry of Christ seemed to say that the leaders were dealing with an extraordinary man here, someone whose claims to divinity may well be justified. That didn't fit into their world-view, however, and they came to him repeatedly to challenge his claims.

The thing they were most offended about was his claim to divinity. To a good Jew, that was an insult to the spiritual God. There is only *one* God; Deuteronomy 6:4 teaches this. They weren't about to accept a pagan idea that God would come as a man. Their strategy, legally, was to get Jesus to clearly say that he was the Son of God and then, by their Law, they would have enough of a case to execute him for blasphemy.

So, they tried to tempt him to show his hand. They took the same approach as their father the devil (see John 8:44) – they challenged Jesus to produce a miracle, on the spot, something that only God can do. They of course didn't think he was God, and they expected only a blasphemous claim (with no proof) that he was God's Son. But it's interesting to see that their approach is the same one that Satan used. They knew exactly how to find the answer to the mystery!

“What miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do?” (John 6:30)

“He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen one.” (Luke 23:35)

Even at his trial, the one charge that successfully stuck and convicted him was the idea that a mere man claimed to be the Son of God.

- **It takes faith** – Jesus put aside his glory, in other words all the outward signs of his majesty and divinity, for a reason. He and the Father wanted people to believe the truth about him not by what their physical senses told them, but through *faith*. Salvation is made up of spiritual treasures, not earthly ones; we need to get in touch with Heaven if we want help. So, Jesus was determined not to look like God on the outside. People have to see something more than that in him if they are going to believe in him.

Faith is a special spiritual skill that penetrates the outward physical appearances of this world. We all know that it's often misleading to go by appearances. The way this world works, appearances can be deceiving – something that our senses told us would be good often turns out to be destructive. We need to penetrate beyond the physical world and see the spiritual foundation that holds the world together, which guides it along God's eternal purposes. We weren't born with this ability, however; it comes from God as a gift. It's the spiritual vision needed to see God as he truly is, to see this world for what it really is, and to see ourselves and our real spiritual needs.

Faith is the key to understanding Jesus – but not everyone has that faith. When Jesus put off his glory, he made faith an absolute requirement if we're going to understand him! Without faith we will never see or know the truth about Jesus. We have proof of that by the various reactions that people had toward him in the Gospels. Those

who had no faith were confused and offended by him; they never did understand who he was or what he came to do – which is why they never took advantage of what he could do for them. But those with faith were able to see the truth about him.

You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. (Matthew 16:16)

The centurion replied, “Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof.” (Matthew 8:8)

Now if it’s a requirement that a person have faith in order to know the truth about Christ, we can safely say that Satan was totally in the dark about him at the beginning! Faced with a man, not yet acquainted with his teaching or miracle ministry, knowing his beginnings as a carpenter’s son and a poor man in society, and going only on his own powers of observation and reason, of course Satan didn’t penetrate the veil and see the Son of God. He couldn’t; faith isn’t something that is open to Satan. God would never give him that gift. He can only go by what he sees. He has seen God in his glory, and he can see this poor, hungry, self-proclaimed prophet. He sees nothing more than that, since he doesn’t have the spiritual vision that faith gives.

### ***Jesus led by the Spirit***

We have to keep in mind what Jesus was doing – there was a reason that he put aside his glory. Such a thing would seem not only unthinkable to those who know God best, but unnecessary. Why would the Son of God, the heir of the universe, dispense with what rightfully belongs to him – especially when it would come in very useful in his ministry?

The reason is that there has to be a new beginning for man, and Jesus himself is going to pioneer the way for the rest of us. Instead of directing things from the throne in Heaven, he came to earth to start up, try out, and establish every step of the way between the old and new creations. Since the old (first) creation was ruined by sin, it must be destroyed and then resurrected to a new kind of life – a life of the Spirit, righteousness, and eternity. And in an astonishing strategic move that would make sure that this program will happen and succeed, Jesus came himself as a physical man – was destroyed (on the cross) – and was raised from the dead as a new man. In himself he laid the foundations for the eternal Church, the new Creation, to replace the old world.

So he set himself limits to live under. For example, he willingly submitted to the Law's demands. (Galatians 4:4) He also was determined to live as God expects every man to live – which means that he was filled with the Spirit and led by the Spirit. (Matthew 3:16) He wouldn't have had to submit to the Spirit's leading like this, since he technically is the Spirit's equal (being one of the Persons of the Trinity, just as the Spirit is). But as a man he *must* submit to the Spirit, to “fulfill all righteousness.”

It's in this special role – the perfect man – that Jesus deals with the temptations of Satan. He could have easily dealt Satan a death blow if he wanted and ended the matter. But his mission was to successfully live as a child of God who pleases God with everything he does and says. So he resisted the temptation to rise to Satan's bait, hid his glory from Satan (so successfully that Satan couldn't discern his true nature), and answered the temptations properly as a Spirit-filled man.

This is the source of Satan's confusion. He knew God well enough that the least smell of divinity – doing a miracle, for instance – would have alerted him to the presence of God in Christ. But he didn't have any idea of the plan of salvation: that Jesus himself would become the perfect man and carve out the path to Heaven for the rest of us to follow. It's Christ's identity with us that Satan didn't anticipate.

So Jesus refuses to accept the enemy's challenge; he won't give Satan what he's probing for. Keeping in mind the confusion, the spiritual darkness in Satan's mind, and the deliberate hiding of Christ's glory for purposes mentioned above, what would naturally occur to Satan? What would he think after offering Jesus the opportunity of “glorifying” himself by doing a couple of miracles – especially things that he certainly had the right and authority to do, *if* his claims were true?

What he would naturally think is that Jesus *isn't* the Son of God. He couldn't do the miracles required (so Satan thought), and only offered up some lame excuses based on loyalty to God. Satan has heard that line before from well-meaning desert ascetics and would-be prophets. He didn't take the “strong arm” approach to temptation that Satan is used to seeing in the glorious, sin-hating God. So, the devil figured that he was an impostor – but a dangerous impostor, nonetheless. Anybody who would start out his life work with a sign from Heaven and the blessing of a prophet of John's stature could be a dangerous opponent if not immediately controlled. Thus his last offer to Jesus.

“All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.”  
(Matthew 4:9)

Seeing it from this angle, the last offer makes perfect sense. Notice that Satan doesn't start by saying "if you are the Son of God" as he did the other two temptations. By now he thinks that the claim is false. Plus, this offer fits only with the theory that he doesn't believe that Jesus is the Son of God. What, after all, would the real Son of God want with the part of the world that Satan controls when he is already Lord of all? But if Jesus was only a man, this offer would be a staggering proposal for launching into a world-wide effort that wouldn't be possible to achieve otherwise.

### ***Later, Satan realizes the true situation***

Later on in Jesus' ministry, Satan obviously has learned from his mistake – but too late. A good commander will hide his plans at the beginning of the battle; then when events unfold, the enemy finds himself at a terrible disadvantage and can never catch up – even though he gradually learns what those plans were. He can only helplessly watch his army being destroyed. Satan labored under the same disadvantages.

For example, the demons knew who Jesus was and pleaded with him to spare them any torment. How did they know? The answer is simple: by then Christ's teachings and works had been revealed, made plain, and advertised all over the countryside. If news travels quickly in human circles, it no doubt travels almost instantly in spiritual circles. Satan would have lost no time alerting his servants to the presence of the enemy in their ranks!

Notice too that even though the forces of Satan came to realize Christ's true nature, he strictly forbade them to announce it.

In the synagogue there was a man possessed by a demon, an evil spirit. He cried out at the top of his voice, "Ha! What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!" "Be quiet!" Jesus said sternly. "Come out of him!" Then the demon threw the man down before them all and came out without injuring him. (Luke 4:33-35)

The reason was that he was determined that people see him through faith, not by sight. He will continue moving about "incognito," so to speak, hiding his glory yet doing the work his Father sent him to do. People would continue to be confused about him and not know exactly what to think of him. But to those who received the Spirit from the Father, he would be seen as the Christ. Those who follow him will do so only because they can see past the outward appearances; they have the gift of faith that rises above this world and comes into the spiritual world of God.

## ***Proof of Satan's incredulity***

There is another proof in the Bible that Satan really was in the dark about Jesus. In 1 John we are told about antichrist, the great archenemy of God who works to destroy the kingdom of God.

This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world. (1 John 4:2-3)

Evidently Satan really can't fathom the root idea of the Gospel – that Jesus has come into the flesh to become the New Man, which is our only hope for salvation. He can't see how or why God would do such a demeaning thing. All his servants attack this very idea of the Christ; it's how we can tell who have been deceived by Satan. Because none of his servants can accept the idea, this is strong proof that Satan – in the story about Christ's temptations – was completely in the dark about who he was really dealing with. Evidently he knows now who Jesus is and what he has come to do, but he still can't fully grasp what God has done. The incarnation of Christ is a weapon that destroys the foundations of the enemy's kingdom.