

Knowing God in the Word

That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death. Philippians 3:10.

Contradictions in Scripture: The Temptations of Christ

The one who chooses to believe the Bible as God's Word and the source of all truth will soon find that there will be opposition to his stand. Many self-proclaimed "experts" will argue that the Bible is full of errors, as if their saying so settled the matter. Others with a limited knowledge of the Bible will claim to have found errors, although the error is usually only in the investigation of the one who is opposing the Scriptures. But there are some good arguments that are put forth against the four gospels. Since these books record many of the same or similar events, it is inevitable that the one who wishes to discredit the Scriptures would look here to try to find evidence for his position. Thus, I have taken up the examination of some of the passages in question to see if the supposed discrepancies are real.

In this light, we come to the temptations of Christ as recorded in Matthew and Luke. There is a glaring problem here, and that is that the temptations are recorded in a different order in the two gospels. If the Scripture is indeed infallible, the detractors say, then why are these two passages at odds as to the order in which these temptations of Satan were made? Obviously, one must be right and the other wrong, for the temptations could not have happened in both orders, could they?

A good question. Let us examine each one of the temptations and compare the details given in both gospels. First we will examine Luke.

Luke 4:1. Then Jesus, being filled with the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, 2. being tempted for forty days by the devil. And in those days He ate nothing, and afterward, when they had ended, He was hungry.
3. And the devil said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread."
4. But Jesus answered him, saying, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God.'"
5. Then the devil, taking Him up on a high mountain, showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. 6. And the devil said to Him, "All this authority I will give You, and their glory; for *this* has been delivered to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. 7. Therefore, if You will worship before me, all will be Yours."
8. And Jesus answered and said to him, "Get behind Me, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.' "
9. Then he brought Him to Jerusalem, set Him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down from here. 10. For it is written: 'He shall give His angels charge over you, To keep you,'
11. and,
'In *their* hands they shall bear you up, Lest you dash your foot against a stone.'"
12. And Jesus answered and said to him, "It has been said, 'You shall not tempt the LORD your God.' "
13. Now when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from Him until an opportune time.

Now let us compare this passage with the same story in the book of Matthew.

Matthew 4:1. Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2. And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry. 3. Now when the tempter came to Him, he said, "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread."

4. But He answered and said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'"

5. Then the devil took Him up into the holy city, set Him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6. and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down. For it is written: 'He shall give His angels charge over you,' and, 'In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.'"

7. Jesus said to him, "It is written again, 'You shall not tempt the LORD your God.'"

8. Again, the devil took Him up on an exceedingly high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. 9. And he said to Him, "All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me."

10. Then Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.'"

11. Then the devil left Him, and behold, angels came and ministered to Him.

We can see, then, that the three temptations are in a different order in the two gospels that record the temptations. As for the other gospels, Mark mentions the temptations, but does not record any specific one of them, as we can see in Mark 1:12-13.

12. Immediately the Spirit drove Him into the wilderness. 13. And He was there in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan, and was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to Him.

John has no record of the temptations, as John is presenting Jesus Christ as God, and God cannot be tempted with evil, so the temptations do not fit with his theme. Thus, the contention really is between Luke and Matthew. Let us summarize again what we see in these two gospels.

Luke Introduction. Luke 4:1-2. Jesus is filled with the Holy Spirit and returns from the Jordan and is led by the Spirit into the wilderness. There he is tempted for forty days (note this!) by the devil. And in all those days He ate nothing, and so came to the fortieth day where we take up the story.

Temptation 1. Luke 4:2-5. He was hungry, and the devil thus tempts Him **"if you are the Son of God,"** to command "this stone" (singular) to become bread. The Lord Jesus answers by quoting Scripture, **"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God."**

Temptation 2. Luke 4:6-8. The devil takes Him up on a high mountain and shows him all of the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. The devil offers to give "all this" authority and "all their" glory to Him (for this has been delivered to him) if He will worship before him. Christ tells him to **"Get behind me, Satan!"** and quotes **"You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve."**

Temptation 3. Luke 4:9-12. The devil brings Him to Jerusalem and sets Him on the pinnacle of the temple. The devil tempts Him **"if you are the Son of God"** to **"throw Yourself down from here. For it is written, 'He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you,' and 'In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.'"** Christ answers by quoting, **"You shall not tempt the Lord your God."**

Luke Conclusion. Luke 4:13. The devil ended every temptation and departed until a more opportune time.

Now, we will compare this to what we see in Matthew.

Matthew Introduction. Matthew 4:1-2. Jesus is led up by the Spirit into the wilderness and is tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and He was hungry. Now the tempter comes to Him.

Temptation 1. Matthew 4:3-4. He was hungry, and the devil tempts Him "**if you are the Son of God,**" to command "these stones" (plural) to become bread. Jesus answers by quoting Scripture, "**Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.**"

Temptation 2. Matthew 4:5-7. The devil takes Him up to the holy city, and sets Him on a pinnacle of the temple. The devil tempts Him, "**If You are the Son of God**" to "**throw Yourself down. For it is written: 'He shall give His angels charge over you,' and 'In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.'**" Christ answers by quoting, "**You shall not tempt the Lord your God.**"

Temptation 3. Matthew 4:8-10. The devil takes Him up on an exceedingly high mountain and shows him all of the kingdoms of the world and their glory. The devil offers to give "all these things" if He will fall down and worship him. Christ tells him, "**Away with you, Satan!**" and quotes "**You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve.**"

Matthew Conclusion. The devil leaves Him, and angels come and minister to Him.

Thus we see the progression of events in these two passages. We can see many similarities in these temptations, but most intriguing is the differences between the two. In Luke, Christ is said to be in the fortieth day of temptation when the devil begins the temptations given there. In Matthew, the tempter comes to Him, with no mention of how long this temptation has been proceeding. In Luke, we have stone to bread, the high mountain, and the pinnacle of the temple, whereas in Matthew we have the stones to bread, the pinnacle of the temple, and then the high mountain. This order is clearly different. Is this, then, a discrepancy, a contradiction in Scripture that proves It is not reliable?

I believe the key here can be found in both Mark 1:13 and Luke 4:2, both of which say that He was tempted *for forty days* by the devil. Surely the devil tempted Him more than three times in forty days! Thus, the temptations we have recorded here must merely be examples of the kind of temptations he subjected Him to over the forty days. The temptation to make stones bread is based on the lust of the flesh, that of the sight of the kingdoms of this works is based on the lust of the eyes, and that of leaping from the temple spire is based on the pride of life. This is in accord with I John 2:16:

16. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world.

Satan bases his temptations on these things, but there was no reason for him to only perform each temptation once, especially when he was tempting Him for forty days. Thus, the temptations in Matthew and in Luke need not be the same temptations at all, but might well be different examples of the same temptations repeated. If this is the case, we might well expect differences between them.

Which set of temptations came first, then? The key to discovering this is in the closing words of both passages. In Luke, we see that the devil ended every temptation, and departed until a more opportune time. In Matthew, however, Christ dismissed him with "Away with you, Satan," and we read that angels came to Christ and ministered to Him. This clues us in to the fact that the Matthew temptations were the very last, and the Luke temptations came before them. Let us compare each temptation, and see if this fits.

In Luke, we have the devil tempting him to turn one stone (singular) into bread (again singular,) whereas in Matthew the devil accelerates the temptation by urging Him to turn these stones (plural) into bread (again plural.) We have probably all experienced temptation, and know that if you overcome temptation once, it is not likely that your struggle is over. The temptation is likely to come again, and be even more severe the second time. This is what the devil is trying to do with the Lord here: repeat the temptation more severely, hoping that this time He will fall to it.

Then in Luke we proceed to the high mountain, whereas in Matthew we go on to the pinnacle of the temple. If we look at the temple example, we see that the devil is wordier in the first example, urging him to "**cast yourself down from here**" and quoting, "**He shall give His angels charge over thee, to keep thee;**" whereas in Matthew we see, "**cast yourself down,**" and "**He shall give His angels charge over thee.**" The second time, Satan seems to be shortening his speech to correspond with the urgency of the temptation to which he was trying to coerce Christ to fall.

Now let us examine the high mountain example. In Luke we see Satan showing Christ all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and offering to give all their authority and all their glory to Him if He will but worship before Him. In Matthew, however, we see him showing Christ not only all the kingdoms of the world, but also all their glory, perhaps taking more than a moment of time to do it so as to make it more enticing. This time he also intensifies the temptation, urging Christ to not just worship before him, but to fall down and worship him! In the Luke example Christ orders Satan to "get behind Me," which apparently was a rebuke but not an outright dismissal, as is clear from the fact that the devil went right on to tempt Him further with the third temptation of Luke. In Matthew, however, we see Christ actually order Satan to leave Him at this point, telling him, "**Away with you, Satan!**" And Satan leaves then, having no choice when God Himself has ordered him to do so.

So what do we see in this? That the temptations in Luke are less intense, that they are wordier, that they include a rebuke of Satan but not a dismissal of him, and that the devil left Him for a more opportune time. There is no mention of Christ receiving food at this time or being ministered to by angels. In Matthew, however, we see the devil coming to Christ (at a more opportune time?) and intensifying all his temptations, being less wordy and more direct, even to the point of ordering Him to fall down and worship him rather than just to worship before him. But Christ falls for none of this and orders him away, at which time he leaves, his tempting of Christ finished. At this point Christ is ministered to by angels, an event that did not follow the temptations listed in Luke. From this examination, then, it seems clear that Luke and Matthew record two separate sets of three temptations. The temptations of Luke happened preceding the temptations of Matthew, and are less intense. The temptations of Luke end with the devil only leaving for a short time, whereas the temptations of Matthew end with Christ ordering Satan away and his leaving with his temptations complete in their failure. All these details, as well as the difference in the Greek words between the two passages, should be enough to show us that the two passages are, indeed, recording two separate sets of three temptations, and not the same three temptations. As we noted above, we have probably experienced the same thing when we have been tempted. A temptation overcome once might well be harder to overcome the second time. The devil is a master tempter and so certainly knows this, and brings his knowledge to bear in his tempting of Christ.

So what of the different order of the three temptations of Christ in the gospels of Matthew and Luke? My answer to this argument is that these three temptations were given by Satan to Christ twice, and not just once as is supposed. The differences between the two passages are clear, and the way they begin and end are sufficient to show us which is the former and which the latter account. Thus we have solved our "contradiction" without having to be unfair to the truth, without having to make up weak explanations about ancient peoples not caring about chronological order, and without having to ignore what is actually said in the passage. In fact, our outline of the events actually is created from a careful examination of the passages in question! Therefore we can see that anyone who makes the claim that "the Bible contradicts itself" from a reading of these passages has merely not taken enough time to explore the truth. The differences between these passages are natural, as they are recording two different sets of temptations. Granted they are very similar temptations, but they are not exactly the same, and the differences, when traced out, show us what the true story is. The gospels then, far from contradicting themselves, actually work together in harmony to tell one story in several different books. This principle learned here will do much to help us come to an understanding of how the gospels work together as, in future studies, we examine other supposed "contradictions in Scripture."