



# Temptation to Distrust

## Matthew 4:1-11

Temptation is often very difficult for us. We look upon trust as an exercise that is far too risky. It depends on handing over part of our lives to the care of another. It depends on conceding that we are owners neither of our future, nor of our present. It is accepting the risk of ceding control of our lives to another who may not consider our needs with the same importance we give them. It is like the young man who fears to declare his love for a young woman due to insecurity of her reaction in the face of such a proclamation. Every time our trust is broken, it becomes more difficult for us to trust once more. The temptation is to live in isolation without depending on others for anything.

Matthew's text deals with Jesus' temptations in the same order of the major temptations of the Hebrews leaving Egypt into the wilderness. There are certain common themes between the temptations of the Hebrews and of Jesus, but this story does not depend directly of that other. Matthew wants us to recall the story of the people wandering in the wilderness, but this story of Jesus is very different. It is in those distinctions that it becomes significant for us, as to Matthew's original audience. Though Jesus' temptations were similar to ours, he came through them in a different way.

Israel was called to be a child of God, but failed to fulfill that call. Though they were still God's people, they did not manage to become a people after God's character. Israel failed, not in belonging to God, but in reflecting God's character by living in fellowship with God and in accepting God's will. They failed in trusting in the protection of provision of God. In the wilderness they complained to God about food, water, and liberation from their enemies. They did not rise to trust that the same God who had freed them from Egypt would care for them in the wilderness. By contrast, Jesus demonstrates his faithfulness and confidence in God, so as to reclaim a basis for being called Son of God in whom God was pleased.

In his forty days of temptation, the main issue was the temptation to make less of God than should be. It was the temptation to distrust God's power and care. From a larger perspective, the specifics of the temptations are not so important. At the same time, Matthew lists them so that we might understand that Jesus essentially through the same temptations.

We heard news reports this week of earthquakes in Haiti. We saw photos of people who were hurt, fallen buildings, collapsed structures that have left millions of people homeless, hungry, thirsty, and in anguish for the desolation they have suffered. Perhaps you also heard this week the words of Pat Robertson, pronouncing this disaster as divine retribution. Such a pronouncement does not flow from confidence in the goodness of God. It does not stem from dependence upon the love and provision of a God of grace. It is actually much closer in tone to the temptations of Jesus instead of his responses to the same. Robertson speaks from the perspective that God is not compassionate, so much as vengeful. He speaks from the perspective that we are more compassionate than God. He begins from the same point of view as these temptations of Jesus: "Do not trust in God; you should take care of yourself."

This is not to say that Robertson recognizes the connection and implications of his words and actions. However, the conclusion that comes of hearing his message of condemnation in consequence of sin focuses on justice, retribution, and revenge as opposed to grace, mercy, and compassion. It is the heart of our problem in depending on God amid the difficulties of this life.

We are tempted to depend on different things, but always counter to a confidence and dependence on God. We want to make use of position and privilege to care for ourselves in contrast to being in dependence. We want to force God's hand in some way such that God might serve us in slavery as the genie of the magic lamp. We want to resort to power or force as a means of obtaining our objectives, without regard to the process we would adopt. Such temptations are common to us. Not one of them cooperates with God's will or manages to carry out God's purposes.

We are distrustful. The plans and means of the gospel seem powerless to us. We do not feel that God's ways can accomplish something as important as changing the world through grace and love. We distrust, for we cannot see the results we believe we should see. It is easier to see life from an alternate perspective. It is simpler to succumb to the temptation of remaining in our distrust than to exercise faith in the midst of life's difficulties. It is in the serious difficulties that we question whether the grace of God is really sufficient for us. It is in these situations that we are tempted to seek another means of achieving our objectives.

Jesus was tempted to seek another means of being Messiah, another style of achieving his aims. He was tempted to find support in something other than God and God's plan. He was tempted to find solutions through one or another shortcut. For us it is not rare to seek some shortcut through political, economic, or propagandistic means. We are struck by the idea of such means of realization, but God's plan is wholly other. God's plan is to reach the world and change lives through things that are simple yet very difficult. For Jesus Christ, this plan included his death and suffering on the cross. There was no shortcut or easier way available. The temptation to find another way of carrying out our salvation was very real, but also without hope of results. It was a dead end, a trap with no potential.

Our temptations are not so different from these Jesus experienced. They call us to abandon God's plan to follow another path. We want to navigate life by an easier route, one more pleasurable and agreeable. We do not really want what is best. We want a shortcut that seems less difficult or quicker. We do not want to expend our energies and feel the discomfort of having to depend on another without being able to accomplish things under our own steam and resources. We want to feel that we are on top of the world, in control, and having the power to overcome anything without anyone's help.

It was not for this God created us. He did not fashion us to be independent and self-sufficient. He made us to be interdependent on one another and dependent on Him. The temptation we suffer is more than anything to distrust God's pleasure in providing for our needs and teaching us the way of life that truly is best for us and others.

God is no vindictive vigilante as painted by Pat Robertson's words. God does not lie in wait preparing to attack us with natural, physical, or emotional disasters. God waits to call us to depend on his love, grace, and provision. God waits prepared to guide us amid the difficulties so that we might learn to rest in trust in contrast to walking ever distrustful.

Are we ready to live in confidence over the love, grace, and provision of God? It may be that His plan is one we would have chosen. It rather certainly is not! At the same time, God offers us the means to live above the tumult of our distrustful temptations. God offers a new way of living based on the fact that His grace and love carry us through the wilderness to encounter His provision and peace in face of the difficulties of living. God may lead us to a cross, but recognizing that even there he is already present.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*