

JESUS' PUBLIC BAPTISM

Then Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan. —MATT. 3:13A

There is something majestic about Jesus' baptism that brought all the previous events of His earthly life into focus. Here He came fully onto the stage of the gospel story and His work and ministry truly began.

Following an eternity past in heaven and thirty years of obscurity in Nazareth, God presented the Savior publicly to the world. John the Baptist, as "the voice of one crying in the wilderness," had heralded the coming of the Messiah (3:3; cf. Isa. 40:3), and now He was fully and publicly prepared to begin the fulfillment of His earthly mission.

A parallel passage in Luke tells us that this was no private or secluded ceremony: "Now when all the people were baptized, Jesus was also baptized" (Luke 3:21). The word translated "arrived" in Matthew 3:13 often indicated an official arrival or public appearance by a dignitary. From now on Jesus would be in the public eye and call no place His permanent earthly home (8:20).

This important episode from the beginning of Christ's ministry clearly shows us that Jesus, though knowing what a high degree of visibility would ultimately cost Him, obediently stepped from the comfort of obscurity into the high-risk position of a public figure. His work would invite strong opinion, but in order to accomplish the Father's will, it must take place in full view of the world. It must come at the cost of being widely observed.

ASK YOURSELF

We are called to be salt and light, not merely to enjoy God's seasoning and illumination in our own lives but to be His conveyors of grace to others. How does this public calling alter the way you express and live your Christianity? Pray that you will live not in fear but in faith.

JESUS' PURPOSEFUL BAPTISM

*Then Jesus arrived . . . coming to John,
to be baptized by him. —MATT. 3:13 A, B*

In the original text of this passage, the wording “to be baptized” emphasizes purpose in this momentous appearance by the Lord Jesus. But it was extremely difficult for John the Baptist to understand why the God-Man would need to be baptized.

John’s baptism was for the confession of sin and repentance (3:2, 6, 11), but Jesus as the Lamb of God (John 1:29) had no need for such a baptism. It is hard to see why One who would take away sin would need to submit Himself to a ceremony that symbolizes death to sin and rising to spiritual life.

Because John knew so well that Jesus was the sinless Messiah, come to fulfill God’s redemptive purpose, he “tried to prevent Him” (Matt. 3:14). The Greek pronouns in John’s statement “I have need to be baptized by *You*, and do *You* come to *me*?” are all in the emphatic position, underscoring his strong bewilderment over the situation. This was not a direct refusal, as Peter might have given (cf. Matt. 16:22), but the Baptist no doubt misunderstood Jesus’ request, thinking He could not possibly intend to undergo baptism.

All sinners need the repentance that baptism symbolizes, but many, such as the Jewish teachers and leaders of Jesus’ day, do not seek true repentance. Jesus, on the other hand, purposed to receive John’s baptism to show His complete obedience to God’s will.

ASK YOURSELF

The same Jesus who walked with such resolve and determination throughout His own earthly life has a distinct and daily purpose for yours. What pieces of this plan are becoming clearer to you? Pray that He will continue to reveal . . . and that you will continue to follow.

TESTIMONY TO JESUS' SINLESSNESS

John tried to prevent Him, saying, "I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?" —MATT. 3:14

John the Baptist's initial reluctance to baptize Jesus is a testimony to Jesus' sinlessness—and John's awareness of his own sinfulness.

In effect, John said to Jesus, "I'm a sinner, just like everyone else I baptize, so why should You, the sinless Son of God, want me to baptize You?" In an indirect yet definite fashion, John agreed with the later description of Christ by the writer of Hebrews, "One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin" (4:15).

Jesus Himself testified to His perfect righteousness and His reason for wanting to be baptized, "Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt. 3:15). Jesus' words did not deny His superiority to John the Baptist or His sinlessness. "Permit it at this time" is an idiomatic expression meaning that Christ's baptism, though seemingly not appropriate or necessary, was actually appropriate for this special time.

The Lord understood John's strong hesitation, and knew it came from deep spiritual commitment and sincerity. Thus He gave John divine permission to do what he was otherwise reluctant to do, so he could perfectly fulfill the Father's plan.

ASK YOURSELF

How do you think you would have reacted to Jesus' request for baptism? How do you react today when you're in His presence, in awe of His holiness and purity? Pray for the spiritual understanding to know that by His grace, He has washed this same righteousness over you.

SYMBOLS FROM JESUS' BAPTISM

Jesus answering said to him, "Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." —MATT. 3:15A

The most important symbol Jesus' baptism gives us is a perfect example of obedience to God the Father. Our Lord always modeled obedience in all things (e.g., Phil. 2:6–8; cf. Matt. 17:25–27). In submitting to baptism, Jesus affirmed the validity of John's standard of righteousness and demonstrated that baptism was God's will to which every believer should be obedient.

Furthermore, Jesus' baptism is a profound, symbolic identification with sinful humanity. Hundreds of years earlier the prophet Isaiah stated that the Messiah "was numbered with the transgressors; yet He himself bore the sin of many, and interceded for the transgressors" (Isa. 53:12). The sinless One took His place among sinners, and that in part entailed submitting Himself to a sinner's baptism.

Finally, Jesus' baptism is a symbol of His death and resurrection, and therefore a prefigurement of our Christian baptism. Concerning His death, Jesus later said, "I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is accomplished!" (Luke 12:50). In pointing to His obedient identification with sinners (cf. Isa. 53:11; 2 Cor. 5:21) and His subsequent atoning death and bodily resurrection, the key symbols stemming from Jesus' baptism remind believers of their need to faithfully obey and be baptized.

ASK YOURSELF

He became one of us, identifying with our sin. Marvel again at the amazement and immensity of this truth. What grace! What humility! What kind of worship should flow from this reality? Worship Him today as the One who was not ashamed to take your place, who stooped down so that you could stand.

TRUE BAPTISM—CHRIST IMMERSSED

After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water. —MATT. 3:16A

Christians, especially new believers, sometimes wonder what mode of baptism Jesus underwent, and therefore wonder which is correct for them to experience. Since genuine baptism represents cleansing from sin and symbolizes the believer's identification with Christ's death and resurrection, the ordinance must involve immersion, not merely sprinkling or pouring.

The Greek word (*baptizo*) literally means to dip or submerge an object into water or another liquid. Confusion regarding the word's meaning resulted largely because Latin and more modern-language translations of Scripture simply transliterated many occurrences of the Greek word.

Until the Middle Ages, the Christian church knew and officially practiced no form of baptism but immersion. Then the Roman Catholic Church formally introduced and sanctioned baptism by sprinkling or pouring. Prior to that, even the great Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas wrote, "In immersion the setting forth of the burial of Christ is more plainly expressed, in which this manner of baptizing is more commendable."

That Jesus "came up immediately from the water" indicates He had been completely *in* the water—in other words, almost surely immersed. John baptized people in the Jordan River (Matt. 3:6) and at other places where "there was much water" (John 3:23). That would not make sense if he had baptized only by pouring or sprinkling (cf. Acts 8:38–39). Unlike immersion, those other modes just do not fully symbolize dying to sin and being raised to new life.

ASK YOURSELF

Baptism is a one-time exercise in obedience, but the reality of being crucified with Christ and raised to "walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4) is an ongoing experience. How do you remind yourself of this on your average day? Pray that the gift of God's grace never loses its wonder.

THE HOLY SPIRIT VALIDATES JESUS

The heavens were opened, and he [John] saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him. —MATT. 3:16B

About the supernatural sign that occurred at the conclusion of Jesus' baptism, one commentator has suggested, "Just as the veil of the Temple was rent in twain to symbolize the perfect access of all men to God, so here the heavens are rent asunder to show how near God is to Jesus, and Jesus to God."

But did Jesus really need an anointing from the Holy Spirit? When He came to earth, Jesus retained His full deity. In His complete humanity, however, He needed divine strengthening for ministry. Like any human being, Jesus experienced fatigue, hunger, sleepiness, and the like. Only the Holy Spirit could strengthen such humanness (cf. Matt. 4:1; Luke 4:14).

That the Spirit came upon Him at His baptism was a fulfillment of the prophet's words, "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners" (Isa. 61:1). It was also the sign God had given to John the Baptist so that he would know Jesus when he saw Him (John 1:33).

This anointing by the Holy Spirit was unique in several ways, including being the only New Testament instance in which the Holy Spirit appeared as a dove. Most important, however, this act not only empowered Jesus as the Son of Man for redemptive service, but it was a confirming sign to everyone present—and to us as well—that Jesus is indeed the Messiah.

ASK YOURSELF

If Jesus was dependent on the Spirit's empowering for effective service, how much more do we need His help and strengthening?

In what ways are you making yourself fully open to the Holy Spirit's power and direction? Pray that He will make you ever aware of your need for Him.

BELOVED JESUS—SUPERIOR TO ALL SACRIFICES

A voice out of the heavens said, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.” —MATT. 3:17

No Old Testament sacrifice, no matter how carefully selected, was genuinely and completely pleasing to God. The people could not possibly find an animal without some imperfection. Furthermore, the blood of the sacrificial animals was at best only symbolic, “for it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb. 10:4; cf. 9:12). But the Cross would effect a sacrifice that would be “with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ” (1 Peter 1:19).

It was this reality that rang out in the Father’s declaration of blessing at the Jordan that day—the day of Jesus’ baptism. His use of the word “beloved” connotes a rich, profound, ultimately satisfying relationship between the Father and the Son. Forms of this word occur elsewhere in the New Testament to denote God’s love for believers (Rom. 1:7) and to describe the ideal love they should have for one another (1 Cor. 4:14). But in God’s eyes the Lord Jesus ever remains the most beloved among any living being—past, present, or future.

This means that Christians, too, are a delight to their heavenly Father, because they are now “in Christ” and adopted into God’s eternal, spiritual family. If God can find no imperfection in His Son, He likewise by His grace finds no defect in His saints (cf. Rom. 3:26; Eph. 1:3–6).

ASK YOURSELF

Is the Son “beloved” in your eyes as well? How does your love for Him express itself in your conversation, your interactions, your behavior, your worship? If you couldn’t say that He is your “first love” (Rev. 2:4), ask God to help you return Him to His rightful place of adoration.

JESUS' DEITY—CENTRAL TO THE GOSPEL

*A voice out of the heavens said, "This is My beloved Son,
in whom I am well-pleased." —MATT. 3:17*

The truth that Jesus Christ is God's perfect Son is a key feature of the gospel message. The author of the letter to the Hebrews makes this clear at the outset of his writing:

God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they. For to which of the angels did He ever say, "You are My Son, today I have begotten You"? And again, "I will be a Father to Him and He shall be a Son to Me"? And when He again brings the firstborn into the world, He says, "And let all the angels of God worship Him." And of the angels He says, "Who makes His angels winds, and His ministers a flame of fire." But of the Son He says, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, and the righteous scepter is the scepter of His kingdom." (1:1–8; cf. Col. 1:15–19; 2:9)

The New Testament presents God more as the Father of Jesus (John 14:6–11; Phil. 2:9–11) than as the Father of believers (Matt. 6:9). We cannot worship God unless we also worship Christ as one with Him (cf. John 5:23).

ASK YOURSELF

Are you as "well-pleased" with the Son—your Savior—as the Father is? And are you willing to declare it, as if boomed from the heavens? Pray that God would renew your love for Him today and fill you with boldness to pronounce your devotion at every opportunity.

PREPARATION FOR TESTING

*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness
to be tempted by the devil. —MATT. 4:1*

One of life's important truisms is that strong temptation tends to follow every major personal triumph. The apostle Paul warns, "Let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall" (1 Cor. 10:12). In the aftermath of significant successes, we are often tempted to think the accomplishment came solely by our own strength and ingenuity. But just when we think success is here to stay, we become vulnerable to pride—and failure. Even Christ in His incarnation was not exempt from testing, such as what came on the heels of His God-affirming baptism.

In a parallel passage, Mark says, "Immediately the Spirit impelled Him to go out into the wilderness" (Mark 1:12). Mark's use of "impelled" denotes the necessity of the Lord's temptation, or testing. Although the testings would come from Satan, it was God's will that Jesus undergo them in advance of His earthly ministry and redemptive work.

So after His ministry and Person had been validated by the Father and the Spirit at the scene of His baptism, Jesus confronted the first great challenge to His mission. Our Savior was not intimidated by the prospect of temptation but fully conscious of His divine mission and strengthened in His humanity by the abiding presence and power of God. That is what Satan sought to forever undermine and destroy.

ASK YOURSELF

What specific temptations often awaken in your own heart following times of encouragement or accomplishment? How do you deal with them and defeat them? May God be seen as your continual supply, even at times when you're tempted to think you can manage on your own.

GOD'S PLAN FOR TEMPTATION

*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness
to be tempted by the devil. —MATT. 4:1*

Jesus' temptation in the wilderness did not catch His Father by surprise. The Son was specifically "led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." The word translated "tempted" is from a morally neutral term that means "to test." But sometimes, as here, the context clearly indicates that the testing was aimed at enticing one to do evil. That the devil was going to present certain temptations to Jesus thus justifies rendering the word "tempted"—it gives us the negative connotation of Satan's sinister intentions.

God sometimes uses Satan's temptations toward evil as part of His larger plan to test believers for good (cf. Job). Whereas the devil wanted to lead Christ into sin and disobedience in the wilderness, God used the circumstances to reconfirm Christ's holiness and worthiness. This is God's plan for all His saints (cf. James 1:2–4, 12–13)—that Christ's righteousness be revealed in us.

Joseph's severe mistreatment at the hands of his brothers in the Old Testament and his subsequent "misfortunes" in Egypt could have driven him to despair and sinful bitterness, but by faith he recognized God's sovereign hand in it all (Gen. 50:20). Whether God tests us directly or uses Satan to challenge us, He will always use the situation to eventually produce good fruit in us.

ASK YOURSELF

What positive benefits does temptation serve in your own life?
As unwanted and unwelcome as it is, what does its mere presence
keep before you, thereby thwarting the aspirations of the enemy?

Pray that God would gain His desired objectives in you,
even through times of testing.

FASTING AS PART OF PREPARATION FOR TESTING

*After He had fasted forty days and forty nights,
He then became hungry. —MATT. 4:2*

For a quite lengthy period prior to the three diabolical temptations directed at Jesus, He fasted. We don't know exactly what He did during the forty-day period, but He likely spent most of the time communing with His heavenly Father.

Even in His perfect humanity, Jesus needed solitary preparation time in meditation and prayer, as we all do in anticipating a major testing. Consider how Moses spent forty years in Midian in preparation for his leadership of Israel out of Egypt to the Promised Land, or that the apostle Paul lived three years in the desert of Arabia before launching his extensive ministries.

Matthew reports, with much simplicity and directness, that at the end of the period of fasting, Jesus “became hungry.” Hunger weakens us physically and somehow leaves us more vulnerable to spiritual attack, which is precisely why Satan often assails us at such times. But temptations that we have anticipated and prayed about have little power to harm us, if we constantly rely on the Lord.

Jesus, though spending more than a month in fasting, is a tremendous example to us of remaining alert to spiritual danger, which He did as Satan approached. During the temptations, He did not yield on the slightest point.

ASK YOURSELF

What other feelings and conditions—like hunger—serve as ready-made points of entry for spiritual temptation? Knowing this, how can you better “keep watching and praying” that you not fall into sin (Mark 14:38)? Pray for the courage to live with such keen awareness.

THE TEMPTER IS REAL

And the tempter came and said to Him . . . —MATT. 4:3A

It is not popular today to believe in a literal, personal devil, even among professing Christians. The devil is increasingly seen as being somewhere between a figment of our imagination and a useful device to coerce obedience.

Yet in addition to the name used here (“tempter”), the New Testament gives Satan many other names: “ruler of this world” (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11); “the prince of the power of the air” (Eph. 2:2); “the god of this world” (2 Cor. 4:4); “Abaddon” and “Apollyon,” both of which mean “destroyer” (Rev. 9:11); and “the serpent of old” (Rev. 12:9).

With these and many other references to the devil in God’s infallible Scripture—all of which assume a real, supernatural person—it’s clear that Satan does exist. And he never made himself more personally manifest than when he confronted Jesus in the wilderness. The Lord’s opponent was an actual, personal foe in every sense of that expression.

Since the Fall, Satan has directed his full attention and fury against God and His kingdom work. While Christ was on earth, that opposition was particularly intense against the Son and His redemptive mission, beginning at the very outset of His ministry. Yet all the forces of hell continue to present us with real challenges as we endeavor to advance God’s kingdom. Thus all believers must remain ever vigilant and prayerful against a genuine spiritual foe.

ASK YOURSELF

Have you grown lax in guarding yourself from the “roaring lion” (1 Peter 5:8) who actively seeks to devour you? He is not to be feared, for your God is triumphant, but he is definitely in need of accounting for.

Ask the Lord to make you wise and wary of the enemy’s presence.

TESTING JESUS' DIVINE RIGHTS

"If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread."—MATT. 4:3B

Before Satan tempted Jesus more directly, he threw out a cynical challenge to test Christ's deity. The devil's conditional statement, "If You are the Son of God," assumed that Jesus was indeed God's beloved Son (3:17). But he hoped to persuade Him into a demonstration of divine power that would violate God's plan, which called for Jesus to set aside His divine power while on earth and use it only when the Father commanded. If Satan could make Jesus presume upon His divine rights and act independently of His Father, this would amount to disobedience.

Obviously, then, the purpose of the first temptation went far beyond getting Jesus to satisfy His physical hunger by wrongly using miraculous power. The devil wanted Him to doubt the Father's word, love, and provision—to disobediently declare that being hungry was simply not fit for God's only Son.

Satan's argument was, "Hadn't He endured enough humiliating circumstances already (the stable, the flight to Egypt, obscurity in Nazareth, this time in the wilderness) in an effort to identify with unworthy humanity?" But unlike Eve in the Garden of Eden (cf. Gen. 3:1f.), Jesus stayed true to God's will and did not cast doubt on the Father's word or His already secured position as God's Son.

ASK YOURSELF

Yes, there is more at stake in temptation than the mere subject of the enticement. There are significant matters of trust and freedom and identity involved. How seriously are you taking these threats to your Christian calling? Pray that God would help you see the battle for what it is.

JESUS' REAL FOOD—OBEYING THE FATHER

He answered and said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.'"—MATT. 4:4

Above all, Satan's temptations of Jesus Christ solicited His rebellion against the Father. But Jesus had come to earth to do the Father's will and nothing else. In fact, His will and the Father's were precisely the same (John 5:30; cf. 10:30; Heb. 10:9).

Case in point: In the ultimate test of obedience, just prior to His arrest and betrayal, Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will." . . . "My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Your will be done" (Matt. 26:39, 42). This supreme example of absolute trust and submission by Jesus to His Father is what Satan tried to smash. In his proudest and wickedest manner, the enemy attempted to fracture the Trinitarian nature of the Godhead.

But Christ, in His immeasurable humility and righteousness, replied to Satan's first words, "It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.'" All three of our Lord's responses to Satan would begin with the simple but straightforward appeal to the Word of God—"It is written" (cf. Ps. 119:11). In quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, Jesus affirmed that believers are far better off depending on God and waiting on His provision than they are in grabbing for their own satisfaction—something we all are tempted to do.

ASK YOURSELF

You may feel unsure of what God's will is for you, but much of it is spelled out clearly in Scripture. How well are you obeying the aspects of His will that have already been revealed to you? In seeking to know His plan, a good place to start is always obedience to His Word.

TRUSTING SELF IS NEVER JUSTIFIED

He answered and said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.'"—MATT. 4:4

Christians are never justified in trusting solely in themselves to meet their basic needs. No matter how worried we might become, if we turn to God in faith and obedience, He will meet all our essential needs in His own way, according to His sovereign schedule. Implicit in this understanding is that God will meet every need, both physical and spiritual, as Paul promises us, "My God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19; cf. Matt. 6:8, 33).

It is always best to follow Jesus' example, obeying God and trusting wholeheartedly in His gracious provision, than to impulsively and selfishly attempt to meet our own needs in ways that could disobey or compromise God's Word.

To trust first of all in ourselves to meet our needs—circumventing or modifying God's will in the process—not only demonstrates a lack of faith but rests on the false assumption that our earthly well-being is our most crucial need. Jesus contradicts such thinking, which is so natural to fallen humanity, both to unbelievers as well as believers who slip into carnal mind-sets. Therefore our Lord quoted Deuteronomy 8:3, "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God." The all-sufficient and sustaining power of God is the only true source that meets our every need.

ASK YOURSELF

Where does your dependence lie? Are you trusting in your paycheck? Your insurance policies? Your physical strength and smarts? Or have you finally realized that everything hinges on God, His Word, and His sovereign plan for your life? Find your sense of security in Him alone.

TRUST IN GOD TRANSCENDS THE TEMPORAL

He answered and said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.'" —MATT. 4:4

James, the Lord's earthly half-brother, reminds us that this life is very temporary and uncertain—it is not even guaranteed that we will have an earthly future. James's practical letter teaches us: "Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that'" (James 4:14–15).

Like Jesus, what we are all about and the ultimate goals of our lives should focus on the eternal, not the temporary. The guiding principle and central motive of our lives must be to please God and trust Him for absolutely everything (cf. Matt. 6:33).

Jesus posed some searching questions in the Sermon on the Mount:

Why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith!" (Matt. 6:28–30)

We always suffer and miss out to some extent on spiritual blessings when we shortsightedly worry about the temporal instead of focusing on the eternal. Jesus' response to the devil's temptations is again our model.

ASK YOURSELF

How much time do you spend listening to the nagging complaints of worry? How much is fretting a part of your thought process? When are you most susceptible to letting anxiety rise up within you, stealing your joy and perspective? Pray for freedom from anxiety—and the faith to replace it.

JESUS REFUSES TO TEST GOD

Then the devil took Him into the holy city and had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple. —MATT. 4:5

In confronting our Lord Jesus Christ, Satan persisted in trying to undermine or destroy the Son's relationship to His Father. This time he goaded Jesus with this statement: "If You are the Son of God, throw yourself down." To fortify his challenge and make it more plausible, the adversary—with a subtle and clever twist—quoted Scripture: "For it is written, 'He will command His angels concerning You'; and 'On their hands they will bear You up, so that You will not strike Your foot against a stone'" (from Ps. 91:11–12).

Now Satan surely had Christ backed into a corner, he likely reasoned, using his misguided and evil sense of logic. "If the Messiah lives only according to the Word of God, then I should confront Him with something *from* that Word." If Jesus wouldn't use His own power to help Himself and meet His immediate needs, maybe He would let God work on His behalf—after all, this was a "scriptural test," according to Satan. Jesus could thus let God fulfill a promise from Psalms and prove to others that He was indeed God's Son and Messiah.

But no matter how persuasive Satan's argument—undergirded with a proof text—may have sounded, Jesus did not agree to it, not wanting to presumptuously test God or jump ahead of the divine timetable for the Savior's redemptive ministry.

ASK YOURSELF

Yes, Scripture can be turned and twisted to suit anyone's ends. What safeguards do you have in place against misusing the Word of God, while still maintaining a bold, believing faith in its sense of direction? Ask the Spirit to guide you into its truth. That's His job (John 16:13).

DON'T COUNT ON SENSATIONALISM

“If You are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command His angels concerning You.’”—MATT. 4:6A

Throughout history, sensationalism has often appealed to average people who are looking for dramatic events that titillate the senses and pander to fleshly curiosity. Toward the end of His ministry Jesus warned, “False Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect” (Matt. 24:24).

Even when signs are from God, they usually do not bring unbelievers to faith, but only confirm the faith of those who already believe. God’s many miracles on behalf of the wandering Israelites just made many of them more presumptuous and unbelieving, as did Jesus’ signs to the Jews who opposed Him. The apostle John writes, “But though He had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him” (John 12:37). Jesus Himself, as the Messiah and Son of God, was the greatest sign God ever gave to humanity, yet “He was despised and forsaken of men” (Isa. 53:3).

Demanding sensational signs, as Satan did from Jesus, does not manifest faith but rather skepticism and unbelief (cf. Matt. 12:39; 16:4). Because a fascination with the sensational is far removed from true faith, Jesus would take no part in it. For those who, apart from special signs, believe in God the Father and trust in His Son—our Savior—it is well evident that Christ has already proved Himself.

ASK YOURSELF

The best Christian witness in the world remains the power of a changed life. People will respond to your testimony of God’s love and mercy much more often than to a high-energy worship service. How are you making Christ known through your own life? Look for the simplest of ways.

WHY JESUS REJECTED SENSATIONALISM

“On the other hand, it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’”—MATT. 4:7

The Lord Jesus had two good reasons for not participating in a worldly spectacle such as jumping from the temple roof. First, such sensationalism is captive to the laws of diminishing returns. To generate and hold people’s allegiance to Him merely by stunning signs, Jesus would have needed to produce greater and greater signs. People would never have been satisfied and would always have demanded just one more miracle, one additional showy event. Real faith would not have been certain; they would have been lovers of sensation more than God, which similarly could happen to any of us who don’t trust God’s already revealed will.

Second, and more important, for Jesus to participate in sensational signs would have demonstrated a profound mistrust in His heavenly Father and a presumptuous, faithless testing of God. But that’s what the devil wanted so that Jesus’ sin would shatter His claim to divinity and ruin humanity’s hope of salvation. Such an action would have questioned the Father’s providence and love—and the wisdom of His redemptive plan.

If our sinless Savior and Lord shunned sensationalism, we as imperfect men and women ought never to live recklessly or carelessly, expecting God to rescue us when we get into earthly trouble or spiritual peril.

ASK YOURSELF

Perhaps you don’t consider yourself a risk-taker. But looking honestly at your own life, do you spot some behaviors that are spiritually risky, actions that presume on the grace of God?

In humble repentance today, surrender these things to the Lord. Receive, but don’t force, His great mercy.

SATAN TESTS JESUS' ULTIMATE ALLEGIANCE

Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain. —MATT. 4:8A

Satan's final temptation was a last-ditch effort to corrupt and derail Christ and His saving mission. The greatest of all adversaries sought to complete a sinister bargain in which extremely attractive and enticing possessions were offered to Jesus in exchange for His subservience to Satan.

The location ("a very high mountain") where Satan took Jesus no doubt allowed them to have a comprehensive view of the earth for hundreds of miles in every direction. But their vantage point was clearly spiritual and supernatural as well. They would have seen the power and dominance of Rome, the glories of Egypt, and the splendor of various Greek city-states. All the wonders of the ancient world, including the magnificence of Jerusalem, would have been included.

As the King of kings, Jesus already had the rights to own and govern all the world's kingdoms, but Satan tried to twist that reality for his own purposes. He wanted Jesus to leap ahead of God's promised plan and reign as a king before it was fully time to do so—and at the unthinkable cost of worshiping him. If our enemy can tempt Jesus to be impatient and impulsive and grasp things prematurely, that is all the more reason for us to be on guard against such attacks.

ASK YOURSELF

Timing is everything. And Jesus displayed an infallible sense of what to do—and when—in every situation. Is there anything in your own life that you're trying to speed ahead with, whether God wants you slowing down or not? Find peace in His timing. It's always perfect—more perfect than we think.