

# Temptation in the Desert and the Divinity of Christ

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February 14, 2016 Carl E. Olson



## Readings:

- Dt 26:4-10
- Ps 91:1-2, 10-11, 12-13, 14-15
- Rom 10:8-13
- Lk 4:1-13

“The whole story of the Temptation is misconceived,” wrote Monsignor Ronald Knox, “if we do not recognize that it was an attempt made by Satan to find out whether our Lord was the Son of

God or not.” In so writing, he echoed many of the Church Fathers, who pondered the question of what Satan knew and what he wished to accomplish in tempting Jesus in the desert. St. Ephrem the Syrian wrote, “He tempted Jesus because a definite sign of Christ’s divinity had not yet been given from heaven.” Yes, Ephrem noted, Satan was aware of Jesus’ baptism, but thought the true identity of Jesus couldn’t be known until he was tested in spiritual combat, through temptation.

It is a point worth contemplating on this first Sunday of Lent for three reasons: temptation reveals the nature of our enemy, it reveals the reality of our situation, and it reveals the identity of the sons and daughters of God.

The enemy has many names, including Beelzebul, the evil one, the ruler of the demons and of this world, the serpent, and the tempter. He is not a metaphor or a myth, but a real creature, a fallen angel. Pope Paul VI, in an audience titled, “Confronting the Devil’s power” (Nov. 15, 1972), said that refusing to acknowledge the devil’s existence or to explain him away as “a pseudo-reality, a conceptual, fanciful personification of the unknown causes of our misfortunes” is a complete rejection of Scripture and Church

teaching. Ironically, the refusal of so many—including not a few Catholics—to admit the true identity of the devil is itself a dark triumph for the great deceiver.

The name “the devil,” comes from the Greek word *diabolos* (Latin, *diabolus*), which means “slanderer” or “accuser.” He seeks to accuse and slander each of us before God in his relentless desire to destroy souls. In doing so he has a certain advantage, namely, that on our own merits we have no real defense against his accusations. The reality of our situation is stark: we are sinners who often give into temptation and, in doing so, make ourselves subjects of the ruler of this world.

This fact is part and parcel of Jesus’ forty days in the desert. His time there was a purposeful re-enactment of the forty years the Israelites spent wandering in the desert. But whereas the Israelites failed, repeatedly, to obey, trust, and worship God, Jesus overcame the devil’s attempts to have him disobey, distrust, and deny God. “At the heart of the temptations,” notes Pope Benedict XVI in *Jesus of Nazareth*, “as we see here, is the act of pushing God aside because we perceive him as secondary, if not actually superfluous and annoying, in comparison with all the apparently far more urgent matters that fill our lives.”

We are rarely tempted to flatly deny the existence of God or to publicly curse him. Rather, we are tempted to gradually replace God, the highest good, with lesser goods: food, comfort, safety, possessions, and position. People rarely go from Christian to atheist in a matter of days or weeks. As Benedict points out, the devil is just as pleased when we demand that God caters to our wishes as he is when we reject God altogether. They are, in the end, not so different, especially when it comes to destroying the life of grace.

“But,” some protest, “Jesus had an advantage: he is God!” Yet all who are baptized into Christ have put on Christ (cf. Rom 6). We are children of God because, by the work of Jesus, we are filled with the Holy Spirit. Today’s epistle states what is required in the face of temptation and trials: confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead.

In facing the enemy and rejecting temptation, Jesus revealed himself. Lent is our opportunity to do the same, in the name and power of the Lord.