

## Jesus And Satan

One of the best selling books of 1991 was a fascinating volume by James Patterson and Peter Kim entitled The Day America Told the Truth. It's one of those books that I find I have trouble putting down. Its basic theory is that Americans lie to census takers and surveys. They interviewed 1,800 people and asked a cumulative total of 200,000 questions to find out what Americans really say and think and do. Ninety percent of Americans, the conclusion was, believe in God. The breakdown showed that 98 percent of Catholics, 97 percent of Protestants and 87 percent of Jews believe in God. Eighty-two percent of Americans believe in life after death, including both heaven and hell, but only 55 percent believe in the existence of Satan.

Even though that means that 45 percent of Americans don't believe in Satan, Jesus did. Jesus believed in Satan because he saw him and talked to him. There's a fascinating account of his conversation with Satan in the New Testament in Matthew 4:1-11.

*Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. After fasting 40 days and 40 nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."*

*Jesus answered, "It is written, man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."*

*Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple.*

*"If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"*

*Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."*

*Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"*

*Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.*

The background for this historic conversation between Jesus and Satan is, at least to my reading, strange. Beginning in Matthew 4, it says that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. "Tempted" may not be the best translation of the Greek word *peirazo*. Maybe it would be better to say "tested." Either way, why would the Holy Spirit of God take Jesus into a desert for the stated purpose of being tempted or tested by the devil? Isn't that a strange thing to do?

Consider this illustration. After a student graduates from the William Mitchell College of Law or the Law School of the University of Minnesota, there is a "rite of passage" before you can practice law in the State of Minnesota — or in any other state for that matter. Even though you may graduate and hold a Juris Doctorate, before you can legally practice law you must pass the bar examination. It is the official proof that you know and understand and can responsibly practice law in the state.

Suppose there is a student who graduates Phi Beta Cappa, valedictorian of the University graduating class. He or she goes on to law school and gets straight A's all the way through. Faculty members say that this is the best and the brightest student that they have ever had. Does that person still have to take the bar examination? Of course. Will he or she likely pass that examination? Of course. Even though everyone knows in advance that this student will do extraordinarily well, he or she still must take the test.

For 30 years Jesus received straight A's in everything that he did. Everyone — God and humans alike — said

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there was never another like him. He was given the title of Messiah. At his baptism a heavenly voice declared him to be God's beloved Son. Did he have to take a test before he could officially begin his public ministry as Messiah? Yes, he did. Was he likely to pass that test? Of course. But he still had to take it.

The Holy Spirit led him one day to a most unusual testing room, a wilderness area 15 miles wide, 35 miles long, to the south and east of Jerusalem. It was a bleak, unpopulated desert — extremely rough terrain with a series of limestone formations and loose rocks everywhere. There Jesus waited for 40

days and 40 nights, praying and fasting in preparation for his big examination. An interesting approach, one that perhaps many of us today would not think of.

If you knew that you were about to face the toughest test of your life, how do you think you would prepare and get ready? It could be divorce or cancer or bankruptcy or even death. Most of us probably wouldn't think of canceling all the appointments on our calendar and getting away for 40 days or even for 40 hours to talk to God and to be recharged and prepared spiritually for that which we would face. Perhaps we should learn from Jesus.

For 40 days he got ready, and then the examiner showed up. Satan had been preparing too, putting together the toughest test that he could — because he was intent on making Jesus fail.

Satan started out with test item number one. He said to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, make these stones become bread." He could almost hear Jesus' stomach rumbling with hunger as the question was asked. It isn't that he doubted that Jesus was the Son of God, but rather he was taking advantage of Jesus' desperate hunger. He knew that Jesus was capable of miraculously turning the stones to bread and he wanted him to do it.

Jesus understood that he faced some significant decisions. What appeared on the surface to be a simple test was really far more complex and complicated, like most of our situations often are. You see, Jesus had to decide before he answered how he was going to use his supernatural powers. Was he going to use them primarily for his comfort or for God's purposes? It is the same decision faced by every Christian who has wealth and power and influence. We must make a critical decision of whether we will use them for our comfort and benefit or for the purposes of God.

Jesus had to decide whether he was going to take a short term or a long term prospective. Did he want what would be nice for now or what would be best for tomorrow? It is a decision that we often face. It is very tempting to sacrifice the future on the altar of the present.

Jesus also had to decide how he was going to win the people whom he had set out in life to win. Was he going to win them by feeding them bread? If the word got out that he could turn the limestones into loaves of bread, hungry people from all over

the ancient world would flock to this desert to eat. But he recalled that the people of Israel in a different desert at a different time had also been hungry and that God had sent down manna from heaven. While at first they were delighted to eat it, it wasn't too many hours before their delight turned to complaint.

As tempting as it must have been, Jesus decided not to do what Satan suggested. Even though it meant staying hungry, even though it meant being accused by Satan and others that he really couldn't do it, and even though it meant that Satan

might use this against him, Jesus refused. He said to Satan, "It is written, man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." Jesus used the most potent weapon in his arsenal, the word of God. He quoted Deuteronomy 8:3 where the ancient Hebrew people were in the desert griping about the manna God was feeding them. It was a reminder to them that the feeding of their stomachs was not the most important thing in life, but rather feasting on the word of God, that that had a far greater value.

Jesus wasn't saying that our physical needs are unnecessary or unimportant, but he was saying they aren't everything, and they are not most important. The greatest value in life is God and what God says, in fact, is more important than eating. There are some people, of course, who live for food. There are other people who live for sex. And there are still others who live for material possessions. But there is a powerful truth that can be documented totally outside of the Bible and Christian belief. It is the truth that people that devote their lives to feeding themselves or satisfying their sexual drive or accumulating material wealth, do not find satisfaction therein. There are records by the scores and by the thousands of those who pursue these things and come to the end of their lives only to be devastated by the disappointment that things are not as they had dreamed that they would be. I'm sure there are some of us who want to say, "That might be true, but give me a ten-year try. Just give me lots to eat, unlimited sex, wealth and power and let me find out for myself." That is a tragic and suicidal approach, because the overwhelming testimony is that

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those who have done it have found themselves to be miserable.

Only God satisfies. That's a hard lesson for many of us to learn. In fact, many people wreck their lives finding it out. Many people will never believe it, but it is true.

That's why Jesus said what he said, and that's why Jesus passed his first test with an A+. He refused to use his power for himself. He refused to be a materialist, no matter how loudly his stomach grumbled. He insisted that God is the ultimate satisfier because man does not live by bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.

He passed the first test. Satan was ready with the second. This time Satan said, "Jesus, if you are the Son of God, throw yourself down." For this test he took him on a field trip to the temple, the highest point in Jerusalem,. Ancient records tell us it was 180 feet high. It was from there that Satan said, "Jump!"

Satan who, by the way, knows the Bible very well, tried Jesus' strategy with a quote from Psalm 91:11-12, "He will command his angels concerning you. . .they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone." It was absolutely true. Jesus could have done it and he could have made it, just like he could have turned the rocks into loaves of bread. But Jesus also knew that there was far more to this test than surviving an 18 story plunge. What it was, was an invitation to win the loyalty of people through sensationalism. The courtyard below the temple pinnacle was the busiest and most visible place in Jerusalem. If people could see him jump and survive it, then they might follow him. In modern terminology you might say that they would look up and say, "It's a bird, it's a plane, no, it's the Messiah!" and follow him. It must have been tempting to Jesus.

But Jesus understood that crowds won by sensationalism are crowds seldom kept. I talked to a pastor in the East whose church typically had 170 people in Sunday School. To increase attendance, they put a great deal of time, money and planning into a spectacular event that they scheduled with the hope of reaching some new people. The Sunday of their sensational event, their Sunday School attendance was 2,000. But the attendance the next Sunday went back to 170. You see, the people that

are gained by sensational means are seldom those who remain loyal thereafter.

Jesus decided not to jump, but again he quoted from the Bible, again from the Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy, this time from Chapter 6, verse 16. He told Satan, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

But wait a minute, isn't that precisely what we are supposed to do? Aren't we supposed to test God and let everybody see how great he is? If we put something really tough in front of God and then he comes through, then everybody is going to believe. Do you understand there is a big difference — one that we need to understand — between testing God and trusting God? Trusting God is depending upon him to bring good from the circumstances of life into which he has led us, but testing God is manipulating the situation to get ourselves out of circumstances that we ought never to have been in.

For example, someone says "I don't know if the Bible means it or not when it says a Christian shouldn't marry a non-Christian. I'm going to marry a non-Christian and just trust God to bring that person to faith in Jesus Christ." That's not trust, that's disobeying and testing God. Or somebody says, "I think I'll rob a bank. I'm going to do this right. I'm going to park the get-away car a block away, and before I get out I'm going to pray and commit the bank robbery to the Lord in every detail, and I'm going to ask that God will intervene on my behalf and let me get a clean get-away. Who knows, I may

even split 50/50 with God if the take is really good." That's not trusting God, that's testing God. How about the person who says, "I'm not going to study for the test because I can depend upon God to

give me the answers." All of these people are not trusting God. They are putting God to the test and he doesn't like it or allow it.

Trusting God is relying on him to give us the strength to break off a relationship that we know is wrong. Trusting God is being faithful to him by not robbing the bank but counting upon him to provide our needs and have them met honestly. Trust is complete confidence and dependence upon God for the right outcome of the situation into which he has led us.

Jesus knew that the "temple jumpoff" was an artificially contrived and manipulated thing that Satan had made. It was not what God wanted, so he

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refused to sinfully put God to the test.

Satan then came up with his third and toughest test of all. He said, "Jesus, all this I give to you if you bow down and worship me." He took Jesus literally or perhaps figuratively to the top of the world so that he could look at all the kingdoms. He said, "Jesus, if you will worship me, it's yours, for the taking." I think Jesus faced a very tough decision because this time it wasn't for him, it was for us.

Do you remember a popular song a number of years ago that started out, "If I ruled the world" where the singer promises to make everything wrong into right? The thought must have run through Jesus' mind that Satan has ruined the world. There are wars, diseases, disharmony and violence and ugliness and crime and sin. If Jesus ruled the world, it would suddenly be different. There wouldn't be all of the horrible consequences upon humans. He could also skip all of the Messianic journey and by-pass the crucifixion. He could just go right to the results without going through all the pain in between. He could do something great and good now.

I am reminded of the year the U.S. entered into the war in the Gulf. Suppose during that time Saddam Hussein of Iraq had taken the Emir of Kuwait on a plane ride above the country of Kuwait and had said to him, "It's yours, you can have it all, the oil wells, the ships, the airplanes, the wealth and gold and oil, everything. It's yours if you will simply bow down and worship me." If such a thing had happened, the Emir of Kuwait might have thought that then there would be no war — no rapes, no suffering or death or devastation. But then, I hope, he would have answered, "You can't give it to me, it is mine. You stole it! Besides, Saddam, you can't be trusted!"

That is essentially what Jesus responded to Satan. "Satan, it's not yours to give. It's mine. I am the king of kings and the lord of lords. What's more, Satan, I don't trust you anyway." So Jesus said "no." He chose to do it the right way, even though it was the hard way. "Away from me, Satan. For it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"

The greatest good in life is to live for and to worship God. Nothing is worth the ultimate sin of taking from God his rightful worship and giving it to Satan.

A seminary classmate of mine was diagnosed with cancer when he was about 30 years old. It was a tragic situation. It brings back to me all the memories of it just to recount it to you. He was a young

pastor in Northern California, doing a good job. He had a fine wife, young children. The disease progressed. Dave told about an experience he had that was extraordinary. He described how on a day the pain was particularly difficult, that Satan appeared to him and promised him a full cure if only he would renounce Jesus Christ and worship Satan. He said that when you are in such great pain, when you are young and you don't want to die; when you don't want to leave the wife that you love and you dread the thought that your children will grow up never to remember you, that that's a hard decision to make. But my friend said what Jesus said. He said "no" to Satan. Like Jesus, Dave chose to suffer greatly and to die tragically in order to remain faithful to God. "Away from me, Satan. For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"

The last line of the story ends with Satan leaving and Jesus exhausted, and the angels coming to attend him. A couple of years ago, when we were in the Orient, I learned something that touched me deeply about the prospective of our fellow Christians in the Peoples Republic of China. They said their experience was that if you are truly a disciple of Jesus Christ, that you will suffer, because suffering is an essential and an integral part of what being a Christian is all about. But they also said that suffering will always be followed by God's great relief and blessing. That's the way it was for Jesus.

As we leave the conversation between Jesus and Satan, the same lessons seem obvious. We, too, will be tested by the enemy. You know that. The tests will not be easy and we will, in fact, be tempted to sin. The answer is to follow the example of Jesus — to say "NO" to Satan, to make scripture our weapon, and to remain faithful to God — no matter what.

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