

THE POWER TO RESIST TEMPTATION

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Readings: Matthew 4:1-11; Arcana Coelestia 1692

The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church tells us that throughout His life on earth the Lord endured many temptations and that by these temptations He overcame the hells one by one, setting them in order. As a result of this the hells no longer had the power to possess people against their will, as they had previously been able to do. This was the result of the Lord's conquering the hells in temptation, so His temptations were the most important means by which He accomplished what He had come into the world to do.

But although the Lord's temptations were so important, scarcely any of them are described or even mentioned in the Word. Only a few are spoken of so that people might know that the Lord did undergo temptation. The Gospel of Matthew tells us about three of these temptations. They are the first ones mentioned in the New Testament, and they took place just before the Lord began His public ministry. Let us look at the first of these three temptations.

Just after the Lord had been baptized in the Jordan River, it is said He was led by the spirit into the wilderness where He fasted for forty days and forty nights. To fast means to be without food. After He had fasted for forty days and forty nights, the devil came to the Lord to tempt Him. The devil knew that the Lord was very hungry. So he said to the Lord "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread" (Matthew 4:3). But the Lord did not obey the devil. Instead He said to him, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God'" (Matthew 4:3-4). This was something that is written in the book of Deuteronomy (8:3). The Lord's response to the devil, therefore, was a truth from the Word. Now we are told that evil spirits and devils cannot withstand truths from the Word, and so when the Lord answered His tempter by a truth from the Word the devil had to stop that temptation.

Now this may not seem to be a very terrible temptation. But actually, it was indeed a serious temptation. For one thing, remember that the Lord had been fasting for forty days and forty nights, and therefore He was feeling very hungry and weak. It is quite likely that He might have felt as if He was going to die of starvation soon. Have you ever felt very hungry—so hungry that you could hardly wait to get food to eat? If you have, then very likely your insides ached because of the need of food. And your mind probably couldn't think of anything else but food—any food. If you have felt this way, then perhaps you have some slight idea of how the Lord probably felt after fasting for forty days and forty nights. He must have wanted food very much indeed. And it was then that the devil tempted Him by telling Him how He could have food without delay, even though He was in a barren desert. The way to do this was by turning the stones of the desert into bread.

Now, as you know, an ordinary person cannot turn stones into bread. But the Lord did have the power to do so. This is what made the temptation all the more severe. Think of yourself. If you want to do something wrong but do not have the power to do it, it is very easy for you to resist the temptation. But if you did have the power to do the wrong thing, it would be very difficult for you to resist the temptation to do it. For example, if somebody was holding something that you wanted very much indeed, so much that you felt like taking it away from him, it would not be very hard for you to resist that temptation if the other person was bigger and stronger than you were. But if, instead, that person was smaller and weaker than you were, it would certainly be harder to remember that taking something away from another person without permission is wrong and should not be done. So perhaps you can understand that the Lord's temptation was a very severe one for Him, for He had the power to turn the stones into bread.

Now you may wonder what would have been wrong with the Lord's turning stones into bread. It doesn't seem to be an evil thing, nor something that would hurt anybody. But think about the purpose for which the Lord would have been using His power. He would have been using His great power not to redeem and save any person nor to overcome hell, which was the purpose of His coming into the world. Quite the contrary! He would have been using His power for His own sake alone—for a selfish reason. For anybody to do anything for a selfish reason is wrong. For the Lord to have done something for a selfish reason would have been terribly wrong indeed, a sin against God, that is against His very being, against all the laws He Himself had established.

And so, although the Lord did indeed want food very much, He knew He should not yield to the temptation of turning stones into bread. So He told the devil that "it is written, [in the Word] 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'" And in this way the Lord overcame His first temptation. In doing so, He weakened the power of the devil and of all of hell.

The temptations that people encounter follow much the same pattern as the Lord's temptation. Evil spirits come to tempt us when we are spiritually weak, not when we are strong. They tempt us when some selfish love in us is strongly felt. They tempt us by making us think of ways to satisfy that selfish love, and by making those ways seem quite all right, even when they are not at all right. They tempt us by making us feel that those ways of satisfying our natural love won't harm anybody, or, if they do harm anybody, that it is really the other person's fault.

So you see, when we want to satisfy a selfish desire, it is not enough to feel satisfied that in doing so we will not harm anybody else, or that what we want is more important than what others want. We must think of what the Word tells us is good and right and true. We must try very hard to think, to will and to live according to what the Word teaches. If you do this, then, like the Lord, you will be answering the tempting spirits by letting them know that the power of the Word will stand against them and give you strength.

Amen.