

**St. Michael's Serbian Orthodox Church**  
**Huntsville, Alabama**  
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**Bible Study Notes for 10-1-2014**

Luke 4:1-15

*And Jesus being full of the Holy Ghost returned from Jordan, and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, <sup>2</sup> Being forty days tempted of the devil. And in those days he did eat nothing: and when they were ended, he afterward hungered. <sup>3</sup> And the devil said unto him, If thou be the Son of God, command this stone that it be made bread. <sup>4</sup> And Jesus answered him, saying, It is written, That man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God. <sup>5</sup> And the devil, taking him up into an high mountain, shewed unto him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. <sup>6</sup> And the devil said unto him, All this power will I give thee, and the glory of them: for that is delivered unto me; and to whomsoever I will I give it. <sup>7</sup> If thou therefore wilt worship me, all shall be thine. <sup>8</sup> And Jesus answered and said unto him, Get thee behind me, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve. <sup>9</sup> And he brought him to Jerusalem, and set him on a pinnacle of the temple, and said unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down from hence: <sup>10</sup> For it is written, He shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee: <sup>11</sup> And in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. <sup>12</sup> And Jesus answering said unto him, It is said, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God. <sup>13</sup> And when the devil had ended all the temptation, he departed from him for a season. <sup>14</sup> And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee: and there went out a fame of him through all the region round about. <sup>15</sup> And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified of all.*

St. Theophylact identifies avarice, gluttony and vainglory as the chief three temptations or “the three heads of the serpent.” “The Lord repelled the temptation of the love of riches by not falling down in worship before Satan. Another view of this is that the devil showed Christ the various kingdoms or realms of sins and was as if saying to Him, if You want to rule over these passions, and if you have come for this reason, to seize from me those who are in my grip, bow down and worship me, and receive all those who are under my tyranny...however, He did not intend to become our king by committing sin or by avoiding struggle, but instead entering into combat and defeating His opponent...notice what great benefit it is to know the Scriptures...for the Lord repels the devil with the words of Scripture...

St. Theophylact also notes that it was the Holy Spirit Who was leading Him up for the contest with the devil. They go away into the desert, to give the devil an opportunity to attack Him, for it is especially when we are alone that the devil attacks us. (St. Chrysostom adds ‘On this very account we have the greatest need to be flocking together continually, so we may not be open to the devil’s attacks...’) He fasts for forty days, not exceeding the extent of Moses’ and Elijah’s fasting, so as not to give Satan immediate cause to suspect that the Lord was greater than Moses and Elijah, but instead to encourage Satan to attack, thinking that He was only a man.

This brings up another topic that a number of prominent Holy Fathers have written about: the “Divine Deception,” which is basically the idea that Christ ‘fooled’ Satan by leading the evil one to underestimate Who He really was; that is, God and letting Satan believe that Jesus was merely a man. Several Holy Fathers such as St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. John Damascene, St. John Chrysostom and St. Theophylact.

Another example of the Divine Deception is found in St. Theophylact’s commentary on Matthew, where he writes that Mary was betrothed to Joseph in part to escape the notice of the devil. For the devil had heard that the Virgin would conceive, and was keeping the Virgin under his surveillance. So that the deceiver might be deceived, Joseph betrothed the Ever-virgin, outwardly appearing to be her spouse, but not so in actual deed

Here is a short excerpt from an article by Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev of the Russian Orthodox Church: “St. Gregory of Nyssa entwines the theme of the descent in hell with the theory of ‘divine deception’. On the latter he builds his teaching on the Redemption. According to this theory, Christ, being God incarnate, deliberately concealed His divine nature from the devil so that he, mistaking Him for an ordinary man, would not be terrified at the sight of an overwhelming power approaching him. When Christ descended in hell, the devil supposed Him to be a human being, but this was a divine ‘hook’ disguised under a human ‘bait’ that the devil swallowed[11] . By admitting God incarnate into his domain, the devil himself signed his own death warrant: incapable of enduring the divine presence, he was overcome and defeated, and hell was destroyed.

This is precisely the idea that Gregory of Nyssa developed in one of his Easter sermons on ‘The Three-Day Period of the Resurrection of Christ’. Judging by its contents, this homily was intended for Holy Saturday[12], and in it Gregory poses the question of why Christ spent three days ‘in the heart of the earth’[13]. This period was necessary and sufficient, he argues, for Christ to ‘expose the foolishness’ (*moranoi*) of the devil[14], i.e, to outwit, ridicule and deceive him[15]. How did Christ manage to ‘outwit’ the devil? Gregory gives the following reply to this question:

As the ruler of darkness could not approach the presence of the Light unimpeded, had he not seen in Him something of flesh, then, as soon as he saw the God-bearing flesh and saw the miracle performed through it by the Deity, he hoped that if he came to take hold of the flesh through death, then he would take hold of all the power contained in it. Therefore, having swallowed the bait of the flesh, he was pierced by the hook of the Deity and thus the dragon was transfixed by the hook.[16]

Yet another reference to this can be found in the Pascal Homily of St. John Chrysostom:

...Let no one fear death, for the Saviour's death has set us free. He that was held prisoner of it has annihilated it. By descending into Hell, He made Hell captive. He embittered it when it tasted of His flesh. And Isaiah, foretelling this, did cry: Hell, said he, was embittered when it encountered Thee in the lower regions. It was embittered, for it was abolished. It was embittered, for it was mocked. It was embittered, for it was slain. It was embittered, for it was overthrown. It was embittered, for it was fettered in chains. It took a body, and met God face to face. It took earth, and encountered Heaven. It took that which was seen, and fell upon the unseen. O Death, where is thy sting? O Hell, where is thy victory? Christ is risen, and thou art overthrown! Christ is risen, and the demons are fallen! Christ is risen, and the angels rejoice! Christ is risen, and life reigns! Christ is risen, and not one dead remains in the grave. For Christ, being risen from the dead, is become the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep..."

One might ask, why didn't Christ simply destroy Satan? Why did He even condescend to permit Satan to tempt Him in the wilderness? Why go through these elaborate means to 'disguise' His Divinity? We could think of many related questions, no doubt, along these lines. And these are excellent questions that deserve much time and study; although to fully fathom the depths of such questions are well beyond the scope of a brief Bible Study at a small Orthodox church in Huntsville, Alabama. However, we might at least consider the following: as fallen human beings, we would naturally like to control things so that our lives might proceed according to what we can perceive looks like the right way for things to go. However, as we learn from Scripture and the Holy Fathers, 'My Kingdom is not of this world!' God does not do things according to our fallen and limited human reason and logic, but since He is all-wise and all-knowing, we must trust that He loves us and always does what is best for us—even when we don't always understand everything He does or why He does it.

St. Nikolai Velimirovic once talked about this in a homily. It was about Christ's choice of mostly illiterate fisherman and sinners to be His Apostles. St. Nikolai said that Christ could easily have converted the twelve most powerful kings in the world to be His disciples. These kings would in turn have simply ordered everyone in their kingdom to accept Him as the Messiah. There would have been no need for the Cross and all the suffering and struggle of trying to teach people the Truth. He said it would be as though a giant uprooted an enormous tree and stood next to it holding it up. The problem would be that as soon as the giant left, the tree would simply fall down, since it would not be a normal tree with deep roots. However, by planting a humble tree, and letting it grow over time into a great tree with such deep roots, no matter how the world tried to destroy this 'tree' of the Christian faith, it would simply put forth new shoots and continue to grow. And this is what has truly happened over the past 2,000 years. No one has been able to destroy the Christian faith no matter how much they have tried. And so by choosing these humble Apostles, the Christian faith grew in a way that was strong and true, not artificial.

And so Christ in His unfathomable humility, became a man in large part to show us what we must do in order to be saved. We too must imitate Him by being humble and letting the Holy Scriptures be our defense and turning to God to help us in all things.

Another way to look at this is that these three temptations reveal three enemies to our salvation: the flesh, the world and the devil. Yet the devil is very subtle and often tempts us unawares

either directly through thoughts, feelings or sometimes through others or various situations; OR the devil uses the temptations of the world to try and get us to serve him—such as power, glory, riches and so forth; OR the devil uses the weakness of our flesh, that is the passions, in order to tempt us into sin and servitude. Fasting helps us overcome the weakness of the flesh: Prayer helps us overcome the temptations of the devil and Almsgiving helps us overcome the temptations of greed and worldly riches.

The Holy Fathers have taught us that Satan is not able to see into our hearts and that when we are tempted, if we keep ‘a poker face’ so to speak, and do not reveal our weakness, that Satan does not know our inward disposition and cannot tempt us further. Another point is that Christ shows us an example for our benefit, by not trying to contend with the devil with our own strength (which is very weak actually), but rather by counteracting temptations from the devil with the Holy Scripture.

Again, St. John Chrysostom writes: “How then are we to get the better of him (the devil)? In the way which Christ has taught us, by fleeing to God for refuge...Angels will receive you also, applauding you, and waiting as guards on you in all things.

St. Anthony the Great once said, 'I saw the snares that the enemy spreads out over the world and I said groaning, "What can get through from such snares?" Then I heard a voice saying to me, "Humility."

This ‘divine deception’ of God over Satan also reveals His almighty power over the evil one. And it shows what a powerful weapon humility is: for God could have simply destroyed the devil with His power directly, but He chose to become Incarnate as a seemingly helpless infant, appearing merely as a man and not revealing that He was God until the right time. So too, we must be humble, for we are truly weak, fallen human beings and yet as Christ once said to the Apostle Paul: “My Grace is sufficient for thee, for My strength is made perfect in your weakness.” So let us embrace our weakness and bear our cross throughout our life, knowing that Christ will strengthen us and conquer Satan for us.