

**August 30, 2009**

## **Matthew 3: God Strengthens by the Spirit**

**Purpose:** To help us recognize that God's Spirit reveals to us the divine will and strengthens us to accomplish that will

Key Bible reference: Matthew 3.1-4.11

Key Verse: Matthew 3.16-17

### **Biblical Interpretation**

Matthew 3:16-17. Matthew tells us that after Jesus had been baptized, the Spirit of God descended upon him; and the divine voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved" (verse 17). Pay very close attention to the words Matthew uses. According to Matthew, only Jesus saw the Spirit descend upon him: "The heavens were opened to him and he [italics added] saw the Spirit of God" (verse 16). But the voice out of heaven speaks to us, not to Jesus. The statement is, "This is my Son," not "You are my Son."

Why in Matthew's account does the voice of God speak to us instead of to Jesus? Matthew's version indicates that the Spirit of God that guided Jesus is the same Spirit that lets us know Jesus as the Son of God. Matthew is concerned for the reader's knowledge; Luke may have been more concerned to report Jesus' self-understanding (see Luke 3:21-22).

Matthew 4:1-11. Matthew also tells us that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness in order to be tempted. It is important to realize that at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, he had to decide what form his ministry would take—that is, to decide what kind of messiah he would be. In the wilderness, Jesus was offered various alternatives to consider.

To understand the temptation that Jesus endured, we must understand something about

the time in which he lived. Jesus was born into a Jewish family and lived his life within the Jewish community. No doubt he encountered Gentiles (non-Jews) as he was growing up, but the greatest influences in his life came from his Jewish community.

The Jewish community at that time was alive with an expectation of the Messiah or Anointed One whom God had promised to send. The prophets of the Old Testament, speaking for God, affirmed that one day God would send the Messiah to deliver the people. This promise gave Jews hope, especially during the time when they lived under the domination of the Roman Empire.

Many Jews in Jesus' day wondered about the Messiah God would send: What will the Messiah be like? What will the Messiah do? What will the Messiah's priorities be? Out of this expectant thinking and dreaming, three basic conceptions emerged as to what the Messiah would accomplish.

First, some people said that the Messiah would lead the way in caring for the poor and powerless. The message of God, given to the people by the prophets, had regularly announced that the poor, the homeless, the widows, the orphans, and the sojourners in the land were to be cared for by the rest of the population. Moses spoke for God when he commanded the people, "You shall love the

Lord your God with all your heart" (Deuteronomy 6:5) and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18).

Love of neighbor became part of the "law of the land" for Israel. For example, there was a law that farmers had to allow the poor to enter their fields any time to eat of the produce of the land. Poor folks were not allowed to carry food away from the field, but they were allowed to eat their fill in the fields. Another law stated that any godly person was to give money to the poor. If you met a poor person on the street, you had to give that person money for the necessities of life. For Jesus' people, love of God was expressed in love of neighbor.

Since the poor and powerless held a special spot in the heart of God, some thought the primary work of the Messiah would be to feed the hungry and to minister to the poor. The Messiah, by word and example, would lead all the people in acts of loving-kindness so that the problems of poverty would be overcome. Jews with this understanding of the Messiah thought that God's anointed one would express love for God by loving people.

Second, some people said that the primary characteristic of the Messiah would be his performance of signs and miracles. These people believed that the Messiah would heal the lame, make the blind to see, cure the ill, and perform other miraculous deeds. Such miracles would display God's compassion for the unfortunate people in the world. But the miracles would also be a sure sign of the presence of God in the person who was the Messiah.

By performing signs and wonders to prove the indwelling presence of God, the Messiah would catch the attention of the masses. Then he

could speak the word of God and people would listen. The miracles would offer evidence of God's presence and would give validity to the Messiah's witness.

Third, some people expected the Messiah to be a "political Messiah." They expected the Anointed One to assume the throne of David and to be the king of Israel. Under the leadership of this messiah the Jewish people would overthrow the domination of the Romans. Once freed, the Jewish nation, guided by the Messiah, would establish itself as the most powerful nation on the face of the earth. Then the Jewish people could insist that all those in other nations act in a way consistent with the will of God. No nation would be allowed to enslave other people, and every nation would provide ways to care for the poor and homeless. Because of the leadership of the Messiah, the Jewish nation would make the world a better and more godly place.

These hopes and dreams related to the Messiah were a vibrant reality for the Jewish people of Jesus' day; he had heard these expectations all his life. When Jesus was baptized and received the gift of God's Holy Spirit, he knew that God was calling him to be the Messiah. Now the question Jesus faced was, "What kind of Messiah does God want me to be?"

To answer that question, the Spirit of God led Jesus into the wilderness for prayer and fasting. If Jesus was to be the Messiah, which of the three types that the Jewish people expected would he embody? Or were the three expectations all wrong? Jesus pondered these questions through prayer, solitude, and fasting for forty days and nights.

Then the Devil came to tempt Jesus, to entice him with forms of goodness. "Make these

stones become bread," the Devil suggested. Jesus was too mature spiritually to be tempted by an offer of food for himself, even after forty days of fasting. The temptation was not to relieve his own hunger; rather, it was to act as the kind of Messiah whose ministry would be devoted solely to the care of the poor and powerless.

Jesus rejected this temptation, but note that he did not dispute the importance of caring for the poor and powerless. Jesus did not deny the need for a ministry that met the physical needs of the outcasts of society. He affirmed the need for "bread" but said that there is more to life than bread. The Messiah of God will seek to feed the hungry and will request that the people of God take care of the needy. But the true Messiah will incorporate this concern into an approach that meets other human needs as well.

Having failed with the first temptation, the Devil offered a second. "Perform the signs and miracles the people expect of the Messiah," the Devil suggested. "Throw yourself down from the highest roof of the Temple in Jerusalem and then land on the ground unharmed. Word will spread quickly of your miraculous deed, and everyone will want to listen to your words. Do a great miracle, and the people will attend to you and have faith in God."

Again, Jesus rejected the Devil's suggestion. Of course, healings and signs are part, of the Messiah's ministry; and they do help us understand that God is working through the Messiah. But miracles are an aspect of his ministry, not the focus. Jesus knew that a faith based on miracles is a shallow faith that will not withstand the test of time. If we must constantly ask for proof of God's power and presence, how strong can our faith be?

The critics of Jesus in his own day and shortly after his life on earth ended never denied that Jesus performed miracles. Of course, the critics said, Jesus healed the lame, made the blind see, and even raised the dead. But by what power did Jesus do these things? Jesus' critics claimed that he was empowered by the Devil. Those who had faith in Jesus accepted his miracles as signs of the presence of God, but miracles alone do not "prove" the Messiah. Jesus resisted the temptation of the Devil to focus his ministry on miracles.

Having failed twice, the Devil tried a third time. "OK," the Devil said, "give up your fanatical faith in God, be a little more like everyone else, and you can have power and control to do what you want. Once you have political control, you can use that power for good." Jesus would not have been tempted by power for its own sake, but power to do good things was another matter.

Jesus also rejected this temptation; he believed that life is to be lived in complete obedience to God. One cannot compromise a little here and there in order to get the position, power, or prestige to do good things. Jesus understood that to work in the systems of this world may mean to be corrupted by those very same systems. To compromise in order to get power is already to be moving away from God and toward the kind of thinking the Devil advocates.