

2. Tempting Alternatives by Ron Johnson

Jesus has just been baptized and is filled with the spirit. In response to an inner prompting, he goes out to the wilderness to learn his destiny. This is where prophets have always gone to receive their call from the Lord. It is time for Jesus to get his instructions.

Forty days pass. Just as Moses waited forty days to receive God's law, now Jesus waits forty days for his mission.

And the plan is laid out to him in this way. Uppermost in his thoughts is his love for his people. He cannot bear to see them suffer. He knows he has come to save them, and that is what he wants to do. But how? How can he use his powers to change the world?

He considers the bread problem. He is famished, and his severe hunger makes him think about the chronic hunger of others. As he ponders the universal problems of humanity, it seems to him that bread may be the main thing. Human life revolves around the need for nourishment. So very few people have enough, and those who do spend their lives trying to get more.

"If you're the son of God," says the Tempter, "command these stones to become bread."

And Jesus is tempted!

Why not? Perhaps he could solve the world's other problems by attacking the bread problem. Why not use his powers to feed people miracle bread? Why not start right here and now?

It's a vexing question. As he looks ahead to his ministry, he can readily see

himself feeding multitudes with bread. But is it right to create bread out of stones? And is feeding the hungry his most important role?

Eventually he realizes this is not the answer. “Man shall not live by bread alone,” he quotes from the Torah, “but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” He cannot devote his life to turning boulders into biscuits. He must use his powers to teach people the word of God. He will feed the hungry by training people to do it in his name.

“All right,” replies the Tempter. “But how will you get people to listen to you? And please don’t insult my intelligence by saying you’ll preach to them about peace and love. If you aren’t going to feed the hungry yourself, then you’ve got to have a plan for getting people to listen to you.”

Jesus is silent.

“What!” says the Adversary. “Are you going to leave it to chance? Will you let the world go to ruin without making them aware that their salvation depends on listening to you?”

Suddenly Jesus finds himself in Jerusalem, on top of the temple. People from all over the Mediterranean world are going in and out. From up here, they look like ants. Jews, and curious Gentiles in the outer court, are there because they are seeking something -- they don’t know quite what. But they are so caught up in religious ritual that they are not finding the meaning and purpose for which they seek.

“If you are the son of God,” the Tempter says, “throw yourself down from here. Isn’t it written in the scriptures that God won’t let you be harmed, and that His angels will catch you if you fall? Jump from this temple, and all the world will know, in a very short time, that you are the son of God.”

Jesus thinks about it! He wants to reach his people. Their only hope is in listening to him. It would be an act of mercy for him to get their attention through an outward display of his power. He could turn the nation of Israel back to God *this year* and send God's invitation out to the Gentiles without delay. It would be so easy. . .

But Jesus knows that that is not his Father's way. He must take orders from his Father, not force his Father's hand. "You must not tempt the Lord your God," he recites.

"It seems you are determined to do this your Father's way," says Satan. He sighs. "Then the human race is doomed. Your Father doesn't understand what's going on down here. He doesn't commiserate with sinful man. But you do! You know what it's like to be human. You're more merciful than your Father is. Come on, admit it!"

He shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world in a glance. "Look at the pain and suffering. Witness man's inhumanity to man. You could stop it, but you refuse. You're unwilling to step up and rule the world, for the world's sake!"

Jesus turns away but Satan follows him. "Your Father leaves too much to free choice. People rarely choose to do the right thing. They make themselves miserable. You can change that! You can make them do what's best for them. You can make them share their wealth. You can make them stop killing each other. And because you *can* do it, all the world's ills will be your fault if you *don't* do it."

He looks Jesus right in the face. "You think you need your Father, but you don't. You've got powers you don't know anything about. Worship me and I'll help you discover them. It's *you* they need! Don't let your people down! Together we can rule the world, and finally. . . finally. . . the human race can be happy. . . thanks to you!"

Jesus breaks free from the Tempter's grip. He wishes he had an immediate

method for stopping the suffering in the world. There is no such method, but there *is* a Plan. “Get out of here, Satan,” he says. “For it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve only Him.’”

The Tempter leaves, for today at least, and angels hasten to Jesus’ side.

From now on, he knows what he has to do. He has indeed come to feed the hungry, but he will accomplish that feat through his followers. He will indeed get his hearers’ attention, but not through magic tricks; he will reach them through deeds of compassion and self-sacrifice. He will indeed rule, but not the way the Tempter has in mind. He will reign in the hearts and minds of all who follow him, and together he and his people will transform the world. It will take far longer than he wishes it will, but it *will* happen.

In overcoming these temptations, Christ shows supreme confidence in God, because he trusts that God’s plan will work, no matter how long it takes. But he also shows that he places great confidence in his people. The plan will work only if the followers of Christ do what they are supposed to do in each new age, to the end of time.

It is the greatest risk he will ever take.

SEE NEXT PAGE FOR REFLECTION QUESTIONS

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Why did Jesus have to go to the wilderness to learn his mission? Do we have to go there, too?
2. Do you recognize the good news in knowing that Jesus was tempted?
3. What would have happened to Jesus if he had turned the stone into bread?
4. Are we ever tempted to place too much emphasis (or too little) on the bread problem?
5. They say that the Buddha levitated before inquirers when it was necessary to convince them of the truth of his words. Why do the gospels tell us that Jesus refused to jump from the temple and, essentially, levitate before the crowd?
6. Why did Jesus so strongly oppose the idea of ruling the world? Doesn't Christian art picture him with a scepter in his hand and a crown on his head?
7. This story warns us how easy it is for those who are passionate about doing good to end up as agents of evil. History is littered with the names of devils who thought they were saving the world. How can we recognize the path of destruction when it looks like precisely the way we must go?