

Text: Mt 4.1-2

Our fasting study has covered the following topics:

- What Is Fasting? (definitions, history, pagans, Israel) [October 23, 2022]
- What Did God Command? (only the day of atonement) [October 30, 2022]
- What Did Israel Practice? (here we talk about various fasts in the OT including those mentioned by Zechariah and Isaiah's rebuke of hypocritical fasting) [Nov 13, 2022]
- The Spirit of Fasting — Mt 6 (not for show) [Nov 20, 2022]
- When You Can't Fast — Lk 5.29-35 (When the Bridegroom is present) [Nov 27, 2022]

Today I want to ask this question:

Why Did Jesus Fast in the Wilderness?

Of course, we are talking about the prelude to the Temptation of Christ. The event is mentioned in each Synoptic Gospel, Mt 4, Mk 1, and Lk 4.

Read Mt 4.1-11

We are mostly interested in the first two verses and the ministry of the angels to Jesus after the Temptation.

In Mark, the parallel goes this way:

Mk 1.12-13 ¶ Immediately the Spirit impelled Him *to go* out into the wilderness.¹³ And He was in the wilderness forty days being tempted by Satan; and He was with the wild beasts, and the angels were ministering to Him.

And Luke has this:

Lk 4.1-2 ¶ Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led around by the Spirit in the wilderness² for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And He ate nothing during those days, and when they had ended, He became hungry. ...

Lk 4.13 When the devil had finished every temptation, he left Him until an opportune time.

I. A few notes on the circumstances

A. All passages speak of the leading or fullness of the Spirit

1. Matthew: Jesus was led up by the Spirit
2. Mark: Immediately the Spirit impelled Him
3. Luke: Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit

B. The language allows for more than three temptations

1. Mark mentions no specific temptation
2. Luke and Matthew name the same three temptations (but the order differs)
3. But it is possible that the whole experience was a time of temptation

C. The place of temptation is the wilderness: this creates a parallel with Israel

1. The number 40: 40 days; 40 years

The number 40 frequently connected to sin and testing in the OT

- a. The forty days of rain during the flood (Gen 7.4, 12)
- b. The forty years judgement for sin in the wilderness (Num 14.33, 32.13, Ps 95.10)
- c. Moses wrestling God interceding for Israel (Dt 9.25)
- d. Jonah's message to Nineveh: forty days and judgement will fall (Jon 3.4)
- e. The judicial punishment prescribed in the Law, forty stripes (Dt 25.3)

2. The wilderness of temptation

"The wilderness of Judea (3:1) is the traditional site of Jesus' temptations. Israel had, of course, experienced temptation in another wilderness for 40 years."¹

¹ Constable, Mt 4.1.

II. The central question: “Why did Jesus fast”

A. The kind of fast Jesus experienced

1. Luke says Jesus “ate no food”
2. Matthew uses the word for fasting
3. Mark makes no mention of fasting

It appears that Jesus drank water during this time, but went without food.

B. The purpose of the fast

1. The Bible doesn’t give an explicit answer to this question
2. Other Biblical examples suggest the fast was a preparation
 - a. Moses fasted 40 days before receiving the tablets of the Law (Ex 34.28; Dt 9.9)
 - b. Elijah fasted 40 days during his escape from Jezebel enroute to his meeting with God (1 Ki 19.8)
 - c. Elders in Antioch fasted before sending out Paul and Barnabas (Ac 13.2-3)
 - d. Paul and Barnabas fasted before appointing elders in the churches (1st missionary journey) (Ac 14.23)
3. Commentaries:

“In all the Synoptic Gospels the baptism account is followed by the account of Jesus’ temptation. In Luke it functions as the last preparatory episode that introduces the public ministry of Jesus.”²

“Luke notes two particular tests in verse 2. First, Jesus went through a forty-day temptation at the hands of the devil, emulating Israel’s forty years in the wilderness (Deut 2:7; Num 14:34) and Moses’ forty-day fast (Exod 34:8; Deut 9:9). Second, and connected to the first, he ‘ate nothing during

² Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 144.

those days,' like Moses above and Elijah (1 Kgs 19:5, 8). There is double meaning in *peirazō*, both 'tempted' by Satan and 'tested' by God. By the end of that time, Jesus 'was hungry' and like Israel more susceptible to the temptation. The key is that while Israel failed her test, Jesus will succeed and point the way to victory for us. Jesus will prove his worth as the Son of God, overcome the failures of Adam and Israel, and demonstrate for Luke's readers how to find victory. This latter point is secondary here but still part of Luke's larger purposes. Primarily, Luke is stressing that at the beginning of his ministry Jesus is completely victorious over the powers of evil."³

"One might expect the main, central period of Jesus' public ministry to unfold at once, but one more crucial preparatory event must occur. Jesus could well have perverted the nature of his messianic sonship and bypassed the way of the cross in favor of some more glamorous political or military role as liberator of Israel. But refusing to die for the sins of the world would have given the devil rather than God the victory. So Jesus' resolve to fulfill God's plans for him must be tested and proved right at the outset of his ministry."⁴

"Jesus' genealogy and virgin birth prove His legal human qualification as Israel's King. His baptism was the occasion of His divine approval. His temptation demonstrated His moral fitness to reign. The natural question a thoughtful reader of Matthew's Gospel might ask after reading God's attestation of His Son (3:17) is: Was He really that good? Jesus' three temptations prove that He was."⁵

³ Grant R. Osborne, *Luke: Verse by Verse*, Osborne New Testament Commentaries (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), 106.

⁴ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary 22 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 82–83.

⁵ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Mt 4.1.

III. An ancillary question: "Did Jesus create a precedent for us?"

"Jesus has even been accounted 'the Founder and Example of the ascetic life' (Clem. Alex., *Strom*, III, 6). By questionable emphasis upon His 'forty days' fast, His abstinence from marriage and His voluntary poverty, some have reached the conclusion that complete renunciation of the things of the present was 'the way of perfection according to the Saviour.'"⁶ [Note: the author of the quote doesn't agree with this conclusion.]

A. This is a distortion of the picture we see in the Gospels.

1. Attended and supplied the feast at a wedding
2. Accepted hospitality of rich and poor, ate in houses of Pharisees, Zaccheus, Matthew, Lazarus and his sisters
3. Permitted the extravagant use of precious ointment to be poured on his feet
4. Welcomed the friendship of women and children
5. No evidence for any austerities, other than the forty day fast at the temptation

B. Some Scriptures countering the approach of Jesus

Mt 11.19 "The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

Lk 7.34 "The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'"

Jesus was criticized because he *did not* fast (other than, presumably, on the Day of Atonement).

⁶ Eager, "Abstinence," 25.

Conclusion:

We have said that fasting can be a spiritual discipline that Christians can use, but we have no precedent in Jesus, we have instructions against misusing fasting, and we have a new era in the New Testament, something we will address in our last message on fasting.