

THE STORY

READ THE STORY. EXPERIENCE THE BIBLE.

Chapter 23: Jesus' Ministry Begins

Key Question: How can expectations affect our reception of God?

The Test

Pages 321–323

Back in Genesis, the devil tested Eve's obedience to God by telling her the forbidden fruit wasn't fatal, but would make her like God. Thinking God denied her something beneficial—something good to eat, exalting to have, and pleasing to behold—she stretched out her hand, wrapped fingers around the focus of her desire, tugged, and ate.

In the desert, the Israelites too faced tests. Like Eve, they doubted God's intentions for them were good. They despised the manna God fed them; disregarded his promise of grapes, figs, milk, and honey to come; and wailed for Egypt's leeks and garlic—thus giving in to the temptation to satisfy their physical hunger rather than obey God's word.¹ When thirsty, they did not turn to the God who had met their needs supernaturally time and again, but rebelled and tested God, asking, "Is the Lord among us or not?"² They gave in to bowing to a golden calf and to the Baal of Peor with its seductive women offering sexual pleasures, thus forgetting their promise to worship God alone.³

Tests confronted Jesus too.

After being baptized, Jesus followed the Spirit into the wilderness. There he fasted forty days and nights. When he was hungry and physically weak, the devil came to test him.

The first test called on Jesus to use his supernatural powers to turn stones into bread to satisfy his hunger.

1. (a) Jesus waited for the angels to attend him rather than create bread for himself. How did his response⁴ differ from Eve's and the Israelites' responses⁵ when they wanted food God had not given them? (b) What can we learn from Jesus about responding to physical cravings (Matthew 4:3–4)?

¹ See Deuteronomy 8:2–3, which Jesus quotes after the first temptation. See also Numbers 11:4–5, 18–20.

² See Deuteronomy 6:16, which Jesus quotes after the second temptation. See also Exodus 17:1–7; Psalms 95:8–9.

³ See Deuteronomy 6:13, which Jesus quotes after the third temptation. See also Exodus 32:4; Numbers 25; Numbers 31:16.

⁴ See Deuteronomy 8:2–3.

⁵ See introductory paragraphs or Genesis 3:6; Numbers 11:4–5; 18–20; Psalms 78:18–19.

For the second test, the devil stood Jesus on the highest point of the temple and told him to throw himself down, for Scripture said angels would protect him.

2. (a) What had the Israelites asked when they tested God?⁶ (b) What similar doubt did Eve entertain?⁷ (c) What part does doubt in God's intentions towards us play in most temptations? (d) What can we learn from Jesus' response (Matthew 4:5–7)?⁸

In the third test, the devil offered Jesus the glorious kingdoms of the world if he would bow to and worship him—a seemingly easier path than the Father offered, which was the cross.

3. (a) What are ways the tempter today claims his method is easier than God's? (b) How is ignoring God's commands a way of bowing to the tempter? (c) Covetousness is idolatry.⁹ What can we learn from Jesus about responding to desires for possessions, positions, and power which God isn't giving us (Matthew 4:8–10)?

⁶ See introductory paragraphs or Exodus 17:7. The Israelites tested God by doubting he'd provide for them when they met difficulties and by demanding proofs of God's presence and abilities, even though they'd seen his miraculous works: Numbers 14:22, 21:6; Psalms 78:18, 41, 56; Psalms 95:8–9.

⁷ See introductory paragraphs or Genesis 3:4–5.

⁸ See Deuteronomy 6:13.

⁹ "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry" (Colossians 3:5, ESV). See also Deuteronomy 5:21.

4. (a) When Jesus ordered Satan to leave him, what did the devil do (Matthew 4:11a)? (b) What else happened (4:11b)? (c) Why do you think they didn't come until after Jesus resisted the devil's temptations? (d) The Bible says, "Resist the devil and he will flee from you."¹⁰ How can you follow Jesus' example in resisting the devil in whatever temptations you face today?

Where Adam, Eve, the Israelites, and all humankind failed, Jesus prevailed.

Introductions

Pages 323–326

Last week we saw the Messiah come into the world: the Word of God made flesh. This week we'll see people's reactions as they suspect the long-awaited Messiah might finally have arrived.

John the Baptist called people to repent from wrongdoing and to be baptized as a sign of committing their lives to God. Crowds responded. When Jesus came to be baptized, John hesitated, but Jesus told him it was the proper thing to do.

5. Let's look back at a passage from our previous reading. (a) What happened when Jesus was baptized (Matthew 3:16–17)? (b) What three supernatural beings are present during the baptism?

Because John the Baptist had a large following, the Jewish leaders asked him if he was the Messiah. He denied it, and told them he was the person Isaiah prophesied about who called others to "Make straight the way for the Lord"¹¹ in anticipation of the Messiah.

6. (a) What did John tell people Jesus was (John 1:29)? (b) John was older than Jesus. What did he mean when he said Jesus was before him (1:30)?¹² (c) John had many followers, yet he told them Jesus surpassed him. What can we learn about humility from John?

¹⁰ James 4:7.

¹¹ Isaiah 40:3.

¹² Recall last week's reading on the Word (John 1:1).

John's testimony counted because he was highly esteemed as a prophet.¹³ But the Father had special plans, plans that Jesus' followers had to be sure came from him.

7. At a wedding in Cana, Jesus turned water into wine. Why (John 2:11)?

One on One

Pages 326–329

One night a religious leader named Nicodemus came to visit Jesus, convinced the miracles Jesus did showed he was from God.

Nicodemus belonged to a popular Jewish sect called **Pharisees**, a mostly middle-class group who believed the Messiah would return when the Jews were righteous enough to deserve him. Not wanting to ever experience an exile again, they created a set of oral rules meant to be a protective hedge around the Law of Moses. They believed in an afterlife for righteous Jews who obeyed both the written Scripture¹⁴ and their own oral traditions.¹⁵

So what did Jesus tell this Jewish teacher?

8. (a) Who can have eternal life (John 3:15–16)? (b) Was eternal life limited to just righteous Jews? (c) Why did God send his Son to the world (3:17)? (d) What happens to those who believe in him and those who don't (3:18)? (e) How did this teaching differ from Nicodemus' beliefs about how to receive eternal life?

Jesus didn't talk to just the respected spiritual elite. Next we look at a conversation with someone on the opposite end of the Jewish popularity scale: an immoral Samaritan woman. In that culture, men looked down at women as inferior, and most Jews looked down on those with immoral lifestyles. But her religious beliefs caused major problems.

¹³ Matthew 21:26.

¹⁴ For most Jews of that time, Scripture consisted of the same books included in what Christians now call the Old Testament, but arranged differently. They did not consider the Apocrypha (a collection of Jewish books written during the 400-year silent period) to be Scripture.

¹⁵ In AD 200 these oral traditions were written down into what is now called the *Mishnah*.

Whereas most Jews respected the Pharisees, they almost universally despised the **Samaritans**. While the Pharisees added to Scripture, the Samaritans subtracted, using only the first five books of the Bible.

The Samaritans lived in the Roman province of Samaria. They were the descendants of the Israelites who escaped Assyrian deportation and the people that the Assyrians brought in to repopulate what had been the northern kingdom of Israel. They had intermingled in both marriage and religious beliefs.

Jesus caught the woman's attention when he knew her secrets. Realizing he was a prophet, she went right to a difference in their beliefs: where to worship.

9. (a) What strikes you about Jesus' response to the Samaritan woman (John 4:21–24)? (b) In what ways did Jesus' response present teaching that was different from the woman's beliefs? (c) What can we learn about sharing the gospel from Jesus?

When Jesus told her he was the Messiah she expected, she headed back to town to tell others. They asked him to stay in their city, and many became believers.

10. (a) Who did the Samaritans say Jesus was (John 4:42)? (b) What is significant about their calling him this (as opposed to "Savior of the Jews" or "Savior of the Samaritans")?

These Samaritans did not hold their prior beliefs and expectations so tightly that they ignored the evidence of who Jesus was.¹⁶

Before the Crowds

Pages 329–331

As word of Jesus' authoritative teaching and miraculous abilities spread, crowds sought him, hoping he was the Messiah.

One day while Jesus taught in a crowded home, an opening appeared in the ceiling and down came a paralyzed man on a mat. Jesus told the man, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

¹⁶ Nicodemus probably didn't either, since he helped bury Jesus (see John 19:38).

11. (a) How did the teachers of the law respond to Jesus' statement (Mark 2:7)? (b) They had expected the Messiah to be but a man. How did Jesus show he had the power to do that which they had just said only God could do (2:10–11)? (c) What possible conclusions may the teachers have considered?

Another surprise awaited the Jewish leaders: Jesus called a tax collector to follow him. The Jews despised tax collectors and even expelled them from synagogues. The Pharisees considered them “unclean” and kept away from them. This tax collector—Levi¹⁷—invited Jesus to dine with other people of less than sterling reputations.

12. (a) Calling an outcast like Levi to be his disciple might have hurt Jesus' credibility with some people. Why do you think Jesus did it? (b) The Pharisee teachers asked Jesus' disciples why Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners; what did Jesus respond (Mark 2:17)? (c) What did he mean? (d) What does this tell us about how Jesus feels towards outcasts? (e) What can we learn from this?

Unmet Expectations

Pages 331–334

Most Jews yearned for the coming of the Messiah. They wanted the Messiah to set them free from Roman rule and restore the kingdom they'd had before exile.

Although many signs pointed towards Jesus being the Messiah, there were things about him no one expected. Some people looked at the evidence and changed their expectations. Others clung to their expectations and rejected Jesus.

¹⁷ He was also called Matthew. He later authored the Gospel of Matthew.

The **Herodians**, a Jewish sect which supported the current Palestinian dynasty, didn't want a Messianic king disrupting their political goals. The **Zealots**, who believed the righteousness that would bring the Messiah required not submitting to Rome or even paying taxes, wanted a warrior to deliver them from Roman rule. The **Sadducees**, the priestly aristocracy who didn't anticipate a Messiah, didn't want anyone disrupting their political power and religious position.

But it was the **Pharisees** who perhaps most struggled. Herod had given them political clout, which they didn't want threatened. Before Jesus came along, they were the most popular Jewish sect; now Jesus threatened that. They had been highly respected for their righteousness and their strict rules which went beyond the requirements of Moses' Law, but Jesus didn't care much for their rules, dismissing them as "traditions of men," not commands of God.

A clash was inevitable.

One Sabbath¹⁸ Jesus went to synagogue and found a man with a shriveled hand. The Pharisees had told him it was wrong to heal people on the Sabbath. Jesus told the handicapped man to stand.

13. (a) What did Jesus ask (Mark 3:4)? (b) What distressed Jesus (3:5)? (c) When Jesus healed the man, what did the Pharisees and Herodians decide to do (3:6)? (d) Why do you think the Pharisees were so angry?

Unmet expectations affected even Jesus' staunchest followers. When John the Baptist was imprisoned for months, he sent his disciples to ask Jesus if he was the Messiah or not.¹⁹

14. (a) Jesus didn't answer a simple yes or no. What did he tell John's disciples to do in Matthew 11:4-5? (b) Why was that better than a simple yes? (c) Jesus listed things he was doing that Isaiah had predicted the Messiah would do; how would that help John? (d) What final word did Jesus give in 11:6? (e) What did John need to do to keep from stumbling?

¹⁸ One of the Ten Commandments was to keep the Sabbath (Saturday) holy by not working (Deuteronomy 5:12-15).

¹⁹ Perhaps prison produced hesitation, or perhaps he wished to prod Jesus to greater action.

Jesus praised John the Baptist highly and said he was “the Elijah who was to come.” No, he wasn’t the man Elijah who had never died and whom John denied being, but he was the one of whom Malachi spoke.²⁰

15. (a) Without using names, briefly describe someone who left God because God didn’t meet his or her expectations. (b) Have you ever had expectations about God that turned out to be mistaken? What did you do to keep from stumbling?

We’ve met Jesus, watched him prevail against temptation, and seen the miraculous signs that drew many to him. There were things about him, though, which no one expected. What will come of that we’ll see soon. Next week, we read what the Son of God taught.

²⁰ Malachi 4:5.