

## Through the Valley of the Shadow of Death; Overcoming the World



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**ABSTRACT:** *The Shepherd's Psalm is arguably one of the more recognized portions of Scripture. While offering words of inspiration, the reader is encouraged to put their confidence in the Shepherd's ability to lead the follower through "the valley of the shadow of death." This paper explores how Jesus as the Good Shepherd (Jn 10:14) leads the child of God through life's challenging ways. It draws on Jesus' own experiences (Mt 4:1-11) to validate His ministry as the Good Shepherd, overcoming the temptations of the devil, and reflecting physical, emotional, and moral challenges. In doing so, Jesus as the Good Shepherd reveals for the follower the nature of life's temptations, a confident way through trials, and sure comfort in His presence through such trials (Ps 23:4). Moreover, Jesus offers a model for the believer to consider their identity as a child of God, and this serves as a living apologetic to temptations in life.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Matthew 4:1-11, Psalm 23, Good Shepherd, overcoming sin, trials, appetites, ambition, anxiety, temptation of Christ, the Valley of the Shadow of Death.*

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Conversations are important. They engage us into the thoughts and motives of others and ourselves. They reveal one's appetites, ambitions, and anxieties about living. The Bible captures multiple conversations that unfold the nature of humanity, as well as the nature of relationship with others and ultimately with God. This study explores a conversation with Jesus and the tempter. It does so by considering Jesus as the Good Shepherd: a title He confers to himself while engaged in a conversation with his disciples about the nature of leadership, both overt and covert (Jn 10:1-18). Moreover, Jesus' conversation in John 10 draws the attention of the Jewish audience to the nature of the shepherd in Ps 23. This study will attempt to connect some dots between the Ps 23 description of the shepherd and Jesus' claim to be the Good Shepherd who pastors His flock. Specifically, we will consider Jesus' credentials for leading us through the valley of the shadow of death. We will endeavor to identify that path through the valley, discover what the 'shadow of death' may be, and learn how the Good Shepherd helps us shed light into the shadows of living that haunt us.

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### Psalm 23: A Pastoral Provider and Protector

Psalm 23 is perhaps one of the more endearing and enduring portions of the Bible.<sup>2</sup> It engages the reader and captures their imagination. Reciting Psalm 23 transforms its simple prose into a prayer of presence that acknowledges one's relationship with God. The Psalm creates an image of a relationship marked by the One who has as personal interest in the welfare of the reader, and acts as provisional host to one's needs in their life's journey.<sup>3</sup> It reflects both horizontal and vertical realities in a Child of God's (COG)<sup>4</sup> experience.<sup>5</sup>

Psalm 23 is multi layered. The Hebrew word forms do not always exactly translate to English, which may challenge a reader's interpretation. For the Hebrew author the focus is more on the "one who is shepherding *me*," in contrast to the English grammatical style that emphasizes "*my* shepherd."<sup>6</sup> The Hebrew recognizes the relationship in reference to the Lord, rather than how the Greek and English define the relationship in reference of oneself. This is important; as a COG, our identity is always in reference in who we are to God - not the other way around.

The image evokes the texture of a believer's relationship with God. Scholars recognize that the image of the shepherd is common in the Mediterranean basin centuries before and after Christ.<sup>7</sup> This theme translated easily into the early church's imagination,<sup>8</sup> as Jesus' words captured in John 10:14 highlight, His ministry was that of a Good Shepherd. The role of the shepherd in context of the occupation was that of not merely passively watching sheep eat, sleep, and regenerate. Then as now, shepherding is a vibrant, robust vocation of observation, guiding,<sup>9</sup> protecting,<sup>10</sup> assisting in birth, and mending injury. Shepherding also demands constant movement of sheep through different pastures to ensure that seasonal dietary needs are met and fresh water remains available, as well as to protect the flock against predators. It reflects the idea of a plan for living that goes beyond day-to-day functions of eating and sleeping.<sup>11</sup>

Verses 3 and 4 seem to suggest that the way between pastures may hold difficulties that test both sheep and shepherd. It is a journey that sheep could not undertake on their own. Life for the sheep, as for us, is not done in isolation from the Shepherd. Doing so opens oneself up to a predatory enemy. It

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<sup>2</sup> J. Hardee Kennedy, "Psalm 23: Strong Faith and Quiet Confidence," *The Theological Educator* 29 (1984): 14.

<sup>3</sup> Ron Tappy, "Psalm 23: Symbolism and Structure," *The Catholic Quarterly* 57 (1995): 261; Philip Nel, "Yahweh is a Shepherd: Conceptual Metaphor in Psalm 23," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 27 (2005): 86.

<sup>4</sup> The term Child of God is used to capture two distinct mutually exclusive relationships for each human being. First, all of humanity are children of God. While secular humanist thought would contend a nontheist evolutionary status of humanity, Christian apologetics unfolding the Cosmological and Teleological arguments for the existence of God would contend all of humanity by virtue of creation as portrayed in the Genesis narrative are created-beings; as such are children of God. Second, the idea of those who have oriented their lives in purposeful relationship with God recognizing their creative and spiritual relationship with God through the salvific work of Jesus Christ would also acknowledge themselves as Children of God (Jn 1:12, Rm 8:14 & 17, Gal 3:26, 1 Jn 3:1).

<sup>5</sup> C.F. Delitzsch, and F. Keil, *Commentary On The Old Testament: Psalms*, vol. 1 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1989), 329.

<sup>6</sup> Harry Hagen, "Exploring Psalm 23: Defining the sheep, Shepherd, host and guest," *The Priest* (2001): 41.

<sup>7</sup> Nel, "Yahweh is a Shepherd," 92, 95, 96; Hagen, "Exploring Psalm 23," 41-41; Tappy, "Psalm 23," 255.

<sup>8</sup> Kimberly Long, "The Shepherd Jesus," *Journal For Preachers* (2006): 51.

<sup>9</sup> Kennedy, "Psalm 23," 16.

<sup>10</sup> Long, "The Shepherd Jesus," 52.

<sup>11</sup> Hagen, "Exploring Psalm 23," 42.

is also a journey where the integrity the Shepherd seems to be tied to the welfare of the sheep<sup>12</sup> “for His name’s sake” (Ps 23:3).

The 4<sup>th</sup> verse of Ps 23 describes the journey through “the shadow of the valley of the Death” (NASB). Scholars agree that the “valley” is a dark<sup>13</sup> place of “evil.”<sup>14</sup> Certainly, the metaphor offers multiple considerations, and, as with much of Scripture, as many practical applications for the believer. The image is unsettling and has profound implication for the believer both presently<sup>15</sup> and eternally.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the COG lives their life with a dual sense of both the ‘here and now’ and the eternal.

The “valley of the shadow of death” evokes reflection: What is the “valley” and its implication for the COG today? Though contextually separate, Jesus’ self-claim as the Good Shepherd (Jn 10:14) draws a direct line back to Ps 23 that the early church easily followed.<sup>17</sup> Its echo through Scripture urges the reader to wonder how the “Good Shepherd” will guide them through the valley of the shadow of death.

Jesus promised our everyday experience would be flush with difficulties (Jn 6:33). Jesus’ assertion seems to include not only those within ear shot but also all believers, or even all of humanity in this κοσμος (world).<sup>18</sup> The word for tribulation, θλιψιν, literally translates as “pressure.”<sup>19</sup> It is no secret for any individual that life is full of pressures. Jesus assures us that He has overcome the world and its pressure(s). As the “Good Shepherd” He, knows the way through the valley of the shadow of death. These claims come before the crucifixion; Is Jesus prophetically referencing the work of the cross here, as the passage’s context would suggest? It is also possible that Jesus is referencing His trial in the desert of overcoming the devil’s trials (Mt 4:1-11), which are common to all humanity. If so, it may be that Jesus is affirming that He, as the Good Shepherd, is uniquely qualified to guide the COG through the θλιψιν, or “pressure(s)” of the world: the valley of the shadow of death.

### **The Conversation: Jesus, the devil, and the shadow of sin.**

The Matthew 4:1-11 narrative describes Jesus’ trial by the devil. In overcoming this trial, Jesus validates His status as God’s Son, overcoming the demonic pressures which are archetypal of the pressures a COG faces. Those pressures challenge each person as it did Jesus: physically, psychologically, and spiritually. More so, if left unaddressed, runaway appetites, overwhelming anxieties, and unchecked ambitions can lead individuals in life to dark shadowy places - or to death itself.

As the Good Shepherd, Jesus establishes a path through demonic traps that plague everyday human experience. Thus, when we travel as followers through our own dark valley, we can have assurance that not only will He keep us safe, but He will comfort us as we follow the pathway He has made. Therefore, as a COG follows Jesus’ steps through the trials, He give us assurance we are not alone and will not be overcome by the shadow.

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<sup>12</sup> Nel, “Yahweh is a Shepherd,” 96.

<sup>13</sup> Tappy, “Psalm 23,” 260; Hagen, “Exploring Psalm 23,” 42.

<sup>14</sup> Nel, “Yahweh is a Shepherd,” 99.

<sup>15</sup> Kennedy, “Psalm 23,” 17.

<sup>16</sup> Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 329.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Glowasky, “Cognition and Visualization in Early Christian Interpretation of Psalm 23,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 13 (2019): 221.

<sup>18</sup> All Greek manuscript references are obtained by (Berry, George. *The Interlinear Greek-English New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977.)

<sup>19</sup> George Berry, *The Interlinear Greek-English New Testament: Greek-English New Testament Lexicon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 47.

Perhaps one of the most interesting narratives in the Gospels is that of Mt 4:1-11 reflected in Lk 4:1-12. What makes this narrative important, standing apart from other narratives, is that it is a conversation between Jesus and the devil. The interview is profound, and only the 2<sup>nd</sup> interview biblically recorded between Satan and humanity. The first is in the Genesis 3 narrative with Adam and Eve where the conversation led to humanity's fall and resulted in universal consequence to humanity's relation with oneself, each other, and God. The Matthew 4 interview stands as the reparation of the damage inflicted upon humanity in the Genesis narrative. In the Mt 4 trial, Jesus unfolds for us archetypes of life's trials that represent the "pressures" in this world. Moreover, Jesus demonstrates how we can overcome the world as He has, or at least, not succumb as completely, naively, or quickly as did Genesis' first-family.

The Mt 4:1-11 narrative has a sense of symmetry to the Genesis narrative. Paul leans on the symmetry between Adam and Jesus in his discourse on justification (Rom 5:12-21) and the resurrection (1 Cor 15: 20-28). It is also interesting that in both the NT and OT, one of the first narratives regarding the first-family and Jesus unfolds Satan's ongoing challenges to one's character and identity. To be sure, the tests are multi-layered. The tests Jesus undertakes are directed at His identity as the Son of God and relationship with the Father. Likewise, the daily trials for each believer set by Satan are meant to redefine our relationship with God and identity as a COG. If accomplished, the individual is pressed to foster a sense of self informed by a world of subjectivity, self-expression, self-determination, and independence through conditional relationships.

The devil's test aims at three clear aspects of human experience: appetites, ambitions, and anxieties. The failure of the first-family against similar tests was what splintered individuals from a natural sense of identity as a created-being reflecting His image (Gen 1:27). The frailty of the first-family reflects the effect of an apparent lack of a clear apologetic grounding regarding their identity as a COG against real life challenges. It may not be enough to passively being known by God. Rather, the strength of identity flows out of knowing oneself as a COG through an active relationship with God. In the temptations with Jesus, the Satan finds a different individual than those in the first-family. Jesus clearly understands His identity. It informs Jesus with a means to address each test not in a bid to merely deflect, defer or evade the challenge. This is key. Jesus shows us how to get to the root of each specific query or trial. Jesus provides the believer an archetype to consider how their sense of self as a COG is key to resisting temptation; this is part each believer's identity formation.

"Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after He had fasted for forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry." (Mt. 4:1-2, NASB)

Jesus is recognized as an exemplar for human relationship between oneself, others, and God. However, it is early in Jesus' official public ministry that His identity as the Son of God is put to test. It seems Jesus is open to the challenges of the Accuser. As such, the matter of His identity becomes an opening for challenge and riposte, as well as the fulcrum of Satan's queries. The trials are not only a challenge over cosmic authority, but are also (and perhaps more significantly) related to His identity as the Son of God.<sup>20</sup> More so, His nature as a human-being is undertaking the same test: Jesus as a COG is also being tested here. If Jesus is not a created-being as COG, His ability to overcome the challenge becomes moot. The trials are archetypes for all COG.

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<sup>20</sup> Jaco Hamman, "On Getting away with It: Jesus and the Temptation in the Desert," *Pastoral Psychology* 62 (2013): 680; Balmer Kelly, "An Exposition of Matthew 4:1-11," *Interpretation* 29 (1975): 50; Lamar Williamson, "Expository Articles: Matthew 4:1-11," *Interpretation* 38 (1984): 53.

The wilderness narrative unfolds a direct challenge-riposte<sup>21</sup> between Jesus and the Accuser. The challenge-riposte is a common rhetorical device in first-century Mediterranean culture to establish honor and status in a public forum.<sup>22</sup> It adds texture and legitimacy to the narrative for the first-century audience. The same challenge-riposte rhetoric is seen in many narratives between Jesus and the religious leaders and perhaps most profoundly with Pilate (Jn 18:28-40). While the Mt 4:1-11 exchange occurred away from the public eye, it very well may have occurred in view of all spiritual entities. The wilderness narrative sets out to validate Jesus' identity and authority to engage ministry as the Son of God.<sup>23</sup> It is what the rest of His ministry hinges upon; a ministry that surpasses theological discourses (Mt 7:28; 13:54; 22:22; Lk 6:40; 9:1-6), psychological counseling (Mt 9:32-35; Mt 11:25 MSG; Mk 12:15; Lk 4:18; Jn 2:25; Jn 4: 7-29), social advocacy (Lk 10: 30 – 37; Jn 4: 39-45; Jn 8: 1-11) and day to day interaction with people (Mt 8: 5-13; Mt 9:10-12; Jn 2:2). Taken together, this narrative of ministry forms the mythos of Jesus. The drama and tension of the interviews with Satan in the wilderness is contested on this point: "Who is this man, Jesus?" This matter of identity is clearly established prior to the desert experience in the post-baptismal narrative of Matthew 3:13-17, where the voice of Heaven declares Christ's identity as "My Son." This declaration echoes from the OT and binds His identity to Israel.<sup>24 25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Challenge-Riposte was a cultural phenomenon in the first century basin. It was reflection of an honor culture where one's identity and social status could and would be challenged by open rhetorical debate in social gatherings. It was not designed as an attack to character or as a means to validate one's social status or claims. The riposte was an individual's platform to validate their claims of identity, status, or philosophical perspective.

<sup>22</sup> David deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2000), 29.

<sup>23</sup> R.T. France, *The Gospel according to Matthew: an introduction and commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 99.

<sup>24</sup> France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 96; Julia Gatta, "If You are the Son Of God, Throw Yourself Down'," *Sewanee Theological Review* 50 (2006): 67; Nicholas Lunn, "The Temple In The Wilderness: Allusions To The Hebrew Sanctuary In The Baptism and Temptations of Christ," *Journal of the Evangelical Society* 59 (2016): 709; Philip Thompson, "Matthew 4:1-11," *Interpretation* 60 (2006): 72.

<sup>25</sup> It is important to note outside of the trial, passion week, and crucifixion narratives, the wilderness interviews with the Accuser stand as common among the Gospels, save John. The scholarship regarding the placement of the Matthean narrative against the Lukan and Marcan narratives offers more textually rich themes. It is not in the scope of this examination to compare the narratives. Suffice to note that there is reasonable scholarship to support the idea that the Matthean narrative is cued by the Marcan account which only notes the interview in passing in the Marcan text (Mk 1: 12-13). Michael Card, *Matthew: The Gospel of Identity* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2013), 15; Craig Keener, *A Commentary On The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 136; William Stegner, "The Temptation Narrative: A Study in the Use of Scripture by Early Jewish Christians," *Biblical Research* XXXV (1990): 6.

Scholarship seems to rest with the Matthean account being more extensive and informed by Jewish perspective and authorship: Card, *Matthew*, 14; Stegner, "The Temptation Narrative," 5-7; Ben Witherington III, *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary: Matthew* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2006), 5. Michael Card notes that Matthew offers the most reasonable voice to furnish the Gospel narratives to a Jewish population. Matthew is identified as a tax collector (Mt 9:9) possessing skills such as attending to details and tracking families, sayings, and histories. He also had the unique capacity to set himself in the crossroads of civic, social, spiritual, and political currents of the day: Card, *Matthew*, 14. As well, his own Jewish heritage, including Second Temple Jerusalem (2TJ) perspectives, lend him insight to recognize and connect the dots of prophecy and history with the symbolism

The context of the wilderness interview is key to illustrating some interpretive features of this passage for study. The narrative elements of the locations, general geography, culture, and character furnish texture for each query and set the tone of the interview that informs the rest of Jesus Christ's ministry. The Apostle Paul captures this ministry in the narrative of many of his epistles, and is perhaps best expounded in Romans 5:12-16.

Moreover, the setting of the wilderness presents a symbolic link between the OT and NT. However, the wilderness is by no means symbolic geography. The environment described as the wilderness is rich in the Jewish literature of the OT. It is not only geographically outside of the holy city's protectorate, but also in proximity to a harsh landscape that lends itself to physical vulnerability.<sup>26</sup> It is the antithesis of the Garden imagery in the Genesis narrative. Here, the wilderness motif reflects the Mosaic narrative of God's people journeying from a life of slavery to that of God's chosen ones.<sup>27</sup>

The characters in the wilderness interview can be clearly categorized as protagonist and antagonist. Jesus is identified as the Son of God through previous Matthean narratives (Mt 1:18-25; Mt 2: 1-6, 11-12), and especially in the baptism by John (Mt 3:13-17). The other key character is identified in Scripture as the τοῦ διαβόλου, or "devil" (Mt. 4:1), and the ὑπειραζών, or "tempter" (Mt 4:3). The identity is clearly that of Satan, the one who is recognized by Jesus as the "ruler of the world" (Jn 12:31; 14:30; 16:11) and Paul as the "evil one" (2 Cor 4:4; Eph 2:2).<sup>28</sup> It is noted that it was in the post-exilic period that Israel began to recognize the activity and identity of "Satan." With "Satan" serving more

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through Jewish theology: Witherington, *Matthew*, 16–18. Jewish theology is clearly on display in how the author quotes Deuteronomy in the narrative. This differs from the Lucan narrative which follows a more Greek rhetorical style, building a teleological, theological and narratological emphasis: David Bryan, 2020. "The Center of Luke's Temptation Narrative," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* (2020): 412. The era of the narrative is one of multi-layered political, social, economic, and spiritual texture. Each plays a role in the unfolding of history and Jesus' entrance to the human condition. The religious context is that of Judaism referred to as 2TJ theology. It holds to centuries of promise of messianic hope from the OT. While God was apparently quiet in the lives of the Jewish people from prophets and leaders, Jewish scholarship was in full bloom as part of the 2TJ teachings. To which, 2TJ theology understood an eschatological event would usher in a reunification of humanity and a return to an Eden-like state for God's people: Nicholas Piotrowski, "Discern the Word and Understand the Vision: Ongoing Exile in Second Temple Judaism and its Relevance for Biblical Theology," *Criswell Theological Review* 16 (2018): 39. This informed not just the priestly or scribal orders of Judaism but also filtered into the daily education system of every male Jew. It explains in part how Matthew could recognize Jesus as fulfilling OT prophecies. However, the general social context of the region also had woven into life a Hellenistic ethos that permeated social relationships: David deSilva, "The Wisdom of Ben Sira," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* (1996): 58; Witherington, *Matthew*, 7. Moreover, such Hellenist influence became a point of contention within Jewish culture in the day. It added to the provincial, civic, and geopolitical tension that flushed the middle eastern environs of the day: Card, *Matthew*, 17. The Jewish people were spoiling for a change politically, culturally, and spiritually. Historically, the wilderness was the place that represented change, transformation, and revelation of destiny to God's people. Change was coming and the wilderness became its stage.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Dormandy "Jesus' Temptations in Mark's Gospel: Mark 1:12-13," *The Expository Times* 114 (2003): 183-187; Williamson, "Expository Articles," 183.

<sup>27</sup> Dormandy, "Jesus' Temptations in Mark's Gospel," 183–187; Williamson, "Expository Articles," 52.

<sup>28</sup> John Peckham, "Rules of Engagement: God's Permission of Evil in Light of Selected Cases of Scripture," *Bulliten for Biblical Research* 30 (2020): 255.

as a title than a name in Greek translation, he becomes commonly identified as the devil and the tempter.<sup>29</sup>

Jesus Christ as the Son of God stands as an exemplar in history of character and moral fortitude. The temptations of the wilderness narrative are the testing grounds that prove this. The key point in the text is verse 1, where the word *πειρασθῆναι* loosely translates as “temptation”. However, it is noted as perhaps a misleading word in context, referring to the devil by action rather than what Jesus experiences.<sup>30</sup> The idea here is that Jesus as the Son of God, incarnated as a human being, will be tested or challenged.<sup>31</sup> In other words, God may lead someone to a place where they can be tempted, but God does not tempt either Jesus or the COG, as clearly noted by James (Jas 1:13-15). For God to tempt would constitute a type of character within God that would allow for evil intent. Temptation lays within the individual’s constitution, circumstance, and character. It is worthy to note that temptations seem to follow Jesus and be as much a part of His ministry as the specific engagements with individuals who are disturbed by physical, social, or spiritual distress.<sup>32</sup> That being true, it raises the question as to the source of the ongoing challenge-riposte throughout Jesus’ ministry. The devil uses the three challenges attempting to unseat the identity of the Son of God. Satan takes aim at Jesus’ physical appetites, anxieties, and ambitions to question who He claims to be. However, Jesus seems unsurprised at this tactic meant to challenge, “Is He really the Son of God?”

### ***The Test of Appetites: We are More than we Eat.***

“And the tempter came and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.” But He answered and said, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes out of the mouth of God.’” (Mt. 4:3-4)

What stands out in Satan’s challenge to Jesus in Mt. 4:3-4 is the conditional statement, “If You are the Son of God.” Immediately, the matter of Jesus’ identity becomes the point of the discourse. The Jewish audience is reminded of the dialogue between Satan and God in Job 1 and 2.<sup>33</sup> The challenge to God’s providence over humanity is somehow conditional. It also harkens back to the first-family’s test of the forbidden fruit and the consequence of their changed relationship with God (Gen 3:5-6). Here in Matthew, Satan tests Jesus’ disposition to exercise His supposed divine power and nature.

There is diverse interpretive consideration of the tests and their implications. Most trend toward theological or pastoral considerations. It is particularly interesting to consider what the test indicated regarding Jesus’ understanding of His identity as Son of God and as a COG. Satan’s suggestion to turn stone to bread is a test that aims at His “hunger,” a basic human need.<sup>34</sup> In this, the tempter attempts to redefine Jesus in two ways: First, this test reduces Jesus’ being to that of a mere creature and orients Him to succumb to animal instincts. It makes human need out to be a primary driving force for behavior; encourages one to define themselves by what they want or need. Second, it pushes Jesus to use His power to meet His needs apart from the unfolding divine ministry to humanity.

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<sup>29</sup> Keener, *Matthew*, 137; Witherington, *Matthew*, 91.

<sup>30</sup> Peckham, “Rules of Engagement,” 679; Witherington, *Matthew*, 89.

<sup>31</sup> Peckham, “Rules of Engagement,” 679; Witherington, *Matthew*, 89.

<sup>32</sup> Peckham, “Rules of Engagement,” 686.

<sup>33</sup> G. Campbell Morgan, *The Crisis of the Christ* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1936), 166.

<sup>34</sup> Donald Gee, *Temptations of the Spirit-Filled Christ* (Springfield: Gospel Publishing House, 1966), 14; Dormandy, “Jesus’ Temptations in Mark’s Gospel,” 184; Morgan, *The Crisis of the Christ*, 136; R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 138; Gatta, “If you are the Son of God,” 70.

It attempts to force Him to redefine terms of His relationship with God; to supersede His needs over God's plan or leverage His power against the Trinity's harmony.

These two attempted redefinitions echo the secular humanist perspective that human behavior is reducible to basic instincts. In this school of thought, one's drive to satisfy oneself is essential to individual and collective survival. It exchanges one's identity as a COG, known by God and informed by God, to an animal-driven-identity compelled by instincts, feelings, and perceived needs. By separating oneself from God, the nature of relationships shifts. Individuals become each other's means to meet a need. It reduces people to something less than a created-being, stripping one's identity from that of a COG. Even altruistic needs are discussed in terms of objectification, with people becoming things needed to meet a natural, individual, or social need. Jesus does not allow His motivation or behavior as Son of God or as a COG to be reduced to mere instinctive behavior; doing so would undermine His status of the Son of God.

In contrast, other perspectives view Satan's challenge as being meant to test Jesus' loyalty to God, tempt Him to abuse of God's power, or question how He would use God's authority.<sup>35</sup> Again, it seems to reiterate the Genesis narrative: A human's appetite for something missing leads to their independent exercise of will superseding all else.<sup>36</sup> However, deeper than even these is the matter of identity. If the Son of God redefines Himself as independent of God, He is then not bound to respond to God's will over His perceived needs. Thereby, it becomes reasonable and rational for Jesus to give in and appease His appetites over God's will. In other words, separating oneself from a relationship with God allows for independent action to be warranted in context of one's perceived needs. It is this action that defines secular humanist thought: independent self-willed action apart from God. However, Jesus understood who He was. He chose to exercise His divine role as the Son of God not to take hold of power for His personal transient human needs, but to use it to serve humanity. This becomes the basis of His teaching in the following Gospel narratives and is captured in the Apostle Paul's Kenosis hymn (Phil 2:2-8).

Jesus does not use Scripture as a battle axe to repel the devil. Rather, Jesus uses Scripture apologetically as a point of context to affirm His identity. It reminds Him of who He is: the Son of God, and as a human-being, a COG. As such, Scripture becomes the double-edge sword that cuts through any doubt as to who He is and lends an edge for Jesus to dissect the devil's verbal challenges. Jesus does not use wit or rhetoric to rebuff the tempter, but confirms His conscious understanding of His status with God. The text drawn from Deuteronomy 8:3 references the wilderness experience of the Mosaic narratives. It offers a couple points of reference in Jesus' riposte. First, Jesus clearly references Himself with humanity in the use of *ανθρωπος*, or "man". Commentators note the use of the word *ανθρωπος* is a generic form to describe humanity.<sup>37</sup> Is Jesus here counting Himself as part of humanity? If so, He sets Himself up to counter the outcomes of the Genesis 3 narrative as a human being, a created-being, and the Son of God. Secondly, Jesus draws on the Mosaic priority to orient one's relationship with God over one's base needs. Here, Jesus succeeds in not selling out, giving in, or stepping outside of His identity as God's Son over a mere appetite. It foreshadows the ongoing priority of discipline of self to the mission.<sup>38</sup>

For the believer, when one understands they are a COG, they understand that they do not have to succumb to the whims of their feelings, emotions, or physical cues which normally drive behavior. The genesis of animation for the believer is not appetite, but their relationship with God and His will

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<sup>35</sup> Keener, *Matthew*, 139; Morgan, *The Crisis of the Christ*, 169; Witherington, *Matthew*, 90.

<sup>36</sup> Williamson, "Expository Articles," 52.

<sup>37</sup> Berry, *The Interlinear Greek-English New Testament*, 9; Spiros Zodhiates, *The Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 1665.

<sup>38</sup> France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 98–99.



as revealed in Scripture. Scripture helps the believer to define their identity and inform themselves of who they are. It defines how relationships with self and others are formed and how they demonstrate the power of God within each COG and in the Church. Clearly, defining the self in the terms of the Bible helps the individual overcome the influence of visceral experiences in their lives. It provides the COG direction on how to morally act toward and with others, despite their personal feelings or appetites. Further more, when one is able to see the COG identity in others, their orientation becomes that of serving others. It overrides the supposed instinctual need to be first in line, to satisfy one's needs, to ensure the self is preserved. The lesson Jesus affirms here is that the COG is not defined by their appetites; rather they exercise faith to find their physical needs met by God despite the visceral experience (Mt 6:26). Jesus the Good Shepherd overcomes the devil's attempt to define Himself by His appetites. He establishes a pathway for the COG to likewise not let their physical needs define who they are. In doing so, the COG can overcome the pressures of circumstance and avoid giving into self-indulgences, which otherwise would animate the shadow of sin to overcome the COG.

### ***The Test of Anxieties: We are More than We Feel.***

Then the devil took Him along into the holy city and had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, and he said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down; for it is written: 'He will give His angels orders concerning You'; and 'On their hands they will lift You up, so that You do not strike Your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, "On the other hand, it is written: 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'" (Mt. 4:5-7, NASB)

The previous challenge tests Jesus' relationship to God. This challenge aims at how Jesus' perceives God's relationship to Him.<sup>39</sup> In other words, the tempter leads Jesus to consider, "how much does God love me?" This retraces the same tactic Satan applies to Eve in Genesis 3:4; casting doubt on how God relates to His progeny. Through this challenge, Satan attempts to lure Jesus into leveraging God to demonstrate God's declaration, "This is My beloved Son" (Mt 3:17). In other words, Satan endeavors to entice Jesus to create an artificial crisis and force God to enact a miracle.<sup>40</sup> Such an act would turn faith around and presume God to respond to Jesus whenever Jesus, as a COG, demands.

In this test, the devil has approached Jesus in a very public forum: the "temple". The temple is the focus of worship and relationship with God for the Jewish people. The temple is also the theatre of teaching, displays of healing (Lk 19:45; 20:1; Jn 5:14; 7:14) and God's kinetic power manifest through the crucifixion narrative (Mt 27:51). This location highlights the implications of the test being levelled against Jesus. Certainly, the leap and the rescue would prove God's power, not only in Jewish culture but in humanity's reality.

As before, Satan uses Scripture to manufacture doubt regarding the status of Jesus' relationship with God. Again, Satan employs a conditional statement, this time using "If." However, now devil employs Scripture (Ps 91:11-12) to establish the grounds of his challenge. On the surface it seems like a legitimate point. Yet, Jesus notes the quote is diabolically twisted out of context in an attempt to leverage Him into a leap of blind presumption.<sup>41</sup> It is the same tactic used on Eve in Genesis 3:1-4 to misquote God and alter her perception of her relationship with God. The duality of the challenge ups the ante for the devil and perhaps lends more legitimacy to the overall test of Jesus' identity as the Son of God. In other words, it is one thing to make the claim and reserve one's own power. It is quite another now to manipulate a relationship to prove claims of love within the relationship.

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<sup>39</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 127.

<sup>40</sup> France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 99; Keener, *Matthew*, 191.

<sup>41</sup> Morgan, *The Crisis of the Christ*, 182; Gee, *Temptations of the Spirit-Filled Christ*, 30.

Attachment Theory offers a lens to consider this section of the narrative. Attachment Theory is a psychological perspective that proposes how relationships are formed and sustained.<sup>42</sup> Accordingly, one's sense of security within a relationship flows from a sense of the attachment within the relationship.<sup>43</sup> In this case, the devil is testing the perceived attachment between Jesus and God. The devil seeks to push both Jesus and God to a point of contention, by leveraging God's own words against Him. It is the misuse of Scripture that creates a shadow of reality and can catch the unsuspecting or naive COG unaware. Here, Jesus demonstrates not only knowing Scripture, but also knowing the context of Scripture to avoid its misuse in informing identity. This prevents the misuse of Scripture to leverage relationships with others, circumstances, and God.

Again, Jesus uses the OT to furnish His riposte: "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test" (Dt 6:16). As much as the devil endeavors to unseat Christ's identity with God on two approaches, Jesus' reply answers both points. In quoting this OT passage, Jesus serves as a link for Jewish audience to recall the actions of God's people at Massah (Ex 7:17). In this account, the exodus peoples' anxiety and indulgence lead them to attempt to leverage God's hand for their benefit. What is on display here is not some kind of spectacular manifestation of God's revelation as angels sent to preserve the Son of God. As in the first test, Jesus does not attempt prove anything by leveraging or manipulating His relationship with God. Rather, Jesus affirms His identity as God's son and as a COG, securely attached, and based on God's word rather than on a test arising from insecurity or anxiety.

When an individual's anxieties and insecurities infect their perception of who they are, it impacts how they perceive relationships as well; it creates shadows and challenges within the relationship. In other words, a disturbance of the attachment between individuals unseats the relationship.<sup>44</sup> Jesus does not take the enemy's bait; He refuses to test His relationship with God on any grounds because He knows He does not need to. Since Jesus is intimately in tune with God and knows who He is as God's Son and as a COG, nothing more needs to be proven. Jesus' faith in the relationship establishes the integrity of Jesus' identity and repels the emotional wash of the devil's subversion.

The tempter aims at Jesus' identity in order to challenge His sense of security, status, and attachment with God. As a COG, this perhaps is elemental to psychological development; it is an individual's insecurity that induces them to test a relationship. Individuals who are unsure of their status in a relationship will query or test the relationship satiate their own needs. Again, it separates oneself from others to test the bond of the relationship. In doing so it objectifies others to meet a need of comfort and security. By testing God, one reduces God to a servant of one's will or needs. It exchanges the eternal omnipotent God for an idol of one's own making, simply to meet their psychological need in a prescribed fashion. This is idol-making in the subtlest of ways. This is the tempter's agenda working in the shadows: to cause a COG to wonder, "Can I trust God?"

This dynamic, wherein the enemy leads one to require evidence in order to trust, is significant. For instance, the skeptic may challenge the COG to produce empirical evidence of God's existence, power, or character. In issuing this seemingly legitimate challenge, the skeptic may appear genuinely curious in their query. However, the reader is reminded that "the absence of evidence is not evidence

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<sup>42</sup> Eric Johnson, *Foundations for Soul Care: A Christian Psychology Proposal* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2007), 509; Paul Bloom, "Religion is natural," *Developmental Science* 10 (2007): 197.

<sup>43</sup> Richar Beck, "God as a Secure Base: Attachment to God and Theological Exploration," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 43 (2006): 125.

<sup>44</sup> Victor Counted, "Understanding God images and God concepts: Towards a pastoral hermeneutics of the God attachment experience," *Research Gate*. November 03. Accessed November 2020. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v36i1.1389>; Aaron Cherniak, Mario Mikulincer, Phillip Shaver and Pehr Granqvist, "Attachment theory and religion," *Current Opinion in Psychology* (2021): 128; Johnson, *Foundations for Soul Care*, 472.

of absence.”<sup>45</sup> Given Jesus’ refusal to test God in Mt 4:5-7, the COG’s response to the skeptic’s challenge may be to refuse to leverage, commodify, or put on display their relationship with God in such an idolatrous way. To the skeptic, this inability or unwillingness may appear to play into their presupposition that no proof of God equates no existence of God. The COG’s reply to such a reductionist challenge is key. It is important the COG remains a counter-cultural light to illuminate the essence of faith and the reality of God’s existence, not by leveraging God to act on cue, but by expressing secure identity as a child of God. Moreover, that this extends to all relationships where the COG, reflecting God’s nature, promotes relationships for their own sake<sup>46</sup> without needing conditional testing to validate anyone’s value or identity. Perhaps the real test for the COG is not taking an open dare, but instead, understanding the nature of the dare and replying accordingly: gently, kindly, and wisely (1 Pe 3:13-16).

### ***The Test of Ambition: You Get What You Pay For.***

“Again, the devil took Him along to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory; and he said to Him, “All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me.” Then Jesus said to him, “Go away, Satan! For it is written: ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and serve Him only.’” Then the devil left Him; and behold, angels came and began to serve Him.” (Mt. 4:8-11, NASB)

In the last portion of the interview, the tempter entices Jesus with what is prophetically positioned as His essential status on earth and heaven. Again, the devil attempts to angle Jesus with a change of perspective. This time Jesus’ status is not on display for the world to see, but Satan puts the world on display for Christ to see. There is some scholarly variation regarding what the “kingdoms of the world” refers to. It is speculated that Jesus experienced this vision at Mount Nebo, echoing OT intertextual references to Moses (Dt 34:1-4).<sup>47</sup> Others consider the potential eschatological apocalyptic vision (Rev 21:11) with the implication of the devil was attempting to upend it.<sup>48</sup> Regardless, it is clear that Satan presumed the “kingdoms of the world” as his to give away. Initially, this appears to be a paradox. However, Jesus affirms throughout His ministry that worldly politics, while under God’s sovereignty, is very much the devil’s playground (Jn 12:31; Jn 14:30; Jn 16:11).<sup>49</sup>

Another possible interpretation of the vision is that of symbolic representation: from a vantage point in the mountains east of Jerusalem, a viewer could easily see the city and its surrounding lands. In this sense, Jerusalem represents the kingdom of God as set apart to serve and lead humanity to God (its failure notwithstanding). Thus, the occupation of the Middle East by Rome represents the political and economic force of humanity to rule by “might makes right.” This region lived under a Hellenist influence, including education and social values that permeated Jewish society.<sup>50</sup> It was also saturated

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<sup>45</sup> Lee Billings, "scientificamerican.com." *Atheism Is Inconsistent with the Scientific Method, Prizewinning Physicist Says*. March 20. Accessed December 2020.

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/atheism-is-inconsistent-with-the-scientific-method-prizewinning-physicist-says/>.

<sup>46</sup> Daniel Lim, "Doing, allowing and the problem of evil," *International Journal for Philosophy and Religion* 81 (2016): 286.

<sup>47</sup> France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 99; Stegner, "The Temptation Narrative," 9.

<sup>48</sup> Lunn, "The Temple in the Wilderness," 713.

<sup>49</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 135.

<sup>50</sup> DeSilva, "The Wisdom of Ben Sira," 58; Witherington, *Matthew*, 7.

with various religious practices of paganism, in part leftovers from the pre- and post-exile periods, and in part suffused Roman occupation.

These historical contexts paint a picture of the rich tapestry that was the multicultural society present in Jerusalem at the time of Satan's test. Thus we may interpret that, when shown 'the kingdoms,' the literal kingdoms of the world were in full bloom for Jesus to see. Any slice of society would reveal layers of the various religious forms, social stratification, economic tensions, and political currents that washed the shores of society then as they do today.

Could the multicultural tapestry referenced in Mt. 4:8-11 be the kingdoms of past, present, and future, which Jesus perceived in a moment? Could it also overlay the eschatological future of John's Revelation, which folds the world's power back on itself to establish the authority of Jesus eternally? Could this be what Jesus saw in "the kingdoms of the world," which evoked such a strong response to Satan's vanity and myopia?

Jesus' reply, as in the two previous challenges, shines light through the devil's presumptuous attempt to cast shadows and alter reality. Moreover, Jesus does not just parry or push back the devil in riposte; in this instance, Jesus definitively stops the interview and establishes His authority over heaven and earth. Despite the vision shown to Him, Jesus does not grasp His endowed rule and reign in order to leverage it. In doing so, Jesus would only subscribe to a one-sided politick animated by Satan, typified by Rome and proffered by secularism.

As before, the key to repel the devil is not by parry and thrust of Scripture or adroit apologetics. Jesus kept a clear perspective on His relationship God. He understood that pain and discomfort is a part of human living. He understood these aspects of life are every bit as transient an experience as being well fed, laughing among friends, and enjoying a cool water in the heat of the day. Jesus understood that, as the Son of God, His transcendent relationship with God did not need be proven through displays of affection or garish acts on either one's part. The steady, faithful loyalty to each other for the other's sake stood on its own merit. Whether others saw it or not did not seem to matter. Jesus as God's Son understood His authority and inheritance.

The story of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-32) demonstrates the effect of ambition on relationships with others and on one's sense of identity. It is interesting to note that Jesus transmits the idea of identity and fidelity with God by defining it as how individuals, Himself included, face hardships (Mt 16:24-26). The test of identity is not a one-time event, but a daily experience of pressures that affect us in subtle ways. It is the valley of the shadow of death through which our ambitions are tested, not just once, but perpetually.

The human illusion of the fast-track is not something that affects only certain people. It develops in every person's life at some level, at some point. This temptation aims to subvert one's status as a COG or created-being, and trade it for a sense of entitlement or individual right. Being animated by ambition for rights or entitlements will then propel an individual to view others as a means to an end to fulfill or support their ambition. By separating oneself and pursuing one's ambition at the expense of others, one objectifies and renders others as subservient to meet the ambition of self. It separates the COG from each other and God by commodifying individuals into objective terms. In this way, ambition is an act of evil.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Benjamin S. Larson, "Participation and Evil: The Problem of Doing Evil When Attempting to Fight Evil," *Currents in Theology and Mission*, (2012): 456.

## Reflections, Thoughts, and Implications.

One of the lessons the COG can learn from the Good Shepherd's testing in Mt 4:1-11 is that understanding one's identity in relation to God filters out the distractions and misinformation regarding what truly matters in life. When one is clear-minded about their relationship with God and their identity as a COG, they no longer instinctually scabble about life seeking to meet their basic needs, manipulating relationships to do so. The COG recognizes how insecurities and anxieties can be used to control relationships with others and to get their emotional needs met. The COG no longer influences relationships to feed their ambitions. Families and loved ones are not ignored for the sake of a business, ministry, or recreational venture. Employees, colleagues, customers, and congregants are not used to leverage time, finances, or status to advance a career or a corporate goal. God is not commodified to validate one's status in business, church, or community. When a COG is secure in this way they guard their relationships from the distractions and disturbances of the devil.

Ps 23 offers a vibrant image of a Good Shepherd's care for his sheep in many circumstances. Most distinctly is the image and implication with "valley of the shadow of death." The text implies that the journey is not terminal. Moreover, the text seems to point to the assurance the reader has in the Shepherd that their fate will be preserved. This assurance comes through the Shepherd's experiences as a guide, but also in the "comfort of the rod and staff" (v.4). The imagery of the rod and staff suggests a tangible quality, which lends assurance to the reality that the Shepherd is with us even in the shadows.

Could the lessons recorded for us in Mt 4:1-11 be, in part, the rod or staff – tangible evidence, points of contact, and guiding principles, given for us to learn how to conduct ourselves in the shadows of this world? Perhaps, the Mt 4 narrative is a touchpoint meant to remind us that one's appetites, anxieties, and ambitions do not need to drive us to meet our needs. The valley of the shadow of death is a part of everyday living, and the shadows harbour the unknown. They work to bring uncertainty in relationships, work, and living. It is in the shadows that we hope to hide our sins and indiscretions, and it is in the shadows where our fears are exposed. However, knowing Jesus as the Good Shepherd who has overcome His own appetites, anxieties, and ambitions for our sake gives us hope and inspires us to walk with confidence in this shadowy world. We can do so without succumbing to the ambiguity of postmodernist relativism, morally or socially, for ego's sake. Rather, as COG we are guided by the Good Shepherd to harness our appetites, face our insecurities, and clarify our ambition – for His sake, and, as He guides us step by step, for our sake.

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