

# THE MISSION CHALLENGED

*SERIES: UNTO US*

**By Danny Hall**

Since the book *The Purpose Driven Life* (1) came out about five years ago, the response to it has been phenomenal. Millions and millions of copies have been sold worldwide, and it has been translated into many languages. It has been popular even beyond Christian circles. The author, Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church in southern California, has been interviewed on numerous talk shows, and has become someone whose opinion is sought after as a representative of the Christian church, with a somewhat different profile than many of the other spokespersons for Christianity.

What is it that Rick Warren is presenting in this book that so many people are drawn to? The book is actually based on one simple idea: we are here on purpose and for a purpose. There is a deep human longing to have a real reason for living, to be someone who matters. We need to know that we are more than just an accident of nature, that we have worth and purpose. I believe that's part of the reason *The Purpose Driven Life* has had such a powerful impact.

We've been studying the early life of Jesus in the gospel of Luke. One theme that is very clear in Luke's telling of the story is that Jesus was here on purpose and for a purpose.

The stories of his miraculous birth, the miracles attending his birth, the unfolding of the early days of Jesus' life, his childhood experience in the temple, and his inauguration into public ministry through his baptism, with the public affirmation of the voice of God and the presence of the Holy Spirit alighting on him as a dove, all point to one thing: Jesus was on a mission. It was a mission to rescue the whole world. And as the story continues to unfold, those who follow Jesus take up that incredible mission themselves. They find that the purpose of their lives is attached to the mission of Jesus.

But in the story we'll look at now, we'll encounter an indisputable fact about life with this purpose: it will be opposed. There will be warfare and struggle. As Jesus heads now toward public ministry, he has a season of battle with the tempter himself.

This story will be instructive to us, because we're going to find that we encounter that same sort of opposition. Following Jesus means we will enter into battle. As we study this passage, I want to examine what it means to us personally. What is the nature of these temptations? What are some of the traps and seductions we'll face as we seek to both follow Jesus personally and minister in his name as the people of God?

Let's begin by looking at the setting. Luke 4:1-2b:

**Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.**

The first thing to note is that twice Luke makes mention of the Spirit's role in this. Jesus is described as being full of the Spirit and also being led by the Spirit. I think Luke wants us to realize that Jesus' falling into temptation, or finding himself in this battle, hasn't happened because he did something wrong. Being engaged in spiritual warfare is a normal part of wanting to live your life for the glory of God and for the purpose for which God created you.

Second, Luke says these temptations go on for forty days. Having left the Jordan where he was baptized, Jesus goes out into a wilderness region, so he's alone in a barren place. The record we have from Luke and other gospel writers is of three specific temptations. But these probably happen at the end of the forty days as a kind of grand climax, if you will, of this season of tempting. Jesus has been alone, communing with the Father, preparing for his public ministry, but all the while he has been in a spiritual battle that culminates in these temptations. They are recorded for us so that we can see the nature of the battle that he has been fighting. All of these temptations are designed to challenge his identity as the One sent from God, and his mission. And in the same way, as you and I follow Jesus, the temptations that come into our lives are primarily designed to derail us from what God created us to be and to do.

Let's look at the first of these three temptations.

## **Physical needs**

Luke 4:2b-4:

**He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.**

**The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.”**

**Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone.’”**

We’ve all been in situations in which we wondered if God was going to provide what we needed. That’s the question this first temptation raises. Since Jesus has spent these forty days fasting, he is obviously hungry and probably weak. The need for physical sustenance is perfectly normal and right. But is God going to provide, or has he for some reason brought Jesus out here to leave him unprovided for? Is God good? Can God take care of him? Also underlying this temptation is the idea that meeting his felt needs is more important than trusting God. Now, all of us go through periods when we think, “If I could just get this need of mine satisfied (no matter what it takes), life would be better. I would be more dedicated to God.” So the devil comes to Jesus at this point of physical hunger and says, “Why don’t you just turn the stones to bread, satisfy that hunger? Then

you'll be fine." He tempts Jesus to doubt whether God truly has his good at heart and will provide for him.

We long to have our basic desires met. But as we think about ministering to others, we also experience this temptation in a different way. I've been reading a couple of books as I studied for this. One of them was Henri Nouwen's book *In the Name of Jesus* (2). He talks about what spiritual leadership in the twenty-first century is going to look like, and he examines these temptations. From a leadership perspective, this first temptation represents for him a temptation to be relevant. We want to prove that Jesus is relevant to all of human need, so we feel as if we ought to be able to fix everything. He talks about seeing hungry people and wanting to be able to turn stones into bread so we could feed all the hungry people in the world. If we could just prove that Jesus is relevant, somehow that would make our message—and maybe us—more palatable and popular.

But both personally and in ministry, what Jesus drives us to understand in his response to this temptation is that meeting human needs, as basic to human life as that is, is not the essence of life. He quotes Deuteronomy 8:3: "Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD." We feel needs on the human level so strongly that we think if we can just get them satisfied, we'll be okay. But Jesus' response to this temptation reminds us that there's something fundamentally more important than the satisfaction of our felt needs, even legitimate ones: a deep, personal connection with God himself that leads us to trust that he will provide everything we need.

Let's look at the second temptation.

## **The currencies of the world**

Verses 5-8:

**The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you worship me, it will all be yours."**

**Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"**

The question behind this second temptation is this: Is God enough, or is there something else we need? All of us have felt this temptation, this seduction by the promises of this world. Success and influence are a kind of currency, if you will. We all think we can use them for good. We think if we just had this ability or that position or whatever, then we could do more. So we begin to question, Is God enough? What is it that's missing to make us successful and productive, even in ministry? So the temptation is to try to gain power.

Think of advertising. The marketing environment we live in tells us if we just had this or that, we would be more capable, more influential, more successful, and so on. The temptation is to take advantage of the currencies of this world. And we all think we would handle it well, don't we? "If I had money or power, I would use it for good." It's the temptation we saw with the ring of power in the *Lord of the Rings*. Boromir says, "Why do you speak ever of hiding and destroying [the Great Ring]? Why should we not think that the Great Ring has come into our hands to serve us in the very hour of need?...Let the Ring be your weapon, if it has such power as you say. Take it and go forth to victory!" (3) Already his soul is starting to be seduced and corrupted by its power. We think we're better than everyone else, so we could use even evil power for good.

Satan says to Jesus, "I will give you all the authority and splendor of the kingdoms of the world." Now, theologians have debated whether Satan even had the authority to make this offer. Did he really have power over everything, or was it a derived power that God could take away at any moment? But it's really irrelevant. He tempts Jesus to operate by controlling the currencies of this world. We need to recognize how easy it is for us to be seduced in this way.

The other book I read was *Tempting Faith* by David Kuo (4). He served for a few years in a high-level advisory position in the Bush White House. He's an evangelical Christian with a strong and vibrant faith, and he's spent a lot of years in politics. He felt that he could bring faith into the power structures of the U.S. and make a huge difference. But

his experience taught him that you cannot achieve kingdom goals through human means. After all, government is a political apparatus, not a spiritual one. Regardless of who holds those offices of power, the institutions of government are thoroughly secular, even when Christian people are involved in them. The system of politics is such that it will always lead to disillusionment and frustration and never the fulfillment of kingdom goals. Kuo writes that he finally walked away from it. He doesn't conclude that all Christians should get out of politics. But he is calling the church to be the ones who build God's kingdom, and while continuing to try to have a voice in the political arena, to quit being seduced by the idea that if we could just get control, we could make everything all right.

Jesus' response to this temptation is simple. He quotes Deuteronomy 6:13: "Fear the LORD your God, serve him only..." God is the only one worthy of our worship. He alone can satisfy. Ultimately only he has the power that can truly change the world.

Let's move on to the third temptation.

## **Agendas**

Verses 9-12:



**The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down from here. For it is written:**

**‘He will command his angels concerning you  
to guard you carefully;  
they will lift you up in their hands,  
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’”**

**Jesus answered, “It says: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”**

At the core of this temptation is the question, Can God be trusted? What Satan has asked Jesus to do is create his own agenda apart from God’s and see if God will bless it. It’s to step off the path that God has placed him on and do something spectacular, see if God will swoop in and save the day. It’s based on doubt that God knows what he’s doing.

You know how we all feel as if we can help God out. We see God leading us in a particular way, but we think, “That certainly can’t be what God wants. Surely God wants things to go this other way.” And we create our own way to go forward. Then we expect God to bless it because we describe it in spiritual terms. This is a particularly powerful temptation when you see that Satan, having been refuted by Jesus’ use of Scripture, now uses Scripture himself, taking it out of context to clothe this temptation. How often you

and I are tempted the same way to set up our own agendas and paths of life and then wrap them in spiritual language, even saying things like “God has led me to do this.”

Nouwen describes this temptation in ministry (5). We think if we can be spectacular, do the flashiest thing, that will prove to the whole world that our God is great. Well, certainly God is able to do whatever we envision. Indeed, God would be able to save Christ if he were in the sort of perilous circumstance Satan promotes. But it’s not about whether God can save the day, but whose agenda we are following. Are we baptizing our own agenda in spiritual language and expecting God to show up, or are we trusting that God will come through in his way and his time?

Jesus refutes this temptation by quoting Deuteronomy 6:16: “Do not test the LORD your God as you did at Massah.” That refers in turn to the events of Exodus 17:1-7, where the Israelites were complaining once again about God’s provision. They didn’t like the way God was doing his work. Now, didn’t God miraculously part the Red Sea and bring them over on dry land, destroying their enemies behind them, set them free from slavery, give them a new Promised Land flowing with milk and honey, and miraculously provide food for them day by day? But they grew weary of the way God was doing things, and they wanted him to do it their way. So they whined and complained, and God told Moses, “They must stop testing me.”

This is the temptation we have, to ask God to bless our agenda, do things our way so we can get our wishes. And the question for us is, Do we trust God? Are we willing to follow

his way? Or do we think he needs a little help from us to figure out how to get things done, choose something spectacular to show everybody just how great he is?

At the core of all of these temptations, Jesus is being asked to depart from his mission. Satan offers him miraculous provision of his physical needs, power, and spectacular scenarios in which God would swoop in and save him. All of these are within the realm of possibility with God, but they depart from the path that God has chosen for Jesus: radical love and sacrifice. God's path is very often the way of sacrifice, even death, certainly the way of humility and service to others, not the way of grandeur and spectacular shows just so that we can appear to be really cool with God.

Luke concludes in verse 13:

**When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.**

Notice two things: First, the battle isn't over. We don't have the luxury of getting through a temptation and being done with it. Following Christ doesn't work that way. The temptations are going to keep on coming. This encounter between Satan and Jesus ends, but Luke says Satan is just waiting for another time. We will always be opposed as we seek to serve God and live for him.

Second, notice this word “opportune.” Satan is a wily, crafty foe. He understands where our vulnerabilities are. He understands the ways we can easily be seduced away from our love for Jesus and our commitment to his mission in our lives. So we always have to be diligent, keep our eyes open and our spirits tuned, remember that this never-ending battle can catch us when we’re vulnerable, and prepare ourselves for that.

What are we to make of this wonderful story? Let me suggest three things to think about as we apply this to our lives. First, remember that spiritual warfare is a normal part of following Jesus. You can’t run away from it. Expect it, because it’s going to happen.

Second, ultimately all temptation is a challenge to the character of God. That’s true even of some of the temptations that we might not connect with the character of God. A lot of temptations are in the areas of our human needs. Some of those needs are legitimate—food, relationships, sexuality. Let’s consider sexuality for a moment. The Bible says that God created us as sexual beings, male and female, and that human sexuality is designed to be the highest expression of intimacy for a man and a woman called together by God. The physical intimacy of our human sexuality, the fidelity and the commitment in marriage, has great mystery about it as an analogy of Christ and his church, intimacy with God. There is mystery even in the human relationship, being fully human and fully alive in this beautiful, deep relationship to which God has called a husband and wife. But we all know that we are prone to sexual temptations of all kinds. And every time we are faced with one of those temptations, it’s a challenge to the character of God. “Surely God couldn’t have meant to restrict it like this. Something I feel so strongly must not be

wrong.” And in any area of life temptation is always a challenge to the character of God. That is the purpose of the questioning embedded in these temptations: Will God provide? Is God enough? Can God be trusted?

The third thing to think about is that our chief preparation for the battles we’ll face is a deeper understanding of God through his word. In every instance, Jesus met the challenge by going back into the revelation of God’s word, refuting the temptation with the truth of who God was and what his calling was. In a deeper understanding of God’s word, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we understand God himself and his ways better. We become more aware of how we might couch our own desires and plans in spiritual, even Biblical terms. It is crucial to be deeply connected to God through his word. We do not have to answer lots of Bible trivia questions. God’s word is the place where his Spirit can connect us deeply with him so we understand who he is and what his ways are and how he wants us to be a part of what he’s doing. A deep, personal walk with God is the foundation of our preparation, day by day, for this battle.

The world we live in is characterized by the deification of self. In the church, while we profess to put Jesus first, much of what we do is about asking God to bless our agenda. This story calls us to radical trust in God, in his character and his will. That’s the challenge of this story to us. Jesus stood firm, kept on mission, experienced the power of God’s word and the power of the Spirit as he withstood the temptations, and is therefore a wonderful example of how we too can stand firm in battle.

## Notes

1. Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, © 2002, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI.
2. Henri J.M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*, © 1989, Crossroad Publishing, New York, NY. Pp. 17-18.
3. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring, Part 1 of The Lord of the Rings*, © 1965, Ballantyne Books, New York, NY. P. 350.
4. David Kuo, *Tempting Faith*, © 2006, The Free Press, Columbus, OH.
5. Nouwen, P. 38.

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Catalog No. 5227

Luke 4:1-13

Eighth Message

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January 28, 2007

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