

Did Jesus Have a Sinful or Sinless Nature?

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Through the years, I have received letters and phone calls asking about the nature of Jesus. Basically, the question is "Did Jesus have a sinful or sinless nature?"

Usually, my first response is "Why does this matter to you?" I ask this in an attempt to get beneath the surface to discover the real underlying concerns. When discussing historical matters, I have observed that some questions are rhetorical icebergs that have a large mass hidden below the waterline.

This topic, like many others in the Bible, contains *apparent* contradictions. An apparent contradiction occurs when Bible texts *appear* to say things that conflict with other texts. The Bible does not have internal conflict; however, it does contain a number of *apparent* conflicts (or paradoxes).

For example, the topic of hell contains an apparent conflict. Some Bible texts give the indication that hell burns forever and other texts indicate that hell will not burn forever. (The upcoming February 2012 DVD of the month is a presentation on this fascinating topic.) *God put apparent conflicts in Scripture to motivate sincere Bible students into a deeper study of His Word.* When a sincere student finds an apparent conflict, he is motivated to resolve its wonderful mystery.

Less motivated students typically fall for the temptation of shortcutting their investigation with "proof texts" that favor whatever position they wish to defend while ignoring, distorting, or discrediting other texts that militate against their bias. The strongest evidence of poor scholarship is the failure to resolve the mystery of an apparent conflict.

Even though questions on the nature of Jesus date back to early Christianity, it is not discussed very widely today. I suppose this silence is largely due to the fact that once a denomination takes a position, all discussion and inquiry typically ends. (After all, what is the point of questioning and researching something that has already been accepted as truth unless the Bible student happens to find an apparent conflict?)

For those who have not given the question of Jesus' nature much thought, a little background information on the paradigm that gives this question importance may be helpful. Since the fourth century A.D., some Christians have believed that Jesus had a sinful nature. Please consider a short description of their beliefs:

1. - Because of sin's curse, Jesus was born like one of us, that is, having a sinful nature or the natural propensity to do wrong and commit sin.
2. - Before Jesus could die on the cross and pay the penalty for our sins, Jesus had to be tempted in all points as we are without sinning.

3. - Through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus resisted every temptation to do wrong. He lived a perfect, sinless life, overcoming every temptation to sin and became a perfect/sinless substitute for sinners.

4. - The gospel requires believers to emulate the life of Jesus. Christians can and must overcome sin as Christ overcame sin through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. If a person is not overcoming temptation or sin, the Holy Spirit is not at fault.

5. - Jesus has demonstrated that anyone having a sinful nature can be perfect (e.g., live without sinning) through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit.

Advocates for this logic need the sinless life and sinful nature of Jesus to prove that perfection (sinless living for all mankind) is possible and necessary. For them, the bottom line is this: If Jesus had a nature that is *unlike* our nature, His victory over sin cannot be used as a model for sinners. Therefore, given the parameters within this paradigm, they conclude that Jesus had a sinful nature.

A Different Paradigm

My understanding of the gospel produces a different paradigm and a different position on Jesus' nature.

1. - I believe the Bible teaches that salvation requires a righteousness from God which no sinner can produce. (Romans 1:17) Jesus created this righteousness by His perfect conformity to the Father's will when Jesus was on Earth.

2. - The Father rewards my faith in Christ (faith in Jesus is defined as a daily surrender to His teachings and gospel) by "covering" the record of my life with Christ's righteousness (His perfect life). This amazing gift is called justification. It enables me to stand before God as though I have never sinned.

3. - It is the Father's desire that I "grow up" in Christ. This phrase means the Father wants me to become more and more like Jesus. Until my carnal nature is removed, the Father knows that the law of sin is at work in my body and I cannot live without sinning. (1 John 5:17; Romans 7:14-25) As a disciple of Jesus, I deeply regret that I sin. I do not want to defame the wonderful name of Jesus with offensive conduct. Therefore, I show sorrow and repentance for my sins by acknowledging and confessing them and making restitution as needed.

4. - I know that victory over a sin (sanctification) is possible through faith. I know that (a) I can resist the devil to some extent, (b) I can ask Jesus to change the desires of my heart so that particular sins are no longer attractive, and (c) I can ask Jesus for strength to overcome spiritual laziness. I want to become all that Jesus wants of me, but I also know that any victory over sin is temporal. If I am careless, it can return at any moment. I also know that victory over any sin is a joyful experience. It gives me encouragement to keep working on my other sins.

5. - The curse of sin is like a greasy flag pole: The minute I stop climbing, I start slipping. Sanctification, climbing the greasy flag pole in an attempt to overcome sin, cannot end unless/until my carnal nature is removed. According to the Bible, the carnal nature is either terminated at death or it will be removed during the Great Tribulation from all who pass the test of faith.

Given my understanding of the gospel of Jesus, you can see that I do not believe that perfection (sinless living) is possible unless a person is sealed during the Great Tribulation when the carnal nature is removed from those who pass the test of faith. I see no need for Jesus to be born with a sinful nature. In fact, I believe that He was born with a sinless nature, like Adam before the fall. Please consider the following:

1. - Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 1:20) This makes Jesus unlike me and the rest of mankind.
2. - Before He was born, the angel called Jesus "the holy one" and "the Son of God." (Luke 1:35,36) This makes Jesus unlike me and the rest of mankind.
3. - As a child, teen, or adult, Jesus never sinned. This makes Jesus unlike me and the rest of mankind.
4. - There is no evidence in the Bible that Jesus needed or experienced rebirth. He did not need to be "born again." This makes Jesus unlike me and the rest of mankind.
5. - The Bible declares that all have sinned. (Romans 3:23) This makes Jesus unlike me and the rest of mankind.
6. - The Bible does not give one example of anyone, other than Jesus, who lived without sinning. Even Paul, one of the most ardent disciples of Jesus, did not attain perfection. (Philippians 3:12-16)
7. - The Bible says that Jesus was tempted in every *point* as we are tempted. (Hebrews 4:15) This does not mean that Jesus was tempted in every *way* that we are tempted. Temptations can occur under very different circumstances even though they may challenge the same *point*. For example, Jesus was tempted to deliberately sin, just like we are, to do something wrong. The test may be different, but the point is the same.

The Meeting

I believe Job's experience is recorded in the Bible because it portrays a similar parallel to Christ's experience. I believe that Lucifer presented an argument against Jesus in Heaven. The argument may have gone like this: Lucifer said to the Father, "Jesus has gone to Earth to redeem mankind, but this is a silly charade. Jesus does not have a sinful nature, He is naturally offended by sin, and His victory over sin will be mockery because He has no propensity or attraction for sin in the first place!"

The Father could have responded, "Lucifer, in the beginning, millions of angels had sinless natures, but you managed to lead them into sin. Adam and Eve were created with sinless natures, but you managed to lead them into sin. Jesus went to Earth as a second Adam to recover all that Adam lost.

He has the same nature that Adam had before he fell. You may do whatever you want to lead Jesus into sin, but you cannot take His life. To put your allegations beyond controversy or doubt, I will send Jesus into the solitude of the wilderness for forty days when He begins His ministry.

When He gets there, He will not eat for forty days and He will have no companionship. I will do this to Jesus so that at the end of the forty days, when He is physically near death and He has the greatest doubts (if any) about His mission, you will have your best opportunity to lead Him into sin.

Everyone in the universe will see that as the second Adam, Jesus had no advantage over the first Adam when confronted with temptation. To make sure that everyone understands that Jesus had no advantage over Adam, I will grant you three chances to lead Him into temptation.

If you win, Jesus will suffer the penalty for sin. If He wins, you will suffer the penalty for sin twice over, once for being a sinner and once for being a predator." With these words ringing in his ears, the devil soberly left Heaven to prepare for a vigorous assault on Jesus.

After Jesus' baptism, the Spirit led Him into the wilderness, just as the Father had promised Lucifer. I am sure this development puzzled Jesus, who knew nothing of Lucifer's discussion with the Father. However, just as everyone else in the universe is required to live by faith, the Father also required Jesus to live by faith (daily surrender to His will) and He meekly went to the desert.

The Faith of Jesus

The Bible reveals very little about the childhood of Jesus. **"And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men."** (Luke 2:52) As Jesus grew up, His understanding of who He was unfolded because He studied the Scriptures. Evidently, the Holy Spirit spoke to Him by the age of twelve, and He was convinced that He was "the Son of God." (Luke 2:42-50) The Bible does not indicate when Jesus discovered that He was "the Lamb of God," but that must have been a very sobering day for the young man.

The Father spoke to Jesus at His baptism and the Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove. (Matthew 3:16,17) These two witnesses and the testimony of His mother were the strongest evidences (reported in the Bible) confirming that Jesus was indeed "the Son of God." This indicates that Jesus was "the Son of God" by faith, and the Father and the Holy Spirit confirmed His faith at the beginning of His ministry.

The faith of Jesus is an often overlooked feature in Christ's life, but it explains why Lucifer's

first temptation in the desert was a poisoned pill, a temptation created for doubt and appetite. After fasting forty days, Jesus was emaciated physically and very weak. A wily Lucifer appeared before Jesus, studiously prepared to win this all-important encounter.

Lucifer knew that his existence rested on this wilderness rendezvous. The Father permitted Lucifer to tempt Jesus three different ways so that no one could ever say that the Father "protected" Jesus, who did not have a sinful nature, from temptation. The devil came to Jesus with three *designer* temptations. Lucifer carefully planned and masterfully presented these temptations because they would be his only chance to present himself physically to Jesus.

"The tempter came to him and said, '*If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.*' " (Matthew 4:3, italics mine) Lucifer's first temptation did not appear to be a temptation to do anything evil. What commandment would Jesus have broken if He momentarily grasped divine power (which Jesus could have done at any time) and turn stones into bread?

The temptation was serious because Lucifer asked Jesus to violate a covenant which Jesus had made with the Father when Adam and Eve sinned. Four thousand years earlier, Jesus had promised the Father that He would come to Earth and die in our place. The Father accepted Jesus' offer *on the condition* that Jesus would not say or do anything on His own.

Jesus would only do the will of the Father. (John 6:38; 14:24) Knowing this, Lucifer approached Jesus, and looking upon his frail target, the devil quietly said, "*If you are the Son of God [and you are, aren't you?], then prove it. Let there be no more doubt about this. Go ahead, exercise divine power and settle the question!*"

Prior to this meeting, Lucifer knew three things about Jesus:

1. - Jesus could grasp divine power at any time and perform a miracle so He would have a temptation to exercise this power.
2. - The Father had granted Jesus the freedom to terminate His endeavor to save man at any time. As long as He did not sin, Jesus could exit from His efforts to save mankind by exercising this divine prerogative. (John 10:18)
3. - Lucifer knew that if Jesus exercised divine power to save Himself from starvation, the plan of redemption would be terminated because the salvation of sinners hinged on Jesus' perfect submission to the Father's will. (John 5:30) *The level of submission required of Jesus was far more strenuous than anything God has ever imposed on human beings. This explains, in part, why the righteousness required for salvation goes beyond anything that a human being can produce.*

Lucifer had studied Jesus for thirty years before confronting Jesus with this temptation. The devil knew that Jesus was limited in various ways by His incarnation as a human being. Lucifer also knew that after forty days of fasting, Jesus would be so weak that He could hardly speak. If Jesus succumbed to Lucifer's first and best temptation, Jesus' upcoming ministry would end before it began.

Therefore, Lucifer tempted Jesus to save Himself from hunger knowing that (a) Jesus was very hungry and fragile, (b) if Jesus had any doubts about His identity as "the Son of God," this temptation would encourage Him to prove who He was, and (c) there was no explicit commandment forbidding Jesus from turning stones into bread. **BUT**, Lucifer knew such an act would violate the covenant between the Father and the Son and this would immediately terminate the plan of redemption which had been under way for 4,000 years. Lucifer is so subtle.

Do not treat this temptation as a casual affair. Lucifer's first temptation was perfect and fit the circumstances. It was well prepared, sophisticated, executed at the best possible time, and clever. The devil is extremely intelligent. His first temptation was designed to appeal to the humanity and the divinity in Jesus at the same time.

As a human, Jesus was hungry and weak, and He had no idea how much longer the Father would keep Him in the desert. As a human, Jesus wanted to escape the painful and lonely prison where He had been sent. He was not in the desert of His own accord. (Matthew 4:1)

Lucifer also knew that faith in God can evaporate since doubt can spring from a suggestion, so he decided to approach Jesus as though Jesus was in doubt. Since Jesus had received little evidence that He was "the Son of God," Lucifer concocted this temptation so that the humanity and divinity of Jesus could be tested simultaneously.

There was genuine hunger (humanity) and there was honest room for doubt. Therefore, the devil challenged the divine side of Jesus by suggesting that He turn stones into bread. Jesus had only to speak the word. The devil insinuated, "Why not exercise divine power? Why not end the misery? Why not turn stones into bread?"

Why not use your own authority and be filled? Even better, why endure all of this? Rise up, show yourself as God, shake off this bondage and do whatever you want!" Jesus did not waver. He saw through the devil's game and terminated the temptation with twenty-one words.

Second Temptation

Rejected, but not defeated, the devil carried Jesus to Jerusalem and together they stood on the highest point of the temple. " **'If you are the Son of God,' he said, 'throw yourself down. For it is written: "He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."** ' " (Matthew 4:6) The devil quoted from Psalm 91 for good reason. History indicates that many Jews anticipated Messiah would descend from the heavens and land in the temple courtyard unharmed.

Given this expectation, the temptation makes perfect sense. Once again, Lucifer was not asking Jesus to do anything sinful, *per se*. Instead, Lucifer challenged Jesus to miraculously establish Himself as the Messiah by descending into the courtyard below. The devil even encouraged Jesus with a Bible text that indicated the angels would protect Him from being hurt.

Jesus and Lucifer both understood the ramifications of this temptation. If Jesus landed unhurt below, then from the start of His ministry, the Jews would greet Him enthusiastically as the Messiah, and this daring event would eliminate the grinding campaign that Jesus would otherwise face.

Keep in mind that like the first temptation, this temptation broke no commandments or laws. The devil had done his homework. In response, Jesus said fourteen words, "**It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'**" (Matthew 4:7) Those words reveal a profound point.

There is a great gulf between faith and presumption: Faith surrenders to obedience, presumption justifies wrong doing. If Jesus had acted on the devil's temptation and descended from the highest point of the temple, Jesus would have acted on His own because the Father had not given Jesus instructions to carry out such an act.

To make his temptation sizzle, the devil even threw in a "proof text" to entice Jesus. Lucifer knew that Jesus desperately wanted Israel to hear what the Father would speak through His lips and Jesus knew that the leaders of Israel would be astonished if He landed in the courtyard without injury.

Jesus knew, however, that He had not come to convince the leaders of Israel, but that He had come to convince those who love God and His truth with all their hearts. Jesus told Lucifer that presumption is no substitute for faith. It is offensive to put "the Lord your God" to any test. (**Note:** It is interesting that Jesus identifies Himself to Lucifer as "the Lord your God." I am very sure the devil did not appreciate being reminded of this.)

Third Temptation

After suffering two failures, the devil played his last card. He carried Jesus to a very high mountain and showed Him the kingdoms of the world and all their splendor. Then, Lucifer presented a fantastic offer: "**'All this I will give you,' he said, 'if you will bow down and worship me.'** Jesus said to him, **'Away from me, Satan! For it is written: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only."**" (Matthew 4:9,10)

I would like to paraphrase this temptation using contemporary English. Lucifer speaks: "Jesus, we both know why you have come to Earth. We both know that you are the Son of God, as well as the Lamb of God. You came here to die. We also know that should you fail to perfectly carry out the will of the Father, which is excessively harsh, the Father will not resurrect you.

We also know that you want to redeem sinners, but if you do something which the Father does not like, your endeavor will fail. Therefore, I am making you an offer which you should not refuse. Bow down and worship me, acknowledge that my ancient claims against the government of God have validity and I will give the world to you.

Everything will be yours and you will not have to die. I took this planet from you, fair and square, and I can give it to whomever I want. Simply acknowledge that my standing arguments against

the government and ways of the Father have validity."

A weak and suffering Jesus rebutted Lucifer's ridiculous offer without hesitation: "You are evil! You are a liar, a thief, and the enemy of a generous and loving God. You are not worthy of any honor or worship. The first commandment forbids worshiping any other God and it condemns you to death. Get away from me." **"Then the devil left him, and angels [from the Father] came and attended him [brought Him food and water]."** (Matthew 4:11, insertions mine)

Summary

If you think perfection (sinless living) is possible, then you will need a Savior with a sinful nature as your model. If you believe that perfection (sinless living) is impossible until the carnal nature is removed, then the sinless nature of Jesus aligns with a much better paradigm. When Lucifer's three temptations are properly understood, we know that Jesus was tested as follows:

1. - Jesus was tempted to save Himself by exercising divine power (something that human beings cannot do). This was a test to see if Jesus would die of starvation (per the Father's orders) or save Himself by turning stones into food.
2. - Jesus was tempted to act presumptuously. If He landed unhurt in the temple courtyard below, the leaders of Israel would have immediately recognized His Messiahship. However, Jesus had promised the Father (when Adam and Eve sinned) that He would not say or do anything other than what the Father wanted. This was a test to determine if Jesus would live by faith or act out of presumption.
3. - Finally, Jesus was tempted to avoid the cross. Both Lucifer and Jesus knew there was a possibility that Jesus could fail in His efforts to redeem mankind, but Jesus would rather risk failure for our sake than avoid the inevitable death that faced Him. This was a test to see if Jesus loved Himself more than He loved sinners.

Jesus (having a sinless nature) was tested far beyond anything that Adam and Eve encountered when they had a sinless nature. The second Adam went on to recover all that the first Adam lost. After considering the perfect life of Jesus and His righteousness, the topics of justification and sanctification, the curse of sin, and the severe temptations which Christ faced after forty days of fasting, I am overwhelmed with the lengths to which God has gone to save sinners. To God be the glory, great things He has done.

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