

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand 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."

Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "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.'"

Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him. (Matthew 4:1-11)

When I was in high school, I cheated a lot. Math has always been hard for me. And somewhere along the line I learned to "borrow" answers from smarter classmates. I even paid one of the smartest guys in the school for answers! But then, right before graduating, something happened to me. I met a person who changed my life—his name is Jesus. He changed me on the inside and eventually that showed up on the outside.

So when I matriculated at Cal Poly I knew my cheating days were over; I vowed never to cheat again. I learned to study (it helps), and I made it all the way through college, graduating with honors without ever cheating. It did help majoring in social science, pretty much avoiding math altogether!

Strangely, it wasn't until seminary that this vow was tested. For some reason, seminary professors believe future pastors are beyond temptation. One of my professors assigned a book as required reading. At the end of class we had to sign off that we'd read it. I tried to read it, but it was a very boring and tedious book, written by a German, and I never made it all the way through. I wasn't doing very well in that class to begin with. If I didn't complete my reading I might not pass. So I signed it and I handed it to the professor knowing I'd probably pass the class but I failed the test.

We all struggle with temptation. Maybe you're tempted to cheat, lie or steal. Maybe when you're alone in a hotel room

you're tempted to watch something you shouldn't; no one will know. Maybe you're tempted to gossip; once you get that tongue of yours going it's like a wildfire. Maybe you're tempted to withhold something that belongs to God. I heard this week the top three temptations people face are overeating, laziness and worry.

Here in Matthew 4, right before Jesus begins his public ministry, we read of his encounter with the devil and his victory over temptation. Like a sprinter who stumbles out of his starting block, ruining his chance to recover and win the race, the devil wants to trip up God's Son just as he starts to run. But he fails and he flees.

It's an amazing story. In fact, it's one of the few stories of an event in the life in Jesus where there were no eyewitnesses. How did Matthew even know about this? There's only one way—at some point during his time on earth, maybe as they sat around a fire at night, Jesus told his disciples all about it; he laid bare his soul and shared how for 40 days in the wilderness he battled the devil.

I can only imagine their reaction, their questions: What did the devil look like? Did you actually hear his voice, audibly? How did he take you to the temple? Did you fly or was it more like a vision? What was it like to see all the kingdoms of the world? Does he really have the authority to offer all that? And those angels... what was that all about?

So Jesus told them this story. **They** needed to hear it, and **we** need to hear it as well. We need to because it again confirms his identity as God's Son. Make no mistake, this story is about Jesus. Twice the devil says, "If you are the Son of God..." He can't say that to you or to me. This temptation is tailor-made for God's Son. And Jesus does something here no one else can do: He succeeds where we've **all** failed. In doing so, his credentials as God's Son and our Savior are proven.

But **we** also need to hear it because **we** will be tempted as well. Not only do we have a Savior we can run to for help when we're tempted, but we have an example to follow in resisting the devil. You might say he overcame temptation so that we can overcome temptation. Today we're going to look at how to do that. In dealing with temptation, this story shows us there are several things we can do.

We Must be Prepared for Temptation

One thing is we need to be prepared for it. Remember at his baptism, the Father affirmed Jesus as his beloved Son, and the Spirit descended on him like a dove. The next thing that happens is that same Spirit led him into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. It's like he goes from the highest high to the lowest low. When you have a "peak" experience, be on the lookout for

temptation. We shouldn't be surprised after receiving those amazing championship rings, the Golden State Warriors were beaten in game one.

But notice the divine intentionality of this. Jesus' temptation in the wilderness was ordained by God. The Spirit of God led him into that forsaken wilderness to be tempted. The temptation was ordained by God but not inflicted by God. The Spirit did the leading but the devil did the tempting. God doesn't tempt us to do evil but he **will** lead us into experiences of testing. It's no mistake the Greek word for "tempt" can also mean "test." The same word can be used in a negative or a positive way. While the devil is **tempting** Jesus, God is **testing** him. When Satan tempts us, he wants us to stop trusting God. But when God tests us, he wants to prove and even show off our faith.

A young woman brings a boy home to meet her father. She's in love with the guy. She can't wait for her dad to meet him. She knows he can be hard on guys, but she's confident her boyfriend will shine under pressure. So she brings him home. Her dad takes him into his study and starts to grill him: Why do you want to date my daughter? What's your background? Where do you work? How much do you make? He puts the poor guy through a grueling test. While the father wants to expose the boy's weaknesses, the daughter believes this will reveal his strengths.

That's what's going on here. For God, this is a test to reveal and prove his Son's integrity, but Satan wants to bring him down. It's the same for us. It's hard to distinguish between what's a test and what's a temptation, but most of the time, both dynamics are at work. While God is refining us and proving us, Satan would bring us down.

This whole scene is reminiscent of Israel in the wilderness. Just like Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness, so Israel spent 40 years there. What was God doing there? Moses explained it to Israel: *"Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and TEST you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands"* (Deut. 8:2).

Israel failed that test, but Jesus succeeded where Israel failed. But here's what I want you to see: If both Israel and Jesus were led by the Spirit into the wilderness, so will you be. You'll be tempted and you'll be tested. Neither are any fun. The wilderness is a desolate place of scorching heat; a place of danger and deprivation. But it's also a place of strengthening. That's why James could say, *"Consider it pure joy...whenever you face trials many kinds, because you know the testing of your faith produces perseverance"* (Js 1:2-3).

I wonder if that's why Jesus fasted. This is the only time we ever hear of him fasting. Was this a way of preparing himself for this test? Why fast? When we fast, we deny our body what it wants to focus on disciplining and strengthening our spirits. Moses fasted for 40 days when he went up Mt. Sinai to get the stone tablets (Ex. 34:28). We need to be prepared for the test. But this fasting also presented the devil with an opportunity. And this leads to another thing this story shows us to do in times of testing and temptation.

We Must Understand How the Tempter Works

We must understand how the Tempter works. And in this story, like a chess master, he makes three strategic moves.

First, he attacks Jesus at his point of physical need. It says, "After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry." Well, of course he was hungry. He's not a ghost; he's a man. I'd say he's famished; starved even! And Satan sees an opening in this. That's how he works. At the right time, he'll strike at the exact point of our vulnerability and need.

So he says, "If you're the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Let me paraphrase that: "If indeed you're God's Son, then why should you go hungry? Use your God-given powers to take care of your hunger. Why should you go hungry, when God has given you the ability to do something about it?"

It sounds reasonable to me. There's nothing sinful about hunger or bread. This is a valid, God-given need. It's not even wrong to take the initiative to provide food for ourselves. God doesn't harvest the crops for us. Food doesn't magically drop onto our dinner tables. So what would be so wrong in using your God-given gifts to turn a stone into a loaf of bread?

But the issue isn't about food, it's about trust. The Tempter wants Jesus to distrust God's goodness: "Look Jesus, perhaps your Father isn't all he's cracked up to be. How can he treat you like this? You'd better take care of yourself. God helps those who help themselves!"

Do you see the issue? If Jesus turned the stones into bread, he'd have been motivated by distrust of God, using his power to serve himself, which was also antithetical to his mission to serve and even to suffer.

Have you ever found yourself in the wilderness where a need of yours isn't being met? You're not there because of sin, and the need is legitimate? You begin to wonder, "Why has God allowed me into this mess? Does he really have my best interest in mind? Maybe I need to look out for myself; take matters into my own hands." Maybe you're stuck in a job you hate, or a loveless marriage. Maybe you're single and not getting any younger; all you've ever wanted is to have a family. Each of one of those situations deals with God-given needs. But the Tempter wants us to move away from depending on God to meet those needs.

How do you deal with that? Look what Jesus did. He quoted Deuteronomy 8:3 where Moses said, *"Man shall not live by bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."* Moses was reminding Israel that in the wilderness God was teaching them to be dependent on **him** for life rather than bread. Although they needed bread to survive physically, it was God who provided it. And if they acted in disobedience or distrust of God to secure bread, they were cutting themselves off from the source of their survival.

Jesus resists Satan because he knew to turn a stone into bread would be an act of distrust and disobedience, which would cut him off from the very source of life—God. It's all about what we think we need to live: Is it God or food? Is it God or a husband?

Is it God or a fulfilling career? If the answer is God, then I won't move away from him to secure any of those things, even if they're legitimate needs. Bottom line: trust God, not yourself.

The second move the devil makes deals not with provision but protection. He somehow takes Jesus to the holy city of Jerusalem and stands him on the pinnacle of the temple. These were places associated with God's protection; places where God's people would run for sanctuary in times of trouble.

He says, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down." And then he uses Scripture to back up his challenge. He quotes from Ps. 91. "*Look right there, Jesus. It says He'll protect you; he'll send his angels to catch you. You won't even stub your toe.*" If used wrongly, the Bible can be quoted to justify almost anything. Beware of wolves in sheep's clothing who use the Bible, but in using it, abuse it.

Why would this temptation be attractive to Jesus? Well, Jesus has just shown off his faith in refusing to turn stones into bread. Now Satan plays off that, challenging Jesus to an even more spectacular display of faith: "Take an even bolder step of faith, Jesus. Throw yourself down and watch God send his angels to swoop down and protect you."

But even more so this would have been attractive because it offered Jesus the possibility of immediate assurance. He's still out in the wilderness; still hungry. He might have wondered if something was wrong in his relationship with his Father. Perhaps he should do something to force the Father's hand to show he really did care.

Jesus sees through this and again turns to Scripture. He goes back to Deut. 8 and says, "*It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'*" The Israelites had done just that in the wilderness when they grumbled against God and demanded he prove his care by providing water. Here, Jesus sees he's being tempted to create a situation where God would be forced to act to prove his care. Jesus says, "Why should I jump? The only reason I'd do that is to test God's love and care for me because of my situation out here. But I don't need to do that. I trust God loves me and has my best interest in mind."

How do we put the Lord to the test? We can do this in so many ways. Under the guise of faith, we step out and do something stupid and challenge God to prove he really cares for us. But that isn't faith; that's presumption. Faith is responding to God's word. It's trusting him when we can't see him. That's risky enough; we don't need to create our own risks! How many of us would be pleased if one of our children ran out into the middle of the street just to show they really trusted us to rescue them? Jesus said, "An evil and adulterous generation looks for a sign." We don't need a sign. The only sign we need is the cross. What more could we possibly need as proof of his love and care?

The third move the devil makes is far less subtle than the other two, but it had to be the hardest. Satan takes Jesus up to a place where he could have a split second vision of all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. What a show! Imagine seeing not just all the kingdoms of his own day but all those of the past and

present: Persia, Babylon, Greece, Rome, perhaps even the USA. Far spreading, glorious kingdoms rich in natural resources, cultural beauty, and untold wealth. It must have been intoxicating.

Satan says, "You can have it all. You can rule over all of it. I can give it to you. Just bow down and worship me." Satan isn't saying Jesus had to do this forever. He's just asking for one isolated act: "Just this once. Just pretend to worship me for 10 seconds, and it's all yours."

You may wonder, does the devil really own all these kingdoms? Are they really his to give away? In one sense, they are. The apostle John wrote, "*the whole world is in the power of the evil one*" (1 Jn 5:19). Jesus called Satan "*the ruler of this world*" (Jn 14:30). But in another sense, an ultimate sense, it's **not** true. When Christ came, he came to establish a kingdom. Paul says in Christ we've been "*delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of his beloved Son*" (Col. 1:13). We don't live under his rule any more. Satan still rules over this world, but we're not of this world. And his reign is doomed. The day will come when Christ will pick him up by the scruff of his neck and throw him into the lake of fire.

Meanwhile, Satan is on the loose, and this had to be a tough one for Jesus. He might have thought, "It's all going to be mine one day anyway. It's my destiny to rule over the nations. Every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that I am Lord." Then it must have struck him, "I can have all this now without the betrayal, and the beatings, and the cross. I can have it all the easy way."

You and I experience this temptation as well. It's still called idolatry. It's the temptation to love and live for the things of this world: fame, fortune, power, pleasure, security. It can even be good things like family, health, education, sports. It's basically saying, "I can't live without these things. To have these things I'm willing to do pretty much anything." Idolatry isn't just a failure to obey God, it's a setting of the whole heart on something **besides** God.

There's only one way to respond to that temptation: Jesus says, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" This also came from Deuteronomy and was the antidote to idolatry. You might say Jesus refused to trade end-time exaltation by the Father for the right-now exaltation of the devil. He overcame temptation so that we can overcome temptation. But do you see how the Tempter works? He tempts us to provide for ourselves apart from God, to put God to the test to prove his care, to worship anything besides God.

One more thing this story teaches us we must do. It teaches us we have to fight, but we don't fight empty-handed. We have a weapon at our disposal, and that's the Word of God. We've seen how Jesus went back three times to the book of Deuteronomy. He says, "It is written...It is written...It is written..." It's like he'd been sitting in Deuteronomy for 40 days, internalizing it, memorizing it, so he could quote it verbatim when needed.

When Paul talks about fighting Satan in Ephesians he says to take up the sword of the Spirit. So we think of God's word as an offensive weapon, a sword. But I wonder if God's word isn't also used defensively as a shield. Because in this story Jesus is more on

the defensive than the offensive. And I believe it's his trust in his heavenly Father, which includes leaning hard into God's promises—promises found in God's word—that Jesus demonstrates.

All three of these attacks deal with a fundamental question: *Can I really trust God? Is he really good? Will he really take care of my needs?* When we're struggling with these questions, the enemy comes along like a lion circling a wounded gazelle and says, "God isn't for you or even with you. He certainly won't walk beside you in your sin and brokenness. You have to look out for you; chart your own path or you'll miss out."

Is God good? Can I trust him? Will he take care of me? Those are the central questions behind every temptation and test. And they're the taproot of every disorder in our souls.

But in the midst of those questions, you can draw near to Jesus. The book of Hebrews says, "***Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted***" (Heb. 2:18). You see, he walked right into lion's mouth, he felt all the weight of temptation we feel and more, yet he didn't yield. So you can draw near to him. He resisted temptation so that you can. And one of the ways you do that is by meditating on and memorizing God's word. Are you doing that? Do you have it at your immediate disposal as a sword and a shield? Do you dare live a day without it?

Do you know what's great about this story? Temptation is tough, but it's also temporary. It says the devil left him. The Bible says, "***Resist the devil, and he will flee from you***" (James 4:7). And that's what happened with Jesus. I just love the picture painted at the story's end. The devil flees and the angels come to minister to him. The word used indicates there was food involved. Like Elijah out in the wilderness—at the end of his rope, asking God to take his life—angels came and offered him bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. Thank God all of life isn't lived in the wilderness. There are sweet times where God provides physically, emotionally and spiritually just what we need.

When I was tempted to cheat, I failed the test. But a few years later God led me to write my professor and confess my sin. He was gracious and even wrote me a handwritten letter saying my repentance was a sure sign of God's grace in my life. He even said there's no need to read the book! It felt like angels were attending me in that moment!

He resisted temptation so we can, but even when we don't, there's grace. The sinless Son of God came to seek and to save those who fail the test.

I'd like to end today by having you stand and pray a prayer out loud with me. This is an old prayer written by a Puritan many years ago.

Lord, I bless you that the issue of the battle
between you and Satan
has never been uncertain,
and will end in victory.

Calvary broke the dragon's head,
and I contend with a vanquished foe,
who with all his subtlety and strength
has already been overcome.
When I feel the serpent at my heel
may I remember him whose heel was bruised,
but who, when bruised, broke the devil's head.

My soul with inward joy extols
the mighty conqueror.

Heal me of any wounds received
in the great conflict;
if I have gathered defilement,
if my faith has suffered damage,
if my hope is less than bright,
if my love is not fervent,
if some creature-comfort occupies my heart,
if my soul sinks under pressure of the fight.

You whose every promise is balm,
every touch life,
draw near to thy weary warrior,
refresh me, that I may rise again
to wage the strife,
and never tire until my enemy is trodden down.

Give me such fellowship with you
that I may defy Satan,
unbelief, the flesh, the world,
with delight that comes not from a creature,
and which a creature cannot mar.

Give me a draught of the eternal fountain
that lies in your immutable, everlasting love and decree.

Then shall my hand never weaken,
my feet never stumble,
my sword never rest,
my shield never rust,
my helmet never shatter,
my breastplate never fall,
as my strength rests in the power
of your might.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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