

## Temptation At the Crossroads by Mark Jarvinen

In the text on this First Sunday in Lent, we meet Jesus at the first significant crossroads of His earthly ministry. Immediately following His baptism, He is led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness. At this crossroads, God's purpose of establishing His Kingdom, and Satan's purpose of thwarting His Kingdom, collide head-on, as they would throughout His ministry. Listen to the text as recorded in **Matthew 4:1-11**, reading in Jesus' Name.

*4 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup> And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. <sup>3</sup> And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." <sup>4</sup> But he answered, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"*

*<sup>5</sup> Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple <sup>6</sup> and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'"*

*<sup>7</sup> Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'" <sup>8</sup> Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. <sup>9</sup> And he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." <sup>10</sup> Then Jesus said to him, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.'"*

*<sup>11</sup> Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.*

### INTRODUCTION

This encounter in the wilderness, orchestrated, by the Father, but executed by Satan, is not a frontal assault, but a subtle attempt to sidetrack Jesus from His Kingdom purpose, by using a variety of temptations. The word "**tempted**" is the word "**peirazo**" in the Greek,

which can mean either “**I tempt,**” or “**I test.**” Here, Satan “**tempts**” Jesus by enticing Him to go against the Father’s will; while the Father has in mind rather to allow these temptations in order to “**test**” Jesus, and thereby prove Him faithful to His will. So, in a sense, **temptation and testing are the flip sides of the same coin.** Satan tempts Jesus to thwart the establishment of God’s Kingdom, while the Father uses Satan’s evil intention for the good purpose of strengthening Jesus for His Messianic role. Therefore, to state it succinctly, “**A temptation in the hands of Satan becomes a test in the hands of God**” (Wilkins, NIV Commentary, p. 156).

### **THERE’S A PURPOSE FOR THE WILDERNESS**

Scripture is clear that God never “**tempts**” anyone to do evil (**James 1:13**), but God does use circumstances to “**test**” a person’s character and resolve to follow Christ, in order to refine character and strengthen faith. James calls these experiences “**trials,**” and admonishes us in (**1:2-3**) to “**Consider it pure joy, ... whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.**” In today’s text, we see that Jesus has been led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit – an indication that the wilderness is not bad in itself, and that what Satan intends for evil, God intends for good. I must admit, as a follower of Christ, that there have been a number of times in my life when I’ve wondered why God placed me in a particular wilderness situation, a difficult time in which I have felt alone and hopeless; only to discover, often in retrospect, that God was preparing me for the next steps in my walk with Him. Along the way I learned a lot about myself, and my relationships, both with God and others, just like Israel did on their wilderness journey, as it is written in **Deuteronomy 8:16 –**

***“He gave you manna to eat in the desert, ... to humble and to test you so that in the end it might go well with you.”***

## **OUR LIVES AT THE CROSSROADS**

Just as Jesus was led to a crossroads in the wilderness, the difficult circumstances of our lives place us at the crossroads too. Initially it may be hard to tell the roads apart. One road, leads us further along the path of God’s will; while the other road, leads to our distraction and potentially our derailment on said path. **Proverbs 16:25** says it well – ***“There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death.”***

**How do we know which road we’re on at any given moment?**

A person is likely on the wrong road when he or she, as a matter of first importance, asks themselves, **“How can I get ahead in life and stay ahead? How can I make my life easier or less painful? How can I make everyone love me? How can I stay in control?”** You are likely on the right road when, while trusting and relying on God, your first question is **“What does God want me to do in this situation?”** **What is God’s Word saying to me?** In general terms, this means to consider as of first importance, **“How can I love and serve God and others in this situation?”** In short, the right road is the one on which God is the central figure and we understand that our role is to love and serve Him and others; whereas the wrong road is the one on which we as individuals choose to be the central character, ignoring God and asking the question, **“What’s in it for me?”**

A moment ago, I said I’ve had moments in which I’ve felt alone and hopeless in the wilderness of testing, but implied that, by grace, I passed the test. Most of us will acknowledge the same. But now hear

me say this: There have also been occasions, while in the wilderness of testing, that instead of affirming God's will and choosing the right road, I have succumbed to temptation and disobeyed God's will. In short, I've sinned. Here's where it gets a little dicey. Are you willing to acknowledge that the same is true in your life?

I hope so, because our sin is precisely why Christ came into the world. Most of the time, we think of Jesus as our substitute in His death on the cross. And that's certainly true. Since you and I can't please God with perfect lives, Jesus came to take our sin upon Himself and bear in His body on the cross, God's wrath over our sin. In short, Jesus died in our place. But here's the part we sometimes miss. He also came to live for us. The perfect life that we are incapable of living, He lived in our place. Instead of you and I depending on ourselves to please God with our perfect lives, we can trust Jesus, who came to earth and lived a perfect life for us. Therefore, Jesus is our Savior, not only by dying on the cross for our sins, but also by fulfilling the law on our behalf, living a perfect life in our place, and by His grace, giving us the credit for it.

And so, like me, even as a Christian, have you ever given way to temptation? Today, let's look at how Jesus, our substitute, did what you and I could never do. He perfectly resisted temptation and defeated Satan; and He did that for me and for you. This was a big moment for Jesus – the first of many victories over Satan in His earthly ministry – eventually culminating in His victory at the cross and the empty tomb. Keep in mind, He did this for us.

## **JESUS' VICTORY OVER TEMPTATION**

**1) Temptation #1** – The text says that Jesus had been fasting for 40 days and 40 nights, and since He had been led by the Spirit into the wilderness, we assume that this was in accordance with God’s will. That’s when Satan showed up to hit Jesus where He was weak, saying, ***“If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.”*** In essence, Satan was saying,

***“Hey, you’re the Son of God! Who’s more entitled than you to have the most basic physical things necessary to sustain life? You don’t need your Heavenly Father to take care of you. What’s the big deal here? Exercise your own vast powers!”***

Let’s put ourselves in Jesus’ shoes for a moment. What would be the big deal about turning some stones into bread if it would satisfy a basic human need? Well, it doesn’t seem like such a big deal, except that it wasn’t God’s will, and Jesus’ whole purpose for coming to earth was to do the Father’s will. Jesus knows there’s more at stake than a measly loaf of bread. **Jesus came to be our substitute.** Would He risk His entire mission for the sake of His own comfort? If God led Him into the wilderness, wouldn’t He also meet His need in the wilderness? Therefore, instead, of giving in to temptation, Jesus quotes from God’s Word in **Deuteronomy 8:3**, the very words God had given the Israelites after He had sustained them in the desert for 40 years with manna from Heaven – ***“Man shall not live by bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.”*** Jesus said, ***“No Satan! If the Father took care of His people in the wilderness for 40 years, He’ll certainly take care of me for 40 days.”***

**2) Temptation # 2** – Then Satan escorts Jesus to the highest point of the temple and says ***“Jump!”*** Notice how Satan knows the Bible too, and quotes from **Psalm 91:11-12**, which paraphrasing says, ***“Don’t worry, Jesus, You’re the Son of God. He will send angels***

***to your rescue and you won't even stub your toe.***" In other words, "It doesn't matter if you're reckless. You're special. Just go for it." How many times have we thought, not as a matter of prayer, but as a matter of presumption:

**"It doesn't matter if I drive recklessly, God will take care of me." Or, "It doesn't matter how I spend my money, God will be my safety net." Or "I don't need to be mindful of my health, my family, my marriage - God will work things out."?**

Jesus, isn't going to let Satan take Scripture out of context. He replies from **Deuteronomy 6:16** – ***"Do not put the Lord your God to the test."*** Jesus understands fully that being a daredevil and acting carelessly is not an act of faith, but of foolishness. How could Jesus serve as humanity's substitute if He missed the boat there?

**3) Temptation #3** - Finally, Satan took Jesus to a very high mountain and in an instant showed Him all the kingdoms of the world. ***"All these I will give to you,"*** he said, ***"if you will fall down and worship me."*** Do you see the lie here? Satan was implying that he was in power over all the kingdoms of the world and that it was within his authority to give that power away. In essence, Satan was saying, ***"I'm God. Worship me."*** It's as if he was saying, ***"Look at how all the people of the world worship me. I know it's your purpose to save them, but you don't need to die to do that. I'll save you the trouble. Make it easy on yourself and bow down to me. Forget about going to the cross. Why should you suffer?"***

Isn't this how Satan comes after us too? ***"Bow down to me, and you'll be happy. Instead of worshipping God, worship money. Don't worry about purity, morality is all relative. Respect authority? Look at all the flaws in their lives."***

In response to Satan, Jesus quoted ***Deuteronomy 6:13*** – ***“Worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.”*** This was for all the marbles. If Jesus worshipped Satan, how could He ever expect to be our substitute? Dying on the cross would be meaningless. ***“Away with you, Satan!”*** Jesus said. Game, set, match. In this tete-a-tete at the crossroads, Jesus’ victory was assured. The text says, ***“Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.”***

## **CONCLUSION**

Why did Jesus need to face Satan in this way? Some say to show us how to win the victory over temptation. There’s certainly some truth to that. The truth of Scripture is ***“the sword of the Spirit”*** with which to overcome Satan, as we learn in Ephesians 6. We dare not rely on logic, feelings, or conventional wisdom to overcome temptation. But providing tips on overcoming temptation is not the primary reason why Jesus had to face Satan in the wilderness. **Here’s the main reason: In order for there to be any hope for the human race to defeat sin, someone perfect had to perfectly defeat temptation.** From the time of Adam and Eve, no human being had ever perfectly resisted temptation, **UNTIL JESUS DID IT FOR US. Satan hit Jesus with his best shots, but to no avail.** As people who have succumbed to temptation multiple times in life, take comfort today in the fact that Jesus stood toe to toe with Satan in our place and withstood the onslaught, and from that first victory at the crossroads, ultimately went to the cross and rose again victorious, **FOR US.** Rejoice in that today! **A-men.**