

Tempted
By Jason Huff
Deuteronomy 6:4-18, Psalm 91, Luke 4:1-13

This week's third reading is from Luke 4:1-13, and it takes us into the last events detailed in the book of Luke before Jesus officially starts his earthly ministry. Last week, we read that Jesus had been baptized by the Jordan River, and that's where we pick up the story. Here's what Luke writes... "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. 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.'" 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 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.'" When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time."

"The devil made me do it." It's not an excuse you hear much anymore, but there are plenty of others that have taken its place. "I felt like it." "It seemed like the right idea at the time." "I wasn't hurting anybody." "It's not a big deal." "I figure God will forgive me later." "It just happened." Have we heard any of those lately? Maybe we've made those statements ourselves. Maybe it's just our fallen human nature, but we have an amazing ability to rationalize all our faults. We have difficulty taking responsibility for our actions, especially when they get us into trouble.

One of my own personal examples is when I came home from McDonalds one evening with dinner for Catha and myself. There amidst the burgers and fries in the bag sat a couple of apple pies...one more than I was supposed to have. Two apple pies, Catha questioned? "Well," I said, "they asked me if I wanted two, and I didn't say no." Then I rationalized it. One apple pie is 90 cents. 2 apple pies are a dollar. What a great deal! That second pie was only 10 cents! Who could pass up that deal? Now the truth is, I'm a big guy already...I need two apple pies like a fish needs a bicycle. But I let the idea of a great deal and my hunger for a special treat get in the way of what I really needed to eat to stay healthy. None of us are proud of how we've handled temptation sometimes. But as I thought about it, we often handle temptation like we handle grief...you've heard of the five stages of grief, right? Denial, anger, bargaining, grief, acceptance. We deny our problem ("no, I didn't eat an apple pie on the way home")...or we get angry ("why are you on my case about eating an apple pie")...or we bargain ("don't you think that a hard day's work is worth an apple pie?")...and finally, we get depressed ("I'm so sad I can't have that apple pie; my whole life is miserable.") Only when we are truly grown up in Christ do we get to that final stage and accept that we don't need whatever has tempted us.

The story of Jesus resisting temptation in the wilderness is one that seems tricky for us to deal with at first. None of Jesus' temptations are anything like what we experience; we can't turn stones into bread, for example. The way that Jesus was tempted was also different from what we experience. I believe the Bible teaches us about a real, actual fallen angel called Satan that is the adversary of God, but this story tells us about a face-to-face confrontation between Jesus and the devil that on the surface seems very different from our experiences of temptation. However, there is far more in this passage that we can relate to. By studying it, we can prepare our hearts so that when temptation comes, we can know how to defeat it the way that Jesus defeated Satan in the wilderness.

Maybe the first question we need to ask is this: why was Jesus out in the desert in the first place? Luke tells us that the Holy Spirit led him there. But again, the question is, why? Maybe the best way to understand it is that Jesus was preparing to begin his ministry and was spending time in prayer and fasting to be as close to the Father and to the Spirit as possible. His 40 days in the desert establishes him as a prophet on the same level as Moses and Elijah. Moses didn't eat for 40 days when he was with God on the mountain receiving the Law. Elijah didn't eat for 40 days as he fled from the rage of the wicked queen Jezebel. This long fast places Jesus on the same spiritual level as these giants of the Jewish faith. So while Jesus' temptation was part of this fast, it wasn't the only reason he went out to the desert. He went to be obedient to the Holy Spirit and to prepare.

That said, his purpose was also to show that he would succeed where Israel failed and that he would succeed in defeating the devil's schemes. Each temptation Jesus faces correlates to a failure in Israel's history. When the Hebrews were led out of Egypt into the desert on their way to the promised land of Israel, they complained about the food that God had provided for them, wishing they were back in Egypt enjoying the meals they had there as slaves. Jesus, on the other hand, rejects the desire for food to establish that he follows God and not his immediate needs. The nation of Israel wanted to be great and just like all the other nations, and they rejected God and followed after the patterns of all their neighbors, having a king and following after other gods. Jesus rejects taking control of the nations, knowing that God the Father will give them all to him at the proper time, rather than taking any shortcuts to power. And the Israelites tested God on many occasions, refusing to follow His leadership until He gave them a sign, and even then they were often not satisfied. But Jesus rejects testing the Father, even though it would have given the Jews the sign they wanted to show that He was the messiah. These specific tests showed that Jesus was the fulfillment of Israel's needs, the one who could overcome their past failures.

Not only does this passage show us Jesus' triumph over the evil one, it also shows us a lot about how we can expect to be tempted and how we can conquer our desires too. Let's break down what we see about temptation in this passage. First off, we can expect that temptations may not always be for terrible things but for good things at the wrong time or the wrong place or the wrong means. Satan only once asks Jesus to break the Law and the Ten Commandments; when he asks Jesus to worship him, he is asking Jesus to break the law against idolatry. But none of the things that Satan offers are really evil or wrong, at least not for Jesus.

There is nothing wrong with eating, and certainly Jesus had the power to make bread from stones. The entire world and everything in it was made by Jesus, and so taking control of the nations was and is Jesus' right. And giving a sign to the world to prove His place as the Son of God wasn't inherently wrong, either. But all of the temptations were about the spirit in how those good things would happen. Satan tempted Jesus to use His power for selfish gain, to change a stone into bread so that He would be satisfied and He would no longer be hungry. But Jesus' power was not intended for his own personal interests but to heal the world and to help the needs of others. To have made the stone into bread would have violated the trust the Father had placed in the Son. In the same way, Jesus' claim to the nations is through his life, death, and resurrection. For him to have accepted power as Satan wanted him to would have been to shortcut the whole process of salvation. And while giving a sign to the people to show that He was the messiah was fine, the sign that Satan tempted him to give was one that would test God, one that would have been suicide if not for the Father's divine intervention. Every last temptation was about something good that Satan was perverting to his own ends.

Then we have to be on the lookout for the same temptations. We all want to be able to have enough wealth to live comfortably, and hopefully we want to be able to share that money with others and with the church that spreads Jesus' name. Money is not a bad thing in and of itself. But do we want to get our money without earning it? Are we looking for shortcuts to wealth? Or do we harm others by hoarding what we have rather than making the sacrifice to help others with what God has given us? Power, too, can be a very useful thing, and we can wield our authority to help those around us and to make the world a better place in Christ's name. But do we want to be powerful so that no one can boss us around? Do we use the power we have for our own self-interests? Many things in this world are not inherently evil, but they can be very easily twisted if we aren't clear that everything we have, whether money or power or anything else, belongs to God and is God's to tell us what to do with.

This passage also shows us that the temptations that we will face will most likely be in the places that hit closest to home. The temptations that Jesus faced are ones that will never face us, but they were deeply personal to Jesus. He was tempted first to take care of his immediate need, his hunger. I don't know how many of you have ever fasted, but it can be a very painful process. After a couple of days, all you can think about is eating again. After several days, that feeling goes away, but your body does strange things to you, and after a few weeks it can cause hallucinations. So this temptation was directly related to Jesus' greatest felt need. In the grand scheme of things, making a loaf of bread is certainly a minor thing...but it was very important for Jesus to reject his own self-interest even in the little things. The other temptations were just as strong. Both of them went to the heart of Jesus' work in the world. Satan's temptation was to take a shortcut to the power that already belonged to Jesus. And what Jesus knew, but Satan almost certainly didn't, was just what sacrifice would be required for Him to eventually take his position beside God the Father as Lord and King of all creation. Only through his painful death on a cross would Jesus be able to claim his rightful throne. The temptation to seize that power without that suffering would have been huge. And the final temptation would have been one that would have made his earthly life so much easier. Jesus was often scorned and rejected, and that rejection eventually led to his death. It would have been so simple to have just come with all his power and glory and shown the world his place as the Son of God. But that wasn't the Father's way. All of these offers would have been truly tempting to Jesus, though...they were very real.

We often don't think much about temptation and don't prepare for it because we expect that temptations are only for "the big things," rather than the little things that are right where we live every day. Most of us will never be tempted to commit an actual murder, for example. But we may be tempted to feel hatred towards the salesperson that cheated us on our cable bill or the unkind relative who always complains about us. We probably aren't tempted to rob the bank, but we might be tempted not to point out the error in our favor on our bill. The list goes on, but we need to understand that our successes and failures in dealing with temptation aren't in the "big things" but the little things that affect us personally, right here and now. It's been said jokingly that "the devil is in the details." When it comes to temptation, though, that's true...we need to resist sin in the big and little things, and we need to expect them to hit us personally.

What else can we learn from this passage? Based on Jesus' example, we need to know Scripture and we need to understand Scripture. First off, we need to know it because it is our frontline defense against every temptation that we have. Jesus never argues from logic or reason with Satan. He does not try and get into a philosophical conversation about His mission and why following Satan would betray his moral standards. All he does is quote Scripture. (In Matthew's account of this event, the only additional thing that Jesus does is order the devil to leave.) The answer to each temptation we have is found in Scripture. Twice Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 6 to answer the devil, and that same passage tells us our proper way to know Scripture. We read it this morning. It says, "These commandments...are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up...write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates." If we are to know what God wants of us and if we are to resist the schemes of the devil, we have to know Scripture, period. Scripture changes us. It makes us ready for battle. It gives us the strength to get through our days knowing that God loves us and it gives us the courage to face the challenges and very real temptations that will come at us.

But not only do we need to know Scripture, we need to understand it. The reason is right here in the passage. When he gets into a corner, the devil knows Scripture and will twist it to his own ends if he can. We read Psalm 91 this morning, which Satan uses as an excuse for Jesus to test God. He tries to use this passage to allow Jesus to throw Himself off the temple to prove He is the Son of God, even though the passage has nothing to do with that. The passage in Psalm 91 is really about God eternally taking care of those who follow Him and watching over them. Jesus rightly condemns the testing of God, and Satan flees.

But this proves why we have to understand Scripture. Memorizing Scripture and setting it in your heart is a fantastic thing that truly can build our relationship with God. But if we don't really understand what it is we are memorizing, if it's just a bunch of words that sound good and godly but don't really impact us, then Scripture can also trip us up. Sadly, Scripture has been misused at times throughout history. At one point, even though the Christian church throughout the world had decided the American form of slavery was a great evil, some churches tried to use Scripture to justify their position to continue the practice. Wars for power and conquest and selfish gain have sometimes been fought in the name of Scripture. I believe that these uses of Scripture grieve God because they involve the same kind of Scripture twisting we see the devil using here.

But that's also why the church exists, why there are people who help us understand and interpret Scripture. If you don't understand a Scripture, work through it with others who are learning and growing. In last week's Bible study, we pieced together a difficult section from the book of James, trying to understand what was being said. I think it helped everyone there because we saw that there are times when we need to work to truly "get" Scripture. I think if there were a single thing to take home today with you, it would be a commitment to work through the Bible and start attempting to really understand it, and to be willing to ask questions when you don't. Because if we do that, we're all going to have the tools we need to fight the temptations that come upon us.

Finally, we need not be worried. We can live confidently if we have prepared for temptation because the devil ultimately has no power over us. Everything he suggests and everything he does comes from outside of us; only we have the choice what to do with those outside temptations. The Holy Spirit lives inside of us, and He is the one who can truly change us. James 4:7 tells us, "Submit yourselves...to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." 1 Corinthians 10:13 says, "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it." We need not fear the devil or temptations or anything else when we know we are God's children. God has promised all believers the same Holy Spirit that guided Jesus in the desert, the same Holy Spirit who allows us to make choices that honor God. And it's important for us to realize that this temptation of Jesus was not just an exercise. Jesus was born without the sin nature that plagues us, that keeps us from choosing to follow God. But just like our forefather Adam, He had the choice to sin or to obey God. And because of the Holy Spirit's work in our lives, we too have that choice to freely obey God.

All of this is meaningless, though, if the Holy Spirit isn't working in our lives. We are told repeatedly in the New Testament that we must turn away from sin and honestly believe in Christ; when we do that, the Holy Spirit is given to us as a gift that makes it possible for us to really change. Someone who has never given over their life to Christ, someone who has not surrendered control and said, "I don't want to sin anymore," they don't have the Holy Spirit. They don't have the means to combat the devil's schemes. If you want to make that change, to live a life pleasing to God, you can't do it on your own...but by calling on Jesus to become your personal Lord and Saviour and being willing to follow Him faithfully, you can know the Holy Spirit's power in your life and overcome the temptations in your life. If you've never done that, I encourage you to do it today.

Jesus Christ met sin and temptation and the devil head on, and He defeated them all, not only in the desert but through His ultimate sacrifice for our sins and His resurrection that proves once and for all that He is the Son of God who is to be worshipped and glorified. Through believing in Him, through dying to ourselves and living for Him, we will find that we too can conquer everything that stands against us through Christ who gives us strength. Let's pray.