

LUKE 4:1–13. (EHV)

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where he was tempted by the Devil for forty days. He did not eat anything during those days. When they came to an end, he was hungry. The Devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.” Jesus answered him, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God’ [Deut. 8:3].” The Devil led him up to a high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. The Devil told him, “I will give you all this power and the glory of these kingdoms, because it has been entrusted to me, and I can give it to anyone I want. So, if you worship me, it will all be yours.” Jesus answered him, “It is written: ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and serve him only’ [Deut. 6:13].” The Devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the pinnacle of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down from here, because it is written:

He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you.

And,

they will lift you up with their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone” [Psalm 91:11–12].

Jesus answered him, “It says: ‘You shall not test the Lord your God’ [Deut. 6:16].” When the Devil had finished every temptation, he left him until an opportune time.

One army was camped on one hill, the other was camped on the opposite hill. A valley lay in between. In the camp on the opposite hill, a huge man, over nine feet tall, layered with muscles, had already put on bronze greaves over his shins and a bronze coat of scale armor weighing about 125 pounds over his body and had slung a bronze javelin over his back. He now grabbed his bronze helmet and his huge iron spear and went down with his shield bearer into the valley below, as the army cheered and shouted behind him. This was the Valiant One, the Champion, of the Philistines—Goliath.

In the tents of the other army, a young man—very strong himself, but much smaller than Goliath—had tried on a royal tunic and a coat of armor and a bronze helmet belonging to someone else. But he had felt too awkward in them, so he took them off and simply took his staff and his sling with him down into the valley. There probably were not very many cheers and shouts sending him on, but there would be plenty later when he was victorious over Goliath. This was the Valiant One, the Champion, of the Israelites, and their eventual king—David.

Let’s go to a third man, more than a millenium later. We don’t know exactly where he was when he took the field, other than in the wilderness, though a mountain just northwest of Jericho is traditionally identified as one of the sites where this encounter took place. He didn’t have armor or weapons, at least not of the metal sort. He doesn’t even go to meet his enemy on his own initiative; he is sent into the wilderness by the Spirit of God for forty days, and there his enemy comes to meet him. Luke tells us the enemy came with lesser attacks throughout the forty days, but since this man was fasting during those forty days, the enemy reserved his fiercest

attacks for the very end, when this man was perhaps looking somewhat thin and gaunt and was feeling hungry.

Yes, this man, this warrior, Jesus, had everything stacked against him, even more than David did against Goliath. But make no mistake, this is our Valiant One, our Champion, fighting for us.

As Jesus sits among the rocks, the devil launches his first attack. “The Devil said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.’”

Did you catch it? “*If you are the Son of God...*” Chronologically, the temptation of Jesus might not seem to belong in Lent, because in Lent we think of the final stage of Jesus’s life and ministry, and Jesus’s temptation in the wilderness happened at the very beginning of his ministry. And if it happened at the beginning of his ministry, what had just happened forty days earlier? Luke basically tells us, “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness...” Jesus had just been baptized. And what had God told him there? “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

And now what does the devil say, “*If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.*” There’s a lot going on in this temptation, but at the heart of it is this: The devil wants Jesus to doubt the promises and word of God in the midst of struggle and discomfort. Matthew tells us that the Spirit of God hadn’t just sent Jesus into the wilderness, but had specifically sent him into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. By implication, that means that this forty-day fast was also not Jesus’s own idea, but the Spirit’s. Would God really leave Jesus so hungry if he was his Son? “God’s word isn’t enough, Jesus. You need to prove that you’re God’s Son at this point. Tell this stone to become bread.”

Do you recognize this temptation, especially in our culture, where pain is something to address and get rid of immediately? “Are you really God’s son or daughter if this or that happened to your father or mother, your son or daughter? Are you really loved by him if you have this or that diagnosis or need to undergo this or that treatment or surgery? Are the promises he says he made you in your baptism sufficient if he is withholding this or that blessing from you? Is this really what the life of a dear son or daughter of God looks like? I’m afraid God’s word isn’t enough, my friend. You’re going to need visible proof of some sort, some gripping demonstration of God’s power. And really, only a life without any pain or struggle is sufficient proof.”

How have we fared against that temptation? And were we at the tail end of a forty-day fast?

How does Jesus fare? Look, apparently he *does* have a weapon! “Jesus answered him, ‘It is written: “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God.”’” Satan tries to get Jesus to doubt God’s word, but Jesus goes back to that very word and wields it against the devil. Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 8:3, where Moses reminds the Israelites that the Lord had shown them in the desert that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. In other words, we often think that our survival depends on our bread-winning—working, trading, buying food and so on. But God is saying, “Actually, your survival depends first and foremost on my word. Even when you do get bread in the usual way, it wouldn’t help you one bit if I didn’t add my blessing to it. And if my word means that you can’t

get what you need in the usual way, then trust my word, and I will provide for you in some other way.”

So Jesus is actually combating Satan’s temptation to doubt God’s word and promises by citing more of God’s word and promises. “Even though it might satisfy my physical hunger to change this stone into bread, God’s word doesn’t want me to eat bread until my fast is over, and so God will keep me alive and well some other way.”

But Satan has had arrows deflected before. He will just string another arrow. “The Devil led him up to a high mountain”—Matthew tells us it was a very high mountain—“and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. The Devil told him, ‘I will give you all this power and the glory of these kingdoms, because it has been entrusted to me, and I can give it to anyone I want. So, if you worship me, it will all be yours.’”

Now, this temptation might seem like no big deal. I remember as a kid thinking, “The devil must be really stupid if he thinks he can simply tell Jesus to bow down and worship him and get Jesus to do it.” And ultimately, it is true that the devil is foolish. But I think we’re not paying close enough attention to the words if we think that this temptation was like some fly that could just be swatted away. What does Luke say? The devil took Jesus, hungry and tired as he was from his fast, and whisked him away to a very high mountain, and then from that high mountain, he showed Jesus “in a moment of time” “*all* the kingdoms of the world,” and Matthew adds, “and their splendor.” You think it’s a temptation if the man on the sidewalk in front of you accidentally drops a \$50 bill and keeps on walking? Imagine being shown in an instant *all* the kingdoms of the world and their splendor—all the best that the world has to offer. The devil may ultimately be stupid, but we had better not underestimate his power.

Jesus imagine what passed in front of Jesus’s eyes, just outside of his reach! Luxurious beds and couches, luscious gardens, sumptuous feasts, beautiful and exotic animals, piles of gold, servants standing at attention, just waiting for him to say the word, yes, probably also attractive servants of a different kind, the disreputable kind, just waiting for him to say the word, all the toys, bells, and whistles, all the fame and fortune a person could ask for. And on top of it all, all of these things, minus the less savory characters, were a reminder of the life Jesus had effectively left behind in heaven. Just worship me, the devil says, and it will all be yours.

And do you think that agreeing to the devil’s request necessarily meant that Jesus would have had to physically bow down and say, “I worship you, devil,” or, “You are my god”? Or do you think that it would have sufficed to say, “Okay, I’ll take it”? For isn’t it precisely in coveting the world’s wealth and splendor that we already worship the devil?

Do you recognize this temptation? Does the devil even need to place *all* of this before our mind’s eye to get us to stumble and fall? Sometimes isn’t he able to say, “Don’t you just want to indulge in this *one* thing?” Or does he get us to adopt the attitude, “I’ll be religious and worship the Lord, as long as it doesn’t affect my 401K, my house, my possessions, my reputation,” and so he already has us not worshipping the Lord right then and there?

How have we fared against this temptation? And when the devil has visited us with this temptation, were we at the tail end of a forty-day fast?

How does Jesus fare? The same weapon he swung before, he swings the opposite way again: “It is written: ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’” Jesus once

again quotes Deuteronomy, this time chapter 6. Essentially he says, “If I am not content with the task and the possessions God has given me, and especially if I bow down and worship you, then I would be committing idolatry, and that is unthinkable. God is the ultimate wealth, the highest good. It is him that I love more than anything on earth you can show or give me, yes, more than all of it put together.”

Satan’s quiver is running low, but he quickly strings another arrow. He leads Jesus to Jerusalem and has him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, because it is written: ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you.’ And, ‘they will lift you up with their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’”

Hang on a second! Did the devil just say, “It is written”? Did the devil just quote Scripture? What is this temptation?

This temptation is the opposite of the first. In the first temptation, the devil tempted Jesus to doubt that God’s word and promises were true. In this temptation, the devil tempts him to pervert and twist God’s promises, to presume upon God’s promises. “God has promised that he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. Well then, you should be able to throw yourself down off this high place—especially if that high place is part of the very house of God itself, right?—and you won’t ever hit the ground. It’ll basically be like skydiving—all the thrills, without having to purchase any of the equipment!”

Do you recognize this temptation? It’s all over the place. We certainly hear it through the lips of the world, when in response to the things we point out as sins, they say, “But isn’t it written, ‘God is love’? Isn’t it written, ‘Do not judge’?” Which is basically to suggest, if not to state outright, “We can live however we want, and God will love us anyway.” But maybe when I phrase it like that, you realize that the devil doesn’t just shoot this temptation at you through the lips of the world. Doesn’t he lead us to presume upon God’s promises and God’s word in other more subtle ways, in our own hearts?

“I’m saved by grace, not by works. I don’t need to go to church this morning, or this evening.”

“I’m saved by the blood of Christ, not by gold or silver. My offering doesn’t need to be that generous.”

“I’m the apple of God’s eye. I can feast my eyes on her or him this once, or twice.”

“I can do this or that. After all, I can always say ‘I’m sorry’ and get forgiveness later.”

How have we fared against that temptation? And were we at the tail end of a forty-day fast?

How did Jesus fare? Watch this gaunt, hungry man knock the devil on his tail! “Jesus answered him, ‘It says: “You shall not test the Lord your God.”’” Jesus once again quotes from Deuteronomy 6. He points out that trust is different from presumption. Trusting is different from testing. The devil needs to stop ripping passages out of context and pay attention to all of God’s word, not just the parts that are convenient for him.

The devil’s had enough, for now. He leaves until an opportune time. This man may be gaunt and hungry, but he looks pretty powerful standing there, doesn’t he? Even at his physical weakest, he is more than a match for the devil.

I wonder if Jesus, before he came down from the highest point of the temple, allowed himself to turn around and gaze upon the hill not too far away, where the devil would most definitely return with every weapon in his arsenal, but where he would hold the field not until another opportune time, but for good and forever.

Here is our Substitute, our Champion, our Valiant One.

With might of ours can naught be done—

Soon were our loss effected.

But for us fights the Valiant One,

Whom God himself elected.

You ask who this may be?

Christ Jesus, it is he—

the Lord of hosts his name,

from age to age the same.

He holds the field forever. Amen.