

**MATTHEW 4:1–11.** (EHV)

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil. After he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The Tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread.” But Jesus answered, “**It is written: ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes out of the mouth of God’**” [Deut. 8:3]. Then the Devil took him into the holy city. He placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, and he 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 they will lift you up in their hands,  
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone” [Ps. 91:11–12].

Jesus said to him, “**Again, it is written: ‘You shall not test the Lord your God’**” [Deut. 6:16]. Again the Devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. He said to him, “I will give you all of these things, if you will bow down and worship me.” Then Jesus said to him, “**Go away, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only’**” [Deut. 6:13]. Then the Devil left him, and just then angels came and served him.

Did you get up early to watch it this morning? The USA men’s hockey team battled the Canadian men’s hockey team for Olympic gold starting at 7:10 a.m. today. If you didn’t watch it, I won’t tell you who won...because I didn’t watch it either. But I am looking forward to watching the highlights later. After all, everyone loves a good battle, whether it’s an athletic battle, like a hockey match or a state championship high school football game; a military battle, like the Battle of Normandy; or an intellectual battle, like a Magnus Carlsen chess match.

What makes a battle good? It helps if one side clearly represents good while the other side represents evil. It helps if one side conquers the other in an impressive and brilliant way. It helps if the battle takes place in a significant historical context or has a significant impact on subsequent history. If the battle is good in any of these ways, we enjoy watching it, studying it, or otherwise being a part of it.

This morning Matthew recounts for us a battle that we do well to study. It is, in the truest sense, a battle between good and evil, a battle between the Son of God and the prince of this world. It is a battle in which good wins in an impressive and brilliant way. It is good because it continues to have an impact for us. This isn’t just a good battle; it’s a glorious battle—waged as a model for us, waged on our behalf.

**1. A Battle Waged as a Model for Us**

First, let’s see Jesus waging this battle against the devil as a model for us.

“Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil. After he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The Tempter came...” Mark and Luke make it clear that the devil tempted Jesus throughout the forty days he was in the wilderness, but Matthew focuses on three of the more powerful temptations that the devil employed at the end of the forty-day period.

This reminds us of how the devil works also with us. Job and Peter tell us that the devil is constantly prowling throughout the earth, seeking whom he may devour. But Paul also tells us about particular evil days (Ephesians 6:13), days Satan has marked on his calendar for special attacks he has been carefully planning. The devil also does both here with Jesus: He tempts Jesus throughout the forty-day period, but he also saves three temptations for the end of Jesus's forty-day fast, when he is hungry.

I remember one of my good friends telling me the story of asking his girlfriend's father for permission to marry her. The father not only gave his permission, but also told my friend what he had observed about his daughter during his years of raising her. I was fascinated when my friend was telling me about this. Here was evidence of a father who had enjoyed a close, loving relationship with his daughter. He paid careful attention to her and took note of traits and characteristics that could be passed along to her husband one day, so that she could continue to be cared for in the best possible way. One of the things I remember my friend telling me from the conversation was that his girlfriend's father said that if his daughter was being short-fused or impatient, there was a good chance she simply needed to eat something. Maybe some of you can relate.

Spiritual health and physical health are related. I may not be able to describe precisely how, but the relationship is there. So just as the devil often attacks us when we are hungry, ill, or stressed out, he also saves his best attacks on Jesus for when he is hungry and weak. Then he comes to him and says, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread." The key to the temptation is in the devil's opening words. We know those words are important, because he opens with them again in the second temptation: "If you are the Son of God..." He is trying to get Jesus to doubt God's own word.

This forty-day temptation period took place right after Jesus's baptism. And at Jesus's baptism, what had God said? "This is my beloved Son."

But the devil says, "Really? Look at you! You're all alone. You're hungry. You haven't eaten for forty days. Can you really be the Son of God? Would the Son of God really be subject to all these things? Should he be? Prove you are the Son of God by miraculously taking care of your physical needs."

But there's more than that. Behind his temptation to doubt is also a temptation to despise God's creation and his natural order. Whenever Jesus went beyond that natural order in providing for needs—what we call miracles—he always did so for others and to confirm the message he had preached. He never did it for its own sake, simply to make life easier or more enjoyable for himself, or just to put on a show. But here there is no human besides Jesus; if Jesus were to perform a miracle now, just for himself, he would be despising the fact that God sent him to live under law just like we have to.

But there's more than that. Let's suppose for a second that Jesus would not have sinned here if he had said Okay to the devil's temptation, if he had decided to exercise his divine sonship by alleviating his own physical need. This is not the last time the devil is going to use this temptation. Do you remember what those who passed by the cross would say when Jesus was hanging there? "Come down now from the cross, if you are the Son of God!" And if Jesus listens to the devil here at the beginning of his ministry, what will he do there at the end? Jesus

did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. But the devil wants him to abandon this purpose and to use his divinity to serve himself.

But what did Jesus answer? “It is written: ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes out of the mouth of God’” [Deut. 8:3]. Jesus rebuffs the devil’s temptation with God’s Word. Even though Jesus is hungry, life is not sustained merely by physical commodities. Bread alone will not satisfy his hunger. Even today, when we put food in our mouths and stomachs, it is not just the food that sustains us. If God does not add his word and blessing and in effect say to that food, “Go and nourish that human being,” the food will do us no good. The same goes for all that is used to sustain our lives—doctors, medicine, pacemakers and other technology, you name it. And so, if Jesus were to give into this temptation to doubt, this temptation to step out from being under law, this temptation to be served and not to serve, in exchange for a morsel of bread, what good would the bread do for him? Do you think failing in his divine mission—if such a thing were even possible—would have gone without any consequences from his heavenly Father? “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes out of the mouth of God.”

Are we faced with similar temptations today? Temptations to doubt what God clearly says in his Word? “Are you really a beloved son or daughter of God?” Are we ready to respond with, “It is written: ‘You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ’” (Galatians 3:26–27)? Or are we tempted to despise God’s creation and natural order in acquiring our daily bread? Are we ready to respond with, “It is written: ‘He who works his land will have abundant food, but he who chases fantasies lacks judgment’” (Proverbs 12:11)? Or are we ever tempted to do something just because we have the ability to do it, without asking ourselves, “Does this give glory to God and benefit my neighbor? Or I am doing it just for myself?” Are we ready to respond with, “It is written: ‘Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves’” (Philippians 2:3)? Jesus’s glorious battle serves as a model for us.

The devil tries again. And we need to note this in considering Jesus’s battle as a model for us. The devil does not give up easily. He is persistent. This time he takes Jesus to Jerusalem and stands him on the highest point of the temple and says to him, “If you are the Son of God, 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’” [Ps. 91:11–12].

Note the devil’s adaptability. Jesus had countered the first temptation with, “It is written,” so the devil himself includes, “It is written,” in this second temptation. He quotes from Psalm 91, which is still a popular psalm among Christians to this day.

Once again though, we see the attack on God’s Word. With the first temptation, he tried to get Jesus to doubt God’s Word. Here we see him add to that an attempt to get Jesus to trust God’s Word, but God’s Word misunderstood and misapplied, so that Jesus trusts God incorrectly and acts on God’s grace wrongly. “God promises that his angels will guard you. So Jesus, go ahead and throw yourself off the temple and see if it’s true. If you’re not willing to do that, then you must not trust God’s Word.”

There is also another temptation here, a silent one. “If the devil has tempted me with, ‘It is written,’ then maybe I should find something better than, ‘It is written,’ in order to resist him. Maybe there’s a better tool, a flashier way.”

Jesus doesn’t fall for any of it. He answers the devil, “Again, it is written: ‘You shall not test the Lord your God’” [Deut. 6:16]. Jesus reminds the devil that Psalm 91 is meant to be a comfort to us as we go about all our ordinary, day-to-day business and life, not an occasion for testing God.

I’ve heard a lot of people say that memorization is losing its value in the eyes of many educators. But if there were no other reason to keep on memorizing Scripture and to keep on being well-versed in Scripture, here is a very good one: The devil has it memorized, at least parts of it. Like Jesus, we need to be more well-versed than Satan if we are to overcome his temptations.

There are plenty of people all around us who know how to talk about God and Jesus, and do we automatically assume they’re on our side? Do we recognize when they’re taking God’s Word out of context? Even when they talk about the gospel and faith, do we know that they’re not trying to get us to trust in God’s Word misunderstood and misapplied? Do we know that they’re encouraging us to believe the right thing? Are we neglectful in growing in our knowledge of God’s Word, neglectful in growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ? Jesus’s glorious battle serves as a model for us.

The devil has one more idea. And here we see not just how cunning and adaptable, not just how persistent the devil is, but also how powerful he is. He takes Jesus to a very high mountain and shows him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. First, the devil didn’t go on a hike with Jesus; he just took him there. And second, I don’t care which very high mountain you’re talking about—Hermon in northern Palestine, McKinley in Alaska, or Everest in Nepal—you can perhaps see a number of kingdoms from those peaks, but you can’t see them all, together with all their glory, but the devil showed them all to Jesus at the same time.

And the devil said to him, “I will give you all of these things, if you will bow down and worship me.” Now this might seem to be ridiculous on the part of Satan, but if, in Jesus’s state of humiliation, having set aside the full use of his majesty as God, the devil is able to show him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory in an instant, don’t you think it was at least a little bit more believable that the devil was worthy of worship and had the ability to give these things to Jesus, not to mention the allure of the things themselves?

Please note this too: The devil does say, “if you will bow down and worship *me*,” but what would Jesus really be worshipping if he would be doing it *in order to get the kingdoms and their glory*? Wouldn’t he actually be worshipping the kingdoms and their glory? The devil does not care. To worship material wealth, power, and pleasure is to worship him.

But Jesus is ready once again: “Go away, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only’” [Deut. 6:13]. With all of his temptations, the devil attacked God’s Word and thereby tempted Jesus to idolatry, since to fear, love, and trust in anything more than God’s Word is to fear, love, and trust in a different god than the true One. But Jesus tells the devil it’s time to scram, because God’s Word is clear that we are to worship and serve only God.

What about us? Are we sometimes just about ready to tell the devil to scram, but then he shows us the nicer house, the nicer car, more money, more pleasure, more fame, less sacrifice, less pain, less shame, if we'll just set aside our Christianity for a little bit, and so we tell him, "Well now, hang on just a minute, Satan. Let's talk"?

With all three of these temptations, Jesus shows us how to wage a glorious battle against Satan: Arm yourself with the Word of God. Every single time, Jesus turns him away with, "It is written." With the Word of God, Jesus is able to sustain himself and repel Satan even at his weakest, even when he is all alone.

## **2. A Battle Waged on Our Behalf**

But what's the problem as we look at Jesus's glorious battle as our model? The problem is that in seeking to follow Jesus's model, our battles against Satan are often considerably less than glorious. Oftentimes even when we have full bellies, the sun is shining, and far from being alone in the wilderness, we're with our family or friends, maybe even in church, and the pastor is reading or preaching the Word of God, instead of saying, "Scram, Satan!" we're saying, "Come over here, Satan, this is getting boring." Not to mention what happens outside the church walls, and when we are alone, and when we are physically drained.

That's why Jesus's battle is glorious also for another reason. That's why it was waged not just as a model, but also on our behalf. That's why after his baptism, the Spirit doesn't send him into Jerusalem to alleviate the poverty of the beggars or the suffering of the sick. No, the first thing he does, and he does it immediately, is to send Jesus out in the wilderness, all alone, to be tempted by the devil, to fight a spiritual battle. That's the primary reason Jesus came, to do battle with the devil, and to do it alone, as our substitute, to succeed alone in the barren wilderness where Adam and Eve had miserably failed together in the lush garden. And if Satan had to retreat out there in the wilderness when Jesus said, "It is written," then what did Satan look like there on Calvary when Jesus said, "It is finished"? I'll tell you how he looked: His head was crushed.

Jesus's temptation in the wilderness is our assurance that Jesus lived the rest of his life under the law in our place in the same way he did here—guiltless, so that when the time came he could offer up his sinless life on our behalf, in exchange for our sinfulness, on Calvary.

In the wilderness, Jesus isn't just waging a glorious battle as our example, as our model. He is waging a glorious battle on our behalf, as our substitute and Savior. Adam and Eve took the fruit because they thought only of themselves, but Jesus refused to turn stones into bread because he thought of his heavenly Father and he thought of you.

Jesus vs. Satan. That's the best, most glorious battle there is. Because the victory that Jesus won isn't just Jesus's; it's yours and it's mine and it's certain. Amen.