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When Temptations Come

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TEXT: Matthew 4:1-11 (ESV)

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

Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple 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."

Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'You shall 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 glory. And he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." 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."

Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.

We have heard it said that life is a battle. Jesus would agree with that statement, for he experienced it firsthand. An interesting thing happened to him after his baptism: He found himself engaged in a battle, a spiritual battle. He had just had this great moment of vision at the Jordan River, at his baptism, when God's calling and love was so dramatically affirmed. And now we see him being led into the wilderness by the Spirit of God to be tempted by the devil. God seems to be on the offensive in this move. After 40 days of fasting, Satan responds by attacking Jesus, tempting him three times with suggestions which were attempts to distort our Lord's true vocation, that of being the

servant king who would suffer and die to save us from sin and death. But that was the God-given vocation Jesus received at His baptism from His Heavenly Father.

First, the devil talked to him about his immediate physical needs. He had been fasting for 40 days. Fasting signifies a total reliance upon God and freedom from every earthly security, a total dependence upon God, and setting aside the ordinary necessities of life like food. And now Jesus was hungry. God's beloved Son was experiencing one of humanity's most nagging sensations: hunger pains. And the tempter whispered, "So take care of yourself, Jesus. Satisfy that hunger. You can do it. Use your power for yourself, if you're the son of God and turn these stones into loaves of bread." You see, Satan was attempting to drive a wedge between Jesus and God, to draw Jesus away from a holy reliance upon God to an unholiness independence from God. "Use your divine prerogatives and power to make this easier for yourself, Jesus, do it your way." But Jesus refuses. Instead, He quotes Scripture. It's from Deuteronomy. All three tempting suggestions from the devil, by the way, are met with quotes from the Book of Deuteronomy, thus linking our Lord's experience in the wilderness to Israel's 40 years in the desert. He responds to this first temptation with "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." In other words, he's saying, I'm depending on God alone to take care of me. I trust him. Just like at his baptism. Then Jesus is fulfilling all righteousness again, isn't he?

Then the next temptation was to get Jesus to put God's character to the test. The devil took him to the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem somehow and said,

If you are the son of God, throw yourself down, for God's promised in His Word that His angels will catch you. So, let's put him to the test and see if he really does care that much about you. And besides, just think of the positive public response to this sensational act. You'll have them eating out of the palm of your hand.

Well, in this instance, Satan was misusing Scripture in an effort to manipulate Jesus, to do his will and test God. But again, Jesus didn't give in and he quoted another verse: "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test." Strike two on Satan.

Finally, Jesus was taken to a high mountain and shown all the kingdoms of the world and was told, "I'll give you these, all of them, if you will bow down and worship me." Of course the devil is telling a lie here. He doesn't have the power and authority to give these to Jesus. He's trying to play a trick on him. "Trust me. Worship me just this once.

Jesus. I'll give you everything you want." He's seeking compromise, and Jesus sees through it and again quotes the Word of God. "Begone, Satan. You shall worship the Lord your God alone. And Him only shall you serve." Strike three, Satan. Then the devil left him. And behold, angels came and were ministering to Jesus.

So, what have we witnessed here? We have witnessed a spiritual battle, haven't we? Satan trying to nip the mission of Jesus in the bud before it got too far, but failing at it. Round one goes to Jesus. But Satan will be back later. Through Peter's rebuke of Jesus statement about having to go to the cross, we'll hear the voice of Satan. "Get behind me, Satan," Jesus will say. And through the mocking voices of the priests and bystanders at the cross when he's being crucified, saying "If you're God's son, come down." Fact is. God's enemy was attempting to thwart the redemptive mission of God in Christ. He does not want to see the cross or the empty tomb happen. That would be the worst news for the evil one.

To be sure the temptations to be selfish and to opt for the sensational and to test God and to compromise come the way of all who are Christians. But these are recorded so that we might witness the testing of God's Son. Is His Messiah-ship to be the slave of popular expectations, or will he go to the cross, to win the crown? And we know the answer to that, don't we? His mission was accomplished. Sin was paid for at the cross. He was raised again and won the battle over sin and death and the devil.

So, what does the temptation story of Jesus mean for humanity – for you and me? Well, it's encouraging news for us. Encouraging news about Jesus, first of all. Where Adam had failed in the Garden of Eden, here we have the new Adam, and he wins. Israel failed and gave in to temptations in the wilderness again and again for 40 years, but Jesus succeeded. We see here the stuff that Jesus has made of, rising to the surface in this story, He is revealed. When Jesus refused to go the way of the tempter, He's embracing the way of God, the way of the cross in order to bring forgiveness and salvation, because Jesus is stronger than evil. Later on, he'll talk of how he is entering the strong man's house and binding him up, so we as God's children can say, "My Jesus is stronger than anything in the whole wide world sin, death, even the power of the devil. So, I'm going to trust him and not be afraid." I'm reminded of Isaiah 9 announcing to us, "Unto us a son is given. And his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God." This story shows us he is the long-awaited mighty God. All power and authority have been given to Jesus. He'll say that at the Great Commission.

He is worthy of my trust and my allegiance. He went into battle to rescue me and make me his own. And He won. And he loves me. Like the song says: Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong. They are weak, but He is strong.

This temptation story also serves as a reminder for the children of God that the tempter, though defeated and headed for ultimate destruction in the end, is for real. He exists and he's still lurking around doing his thing: tempting us, trying to pull us away from God. We face our own set of temptations from Satan that are meant to turn us aside from our true vocation as baptized servants of Jesus. He wants to distract us from the path of servanthood to which we have been commissioned, to bring about doubts in our minds, to get us distracted. And on our own we cannot withstand the attacks of our enemy. But we do have help to us available. We have help available to us first from the one who was tempted like us in every way but didn't sin: Jesus. He promised us, "Lo, I'm with you always." So, we can always turn to Him for help. The writer of Hebrews in the New Testament assures us with these words, he says,

Since then, we have a great high priest has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God. Let us hold fast to our confession, trusting Him, for we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are yet without sin. Let us then, with confidence, draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive His grace to help us in time of need.

We can turn to Jesus Christ for grace and strength to overcome Satan's attacks when they're happening. We have the privilege as children of God to approach His throne of grace and entrust ourselves to His care each and every day, to call upon him knowing he will not turn us away.

And when we fail to do that, as we sometimes do because of our pride and self-centeredness and independent thinking, we also have the gift of being able to turn to him for mercy and grace as we confess our sins to him and our need for forgiveness to start over again. And he promises to forgive us and cleanse us of our and righteousness so that we can continue on with him, walking in his ways to the glory of God. We have Jesus.

Rich Mullins, a popular Christian musician and songwriter who died at a young age, once confessed in a concert that he struggled with watching pornography while

traveling alone on his musical tours. One of his spiritual mentors told him, "It's not that you're so bad, it's just you're not supposed to go out by yourself." So, he took a friend along with him on his next trip to Amsterdam, near the famous red light district.

Mullen said he was hoping his friend would fall asleep and start snoring. So, as he put it, I thought maybe it would be fun to take a walk and look around and be tempted. He waited until five in the morning for his friend to start snoring, but he never did. Meanwhile, in the midst of this temptation, he picked up a notebook and wrote the words to one of his more popular songs called *Hold Me Jesus*. And here are a few of the lyrics, he says.

And I wake up in the night and feel the dark,
It's so hot inside my soul.
I swear there must be blisters on my heart.
So, hold me, Jesus, because I'm shaking like a leaf.
You've been king of my glory.
Won't you be my prince of peace?

And with this back story, some people have called this song Mullen's prayer for porn addicts. But it could also be called a prayer for anyone who's tempted. We can call to him "Hold me, Jesus." The fact is, we do need to do that. As evangelist D.L. Moody once said, "My friends, you're no match for Satan. And when he wants to fight you, you just run to your elder brother Jesus, who was more than a match for all the devils of hell." Go running to Jesus. That's our privilege.

And next, as God's sons and daughters, we're entitled to use the same defense against the devil's temptations as God's son did: scripture. Jesus had obviously studied Deuteronomy as part of his devotional life, and now he's drawing from that book what he has learned. The spirit which came upon him so powerfully at his baptism, was able to take those scriptures that he'd learned and use them to fend off Satan's temptations and spiritual warfare. The Word of God is powerful. As the Apostle Paul noted in his letter to the Ephesians, the Sword of the Spirit is the Word of God. It's valuable then, for each one of us to become proficient with the Sword of the Spirit, God's Word, to know it and store it in our hearts and learn how to use it. And oh, how we sometimes fail to do that. We need to heed those words of wisdom from George Mueller, that great Christian of the past, he says

It's a common temptation of Satan to make us give up reading of the word and prayer when our enjoyment isn't there, as if there were of no use to read scriptures when we don't enjoy them. And as if it were no use to pray when we

have no spirit of prayer. The truth is that in order to enjoy the word, we ought to continue to read it. And the way to obtain a spirit of prayer is to continue praying. Because the less we read the Word of God, the less we desire to read it and the less we pray, the less we desire to pray.

And friend, that is a recipe for disaster. It makes us vulnerable to Satan's attacks. It is absolutely necessary for us to know our way around the Bible and trust the Holy Spirit to work in us through that word in order to stand strong against our enemy. We cannot and will not share in the victory of God's son if we don't commit ourselves to this practice. But if we do, the Spirit will build us up to withstand temptations and bring scriptures to our attention when temptation is pressing on us. God's Word holds the resources you see that we need to fight the good fight of following Jesus. So, it's so vital to commit yourself to opening it each day, to let God speak to you as you read and study it. I recommend beginning with one of the gospels, read a chapter a day and reflect a bit on what you've learned in your reading about Jesus and about God and about yourself. And I know this: our enemy, Satan, hates it and shakes when you spend time in God's Word, growing in your knowledge of God and faith in His love for you.

So, friend, may you run the good race and fight the good fight as a servant of Jesus Christ. Staying connected to Him, the stronger one, who is the conqueror of sin, death, and the power of the devil. He will always be with you. Let's pray. Father, we give you thanks and praise for our strong conquering savior, Jesus. Thank you for the reminder that we can always turn to Him and open your word and find help in times of trial and temptations. Amen.