

“Duel in the Desert”

Introduction: Over the past few weeks we’ve been noticing the various (and remarkable) ways that God, in Jesus, has come to be with and to identify with the human race. From being born as an infant, to being raised by a poor family in a small village, to standing in the waters of baptism, Jesus is intimately acquainted with the human condition.

This morning, we will continue to explore that identification and all that it means for us as we see Jesus, after his baptism, led directly by the Spirit into the wilderness where he experiences various temptations that seek to knock him off the path of servanthood. We saw last week that after his baptism, Jesus was blessed with the empowering presence of the Spirit and the affirming love of the Father. “This is my Son whom I love, with him I am well pleased,” were the words the Father spoke over him. The question then becomes: What kind of Son would he be?

Let’s listen to our texts for this morning and then head into the wilderness to find out!

I. Jesus in the Wilderness

A. Last week we considered how Jesus stood with us in the waters of baptism in order, as he explained to John, “to fulfill all righteousness.” His baptism, in other words, pointed to the cross and the sacrifice Jesus would make on our behalf to redeem us and enable us to begin living the life that is truly life. So that Jesus would not “falter or become discouraged” in carrying out his mission (Isa. (42:1-4), we saw how Jesus was equipped with the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit and the affirming love of the Father.

B. Now, you might think that after that event, Jesus would celebrate. That he’d rush home to tell his family all about it and then quickly begin making plans to launch his new ministry. But Jesus never made it home. Instead, he was led into the wilderness . . . by the Spirit, to be tempted by the devil! You can almost hear him saying, “Father, this is not what I signed up for . . . was it?!”

C. What is temptation? It’s an enticement to evil, to making a choice that either harms our relationship with God, with another, or with our selves, or with all three! Importantly, temptation is not sin; giving into temptation is. Further, while the Bible teaches that God does not tempt us, he very well may test us. In fact, the Greek word translated “tempted” can also be translated as “tested.” The purpose can either be to bring one down or to build one up, depending on the context. So, while the devil – that personal opponent to all that God is about and for – may tempt, God may use that time of temptation for a time of testing.

D. Why would the testing of Jesus be necessary? A theologian named Joel Green puts it this way: “[Jesus’ time of testing] is concerned with finalizing the establishment of Jesus’ performative competence prior to his actual assumption of public ministry in the service of God’s salvific aim.” Why do people write sentences like that?! What it means is that in this wilderness time, we will see how Jesus will use the “new equipment” – the power of the Spirit and the love of the Father – that he has been given. Would he use it to serve us, staying on the path God had laid out for him, accomplishing the purposes of God, or to walk his own way and serve himself?

E. This is not an idle question. For, behind this time of testing lies the experience of Israel. As Jesus came through the waters of baptism and into 40 days in the wilderness, so did Israel come through the waters of the Red Sea followed by 40 years in the wilderness. She was to bring blessing to the peoples of the world (Ge. 12:1-3) but failed miserably in her time of testing. She grumbled for bread, flirted with idolatry, and continually put God to the test. Lying behind this failure was that of Adam and Eve whose failure to obey God had ramifications for the entire human race. The question was, would Jesus fare any better? Would he be able to walk the path that God had laid out for him, putting others ahead of himself, going the way of the cross to deliver us from the grip of the enemy and our slavery to sin? Or, would he fail, too, giving into selfish desires, and leaving us to look for another deliverer?

F. Certainly, Jesus could have considered his newfound power and his experience of being loved as a platform from which to serve himself. He could've thought: *Now I've got the opportunity to make some real shekels, to get whatever I want. Don't I deserve to live comfortably after growing up on the other side of the street? And now, after going thirty years living in relative obscurity, I can do some dramatic stuff and finally receive the fame and popularity I've longed for. Now, I can even avoid any kind of suffering and simply walk down the road of glory to the cheers of the crowd!* That was the temptation, and that was the test.

## II. Temptations and Responses

A. What were these temptations? It's likely there were more than three, given the length of time Jesus spent in the wilderness, but these three probably sum up their essence.

- The temptation to turn stones to bread was one that encouraged Jesus to doubt the Father's care and provision and feed his own desires, to pursue whatever would make him feel good. He was, after all, the Son of God; couldn't he have what he wanted?
- The temptation to jump off the highest point of the temple and trust angels to rescue him was one that attempted to manipulate God and put God's goodness to the test, trying to prove God's love in a rather ridiculous manner. Perhaps kind of like refusing to look ways before crossing the street, or refusing to wear a mask, believing that God would never let anything bad happen to you!
- The temptation to receive the kingdoms of the world in exchange for worshipping the devil was one that encouraged Jesus to pursue power at any cost. No matter where it comes from or what you have to give up, the means, Jesus was tempted to think, justified the end.

B. Fortunately for us, Jesus met head on, and passed, all three tests. How did he do so? He began to put into practice the equipment he had been given, trusting in the love of the Father, and wielding the word of God, which the apostle Paul describes as the sword of the Spirit, in a passage which talks about the armor we need to fight off the devil's schemes (Eph. 6:10-17). Worth noting is that each passage of scripture Jesus drew on is taken from the journey of Israel in the wilderness, as recorded in Deuteronomy. It suggests that Jesus was not only well acquainted with the scriptures, but that he had spent time meditating on its promises. Jesus didn't consider them to just be ancient words but words that revealed God's character as he interacted with his people, words that were grounded in God's past track record, and words that were filled with God's power.

- They spoke of the promise of God to provide sustenance for his people that went well beyond their physical needs: “Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.”
- They spoke of the promise of God to be there for his people even when it didn’t feel like he was: “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”
- They spoke of the promise of God that true fulfillment in life comes from centering ourselves in God alone: “Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.”

Where Israel failed, Jesus was faithful. Jesus rested in the promise that God was trustworthy and would care for him as he thought best.

Illustration: Thinking back to your school days, did you ever like taking exams? I don’t know too many people who did. But I also know that it was only when I was forced to take a test that I really took the time to study and learn the material. Learning it, and proving that I knew it, was the way for the teacher to determine what was in my head, and whether I was ready to move on to the next level.

As exams reveal what is in our heads, the temptations Jesus faced would reveal what was in his heart. Would he remain faithful? Would he rest his trust in the Father? Would he make the choice to serve others and not himself? Was he willing to travel the path that led to the cross? Was he qualified to be the savior of the human race? The answer would be a resounding “yes.”

C. But not only that. That Jesus passed, the writer of Hebrews observes, means that he has not only secured our future, but he can help us live and hold firmly to our faith in the present (Heb. 4:15f):

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Jesus, who has been through it, knows how to come alongside us when we are tempted to walk our own way and serve ourselves. He can help us stay on the path of service, the path that connects us with the mission of God and the living of a life that is truly life.

D. Peter, who struggled to figure this all out as he gave in to the temptation to deny Jesus, was finally able to conclude this: [2 Pet. 1:3-5a, NLT]

As we know Jesus better, his divine power has given us everything we need for living a godly life. He has called us to receive his own glory and goodness! And by that same mighty power, he has given us all of his rich and wonderful promises. He has promised that you will escape the decadence all around you caused by evil desires and that you will participate in his divine nature. So make every effort to apply the benefits of these promises to your life.

Jesus desires that we experience the joy of living the life that is truly life as we walk the path of service and sacrifice, participating in God’s mission to the world. May his rich and wonderful promises help us quiet the tempting voices we will hear along the way and hold firmly to the one we will find is holding on to us.