

Mark 1:12-15

¹²At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, ¹³and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

¹⁴After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ¹⁵"The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"

Every day we are under attack. This attack comes without warning. And it is deadly. Its victims cannot be numbered. This attack, however, has no connection with al-Qaida or Hamas or some other terrorist organization. It involves no nuclear, conventional or biological weapons. Rather this threat is temptation. From the lure of the forbidden cookie jar to the draw of dark sites on the Internet, from the gossip we long to share to the grudge we continue to hold—our minds are not at peace. We are at war with ourselves, with a sinful world, and with a deceptive devil. As Martin Luther taught us to sing, "With might of ours can naught be done, Soon were our loss effected." On our own we fail. We are unable to defend ourselves. "But for us fights the valiant One, Whom God Himself elected." We are not alone in our battle. We have a Substitute who fights for us.

Jesus Christ is Our Lenten Champion.

Fresh from his Baptism in the Jordan River, Jesus, the Son of God and the Son of Man, engaged the enemy in our place. **"At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him."**

Jesus came into the world to free the world from Satan's power and Satan wasted no time in challenging Jesus. Notice that the Savior doesn't hesitate to join the fight. In this brief account from Mark's Gospel we get the picture. The water of the Jordan River was still trickling off our Lord, as he marched into the desert to face temptation. Heaven and hell were about to exchange blows.

As we read what the gospel writers tell us about Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, it feels like we are viewing this fight as a spectator. It almost seems appropriate that we should cheer for our Big Brother who is about to blacken the eye of the bully from hell. But we are not just fans in the stands – safely separated from the battle. No, we are joined together with Christ. In Jesus, the entire world goes toe-to-toe with the heavyweight champion of hell. When Jesus enters the ring with the tempter, we all step in with him. Just as in Adam all humanity fell through temptation into sin and death, so in Christ all humanity rises through obedience into righteousness and life. We are not in the audience; we are in the desert, for we are with Christ.

The devil had heard the Heavenly Father's sermon at the baptism of his Son. Remember the voice from the cloud, **"You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased"** (Mark 1:11). Now Satan watched as Jesus went without food. He saw Jesus' human hunger, so he devised a plan of attack. The other gospels record that **"the tempter came to him and said, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread'"** (Matthew 4:3). Did you hear that? The devil is saying, "If it is true, what that voice from the clouds said, if you really are the Son of God, then why has he abandoned you to die of starvation? Why is he depriving you of the basic necessities of life?" Satan, hungry for victory, attacked the empty stomach of our Lord.

But no more had Satan thrown the punch than it was blocked—not by human strength, nor by human will power, but by the Word of God. Jesus answered and said, **"It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God'"** (Matthew 4:4). And the word that had proceeded from the mouth of God was, **"You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."** Satan's temptation was not simply to turn rocks into food. Satan wanted to turn Jesus from the trustworthy words of his Father to the unreliable feelings of the human heart. But instead of turning stones into bread, Christ stuffed the stone of his Father's Word into the devil's tempting mouth.

Satan continues to drop doubts into our thoughts, doesn't he? "Did God really say that he loves you?" At your Baptism too the Father said, "You are my son, you are my daughter, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." But does it always seem that way? When the bills pile up, have you wondered what use is the Father's rich grace if you haven't money to pay what you owe? If you are so loved by him, why did he allow you to be injured, to become ill, to spend hour upon hour in pain and misery? If God is good, why is my life so bad? So Satan tempts us to despair.

Satan is also tempting us to turn from the trustworthy words of our Father to the undependable feelings of our human hearts. Don't trust yourself. Trust your Father. If he sent his own beloved Son to the cross, do not pretend that he will spare you crosses, sufferings, and pains. But behind these masks of suffering is the smiling face of your beloved Father. The Lord disciplines those he loves (Hebrews 12:6). In love he is bringing you, cross by cross, suffering by suffering, to the glory of the resurrection.

Having failed in his initial assault, Satan circled his opponent, planning his next attack. As Matthew records: **“Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. ‘If you are the Son of God,’ he said, ‘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.’ ”** (4:5–6)

Is the devil simply trying to break our Lord’s neck? No, he is far more sinister than that. He is saying, “You claim that you are the beloved Son of God, in whom God is well pleased. If that is so, if your Father loves you *so much* and you are *so* well pleasing to him, then I suppose he will do anything to protect you. So, throw yourself down from the temple. Why, he has even said he will protect you with his angels. You rely on his Word. Take him at his Word and jump, O Son of God.”

This second temptation is one of sinful arrogance. It is written, **“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see”** (Hebrews 11:1). And again, **“We live by faith, not by sight”** (2 Corinthians 5:7). This temptation of the devil is to abandon faith and live by sight. It is a faithless pride that because we are saved God will always shower us with blessings and miracles. Jesus’ answer makes it clear that we have no right to put ourselves in danger. He says, **“It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’ ”** (Matthew 4:7)

Having been defeated in the first two rounds with our Lord, Satan stepped forward for one final effort. Here Satan holds prosperity and delight before him. The devil knew that Jesus knew what sufferings awaited him, so the devil said, in essence: “Because you are God’s Son, you deserve better than this miserable life; you deserve riches, honor, glory. I can give all that to you, yes, all that and more if only you will get on your knees and worship me.”

But our Lord came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many—as a ransom for you and me. And if he came not to be served, certainly he came not to pursue wealth, fame, and glory! He came to “fear, love, and trust in God above all things,” and in so doing, to fulfill the Law for you. So he said, **“Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only’ ”** (Matthew 4:10).

Do you see what our Lord has done in his conquest of Satan with all his temptations? He has completely reversed the fall of the first man and has brought forward a new Adam. What you and I could not do, Christ has done for us. The tempter whom we could never defeat on our own—Christ has defeated. The new beginning that we could never create—Jesus has created for us.

In the Garden of Eden, Adam was defeated by the ancient serpent. But in the Judean wilderness, Jesus fought off the temptations of the evil one. Every fiery arrow shot from Satan’s bow was doused in the water of the Word. Heaven and hell stood toe-to-toe, and hell was left flat in the dust.

The Lord Jesus fought this battle for us. His victory over the devil is our victory as well, for all that Christ accomplished has been given to us. When you fall prey to the temptations of Satan, flee to the One who defeated Satan. Those who are in Christ Jesus cannot be harmed by the temptations of evil. As in Adam you died in sin, so in the obedient Christ you live.

This is the good news that Jesus was announcing throughout his earthly ministry. Repent and believe the good news. We cannot earn God’s favor. Cling to what Jesus has done for us. He who was tempted for us is never tempted to turn away from us. His baptism is our Baptism. His conquering of sin is our conquering of sin. His crucifixion, his resurrection, his ascension – they all belong to us.

We pray “Lead us not into temptation.” Instead, Heavenly Father, lead us to the One who conquered the tempter for us, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

The daily battles against temptation are continuous and our many losses are deeply discouraging, but do not lose heart. Jesus has defeated Satan. He paid our debt. He lived without sin. He put Satan in his place. Jesus won. Jesus is the champion, but he gives us the victor’s crown of life. Amen.

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