

**“Forty Days in the Wilderness” | Luke 4:1-13**  
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**(Discussion questions on page 7)**

**Introduction**

“You are dust, and to dust you shall return.” It’s a sobering truth to pronounce over people on Ash Wednesday, and it is probably an equally confronting truth to hear pronounced to you. This is how the season of Lent begins.

The Book of Common Prayer (p. 542) reminds us that, as Christians, we are “marked with ashes in the same manner that we were signed with the Cross in Baptism.” Lent is not solely about the gloom of mortality, but is rather a sobering season in which we examine our own mortality as it is mingled together with the redemptive realities of the gospel.

This week, we’re going to focus on the three temptations of Jesus in Luke 4. We’ll follow the interactions between Jesus and the devil, and explore three types of temptation:

- The temptation of comfort when weakness prevails
- The temptation of power and glory when we feel powerless and humiliated
- The temptation to prove ourselves to ourselves and others

**I. The First Temptation (Luke 4:1-4)**

The first temptation begins from a place of profound bodily weakness. Jesus had been led into the wilderness by the Spirit for forty days. The passage says, “he ate nothing during those days. And when they were ended, he was hungry.”

We must recognize, as the church always has, that Jesus, though fully divine was also fully human. He would have been ferociously hungry!

In this space of extreme vulnerability, after a forty day fast, the devil offers a bit of ‘advice’ to Jesus:

“If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.”

**Ia. Starting with sonship**

*If you are the son of God?* What’s going on there? Satan is gaslighting Jesus. We already know that Jesus is the son of God because Luke explicitly tells us this earlier in his gospel.

- In Lk. 3:21-22, when Jesus was baptized in the Jordan by John, everyone (including Jesus) heard a voice come from heaven as the Spirit descended upon him like a dove that said,

**“You are my beloved son; with you I am well pleased.”**

- Then, in Lk. 3:23-38, the genealogy of Jesus ends by calling Jesus: **“the son of God.”**

Jesus is prompted to assuage his own hunger by means of parameters set by Satan, not by God. And, Jesus “the beloved son” could hardly be “the son *of God*” if he had been willie his cues from the proverbial wisdom of the prince of darkness.

#### **Ib. Why does ‘sonship’ matter anyway?**

But we have to ask ourselves: why would Satan begin tempting Jesus by calling into question his sonship? Why was *that* so significant?

Well, to start, before Jesus arrived on the scene, it was the people of God—Israel—who were referred to in the Old Testament as “God’s son,” in text’s like Hosea 11:1.

You can see it most clearly in Exodus 4:22-23,

“Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD, **Israel is my firstborn son**, and I say to you, **“Let my son go that he may serve me.”**”

Therefore, whenever we hear Jesus referred to as ‘the son’ we should hear ‘Israel.’

In Luke 4, Jesus was **fulfilling the sonship of Israel** and bringing it to fruition in his own person. Through his own perfect faithfulness, Jesus the Son was bringing salvation of God to the whole world as Israel’s representative, as the faithful Israelite. This is why it is so important that Jesus didn’t fall into the cycle of Israel’s disobedience when being tempted by the devil.

#### **Ic. What would have been the problem if Jesus did make stones into food?**

Jesus was hungry, and he was God! He eventually turned water into wine, and multiplied the fish and the loaves. In the past, God had miraculously made water flow from a rock in the Book of Exodus.

What was the problem? The problem was not whether Jesus as the son of God *could* produce food miraculously. Or, whether food itself is good, nourishing and necessary for survival. No-one is denying these things. There’s nothing wrong *in principle* with food or the idea of miraculously providing it; but there is when Satan commands it, not God! That is what is at issue in this first temptation. It represents any situation in which we are invited to **give up on obeying God in favor of following the cues of the world, our own sinful nature, and the devil.**

Going beyond the “prescribed boundaries of God” (Calvin) at the suggestion of the Satan (Gen. 2:16-17), is exactly what led Adam and Eve to plunge the world into sin, death, and destruction in the Garden. God had given Adam and Eve everything they needed in the Garden. He had told them they could eat of any tree that was good for food *except* the Tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil, lest they die. Satan made, what seems to many like one tiny addition. It seemed reasonable.

As Genesis 3 says,

“[Eve] saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise so she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.”

Often times, in arguments with atheists or agnostics, they hone in on this. “All this destruction, death, and carnage, because they ate a fruit, how ridiculous.” But it was never about the fruit, you see. It was about a heart that chooses to **overstep the prescribed boundaries of God** and follow the path of infidelity at the instigation and alternate instruction of the devil.

Like Israel, and like Adam and Eve, our human inclination is to act according to our own will and desires, even when God has prescribed and provided his own ways. Our own perceived sense of the path to well-being so easily eclipses the provision and prescribed boundaries of God—boundaries that exist not to diminish joy, but to enhance it; boundaries put in place to preserve and save life; not to disrupt or destroy it.

### **Ic. Application & Illustration [Breaking Bad]**

Here we observe the first tactic of the tempter: **sin and the forces of evil always seems to strike when we are weak, hungry—when we are vulnerable**. When there is a deep and immediate need to be met, and a seemingly more expedient way to meet that need other than obeying to God. But these alternate ways weaken our faith, compromise our witness, and spiritually-wound ourselves and others.

Recently, my wife and I have been re-watching the classic show *Breaking Bad* starring Bryan Cranston and Bob Odenkirk, among many others. The show traces the journey of Walter White, a gifted chemist, whose doctoral work was stolen by former friends who became rich off of it while ‘Walt’ as he is called was barely making end’s meat working two jobs as a high school chemistry teacher and a car wash associate. All this to support his son and pregnant wife. Enter a completely unexpected cancer diagnosis, and no way to pay the bills, and ‘Walt’ finds himself searching for alternate solutions to raise money to support his family, Walt done everything wright, but the world had let him down. His friends, the health care companies, life—the system failed him. And you can feel the total lack of fairness when you watch Walt go through this. And now, here he was, set to die without any ability to pay his medical bills or leave any financial security for his family.

In the midst of the crisis, Walt re-connected with an old troubled student, and shockingly began manufacturing methamphetamine as a side hustle to pay his health bills and support his family. This wasn’t Walt, the teacher, the family man, the good guy. You get the sense in the show that everyone is surprised by their actions, and the things they are capable of when the metric for success becomes raw survival. Practically every character in the show has some sort of unexpected moral failure precipitated by following the cues of the sin, the flesh, and one could say, the devil. “If you are the son of God, command this stone to become bread.”

You can almost hear the whispers of the devil, tempting Walt, justifying acting on his own, outside of the Law and apart from dictates of a right conscience and a holy God.

“You don’t deserve this, Walt?”

“Don’t you see what playing by the rules get you?”

“There is no justice; no righting of these wrongs?”

"Haven't you ever heard, nice guys finish last, and in this case, nice guys finish last by dying first, Walt."

"Are you willing to lose just to prove a point? What point? That you're good and decent man? What good is being good and decent if your dead? And what differences does right and wrong make when your gone and your family is left with nothing?"

"Is that who you are? A 'man' (if you want to call yourself that) who is willing to leave his family nothing?"

"Aren't you, Walter White, the accomplished chemist whose been taken for granted one too many times? Isn't it time you took matters into your own, intelligent, very capable hands?"

Sidestepping the prescribed boundaries of God in the name of pragmatism, in the name of 'getting things done when push comes to shove,' is not only foolish; it is faithless. And little by little, it destroyed this character, just like it destroys us. By virtue of not taking our cues from God, we either directly or indirectly take them from the devil.

Into this propensity to provide for ourselves in ways that forsake faithfulness to God comes Lent. Lent is not a reactionary season; *it is preparatory season*. Lent is about **preparing for weakness in advance** through spiritual disciplines like prayer, fasting, self-examination, Bible reading, and almsgiving. The wilderness of Lent is meant to be a training camp for the well-lived Christian life that takes place in the real world during 'Ordinary Time.'

Lent is about **embracing planned intentional weakness** so that we can faithfully persevere in forthcoming seasons of **unpredictable but inevitable pain**. Lent is a spiritual formation laboratory where we test ourselves so that when we find ourselves weakened and vulnerable we don't test God like the wilderness generation, like Adam and Eve.

The first temptation in the wilderness is one that comes in the vulnerability of weakness. The second temptation, comes with quite the opposite problem: the temptation of power and glory.

## II. The Second Temptation (Luke 4:5-8)

The second temptation comes with another lie 'you're not really the son of God, because you don't have glory and authority over the kingdoms of this world.' 'I do' says the devil, and 'I can give you all glory, all authority, and all power, over *all kingdoms*, now, if you only worship me.' The devil invites Jesus (and us) to grasp at the glory can only ever come *on the other side of the cross*. Satan invites Jesus—and invites us—to settle for a short cut to a pseudo-glory of a sub-par kingdom that comes without the saving power of the cross. The kingdoms of this world can, at best *sustain* life; but they cannot ultimately *save* it.

The only true kingdom is the one that comes through the cross; the only glory that lasts is the glory on the other side of suffering (see e.g., Hebrews 2:9-10, 14-15).

The glory of human kingdoms ends in dust just as they began. Lent invites us to stop treating our tombs as the resting place for our glory; and to stop longing for the glory that comes from Pilate and the powers of evil, and to fix our eyes on our future glory in Christ, in his kingdom, under his rule and his reign.

Stare into the end of every earthly kingdom, and you'll find a Tomb. Stare into your future. Stare into the tomb and proclaim boldly and with hubris "I will raise myself up by the power of my own will."

The devil can deliver every earthly power into our hands; but he cannot deliver us from death. Receive the dreadful benediction: 'from dust you are, to dust you shall return.' Full stop. The full reward for human vain glory is dust.

But the benediction of Jesus speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. The voice of Jesus that says to his own,

'I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst (John 6:35ff).'

The second temptation reminds us that it is not only the relief of weakness that can motivate us to sin; it is the promise of power, especially when we feel powerless. But it is the third and final temptation that is, perhaps, the most insidious. The temptation to prove ourselves to ourselves and others, and if it were possible even to God.

### **III. The Third Temptation (Luke 4:5-8)**

#### **IIIa. Satan calls into question Jesus's identity as the Son**

**Luke 4:9** And he took him to Jerusalem and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here,

#### **IIIb. Satan misquotes Scripture**

<sup>10</sup> for it is written,

“He will command his angels concerning you,  
to guard you,'

<sup>11</sup> and

“On their hands they will bear you up,  
lest you strike your foot against a stone.”

#### **IIIc. Jesus answers Scripture misquoted with Scripture rightly handled**

**Luke 4:12** And Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Lent is about more than simply memorizing Scripture verses like magic words to use as a verbal talisman to fend off Satan. Lent, as we've said is about **preparing for weakness in advance**. The best way to identify, fend off, and not fall victim to the lies of the evil one, are to be well acquainted with the truth that God has spoken in his word and through his Son. If we are accustomed to listening to the voice of Jesus; the voice of Satan will show itself to be the

invitation of an imposter not the voice of a friend. By being attuned to the Spirit through the disciplines of Scripture reading and prayer, we predispose ourselves to stay attuned to God when the trial comes. By frequently hearing God speak in Scripture and by frequently speaking to God in prayer, we are like the sheep who know the shepherd's voice.

The voice of Satan, on the other hand. Often comes through the mediation of others, as verse 13, says the passage says, **'waiting until an opportune time.'**

This opportune time for Jesus was when he his most vulnerable: on the cross.

- There the leaders of Israel mocked Jesus on the cross: "Let him save himself **if he is the Messiah**" (Luke 23:35)
- And the Roman soldiers shouted: "**If you are the King of the Jews**, save yourself" (Luke 23:37).

And Satan whispers to us in the same manner, when we are weak and need to feel strong. When we are tempted by grasping at strength and need to be reminded that we are weak apart from God.

What are some of the lies we hear in the whispers of the world, the flesh, and the devil?

- Did God really say?
- Can you really trust what the Bible tells us he said?
- Is God really faithful, or should you maybe take matters into your own hands, just in case?
- Are you sure you really are who God says you are?

And then the questions suddenly turn into accusations:

- You're not who you think you are; you're not who God says you are.
- Your nothing; you've failed.
- You're not really a good enough mother or father, or husband or wife?
- You're not worthy of the loyalty and friendship of others?

Don't listen to the shadow realities of Satan about you which have no basis in reality. You don't need to prove yourself to God, to yourself, to anyone—and certainly not to the devil. God has proven himself to you. To be with you, by the fullness of his Spirit, to be for you in the blood of Jesus. which don't reflect the mind and heart of God toward you. Don't believe the whispers of the evil one in the wilderness. They are not true.

## Discussion Questions

- 1) How can envisioning Lent as “preparing for weakness in advance” and “intentionally embracing weakness” so that we can “walk faithfully in the inevitability of pain” in future seasons help us to rethink the spiritual disciplines? How does the revealing power of practicing prayer, fasting, and attuning our hearts to listen to God’s Word clarify points of character weakness and sinful tendencies during our time of intentional Lenten preparation?
- 2) The first temptation is that we deviate from “the prescribed boundaries and provisions of God” in the name of pragmatism, in the name of ‘getting things done when push comes to shove,’ and for the sake of expediency and the prompting of the cues of the world, our sinful nature, and the devil. What areas of weakness is God revealing to you in your inmost being that are susceptible to the lies of Satan and the inclinations of the sinful nature?
- 3) If the glory of earthly kingdoms follows the devil’s benediction: ‘From dust you come, to dust you return, and as dust you will remain’ and the heavenly benediction is ‘from dust you have come, to dust you shall return; but I will raise you up on the last day,’ how can the reality of staring at the end of every earthly glory, and occupied tomb with us in it, cause us to long for Easter glory at the end of Lent rather than to settle for the pseudo-glory of the kingdoms of this world that end in a occupied, not an empty tomb?
- 4) It was stated that contrary to the prompt of Satan, you do not need to prove yourself to yourself, to others, to the devil, or even to God, but that instead in the Gospel, *God has proven himself to you*, through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, his Son. How does this change the way we experience the whispers of the shadow realities of the world, the sinful nature, and the devil in the wilderness times of life? How does attuning ourselves to the voice of God in Scripture and accustoming ourselves to respond in prayer, help us to identify the false whispers of Satan as opposed to the Spirit speaking through the word of God through the voice of Jesus, our shepherd, God’s Son?
- 5) Is it possible that John’s study questions could be longer, and if so how?