

## **Parts of the Saving Passion: Temptation**

**Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Luke 4:1-13**

The First Sunday of Lent

March 10, 2019

By Dr. David B. Freeman, Pastor  
Weatherly Heights Baptist Church

“Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one--the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts, Your affectionate uncle, Screwtape.”

So ends Letter XII of *The Screwtape Letters* by C. S. Lewis. It is a series of instructions from a senior demon, Screwtape, to his young nephew named Wormwood, who is a demon apprentice. C. S. Lewis brilliantly captured the subtlety and destructive nature of temptation—that gentle slope, not a sudden cliff. Soft underfoot, so it’s easy to travel. Without sudden turns, milestones, or significant signposts. Just an ever so gentle descent to where you do not want to go.

Wormwood, the younger apprentice demon, made many mistakes. Somehow he was inattentive to the “patient,” their description of the man Wormwood was trying to tempt, and allowed him to become humble. It was a terrible thing for him to become truly humble, Screwtape told his young nephew. Here was his solution:

*Your patient has become humble; have you drawn his attention to the fact? All virtues are less formidable to us once the man is aware that he has them, but this is specially true of humility. Catch him at the moment when he is really poor in spirit and smuggle into his mind the gratifying reflection, "By jove! I'm being humble", and almost immediately pride—pride at his own humility—will appear.*

Their solution to the problem of humility was to make him proud that he was humble.

Temptation indeed can be subtle and take us places we don’t really want to go.

Jesus learned this early in his ministry. Immediately after his baptism, before he called his disciples, before he preached his first sermon or performed his first miracle, Luke says that he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. For forty days—from which we get the forty days of Lent—Jesus fasted and prayed. At the end of those forty days, when he was his most vulnerable, weakened by hunger, the devil approached Jesus with the first of three temptations, Luke says. “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread,” the devil tempted.

If? What do you mean, If I am the Son of God? A stone into bread? Why, that’s nothing!

It was a temptation to do for himself what God had done for the people of Israel when they wandered in the wilderness for forty years. Deuteronomy 8 recalls that time in the wilderness and how God provided manna for the people to eat. Then it explains why God made that provision: “that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but that man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord.”

Jesus knew that story, so he responded to his adversary, “Man shall not live by bread alone.”

No disciples yet. No sermons preached. Not even any healings. The question here at the beginning of his ministry was this: What would the nature of his ministry be? This was a temptation to be a social superstar. Anyone who could turn stones into loaves of bread would have been a hero, adored by the masses. He could have had far more than twelve apostles. He could have had dozens and dozens. No place today his head? Why, they would have built him a palace. And forget all that business at the end...you know, the beatings, the mocking, and the cross. Be a superstar, Jesus, and forget about the cross. But Jesus knew the importance of the cross and refused the temptation to be a hero.

After the devil failed at tempting Jesus to be a social superstar, he or she (whatever the devil’s gender is!) took Jesus onto a mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world “in a moment of time,” Luke notes. Gazing out across the world’s kingdoms, the devil said to Jesus, “To you I will give all this authority and their glory.... If you, then, will worship me, it shall all be yours.”

All of this? Every kingdom? And the authority? And the glory? Nice!

It was a temptation to be ruler of the world, to gain power by compromise. It was a Faustian deal: worship me, the devil said, and it will all be yours. Again his response came from the book of Deuteronomy. This time chapter six. God had just given them the great commandment: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your

soul, and with all your might.” Then he said this: “You shall fear the Lord your God; you shall serve him and swear by his name.”

So Jesus responded to his adversary, “You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.”

No disciples yet. No sermons. No miracles. What would the nature of his ministry be? This was a temptation to be a political powerhouse. All the kingdoms of the world! All the authority and glory! He could have been ruler of the world. He could have legislated righteousness, made it law. Thou shalt attend sabbath worship every sabbath day. Thou shalt return a tithe of thy income each week. With that kind of authority he could have forced religion on the entire world. Go ahead, Jesus; be a political powerhouse. But at what cost? Bow down and worship the devil. Besides, he knew religion doesn’t work that way. True religion cannot be forced. Like love, it must be freely chosen. Jesus knew that, so he refused the temptation to gain power by compromise.

After the devil failed at tempting Jesus to be a political powerhouse, he tried one more time. He took Jesus to Jerusalem and set him on the pinnacle of the temple. Since Jesus fended off the first two temptations with words from scripture, this time the devil quoted scripture to Jesus. “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here; for it is written, ‘He will give his angels charge of you, to guard you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.’”

Jump? All the way down from the pinnacle of the temple? And let the angels catch you? What a great idea!

It was a temptation to test God, to dare the teaching of scripture. But what if it worked. What if, just as he was about to smash into the ground, the angels swooped in and scooped him up. Wow, what a show! Again Jesus turned to the book of Deuteronomy. God told the people of Israel, “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test...”

So Jesus responded to his adversary, “You shall not tempt the Lord your God.”

No disciples. No sermons or miracles yet. What would the nature of his ministry be? It was a temptation to be a spiritual showman, to attract followers in a circus-like environment. With that kind of act, he might even have gotten a television show! Go for it, Jesus; be a spiritual showman...or a clown. But for the third time, Jesus resisted the devil.

Seeing that he had failed, Luke says that the devil then departed from Jesus until an opportune time.

A part of the saving passion is temptation. Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, after forty days of fasting, when he was his most vulnerable, weakened by hunger, and he emerged victorious because of his single-minded fidelity to God. At the beginning of his ministry—before disciples, before sermons and healings—Jesus nailed down a stake. Even the devil couldn't move it.

That is important for us too. If we fail to define who we are, the world will be pleased to do that for us. This first Sunday of Lent challenges us to single-minded fidelity to God. Because temptation indeed can be subtle and take us places we don't want to go.

### Closing Prayer

Lord, you are our model. Help us to imitate you. Amen.