

**From Suffering to Salvation:
The Temptation of Jesus**
Psalm 32; Matthew 4:1-11

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The First Sunday of Lent
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It was the witty Irish poet, Oscar Wilde, who said, “I can resist anything except temptation.”

Temptation is a major theme of human history, captured in literature, art, and theater. You may remember Leo Tolstoy’s story, “How Much Land Does A Man Need?” It’s about a young Russian peasant who owned a small plot of land. It was enough, but he dreamed of expanding his little farm. One day he said aloud to himself, “If I had plenty of land, I’d fear no one—not even the devil himself!” Unknown to the peasant, the devil overheard him.

A landlady in a nearby village decided to sell her land. The man scrapped together as much money as he could. He sold items. He even sold out his son’s labor. He finally cobbled together enough to buy the land. But it didn’t make him happy. It made him selfish. And mean. And greedy.

He finally met a village of simple people. They owned a lot of land. He approached them and offered to buy their land. He just knew he could get it for a steal from these simple people.

However, the chief of village made him an offer he couldn’t resist. For 1,000 rubles, the chief said he could have all the land he could cover on foot in one day. The man was delighted, believing this was the bargain of a lifetime. The only condition was that he had to return to the same spot from which he started before sundown. If he didn’t make it back before sundown, he would forfeit the 1,000 rubles.

The man peered out across the rich fields in the distance. “It was all virgin soil,” the story reads, “as flat as your palm.”

The chief laid his cap on the ground. That was the starting and ending point. Then the man set out to mark his land. He went this way and that. He eventually tired and sat to rest for a while. He decided to push for three more miles. When he finished marking his property, he realized that he was far from his starting point. He had to rush to get back before the sun set, so he ran as fast as he could. He arrived at the starting point just as the sun was setting. With his last burst of energy, he dove and touched the chief's cap. He made it. All the people who had gathered cheered his good fortune.

But the chief, who was really the devil, was laughing and holding his sides.

The man's servants rushed to lift him from the ground. But he was dead.

The man's servants then buried his body, answering the question. How much land does a man need? The story ends with this sentence, "Six feet from his head to his heels was all he needed."

Oh, we can resist anything, right? Except temptation.

We all face it, that strong urge to do something that leads to pain, destruction, or even death. A few months ago Pope Francis spoke out about temptation. He said we've been translating the Lord's Prayer incorrectly. We say, "lead us not into temptation," as if God would lead us into temptation. Pope Francis said it should be translated this way, "do not let us fall into temptation." God does not lead us into temptation, he said. God is not behind us pushing us. But we all do fall into temptation.

Matthew says it was the devil, the tempter, Satan, Matthew's personification of evil. He says that the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness, but it was the devil who tempted Jesus. Jesus had fasted for forty days and nights, was famished, and then the devil tempted him three times. Two of the three temptations begin with the word "if." "If you are the Son of God...." A theologian named Eugene Boring says that word should be translated "since." (*New Interpreter's Bible*, "Matthew",

p. 163) Here's the difference that makes. The dispute wasn't about whether Jesus was the Son of God—"if you are." The dispute was about what it meant to be the Son of God. Since you are the Son of God, what kind of Son of God are you going to be?

The devil said, "(Since) you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." Not *a* loaf of bread, which would have been enough to feed one hungry man. It's plural, "loaves of bread." It was a temptation to use his role as Son of God to provide bread for everyone, to alleviate world hunger, to meet that obvious human need for food. That would have been a good thing, but was that his role as Son of God? He did feed the multitudes, twice. But his role as Son of God was greater than a hunger mission.

Jesus responded to the devil with words from the book of Deuteronomy. He would feed hungry people on other days, but not this day. On this day he defined his role as Son of God,

*One does not live by bread alone
but by every word that comes
from the mouth of God.*

The devil then took Jesus to Jerusalem, the "holy city." They went to the pinnacle of the temple. The devil tempted him a second time, "(Since) you are the Son of God, throw yourself down" and let God's angels catch you. When I was in Jerusalem several years ago, I observed that people were always gathered at the temple. Day and night people were always there. Imagine if Jesus dove from the pinnacle of the temple. All the onlookers would gasp. Then at just the last moment, the angels would catch him. That would be amazing! I can hear the people saying, "He must be the Son of God!" There was nothing wrong with amazing feats. He performed many amazing feats. But his role as Son of God was not to amaze people?

Again he quoted from the book of Deuteronomy. There would be a time for amazement on other days, but not this day. On this day he defined his role as Son of God,

Do not put the Lord your God to the test.

The last temptation took Jesus to a very high mountain. From there the devil showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and their great splendor. "All these I will give to you," the devil said, "if you will fall down and worship me." They would call him King of the Jews, right? Here was a chance to be King of the World. Imagine the political power. He would be greater than Herod. Greater than Caesar. He would be greater than anyone, except the devil, whom he would have to bow before and worship. He knew that certainly was not his role as Son of God.

Jesus dispatched the devil quickly, "Away with you, Satan!" For the third time Jesus resisted the devil's temptation with words from Deuteronomy,

For it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only."

With that the temptations in the wilderness quickly ended. The devil left Jesus, Matthew says, and angels ministered to him.

Yes, we all fall into temptation, that strong urge to do something that leads to pain, destruction, and sometimes even death. So the Lenten season opens with the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness, temptations to distort his role as Son of God. Would he only feed hungry people? Would he only amaze the crowds? Would he only amass political power? No. As Son of God, his role was defined by a whip, a crown of thorns, and cross. Jesus was faithful to that role to the end.

And now we follow in his way. In order for us to be faithful, we too must resist temptations. May God help us not fall into temptation.

Closing Prayer

For these forty days, Lord, help us to follow closely. Lead us from suffering to salvation. Amen.