



Sermon “Revealing God’s Heart Through Trial”

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I remember being a gymnast in high school. I was performing on the parallel bars in a meet at a neighbouring school. I had joined our school’s gymnastics club because my older brother, Dan, had joined the team. We lived in a small town in the mountains of Colorado. Our home was even further out in the country and a good number of miles away from the high school. My brother had a car and so if I wanted to join any club, I had to join the ones he was in, which was wrestling and gymnastics.

I wasn’t a particularly good gymnast. In fact, I was on the B-squad. Because of that, at the meet, while I was on the parallel bars no one, and I do mean no one, was watching my routine. Everyone was watching the more important events with the more skilled gymnasts who were on the other side of the gym. So, before my simple routine, I remember looking into the empty bleachers near me and imagining that someone was there who was watching me.

Focused on the one imaginary person, I mounted the parallel bars and completely focused on each move and each transition of my routine. I remember being completely “in the zone.” I had no fear, no inhibitions, all of my undivided attention went to doing my routine as flawlessly as I could. I paid attention to each move. At the end of my routine, I stuck my landing cleanly and felt very proud of how I had done, and I really enjoyed myself.

I suddenly heard from across the gym a few people clapping. I turned my head to see several of the other gymnasts from my team smiling towards me and clapping their hands. Apparently, they had seen my performance at some point and were happy with me for how it went.

I mention this story because it highlights for me, the undivided attention I hope to give God and His every word to me. If there were crowds in the stands looking at me, if everyone expected me to be perfect, would I have focused so simply and tenaciously to each move of my routine? As people look at us and place expectations on us, do we get distracted from our devotion to one person, the Lord? Do we get distracted from following His simple instructions to us? Do we fail to draw on His strength and support to do His will?

In today’s passage, we see Jesus just after his baptism by John in the river Jordan. Jesus is baptized, the Spirit of God descends on him and a voice from the Father in heaven says, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” That is the voice that Jesus is fixated on. In our passage today we will see how Jesus went from following his Father to be baptized to following his Father to a wilderness to suffer. Why to suffer? To show that the Son is fixated on every word that his Father speaks. And that the Son goes nowhere alone, but always follows the guiding of his Father and his Spirit.

1.) Walking with God

Matthew 4:1

¹ Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

In Matthew 4:1, it is vital to know that Jesus is being led to enter the wilderness by his Father through His Spirit. Jesus is not choosing for himself to test how powerful he might be to resist temptations. He is not acting just on his flesh. He is following the Spirit's call to enter a period of testing. The Spirit is leading Jesus to be alone without resources to be tested by the devil.

When we first consider this we might be a bit shocked. Why would the Spirit lead Jesus into a barren wilderness alone to be tempted by the devil? Shouldn't God also lead a group of spirit-filled disciples to support Jesus? Isn't the saying true in the Old Testament that, "though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken" (Ecclesiastes 4:12). Why is the Spirit leading Jesus to be alone?

While it would be wise for fallen men and women to seek support from others, Jesus is different. He has all that he needs through his union with the Father and the Spirit. He is sustained by the King over Creation. Again, it is important to know that Jesus doesn't go out by himself into the wilderness to prove himself to others. He simply follows what his Father wants him to do as his Father gently guides him by His Spirit. We will see in what follows the importance of Jesus' union with the Father and Spirit has when he is tempted by the devil in this barren land.

2.) God Gives Food

Matthew 4:2-4

² After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³ The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

⁴ Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

In Matthew 4:2-4, after a long period in the wilderness with no food, Jesus' body needs food. His body is no doubt breaking down because it needs food to sustain it. This is a point of real vulnerability. It's not as if Jesus has been without food for a day. Hunger pains then aren't real. They don't really indicate that the body really needs food at that point. We get hunger pains because our bodies are conditioned to eat at a certain time. Our hunger pains are really only our body's preparation to eat. Jesus' body was in real need of nourishment. His body truly needed nourishment.

At this point, the devil tempts Jesus. The devil knows that Jesus is the Son of God. Where humanity does not recognize Jesus as God's Son, the devil certainly is without excuse. He recognizes the Son of God and attempts to tempt him to abandon his union with his Father. The devil challenges Jesus. He says, "If you are the Son of God, certainly you can provide yourself some bread from these stones!" Maybe the devil is saying, "Why suffer hunger if you have the power to feed yourself?"

Remember the temptation of Eve and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Eve saw value in the fruit God told her not to eat. Eve, "saw that the fruit...was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom...(so) she took some and ate it" (Genesis 3:6). Certainly the idea of making bread to eat would have had real value to Jesus after so many days without nourishment.

But Jesus reveals real faith in action. Jesus is drawing on the life of his Father and the Holy Spirit. Jesus is unified with eternal life and because of that he has the nourishment he needs. But Jesus didn't have to figure this truth out himself, his Father had already taught him this lesson. This lesson was written down before that,

“Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Certainly bread is food, it is nourishing, but in God was eternal food that sustains one forever.

3.) God Gives Authority

Matthew 4:5–7

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. ⁶ “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.”**

⁷ Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

In Matthew 5:5–7, the devil can see that Jesus clings to his Father and the Spirit He has given to guide and empower him. The devil attempts to dislodge that unity a second time. Remember Jesus is following the Spirit who is calling Jesus to be tempted by the devil. Jesus isn't, by himself, following the devil in order to prove to the devil that he is stronger or better than the devil. There is no competition going on here. There are not two sides locked in a struggle. Jesus is filled and following the Spirit who is calling him to reveal to the devil and to the world the incomparable value and glory of God.

The devil takes Jesus to Jerusalem, the holy city where God has chosen to establish His reign in Creation. The devil takes Jesus to the top of the temple itself, the top of the earthly throne room of the Great King of Heaven. The devil says, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down because it has been written by God Himself that he would protect His Son from injury.”

It is difficult to know why this would have tempted Jesus. Why would Jesus wish to listen to the devil? What would he gain from jumping? It was easier to see the temptation to create food, but not here. Did the devil think he was striking fear in Jesus and that Jesus would respond in fear and prove to the devil his authority over him? It is clear that Jesus has been without physical nourishment for a very long time. We remember that his body is breaking down from the lack of food. Could it be that the devil is prodding the armour of Jesus to see if, in his weakness and vulnerability, he might give in to the devil's temptation to “fight” him on his own?

Whatever the temptation was, it had no effect on Jesus' heart to cling to His Father and His Spirit. Jesus didn't need to prove to anyone no matter his circumstances, even desperate ones that he found himself in, that he had spiritual authority over Creation as the Son of God. Not fighting against the attacks of the devil on his own, Jesus hears from the Spirit and replies, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” The Father has given Jesus authority because the Son clings to the Father no matter the temptation.

4.) God Gives Glory

Matthew 4:8–11

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. ⁹ “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.”

¹⁰ Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

In Matthew 4:8–11, it's possible that the devil knows that Jesus would be glorified and reign over Creation. It's possible that he sought to entice Jesus to take his rightful place as King over the nations of the world without having to die for the sins of the world. The devil takes Jesus to a place in which he can see all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. There the devil says, "take them now rather than having to die like a criminal on a cross." The devil tempts Jesus to take the easy road of selfishness and not the difficult road of righteousness. The devil promises a quick road to glory if Jesus would worship and follow the devil.

Weak and dying from malnourishment, tortured by an enemy who seeks to destroy him, Jesus shows that, united with his Father and His Spirit, he really needs no other thing. Jesus says, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" Jesus hasn't won the fight against the devil. Jesus has simply shown the devil that he has nothing to offer. United with his Father and His Spirit, Jesus has food, has authority and has glory. The devil can give nothing but lies.

Of course Jesus does reign over the nations of the world, but he does so as a Son united to his Father and guided by His Spirit. God alone gives food, gives authority, gives glory. The devil merely tempts others away from these good gifts from God. The devil tempts in order that he might destroy, because he knows that one day that will be his earned end. It was revealed in a vision that the devil who tempts and deceives the world would be thrown into a lake of burning sulfur where there he would be tormented day and night for ever and ever (Revelation 20:10).

After these lies and temptations to destroy are finished at the direction of God and His Spirit, angels do appear and attend to Jesus. Jesus reveals to the world the righteous path of his Father to provide a sacrifice that is pure and sinless so that His children and His creation would be restored and sealed forever. Whereas we are easily swayed by the temptations of the devil, Jesus has shown us that his life is one that stays united with his Father and His Spirit.

What is our application for today?

Don't live your life on your own trying to prove yourself

It is too easy thinking life is filled with lessons we get to learn in order to better ourselves. We can think that the world is an exciting place that we hope to explore and become better for it. But when we say or think these things are we really just living our lives on our own? Sure, we ask for God's guidance sometimes and we try to do Christian things, but are we just living our lives like Adam and Eve did when saw the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. They knew that God had prohibited them from eating it, but they saw value on their own in eating. The fruit was good for food, pleasing to the eye and desirable for gaining wisdom. Aren't there times when we make our own decisions and try to improve our lives on our own?

Jesus teaches us an important lesson. He shows his followers that the Spirit of God desires to lead and empower them ALL THE TIME. We were never meant to live life on our own. I remember the first time that truth became clear to me. I was living in Hawaii and a friend in our church's youth group, John Biggs, who is now a Lutheran pastor in the States told me we were never made to be alone even when we leave all other people. We were never meant to be by ourselves.

Strange right? It seems natural for us to think that we need "alone time." People who are introverted think they need to be by themselves in order to recharge. But Jesus shows us that we were not created to be alone. We were created to be unified with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We may need a break from serving others, but even then we don't get to decide when. We should trust that the Holy Spirit will guide us to places where he will restore us through the life of Christ given to us.

This Lenten season, let us not fast in order to develop ourselves spiritually. Let us follow the God's Word with the life of Jesus given to us through the Spirit ALWAYS, at all times. Let us know and experience in deeper ways the real food, authority and glory we have in Jesus as we trust and follow his every word.