

The Word of the Lord from Luke 4[:1-2]: And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil. This is the Word of the Lord. **Luke 4:1-13**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

I. Jesus and Israel in the Wilderness

Jesus is in the wilderness, led by the Spirit and fasting for forty days. Just before this, He was standing in the Jordan River, just baptized by John, with the Father declaring from heaven, “You are My beloved Son; with You I am well pleased.” Now, He’s isolated, weak and hungry: a strange circumstance for the almighty Son of God. Meanwhile, the devil is near at hand, tempting Him.

What is Jesus doing there? It’s connected to His baptism, and there’s a reason why this happens immediately afterwards. Remember why Jesus was baptized: with that start to His ministry, He identified Himself with sinners, declaring that He had come to take their place—He had come to undo the curse of sin. Now, in the wilderness, He is going about saving the people of God.

Along with Jesus’ baptism, there’s something else to keep in mind: the people of God have been in the wilderness before. When the Lord led them out of Egypt to the Promised Land, they spent forty years in the wilderness. Their record of faithfulness during those years was far from perfect.

Remember, for instance, that is was only in Exodus 16 (very quickly after crossing the Red Sea!) that the people grumbled about food. They declared to Moses that he and the Lord had brought them there to die, that they missed the bread and the meat they had in Egypt—even though they were slaves whom the Egyptians mistreated and worked to death. God responded by providing them manna, bread from heaven.

There was also the grumbling about water in Exodus 17, the chapter after grumbling about food. The people reached a place called Massah and complained that there was no water, that the Lord was out to kill them, not save them. They demanded, “Is the Lord among us or not?”—“Is God really here?” God responded faithfully again: He directed Moses to strike a rock with his staff, and water flowed for all of the people.

Then there was the golden calf in Exodus 32. When Moses had been away on Mt. Sinai with God for forty days, the people decided that he had been gone too long and it was time to give up hope. They demanded that Aaron make a new set of gods to deliver them to the Promised Land, and thus the golden calf was made. After only forty days of camping in the wilderness around Mt. Sinai, the people were ready to believe that God wasn’t looking out for them anymore.

You get the picture. When the people of God were in the wilderness, they did a terrible job of trusting the Lord and resisting temptation. They doubted God’s love. They felt they deserved better than His plan. They wanted to turn and follow other gods, even though the Lord provided them with food and water every day of the journey. They

couldn't even make it forty days in the wilderness at Mount Sinai without looking for another god to worship.

So Jesus goes into the wilderness for forty days, without any food at all. He goes to take the place of sinners in the wilderness, to undo the curse of sin. The Lord is now on foot, incarnate, in the desert; and as He is visible, the devil is apparent in our Gospel lesson too—though you can bet that, in the Old Testament, Satan was busy leading the people of Israel astray in the wilderness. And while the Lord is the Creator of all things, the devil just isn't creative at all. He throws the same temptations at Jesus that he's been using since Exodus. Since Eden, really.

First, he tempts Jesus to doubt His Father's love. Just days before, the Father said from heaven, "You are My beloved Son." The devil immediately calls that Word into question: "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread." In other words, "Are You really the Son of God? Then why are You so hungry? Why would Your loving Father bring You out into the wilderness to die?" It worked well on the Israelites in Exodus 16: in no time, they were saying, "Hey, yeah. Why has God brought us out into this wilderness to die?", as they immediately forgot about the Promised Land. But Jesus doesn't give into the temptation. He quotes Scripture, from the time of the Exodus in Deuteronomy 8:3: "Man shall not live by bread alone." Oh, and how does that verse continue? "Man shall not live by bread alone, but man lives by every Word that comes from the mouth of the LORD." In other words, Jesus says to Satan, "I don't judge My Father's love by a temporarily empty stomach. I know my Father's love because of His Word; and I've heard Him say to Me, „You are My beloved Son.”"

Where the people of God quickly trusted empty stomachs more than God's Word, Jesus remains faithful in order to save them.

Since doubt doesn't work, the devil tempts Jesus to entitlement. He shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, and says, "To You I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. If You, then, will worship me, it will all be Yours." In other words, he says to Jesus, "Ok, so let's say You're the Son of God. Don't you deserve better than this? Shouldn't you be King of the world, not a weak and hungry man alone in the wilderness? You can keep on being God's Son if You want, I suppose, but You and I both know that it's only going to take You to a cross. Or, You can opt out and worship me, and I will give You all the kingdoms of the world—all the wealth, none of the suffering. You deserve better than God's way." Jesus responds with the Word of God again and says, "It is written, „You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only shall you serve." He's quoting Deuteronomy 6:13, originally spoken to the people of Israel in the wilderness; verse 12, just before it, says, "Take care, lest you forget the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." The people of Israel too easily forgot the Lord when they were confronted with temptation: they grumbled that they deserved better than manna and wanted cucumbers and melons—even if it meant slavery again. But Jesus doesn't give in. He knows that the gifts of God will appear meager and insufficient to sinful eyes, but

He also trusts that His Father's plan is right. Even when it means forty days in the wilderness without food. Even when it means the cross.

Satan is 0 for 2, so he tempts Jesus to demand a sign. He takes Jesus to Jerusalem and sets Him on the pinnacle of the temple; and this time, the devil even quotes Scripture as part of the temptation: "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down from here, for it is written, "He will command His angels concerning You, to guard You," and "On their hands they will bear You up, lest You strike Your foot against a stone." Satan quotes Psalm 91:12-13, but he leaves off verse 14: "Because He holds fast to Me in love, I will deliver Him; I will protect Him, because He knows My name." Satan really isn't concerned about whether or not the angels catch Jesus. He wants Jesus to doubt His Father's Word again. He wants Jesus to ask "Is God really with Me or not?" to the point that He throws Himself off the temple to make His Father prove it. He wants Jesus to demand a sign rather than trust in the Word He has heard. Jesus responds, "You shall not put the Lord Your God to the test." He's quoting Deuteronomy 6 again, this time verse 16. Oh, and how does the rest of the verse go? "You shall not put the LORD your God to the test, as you tested Him at Massah." At Massah, thirsty and unhappy with God's plan, the people doubted and said, "Is the LORD among us or not?" Jesus knows there's no need to doubt His Father's will or demand proof. He doesn't give into the temptation to doubt.

The devil strikes out and leaves until an opportune time. He'll be back. He'll be whispering in the Savior's ear as He prays in Gethsemane and walks to the cross. Where Satan said, "If You are the Son of God" in the wilderness, he'll provoke sinners at Calvary to cry out, "If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross." Do you see what Jesus is up to in the wilderness? He's doing what sinners couldn't do. He resists every temptation. He remains sinless and holy.

Where the people exchanged the one true God for a golden calf, the one true God becomes man to die for their idolatry. Where the people grumbled about bread in the wilderness, the Bread of Life goes hungry in the wilderness to save them. Where the people demanded water and put God to the test until water flowed from a rock, the Rock from whence living water flows accepts God's Word for what it says and goes to the cross.

Not just for them, but for you.

II. Jesus for You

You're in the wilderness. That's what this sinful world is. Heaven is the Promised Land. You know it because God has said so in His Word. He's given His Son to die for you, that heaven might be your inheritance. In the meantime, as long as it is given you to wander in this desert, the Lord leads you by His Word. He's brought you through the Red Sea of your baptism to deliver you from your enemies, and He feeds you with His Holy Supper until the end of the age.

You are the Lord's, because Christ has died for your sin; and because you are the Lord's you can be sure that the devil will tempt you, even as he tempted Christ in the wilderness. He's still not creative: he'll use the same temptations on you. But because you're made of sinful flesh, his temptations can be devastating. He'll tempt you to doubt God's love, to feel like you deserve better than He provides, and to demand signs and expect God to change His will to accommodate you.

If you want a little exercise in temptation, I'd encourage you to try fasting from now until Easter, for the rest of the forty days of Lent. Fasting doesn't earn forgiveness, but it is a good outward training. If you skip a meal, you quickly feel weak and tired—a good reminder that you cannot live without God's gifts of daily bread. It's also a reminder of Jesus' fasting in the wilderness for you. But consider giving up something you really enjoy, like coffee or sweets or whatever. It's a harmless enough thing, but once you've given your word to yourself, the temptations will start. In very little time, you'll find yourself reasoning, "This was a silly thing to do, because I really want to have what I've given up." Then you'll find yourself saying, "Why should I deprive myself? I said a silly thing and I might as well get back to having what I want." Or perhaps, "I'm going to agree with my word in principle, except for the times when I decide to do something different."

Let this be a lesson to you. With such a little thing, you've just doubted your own word, declared you deserve better and have decided to alter the plan you sketched out. Now, the devil doesn't much care if you break your word to yourself about a cup of coffee. But if you can't be faithful in such a little thing, do you think you have much of a shot at faithfulness when the Lord speaks to you?

You'll be tempted to doubt God's love. The devil will use every inconvenience, trial and affliction to say to you, "Are you really a child of God and an heir of heaven? Really? Why would God treat one of His beloved children the way He lets you get kicked around? Why don't you dump Him and start looking after yourself, doing what you want to do?" That was the first temptation the devil tried on Jesus. Jesus resisted. The people of Israel didn't in Exodus, and neither will you—not daily, not perfectly.

You'll be tempted to believe you deserve better than God provides. Whether it's better health, better education, better food, more abundance and wealth, the devil will find your weakness and say, "If you are a child of God, shouldn't your life show that? Shouldn't you be more happy, healthy, wealthy and wise?" Where the Lord would have you give thanks for what He provides, the devil always wants you discontented and wishing God would give more. Jesus didn't fall for it in the wilderness. The people of Israel did, and so will you.

You'll be tempted to bargain with God, to say, "I'll follow You if You show me a sign." The sign may not be "...if You catch me when I throw myself off the temple." It may be, "...if you make me better," or "...make me feel better," or "...fix this or that so it doesn't trouble me anymore." The Lord allows affliction in this wilderness so that you don't fall

in love with this desert and prefer it over the Promised Land of heaven. When He was tempted, your Savior didn't question God's plan and demand a sign. You will.

The devil will not stop tempting you, and his goal is obvious: as Satan wanted to make Jesus doubt that He was God's Son and that God loved Him, so the devil wants to make you doubt that you are a child of God and that God loves you. As he wanted Jesus to doubt God's Word, so he wants you to doubt God's Word. Satan's been doing this for a few thousand years, and he's very good at it. You're no match for him. Don't think for a moment that you have the strength to resist him.

But you do have God's Word, just like Jesus did; and when you wrestle against spiritual forces, God grants you the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God. When the devil tempts you to believe you're not a child of God, you say, "But I know that I am. When Jesus was baptized, God called Him His beloved Son. When I was baptized, God made me His beloved child." Your baptism is a devastating weapon against Satan's temptations. When you say "I am baptized," you speak God's Word to prove the devil a liar. When you make the sign of the cross, you show exactly why you know God's promise to you is sure.

When the devil tempts you to believe that you deserve better as God's child, you know better from God's Word. By your confession of your sin, you declare that you deserve nothing good at all from the hand of God; and by the absolution you receive, you know that God will work all things for your good and give you all good things in His time, according to His will.

And when the devil tempts you to ask, "Is the Lord among us or not?", you hear the Lord speak the truth in His Supper: "This is My body...this is My blood...for the forgiveness of sins." Oh, yes: the Lord is with you, with grace and salvation, even to the end of the age.

So when you are tempted, God's Word is your refuge: that is why you rejoice to be in the Word daily, even as you are tempted daily. And when you give in and sin, you gladly confess; and the Gospel declares that God's grace is sufficient for you, that you remain His beloved child.

This wilderness will not be fun. You will have your share of affliction; and should the Lord wait, your death will eventually look like the devil has won. The cross looked that way, too—until Jesus rose from the dead. So also for you: Christ will raise you from the dead, from this wilderness of sin to the Promised Land of heaven. We will not let the appearance of your death belie that good news at your funeral. Instead, we will proclaim that you are delivered from temptation and sin to life everlasting: because Christ defeated the devil, sin and death for you, and you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen