

“Holding Up Under Pressure”

Matthew 4.1-11

September 21, 2008

We have two dogs in our family, a Black Lab named Zoë, and a Chihuahua. When we first got the Lab as a puppy nine years ago, she would eat everything, and we'd come into the living room to find she had eaten a shoe, and spread bits of it over the carpet. One time she even chewed a great big hole out of the kitchen table. Now, there's nothing wrong with chewing, it just depends on what you chew!

Another time, we left the lid off her container of dog food, and Zoë got into it. She must have eaten 10 pounds of food, and she was bloated for three days. The temptation was too much for her. Nothing wrong with eating, of course, it just depends on what you eat.

Our daughter Célia is a great dog trainer, and she'd be patient with Zoë, and she'd train her to wait before getting her food. Now food isn't bad, it's good, but it was a matter of timing. So Célia would make the dog sit in front of her bowl filled with food and wait. And when Célia said, “Okay!” then the dog could lunge into her dinner bowl and start to devour.

It's like that for temptation. It helps train us for God's best. Sometimes we're tempted by something bad for us. Sometimes it's something good but the timing's wrong. God wants to train us through the discipline of resistance.

Maybe we're surprised by the passage this morning. Jesus has been on a spiritual high, and God has just announced to the world, “This is my beloved Son, and I am fully pleased with him.” How wonderful! Then, the Holy Spirit pulls Jesus right into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. The Spirit doesn't just lead us to good things, but to become strong by resisting bad things, too. He's always been doing this.

Why was Jesus tempted?

In fact, the “40 days” is going to ring a bell for Matthew's Jewish readers of this story about Jesus because it echoes the testing of Israel in the wilderness for 40 years. And that time in the desert wasn't just an accident. God led and shaped his people through it. Exodus says,

In steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed. (Exodus 15:13)

It was a time of testing, of challenge, of trial. Think of it like spiritual boot camp. I have a nephew Sergei who is a U.S. Marine. For most recruits, boot camp is the hardest thing they've ever done in their lives, but it's for a good purpose of making them into U.S. Marines, the elite fighting force of the world. The time of testing has a purpose.

So, Israel was tested in the Old Testament. The wilderness was a tough place. That time of testing and God's care for his people became the most defining experience in Israel's history. The Bible writers keep looking back on it, from Exodus 15 to Psalm 106 to Acts 7.

Like Moses told Israel,

Remember how the Lord your God led you through the wilderness for 40 years, humbling you and testing you to prove your character, and to find out whether or not you would really obey his commands" (Deut. 8:2).

What's the principle for us? Temptation is testing, because God's calling has to be tested:

Abraham and Sarah, Joseph, Moses, David, Job, John the Baptist, even Adam and Eve—they were all put to the test.

But they didn't always do so well on the test:

Abraham lies about his wife. (Genesis 12:13)

David reacts rashly and wants to kill a man for insulting him. (1 Sam 25:13-34)

Elijah despairs of life and gives up hope. (1 Kings 19:4)

Jeremiah accuses God (Jer 20:7-18)

Adam disobeys God and eats forbidden fruit. (Genesis 3:6)

The name Adam means "human." Adam and Eve were representative humans, and they failed the test. Israel as a whole failed the test to be God's special people.

But Jesus was tempted so he could make right what Adam made wrong. Romans says,

Yes, Adam's one sin brought condemnation upon everyone, but Christ's one act of righteousness makes all people right in God's sight and gives them life" (Rom. 5:18).

Jesus passes the test because he's True Israel, the perfect human being. He's the model of victory in testing. He was tempted so he could identify with us. The Bible says,

That is why we have a great High Priest who has gone to heaven, Jesus the Son of God. Let us cling to him and never stop trusting him. This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same temptations we do, yet he did not sin" (Heb. 4:15).

Now I want you to hear this: when God calls you and empowers you for service, you will be tested. Testing is hard, but it is for our good: that's how we come to know the power of grace that sustains us.

The reality of Satan.

Now, if we're tempted, there is a tempter. Our text names a personal adversary of Jesus, and calls him Satan and the devil. A lot of people have a hard time believing Jesus had to face a real Satan. They think the devil is someone people believed in when we still thought there were witches and werewolves. But the Bible teaches the devil is real, just like evil is more than an abstraction. There is moral will against God at the cosmic level. His purpose is to defeat God's

purpose, to harm and destroy us. And we want to be ready for him when he comes. Because when God fills you, the devil fights you.

The Bible says everything God made was good. But angels had free will, just like people did, and some chose to oppose God. Isaiah writes,

How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning!
 For you said in your heart "I will ascend into heaven,
 I will exalt myself above God:
 I will sit on the heights of the sacred mountain.
 I will ascend above the clouds; I will be like the most High.
 Yet you shall be brought down to hell, to the depths of the pit. (Isa. 42:12-15)

Now that passage might be describing the pride of an earthly ruler like Nebuchadnezzar or Sennacherib, because they saw themselves as gods, and wanted to rule the world. But it might be describing the origins of the devil. In any case the passage gives a good picture of the pride that opposes God, and it will be judged. It teaches that evil posturing as God is real.

C. S. Lewis wrote a book called *The Screwtape Letters*. It was an ingenious work of imaginary letters from a senior demon written to his nephew, giving him advice. The brilliant thing about the book is it gives good advice for the Christian, as long as you take it all backwards, because it's all satire. For example, Screwtape calls God, "the enemy," and Satan himself, "Our father below." It's all satire, but Lewis is completely serious about the reality of spiritual warfare with forces trying to get us. He writes in the preface of *The Screwtape Letters*,

There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors, and hail a materialist and a magician with the same delight.

Now why the attack just when Jesus was baptized? From God's perspective, it's to strengthen him through testing. From the devil's perspective, it's to undermine him and get him to fall. Whenever God leads you to something greater, the devil is opposed. He doesn't want you to get there, to grow more in the Lord, and so the battle gets hotter. Remember it this way: when you reach new levels, you face new devils.

What exactly are the temptations about? Let's take a brief look at them one by one, and then we'll see what the Lord's experience teaches us about overcoming. Three temptations, and then three tactics.

First, the temptation about the stomach

The devil says, "If you are the Son of God, change these stones into loaves of bread." The doubt that can make this temptation real is this—will God really provide? This one's about the stomach, our appetites, our physical needs.

Those are understandable; nothing wrong with being needy, physical beings. Our Lord was, too. He understands, and he told his disciples, it's okay to ask God to meet those needs: "Give us this day our daily bread." But sometimes in our need, we start to doubt, and we wonder, "Is God really going to provide? Or do I have to grab it for myself?" I get that way. It's scary when you have to trust. And the devil tries to exploit our hunger, our weakness, our impatience.

There's always a way out, and that often comes by remembering God's Word. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth,

But remember that the temptations that come into your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will keep the temptation from becoming so strong that you can't stand up against it. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you will not give in to it" (1 Cor. 10:14)

Notice when you're most vulnerable, when you're hungry and tired. Jesus says, when you're vulnerable and weary, depend on God. It's like the Simon and Garfunkle song from the 60s:

When you're weary
Feeling small
When tears are in your eyes
I will dry them all, oh
I'm on your side
Oh when times get rough,
And friends just can't be found

Like a bridge over troubled water
I will lay me down

That's what the Word of God does, it provides a bridge. And Jesus didn't try to reason with the devil, and he didn't try to amaze him with his powers or miracles. He relied on the word of God. "People need more than bread for their life; they must feed on every word of God."

Second, the temptation of the spectacular

The devil says, "If you are the Son of God, jump off the Temple!" See, the Temple was the religious center of the faith of Israel. The people expected the Messiah to arrive here. The Temple was a magnificent building on a high mount, and from the corner of the mount Jesus could see the country for miles around. See, the temptation here was for God to rescue Jesus. The real need behind this is for impressing people with a spectacular sign

Jesus was tempted toward the spectacular, toward proving something, and I think we're subject to that, too. But God says, no, I don't want spectacular, I want stable, not stunning, but steadfast. We don't have to go the way of the spectacular.

Third, the temptation of power.

The devil says, "I will give the nations of the world to you in all their glory, if you will only kneel down and worship me." This is the appeal to Jesus' pride, to his will for power. The real doubt involved is, "Is God really in charge?" Or will I just go for the quick power, the easy solutions, the need to prove equality with God.

Did the devil really have the power to give it all to Jesus? Doesn't God control the world? The devil might have been lying about his power, or basing it on the temporary control he has over the earth based on human sinfulness. The temptation was for Jesus to attempt to bypass God's plan to achieve political rule.

There's an order to life. Worship God, and then everything else falls into place. Sort of like buttoning your shirt. If you get the top button right, all the others fall into place. If you miss the top button, then you're going to be all messed up.

Same in your life. "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." Start with the top, with God first in your life, and it'll fall into place. James, the brother of the Lord, wrote to the church,

Submit to God; resist the devil, and he will flee from you. (Jas. 4:7)

He also says,

Whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing. (Jas. 1:2).

Temptations make us stronger and better. And you could remember our tactic of resistance with this acrostic:

It takes "Jesus" to hold up under the pressure.

J... Join in the Battle (Eph. 6:10-18)

E... Exercise daily

S... Stay with the Spirit

U... Understand your Bible

S... See the Big Picture

There's a song that goes like this:

"Come join our army
and get the gospel gun
and shoot it at the devil
if you want to see him run."

You want to see the devil run? You want God's best for you? You want to stand strong under pressure? Then stick close to Jesus, and let him have his way with you.