

Matthew 4:1-11
(Genesis 3:1-7; 1 John 2:15-17)
“Led by the Spirit to Be Tempted by the Devil”

Introduction

Many of us have sought to experience the power of the Holy Spirit because we are weary of temptation. We long to rise above it, to walk in freedom from the tug and pull of this world, its lusts and desires. We think that, if only God would mightily pour out his Spirit on us then the warfare we have known would be over, and we would be free of the wearisome struggle with “the world, the flesh and the devil.”

How odd, how very peculiar, that we should think such a thing, when the biblical evidence is all to the contrary. I am not saying that we should not seek the baptism of the Holy Spirit, nor am I suggesting that it is anything less than glorious and empowering. What I am saying is that any time God meets us mightily, we should expect that we will enter into temptation. It is so much the nature of things that F.D. Bruner has written of temptation as “the sacrament of confirmation brought to every baptized person.”

Look at the point where Jesus had this powerful experience of temptation, recorded in all three synoptic gospels: it immediately followed his baptism, and preceded his public ministry. In other words, this was part of his preparation for ministry, a sign – if you will – that God really had met him powerfully in the waters of baptism, and an example for those of us who would be his disciples.

There are several pictures that arise in studying this text: Here we see Jesus reliving the experience of our first parents, Adam and Eve in the Garden, tempted by what the apostle John referred to as “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life.” But unlike our first parents, and all of us who have followed, Jesus resisted those temptations in all their subtlety and power. Our first parents’ sin caused us to be born, not in a garden, but in a desert, a place of thorns and thistles, of sickness and death. Jesus went to the desert to find us and lead us home.

Here we also see Jesus reliving the experience of Israel in the desert. Unlike those who were afraid of the giants in the land of promise, who cowered and feared going in and possessing their possessions, Jesus crossed into the land, leading captivity captive, and giving gifts to people like us. And here again, we see Jesus showing us the certainty of God’s final victory over temptation, sin and death, and the resources God has given us for winning that same victory, namely, his Spirit and his Word.

I would invite you to join me over the next few Sundays in reacquainting yourself with this familiar story, approaching it as a picture of what we should expect to face if we are serious about going on with Christ, and how we are to triumph in life’s very hardest places.

Body

1. First, this story offers us two strong warnings:

A warning to those who run toward religious experience to get free from temptation: There is no experience so glorious that it puts us beyond the reach of temptation.

- Elijah triumphed over the prophets of Baal, only to run away at Queen Jezebel's threats.
- Here, Jesus has just been baptized in water, and by the Spirit, and has been acknowledged as God's beloved Son. He is thrust immediately into the place of temptation.
- My own experience, whether in high school returning from the "high" of summer camp, or in ministry returning from seasons of spiritual retreat, such times are invariably followed by what feels like spiritual assault.

A warning to those who try to run away from life in order to get away from temptation: There is no place so desolate that it puts us beyond the reach of temptation.

- The first monastics went out to live in the Egyptian desert, because they wanted to get away from the temptations of the world, only to find that they had carried the world and its temptations with them in their hearts.
- Some of us have had the same experience going to Christian schools. They can be wonderful in helping us develop a Christian world-view and in making life-long Christian friendships, *but* they cannot protect us from temptation. I was wilder at Wheaton College than I had ever been during my years in public high school.

2. Secondly, it offers us two strong encouragements:

Encouragement for those who think that they have sinned far too much for far too long to ever know God's grace: There is no place so desolate that it puts us beyond the reach of grace. If temptation can find us wherever we go, how much more can God's grace find us and show us the way of victory.

- In the bowels of a Navy ship in the South China Sea, in 1971, a book tumbled out of my sea bag that I had never meant to put there, a book that would be God's instrument in starting to turn my heart back to him (Thomas Merton's autobiography, *Seven Story Mountain*).

- In the aching emptiness of a strip bar, in the awful brokenness of an adulterous affair, in the scandal and humiliation of the exposure of an illegal business deal, over and over again, God has met his people at their lowest moment, has heard their cry and rescued them.
- In the grief over the loss of someone dearly loved, in the breakup of a family, when everything we have looked to for security is collapsing around us, God is still mighty to save.

Encouragement for those who think that their defeat is final, who see themselves as bound hand and foot by sin's enslaving power: There is no temptation either so subtle or so strong that we cannot triumph over it through the power of God's Spirit working through God's Word.

- This is, in fact, the story of everyone whose life has been transformed by grace. Only after we have been forgiven and have received God's Spirit do we realize how lost we were.
- In Scripture and in our own experience, it is only when people realize how desperately lost and utterly hopeless life is apart from God's grace that God's grace finds them and sets them free.

Conclusion

That then raises several questions:

- Have you received God's Spirit?
- Do you believe God's Word?
- Are you learning God's Word and hiding it in your heart?
- Have you begun to train yourself to use God's Word in the midst of temptation?

This is the means used by God's Spirit to enable God's children to stand strong in Christ as more than conquerors through him who loved us and gave himself for us.

© John M. Wood, all rights reserved