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The Gospel of Luke
X. The Temptation of Jesus
Luke 4:1-15

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Last week we learned who Jesus really is – that He is both the Son of God and the Son of Adam. Son of God, meaning that He is fully God; and that when we look at Jesus, we are seeing precisely what God is like. And Son of Man, meaning that He is also fully human; and that when we look at Jesus, we are also seeing what we are supposed to be. So, last week we learned who Jesus is – this week our passage teaches us what Jesus has come to do.

If we were asked to summarize what Jesus' ministry was all about, I suspect most of us would answer that He came down to earth so that our sins could be forgiven. And that answer is not incorrect – but it is very incomplete. What our passage this morning tells us is that Jesus didn't come just so that our sins should be forgiven, but also so that we should be delivered from our sinning altogether. Not just forgiven, but also changed, made righteousness, made capable of not sinning, made good. And, even more than that: that the scope of Jesus' work of salvation isn't just the salvation of individual persons, but rather that Jesus has come to turn the whole story of God's creation around. Everything that has gone wrong since Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden, Jesus has come down to set right. He has come not just to get us up into heaven – He has come that heaven might begin to come down here to earth. He has come to fulfill the very prayer He has taught us to pray: *“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”*¹

Now, how am I getting all of this out of the story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness? I'll tell you. In order to understand what is really going on here, we have to understand that there are two major league Old Testament stories playing in the background of Jesus' temptation. Knowing these two Old Testament stories provides the crucial insight into Jesus' temptation. The first of these stories is the story of Israel being tested during the forty years of wilderness wandering which followed their deliverance from slavery in Egypt.² Right away we can begin to see the connections. Where was Israel tempted? In the wilderness. Where was Jesus tempted? In the wilderness. How long was Israel in the wilderness? Forty years. How long was Jesus in the wilderness? Forty days. And the connections run even deeper than that: the three temptations Jesus faces and overcomes are all reflections of three specific temptations Israel faced in the wilderness and failed to overcome. In other words, where Israel failed, Jesus will now succeed – the trajectory of the history of God's people is being relived and reversed.

But it is the second Old Testament story playing in the background which is the really big one – the story of the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.³ The temptation placed before Adam and Eve by the serpent is reflected in each of the three temptations placed before Jesus.

Adam and Eve succumbed to their temptation – setting human history and all of God’s creation on a downward spiral of sin and suffering and sorrow. Jesus Christ – the Son of Adam as well as the Son of God – overcomes His temptations, setting human history and all of God’s creation on a new and upward course, back toward its original created goodness and beyond. St. Ambrose of Milan, the great fourth century teacher of the church, puts this beautifully in his commentary on Jesus’ temptations:

There is here an Adam typology and a Genesis background to this story: as Adam is cast out of paradise into the wilderness, so Christ, the new Adam, goes into the wilderness on our behalf, then to come forth from that temptation to lead us back to paradise.⁴

In other words, as the fall of Adam and Eve to temptation in the Garden of Eden is the first turning point of history, turning themselves and all who follow onto a path away from God – so the success of Jesus, the new Adam, in facing down temptation in the wilderness is the great and final turning point, returning us and all things back onto a path towards God, back towards the way things were always supposed to be.

So, with all that background tucked away in our brains, let’s look at the three temptations of Jesus. Jesus has been led into the wilderness following His baptism, and He has been fasting there for forty days. He is hungry. Along comes the tempter. *“If you are the Son of God,”* he says to Jesus, *“command the stones to become bread.”* Note how devious and subtle is the devil’s lure. He is not tempting Jesus with something sinful, but with something which is, in and of itself, a good gift of God – food! Just as Adam and Eve were tempted by the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; just as Israel in the wilderness is hungry and so is tempted to go back to slavery in Egypt where they ate melons and cucumbers and leeks. So now the tempter whispers to Jesus, *“Surely God doesn’t want His only begotten Son to go hungry. Why don’t you just change those stones into bread and be filled. Where’s the harm in that?”*

But the temptation is about more than stones and bread – just as for Adam and Eve it was about more than just that apple, and for Israel about more than just those melons and cucumbers and leeks back in Egypt. At heart, this is the temptation to distrust the provision of God for the needs of our souls. The temptation to satisfy the hunger God has placed within us – a spiritual hunger for God Himself – to satisfy that God-given, God-desiring hunger by substituting for ourselves something other than God. *“Restless are our hearts, O God, until they rest in Thee,”* wrote St. Augustine.⁵ We were created with a primal, basic, necessary hunger for God our Creator and Sustainer – with a hunger to know Him, to be in relationship with Him. All of which God is willing, ready, and delighted to supply to us in boundless measure.

But, like Adam and Eve, we choose to reject God’s provision for our lives as being tasteless, dull, and unsatisfying. We decide that we know better than God what we require to truly satisfy the hunger within us. And so we devour all the wrong things – or even all the right things, but in a way which dishonors God the Giver. We feast on success and status and money and possessions and Facebook likes and twitter follows and just about most anything else we can lay our hands on – but nothing satisfies the hunger within, nothing takes away the hunger in our hearts. Maybe blunts it for a little while, but in the end it is just one empty calorie followed by another.

Because we have turned away from what we are really hungry for – the One we are really hungering after. And so, also, turning away from His gracious provision for our hunger.

But not Jesus. Jesus sees right through the tempter's ploy. Jesus knows that if He seeks to satisfy His hunger apart from the Father, if He decides to take matters into His own hands and seeks to solve His hunger in His own way and on His own terms the way we do, if He gives into the tempter's voice – Jesus, the Son of Adam, knew that then He would surely starve. For there is no satisfaction, no lasting sustenance to be found apart from God. He answers the tempter, "*Man shall not live by bread alone.*" He is quoting a verse from Deuteronomy, and most certainly intended that we should remember how that verse continues: "*Man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.*"⁶ Only God can satisfy the hunger He has placed in our hearts. Indeed, "*Restless are our hearts, until they rest in Thee.*" Round one is over – and Jesus has won.

The second temptation follows. The devil takes Jesus up on a high mountain, shows Him all the kingdoms of this world, and says to Him: "*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.*" Of course, the devil is lying – he only thinks he owns the world; it is not his to give. "*The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof,*" says the Psalmist.⁷ But the temptation is deep – it is the temptation to distrust God's plan. For God has indeed promised that one day "*every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord*"⁸ – but that day is distant, and the path towards it runs through a cross. "*Come on, Jesus,*" says the tempter, "*make it easier on yourself. Just a few compromises, a few bows in my direction, and all this can be yours right now, without the cross!*" The temptation to distrust God's plan, God's way, God's Word.

God gave Adam and Eve the rules of the garden – His plan for their lives. And they were good rules which did not restrain so much as they ensured Adam and Eve's happiness, ensured that all would go well for them in the garden. But Adam and Eve decided to distrust God's plan, God's rules – to live by their own rules instead – and the world has been in a mess ever since. Israel in the wilderness – Moses up on the mountain with God, receiving the Ten Commandments, God's plan for Israel's health and happiness in the Promised Land. But it's taking a long time, and Israel is growing impatient. They go to Aaron and say, "*We need to take care of this for ourselves. How about we make up a god for ourselves – a golden calf – and then follow its rules instead.*" And before you know it, there is Israel bowing down before an inanimate golden calf and pretending that this hunk of metal is their way and truth and life.

And we are constantly tempted to do the very same. The Sermon on the Mount is great, we think, but surely God doesn't really intend that we should do these things – it's not actually a real plan for our actual living. Or nodding in agreement with the Way and the Truth and the Life on a Sunday morning, but bowing down before mammon and all his first cousins on Monday. The temptation to distrust God's plan for our lives – to assume that the world around us offers a better plan for living than God does, that we would be better off picking and choosing for ourselves what sort of life to live. To think that we know better than God what will truly make us happy.

But Jesus doesn't blink in the face of the devil's lure. He recognizes the big lie of this temptation straight off – one, that the world is not the devil's to give; but two, and even more, that

there can be no other plan than God's plan, no other way to live except for the life God lays out for us in His Word, no other path to joy and fulfillment than the one God Himself has placed before us. Jesus faces down the tempter and says to him, again citing Scripture: *"It is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.'"* Round two is over – and Jesus has won again.

The third temptation – the greatest of them all. The temptation to distrust God's person. To distrust His disposition of goodness and love towards us. The temptation to believe that God can't really be trusted with our lives, that He can't be counted on to deliver on His promises to us in the end. It is the same temptation which ultimately undid Adam and Eve in the Garden – to disbelieve God's care for them. It is the same temptation which brought Israel almost to destruction at Massah and Meribah in the wilderness. The temptation to believe that God doesn't really care, that God's intentions toward us are not actually loving and good, that God doesn't really want what is best for us, that God cannot finally be trusted with our lives. The devil takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple and says to Him, *"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.'"* God can't be trusted – just put Him to the test and you'll see. *"Come on, Jesus,"* says the tempter, *"Jump! Then you'll know if He is as good as His Word. Or are you afraid that He won't be there to catch you?"*

We know this temptation also. Especially when life has come apart at the seams, when we are sinking beneath the weight of some loss, some anxiety, some seemingly insurmountable trouble. And there comes the tempter's voice in our ears, saying, *"Are you sure you can really trust God here? I mean, just look at what is happening to you. Are you really sure you can count on God to deliver you? I mean, why, if He is so loving and good, is He letting all this happen? Can you really be sure you can trust Him?"* The temptation to distrust God Himself. To distrust that our lives really are safe in His keeping. To distrust that God really is as good as His Word.

But Jesus, again, sees the temptation for the falsehood that it is. Because God did not promise us that belief in Him would exempt us from all trouble – especially since a good bit of the trouble we bring upon ourselves by our sin. The promise of God is something more, something deeper, something better: that He will be with us in all things to uphold us and to sustain us, and that He will in the end bring all things round to good for us. A promise that nothing will be allowed to separate us from His love for us – and that, because of His love for us, all bad things in the end will be overcome for good, by God.

But He doesn't offer us proof of that, He gives us His promise of that. And He gives us Jesus so that we can see that He really does love us and care about us, and that He really is a God who is as good as His Word. So that we may live by faith in those promises – trusting in God, trusting in those promises, trusting in what we have seen and heard in Jesus about the nature and character of our God, even in the darkest night. Which is precisely what Jesus tells the tempter: *"It is said, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'"* We live, we must live, by faith and not by sight. We trust in the promises God has made. Round three is now over. And Jesus has won them all.

Everything we have gotten wrong – since Adam and Eve, since Israel in the wilderness, since you and me – Jesus has now, and for our sake, gotten right. Something new has now broken into our world. Something powerful has now turned the tide of history in God’s favor. The power of sin, death, and the devil is already being overturned by Jesus’ perfect obedience. And, because of His perfect obedience, you and I are even now on our way, not only to forgiveness, but to being cleansed of all our habits of sin, on our way to being purged of any remnant power those old temptations may have held over us. We are now on our way to a full restoration in Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the Son of Adam. And not just us individually, but all things in God’s creation. Out in the wilderness, before Jesus even has begun His public ministry or laid eyes upon the cross, the course of this world, the course of human history, the course of your life and my life, has now been turned back towards God.

And we learn one thing more from this story of Jesus’ temptation – namely, how to defeat the tempter whenever he draws near to us. “*One little word shall fell him,*” we sang of the tempter in our opening hymn – Martin Luther’s great hymn.⁹ One little word. And we now know what that word is: “Jesus”.

¹ Matthew 6:10.

² Exodus 15-40; Numbers 1-21.

³ Genesis 3:1-24.

⁴ Ambrose of Milan, Exposition of Luke 4:7, quoted in David Lyle Jeffrey, Luke (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012), p. 66.

⁵ Augustine, Confessions, I.1, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin, 1984), p. 21.

⁶ Deuteronomy 8:3.

⁷ Psalm 24:1.

⁸ Philippians 2:10-11.

⁹ Martin Luther, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.”