

Scripture Readings for March 1st 2020

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 (NIV)

¹⁵The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. ¹⁶And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; ¹⁷but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”

³ Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’” ²The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, ³but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’” ⁴“You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. ⁵“For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” ⁶When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. ⁷Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

Matthew 4:1-11 (NIV)

⁴ Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 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.’”¹

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.””² ⁷ Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”³

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. 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.’”⁴

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

¹ Deut 8:3.

² Psalm 91:11,12.

³ Deut. 6:16.

⁴ Deut. 6:13.

Sermon: The Temptation of Jesus

The season of Lent has begun! It's traditionally a time of *preparation* for the events of Easter and, as part of that, many consider refining their spiritual disciplines of prayer, generous giving, and of giving-up something for Lent as an *authentic* sign and measure of their devotion to God. It's a good thing and I encourage it, as long as it's done for the right motives. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus also wanted his followers to continue the Jewish practices of prayer, fasting, and giving to the poor, and he commanded that such acts be done *secretly* and without a fanfare, remembering that God knows our *hearts* and sees all.⁵ The obvious connection with our assigned gospel reading this morning is that Jesus voluntarily *fasted*.⁶ Since Jesus was Jewish, that fact is *not* surprising in itself, but everything else about this story is significant, namely, that Jesus fasted for *forty* days and nights in the *wilderness*, right *after* his baptism and *before* he began his public ministry. What is this story all about and how might it relate to us today? Let's see.

The astute among you will have noticed how Matthew introduces this story, he says: “[Immediately following his baptism] Jesus was *led by the Spirit* into the wilderness *to be* tempted by the devil.”⁷ This is a scary thought and we have to ask, “Is it true that God *deliberately* puts us into tough situations to *test* us?”⁸ Personally, I *don't* think so – though you often hear people say such things. Yes, life can be hard and circumstances *do* test our character and faith, but I *don't* think God *intentionally* tests us to see if we will trip up. Having said that, it is quite possible Matthew and his primarily Jewish audience *did* believe God *was* testing Jesus⁹ for reasons that will become clear in a moment. What Matthew says is even more disturbing, however, because the text implies that God is *collaborating* with the devil!¹⁰ Thankfully, later in Chapter 13¹¹ Matthew gives the impression God is, at best, *tolerating* the devil for the time being, and does *not* collaborate with him – and that should give some reassurance. Others find the mere mention of “the devil” or “Satan” too much to take seriously.¹² Not least because to exclaim, “The devil made me do it” is an escape from personal responsibility for our actions. I totally get it. However, even if we take “d” out of “devil” we still end up with a four-letter word! I believe “evil” is a reality *greater* than the sum of *all* our human inclination to evil and is a power that holds the whole world in bondage and from which we need divine rescue. There are both *systemic* evils,¹³ like racism,

⁵ Matt 6:1-6; 16-21.

⁶ Matt 4:2. (See also Luke 4:1-13; Mark 1:12-13)

⁷ Matt 4:1. Note the Greek word for “test” is the same as “tempt,” and some scholars say the better translation is “test.” Moreover, compare the wording with Mark 1:12 and Luke 4:1. They express it differently; yes, God's Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness where he happened to be tempted or tested by the devil, but the explicit connection to God is omitted.

⁸ See also James 1:12-15 (especially 13), Noting that James is (like Matthew) a very “Jewish” book.

⁹ This connects with the (very disturbing) story in Gen 22:1-18 where God “tests” Abraham.

¹⁰ It could well be that Matthew is using/evoking the *literary* language of Job 1:6–12, 2:1–6. However, I question whether the image of Satan as “the accuser” wandering freely in the heavenly court is still appropriate for the New Testament (see, for example, the *apocalyptic* imagery in Rev 12:7–9). Indeed, in the NT, the devil (*diablos*) is one who attacks, misleads, discredits, or slanders. See also [7].

¹¹ Matt 13:24-30; 36-43. See Matt 25:41 for the ultimate destruction of the devil and his demons.

¹² See: Tim Reddish, *Does God Always Get What He Wants*, (Eugene: Cascade, 2018), 149.

¹³ See: Walter Wink, *Powers That Be*, (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 27-31.

consumerism, and genocide, and *personal* addictions, like gambling, alcohol, drugs, porn, as well as phobias that hold individual's in captivity. More generally, evil *actively* opposes the reign of God.¹⁴ In the New Testament, this dark force is given a face in the "devil."¹⁵ I suggest we don't get distracted by such personal representations of the undeniable *experiential* reality of evil; instead, let's engage in the deeper significance of the story.

A good Jew would pick up on the mention of "forty days and nights" and immediately go back to Moses who also fasted for the same duration before God gave him the 10 Commandments.¹⁶ More pertinently in this context is that the Israelites wondered in the wilderness for 40 years. A key text in understanding the temptations of Jesus is Deuteronomy 8:2, where we read, "Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and *test you in order to know what was in your heart*, whether or not you would keep his commands."¹⁷ The overall image, then, is that God, through Moses, rescued his people from bondage in Egypt through the waters of the Red Sea to ultimately take them into the Promised Land. In an analogous way, Matthew sees Jesus as passing through the waters of baptism to ultimately save his people from the slavery of sin and bring them into the kingdom of God.¹⁸ This testing of Jesus in the wilderness for 40 days and nights therefore *parallels* the testing of Israel in the wilderness for 40 years. Alas, the people of Israel *failed* that test; they did *not* trust God to provide for their basic needs¹⁹ and they also worshiped idols – recall the famed golden 'calf.'²⁰ The issue at stake here is, "Will Messiah²¹ Jesus pass the test?"

The devil's first temptation to Jesus acknowledges his human need of food after a long fast. The devil says: "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."²² First, it's a mistake to think the devil is doubting that Jesus is God's Chosen One by stressing the word "*if*" in that verse. Later in Matthew's description of an exorcism, even the demon addresses Jesus as the "Son of God."²³ A better translation is, "*Since* you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."²⁴ The temptation is *not*, then, for Jesus to doubt his true identity but to ascertain *what kind of Messiah will he be*. Will he, for example, perform miracles for personal gain? Furthermore, the connection to the experience of

¹⁴ See: N T Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), 107–9, 111–2.

¹⁵ This 'personification' of evil came back with the Jews from the Babylonian exile and influenced 2nd Temple literature (and the New Testament). Modern sensibilities can belittle the power of evil and its reality. [Prior to that, *God* was seen as the source of good and evil in the Old Testament. See, for example: Isa 30:19–20; 45:5–7; Lam 3:37–38; Job 1:21; 2:10; 42:11; Amos 3:5–6.]

¹⁶ Exod 34:27–28. See also 1 Kings 19:7–12 where Elijah had a similar fast ending with a powerful encounter with God. (Compare 1 Kings 19:5,7 with Matt 4:11.) Again, recall that Jesus as a Moses-like figure is a key theme in Matthew.

¹⁷ That Deut 8:2 is the key (explanatory) verse is "obvious" because Jesus reply to the first temptation is from Deut 8:3!

¹⁸ See Matt 1:21; 20:28. [Recall, Matthew uses the term "kingdom of heaven," I use Luke's term to avoid confusion.]

¹⁹ See Exod 16:1–17:7. (The manna and quail, plus the water from the rock incidents.)

²⁰ See Exod 32. For "calf" read "young bull."

²¹ Matthew has already explicitly told his readers of Jesus' identity as *Messiah* in 1:1,17,18; 2:4; 3:11–17. In Exod 4:22–23; Deut 8:2–5; Hosea 11:1 Israel is referred to as "God's son." In this spirit, Jesus becomes a representation of the "new Israel" and is to be tested in a similar way people in the wilderness.

²² Matt 4:3. "Son of God" is equivalent to "Messiah here," *not* the second person of the Trinity.

²³ See Matt 8:29. (See also Matt 8:16; 12:22–37; 17:14–20.) [For more on demons revealing the identity of Jesus see Mark.]

²⁴ This therefore follows on from the baptism where Jesus identity is publicly proclaimed; Matt 3:17.

Israel in the wilderness becomes crystal clear when we read the very next verse in Deuteronomy 8: “[the LORD your God] humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”²⁵ You will obviously recognise that the latter part was Christ’s reply to the devil.²⁶ Thus part of the test was simply: will you *trust* God to provide for your basic human needs. The Israelites in the wilderness doubted and moaned,²⁷ yet God did graciously supply them with manna, quail, and water. The kind of Messiah Jesus would become is one who would willingly experience human *suffering*, trusting in God’s provision at the appropriate time.²⁸

In the second temptation, the devil mystically took him to the roof of the Temple in Jerusalem²⁹ and said, “Since you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For the psalmist says: ‘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.’”³⁰ Again the underlying question is, “What *kind* of Messiah will Jesus be?” Will he start a new movement with a spectacular, miraculous entrance that will compel people to believe in him?³¹ What the devil is asking is not obviously sinful and he cleverly backs it up with a supportive “proof-text” from scripture. This perhaps highlights how well-intentioned interpretations of Scripture can become a vehicle for evil, in this case a temptation of an alternative path that circumvents suffering and the cross. According to Matthew, the last time Jesus will hear the phrase, “If you are the Son of God” is when he is being mocked on the cross.³² Jesus answered the devil, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test,’”³³ which is an appropriate rebuttal. Yet we can’t overlook the fact that this quote from Deuteronomy 6 continues with an encouraging word to *endure*, “Do what is right and good in the LORD’s sight, so that it may go well with you and you may go in and take over the good land the LORD promised on oath to your ancestors, thrusting out all your enemies before you, as the LORD said.”³⁴

In the last temptation the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.”³⁵ This is the temptation of having prestige and power - to rule the world, a role played at the time by the Roman Emperor. It also pertains to worshiping idols, a test Israel failed in the wilderness.³⁶ The tension

²⁵ Deut 8:3.

²⁶ Matt 4:4; the word “man” can be translated “humanity,” contrasting with the christological title “Son of God.” [It is not insignificant to a Jewish audience that Jesus is quoting from the Torah, the words of Moses.]

²⁷ Exod 16:2–4.

²⁸ Whatever the meaning of “Son of God,” (a.k.a. “Messiah”) it does *not* deny Jesus’ humanity. Jesus does later feed the multitudes (5000; Matt 14:13-31) at the appropriate time, *kairos* – God’s time, mirroring Moses and manna.

²⁹ The reference to the “holy city” has eschatological overtones; see Isa 48:2; 52:1; Dan 9:24; Matt 27:53; Rev 11:2; 21:2, 10.

³⁰ Matt 4:6; Ps 91:11,12. (Some scholars point out that the devil’s usage of Ps 91 is out of context; but so is Jesus’ reply!)

³¹ We are fascinated by popular celebrities today, quantified by the number of followers on social media!

³² Matt 27:39-44.

³³ Deut 6:16; (Matt 4:7).

³⁴ Deut 6:18-17 (see also 17.)

³⁵ Matt 4:8-9. “Being like God” is a feature of the temptation in Eden (Gen 3:5), though that is a thirst for knowledge rather than power.

³⁶ Deut 6:13-19 (and Exod 32).

between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world, represented by the Jewish and Roman authorities runs throughout the Gospel.³⁷ This temptation for power and influence is very real, and the Church has often failed this test throughout history. Recall too how the mother of James and John wanted her two sons to sit at Christ's right and left when his kingdom arrived.³⁸ And Jesus reminds her that, "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."³⁹ *This is the kind of Messiah Jesus was to be. In the end, Jesus rebukes the devil in good Jewish fashion, citing a passage connected with the *Shema*, which Jews pray daily: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. . . . Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only."*⁴⁰ Jesus therefore *passed* the three tests and his ministry begins!

What are we to make of this today? Three points come to mind. First, in the book of Hebrews we are reminded that, in Jesus, we have someone who is able to empathize with our weaknesses because he was tempted in every way, just as we are—yet didn't sin.⁴¹ This thought was expressed in the words of the comforting hymn we sung earlier, "What a friend we have in Jesus." This stresses our link to the *humanity* of Jesus, especially if we imagine a holy God as one who is unapproachable or as one who can't truly understand our sufferings. While I believe all this is indeed true, we likely can't relate to those three specific temptations of Jesus and wonder if the writer of Hebrews was right. In response, I'm sure those temptations were *not* the only ones Jesus faced in his ministry. Although this message of encouragement from Hebrews is important, the story of the temptations of Jesus has a different purpose. As I emphasised earlier, it is a character-defining story that highlights what *kind* of Messiah Jesus would be - with the rest of the gospel fleshing out the detail.

Second, temptation is often most intense and effective when we are vulnerable, insecure, anxious, tired, and alone. We therefore need to be aware of that fact and be on our guard. As it says in 1 Peter, "Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings."⁴² Temptations detract us from God's ways and seek to turn us to follow human paths instead, for example, to gratify our own immediate needs, to crave attention from others, or to follow blind ambition. Remember, temptation is inevitable for God's children; it's unavoidable. However, just as angels ministered to Christ's needs, so we as a community of faith are to support and encourage each other.⁴³ Others have suffered in similar ways to ourselves and can relate to us in our time of need.⁴⁴

³⁷ See Matt 12:26 for the battle between with the kingdoms of Satan and God.

³⁸ Matt 20:20-28.

³⁹ Matt 20:26-28.

⁴⁰ Deut. 6: 4-5,13; Matt 4:10. (See also Matt 22:36-38).

⁴¹ Heb 4:15. See also Heb 2:14-1.

⁴² 1 Peter 5:8-9; see also 5-7.

⁴³ Let's *not* underestimate the power of evil; that power is real, but it is *limited*.

⁴⁴ This involves the wider Church too; reading books of the experience of others can often prove helpful.

Third, in Paul's letters we are told that through baptism we have become God's *adopted* children; we too are children of God because of the *faithfulness* of Jesus Christ.⁴⁵ Just as the temptations of Jesus demonstrated the *kind* of Son of God – or Messiah – he would become, so our trials in life help to establish what *kind* of “child of God” we will be. Will we be faithful? Will we trust God for the basic provisions of life? Will we trust God even if that path contains suffering and hardship? Will we trust God alone, or worship other idols - like money, sex, and power? In short, will we be tempted into ways of darkness or will we faithfully follow the Light? Like for Jesus, distracting temptations challenge our identity and integrity;⁴⁶ let us continue to be faithful to *our* calling, not just for Lent, but everyday, and with the Spirit's help. Amen. Let us pray.

⁴⁵ See Gal 3:26-27; 4:6-7; Rom 8:14-17.

⁴⁶ This is true both as individuals and as a church.