

## ***Duel in the Desert***

### ***Luke 4:1-12***

The Judean Desert was a wasteland of scorched stones. The sun was a boiling blister in a cloudless sky, warping and wrinkling the horizon with heat waves. It was lifeless place with neither shade nor solace.

So it seems strange that this maze of rocks and ravines is where God's Spirit first spoke to John the Baptist. Now that same Spirit had come upon God's Son in full force. But the Spirit's first work within Jesus was neither inspiration nor empowerment.

***Immediately the Spirit impelled Him to go out into the wilderness. Mark 1:12***

Jesus was still wet with river water. And the voice of God the Father still echoed in His ears. The Father's message was unmistakable. He was and ever shall be God's Son, precious and powerful. Nevertheless, His ministry on earth was not quite ready to begin. Not just yet.

Before the Savior could touch and transform lives, before He could teach multitudes and train disciples, He had to be proven. And the desert wilderness of Judea was His proving grounds.

Christ would not be alone in that merciless wasteland, either. His eternal adversary was waiting for Him there.

## ***Faith and Food***

Both Matthew and Mark mention that God's Spirit directed our Redeemer to turn His back on the reeds and rushes of the Jordan and walk up the swelling slope of desert mountains into the wilderness. But Luke assures us that the Spirit did not abandon our Lord in that desert.

***Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led around by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil. Verses 1-2***

Our eternal God is a Lord of love, of kindness and compassion. And His guiding hand upon Christ was immediate and unmistakable.

Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit did not direct God's chosen Messiah to a garden. He led Him to a place where there were neither shadows nor shade to cool His brow. Worse than that, there was nothing to eat, either.

***And He ate nothing during those days, Verse 2***

It might surprise us that God's Spirit would lead the Lord's Servant to such a place. We assume the exact opposite.

We take for granted that our God will always lead His flock to lush, green pastures. And quite often, He does. But not always.

When the Jews were in bondage, God delivered them from the slime pits and slave shacks of Egypt with a strong hand. Then He piled up the waters of the Red Sea like a crystal canyon. And by the Lord's power, they walked, crunching on coral, over a dry sea bed.

But on the other side of that sea was a searing world of sharp stones and stinging scorpions. Yet God directed Jacob's descendants there with a visible presence: a cloud by day and pillar of fire by night.

True, God's ultimate goal for His people was Canaan's green pastures, olive groves and hillside vineyards. But before they could live in those houses they had not built and farm those fields they had not cleared, they had to endure the blistering Sinai Desert.

That is the way it was with Jesus. And sometimes, it will be the same with us. We dare not assume our loving Lord will never lead us to places where life is lean and conditions are cruel.

And when do we find ourselves surrounded by pain and problems, we must not cry out to God in confusion and call into question Christ's concern for us.

For more than a month, Jesus wandered the desert, beset by heinous hordes of demons. And all that time, God did not provide so much as a mouthful of food for him.

***And He ate nothing during those days, and when they had ended, He became hungry.***

***Verse 2***

Finally, our Savior was starving for food and His body cried out for nourishment. That is when the demons stepped aside. And Satan himself came with a sly suggestion.

***And the devil said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread."***

***Verse 3***

On the surface, it seems Satan was tempting Jesus to prove He really was God's beloved and only begotten Son. But that misses the mark.

The word *if* in Satan's suggestion expresses no doubt. It really means, *if which is the case*. So the words might be paraphrased, *since you are the Son of God*.

Our eternal adversary was not equivocating. Both he and Jesus knew the truth. The Carpenter from Nazareth was and is and ever shall be the one and only Son of God.

The temptation really ran much deeper than merely providing proof. Satan urged Christ to call into question His Father's faithfulness. After all, God had led His Son to a barren, empty place.

The eternal Father could have provided for His Son. But He did not. So since the Savior was the Creator in human flesh, why to use His divine powers to provide food for Himself? Food He desperately needed. Food His Father had not bothered to supply.

It seems shockingly simple and harmless. After all, God could have given His Son the food He needed. So, what would be so terrible about Christ doing whatever He had to provide what He needed?

There are several problems hidden within the devil's initial temptation. First, God had indeed endowed His Son with powers and abilities that were and are virtually limitless. He gave Jesus the power to command creation and even raise the dead.

God also gives born-again believers spiritual abilities today. But neither Christ's vast powers nor our special abilities are to be used for selfish purposes. God always grants His servants special abilities for the same righteous reason.

Just as our Lord did, we are to use the supernatural abilities and spiritual gifts God gives us to bring honor and glory to the blessed Name of our Creator. And for no other purpose.

But that is not all the darkness and deception within Satan's temptation. Our Redeemer's reply points to a larger issue.

***And Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone.'" Verse 4***

Our Lord took it for granted that His eternal enemy knew what the scriptures say. So He did not bother to quote the entire passage.

***He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord.***

***Deuteronomy 8:3***

Those words were spoken by Moses. They summarize our Sovereign Lord's reasons for leading His people about the scorching Sinai Desert forty long years. He did it to teach them to trust in Him.

It is as if our Savior said, "My Father provided manna for His people in the desert. Not for forty days but forty years. And He can provide food for Me if that is His perfect will."

But it was not God's will to give His Son food. So Christ was perfectly willing and completely content to do without. In our Master's mind, something mattered much more than even life-sustaining food.

***My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work. John 4:34***

Nothing was more important to God's Son than doing His Father's will. And if it was God's will that He be hungry, He would never lift a finger to provide food for Himself.

Our Heaven Father would have His adopted children embrace that same commitment to His perfect will. And neither hunger nor hardship can be allowed to turn us away from it.

## ***Faith and Forever***

Satan's next temptation was the cruelest of all. It presented our Savior with an excruciating, agonizing dilemma.

***And he led Him up and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time.***

***Verse 5***

High atop the rocky peak of a desert mountain, the devil gave God's Son a glimpse of kingdoms to come. And it was not a pretty picture.

The ovens of Auschwitz and the killing fields of Cambodia were part of the devil's preview. Frozen bodies piled high in Stalin's Siberian gulag were there along Idi Amin's torture chambers. Arenas in Rome and concentration camps in North Korea ran red with the blood of faithful Christians.

The adversary let the Lord look at all the horrors to come in kingdoms around the world. Then he smiled and made the Master a simple, straightforward offer.

***And the devil said to Him, "I will give You all this domain and its glory; for it has been handed over to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. Therefore if You worship before me, it shall all be Yours." Verses 6-7***

At Eden, Adam obeyed the enemy and disobeyed God. That was an overt act of bowing before the devil. And by doing so, he gave Satan the lordship over the earth which God had given him.

So Satan was not making an idle boast. He could indeed give power and authority to anyone he chose. And if Jesus would but bow His knee before Satan, he would give Christ full authority over all those kingdoms.

Yes, Jesus would one day rule all those kingdoms and many more. But that throne would come at the price of pain and blood. Satan was offering God's Son the crown without having to endure the cross.

But even that is not does not plumb the depth of the devil's temptation. The scenes Satan showed our Savior tore at His heart. The terrible torture and unimaginable pain that awaited uncounted millions filled our Lord with agony. His dark adversary counted on that.

Jesus did not even have to worship Satan only. All He had to do was bow His knee before the lord of darkness for a moment. And all that savagery and slaughter could be averted.

No one would be hacked to death by raging rebels. No lions would drag loving Christians across Roman arenas. The gas chambers of Dachau would be empty. No one would have to suffer. Jesus would be rule with mercy, compassion and justice.

It was an agonizing dilemma. It asks the old question. Do the ends justify the means? If the goal be good and godly, does it really matter what we have to do to attain it?

This is an extreme example. No goal could be greater or more merciful than to stop worldwide suffering and slaughter of all men for all time. But even that end did not justify stooping to sin.

***Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and serve Him only.'"***

***Verse 8***

No matter what might be at stake, it is always right to do right. And it is right to worship God. More important than that, it is essential that we worship God alone.

We cannot bow our knee to possessions or pleasure and yet worship the great God of Heaven. He is a jealous God and will not tolerate partial piety or a divided heart.

Hidden deep within Satan's temptation was another ugly thorn. Yes, the Savior could have saved men from suffering, sorrow, and slaughter. And men could have lived their lives in peace and serenity.

But if Jesus had accepted the devil's offer, a much darker problem would have gone unsolved. By disobeying God's commandment that He and He alone is to be worshiped. Jesus would have disqualified Himself from paying the price of blood and death for mankind's sin.

It would have been like keeping condemned criminals in a luxury hotel. No matter how lush and luxurious their lives might be, they would still have to face execution.

And if Jesus had bowed His knee to Satan, if He was made world ruler early without having to die on the cross, man's greatest problem would not be solved at all.

So no matter how pleasant and peaceful life might be here on earth, we would still have to face the fire and fury of God's wrath when this life is over. We would still be condemned criminals.

Our eternal enemy still makes the same offer to Christians today. He urges us to forget about sin and salvation and focus all our attention on helping the temporal needs of people.

Yes, believers are commanded to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, to care for the sick and comfort the dying. But that cannot and must not be all we do.

We must never lose our focus. The most pressing problem that faces absolutely everyone on earth is eternity.

More than anything, people need to be saved from sin and the darkness, despair and death that ripple in its wake.

And only a crucified and risen Savior can deliver men from sin.

## ***Sin and Falling***

The desert would not do for the devil's next temptation. So He took Jesus to Jerusalem.

***And he led Him to Jerusalem and had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down from here;" Verse 9***

Each time Satan tempted our Savior, the Redeemer replied by quoting God's Word. So this time the devil tried to turn the scriptures to his own advantage.

***"...for it is written, 'He will command His angels concerning you to guard you.' and, 'on their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" Verses 10-11***

A high, pillared walkway on the edge of the temple courtyard shaded worshipers from the summer sun. From the tile roof of that portico, it was a straight drop of 750 feet to a crowded courtyard far below.

So it was a very good place to test the truth of God's promise to protect His chosen Servant. But there were cliffs and chasms in the Judean Desert which were much higher. Why not urge the Master to throw Himself off of one of those?

To understand the answer, we must first realize that both our Redeemer and Satan had no doubts. God would indeed keep Christ from harm if He stepped off a high ledge.

Once again, we might paraphrase Satan's words, *since you are God's Son*. The devil had no doubt that Jesus was God's Son.

But then the adversary was not the one who hungered for proof. The people did. That is why it was essential for the enemy to take Jesus to Jerusalem.

There in the crowded courtyards of the temple, the best and brightest, the purest and most powerful of God's ancient people would be watching. And they would all see for themselves.

If Jesus had stepped off the edge, the angels would have caught Him to keep Him from harm. And both on top and at the bottom, a great crowd of people would have seen it.

Then there would have been no doubt. No one would have to take Jesus at His Word. They would all see. So there would be no need for faith. And without faith and hope there is no salvation.

*...without faith it is impossible to please Him, Hebrews 11:6*

*...in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? Romans 8:24*

That is why God cannot abide demands for signs and miracles to prove either His existence or His faithfulness to His promises.

*An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah. Matthew 16:4*

The only proof that Jesus was and is and ever shall be God's Son is the empty grave He left behind on that first Easter morning. No other proof is needed. And no other proof will be provided.

Proof cannot coexist with faith. What is more, no amount of proof is enough. That is why Jesus quoted the particular passage He did.

*And Jesus answered and said to him, "It is said, 'You shall not put the Lord to the test.'" Verse 12* That verse is taken from a passage in Deuteronomy. It refers to a time when God's people demanded water as proof that God had indeed delivered them and really was guiding them.

*You shall not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested Him at Massah. Deuteronomy 6:16*

It was not enough that God had killed all the first born in Egypt. It was not enough that He had parted the Red Sea. It was not even enough that He provided perfect food each day.

God's people were still not convinced. No amount of proof was powerful enough to plant faith in people's hearts then. And it still is not.

Time and time again, people asked Jesus to work a wonder as a miracle sign that He really was the Messiah. But our Redeemer always refused to put on a show and demonstrate His power.

And He still refuses to do so today. If we would come to Christ, we must simply believe He is God's Son who died to pay for our sins and returned from the grave three days later.

We must take the Lord at His word. If we do not, we fall into the devil's trap. And God's power and presence in our lives is out of reach.

