

## Jesus, God's Son, Overcomes Satan

Matthew 4:1-11

by Rev. Michael G. Lilienthal

Hymn: ELH #253 – “Rise, My Soul, to Watch and Pray”

Prayer: Jesus, our mighty and humble hero, though devils fill all the world, we do not fear, for we know that you have won the victory. Lord, we believe. Help our unbelief. Amen.

### Matthew 4:1-11

<sup>1</sup>Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil. <sup>2</sup>After he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. <sup>3</sup>The Tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread.”

<sup>4</sup>But Jesus answered, “It is written:  
Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes out of the mouth of God.”

<sup>5</sup>Then the Devil took him into the holy city. He placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, <sup>6</sup>and he said to him, “If you are the Son of God, 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.”

<sup>7</sup>Jesus said to him, “Again, it is written:  
You shall not test the Lord your God.”

<sup>8</sup>Again the Devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. <sup>9</sup>He said to him, “I will give you all of these things, if you will bow down and worship me.”

<sup>10</sup>Then Jesus said to him, “Go away, Satan! For it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”

<sup>11</sup>Then the Devil left him, and just then angels came and served him.

Dear people of God,

We saw last Sunday how Jesus came to stand in the place of sinners in his Baptism. As this account begins: “*Then* Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness.” It seems practically immediate. In fact, this is how St. Mark’s Gospel puts it: after Jesus was baptized, “The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness” (Mark 1:12,

ESV). In fact, the emphasis that it was “the Spirit” who led Jesus into the wilderness creates a close link to his Baptism account: the Spirit of God who descended on Jesus in the form of a dove now leads him out to be tempted.

Therefore, thematically, we should see a similar link. Jesus was Baptized, coming to stand in the place of sinners. In the same way, he was tempted – in the wilderness and throughout his life – standing always in the place of sinners: not sinning where we sinned, resisting temptation where we acquiesced, bearing up where we fell. In the temptation account, we see Jesus as *Christus Victor*, the victorious King who defeats his enemies, specifically the enemy Satan; but also we see *Christus Vicar*, the vicarious substitute who took our place. Jesus, the Son of God, conquered temptation and Satan in our place.

### **I. Conquering Temptation in Our Place**

St. Matthew phrases the beginning of this account deliberately: “Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil.” Notice the *purpose*: “Jesus was led...into the wilderness *to be tempted*.” He is *willingly* becoming the vicar, the substitute, of sinners in facing temptation. This was God’s purpose for him.

And yes, Jesus did so in our place, but he also did so in the place of all Israel. The Old Testament refers to the forty years Israel spent in the wilderness as a “testing,” as when “Moses said to the people, ‘Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin’” (Ex. 20:20, ESV). Israel failed the test, repeatedly. They didn’t trust that Moses would come back down from Sinai, so they built a Golden Calf and called *it* YHWH. They didn’t trust God to conquer Canaan

for them, so they rebelled. They didn't trust God to sustain them through the wilderness, so they complained. After each failure, the people of Israel were punished – the ground opened and swallowed them, they were banished to a wandering forty years long, serpents came and bit them. But the intercession of God's mercy and grace, frequently through the voice of Moses, bore them up. It was only because God was planning something, that he had not yet completed his plan, that he overlooked their sin at that time. And in fact, it was because Israel failed the testing in the wilderness that Jesus subjected himself to the tempting in their place.<sup>1</sup>

One could draw an explicit parallel between Israel (who failed) and Jesus (who took their place):

1. Israel, when they were hungry, grumbled against God: "Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger" (Ex. 16:3, ESV). When Jesus "was hungry": "The Tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread.'" But Jesus refused to bow to the temptation to rely on oneself and not on God's providence and promise and will: "Jesus will not use his power to murmur or reject God's will and purpose, as Israel did in the wilderness."<sup>2</sup> Jesus answered the Tempter: "It is written: Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes out of the mouth of God." What's really telling about that response is where that comes from.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1-11:1*, 188.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 194-195.

Jesus was quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, which says, in full: “And [God] humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” (ESV). Jesus knows and lives the lesson that Israel would not learn. Therefore, in this temptation, this is all Jesus, laying aside his divine power, in humility obeying his Father, which he does for our sakes.

2. Israel, when they left Egypt, “tested the LORD by saying, ‘Is the LORD among us or not?’” (Ex. 17:7, ESV). They wondered whether God would quench their thirst, and put him to the test. So, Satan wanted Jesus to test whether God would protect and save him: “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.” Let’s see if God will really keep his promises. Let’s see if God is trustworthy. Israel tested God, but Jesus answered: “Again, it is written: You shall not test the Lord your God.” This, significantly, is from Deuteronomy again, chapter 6 verse 16, which reads in full: “You shall not put the LORD your God to the test, *as you tested him at Massah*” (ESV), which was precisely that occasion I mentioned, when Israel “tested the LORD by saying, ‘Is the Lord among us or not?’” (Ex 17:7, ESV). Rejecting this temptation, this is all Jesus, laying aside his own self-sufficiency, in humility trusting in his Father, which he does for our sakes.

3. Israel, when they came into Canaan, fell away from the worship of the true God, and instead turned to Baal, Ashtaroth, and other Canaanite gods. They saw the wealth

and power of those peoples, and wanted to share in it. Just so, Satan sought to tempt Jesus away from the true God: "I will give you all of these things, if you will bow down and worship me." This was the last straw for Jesus. Notice that in the first two temptations, idolatry was implied: Jesus would make bread himself if he didn't fully *trust* in his God. Jesus would cast himself down from the temple as a *test* of the true God. But here, Satan showed his hand. Satan's goal was idolatry, and now he makes it explicit. It is because Satan explicitly tempts Christ to turn away from the true God that Jesus shouts: "Go away, Satan!" and then he cites Scripture once again: "For it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" Once again this is from Deuteronomy, chapter 6, and verses 13-15 read: "It is the LORD your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by his name you shall swear. You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the peoples who are around you – for the LORD your God in your midst is a jealous God – lest the anger of the LORD your God be kindled against you, and he destroy you from off the face of the earth" (ESV). Israel forgot these words, lost the message, and turned to idols. Jesus worships and serves the true God, which is, in fact, his purpose.

The easy sermon would tell you at this point that Jesus has shown us in this account how *we* can overcome temptation. Look, you might hear, Jesus quoted Scripture. If only you keep God's Word in mind all the time, you can overcome Satan the same way! However, you never see a hint in this account that Jesus is meant to be presented as our *model* whom we must emulate in our resistance of sin and temptation. Instead, he is our *substitute* who conquered Satan on our behalf and in our place! What

this account proves to us is that where everyone failed – *everyone* falling into temptation, sinning, rejecting God – Jesus succeeded. Jesus is not a model, because there is no one else who could live up to that model.

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned...as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. (Rom. 5:12, 18-19, ESV)

That is why, while it is certainly good advice to keep your Bible handy, and to keep it committed to memory, the moral of this story is not what *you* should do to keep yourself sinless, but to see what *Jesus* did to make you sinless.

## II. Fulfilling His Purpose and Identity

A close examination of these temptations reveals how “Satan tries to Get Jesus to misunderstand or contradict what it means for him to live out his mission as God’s Son.”<sup>3</sup> Will Jesus use his powers to help himself, or will he lay aside his omnipotence in order to humble himself in service to others? Will Jesus test God to see if he will be saved from harm, or will he lay aside doubt and, despite being perfect, suffer the worst pain of hell on the cross so that that salvation might be ours? Will Jesus deny the true God, or will he serve that God and fulfill the purpose that God has for him?

In the Gospel of Matthew, there are in fact two accounts that are recorded with similar vividness, and, while it is lost in translation, the original Greek uses exclusively

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 198.

the present tense throughout each: this temptation of God's Son in the desert by the Devil, "and in the garden, where Jesus prepares to submit to the Father's will to drink the cup of wrath for all."<sup>4</sup> In that account we read:

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here, while I go over there and pray.' And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, 'My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me.' And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, 'My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.' And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, 'So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.' Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, 'My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.' And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So, leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words again. Then he came to the disciples and said to them, 'Sleep and take your rest later on. See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand.' (Matt. 26:36-46, ESV)

Again, where any other human being would be weak and...fall asleep, or wimp out, or choose something better for himself...Jesus persists and says, "your will be done."

You'll find that this was exactly his purpose, for he himself said, "For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me" (John 6:38, ESV).

But we're not left in the dark as to what that means, for Jesus continues: "And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 189.

it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (6:39-40, ESV). Jesus’ purpose, put briefly, is our salvation.

And therefore our identity is all wrapped up in Jesus. Who are you? What makes you who you are? Are you a mother, father? grandmother, grandfather? employed, student, retired? married, single? All of these titles are actually secondary to your identity. You are a “Christian,” a very specific name incorporating the name “Christ,” because you have been baptized into Jesus Christ, taking himself onto you. That is your identity.

Which also should prepare you for how Satan’s temptations will come against you. If Satan sought to corrupt Jesus’ sense of his identity and mission, then “as men and women in Christ, Jesus’ disciples of all ages can learn to recognize Satan’s temptations as attacks on their identity as the children of God.”<sup>5</sup> Satan’s aim is to destroy our identity as the redeemed children of God, which means he will seek to destroy our trust in God. The moment we think, “I don’t need *that* Bible Study,” or “My family can get by without a devotion *one* day this week,” then we’ve placed something else into priority over our faith, over our God. The moment we think these things, Satan wins a victory.

Satan wins a victory over each and every one of you every day. We can comfort ourselves and think otherwise, thinking, “No, I read my Bible regularly! I come to

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 198.



every Bible Study! I come to every worship service! I even talk to my neighbors about church!" Ah, but now you've answered the question wrong. When confronted with your sinfulness, you've started to answer it by pointing to your own righteousness. And there Satan wins a victory again, for he has caused you to trust in something else as your God: namely, yourself.

Instead, here's what you *can* learn from Jesus' example. When Satan tried to get him to trust in someone other than his God, Jesus shouted, "Go away, Satan! For it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" So, too, we can shout, "Go away, Satan! For it is written, 'God loved the world by sending his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.'" We trust in Jesus' merits, not ours. Remember that Latin phrase: *Christus vicar* – Christ as substitute, Christ in *your* place. His death and resurrection was in *your* place, so that his merits are *yours*.

And remember that other Latin phrase: *Christus victor* – victorious Christ. We've begun this 40-day trek toward Easter, and already, amid all the ashes and dust and death and repentance, we've seen the end: Jesus defeats the Devil, and he does it for you.

Amen.

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