

First Sunday in Lent; February 26, 2023  
+ Matthew 4:1-11 +  
“The War for Your Soul is Won”

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

**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.”**

**Then the devil took him into the holy city. He placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 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.”**

**Jesus said to him, “Again, it is written:**

**You shall not test the Lord your God.”**

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

**Then Jesus said to him, “Go away, Satan! For it is written:**

**Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.”**

**Then the devil left him, and just then angels came and served him.**

What would you say is the greatest conflict in our world today? Global poverty or global warming? What about in our own country? Is it the vicious politics of left versus right or the deterioration of American morality? Is it one of the great ongoing wars our society is waging against drugs, homelessness, or inadequate education? Maybe the battle is closer to home. Are you fighting a cold or a disease or depression? Are things with your spouse or sibling or child or friend rocky at the moment and the conflict has left you drained? Maybe you are fighting to make ends meet or fighting to keep getting out of bed. Perhaps more than one of those is on your list.

But do you know what? If you listed any of those battles as the most important, you would be wrong. The fiercest battle in the world isn't over geographical territory or political power or finances or health or

relationships. The greatest battle – one that has been raging since Genesis 3 – is the one for immortal human souls, including your immortal soul. Satan has successfully distracted much of the world and, sad to say, much of Christianity from this most important conflict. But the fact remains, this is the most important conflict in the world. Why? Because unlike any other conflict you can think of, the consequences of this battle extend beyond death into eternity. This battle is what Matthew sets before us this morning: as Jesus begins his public ministry he enters the field of battle to engage Satan in the war for your soul and mine.

Chapter four of Matthew's Gospel follows right on the heels of Jesus' baptism, where he publicly stepped into his role as the substitute for the entire human race. Jesus enters the desert to battle Satan, not for his own benefit, but for our benefit, for our eternities' sake. Why? Why did we need a champion to go to war for us? Simply because, like Adam and like every human before us, we have failed God's test. It is the test of living up to His holiness. It is the test of submitting our reason and our lives to God's authoritative Word. It is the test of putting obedience to his commands before the desires of our flesh. Because humanity has failed God, God's Son had to go to war for us.

**Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil. After he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.** Notice two things: the Holy Spirit leads Jesus into the desert with the express purpose of facing temptation. Don't we sometimes think of temptation like we think of dessert if we're on a diet? Keep it out of the house and it won't tempt you! Stay away from certain places and certain people and Satan can't get you. But that's a naive way to think of temptation. Of course we don't want to unnecessarily expose ourselves to temptations around us. But the fact is that even if you were able to totally isolate yourself from every single source of evil in this world, you still wouldn't be able to avoid temptation. Our enemy is powerful and his greatest ally lives in our own flesh. No matter how hard you try, you can't avoid his temptations. Which is precisely why Jesus has to enter the desert to be tempted. If he is going to be our substitute, he has to face the same temptations we face...with one big difference: where we fail, miserably, repeatedly, he has to emerge absolutely victorious, without even a hint of sin.

Secondly, note how the circumstances differ from Genesis 3: when Adam was tempted to eat the forbidden fruit, he was surrounded by more food than he could ever hope to eat. When Jesus faced down Satan, he was hungrier than you and I can imagine: he had eaten nothing for forty days and forty nights.

It is this natural, human need for food that Satan chooses to attack first. **The Tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread."** "Jesus, you're hungry and you're God – put those two things together and make yourself some food." It sounds so harmless that we almost miss the trap, don't we? What would be wrong with Jesus making himself a sandwich? Nothing...except the biggest thing. Satan is using Jesus' aching stomach to lead him to distrust God's loving care and to disobey God's will. His Father wants him to go hungry, and will provide when the time is right. So if Jesus makes himself a meal, he will be sinning against the First Commandment.

How does Satan lead you to distrust God's promise to provide? Has unemployment or underemployment led you to doubt that he really cares? Do you anxiously check the stock market every day because you have begun to trust it to provide for you rather than God? Have you turned work or pay into an idol and sacrificed your duties to your spouse, your family and your God on that altar?

A salesman who was trying to sell me whole-life insurance once asked me, “What is your most valuable asset?” The answer he was looking for was my potential to work and make an income. It was a chance to give him a wildly different – and correct answer. But I knew the answer he wanted, and just gave him that. Because it’s so much easier to go along with the world’s way of thinking: our talent, work, and ability is more valuable than God’s promise to care for us.

For every failure from Adam’s all the way down to ours, Jesus endures a grumbling stomach without grumbling against God. While we often mistake needs for wants and necessities for luxuries, Jesus sees the insidious nature of Satan’s proposition and he defeats it – not with an army of angels but with the sword of the Spirit: **“It is written: ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’** Jesus understands and trusts that all the bread in the world will not keep him alive if his Father does not want him to live, and that if his Father wants him to live, he will keep him alive even if he doesn’t eat for another forty days. Food or no food, our lives are in God’s hands. Jesus trusts that. Imagine that kind of faith! Now stop imagining and believe, because Jesus did this for you! And his obedience is credited to your account. You have God’s promise, and in Jesus you have that kind of faith...so act like it! Jesus: 1; Satan: 0.

**Then the devil took him to the holy city. He placed him on the pinnacle of the temple. “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.”** Again, it is easy to miss the trap. After all, doesn’t God promise to send angels to protect believers? Well, yes, but if you read Psalm 91 carefully, you will see that Satan left out an important line. **For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.** Psalm 91 is about the protection that God promises to provide from the dangers that come near believers as they are busy living for God, not diving off temples or taking other unnecessary risks to see if God will really spring into actions. The trap Satan lays is to see if Jesus would put his Father’s promise to the test.

But of course we would never needlessly expose ourselves to danger in body or health, would we? Yes, we too are tempted to take Scripture out of context and demand God’s protection in places he has not promised it. God hasn’t promised you a long life to those who needlessly place themselves in danger. God hasn’t promised to send his angels to guard you if you drive like a maniac. And he hasn’t promised to put food on the table if we will not work for it. Yet Christians often test God in these things.

But Jesus doesn’t. **Jesus answered him, “Again it is written: You shall not test the Lord your God.”** Jesus knows that God hasn’t promised to send his angels to catch him if he throws himself off of the temple. He doesn’t test his Father. But throughout his life, he also displays perfect trust in his Father’s protection and plan. We witness it when Jesus was calmly sleeps in the boat on the stormy Sea of Galilee, even as his disciples – seasoned sailors themselves – panic. We hear that trust when he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane: **“Father...not my will, but yours be done.”** We see it as he is hanging on the cross, flattened under the hammer of God’s wrath we deserved, when he submissively commits his spirit into his Father’s hands. Because we have tested God in things he has not promised and failed to trust the promises he has made, Jesus overcame Satan’s temptation in our place. He won. Jesus: 2; Satan: 0.

Finally, **Again the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. He said to him, “I will give you all of these things, if you will bow down and worship me.”** This time, you would have to be sleeping to miss the trap. The devil brazenly tempts Jesus to become

a Satanist. Why is this even be a temptation? Because Satan is proposing a shortcut to the glory God had promised Jesus; a shortcut to glory that does not involve blood and sweat and suffering and death. It is the shortcut Adam took in the Garden: Disobey God and be more glorious, like him. Forget following his will! Get glory fast and easy!

What shortcuts to glory has the devil highlighted on your path through life? I know they're out there, because I know Satan hasn't given up. Marriage is hard work. So why not look for happiness somewhere other than your spouse, when it's tough? Raising children to know and fear and love the Lord is not easy either. So why not let the church do all the work? Going day after day to an underappreciated job takes persistent effort. Why not take it easy and slack off? Honest repentance is humbling – even embarrassing. So why not just find a church where they will tell you that God loves you just the way you are? Whatever the shortcut to glory, we should understand why it's not an overstatement to call it Satanic. It's the sin Satan himself committed when he tried to knock God off the throne of heaven, and the temptation he used to snare Adam in the Garden.

Once again, Jesus does not give in. He refuses to betray his Father in favor of a shortcut to glory. **“Go away, Satan! For it is written: Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.”** Jesus holds out against this third and most attractive temptation even though he fully understands that it will lead to a path of rejection and betrayal, blood and tears, suffering and death. As we begin Lent, this battle in the wilderness gives us a pretty good indication of how the war will end on that hill outside Jerusalem, doesn't it? Jesus: 3; Satan: 0. And on Good Friday, he will win again.

So, now you have the handbook to defeating Satan and his temptations. Just do what Jesus did. Know your Bible as well as he did. Identify both Satan's traps and the specific passage that will serve as the perfect sword to shred his lies. Do that, and you too can be victorious! True enough...But wait, there's so much more to it!

If you walk out of church this morning thinking that Jesus has done nothing more than give you an example of how to fight and beat temptation, I have failed you miserably. Jesus doesn't enter the battlefield just to show us how to resist temptation (although he does that, too). He battles and defeats Satan's temptations for us. Perfect obedience to God even as he is famished – that is how Jesus begins his work of destroying Satan's power over us. And now he will continue his march all the way to Calvary to pay for our sins. Through faith, his perfect obedience is your perfect obedience. That is the victory Jesus fights to win for you.

And that's why, as we leave here to go back to our own personal battlefields, we must never give up the fight. Don't be afraid. Take the devil down, the way Jesus did. Because he did it for you, to win the war for your soul. Amen.