

“Everyday Temptations”

“When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.”

The grocery store where my family shopped was only a three-block walk from our house, so my parents would often send me on errands to pick up some needed items like bread and milk in between our weekly shopping trips. They would entrust me with taking the money they gave me to the Acme and returning home with the items on my list; but between our house and the store was a great source of temptation: the Planters Peanut store. It was one of my favorite places in town (along with Grigsby Nut Kitchen’s wonderful chocolate chip cookies), and the smell of fresh-roasted peanuts was irresistible. Every time I walked to the store, I was faced with a temptation: do I use the money my parents gave me for the purpose they intended, or do I give into temptation and buy peanuts instead?

Even after the peanut shop was torn down and replaced by Fabric Land, I would often encounter situations in which something was seeking to tempt me away from the task or purpose that I was supposed to accomplish. Should I come home from school and do my homework, or should I go outside and play with my friends? Should I practice my clarinet as my music teacher expected, or do I put a comic book on my music stand and pretend to be practicing? Do I complete my chores to my parents’ expectations, or do I only give it a half-hearted effort, not dusting the tops of the cabinets since no one but me could see them anyway? Do I resist the temptation to do the easy thing, that which I want to do – or do I do the right thing, that which is expected of me, things that in the end will be far more beneficial than whatever is tempting me away from what I should be doing.

Temptations are *“the desire to do something, especially something wrong or unwise.”* It may be as simple as a childhood temptation to buy peanuts and cookies instead of bread and milk or playing baseball instead of doing one’s math homework. Temptations continue into adulthood; we may be tempted to leave work early on a sunny day, or take a nap instead of cleaning the house, or ordering pizza instead of cooking a healthy meal. Some temptations can lead us into dangerous territory: cheating on taxes, being unfaithful in our marriage, or embezzling funds at work. Our life circumstances may change, but temptation in some form will remain a constant challenge; the question is not if we will encounter temptations, but how we will respond to them.

For Christians, the means through which we understand temptation as we seek to overcome them leading us astray is to look to the one who faced temptation in his life and ministry, our Lord Jesus Christ. Temptations were a constant threat to Jesus; the letter to the Hebrews reminds us that *“we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.”* (Hebrews 4:15). In each of the Synoptic Gospels, the baptism of Jesus, in which he hears the heavenly voice proclaiming that *“you are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased”* (Luke 3:22) is followed by a forty day ordeal in wilderness in which Jesus is tempted three times by the devil, reminiscent of Israel’s forty years of testing following their liberation from slavery in Egypt (*“According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, for every day a year, you shall bear your iniquity, forty years, and you shall know my displeasure.”* – Numbers 14:34). Luke reports that Jesus was *“led by the Spirit in the wilderness ... He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.”* (4:1-2). The temptations begin after this time of fasting, catching Jesus in a vulnerable position, weakened by hunger.

In each of the ensuing temptations, the devil is enticing Jesus to exploit his identity as the Son of God for purposes other than those intended by God. A temptation is only effective if it is something that a person is capable of doing; while none of us would be tempted if the devil were to challenge us to *“command this stone*

to become a loaf of bread" (4:3), because Jesus has this ability it is something that would be tempting: use his divine powers to alleviate his physical hunger, to exploit his sonship for his own benefit. But even though his hunger pains must have been overwhelming, Jesus knows that this is not the reason why he has come to dwell among God's people; so the one who is *"the Word [that] became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth"* (John 1:14) turns to that same word in order to reject the temptation of Satan, responding that *"one does not live by bread alone"* (4:4, quoting Deuteronomy 8:3: *"... one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD."*).

Jesus has successfully rebuked the devil, but Satan has just begun in his efforts to entice Jesus to turn away from the path that has been set before him. In the second temptation, the devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and offers him a Faustian deal:

- *"To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours."* – 4:6-7.

The human appetite for power is as great as one's physical appetite, and the possibility of having authority over the whole world would be enticing to any person. But as the child who was born "king of the Jews" in a humble stable, Jesus knows that he is called to be a different kind of king, one who has come *"not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."* (Mark 10:45). Once again, Jesus turns to Holy Scripture to rebuke the power of Satan: *"It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" (4:8, quoting Deuteronomy 6:13: "The LORD your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear."*). The faith in which Jesus had been raised is rooted in the *shema*, in which the Jewish people are called to *"Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone."* (Deuteronomy 6:4). It was this holy Word that became for Jesus *"a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path"* (Psalm 119:105) in this hour of need.

But the devil has one more temptation for Jesus: he takes Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem, places him on the pinnacle of the Temple, and dares him that *"if you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here"* (4:9). After hearing how Jesus used the Bible twice to rebuke his temptation, Satan decides to "fight fire with fire" as he now uses Scripture for his own purposes; he reminds Jesus *"for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" (4:10-11, quoting Psalm 91:11-12).* The temptation for Jesus is to put God's promises to the test, to see if God will be faithful to what God has declared in Scripture. But Jesus is not fooled by Satan's use of the Bible; he once again rebukes the devil by using Scripture in its proper fashion, stating that *"it is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" (4:12, quoting Deuteronomy 6:16).* Jesus is able to overcome Satan's temptations because his life is rooted in the Word of God, which is the means through which God's people can overcome the temptations to use what God has entrusted to us for purposes other than that which God intends:

- *"There is a twofold armor with which the devil is slain and which he fears: 1) to listen unceasingly to the Word of God, to instruct oneself in it, and to be comforted and strengthened by it; 2) then, when temptation and struggle come upon us, to lift up our hearts to that same Word and cry to God, invoking him for help. Thus one of the two things is always present, continuing as an eternal conversation between God and the soul. Either God speaks to us and we are still, listening to God, or he listens to us as we speak to him, praying for what we need."* – Martin Luther, 1539.

In both Matthew's and Mark's account of the Temptation, the devil departs and Jesus is comforted by angels:

- *"Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him."* – Matthew 4:11.
- *"He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him."* – Mark 1:13.

But there are no angels to provide Jesus with comfort in Luke. Instead, the scene ends with foreboding: *“When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.”* (4:13). That “opportune time” would come at the hour of Jesus’ Passion, when the Tempter will reenter the narrative through Judas: *“Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was one of the twelve; he went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers of the temple police about how he might betray him to them.”* (22:3-4). The temptations would reappear as Jesus was crucified, when bystanders became agents of Satan in their taunts and cries for Jesus to come down from the cross in order to save his own life at the cost of being the Savior of all people:

- *“And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, ‘He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!’ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, ‘If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!’”* – 23:35-37.

The soldiers and leaders of the people revive the voice of temptation first heard in the wilderness: *“If you are the Son of God ...”* Jesus again refuses to call upon the power of God for his own comfort of security; *“if he is, in a larger sense, to save others, he cannot save himself.”* (Fred Craddock).

The temptation scene serves several important functions in Luke’s Gospel:

1. The temptations clarify the nature of Jesus’ work as the Son of God, interpreting the implications of his identity for his coming ministry.
2. The temptations identify Jesus with the heritage of Israel: bread (Exodus 16:15), testing the Lord (Exodus 17:1-7) and idolatry (Exodus 32).
3. The temptations mirror the conflict of God’s reign with the reign of Satan, enabling the reading to understand *“the whole of Jesus’ ministry as an attack on the enslaving and destructive effects of Satan’s work.”* (Fred Culpepper).
4. The temptations emphasize that Jesus’ ministry should be understood as the fulfillment of Scriptures. Jesus’ three responses to the devil are quotes from God’s Word, focusing attention on both the power and fulfillment of Scripture that Jesus will proclaim when in his hometown synagogue he announces that *“today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”* (Luke 4:21).
5. The temptations offer Jesus’ followers a model for resisting temptation; *“he relies on Scripture and refuses to put God to the test.”* (Culpepper).

The words from Deuteronomy through which Jesus rejects the temptations of the devil are words that are applicable to all people. They declare that we are to make life more than merely the pursuit of our physical needs or the satisfaction of our own desires and agendas.

- *“We are to worship and serve God and God alone, and it is not for us to test God ... The supreme purpose of all life is the worship of God. Any pursuit, priority, or preoccupation that diverts us from that purpose should be seen for what it is: the devil’s temptation.”* – Culpepper.

Jesus begins his ministry fully aware that the temptations of Satan did not end in the wilderness, because Satan continues to look for any “opportune time” in which to strike. In John’s Gospel, which does not contain an account of the temptation in the wilderness, there are reports of temptations that Jesus faces in numerous situations:

- *“Jesus answered them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves’ ... So they said to him, ‘What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, “He gave them bread from heaven to eat.”’”* – John 6:26, 30-31.

- “So his brothers said to him, ‘Leave here and go to Judea so that your disciples also may see the works that you are doing’ (For not even his brothers believed in him.) Jesus said to them, ‘My time has not yet come, but your time is always here. The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify against it that its works are evil.’” – 7:3-7.
- “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say – ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” – 12:27.

Jesus is aware that trials and temptations are an everyday threat to him, and that they will be an everyday reality for those who follow him as disciples. He knows that they will be tempted to use their position for their own gain, or to put themselves in a position that is superior to others, or to misuse the powers entrusted to them for a purpose other than that which the Lord wills. It is for this reason that when Jesus teaches his disciples how to pray, he includes the petition that we pray regularly: *“Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.”* It must be emphasized that this does not mean that God is the source of temptation, or that our Father is responsible whenever we are exposed to the powerful enticements of the Evil One. As Martin Luther teaches in the *Small Catechism*, *“it is true that God tempts no one, but we ask in this prayer that God would preserve and keep us, so that the devil, the world, and our flesh may not deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great and shameful sins, and that, although we may be attacked by them, we may finally prevail and gain the victory.”* As we sing in the beloved hymns, when we are beset by trials and temptations *“we should never be discouraged – take it to the Lord in prayer.”*

- “So you see that no one is free from trials. However, we can defend ourselves against them and check them by entreating God’s help in prayer ... Thus, as St. Augustine declares, we cannot prevent trials and temptations from overtaking us, but with our prayer and our invocation of God’s assistance, we can stave off their victory over us.” – Luther, *Exposition of the Lord’s Prayer*.

My temptations did not end when I no longer had to walk past the Peanut Shop to the Acme; throughout my life, I have been tempted to live my life according to my own wishes and desires, to use my position as pastor to “get ahead,” to seek glory for myself instead of giving God the glory that belongs solely to God. As temptations in Jesus’ life were not confined to one time and place, everyday we will face temptations as individual Christians and as the Church of Jesus Christ. While such temptations are dangerous, they are not insurmountable; as Jesus overcame the onslaught of the devil through the power of God’s Word, we also have the Word of God as our “mighty fortress,” as the means through which we can defeat the forces of “sin, death, and the power of the devil”:

- “Though hordes of devils fill the land, all threatening to devour us, we tremble not, unmoved we stand, they cannot overpower us ... God’s Word forever shall abide, not thanks to foes, who fear it; for God himself fights by our side with weapons of the spirit.” – ELW Hymn 504, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.”

We will face temptations every day; but every day, we have the assurance of God’s steadfast, loving, powerful presence with us, giving us strength to overcome the forces of temptation so that we might be steadfast in God’s Word, faithful to God’s call, and confident that all along our pilgrim journey – in our trials, in our troubles, *“when my head is bowed in sorrow”* – we have *“Jesus to walk with me.”* Amen.