

We assume Jesus' wilderness temptation was just a time for the devil to trick Jesus into doing something bad or evil, just as we look at temptation that way in our lives. But too often we miss the point of the encounter. We can blame the devil, but temptation never comes from outside. It comes from within. It is what we choose it to be. It is only where I am weak that I can even begin to be tempted.

Jesus' ministry began where it could have ended. He either began on the right foot or would abandon his mission. The emptiness of the desert was a perfectly empty place to begin. This was the most important moment of the Gospel for Jesus, the fully human son of God, had to look inward and decide what his ministry would become. He began by testing his resolve. He began by clarifying his vision. He stood all alone testing his love for heaven and for earth.

The Greek word for tempt means to undertake a trial or put something to a test. It has to do with seeing what will happen when variables are applied to the basic element of what is undergoing a test. And so Jesus walked into the desert not on the defensive but firmly putting his love on the line and announcing what he was ready to do, no matter what distractions or diversions might be planted as roadblocks to defeat his purpose.

Jesus put himself to the test in a way that the devil would know what he was up to. It is easy to think this was no big deal for Jesus (as he was also God) but the point of this is to emphasize Jesus was really a man. This was a big deal and maybe for reasons that we often don't even consider. For God to breeze through ministry from Christmas to Easter using all of his power and perfection would have been no big deal. But Jesus emptied himself in every way he could, leaving his home, his family, giving up food and water, and rejecting the heavenly glory and power that could be a crutch in his important moment. This was an incredible sacrifice, to make himself as weak as he could before rejecting the tantalizing offers placed on the table in front of him.

This was his dry run for Calvary when he would face a similar surrender. And his victory in the desert announced from day one what he was up to and assured Satan who the ultimate victor would be. What we call the scientific method of inquiry is what this moment was all about. He removed all the variables, turned up the heat and we see the result. He was like a scientist who boils an impure rock to extract pure gold. He was like an athlete who trains to his utmost endurance to be able to run the race of his life. Temptation is only a word, but now you have a better sense of what Jesus was up to and how the devil was more of a spectator than the director of this moment.

Knowing Jesus was in the desert for you and me begs the question of what we will

be tempted to do in response. Will we value his loving effort by how we live, or will the values of a broken world be too shiny to resist? What will each of us do, and how will each of us live in response to such love? Think about it this way. We would rather never be tempted, but the reality of living in a broken world is living with temptation. You know how it goes: *"No one is looking. Don't tell mom what really happened. If the gossip is juicy, spread it. If it feels good, do it!"* You see, temptation is simply deciding what the basis of our life really is.

How we deal with temptation is more important than trying to avoid the inevitable. That is why Jesus' went looking for his adversary! I am not suggesting anyone should seek to be tempted, but to realize that daily our faith will be put to the test. Daily living is about putting our faith in front of our weakness and trusting that God will give us the basics to keep moving forward.

There was a father who took his young son along on a business trip. He said, *"Son, our hotel will have a pool, but we will not be able to use it. I have meetings while it is open and don't want you to go by yourself."* The father came back to the room, couldn't find his son, until he looked in the pool where he was swimming. *"I didn't mean to go swimming,"* pleaded the boy. *"So why did you bring your bathing suit?"* the father asked. *"Oh,"* replied the boy, *"I brought it along just in case I was tempted."*

The reality is the temptation didn't happen on the trip, but when the young boy packed his suitcase ta home. He had already failed the test and it was just a matter of time before that came out in the open. This boy knew his enemy but decided before they left home that he would ignore his father. He could have left his suit behind, so that even if he was tempted, he wouldn't have gone in the water. But he chose a different path. And that path caused a lot of pain.

Jesus' temptation was no surprise, it was his goal! His plan was to face the same choices we face. He went looking for the devil where he knew he would find him. Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness was not a distraction but an attack in Satan's playground. A preemptive strike as he began ministry by facing what could defeat him. Even though Jesus showed his power, Satan simply disappeared, only to try again later. So it is for us. Sometimes we are strong. Sometimes we are weak. To show the purpose of his mission, Jesus faced what we face and conquered where we fail.

Jesus began ministry by facing everything the world seeks (miracles, glory, and making demands of God) and saying, "No thank you." His goal was to show that faith is our strength against Satan. Instead of an easy way out, Jesus chose, servanthood, sacrificial death, and a tomb he didn't deserve. And in response to the inevitable, when temptation is not resisted, he says, *"learn from your mistake. Repent. And I will forgive you!"* Just think of Peter's denial in the garden, or a

parable about a runaway son who was welcomed home. Jesus' ministry is all about freeing us keeping us from temptation ... and also about freeing us when caught in temptation's snare. It is all about his loving grace!

We begin our living with those gifts in hand. In the wilderness and in the garden of his arrest, Jesus faced what could derail his mission. And his victory assures strength where we would otherwise be weak.

When life is easy, faith can be ignored or taken for granted. But when faith is tested, it grows, and we remember where we have been. Faith is shaped and grows in the wilderness, so that it might become even more powerful in the moments of joy and blessing. Whenever faith is an answer, it becomes more of an asset. Satan will keep pecking away. And painful as temptation might be, each experience of faith in the midst of tough choices prepares us for the next battle to come.

A counselor once complained to another therapist that he had never been propositioned by a client. He wondered if something was wrong with him, and his feelings obviously were a little hurt. His friend told him that in reality, he had never been propositioned because he had never given anyone a hint that he would take the bait. *Knowing your enemy means staying away from where Satan has the upper hand.*

Today we remember that God has come looking for us so that whatever we face, we are never alone. His strength and guidance are gifts that we don't deserve, but they flavor the choices and the living that follow. Certainly, we keep praying, "lead us not into temptation," but how wonderful to know that when temptation comes, we are never alone.

There is nothing we must face; no wilderness, no cross, and no tomb that Jesus has not already conquered for us. That gift leads to certain peace. Amen