

 **Main Street**
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Matthew 4:1-11
“The Testing Of God’s Son”

January 11, 2015
(1st Sunday After Epiphany)

Pastor Phil Thraikill
Main Street UMC
211 North Main St., Greenwood, SC 29646
Church Office: 864-229-7551
Church Website: www.msumc1.org

“Following Christ From City Center!”

IIB', MATTHEW 4:1-11 "THE TESTING OF GOD'S SON"

Testing God's Son, //Abraham, b. San. 89b, Genre = Jewish Haggadah (Story)

IIB: 4:1-11 JESUS TESTED IN WILDERNESS BY SATAN. _____ Trials After Baptism, Before Ministry

James 1:13-14, Lord Tests For Success; Satan Tempts For Failure

1) vv.1-2 INTRODUCTION: HOLY SPIRIT LEADS INTO TESTING (peirazo). _____ Spirit Remains

ND Conceived, Empowered, Led By Spirit, Will He Be Faithful? Dt. 8:2, 13:3

1 Then Jesus was "taken up" by **the Spirit** into the wilderness **Haunt Of Demons, 4 Macc. 18:18, 1 Enoch 10:4-5**

to be tempted by **THE DEVIL**. **Heb. 4:15, Purpose = Sir. 2:1, Abraham In Jub. 17:15-18:19, Dt. 8:2-5 LXX, Israel**

2 And he fasted "forty days and forty nights," and afterward he was hungry. **Moses, Dt. 9:9, Ex. 24:18, 34:28**

Devil = Diabolos = Slanderer, Job 1-2, Zech. 3:1-2, 1 Chron. 21:1

Great Baker **2) vv.3-10 THE THREE TEMPTATIONS AND THREE RESPONSES OF JESUS.**

_____ Temptation = Will Satan Or The Spirit Guide The Son?

a) vv.3-5 Temptation To Meet His Own Needs Independently. _____ **Mk. 1:12-13, Lk. 4:1-12**

DD **What Does It Mean To Be God's Faithful Son? Israel Doubts God On Food, Ex. 16**

3 **Lower** *And THE TEMPTER came and said to him,* **Provision, Independent Action, Satanic Vision, Divert Jesus (1)**

"If (better Since) you are the Son of God, **27:40, Take Care Of Yourself! Only Proper To Him (2)**

command these stones to become loaves of bread." **? = Provision, Temptation: Bodily Hunger (3)**

Magic-Bread Messiah? Life More Than Bread, Spirit As Guide

4 **But he answered,** **Jesus Trusts God, Remains Dependent, Uses Tools We All Have = Bible/Spirit**

"It is written, **NO! How A King Responds, Response From Scripture (1)**

'Man shall not live by bread alone, **6:33 Later, Deut. 8:3 LXX, Wis. 16:26 (2)**

but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of GOD." **Eph. 6:17, Life Is More Than Appetites**

Is Jesus A Bread/Populist Messiah Or A Magician (Gratuitous Miracles)? No

Miracle Man **b) vv.5-7 Temptation To Test God's Love And Protection, Misread Scripture.**

DD **Providence, Israel Tested God's Faithfulness, Ex. 17**

5 **Higher** Then **THE DEVIL** took him to the holy city, **Ezek. 8:3, ? = Providence, Satanic Initiative (1)**

and set him on the pinnacle (wing) of the temple, (6) and said to him, **450 ft., Trust Without Demonstration**

"If (better Since) you are the Son of God, **Two Can Play This Game! Question Identity (2)**

throw yourself down; **Does God Do Human Bidding? Temptation: est God's Care (3)**

for it is written, 'He will give his angels charge of you,' **Scriptural Support, Echoes Jesus (4)**

and 'On their hands they will bear you up, **Lying Words Using Scripture, Real Danger**

lest you strike your foot against a stone." **2:13, 19, 26:52-54, Ps. 91:11-12 LXX, Wis. 2:16-20**

Instant Following? Son Will Serve The Father, Not Father The Son

7 Jesus said to him, **Miracle On Demand Lifestyle, Again in 16:1, 27:40, Trust Is Not Presumption**

"Again it is written, **NO! Response From Scripture (1)**

'You shall not tempt the Lord your GOD." **No Gratuitous Miracles, Deut. 6:16, Ex. 17:2-7 (2)**

Will He Be A Spectacular Messiah? Deluded Visionary? No

Power Broker **c) vv.8-10 Temptation To Idolatry And A Short-Cut Mentality.** _____ **Is Jesus An Idolater?**

DD **Reverses Their Disobedience, Israel Committed Idolatry, Forsook God, Ex. 32**

8 **c Highest** Again, **THE DEVIL** took him to a very high mountain, **Dt. 3:27, Desperate Satanic Initiative (1)**

and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them; **//Nero, Appeal To His Future (2)**

9 and he said to him, **Political Power, Jesus Accepts Sovereignty On God's Terms**

"All these I will give you, **Escalation: Desert ⇒ Jerusalem ⇒ World, Jn. 12:31, 2 Cor. 4:4, 1 Jn. 5:19**

if you will fall down and worship me." **Empty Claim, Temptation: Short Cut, Idolatry To Gain All (3)**

Uses Spirit/Word, Jesus' Kingdom Has Other Origins //Magi In 2:2, 8, 11, 28:17

10 Then Jesus said to him, **Preview Of Exorcism Ministry, Power Over Evil One, 28:18**

"Begone, SATAN! **NO! //16:23, Abolished In 25:41, Climactic Command Of Victory (4)**

for it is written, **Face To Face Standoff! Satan Quotes, Jesus Obeys, Response From Scripture (1)**

'You shall worship **Dt. 6:13, Later On, Peter Wants Kingdom Without A Cross, 16:22**

the Lord your GOD **Worldly Means, Jesus Responds With Scripture Only**

and him only **28:18, Victory Is For Those Who Persevere**

shall you serve." **Satan's World Control Challenged, Loyalty Is Settled, Deut. 6:13 (2)**

All Three = His Use Of Power, Seek Worldly Kingdoms By Worldly Means? No

1') v.11 CONCLUSION: MINISTRY OF ANGELS AFTER THE VICTORY OF FAITHFULNESS.

ND **Issues Settled, We Now Know What Kind Of Son He Will Be: Faithful, Patient, Steadfast**

11 **c'** Then **THE DEVIL** left him, (v.10)/ **1) He is Champion/Victor Over Evil One, 2) Faithful Son/True Israel, Test. Nat. 8.4**

b' and behold, **angels** came (v.5), **6:13, 33, Worthy King Not Defect, Ministry Begins, 12:26-29**

a' and ministered to him (v.4). **1 Kgs. 18, Devil/Satan/The Evil One/Beelzebul/Ruler Of Demons = Synonymous In Matthew**

A Brief Treatment Of IIB' Matthew 4:1-11

This thought unit is bounded by the inclusion *the devil* (v.1b // v.11a) and *the Spirit* (v.1a) // *angels* (v.11b). The surface structure is concentric with a clear introduction (1. vv.1-2), a clear conclusion (1' v.11), and a longer central section. (2. vv.3-10) in three parallel sections (a. vv.3-5. b. vv.5-7, c. vv.8-10). The introduction and conclusion are Narrative Discourse (ND); the three central sections Direct Discourse (DD). Thus, storytelling surrounds three dialogic exchanges. Each of the central components has a two-part structure: an attack of Satan (vv.3, 5-6, vv.8-9) followed Jesus' response invoking Deuteronomy using *it is written* (vv.4, 7, 10). The word *devil* is used four times (vv.1b, 5a, 8a, 11a) to tie the unit together and is supplemented by two other titles: *the tempter* (v.3a), *Satan* (v.10a)

Other structural strategies in the central section involve escalation, the first from lower to higher to highest (i.e. desert, ascent to the pinnacle of the temple, ascent to the cosmic mountain), the second from smaller to greater area (desert isolation, city of Jerusalem, all the kingdoms of the world). Still another possible literary pattern is that Jesus proves faithful on three fronts where Israel failed in their wilderness wanderings: 1) Israel failed on the food issue (Ex. 16), 2) Israel tested God's faithfulness (Ex. 17), 3) Israel Committed Idolatry (Ex. 32). That such typology is not foreign is indicated by the fulfillment citation of 2:14, "Out of Egypt have I called my son." Where God's people failed, God's Son succeeds as he recapitulates the history of the Jews. Jesus is the obedient one through whom God's gains leverage.

The contrast between the theophany of the baptism and the beginning of the temptations is stark. The empowering of the Spirit and the heavenly voice of affirmation are a high point that leads immediately to a confrontation with the Evil One. The first act of the Holy Spirit is to take Jesus up into the wilderness for the purpose of being *tempted by the devil*. It is a trial of endurance, obedience, and faithfulness. Jesus is to be exposed to the full force of evil and its deceptive powers. That the fast was for "forty days and forty nights" echoes the fast of Moses in Deut. 9:9. It is when starvation is near that the devil first presents himself. It is not uncommon for spiritual experiences and fresh commitment to be followed by trials (Sirach 2:1). An important distinction is that God *tests us* with a view to our success, but Satan *tempts us* with a view to our failure (James 1:13-14). We endure testing and resist temptation.

Since the second and third temptations are clearly visionary, i.e. involving transport to the pinnacle of the temple and a cosmic mountain, so likely is the first. To say it was mental is not to label it illusory. It was in the theatre of Jesus' mind that this drama was enacted. After forty days of fasting and solitude, the tempter presented himself at Jesus' point of weakness, "Since you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." In other words, break your dependence on God and use your status and powers independently to meet your own immediate needs. Jesus response from Deut. 8:1 is that feasting on God is more basic than bread. Jesus human appetites will not run his life. He'd rather die than sin.

As Jesus was *taken up* by the Spirit in 4:1, so now *the devil took him to the holy city* to gaze down 450 feet from the temple to the valley below. The temptation is presumption, i.e. to dare God to break his fall with angelic intervention, and since Jesus has just quoted Scripture, Satan does likewise with his own little twist. Jesus' reply from Dt. 6:16, "You shall not tempt the Lord your God," is a rejection of showmanship, of taking the easy way to wow the crowds. From the temple the final vision ascends to a cosmic mountain from which all the world is visible. Here Satan tips his hand; what's he after is to take glory to himself and deny it to God. If Jesus will but prostrate himself, it shall all be his! One day Jesus will rule, but not by any shortcut. With a curt command, "Begone, Satan," Jesus dismisses his foe and affirms first commandment faithfulness in Dt. 6:3, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve." Jesus is the victor and will now begin to plunder enemy territory. The character of the Son is proven. His flesh, his understanding of power, and his deepest loyalty are all in proper order.

THE TESTING OF GOD’S SON

*“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness
to be tempted by the devil.”*

The Holy Spirit arranges a test of character.

M A T T H E W 4 : 1

There is a yearly media-frenzy about Super Bowl commercials, the most expensive in the world. One from 2013 starts with thirty-something man in a café.¹ As a waitress brings coffee, he gazes out the window at workmen posting a billboard for the new Mercedes CLA. Suddenly a man (played by Willem Defoe) sits across the table. The Satan-figure says, "Nice car!"

"Sure is," the young man agrees.

The Devil with pointed, polished fingernails holds a gold fountain pen in hand and says, "Make a deal with me, kid, and you can have the car and everything that goes with it." The background music throughout is, appropriately, the Rolling Stones classic *Sympathy For The Devil*, "Please allow me to introduce myself, I'm a man of wealth and taste. I've been around for a long, long year. Stole many a man's soul and faith.... Pleased to meet you, hope you guessed my name. But what's confusing you is the nature of my game."²

As the young man takes the pen, he visualizes himself in a series of scenes. In the first he drives his new Mercedes to a red carpet ceremony, exiting the car with gorgeous blond on his arm (Kate Upton). Fame and lust. In the next, he's at a club dancing side-by-side with his good buddy Usher. A-list prestige. In the next he's a popular model being photographed for magazine covers. Being envied. Finally, as he jumps in his car to escape a mob of groupies, he's driving a Formula One race

¹ Preaching Today.com search under Matthew 4:1-11. Viewable at abcnews.go.com/Business/video/mercedes-super-bowl-ad-features-willem-dafae-usher-18396869,

² Lyrics, www.youtube.com/watch?v=pkXIYgsvO0c.

course speeding by the lead car. Beating the competition. It's pure male fantasy enabled by the devil's magic pen, as if someone plugged a video feed into his imagination. He's slipping, as is every man watching the commercial.

Suddenly, they are back at the table. The tempter asks, "So, what do you say?" Holding the golden pen, the young man stares at a medieval looking hand-lettered Latin contract, then gazes out the window where he sees the relatively low price of the Mercedes on the billboard, starting at only \$29,900. "Thanks," he says, "but I think I've got this!" A disappointed devil vaporizes in a cloud of smoke. Our young friend is rescued not by his character or higher commitments by his own more-than-adequate checkbook. He's not rejected the temptations of the devil; he already has the money for the car and all that may go with it in a world of imagination. The commercial then ends with the true lie cast in religious language, "This September *set your soul free*. The Mercedes Benz CLA, starting under thirty thousand dollars."

It's a new spin on an old story, as old as the Garden of Eden and its clever, talking snake, as old as Israel's forty years of failed desert wanderings, as old as Jesus forty days of wilderness fasting and character testing. We are temptable, aren't we? Our desires easily bent and misdirected from right appreciation to wrong usage. Our first impulse to complain and blame God rather than look within. So when people say, "I don't know what came over me?" or, "How could I do such a thing?" or "All I wanted was to be happy," be careful of looking down on them because they are you; they are your mirror. We are all in this temptation and sin and evil thing together, all combatants on the same moral and spiritual battlefield; no one is exempt, and all are under customized pressure. Everyone needs encouragement and accountability.

Our world is currently arranged and managed to destroy us if we're not careful and if we do not know, as the Stones sang, *the nature of his game*, meaning our enemy's strategies and our particular thin spots.³ Behind the appearances of our world is a real foe: angelic, fallen, a leader of hordes, evil and a liar, part of the cast of characters in a much larger drama, and alongside us- if we follow him- is a real champion who can protect and defend and equip and train and forgive and restore us, and his name is Jesus Christ. It is his story of testing before us today, and when he first revealed its contents to his closest associates, I suspect they could not breathe, so great was the suspense and privilege of viewing history's greatest conflict through

³ 2 Cor. 2:2, "... to keep Satan from gaining the advantage over us, for we are not ignorant of his designs."

the eyes of one who was there and emerged the victor. It is the battle without which Jesus would never have had the authority to go public and thus cross their paths with the invitation, “Follow me, and along the way I’ll teach you to fish for people.”⁴

If you had a camera that fortieth day, you might have seen a skinny Jew sitting in the shade of a mountain cave looking out over the chalky wilderness west of the Jordan, heat rising in shimmering waves of mirages.⁵ Lips swollen, eyes sunken, a half-drunk skin of water at his side, waiting on something yet to happen, wondering when Abba-Father would release him to eat again and willing, if necessary, to die here rather than disobey. But if you had occupied a seat in the theatre of his mind, it was a different world: a flash of light followed by an alien voice and rounds of debate over Scripture,⁶ then a sudden spiritual transport from one place to another and a battle to say No to offers that were appealing at so many levels. When it was over, an exhausted Jesus was fed and comforted and soon began the long walk north to Galilee as the lone victor in an ancient war, ready to set captives free and demonstrate what it meant for God to be king again at ground level.⁷ Jesus survived the ordeal. His character was shown to match his identity as God’s beloved Son. So if you’ve ever felt guilty or disgusted because of your thoughts and actions, as I have, listen carefully. If you’ve ever felt something tugging you towards what you know is wrong, as I do, this word is for you. If you bear the scars of battles lost, this is for you. If the Christian life is a spiritual trip to Disney World, then buy your ticket and buckle up for a pleasant ride through the Magic Kingdom, but if it’s a battlefield with live rounds and real casualties, a different mindset is needed.

⁴ Mark 1:16-20.

⁵ For a narrative based on careful scholarship, see Ben Witherington, *The Gospel of Jesus: A True Story* (Franklin, TN: seedbed, 2013), Chapter 6, “Temptation,” 32-36.

⁶ The genre of 4:1-11 appears to be an haggadic (story) rabbinic form parallel to the threefold contest between Abraham and Satan in which each quotes Scripture (b. Sanh. 89b) [Charles Talbert, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010), 60].

⁷ On the kingdom, see N.T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus* (Downer’s Grove, ILL: IVP, 1999), Chap. 2, “The Challenge of the Kingdom,” 35-53; on the battle with evil his *Simply Jesus* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2011), Chap. 10, “Battle and Temple,” 119-130; also his new *Simply Good News* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2015), Chap. 3, “Surprised by King Jesus,” 35-56.

The Bible teaches we human beings are complex creatures made in God’s image and designed to be infused with God’s Holy Spirit. The same capacity that allows us to experience the filling of the Holy Spirit allows the possibility of being filled with an unholy spirit leading to inhuman actions. Like a single cell within the body we have identifiable boundaries; the boundaries are semi-permeable membranes that let in nutrients and evacuate waste. The cell is highly interactive with its environment, so the human person with the visible and invisible worlds. Cells can be infected with a deadly virus, and the human soul can be colonized. When added to the arsenal of the other ways we understand human complexity, the Christian understanding of the personal nature of evil has real explanatory capacity.

In his psychologically probing novel *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*⁸ Robert Louis Stevenson tells the story of Dr. Henry Jekyll: respected in his community, a gentleman in every respect. But our physician had a number of secret vices concealed from public view. So he could practice his obsessions without endangering his reputation, Jekyll used his skills to concoct a potion which dramatically altered his appearance. The evil within was now manifested in his monstrous visage, and under this disguise he was free to indulge dark passions. How clever! How deadly! But the more he yielded to the dark side- however, the harder it was to make the return to his other more respectable self; he was finally consumed by the evil he had surrendered to bit by bit. Stevenson is right. There is an ongoing battle within each of us, even the most respectable. Each of us retains the capacity for monstrous evil if we give ourselves over to temptation again and again. Anyone can become *Mr. Hyde* if they drop their defenses against the dark spiritual forces that are around us. When you woke up this morning, someone was already after you! The verses we used in our Greeting at the beginning of the service are perhaps the clearest warning: “Be sober,” warns Peter, “be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experience of suffering is required of your brotherhood throughout the world.”⁹ Threat and resistance, steadfastness and suffering are our lot.

The Bible doesn’t tell us all we’d like to know about the origin of evil. It hints

⁸ New York: Penguin, 1980.

⁹ 1 Peter 5:6-9.

at a heavenly rebellion but gives few details.¹⁰ That it's already in the garden to lure our first parents means it's primordial. The classical Christian answer is that behind evil in this world is the organizing intellect of a fallen angel who is variously named *Satan, The Devil, The Evil One, The Ruler Of This World*.¹¹ We are not speaking of a cartoon creature with red costume and pitchfork. And no horns or cloven hooves or sulfur breath as with later mythology. Nothing so silly as that, and people who invoke this image as a way to dismiss the awful reality Jesus spoke of show themselves to have little understanding. Here is immense angelic intelligence and powers beyond our own. Been at it a very long time. This fallen angel is not the equivalent of God but of Michael the archangel; he remains a creature and is thus God's devil, allowed a measure of freedom but kept on a chain of limits. Vicious and malignant as this being is, the Evil One does not have power to destroy creation. There is no eternal standoff between good and evil, no absolute cosmic dualism, no eternal yin and yang of opposing realities as in the *Star Wars* movies, and the outcome is not up for grabs. Satan remains a non-human and inhumane creature, neither omnipotent nor omnipresent. But he is the usurper of this world, it's temporary malevolent landlord, a squatter on someone else's property. One day he will be removed from the script.¹² His greatest tools are lying, deception, and the capacity to infect culture with his own rebellion against the Lord God. He is able to tempt and lure but not compel; that is always a choice for which we are responsible. The door to temptation leading to evil is opened from inside. To say, as Flip Wilson used to quip, "the devil made me do it," is a copout and no excuse.¹³ Have you been aided and coached and lured? Yes. But *made you do it?* No. Your *Yes* was required.

I love what D.L. Moody said, "I believe Satan to exist for two reasons: first, the Bible says so, and second, I've done business with him."¹⁴ Each of us has done

¹⁰ 2 Pet. 2:45, Mt. 25:41, Jn. 8:44, Eph. 6:12.

¹¹ Methodists will be interested in the John Wesley sermon *Of Evil Angels*, available <http://new.gbgm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/72/>.

¹² Mt. 25:41, Rev. 21:1-8.

¹³ For a scholarly treatment, see Anthony N.S. Lane, editor, *The Unseen World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), especially Chapter 6 by Keith Fernando, "Screwtape Revisited: Demonology Western, African, and Biblical," 103-132.

¹⁴ Albert M. Wells, editor, *Inspiring Quotations* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 198), 75.

business with him, or at least with one of his underlings the Bible calls *demons* and *unclean spirits*. Our foe is organized and relentless; he fights dirty by exploiting weak spots. His ultimate goal is to steal the worship that belongs to God and to draw us under his destructive power, now and in the age to come. He is not a creator but the spoiler of all he touches. And when Jesus came, it was to expose him, defeat him in the desert, free as many of captives as he could in one lifetime, leaving the rest of the work to his Spirit-empowered church till at the end, as we sing, “every foe is vanquished and Christ is Lord indeed.” We are to implement his victory.

We need a sober appreciation of the fearsome reality and subtle power of the Evil One, for whom Matthew gives us three titles: he is *the tempter* (v.3), the *devil* (v.5), and *Satan*. (v.10). One reality, several names. The one Jesus faced and with whose underlings he skirmished is not a joke. Three times in Gospel of John Jesus respectfully calls him *the ruler of this world*.¹⁵ That he offered Jesus the *kingdoms of this world* in exchange for a moment of worship confirms this title. The kingdom of God had not yet come, and so a false prince fills a temporary vacuum. The reason this world looks like a war zone is because it is. ISIS beheadings, Paris magazine massacres and Jewish deli killings, crystal meth corroding people and filling our jails. Such biblical realism is not popular. We dismiss the Evil One as a useless symbol and outdated myth, something we moderns have moved beyond. An important minority voice is noted historian Dr. Jeffrey Burton Russell, who writes:

"Every day, in every place, Satan and his powers and working to block the kingdom of God. The Devil is the source of lies, of murder, of wars; he tempts us, accuses us, punishes us; he afflicts us with disease, and even possesses us.... The devil of the New Testament is not a joke... he is not merely symbolic...." And here is Russell’s key sentence: "The saving mission of Christ can be understood only in terms of its opposition to the power of the Devil.... The world is full of terrible grief, suffering, and pain. But somewhere, beyond the power of Satan, is a greater power that gives meaning to that."¹⁶

¹⁵ John 12:31, 14:30, 16:11; see Ed Murphy, *The Handbook of Spiritual Warfare* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1992).

¹⁶ *The Devil- Perceptions Of Evil From Antiquity To Primitive Christianity* (New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977), 249.

When we remove Satan from the cast of characters who make up the drama of our faith, the result is a plot something less and even something other than the faith once delivered to the saints.¹⁷ Christianity soon degenerates into a mushy, bureaucratic, *do-good* religion of niceness, accommodation, and tolerance that bears little resemblance to the heroic lives of the apostles and saints. For there to be a renewal of the church, there must be—along with many other things,¹⁸ a thoughtful recovery of the neglected doctrines of Satan and spiritual warfare and of how the Holy Spirit deliberately provokes confrontation between the church and these hostile powers. To be filled with the Spirit is to be thrust into conflict, not just given happy feelings and good advice for successful living. If we expect public victories for the faith, we must be willing to take up private battles with the Evil One and his accomplices. We must practice saying *No* and fire back the truth of Scripture as an offensive weapon. Before Jesus could begin his public work there was a private appointment, a showdown with the master of deception, a cage fight, a duel to win with the weapons of dependence and self-control and God’s Word as selected by God’s Spirit. The one who inspired King Herod to try to kill Jesus as a child¹⁹ would like to try it again, only this time to splatter Jesus all over the floor of the Kidron Valley with a foolish leap off the temple, “I wonder if he will commit suicide? That would get him off my turf. There’s even a Scripture I could twist.”²⁰

Apart from spiritual conflict, Jesus is incomprehensible.²¹ The life of Jesus was one long combat against the Evil One and the various spheres of his influence. And

¹⁷ See Andrew Walker’s *Enemy Territory* (Wilmore, KY: Bristol, 1987).

¹⁸ See Dr. William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Renewal* (Grand Rapids, MI, 2003), Chapter 9, “Renewal and the Quest for Intellectual Integrity,” 153ff. for a vision of renewal that involves all the various means of grace enlivened by the Holy Spirit.

¹⁹ Matthew 2:13-23.

²⁰ See Craig Evans, “Jesus and Evil Spirits in the Light of Psalm 91,” in *Baptistic Theologies*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Autumn 2009, 43-58, on reading Ps. 91 as exorcistic.

²¹ See Gregory A. Boyd, *God at War: the Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (Downer’s Grove, ILL: IVP, 1997), especially chapter 6, “Tying Up The Strong Man: The Kingdom of God As a Warfare Concept,” 171-191; also his *Is God To Blame* (Downer’s Grove, ILL: IVP, 2003). For a debate on methods, see James Beilby and Paul Eddy, editors, *Understanding Spiritual Warfare: Four Views* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012).

when the twisted forces of religion and government conspired together to kill him, God raised Jesus from the dead so we could have hope that sin and evil and death are not the final word about human life or the good creation. Jesus is our champion, and it is in clinging to him and learning to do what he did that we are given power to resist evil, injustice and oppression in our own spheres of influence. The Christian life is not a pleasant vacation; it is a battle, a life of vigilance against a foe who wants to do us in, and the best mindset is a military one. This is why the United Methodist baptismal vows are so clear. We want people to know what they're in for. The first vow- which I never get tired of quoting- reads, "On behalf of the whole church I ask you: Do you *renounce* the spiritual forces of wickedness, *reject* the evil powers of this world, and *repent* of your sin?" Note the strong action words: *renounce*, *reject*, *repent*.²² Baptism is not a cute ceremony for kids and converts; it's induction into a cosmic battle in which you are not relieved of your commission till you die. There is no retirement from following Christ or from our struggle on multiple fronts with the world, the flesh and the devil. You will be in this battle till you die. Be loyal to Jesus; stay strong in him; expect opposition; count on your comrades; use your weapons; and please, stop whining about how hard it is!

We have lost a vivid awareness of evil and its personal source. We Methodists have become more sociological than theological. But what you cannot name you cannot resist. I'm not arguing we should become devil focused and live in fear. C.S. Lewis wrote that "There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive interest in them."²³ As Christians we do not so much believe *in* the devil as we believe *against* him.²⁴ I only want us to be as aware of our foe as Jesus was, as Paul was, as the New Testament writers were, as John Wesley was.²⁵

²² *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 34.

²³ *The Screwtape Letters* (London: Fontana Books, 1942), 9.

²⁴ Professor Otto Webber wrote, "As Christians we do not believe 'in' the devil. The devil is not mentioned in the Creed. But we do believe 'against' the devil. The whole creed is simultaneously the 'renunciation of the devil.' Yet the power against which faith is faith has its own reality, just as certainly as it does not have its own validity" (*Foundation of Dogmatics*, Vol. I [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns, 1982], 489).

²⁵ For a review of John Wesley on angels and demons, see Thomas Oden, *John Wesley's Teachings, Vol. 1: God And Providence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012),

Before us today is the classic text on spiritual warfare. It is the *Duel In The Desert*, a forty-day trial from which Jesus emerges victorious to begin his ministry of preaching the kingdom of God, forming a new community, and freeing captives through exorcism, healing, and forgiveness. I open with a quote from C.S. Lewis:

“A silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means. This is an obvious lie. Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is. After all, you find out the strength of the German army by fighting against it, not by lying down. A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later. That is why bad people, in one sense, know very little about badness. They have lived a sheltered life by always giving in. We never find out the strength of the evil impulse inside us until we try to fight it; and Christ, because He was the only man who never yielded to temptation, is also the only man who knows to the full what temptation means- *the only complete realist.*”²⁶

TURNING TO THE TEXT

1-2) vv.1-5 Introduction And First Temptation.

I remember the day in the sixth grade when two friends set up an after-school fight between me and David Watts. At 3:15pm behind the Methodist parsonage we duked it out until we were both weeping with the shame and pain of it. I cried all the way home, not because I lost (we both just quit) but because that day I lost some of my boyhood innocence through senseless violence. I tasted evil, and it was bitter. We did not want to fight; we were pushed into it and did not have the courage to say No. But there are some fights worth fighting, some enemies that must be engaged for the sake of others. So it is in the first two verses of Matthew 4 when the Holy Spirit, who just filled Jesus at his baptism, takes up the offensive and leads Jesus into a direct confrontation with the devil. The Holy Spirit picks a fight. The Son of God is introduced to forty days of intense testing. Jesus can't go public till a score is settled. The school yard bully must be dealt with and his strategies exposed.

139-146.

²⁶ R. Kent Hughes, *1001 Great Stories...* (Wheaton, ILL: Tyndale, 1988), 409.

One of the surest signs the Spirit is active in your life is that you become aware of spiritual conflict and evil. You see what you did not see before. Before you went along; you now feel the impulse to resist, to speak up. You used to listen with interest; now you know it's gossip. Before it was just two cocktails before dinner; now you see the beginnings of alcoholic bondage. Before you shopped for hours buying what you did not need; now you see it as greedy indulgence and the reason you can't tithe. The Holy Spirit opens our eyes. There's a battle raging around us, and the question is, Are you aware of it? Here Jesus himself is the battleground, his humanity impinged upon by two invisible realities: the Holy Spirit pushing him into combat, the Evil One probing his character in three assaults. In this world temptation is inevitable, and Jesus faces the full force of it. Temptation will make or break you, and how you respond determines the course of your life.

In addition, Jesus is instructed to forego eating. Fasting is a spiritual discipline, the temporary negation of an otherwise good thing for the sake of intense spiritual activity.²⁷ Knowing God's will and staying loyal to it were more important to Jesus than food. Try it sometime if health allows it. Go a day without eating; devote the time you would have spent eating to prayer and Bible reading. Your stomach will scream, but your spirit will become intensely aware. And if you go beyond the third day the hunger pangs will disappear. Only at the end of the forty days did the deep pains associated with the beginnings of starvation afflict the Lord. He was immersed in desert silence. Alone with his thoughts, but it was anything but peaceful. It was a cosmic battle on which the future of humankind hung. Do you know the devil's voice? Jesus did: "Since you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread. Quit trusting God to meet your needs; meet them yourself. You have a right to food. I care more about you than the one you call Father."

Have you ever heard such? I have, and it means not all of the thoughts that bubble up in our heads are from us or God. Someone else is able to inject thoughts into your stream of consciousness, as he did with Jesus, and they must be carefully tested against Scripture. You are responsible for what you do with what you think.²⁸

²⁷ Lynne M. Babb, *Fasting: Spiritual Freedom Beyond Our Appetites* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2006).

²⁸ 2 Cor. 10:5, "We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ..."

Note that Jesus did not argue with the Evil One. He knew better than to let his opponent set the terms of debate. With the Spirit's guidance Jesus responded with Scripture, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'" Jesus would rather starve than distrust his Father. The discipline of fasting, the presence of the Spirit, and his history of immersion in Scripture were means of grace to keep Jesus strong. If there's no Scripture on the hard disk of memory, you will lose many battles; there are no bullets in your gun.

Many people are vulnerable at the level of the body, and some more vulnerable than others. There are the *warm* sins of lust and gluttony and sloth and addictions of all sorts. Satan hooks many with physically pleasurable bait. Jesus wins round one; he refuses to worship his belly and be a Messiah who only meets physical needs, but the battle does not end there. Satan always uses more than one angle of attack; the spiritual battle has multiple simultaneous fronts. Just to win one round is not enough. You must persevere and not celebrate prematurely.

b) vv.5-7 The Second Temptation.

When the bell sounds for round two, a visionary journey is taken to the pinnacle of the Jerusalem temple, four hundred and fifty feet above the valley below. The temptation is to force God's hand by demanding a tangible sign of protection:

"Take a leap, Jesus. The book you so love says the angels will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone. This is God's house, surely God's word applies in this holy place."

John Calvin wrote that "Satan is an acute theologian."²⁹ He knows his Bible and twists it to his own ends. Because someone uses biblical language does not mean they are of God. There are times angels offer supernatural protection, but that is not a blanket promise for fools leaping off buildings. Faith is not the same as presumption. Jesus will not be diverted from trusting God, "You shall not tempt the Lord your God." Asserting God's Word persistently under the Spirit's guidance is the best defense against evil. Satan offers an attractive lie; we respond with the truth. Jesus refuses to win Jerusalem through stunts. Obedience is his chosen path.

²⁹ Wells, *Inspiring*, 175.

c) vv.8-10 The Third Temptation.

The final temptation is a second visionary experience beyond space and time. Jesus is transported to a cosmic vantage point where all the riches and kingdoms of the world flash before him in a moment. An offer is then made. Jesus can have it all now if he will only do one thing, fall down and offer Satan worship. The devil's greatest desire is to divert worship to himself- to steal God's glory. Having been defeated twice before, his true motives are now seen. The devil is the ultimate egoist, and every time we worship God we give him a black eye.

Was the whole world really Satan's to offer? Some say Yes. Others temper this with the truth that Satan is a consummate liar and always inflates his own power. So whether it was a bluff or a semi-realistic offer- or some mix of the two, the temptation remains. It's the lure of the shortcut, to arrive at the right end by the wrong means, and Jesus refuses it with a third citation from Deuteronomy, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve." Satan's tempts Jesus to become an independent operator and make a grab for the glory, and his response- as before- is to stake everything on God's sure Word.

Many people take wealth and power as a sign of God's blessing, or at least of some personal superiority on their part. But if the stuff is Satan's to give to those who worship him, then perhaps we should not be so quick to envy. Some inherit it; some earn it through hard work and smarts; some have it given to them to numb their consciences so that they can slide into spiritual oblivion in velvet style. Wealth is ambiguous. Watch what people do with it. Watch what it does to them. Only then you will know whether it is controlled from above or from below.

There are some who worship Satan directly, namely those who have given themselves over to the occult and to witchcraft in any of its forms. Many of the great butchers of history, including Hitler, were involved in the occult. I've read a biography of the famed Swiss psychoanalyst Dr. Carl Jung and found- much to my surprise- that he was heavily involved in astrology, divination, and the worship of ancient pagan deities.³⁰ No one is beyond being spiritually deceived and seduced.

³⁰ Richard Noll, *The Aryan Christ: The Secret Life Of Carl Jung* (New York, NY: Random House, 1997); also his *The Jung Cult* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1997).

I have dealt with a hand full of people who have been immersed in the occult, and I tell you that the job of spiritual extraction and detoxification is difficult and exhausting. To begin with curiosity about the occult and then to move on to fascination, then fixation and finally domination is a path into moral perversity, mental torment, physical illness and finally spiritual death. I've seen it up close, and it's not pretty. Stay away from it! Do not pollute your life, your family, or your church with such forbidden and evil practices.

The central issue is worship. Those who worship God weekly in a church have a form of spiritual protection not available to others. A day in seven we are called to worship the Living God and to turn away from all others things that call for ultimate allegiance, "Pastor, tell us again about the Living and Triune God. Read from the Book; give us a fix on the north star of our souls." Round three goes to Jesus, and when the battle is ended he dismisses his opponent, "Begone, Satan." Jesus won the initial engagement; he wins every future skirmish, and finally in the cross and resurrection he wins the war itself. Death is defeated; love wins; evil loses; we share in that victory through Christ, and one day the whole of this earth will be beautifully restored. But between now and then we are at war. Stephen Covey was right. Private victories precede public victories, and most of my public failures can be traced to some prior private failure, some battle I lost in my inner world of imagination and habit. Jesus won in private, then went public. We learn from what he did and how he did it.³¹ We support each other in the struggle against sin and evil at all levels and in all forms. We practice the disciplines of solitude and silence, of fasting and self-examination, of Scripture memory and resistance to temptation. And what we learn in private, we live in public. It's what being a disciple is all about.

CONCLUSION

Guess what? We really do need a Savior and a Champion and a Protector and a Powerful Friend. His name is Jesus, and the only safe place in the universe is at his side and with his people. Outside of him you do not stand a chance.

³¹ See Jacques Roets, "The Victory Of Christ Over The Tempter As Help To The Believers' Fight Against Sin," *MAJT* 22 (2011): 107-127, on twelve strategies from Jesus; also William F. Cook, "Principles Of Spiritual Warfare In Light Of Jesus' Temptations," *The Theological Educator*, Fall 1996, 13-19.
