

Has Satan Made You An Offer You Can't Refuse?

Luke 4.1-13

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Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone." '

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, '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.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." '

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, 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." '

Jesus answered him, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." ' When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

When Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River, he heard a voice from heaven declare, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," and the Holy Spirit descended upon him. After that, things got hard in a hurry. The Holy Spirit led him into the wilderness, where, over the course of the next forty days, he grew very hungry and was tempted by the devil. The church season of Lent is based on Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness. It is a time to reflect on where we have come from, how we got here, and

what we have to deal with now. One of the very large things we have to deal with is the devil.

In scripture, the devil is not the evil equivalent of God, but an angelic being created by God. Like all angels and all persons, Satan was endowed with free will. Satan's free will (and our own) meant that he (and we) have the choice to love and follow God or to rebel. The devil chose to rebel, to become the evil equivalent of the good archangel Michael. In the Book of Revelation, it is prophesied that, at the end of days, Michael will thrash Satan [12.7-9]. But even though Satan will be no match for a good archangel, and is absolutely no match for God, he can still make life miserable for human beings. Since Satan can't touch God, he goes after those made in God's image: he goes after people. He especially goes after people when they are at their weakest. The devil does that because he is a bully. He's a Nazi. He's a serial murderer. He's the spiritual equivalent of an Al Qaeda or ISIS terrorist. He's out to get us.

The essential Christian confession is that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, our Lord and Savior. It is not an essential article of faith to believe in the personhood of the devil. In fact, some modern Christians think the devil is only a metaphor for a host of temptations and destructive longings (like addictions). For what it's worth, I believe in the personhood of Satan, not as a matter of faith but as a likelihood. I believe in that likelihood not only because of the testimony of scripture, but because the totality of evil in the world seems greater than the sum of its parts. But

whether Satan is a fallen angel—or a metaphor for a whole host of natural, supernatural or moral evils—we know that when we are not in a good place mentally, physically, emotionally, socially, financially, geographically or politically, we are liable to succumb to temptations and make decisions we probably would not make were we in a better place. At those times, we will be spiritually confronted and profoundly tempted. The three ways we are most likely to be tempted are 1) in our need; 2) in our ambitions; 3) and in our despair, especially the despair that can result from issues of self-identity. Those were the three places where Satan tempted Jesus.

Traditional Christian doctrine asserts that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully human, Son of God and child of Mary. Through the Incarnation--i.e., by being born and taking his place among human beings--he emptied himself of his eternal self-awareness and only knew of his own divine nature what God the Father chose to reveal to him [Philippians 2.5-11]. Except for the incident in the Temple when Jesus was 12, when Mary and Joseph found him talking to the elders, the Bible doesn't tell us anything about what Jesus did between his infancy and his baptism. This is not to say that his years of growing up in Nazareth didn't shape him. With his earthly family and in the company of friends, he no doubt loved and cared for others, probably worked in Joseph's carpentry business, grew in wisdom and in stature, and likely read a great deal of scripture in the synagogue. All of that was preparatory to the beginning of his earthly

mission. When the call to begin that mission came, Jesus was baptized, and afterwards heard his heavenly Father declare, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” [Luke 3.22]. With that, the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness. No celebratory lunch there, no gift Bible, no warm congratulations from the people who loved him. All of a sudden, he was out in a landscape that would have looked like the most desolate parts of the Texas Panhandle. No food. No friends. No family. No sustaining scripture except what he carried in his head. All of his days, he had gone about his business learning the things humans learn, and now he had 40 days to try to figure out what it meant to be God’s own beloved Son. And he had to learn it under the worst possible circumstances. New Christians will often talk about a similar thing happening to them when they take Christ as Lord and Savior. They are filled with great expectations, and are baptized in faith and joy. Far too many times, though, bad things start happening almost immediately, most of them through no fault of their own. Some of those bad things come from Satan, because if Christ is our Lord and Savior, we’re on the devil’s bad list. But some of them may come because our young faith needs to be tried and tested. There’s an old story about St. Teresa of Avila—who was always conversing with God—falling down, hurting herself, and asking the Lord, “Is this the way you treat all of your friends?” The answer came back, “Yes.” Teresa responded, “Then it is no wonder you have so few of them.” Sometimes, we are tested because the mission the Lord intends to send us

on requires us to become spiritually stronger. After all, the reason Jesus was in the wilderness contending with Satan was because the Holy Spirit had brought him there.

Satan couldn't contend with Jesus' divinity. But with his humanity? The devil knew how to work that angle. He must have still had some of his ancient angelic radiance, because he specialized in tempting, not repelling. After thousands of years of observing people, Satan knew that when they were hungry and alone, they became vulnerable. So how was Jesus toward the end of those interminable 40 days? He was probably almost delirious from hunger. But instead of actually giving Jesus something to eat, Satan tried to tempt him into using his newly discerned divine power for his own ends. "Jesus, if you're the Son of God, I bet you could turn this rock into a loaf of bread. Come on. You can do it. You *need* it!" Jesus may have looked down at that stone, and the beckoning face of Satan, and then at the rocks and the sand and the scrub of that gosh-awful place and pondered the possibilities. But somehow, the Spirit spoke to him and a scripture came to him, and maybe what Jesus said in response was said less to Satan and more to himself: "You shall not live by bread alone."

The devil also tempts us in that way. He proffers bad, destructive solutions to our genuine needs. An alcoholic may think what he most needs is a drink; someone who has a history of shattered relationships may think the most essential need is another one-night stand; a nation bled white by war may see the only solution as yet more war.

Once Satan realized he couldn't corrupt Jesus just for a meal, regardless of how hungry he was, he tried to tempt him through his ambitions. What were those ambitions? To save the people of God. "I want you to see something, Jesus, something only I can show you. You see all these kingdoms of the world? You see Rome over there, banners flying over the battlements? That's mine. You see Jerusalem over there, the holy city? That's mine, too. Wherever you look, Jesus, whatever you see right now, all that's mine. You see that nasty guy shafting that poor old widow? He's doing that because of me. You see those children who are hungry, neglected and sick while people look away? They're looking away because of me. You see those young kids over there on that battlefield killing each other, pouring their life's blood onto the ground because some arrogant potentate said that's what they should do? That's happening because of me, Jesus. You see those people who used to love each other screaming at each other as if they'd like to rip out the other's guts? *Mea culpa*--I did it. You want to change things, Jesus? You can. I'll hand the keys to the kingdoms over to you this instant. All you've got to do is worship me. Come on, Jesus. Do it for *their* sakes." I wonder if Jesus was especially tempted here—not because he was interested in the riches of the earth, but because he wanted the suffering of God's people to end. If worshiping Satan would end their pain, maybe he should do it, for their sakes. But again, the Spirit spoke to him and reminded him that we cannot give what we do not have. Even if all the kingdoms of this fallen world

really did belong to Satan, as he claimed—and the devil is a liar—letting evil get its way would not serve a greater good. Jesus’ lips would have been cracked wide open by then, and the burning sun would have been casting light motes into his eyes, and the words would barely have come out because his throat was parched, but he was able to whisper, “Worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.”

Satan swore under his breath at that moment. *One more try*, he thought. *Jesus relies on scripture to rebut me. But I know scripture too. And I can quote it just like Jesus does.* And so, he took Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem, where the chosen people of God worshiped God in glory. It was strange how the devil knew his way around there. “Jesus, does this place look familiar? Your mother had you dedicated here when you were small. Remember when you were 12 years old, and you were here and you were talking to the elders and your parents thought they’d lost you? You told them you had to be about your Father’s business and you didn’t mean Joseph. Welcome back to your Father’s house. Now, it’s time to find out if God really is your Father and you really are his Son. This is your home turf, Jesus--not mine, yours. You remember the scripture, don’t you? ‘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.’ Psalm 91. It would make a beautiful song, wouldn’t it? Now, Jesus, reveal the truth. If you’re really the Son of God, *fly!*”

And maybe Jesus thought about that, too. Maybe he thought how good it would be to just let go and launch himself into space. The angels would catch him, or they wouldn't, and either way the truth would be revealed and the hunger and confusion would end. The words all sounded so good—words of holy scripture, words about angels protecting you from harm. And what purer place to test it than here at God's own Temple? Despair has its own logic. Very few people take their own lives because they think it's the *wrong* thing to do. Most do it because during their most desperate hours, it seems like the only *right* thing to do—to end the pain, or to spare their families the burden of their company or their care. We will never know this side of heaven how close Jesus came, but something—the Holy Spirit, the voice of his Father, his mother's love—something, *Someone*, told him not to leap. “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test,” he rasped.

And that was it for right then. Jesus triumphed over temptation. He could barely stand or see straight, but he had withstood the wiles of the devil with scripture and the power of the Holy Spirit. It hadn't been easy, and I don't believe the devil would have said “adios” and ridden peaceably off into the sunset. Luke puts it genteely: “When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.” That opportune time would come. Before he departed, I can imagine the devil screaming at Jesus (evil likes to scream, and to hear the sound of screaming), “You think you've won? You think you've beaten me? I'll be back. I'll have

people you love betray you. I'll have people you trust deny you. I'll have the people you want to save spit in your face, and flog the hide off your back, and pound spikes into your hands and feet, and deride you while the flies crawl on your face and your mother's looking up at you weeping, and you're going to cry out, 'My God, my God why have you forsaken me?' You may be the Son of God, but you haven't seen the last of me, and when we meet again next time, I'm coming with a posse, and you're going to recognize every one of their faces." Then he was gone, and Jesus was alone in the wilderness again, though Matthew's Gospel adds that the angels—the *good* angels—came and took care of him. "Then Jesus," Luke adds, "filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee." Sometimes, we'll have our own matches with the devil, and he'll try the same things with us that he did with Jesus: come in easy, get to know us, try to tempt us through our needs or our ambitions or our despair. We're no match for him, and if we fought him all alone, we'd be cold on the mat in the opening round. But we're not alone. We've got scripture, too, and we've got the Holy Spirit. But most of all, we've got the Son of God standing by our sides in the form of our fellow Christians, the Body of Christ. And the next time we feel as if we're alone in the wilderness taking Satan on all by ourselves, look around. Coming over the hill, appearing from behind that cottonwood tree, striding straight toward you through the sage, you'll see people who love you and care about you and who want what's best for you

and who will not leave you forsaken. You'll see your brothers and sisters in the Lord. And every one of them will bear the face of Christ.

Amen.