

## “He Will Command His Angels Concerning You”

Luke 4.1-13; Psalm 91.1-2, 9-16

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Wednesday we began **the season of Lent** – that 40-day journey (not counting Sundays) that prepares us for Easter. For many Christians it is a time of special devotion: prayer, fasting, giving up something, practicing some sort of daily or weekly discipline. We have Lenten devotionals available in the Memorial Room. I’m starting up a study on the book of Hebrews. Various Christian organizations are offering devotions through email or apps. There are lots of different ways to observe this season.

The practice of 40-day devotional period goes back to Jesus himself. The gospels tell us that after Jesus was baptized and before he began his ministry, he “was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.” What Jesus experienced in the desert, we emulate.

**Here is the desert.** The Judean desert, or wilderness, depending on your translation. Roughly 50 miles long and 15 miles wide, just east of Jerusalem, stretching down towards the Jordan River and the Dead Sea. **There are mountains and valleys**, cliffs and hills. **A few roads**, both ancient and modern. Some streams. **Some animals**, too: gazelles and ibex; foxes and cats; snakes and salamanders. **Even some people**: the Bedouin, groups of Arab nomads who live a traditional lifestyle away from the cities.

**It is to this wilderness** that the Holy Spirit sends Jesus. There was something he needed to *do* out here, some things he needed to *experience*. *Temptation*. He needed to conquer temptation.

Jesus is hungry. Very hungry. The Tempter comes alongside him and offers a simple suggestion: “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” It *sounds* like a reasonable suggestion. “You’ve got power. Use it!” Except that Jesus knew what he needed to do out here. Who he needed to *be* out here. This is the same Tempter that had come alongside Adam and Eve in the garden, and had encouraged *them* to eat. That’s what had gotten humanity into this mess in the first place. That’s why Jesus was here, on this earth; to undo the wrong that had been done so long ago. God had told them, “Don’t eat that.” The Tempter had said, “Eat it!” They had ignored the divine will, had made a fatal choice that resulted in *centuries upon centuries* of evil and suffering and pain. Jesus was here to undo all that. The path to salvation involves saying “no” when the Tempter offers you food that *God* doesn’t want you to eat. Jesus had a choice: “Do I satisfy my own desire for food – the way they did – with the result that we don’t get *anywhere*, and my mission is a *failure* – or do I deny myself for this period of time, so that I can *overcome* the Tempter’s power, and we can *fix* this mess?”

He chose “no”. He chose to put his *purpose* over his personal desires.

Do you know *your* purpose? Do you know what God wants you to *do* with the rest of your life?

Jesus responds: “One does not live by bread alone.” It’s scripture. Deuteronomy 8:3. Jesus knew that the source of his spiritual strength is not *bread* – but the *Word of God*.

The Tempter tries again. He takes Jesus up a very high mountain to show him all the kingdoms of the earth. **It might have been this mountain**, a limestone peak at the edge of the desert, towering over the city of Jericho. It’s called “the Mount of Temptation.” **From the summit you can see** scores of miles in every direction. Moab is to the east. (That’s Jordan today.) To the northeast is Damascus, in Syria. To the northwest are Tyre and Sidon, modern Lebanon. To the southwest lies Egypt. Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives are to the west, and beyond them, the whole Mediterranean world. You can’t see *all* the countries of the world from this mountain – but on a clear day you can sure see a lot.

**We did not climb this mountain.** We just stood in the ruins of ancient Jericho and looked up. Halfway up is a Greek Orthodox monastery. Up on top is a wall surrounding ruins of an ancient fortress.

Maybe Jesus stood up there, long ago. Looking out in every direction, at a multitude of ancient kingdoms, many of whom had caused trouble for the Israelites at one time or another. The Tempter says, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority.... If you worship me, it will all be yours.” Jesus responds: “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.” More scripture. Deuteronomy 6:13 and 10:20. Jesus will indeed one day rule over all the kingdoms of the earth, but he will not do so by *this* means, not with a *selfish* motive. He will get there only by perfect obedience to God, only through a road marked with suffering, and only for the purpose of ruling with justice and integrity. Jesus knew the scriptures well enough to know that what the Tempter was asking him to do was just *wrong*.

Do you know the scriptures well enough to know when you are being tempted to do something that is just *wrong*? There are a *multitude* of temptations in this world. We have to develop the ability to overcome them all. The ability to do what Jesus did, to *just say no*. That does *not* come easily to us!

The Tempter tries one more time. He takes Jesus to Jerusalem, and places Jesus on the pinnacle of the temple. If you go to Jerusalem today, to the Israel Museum, there is **a scale model** of what Jerusalem probably looked like during the time of Jesus. **Here is the temple**. Where was the “pinnacle”? Perhaps it was the highest point on the temple. More likely, it was **the southeast corner of the wall** enclosing the temple, positioned over the ravine that we call the Kidron Valley, that separates Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. If you stood on that corner, you would have been about 450 feet above the valley below. It’s not a huge height – but I wouldn’t recommend standing there!

The Tempter invites Jesus: “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.’” The Tempter is quoting scripture; Psalm 91:11-12 – yes, as Shakespeare said, “the devil can cite scripture for his purpose.” Just because somebody is quoting the Bible does not mean that they are presenting God’s will. People use scripture

all the time to try to justify their own actions, or to get other people to do what they want them to do. That's not the purpose of scripture. Be careful that you don't get taken in by people who like to twist it.

Now, it is certainly true that those verses are in the Bible. Psalm 91 does say that God's angels will protect us. But the purpose of that Psalm is to tell us that when we place our faith and trust in God, God will give us protection from danger and help in times of need. Jumping off a very high pinnacle out of a foolish desire to test whether God is as good as his word is not what this psalm is advocating! God is providing assurance to people who are *already* in danger – not to people who just feel like being daredevils for no good purpose whatsoever. The Tempter was misinterpreting the psalm.

Jesus quotes scripture back. “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” Deuteronomy 6:16.

**The Tempter threw everything he had** at Jesus. We only know of three temptations, but the whole experience lasted for *forty days*. There was a *lot* that did not get recorded! In the end, Jesus emerges triumphant. “When the devil had finished every test,” Luke says, “he departed from him until an opportune time.” He will try again. As far as the Tempter is concerned, Jesus is a *threat*, and he needs to be eliminated. So he will lurk in the shadows, looking for a more favorable time ... or a person close to Jesus, who could be tempted to betray him. But that's a story for another time.

In the meantime: Jesus withstood every single temptation. He was, as the book of Hebrews puts it, “tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin.” (Hebrews 4:15)

It is that victory over every temptation that enables him to undo the damage that Adam and Eve had unleashed upon the world. That victory also enables *us* to secure our *own* victories. When the Tempter comes knocking on *our* door, beckoning us to deviate from our purpose and from God's will, there are two very simple – and very hard – things we must do. Number one: recognize that we are being tempted. “Oh, look! I feel like doing something that God doesn't want me to do! I've heard about this! It's called, *temptation!*” I'm making light of this, but you get my point. When you feel like doing something that you know, in your heart of hearts, you shouldn't, congratulations! The Tempter is tempting you, just like he tempted Jesus! Take it as a compliment: you are worthy of his attention! Then move to the second step: *ask Jesus to give you strength to do the right thing*. The mistake we tend to make at this point is trying to use our own willpower. But *willpower is not sufficient*. It is not *human* power that is going to get you out of the mess – but the power of *God*. **Remember Philippians 4:13**: “I can do all things through *Christ* who strengthens me.” You do not have the power to do all things *on your own!* You have the power to do all things through *Christ alone*. *He* had the strength to withstand the Tempter's power. He will give *you* that strength – *if you ask for it*. He's not going to give it if you don't ask! Psalm 91, again: “Those who love me, I *will* deliver.... When they call to me, I *will* answer them.... I *will* rescue them, and honor them.” Jesus will give us the way out of *every* temptation. Every single one! Whatever you are facing – *he faced it too*. All you need to do is turn to him, ask him for help (sincerely, not just half-heartedly), and *he will give you the strength you need to do the right thing*. Keep asking, as much as you need to, until the strength is there. Then look the temptation in the eye, and say, “*No thanks.*” Congratulations – you've just achieved a victory. You, and Jesus, together.

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