

“Temptation!!!”

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Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 + Romans 5:12-19 + Matthew 4:1-11

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First Sunday in Lent

Today is the first Sunday in the season of Lent, which is a time of preparation for the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It lasts for forty days, beginning with Ash Wednesday and ending the day before Easter, not counting Sundays, because we celebrate Christ’s resurrection to some extent every Sunday. Many Christians participate in a variety of spiritual disciplines during the season of Lent. What you do with this season is up to you. I would encourage you to move beyond the simple practice of “giving something up for Lent,” like chocolate or caffeine or social media, and instead focus on a deeper and more important question: what can you do during these forty days to draw closer to God?

Every year on the first Sunday of Lent we give attention to the story of Christ’s temptation in the wilderness. Matthew and Luke both record three specific temptations: the temptation to satisfy his hunger, for he was fasting; the temptation to test God’s faithfulness by taking a deathly plunge from a very high place; and the temptation of worldly power and domination. Some commentators see the first as a temptation of the *body*, the second as a temptation of the *mind*, and the third as a temptation of the *heart*. Jesus does what none of us can do: he says no to *all* of them – to *every single temptation* the forces of evil send his way. The fact that he could do that has *huge* implications for us, as I will try to explain.

Every *third* year on the first Sunday of Lent, this story of the temptation of Christ is paired with another temptation story: the man and the woman in the garden of Eden. We know them as “Adam and Eve,” but when the story opens neither of them has a name. This is one of the most foundational stories in the Bible. The events described in this story are *epic* in nature. They are meant to tell us something about the human condition, and why things are the way they are. Please don’t try to place this story in the realm of history. The storyteller’s intent is not to be a historian, but a theologian. The story gives an answer to a crucial question: if God created us humans *good*, why have we turned out to be so *bad*?

“The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.” “Eden” is a Hebrew word that means “delight” or “pleasure.” “The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Delight.” God’s design was that we should live in a place of *delight* and *pleasure*. We were meant to live in a world free from suffering of any kind. God’s intent for humanity was endless joy.

“The LORD God commanded the man, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.’” God’s bounty had created a lavish feast: “In the fertile land, the LORD God grew every beautiful tree with edible fruit, and also he grew the tree of life in the middle of the garden and the tree of the knowledge

of good and evil.” So there were an endless array of fruit trees, and two *special* trees. One was called the “tree of life.” The fruit on this tree could be freely eaten; God was more than willing to share with us the gift of immortality! The other tree was the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” This tree was off limits; it was the *only* forbidden tree in this bountiful garden. At this point there is *one and only one* rule: *do not eat from that tree!* The consequence of eating from that tree are clear: “You shall die!”

We could have stayed in this Garden of Delight forever. Humanity could have been spared sickness and disease, war and famine, greed and violence, lust and envy, anger and hate, prejudice and racism. An idyllic existence – *this* was what God wanted for us. *This* was what God had in mind.

But: “the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made.” By this point God has created a vast array of creatures – every bird of the air, every animal of the field. One of those was the serpent. In Hebrew it is called *nahash* – you can hear its hiss! This *nahash* is described with an adjective that can mean “crafty,” or “shrewd,” or “cunning.” It was more “crafty” or “shrewd” or “cunning” than any other creature God had made. The storyteller is clear; this serpent *is* one of God’s creations. Every creature that exists was created by God, *including this one*. Other biblical passages (Revelation 12:9; Luke 10:18; 2 Peter 2:4) suggest that this creature was an angel of God that had gone awry. John Milton, in his epic poem *Paradise Lost*, depicted this creature as a majestic angel who had rebelled against God and had been banished from heaven. J.R.R. Tolkien’s interpretation, in *The Silmarillion*, is that this angel introduced discordant notes into the divine harmony of creation.

The *nahash* gets to work. “He said to the woman, ‘Did God say, “You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?”’ The woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, “You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.”’ The woman had not been present when God gave the man the rule about the tree, but by now she has been told. “The serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not die, for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’” Consider: is that true? Is what the serpent says to the woman actually true? The answer is *yes*. When all is said and done, God perceives that “the human being has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil.” So *the serpent knows things that God has not revealed to the man or the woman*. And the serpent is using that knowledge to entice the man and woman into doing things that God does not want them to do. This is *temptation*, and temptation often tempts us with the *truth*. “Eat this, and you’ll feel good.” “Do this, and you could get rich.” “Say outlandish things, and you could get a lot of followers.” The biggest temptations in life often come dressed up in ways that look or sound or in fact *are* true.

Does this mean that God had *lied*? God had said, “in the day that you eat of it” – the tree of the knowledge of good and evil – “you shall die.” Was that a lie? Did the man and woman drop dead on the day they ate that fruit? No. But when they ate that fruit, that initiated a process that *resulted* in their deaths. God kicks them out of the garden, and they *no longer have access to the tree of life*, the tree that would have enabled them to live forever, so *the process of their dying begins*. God didn’t lie; God just didn’t tell them the entire truth. God doesn’t reveal *everything* to us, and we just have to accept that.

So the serpent successfully tempts the woman. And the woman successfully tempts the man. There’s a long history of blaming the woman for what happened. Come on, let’s be real. Both the woman *and the man* do what they *know* they shouldn’t do. They are both guilty of the same sin. Both of them bear responsibility for their own actions. And the *serpent* is the one who is the *most* to blame.

The story goes on from there. The man and the woman experience the world differently. They feel things they haven't felt before. They are now capable of doing evil. They try to hide from God. God is horrified. God punishes them. God kicks them out of the Garden. Paradise is lost. God's beautiful creation is shattered. It remains shattered to this day. This is *not* the world as God intended it to be.

The apostle Paul offers some important commentary on this passage. "Sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin." Elsewhere Paul says some things about the woman, but in this passage his attention is focused solely on the man. "And so death spread to all because all have sinned." Sin leads to death, not just for the man, but for everyone. We are all subject to the twin powers of sin and death. This man, Paul says, was "a pattern of the one who was to come." The "one who was to come" is Jesus. What Paul means is that the man had a cosmic impact on the world that is similar in scope to the cosmic impact that *Jesus* had on the world. Paul elaborates: "Many died through the one man's trespass.... Because of the one man's trespass, death reigned through that one." That is, we are all subject to death because of what the man did in the Garden. "One man's trespass led to condemnation for all." We are all subject to the power of sin, and its consequences, because of what that man did. But Jesus, at the cross, offered a "free gift" of grace that essentially *reverses* all of this. "The grace of God and the gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, [have] abounded for the many." Just as the man's act had consequences for all people, so too does Jesus's act have consequences for all people. "The gift ... brings justification." Justification is the declaration that we are righteous in God's sight regardless of anything we have ever done. "Those who receive the abundance of grace and the gift of righteousness [will] reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ." Because of Jesus, sin gives way to grace, and death gives way to life. "Therefore just as one man's trespass" – the man's trespass – "led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness" – Jesus's act – "leads to justification and life for all. For just as through the one man's disobedience" – the man's disobedience – "the many were made sinners, so through the one man's obedience" – Jesus's obedience – "the many will be made righteous." Everything that went wrong because of what the man did in the Garden of Delight has been set right by the man who prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. The man's choice brought sin into this world; Jesus gives us a way to escape the clutches of that sin. The man's choice brought death into this world; Jesus gives us a way to escape the clutches of that death. Through Jesus, we once again have access to the tree of life.

The bottom line: we humans have a persistent habit of falling prey to the lure of *temptation*. This is our most fundamental flaw. It is present within us from the very beginning, and it manifests itself in all sorts of different ways. The end result is a world that is really *hurting* from the horrendous things we humans do to one another. A world that feels like it is still in bondage to *sin* and *death*. But Jesus offers us a way out. Jesus triumphed over *every single temptation* the forces of evil could throw at him. His unsurpassable righteousness gives us access to righteousness; his sinless life frees us from all our sins. Thanks to Jesus, God declares us righteous, no matter *what* we have ever done. Thanks to Jesus, God grants us life beyond death. The powers of sin and death are *broken*. These gifts are *free*! We don't *earn* them; we can't *buy* them. We just need accept the truth that *God loves us so much* that Jesus came here to *unburden* us. We were created to live in a Garden of Delight. Thanks to Jesus, we can get there. We don't have to live life feeling *guilty*. Or feeling *ashamed*. Or *beating ourselves up*. Just receive the simple truth: God *forgives* you. God *liberates* you. God wants you to have a *beautiful* life, in a Garden of Delight. So *accept the gift that God is offering you!* Live in *hope*. Live in *joy*. Live *free*.

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