“MAN SHALL NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE”

Matthew 4:1–11

Key Verse: 4:4

“Jesus answered, ‘It is written: “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.”’”

We’ve been looking at the preparations for Jesus’ ministry. Last week we saw how John the Baptist prepared the way through his challenging people to repent, and through his baptizing Jesus. Today Jesus prepares the way through his being tempted in the wilderness. What are temptations? Generally, they’re inducements to do something wrong, and thereby, to turn away from God. In this passage Jesus is tempted three times, and each temptation seems to be different in nature from the others. We should be asking: What do each of these three temptations mean? Why did Jesus have to be tempted in these ways before beginning his ministry? And how was he able to resist these temptations? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living word today.

Look at verse 1. The first thing we notice here is that it’s “the Spirit” leading Jesus to be tempted. When he was baptized by John, the Spirit of God alighted on Jesus like a dove. God sent the Spirit to empower him for his ministry and to guide and lead him. But it’s surprising that the Spirit led him into temptation. Our Lord taught us to pray, “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” (6:13). But the Spirit led Jesus into temptation. Why? Jesus was on a mission to rescue us from the dominion of darkness and bring us to the kingdom of the Son he loves (Col1:13). God’s will for Jesus was to face the temptations of the devil first and defeat them, so that he might be our Savior (cf. 1:21b).

The next thing we notice in verse 1 is the place: “the wilderness.” Ancient people thought of such a place as the haunt of demons. Jesus’ going to the wilderness fulfills what is described in the Old Testament. Deuteronomy 8:2 reads: “Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands.” Just as God did this to Israel his child, so he did it to Jesus, his Son. Israel failed God’s test, but Jesus came to pass it, to truly keep God’s commands. Next, we notice the word “tempted.” In Greek, it can also be translated as “tested.” To be clear, God tests; the devil tempts. James 1:13 says, “When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.” God doesn’t tempt us; but he does allow us to experience temptations as a spiritual test. The devil is an expert at tempting us, especially through all kinds of rationalizations and excuses. His temptations are so powerful they can make us feel helpless, like giving up. We even can become afraid of his temptations. But 1 Corinthians 10:13 says, “No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.” Finally, we notice at the end of verse 1 the word “the devil.” “Devil” is a Greek word and “Satan” is a Hebrew word; they both mean the same thing: “the Accuser.” The devil’s essential nature is to accuse. He accuses God; he also accuses God's people. He constantly accuses us of our sins so that we might live in guilt and torment and try to destroy ourselves. As followers of Jesus we should not be known for accusing people, but for leading people to the saving grace of Jesus. Jesus referred to the devil as “a liar and a murderer from the beginning” (Jn8:44). And Jesus said the devil's purpose is to “steal and kill and destroy” (Jn10:10a). So he called the devil our “enemy” (13:25,28,39). We should not be naïve or unaware, like Pinocchio; our enemy the devil is out to destroy us. He’s way smarter than we are, and he knows exactly how to entice us, knock us down, drag us away from God and ruin our lives.

Look at verse 2. Here we see that Jesus took these temptations very seriously; he prepared to meet them by fasting forty days and forty nights. Fasting is not just for losing weight to feed our vanity; fasting is a means to focus on prayer so as to get closer to God. Jesus also said it’s a means for driving demons out of people (Mk9:29; see footnote). Fasting teaches us to totally depend on God, not on our human strength. The forty days and forty nights remind us of how Moses and Elijah both fasted that long. Jesus came to do what Moses and Elijah couldn’t do. After the long forty days and forty nights of fasting, verse 2b says simply, “…he was hungry.” It was a moment of great weakness and vulnerability for Jesus. Sometimes, when people are hungry, they’ll do anything, even throw away all their ethics and morals for a meal.

What was the devil’s first temptation? Read verse 3. The first thing the devil talked about was whether or not Jesus was the Son of God. He asks about it again, in his second temptation in verse 6. At Jesus' baptism, a voice came from heaven, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (3:17). The devil tried to tempt Jesus by attacking this. He tried to get Jesus to doubt the Father’s love, and doubt his identity as God’s Son. In a sense, he’s saying, “If God really loves you as his own Son, why are you suffering so much hunger here out in the wilderness?” The devil still tempts us in this same way. He tries to get us to think that the hardships and suffering in our lives are evidence that God doesn’t really love us, or even, that God isn't really there, he’s not real. The devil also tries to get us to lose our identity as God’s children.

In this case, the devil is especially tempting Jesus to use his power as the Son of God for his own gratification. It seemed harmless enough; turning stones into bread didn’t seem to be hurting anyone, not even himself. It might even seem to be a good thing. Underneath, it was a temptation to do anything in order to survive. Just as the temptation to give in to our physical desires can be overpowering, so the temptation get money also can be overpowering. It may not be a temptation to grab millions of dollars illegally; it may be as subtle as to say, “My job needs to be my first priority; otherwise, how will I live?” Most people succumb to this temptation and live under the cursed struggle to survive.

What did Jesus say to this temptation? Read verse 4. Here Jesus is quoting from Deuteronomy 8:3. God was training the Israelites in the wilderness through humiliating poverty and hunger to learn an important life lesson: “Man shall not live on bread alone.” The devil deceives people into thinking that if only they have enough bread, they’ll be happy. Our media is full of deception that if only we have lots of money, a nice house, a fancy car, a well-toned body and an endless supply of food and drink, we’ll be satisfied. But it’s never enough. People who gain these things always want more. Actually, worldwide the most affluent people are actually the unhappiest. Wealthy people have the highest suicide, depression and divorce rates. Why can’t lots of bread and lots of money make us happy? It’s because God made each of us with a soul. Our souls can never be satisfied with physical, material things. Our souls can be satisfied only in God.

In verse 4, the expression “live on” has deep meaning. So many people are physically alive, but spiritually they’re dead. They’ve lived throughout their lives as if they have no soul. Many have virtually killed their souls through sinful living, trying to numb their consciences. Outwardly they may look good and laugh a lot, but inwardly their souls feel restless and meaningless. Read verse 4 again. Here Jesus tells us how our souls can come alive: “…on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” What does it mean to “live on” every word of God? And where can we find such words? We find these most precious words in the Bible. The psalmist wrote: “The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes…They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb” (Ps19:7,8,10). Job 23:12 says, “I have not departed from the commands of his lips; I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my daily bread.” The verses in the Bible are not mere empty words. Jesus once said, “The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit and life” (Jn6:63). Just as we eat food every day, we need to learn to feed on God’s word every day. Colossians 3:16a says, “Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly…” How can we do that? It can’t be through just listening to a sermon on Sunday; we have to learn to feed ourselves through morning devotions and personal Bible reading. The word of God can grow in us through answering Bible study questions, writing Bible reflections and teaching the Bible to others. To be filled with the Spirit and life, we can’t be superficial; we need to be thinking about God's word deeply. The psalmist wrote: “Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers” (Ps1:1–3). Jesus emphasized the expression “every word.” We can’t pick and choose which parts of the Bible we want to know; we have to read it all, and listen to it all carefully, as if we’re reading the very words of God. When we feed on his word, we grow in love for God and gain spiritual strength to resist the devil’s temptations.

The temptation of bread was just the beginning. What was the devil’s second temptation? Read verses 5,6. It seems weirdly suicidal. What was the point of this temptation? It was to get Jesus to take a quick and easy way for his ministry. If he jumped off the Jerusalem temple in front of a crowd and God rescued him, such a great miracle would immediately prove to everybody that he really was the Son of God. Then there would be no need for struggle or suffering or patience. Just like the temptation of bread, it’s a very powerful temptation. The devil still tempts us to take the quick and easy way. This time, the devil was even quoting Scripture, tempting Jesus to use God’s word for his own purpose. The devil still tempts us to use God’s word to justify what we want. How did Jesus answer? Read verse 7. He’s again quoting Deuteronomy, from 6:16. Jesus' answer helps us understand better the nature of this temptation. It was a temptation to test God. What does it mean to “test” God? It’s not just asking God to prove that he exists; it’s demanding God to prove that he loves us and will protect and care for us. In fact, some people enjoy living on the edge; they call it life in the fast lane, or living dangerously. They get an adrenaline rush from taking risks. It may seem fun or cool, but according to Jesus, it’s testing God. We should never test God; we should humbly trust God and obey him.

The devil had one more temptation. Read verses 8,9. It was yet another powerful temptation: the temptation of glory. Jesus enjoyed glory with the Father before the world began (Jn17:5). In fact, we human beings all have in our souls a longing for eternal glory, to share the glory of God, because we were made for glory (Ro2:7; 8:17,18,21; 9:23; 1Co2:7; 4:17; 2Th2:14; 1Pe5:10). In this case, the devil is telling Jesus he could have all the glory he deserved, if only he would bow down just once and worship him. It was a temptation to get out of being despised and rejected, a temptation to get out of all the suffering and humiliation, to compromise with the devil just once in order to gain personal glory. Just as in the German legend of *Faust*, many ambitious people give up their moral integrity in order to gain power and success in this world. They’re so hungry for power and glory they’ll do anything to grab it. These people have the philosophy, “The ends justify the means.” But whatever the purpose, it’s never good to compromise with the devil, not even a little bit, not even just once.

How did Jesus respond? Read verse 10. Jesus was not intrigued in the least; he said, “Away from me, Satan!” "Get lost!" And he quoted from Deuteronomy yet again, from 6:13. To Jesus, a love relationship with God the Father was more valuable than all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. We should never listen to the devil’s subtle rationalizations to compromise our worship of God. Do we value personal glory and success in the world, or do we value God? Where, honestly speaking, is our heart? We may be offered this temptation only once in our lifetime, and at that moment we have to make a choice. Will we choose following the world, or will we choose following Jesus?

Verse 11 shows us that when Jesus repeatedly resisted the devil and his temptations, giving him the clear word of God, the devil gave up and left him. If we’re ready to play around and compromise, the devil won’t leave us alone. We need to be crystal clear about temptation.

We also notice that in all three temptations Jesus quoted Scripture. He didn’t depend on his own willpower or strength; he humbly depended on the power of God’s word to resist the devil. Apostle Paul who fought against many temptations in his own life called God's word “the sword of the Spirit” (Eph6:17). We may be very weak spiritually and even humanly. But if we hold firmly to the word of God we received, we have the most powerful spiritual weapon, and we can gain the victory over the devil and all his temptations.

But why did Jesus have to defeat temptations beforehand? It was so that his ministry would be powerful and effective. But it was especially for us. The Bible says he was tempted in every way, just as we are, so he can empathize with our weaknesses (Heb4:15). And he suffered when he was tempted, so he can help those who are being tempted (Heb2:18). We may have given in so much that we feel like total failures. But whatever we’ve done, we can still come to Jesus, who defeated all the devil’s temptations in our places. Hebrews 4:16 says, “Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” We may be losers, but if we depend on Jesus, we become more than conquerors (Ro8:37).

Praise Jesus who defeated all the devil’s temptations in order to save us. May God help us learn how to humbly depend on Jesus, and learn, like him, how to live on his every word so that we can resist the devil’s temptations in our lives.