

“THE CHRIST OF THE WILDERNESS CRISIS”

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Mt. 3:13-17, 4:1-11

Almost nothing is known of nearly thirty of Jesus' thirty-three years on earth. To the best of our knowledge, during those silent years he worked no miracles, preached no sermons nor in any way distinguished himself from the rank and file of his fellows.

As a matter of fact, he apparently was so successful in assuming this state of studied obscurity no one suspected him of being anything more than the humble village carpenter he appeared to be.

In spite of the political ferment seething just below the surface in Palestine those days, for the unyielding yoke of Roman oppression rested heavily upon the freedom-loving heart of the Jews, this young Galilean refused to identify himself with any of the underground movements which were constantly springing up.

But one day the shops and homes of Nazareth began to buzz with the rumor of a new prophet. A prophet who preached, not against Rome, but against sin. A prophet whose central theme was the ringing cry: “Repent, for the Kingdom is at hand.”

As word of this new prophet reached the ears of the young carpenter bending over his bench, he laid down his tools, bade farewell to his family, and headed off toward the river Jordan to be baptized of John. Somehow he knew this was his hour of destiny. The moment for which he had been born. The time for which he had waited these many years.

The Baptism Of Jesus

No one really knows at what hour of the day the Lord Jesus was baptized, and it doesn't really matter. James Stewart suggests it may have been along about evening when the day's crowds had dispersed and the Baptist, weary and spent, was left alone in prayer.

“Picture this solitary figure, bronzed and young, clean and God-like, coming through the gloaming. And when John, rising from his knees, meets him, looks into his face and sees shining forth from those eyes a light he had never seen before, he cannot contain himself and cries, ‘Behold, the lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world.’”

At first the incongruity of Christ’s request that he be baptized overwhelms John. “I have need to be baptized by you, and you come to me?” (Mt. 3:14). But, Christ’s quiet response dispels any hesitation, and together -- the sinner and his Saviour, the servant and his Lord -- go down into the river, and there, in the river Jordan is performed “one of the grandest anomalies of history.” The Savior is baptized by one of the very souls he came to save.

The Significance of Jesus’ Baptism

How are we to interpret this incredible mystery, this strange event in which the sinless Jesus undergoes a baptism meant for sinners?

Well, of course, there is the obvious meaning that this was Jesus’ way of declaring himself on the side of God and good. But it seems to me there is a meaning which runs much deeper than that. And, as Stewart suggests, when Jesus went down into the Jordan with John he was taking his stand by the side of sinners.

Here was redeeming love identifying itself with those it had come to redeem.

Here was an actual fulfillment of Isaiah’s great prophecy,

“He was numbered with the transgressors” (Isaiah 53:12).

Here was proof positive that the accusation later hurled at him by sceptics, “You’re nothing but a friend of *sinners*!” proved to be absolutely true.

But when you see the sinless Son of God going down into a sinner’s baptism you are seeing God making our shame his shame, our trouble his trouble, our burden his burden. So much so, in fact, that once having picked it up God cannot lay it down again until every last bit of it has been nailed

with his Son to a cross.

The Voice and the Vision

When Jesus came up out of the water we're told he heard a voice and beheld a vision.

A voice saying,

“This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.”

A vision in which he beheld

“the Holy Spirit descending like a dove, (enduing him with power to fulfill his purpose.)

The baptism of Jesus forms an unmistakable dividing line in his life. From that time on nothing is the same. The quiet, peaceful, obscure life of a carpenter in Nazareth ended. Jesus began a three-year journey which would conclude on the summit of a hill called Calvary.

Temptation Follows Glory

It was immediately following the glory of his baptism that the Lord Jesus was confronted with the tempter's snare. From the scene of his exaltation to the place of his humiliation was just a step.

It's really important to take note of that fact, for we are rarely as susceptible to a great loss as just after we have won a great victory.

Have there been times when you doubted your relationship to Christ because you were attacked by temptation? Have you been disturbed to discover you were on the verge of a devastating defeat while celebrating a great victory?

Oh, my friend, when you endure such moments of peril, you are walking in company with the Galilean. You are experiencing one of the inevitabilities of life. To have times of testing on the heels of triumph is an experience common to all of us. It happened to Jesus. It has happened to every Christian who ever lived. The wondrous voice from heaven is often succeeded by the taunting voice from hell. And to know such moments of humiliation on the heels of exaltation is to share in the experience of your Savior who was,

“In all points, tempted like us.”

I believe that’s why Jesus shared the story of his temptation with his disciples. And there is no other way we could have learned of this wilderness crisis except from the lips of Jesus, for out there in the desert there was no eye to see. No ear to hear. No sensitive soul to sympathize with him. He was alone!

But knowing temptation is the common lot of all people, Jesus shared his nightmare with his disciples to help them through their *own* hours when they would be dogged by Satan. And it *does* help, doesn’t it? It helps enormously, in our times of testing, to remember Jesus faced tough to handle temptations, *and gained the victory!* It’s encouraging to know our lot is not hopeless, and that with his help we, too, can overcome.

Two Important Factors

There are two important factors which ought to be mentioned before we go on to a consideration of the temptations themselves.

First, this wilderness crisis was not an accident. The scriptures specifically state that,

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

In fact, a closer look at the record shows that Satan was joined by the Holy Spirit *and angels* in this crisis.

The Holy Spirit guided him. The devil tempted him, and the angels comforted him. As someone has said,

“The whole universe was interested, (for) the destiny of creation was at stake.”

It was not God who tempted him, for the Bible specifically states,

“God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man.”

No, God did not present these temptations, but God did *allow* them. He knew *second* Adam, Christ, had to meet and conquer the same “insolent rogue” who met and defeated *first* Adam back in the garden of Eden. So, while he did not ordain them, God allowed the temptations of Jesus, and then sent his ministering angels to sustain him while he was under fire.

The Master Key

The second thing worth noting before going on to consider the temptations is what we might call the master key to their interpretation.

A great deal can be said about the wilderness crisis of Jesus. But the basic key to understanding it can be put in one sentence.

“How else was our Lord to fulfill his mission among men?”

He had come to seek and to save that which was lost. His goal was to win the world for God. But how? That was the question! It was Satan’s suggestion that he accomplish this by worldly means. That he achieve a spiritual result by a secular method. That he take a shortcut which omitted the necessity of suffering. To put it crudely, that he get something for nothing!

In his endeavor to snare Jesus in this diabolical scheme, Satan set before him a series of alternatives, each of which was aimed at leading Jesus to choose the good instead of the best. The lower instead of the higher. Facing these beguiling alternatives was the essence of his temptations. And it was his response to them that proves beyond any shadow of a doubt that here, indeed, as Luther described him, was “the man of God’s own choosing.”

Stone Into Bread

The first temptation came after forty days of fasting, when hunger, like a marauding tiger, was gnawing at his “innards.” Alone in the wilderness, away from all human sympathy, driven to the edge of despair by sheer physical weakness, our blessed Lord is attacked by Satan.

And notice the slimy, cowardice of Satan. That old codger never did a courageous thing in his life. He always attacks people in their weakest moments and at their weakest points. And we read that,

“when he (Christ) had fasted forty days and forty nights, he afterward hungered. And the tempter came and said unto him, ‘If thou art the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.’”

Here we have several temptations rolled into one, as with supreme subtlety the enemy tempts Jesus to:

1. Cease living a life of perfect trust in the Father’s plan.
2. Reject the lot of all other people. And,
3. Put his physical desires ahead of his spiritual needs.

Doubt God

Notice the gigantic question mark with which Satan begins the temptation

“*If?*” “*If* thou art the son of God command that these stones become bread.”

My, how that smacks of the serpent’s sneer back there in the garden of Eden. Remember how Satan argued with Adam saying,

“God says you will die if you eat of the tree, but you will not die.”

He was tempting Adam to doubt God. And that’s precisely what he is trying to accomplish here. *If* you are the son of God, why remain hungry? *If* God is your Father as you claim, do you think he would allow you to suffer like this? So, *if* you really are his Son, command these stones to become bread. In other words, doubt God! Call into question his wisdom, his way, his will and his faithfulness.

Reject Your Humanity

Along with the temptation to doubt God, there was the urging that Jesus reject his humanity.

Temptation is common to us all. So is hunger. If Adam had never sinned, he still would have grown hungry. It's one of the inevitabilities of life that bodily energy will be burned up during the course of a day's activities, and must be replaced in the form of good, wholesome, nourishing food. To be hungry is perfectly natural.

But you and I cannot perform a miracle when we're hungry. We cannot perform a miracle in our hour of desperation. Some folks have tried. They've gone to Las Vegas, or the racetrack, or have engaged in some clever, but dubious, bit of business, only to discover their Satan-inspired schemes won't work.

No, you and I cannot perform a miracle in our moments of desperation. And if Jesus is to be the representative man, “bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh” as the Bible defines him, and if, in the arena of everyone's life, Jesus was to demonstrate how God intended us to live, then he must not work a miracle in his hour of desperation. Though he could, he should not! To do so would be a rejection of his humanity.

Physical Ahead of Spiritual

Perhaps the most significant feature of this first temptation, is the appeal to put the physical ahead of the spiritual. As Fulton J. Sheen says,

“To follow the path of social amelioration without spiritual regeneration.”

And this may have been the most difficult part of the temptation to resist. Jesus was not only aware of his own great hunger, he was also conscious of the never-ending struggle of all us commoners to feed and clothe and care for ourselves and our children.

The subtlety of the first temptation lay in the fact that the devil was suggesting Jesus satisfy a perfectly legitimate craving. There is no disputing the fact that human beings must have bread. Jesus himself taught us to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.”

He knew man is a physical as well as a spiritual being. But the question which had to be answered, once and for all, was this, “Which comes first, the physical or the spiritual?” And in his reply to Satan, Jesus gave us the answer,

“It is written, man shall not live by bread *alone*.”

He did not deny that people must be fed or that social justice must be sought. But he *did* make it abundantly clear that these things do not come first. He refused to be an ethical reformer who catered to the physical in preference to the spiritual. Jesus was not interested in making men richer, without making them holier.

He also refused to disassociate himself from the common agonies of common people. If other folks cannot make bread out of stones, neither would he. The special powers he had been given were not for his own private use, but for the glory of Almighty God. They were given, not as a human convenience, but as aids in his work as the Messiah. And so he refused to doubt the faithfulness of his Father. In substance he said,

“Because God’s guiding hand has led me *into* this place, I will trust him to lead me *out*!”

And thus, with sublime dignity our blessed Lord answered the first temptation. He refused to do the right thing in the wrong way. He placed man’s spiritual needs above his physical needs, and he steadfastly refused to distrust God.

In the most trying of circumstances, Jesus lived out the wisdom of his later words,

“Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these *things* (food, clothing, shelter, physical comfort) shall be added unto you.”

Leap From the Temple

Having failed to win our Lord away from his holy mission by a physical appeal, the devil then approached him with an emotional appeal.

He took him to a lofty pinnacle of the temple and said, “Cast thyself down.” And then diabolical demon that he is, he began to quote scripture,

“Is it not written,” he said, “he shall give his angels charge concerning thee.
And on their hands they shall bear thee up, lest haply thou dash thy foot
against a stone?”

Now remember the master key. The issue at stake in this wilderness crisis is how Jesus will fulfill his holy mission among men. During these desert days Jesus had been thinking about his life’s work and the methods he would follow in fulfilling it. It was clear to him that God had sent him to save the world. The question was: “How best to do it?”

In his quandary, the tempter struck suggesting that because he was so confident God was guiding him, and as I have said, the devil quoted scripture to substantiate his point, ignoring, of course, the fact that he misquoted it and used it out of context, but building upon Jesus’ absolute trust in his heavenly Father, the devil suggested that he presume upon God’s protection and do something stunning. Something heroic. Something spectacular to enhance his popularity.

There was real appeal in this suggestion to Jesus. After all, the Old Testament prophet had said, “The Lord will appear suddenly in his temple.” If God could introduce him to the nation at the temple in some miraculous way, it would be much easier for him to lead the nation back to God.

There’s no escaping the fact that Jesus was an unknown. His humble up-bringing as the son of a carpenter, hardly guaranteed him an audience should he begin to preach. And how can he be sure they would listen? Perhaps he should take a shortcut to success. Do something daring and unusual, something spectacular to dazzle men and thereby gain their attention.

But as Jesus wrestled with this most plausible temptation, there came floating up to the surface of his consciousness another verse of scripture which, as a child, he had hidden in his heart,

“Thou shalt not tempt the Lord, thy God.”

He knew that a “headline making” leap from the pinnacle of the temple would not be an act of faith in God at all. It would be the same as flinging a challenge in God’s face. Forcing his hand. If Jesus was to trust God, he must obey God. And if he was to obey him, he must wait for him. He must do God’s work, in God’s way, and in God’s *time*!

And so, with the self-restraint becoming his sinless nature, Christ resisted the second temptation. He refused to perform a stunt in order to win men. He refused to begin his ministry to the accompaniment of celestial fireworks. He chose rather to work, not by might nor by power, but by the Spirit of patient and redeeming love.

To Worship Satan

The final temptation of our Lord, and I use that word “final” advisedly, for the New Testament records how, throughout his entire sojourn upon earth, Jesus was confronted with temptation in some form or other. And that should give us comfort for we, too, have often seen old foes, once beaten, coming back again. But using the word advisedly, I want to point out that this “final” temptation of our Lord in the wilderness was the most insidious of them all.

The tempter took him to a high mountain and, in the wink of an eye showed him, not the misery and poverty and heartache of man, but the glory and power of the kingdoms on earth. And then with a sweeping gesture he utters the most terrifying words in scripture,

“All these things I will give thee, if thou wilt fall down and *worship* me.”

Here is the devil at his diabolical worst, offering our Savior everything he had come in the world to win, not by going to a cross and dying for it, but by the simple procedure of bending a knee.

“Let’s go into partnership,” suggested Satan. “You bow down to me, and I’ll turn over the whole ‘kit and caboodle’ to you. Let’s have an amalgamation of heaven and hell. Then the lion and lamb *will* lie down together. Good and evil will be twins.”

No muss, no fuss, no bother. No blood, no sweat, no tears. No Gethsemene, no betrayal, no Calvary. Here was sin in its most beguiling form: instant gratification! A painless path to prominence! A freeway to rulership. The only requirement? C-O-M-P-R-O-M-I-S-E!

How familiar that word sounds to our ears! How often we have been tempted. Yes, and have succumbed to the temptation, to do evil so good would result. How often we have listened to the siren suggestion of Satan, with sad results I might add, that, “The end justifies the means.”

I say to you, my friend, Satan holds the original patent on shortcuts! Instant gratification has been, is and always will be, one of his most effective weapons. If he cannot undermine a soul completely, he will strike a bargain. He will aim for compromise. But thanks be to God, though this temptation was unbelievably appealing, Jesus routed Satan quoting a third verse of scripture,

“Thou shalt worship the Lord, thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.”

We can almost hear Satan say,

“But, Jesus, I didn’t say anything about serving me, I simply asked that you worship and bow down.”

But with wonderful wisdom our Lord recognizes that to worship *is* to serve. To worship gold is to *serve* gold. To worship success is to *serve* success. To worship fame is to *serve* fame. To worship *is* to serve and, as Jesus said later in his ministry,

“What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?”

It was not an easy choice for Jesus to make. To reject the course of compromise is always costly. For Jesus it cost a thorn-crowned brow, a bleeding back, a spear-riven side, hands and feet pierced by nails, and a broken heart. But it also meant, and this is the glorious part, God’s work would be done in God’s way and according to God’s will. For Jesus, *that* was what really mattered.

Thus it was that our Lord faced his wilderness crisis. Three times he was tempted and three times he emerged the victor. What was his secret?

The Importance Of A Powerful Counter-Attraction

Jesus did not win this inner war of the spirit by the force of brute strength and sheer resistance. He gained the victory by exercising the principle of a powerful counter-attraction. He filled his heart and mind with both the letter and *spirit* of God’s word. Motivated by a higher, nobler, sweeter sound than Satan’s siren song, our Lord was able to resist the tempter’s snare, and come back from his dual in the desert with a clearer light in his eye, a brighter glow in his countenance, a stronger resolve in his soul.

My friend, if you would enjoy his victory, you must share and employ his technique! You must exercise the principle of a powerful counter-attraction. You must make an effort to fill your heart and mind and being with the word and love of God. In *this* way you will be fortified against the tempter’s tricks. *This*, and this alone, is the path to triumph. So “walk in the Spirit,” for we (you and I) are “more than conquerors through him who loves us.” And all God’s people said, Amen!