

Matthew 4:1-11
First Sunday in Lent
February 22, 2026

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

In this Lenten season now begun, we would almost *prefer* to make this text of Jesus' temptation about our Christian discipline, as seen through Jesus' example. And, it's certainly true that we *should* take a specific pointer from this account: "In every temptation, always depend on the Word of God: for *it is written.*"

But, where the epistles do sometimes speak of Jesus' example (we could cite 1 Peter 2 or Philippians 2, to name a few), the Scriptures generally, and the Gospels specifically, are not written to convey Jesus as a mere example, as if you should always read yourself into the text as one who could trade places with him.

In short, this text really isn't about *us*. Certainly, we can use Lenten midweeks this season to teach ourselves how to *always*, in *every* season, wrestle with our own temptations – drowning the Old Man, raising up the New. In fact, the word for temptation can also be translated "test" – for the Lord *does* test us so as to positively encourage our exercise and training and improving in the faith, even as Satan uses the same occasion not to positively test, but to

negatively tempt and injure and discourage and tear down the faith. Yes, we'll get to our own testing and wrestling and works of the flesh versus fruit of the Spirit... we'll get to that in the midweeks; and everyone is pastorally admonished to take advantage of that opportunity.

But, this morning's text is not about *us*. The Father cast His Son into the wilderness, and the Spirit led him into the wilderness, not because the Son would *benefit from or needed* the exercise of positive spiritual testing, but because – if He were to be the sinner's substitute in *every* way, yet without sin – He must also “be tempted by the devil,” the text says. Yes, God specifically wanted His Messiah *tempted by the devil* – not because the Son *needed* to prove himself – but because the Father *knew* His Son, as the perfect substitute, *would* be perfectly obedient and, thereby, fulfill all righteousness. Did the Father not just say at Jesus' baptism (the verses immediately before our text begins, “Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit”)... did the Father not just say at Jesus' baptism, “You are my beloved Son; with You I am well-pleased.” The Father had no doubt Jesus would withstand the temptation; but the Son needed to endure it genuinely and truly, as *true* Man, that he might genuinely and truly be the perfect Substitute for *fallen* man.

Now, when we begin to meditate upon the theology of all this, we note that this morning's Old Testament and Epistle readings want us to compare Jesus to *Adam*. It's not a mistake by the

lectionary editors to join these passages together – St Paul himself made the comparison to the Romans. But Jesus fulfills *all* the Old Testament, so that there can be multiple ‘layers’ of purpose to his conduct. Indeed, as the comparison to Adam is very strong and specific in *Luke’s* gospel, our text in *Matthew’s* gospel compares Jesus to Israel.

Recall, Matthew writes to Jews... those who cling to their title, “children of Israel,” proudly recalling the history of their forefathers who went through the Red Sea and came out the other side as the Chosen people of God... So, Matthew makes the connection that Jesus is *the* Chosen, Israel reduced to one, having come through baptismal waters, acclaimed by the Father as His beloved. Yes, Matthew’s account reports the connection that is already divinely there: *The Father* sees Jesus as Israel reduced to one (just as the Father sees Jesus as the substitute Adam)... The Father sees Jesus as Israel reduced to one, Jesus is righteously obedient as Israel reduced to one, and Matthew records those events in this account.

Through that lens, the Collect prays, “O Lord God, You led Your ancient people through the wilderness and brought them to the promised land.” *And*, in that same lens, the Introit sings the ancient psalm, “When he calls to me, I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him and honor him. With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation.” Well, who is the *him* of which God

speaks? The Christian? God's people Israel? Or Israel reduced to one – the perfect substitute who perfectly called upon God, who depended totally on the Word of God, who honored His Father, that – as the Fourth Commandment says – “You may live long”... or, back to the psalm, “With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation.”

Yes, through the lens of God's desire for this only-begotten Son to substitute for God's once-chosen Israel, we see this series of temptations unfold:

First, that the devil would tempt Jesus with bread. Recall, we said that where God tests to exercise faith, the devil tempts to extinguish faith. And, in the case of the Israelites, did not God lovingly test them over matters of bread? When Moses preaches his sermon of Deuteronomy, he reminds them, “God humbled you and let you hunger and fed you the manna... so that He would make you know that man does not live on bread alone, but lives on every word that comes from the mouth of YHWH.” But, where the LORD had *tested* to exercise and teach, the devil had *tempted* Israel to reject and grow bitter, grumbling over ‘such worthless food.’ But, where Israel had failed, Jesus rejoices in the word that comes from the mouth of the LORD, especially as the LORD had just said of Him, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased” (Mt. 3).

That beloved Son then dutifully endures the **second** temptation that recalls Israel's distrust of God. While it seems odd to

parallel Israel's wilderness-wandering to Jesus on the temple pinnacle, Jesus's own response teaches us to see the parallel. In rebuffing Satan, Jesus cites Deuteronomy 6, in which Moses says to Israel, "You shall not put the LORD your God to the test, *as you tested him at Massah.*" Massah was shortly after God had provided them manna from heaven, when they grumbled the first time... but then, they grumbled *again* against God, this time over their thirst. We read from Exodus, "Moses called the place Massah... because they tested the LORD by saying, 'Is the LORD among us or not?'"

Isn't the temptation the devil hurls at Jesus quite *parallel*? – "Throw yourself down and test whether the Lord is with you or not. He's promised his angels will not let your foot strike against a stone! Here's His chance to prove He is with you!" But, Jesus knows: where sinful man needs to be tested and exercised and strengthened, God need not be tested, requires no exercising; indeed, God *must* not be tested, *if* those who say they hope in Him *actually* hope in Him. The perfect Son trusts God perfectly, and thus responds in perfect obedience: "It is written, "You shall not put the LORD your God to the test."

Thirdly, the devil takes Jesus to a very high mountain. Liturgically, this may remind us of last week's Gospel reading and that – as we said – God dealt with Israel on high mountains. Where God *promises* to be with and dwell with His people, the devil *tempts*, "I will give you all this" – I will be your god – "if you will fall down and

worship me.” Again, Jesus’ response points us to the Israelite parallel. For, Jesus cites Deuteronomy 6, in which Moses warned the people to keep the First Commandment, saying, “Take care lest you forget the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt... You shall not go after other gods...” (What does that remind you of, but that the Israelites – even as Moses had been on the mountain with God – were falling down and worshipping the golden calf)... “You shall not go after other gods – for the LORD your God *in your midst* (God dwells with His people) is a jealous God – lest the anger of the LORD your God be kindled against you.” Did not Moses and God burn with anger at the children of Israel, that they fell down and worshipped the golden calf?

But the *perfect* Israel worships God *perfectly* and rejects all who would interrupt such dwelling with God: “Be gone, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the LORD your God and him only shall you serve.’”

Now we see the purpose of this text, especially as Matthew reports it to the descendants of Israel: Jesus is the Chosen *One* to redeem the so-called chosen *people*. Jesus is Israel reduced to one, the perfect Substitute, come to endure temptation in perfect obedience that He might go to the cross as the Lamb of God, the perfect sacrifice, to atone for the sins – not just of the Jews – but of the whole world.

And *that* is where you read yourself into this text. Matthew may have connected the dots for an immediate audience, but even those Jews *should* have also recalled that the Old Testament did not begin with Moses and the Exodus or even with their father Abraham. The Old Testament began with the promise to the entirety of fallen mankind, every descendant of Adam, including you... and that promise came in the form of a threat to the Serpent: “The Seed of the woman will crush your head, Satan, and you will crush His heel.” God would have victory through the one Seed’s perfect substitution and His suffering upon the cross.

And what God once in history *promised*, God once in history *fulfilled* – for He is faithful. And that fulfillment not only included the passive suffering of the cross, but the active obedience and righteousness of perfectly enduring temptation and remaining the faithful beloved of God, the Messiah come not to do his own will, but the will of him who sent Him.

And, if that gospel is for you, too, then you may – with a clear conscience as the beloved of God, see Jesus as *your* substitute. And because He is *your* substitute, and because His righteousness covers *your* unrighteousness, and His atonement has brought *your* salvation, and His sacramental gifts pour out forgiveness upon *your* head and into *your* mouth, then *you* may follow him not as some mere moral example, but as the One who has merited you all the inheritance once promised to the children of Israel.

Understand that relationship correctly: Christ Jesus is Israel reduced to One (you might say, “the one Child” substituted by God for “the children of Israel”), and thus – all who are baptized *into Christ Jesus* are now that Israel reduced to One expanded again, if you will, and numbered in a multitude as expansive as the skies of heaven and grains of sand upon the shore.

Thus, you should learn from this text how to endure temptation and trust God, not merely by looking at *Jesus* as an example, but – as St Paul says – by seeing the children of Israel as the example of what *not* to do, how *not* to follow. Doesn’t St Paul say to the Corinthians regarding the Old Testament wilderness wandering:

Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.”... We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. *Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let anyone who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.*

Notice, Paul says, We are the end of the ages; we are the heirs of the *new and everlasting* testament. Let us learn from the Israelites’ example, lest we, too (assuming we can never fall) play fast and loose with God’s mercy in Christ and give up the inheritance

and title of “children of God.” *That’s* what we are to learn from the children of Israel: They did not trust God; they did not trust Christ. They grumbled, grew bitter, even hoped in fake gods. Learning from their destruction (remember, as we heard last week, not a religious *story*, but true history – perhaps the worst collapse of faith in God in human history!)... learning from their destruction, let us – in every temptation – keep fixed firmly on the Word of God... not on the Word of God as *blueprint* and Jesus as *example*, but Word of God as promise, and Jesus as shepherd and high priest who mercifully grafts us into and keeps us in the holy will of that promise.

In fact, notice what Paul does not say, “Corinthians, look at what a great *example* Jesus was. Let’s be like Jesus.” No, in fact, Paul says, *Jesus* led them through the wilderness, and some of them “put Christ to the test.”

Not ‘Jesus the example for Christians in temptation’... yet, Paul does immediately go on to talk about temptation: “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”

Paul *does* tell Christians to be ready; he’s very candid that temptation will come. We don’t need Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness to remind us that temptation will come to us; we know it will! *And*, Paul says, no Christian can say, “I can’t help it. I haven’t the

ability to overcome temptation. I can't endure it; I might as well sin and then plead forgiveness later."

Rather, Paul promises, "God is faithful; He will provide the way of escape"... just as Jesus proclaimed, "Man does not live by bread, but by every Word that comes from the mouth of God."

And that Word is no mere blueprint – Jesus the example. But that Word is a promise: God is faithful – that's what the Israelites forgot and despaired of; God is faithful in Jesus Christ. And where we see Jesus Christ *for* us – our substitute, our righteousness – then we can be confident in God's chosen Christ *with* us:

- "Those baptized into Christ have put on Christ"
- "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing the word of *Christ*"
- "Take eat, this is my body; take drink, this is my blood."

In short, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them; and they follow me"... we follow Him through wilderness wandering and every temptation, for He promises, "I *give* them eternal life, and they will never perish; and no one can snatch them out of my hand."

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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