

We are in the middle of a series of messages called “Encounters With Jesus.” Each week we have given our attention to places in the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke & John), where we find Jesus spending time with people and answering their deepest questions through life transforming conversations and experiences. Their questions are the same as ours. *Why am I here? What is my purpose in life? Why is there so much wrong with the world and is there anything I can do to make it right?* As we’ve examined these interactions, I hope we’ve come to find that we too can be changed and our questions can be answered through a personal encounter with him. But today, our text shows us an encounter Jesus had, not with an eager student, not a potential follower, or even a skeptic, but with a Spiritual Adversary- a Great Enemy. This event is preceded by a really beautiful moment in Jesus’ life. Look with me in Matthew 3:13-4:11.

13 Then Jesus went from Galilee to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. **14** But John tried to talk him out of it. *“I am the one who needs to be baptized by you,” he said, “so why are you coming to me?”*

15 But Jesus said, *“It should be done, for we must carry out all that God requires.”* So John agreed to baptize him.

16 After his baptism, as Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and settling on him. **17** And a voice from heaven said, *“This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy.”*

1 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted there by the devil. **2** For forty days and forty nights he fasted and became very hungry.

3 During that time the devil came and said to him, *“If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become loaves of bread.”*

4 But Jesus told him, *“No! The Scriptures say, ‘People do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”*

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city, Jerusalem, to the highest point of the Temple, **6** and said, *“If you are the Son of God, jump off! For the Scriptures say, ‘He will order his angels to protect you. And they will hold you up with their hands so you won’t even hurt your foot on a stone.’”*

7 Jesus responded, *“The Scriptures also say, ‘You must not test the Lord your God.’”*

8 Next the devil took him to the peak of a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. **9** *“I will give it all to you,” he said, “if you will kneel down and worship me.”*

10 *“Get out of here, Satan,”* Jesus told him. *“For the Scriptures say, ‘You must worship the Lord your God and serve only him.’”*

11 Then the devil went away, and angels came and took care of Jesus.

Exactly eight years ago this month, my family and I were getting ready to embark upon a new and exciting time in our lives. After serving as a youth minister to teens in the Charlotte area of North Carolina for 10 years I had agreed to help a former college classmate plant a church in the Raleigh area. We sold our house, said goodbye to dearly loved friends and students, packed up our things and moved. It was difficult to leave the familiar for the unknown. Maybe you've experienced something like this too? My entire adult life had been spent in this one place, but I was excited about the opportunity to launch a brand new church and thrilled by the prospect of taking a step of faith and watching God move, scary as it was.

There were months of preparation (fundraising, locating a venue, purchasing equipment, getting the word out, building a core team of people to help us), but finally in March of 2007 we came to our opening weekend. Two days before our first service our launch team gathered together in the home of our lead pastor. Together we were a flurry of motion and anticipation. We were tending to last minute details, reviewing the schedule, double checking our supplies to make sure everything was ready, and talking giddily amongst one another.

But all of that excitement came to a stop for me with a phone call. One of my closest friends, a former youth ministry student who was just months from his college graduation, had been hit by a car and was in a coma, critical condition, in an ICU. It's troubling how quickly life can take you from the mountaintop into the desert- from a moment of joy and pure adulation to a place of despair and pain. Heaven and Hell colliding in front of our eyes- not fantastical far off places of the imagination- but real, present, palpable. That weekend, which should have been a pinnacle moment, changed into something all together different for my wife and I. Just days after we witnessed the birth of a new church we stood next to the casket of a dear friend- Heaven and Hell pressed right up against each other.

My guess is that in your life you've experienced this phenomenon too. Different circumstances, of course, but no less the same. We see it at Harbor all the time. People who take on new leadership or service opportunities, people sometimes fresh out of the waters of baptism themselves often experience, in short order, a season of testing or trial. This should not surprise us, nor discourage us. Jesus experienced this too.

There is a lie people believe that has the ring of truth but doesn't, ultimately, hold up against scrutiny. Here's the lie: as long as we live good, morally upstanding lives, all will go well for us. If we can simply tow the line, stay on the good side of the law, be reasonably civil with others, give occasionally to charity, show kindness to animals and nature, and live without violating our principles then we deserve and should receive a life that is free from real pain and calamity.

Jesus' life not only contradicts this notion, it blows it apart. Let's face it, you and I make bad choices sometimes. We are incapable of upholding even our own principles, let alone God's. But Jesus- Jesus was perfect in obedience, perfect in goodness, never lacking in self-control, and yet, he experienced temptation, pain, suffering and death.

In our passage of Scripture today we see an important principle. There's a baptism and then there's temptation. There are words of validation and then there are words of opposition. There is life-giving water and then there is desert desolation. First there's a voice from heaven, then there's a voice from hell. The sequence of events we see here is not arbitrary. Remember that, "*Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted.*" Fresh out of the waters of baptism, Jesus was directed into the desert. The same Spirit that descends from heaven as an indication of God's favor moved Jesus to a desolate place where he would face opposition. Here's the principle: when there's Spiritual baptism, what follows is Spiritual battle.

When you experience a spiritual awakening, do not be surprised that you soon find yourself facing a spiritual challenge.

Jesus has just experienced a beautiful moment of affirmation from God. He comes out of the water and hears these words from His Father, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." I don't have time to get into Jesus' reason for getting baptized, but I must explain the significance of God's words here. He's fusing two Old Testament texts together: Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1. In Psalm 2 the king is addressed as the 'son' of God. Israel's kings proved to be disappointing 'sons', but there was hope God would one day bring into the world a true Son. The voice from heaven announced that Son, the expected and hoped for Savior, had come. But there's more. The second half of God's message declared Jesus was loved by, and pleasing to His Father. These words are a reference back to the chosen servant of God whose ultimate purpose is to suffer and die for the sins of the people.

Do you understand what this means? God is declaring with these words that Jesus is the long-awaited deliverer- Son of God yet suffering Servant. Then, as if to prove it, God leads Jesus straight into a time of testing by the enemy.

-Our Adversary

Let's stop here for a moment and acknowledge that Jesus coming face to face with the devil is problematic for some of us. Some of us here likely find ourselves skeptical that evil has a face and a name. So let's just start with something we're more likely to agree on- the existence of evil. In the gospels we see Jesus endure suffering and pain and death- this even though he deserved none of it.

We don't need anyone to explain to us that this is wrong. It's unjust. When we experience betrayal, or grief, or rejection or when we see evidence of it in this world there is something in each of us that inherently understands, "This is not as it should be." What does this tell us? In Tim Keller's book *Encounters With Jesus* (which we have been using as a touchstone throughout this series that shares it's name), Keller shares this insight.

He writes:

*One thing (betrayal, poverty, grief, loss) demonstrates is the power, complexity, and intractability of evil in the world. Secular people see the world as made up of strictly material forces. There is no soul or spirit, no demons or angels. Everything has a natural scientific explanation. In this view, we can deal with evil in the world (if there even is such a thing) by educating the ignorant, changing the social systems, and providing better psychological and pharmacological treatment. Yet time and again over the last century, Western thinkers have been shocked anew by the depth and power of the forces of evil in the human heart and in the world. Columbia professor Andrew Delbanco, in his book *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil*, writes, "A gulf has opened up in our culture between the visibility of evil and the intellectual resources available for coping with it."*

In Scripture we clearly find an alternative to this approach toward evil in the world. The Bible can bridge the gulf and account for all that we experience personally and witness in the sweep of history. It says that evil is more multidimensional, nuanced and complex than the sciences alone can suggest. It maintains that, in addition to systemic injustices and personal ignorance and physiological imbalances, there really are forces of spiritual evil in the world—and behind them all, there is a singular supernatural intelligence. The Western world has largely rejected this dimension of evil that the Bible gives us, and as a result, we are always underestimating—and sometimes misdiagnosing—the power of evil in our lives.

I may not be able to convince you in such a short time of the existence of a spiritual adversary, but I want to encourage you to read this chapter from Keller's book and examine his arguments. Regardless of where you stand on this, I intend to point out the tactics our enemy uses to rob us of peace, steal our joy, and remove any sense of confidence in who we are and whose we are.

-Our Adversary's Tactics

When Satan tempted Jesus, he was attempting to undermine and cast doubt on the words of affirmation God had just communicated to His son following Jesus' baptism. Consider the way he approaches Jesus, God had just declared, "This is my Son," so Satan begins with, "If you are the Son of God..."

These temptations were calculating attempts to dismantle what God had just established. In the same way, our enemy would like to undermine and cast doubt our own standing as God's children. Let me clear, it would be a mistake for us to imagine that this story of Jesus' temptation exists to provide us with a template for how the enemy works and how he is defeated. These temptations were directed at Jesus and they were uniquely appropriate to God's Son. When the enemy comes at you he will not utilize the same approach, but he is still after the same result.

Three times he takes shots at Jesus mission and identity. They are curious examples. "Turn these stones to bread." "Cast yourself off this building" "Bow your knee." The rabbis in Jesus' day had all sorts of expectations about how the Messiah would rule and what he would accomplish. One of them went like this, 'When King Messiah comes, he will stand upon the roof of the holy place. Then he will announce to Israel, "Ye poor, the time of your redemption draws nigh."' The rabbis were also confident that the Messiah would bring about a repetition of the gift of manna in the desert. Which is one reason for the people's excitement when Jesus fed the multitudes in a desert place. They attempted to make him King at that time because they knew the Rabbis' teachings that when manna in the wilderness came, that would be the sign that God's Kingdom had arrived.

These were temptations to bypass the cross, to short-circuit the path of obedience, and to adopt the role of king without stooping to the role of suffering servant. Clearly that's the purpose behind the third temptation: gain dominion back from the usurper by striking a bargain with him rather than by going to the cross. Be selfish. Opt for the sensational. Compromise God's promises. We certainly face similar choices today. They may come at us from different angles but these tactics of our adversary are as potent in our time and in our lives as they were when Christ faced them.

So there's plenty of bad news to reckon with here. We have an adversary—a great enemy who is intent on stealing our faith and robbing us of our spiritual heritage in Christ. In addition, he's very good at what he does. His tactics are powerful and effective. What do we do? What can we do when faced with such a foe?

-Our Defense

Jesus used Scripture in response to each temptation that was brought against Him. In our text he quotes three times from the book of Deuteronomy, which tells us Jesus not only knew and studied Scripture, but that he was able to draw from it and apply it to his life. We will never possess Jesus' fluency with Scripture, but that doesn't mean it's any less potent in our hands than it was in His.

When we know the Truth- when we are versed in the language of God's heart- we find ourselves fortified against the temptations and difficulties that we endure in this life just as Jesus was. Are you reading and studying the words of Scripture?

They are more than simple platitudes and clichés. They are foundational truths. They are words of eternal life. *"All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work."* (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

When you are tempted to feel unworthy of love... (Romans 5:8 *"But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners."*)

When you are tempted to trade the temporary for the eternal (pursuit of power, lust, comfort, & esteem vs. God's love and His ways)... (Philippians 2:5-8 *"You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross."*)

When you are tempted to worry and fret... (Matthew 6:31-33 *"So don't worry about these things, saying, 'What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?' These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need."*)

When you are tempted sexually...(1 Cor. 6:18-20 *"Run from sexual sin! No other sin so clearly affects the body as this one does. For sexual immorality is a sin against your own body. Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price. So you must honor God with your body."*)

Why does God allow us to be tempted? That's a reasonable question to ask. He allowed Jesus to be tempted. Why? Temptation has a way of sorting out the emotional "high" from the reality of spiritual growth. We are not meant to exist solely on mountaintop experiences. We were meant to be sustained by the bread of life that comes from God alone- even in the desert.

God allows temptation. So when we are tempted we must not think that His favor has vanished. Temptation has the ability to build us up in maturity and faith. And, of course, it's also wise to note that with each temptation we face God is faithful and will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we are able. With each temptation he provides a way of escape so that we may be able to defeat it. That promise comes from 1 Corinthians 10:13, and it's a consoling passage, until it isn't.

Let's be honest. None of us, myself included, have always responded to times of tempting without blemish or fault. Not one of us can say we've passed each time of testing unscathed. So don't forget this one thing. Jesus succeeded where we fail.

Not only in the desert when he was hungry and harassed, but in the garden when he was betrayed and abandoned, and ultimately on the cross where he suffered and died. He had the power to avoid these experiences. He could have abandoned us and left us to our own devices. But his heart for us is so huge, his purpose so resolute, that he endured that suffering and shame. He took no shortcut, though plenty were offered, and so his triumph is all the more complete. Jesus' walked out of the grave victorious over sin and death and it is in his name and by his grace alone that we share in his glorious redemption.