



CHURCH of
the SAVIOUR

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“If You Fall Down”

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Matthew 4:1-11 (CEB)

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Turning stones to bread. Being rescued from falling. Controlling all the kingdoms of the world. The story of Jesus’s temptation sounds like an epic confrontation, a battle in the eternal war between good and evil, an attempt by the devil to snuff out Jesus’s ministry before it got started. *Temptations for the Son of God; but surely, these are not the things that tempt us.*

Being self-sufficient enough to provide for our own needs? Avoiding pain and suffering? Having the power and influence to change what’s wrong with the world? *I mean, who would want that?*

You’ve been depriving yourself for a long time, Jesus. What’s it been, forty days? Listen, you don’t need to do this. You’re the Son of God – you don’t have to scrounge around like a lowly human. Go ahead. Conjure bread from these rocks. Provide for yourself. You have a long road ahead of you, literally and metaphorically. Why should you rely on their hospitality, be bound by their worries about what to eat and how far from home you can travel? At least give yourself a little snack before going back out there. Nobody is around to see, anyway.

It is written: “People won’t live by bread alone, but by every word of God.” I’m not going to just *pretend* to be human. I came to be one of them. How can I ever understand them if I don’t feel what they feel, including hunger? No, I’m in this thing all the way.

Fine. I get it. You want to keep it real. But look, if you’re going to do this, get people’s attention. Make a big splash. Start off your ministry with a bang. Leap off the temple. Just imagine the look on their faces when angels swoop out of nowhere to catch you and deposit you at the temple gates! They’ll be coming in droves to hear what you have to say. Heck, I’d like to see that for myself. If you really are who you say you are, prove it.

That’s not the way. I’m not pulling a cheap stunt just to get their attention. I need them to understand who *they* can be, not show off how different *I* am. Besides, I won’t test God. And you’re not going to use me to test God, either.

Okay, okay. But if your mission is to redeem the world, you’re going to have to change the way things work around here. And to do that in this world, buddy, you need power. You need influence. I can give you that. Walking from village to village to spread your brand will take years just to convince people in the backwaters of Galilee to follow you. It would take centuries to reach everybody, especially the way you’re going about it. But if you work with me, we can be an unstoppable team. I can put you in the most important rooms and on the biggest stages. A banquet here, a few drinks there, some strategic introductions and you’re “in like Flynn.” Tell you what – once we’re in charge, I’ll let you run the whole operation – Jerusalem, Rome, Alexandria, Addis, you name it. All you have to do is say yes to my offer, and it’s all yours.

That’s not the way, either. They have to *choose* this life for themselves, not have it forced on them. They need to come by faith. Yes, it’s going to take a long time – long after my earthly life is over. And I know many of them will *never* get it. But my mission isn’t top-down. It starts in the heart. Besides, even if you *could* deliver all the kingdoms of this world, I wouldn’t trade them for the kingdom I have in mind, a kingdom that is greater than all the world’s kingdoms put together. Only *God* is worthy of my worship.

I'm not certain how most first century Palestinian Jews would react to these devilish offers, but I have a pretty good sense of how we would. Though each of the temptations takes a different angle to get there, in the end, they're all about the same thing: power. Power to make food out of nothing (self-sufficiency), power to avoid death (immortality), power to influence people and nations (control). For Jesus, the temptation was to be more divine than human. For us, it's much the same: to try to assume the role that belongs only to God.

Who among us hasn't imagined what it would be like to be king or queen for a day, to rub a lamp and find a wish-granting genie, or even win the lottery? We might first think of some personal indulgences like houses, cars, and money; but there are probably bigger things that make the list, some personal, others more magnanimous. If money was no object and you couldn't fail, what would you change about the world? Ending the production of greenhouse gases and our reliance on fossil fuels? Eliminating the proliferation of guns? Alleviating world hunger? Narrowing the income gap? Finding a cure for cancer? What if there was a way to achieve your biggest dream for the world, but to do it required you to make a major moral compromise. Would you do it?

There are countless examples of people who do. Powerful countries exploiting less developed nations and stripping them of their natural resources to amass wealth. Corporations placing profits over safety and the future of our planet. Government officials willing to "get their hands dirty" to advance their political agenda. Undercutting coworkers to climb the corporate ladder or casting aside friends to rise to a more prominent social circle. Our remarkable capacity for self-delusion enables us to convince ourselves that whatever good we might accomplish justifies the means by which we achieve it.

That's the temptation the devil offered to Jesus – not simply an empty promise of food, safety, or meaningless thrones, but a platform through which he could achieve his mission, albeit one that would have cost him his integrity... and even his soul.

It's unlikely any of us will be offered a deal by the devil to achieve greatness. More likely, it's a series of little compromises that can slowly erode our character. Blowing off family time to touch up a work report to gain a supervisor's praise. Holding back the help we could offer someone in need so we can squirrel a little more away for our personal indulgences. Telling ourselves, "It's no big deal – I'm only going to do it this one time."

Every week in worship, we pray the prayer Jesus taught his disciples. There's a line in that prayer that at first appears confusing: "Lead us not into temptation." Why would we need to ask God not to lead us into temptation? Would God ever do that? I think there's at least a good chance Jesus included those words in reference to this experience. "Then the Spirit led Jesus up into the wilderness so that the devil might tempt him." Jesus might have been able to resist all the temptations the devil offered him, but he knew we were more vulnerable. He said we should ask specifically *not* to be led into temptation. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we're essentially saying, "Don't take us where Jesus went, because we'll fail." We've proven that over and over.

But friends, there is good news in this story for us. First of all, recognizing our potential for succumbing to temptation and confessing the ways we already have can help us be alert for temptations yet to come. The three temptations Jesus faced are, in fact, ways we are still tempted today: to be so self-sufficient we don't need to rely on God, to reduce faith to being about personal comfort and avoiding suffering, and to acquire power by compromising our principles. If we recognize our temptations and can be honest about them to ourselves, each other, and God, we will be better prepared to resist them.

Jesus also provides for us not only an example of successful resistance, but the key to reversing our "me first" tendencies and the culture of coercion and domination that characterize so much of human society. German theologian Joerg Rieger points out that if Jesus expected that God would soon give him all the things the devil promised, these temptations wouldn't have amounted to much. But Jesus emphatically rejected top-down models of power – not only

here in the desert, but throughout his life – even if that power could be used to help people.¹ From the calling of the disciples to the feeding of the 5,000; from the woman at the well to healing on the sabbath. He lifted up the lowly and challenged the powers of the time – temple leaders, religious authorities, even Herod. And when they finally came for him, he remained committed to his mission, all the way to the cross. Even his resurrection rejected worldly notions of power; he appeared first to the women, then the disciples, not to the powerful and mighty in Jerusalem or Rome. He led by empowering people – ordinary, everyday people – who could imagine the kingdom he came to bring and have the faith to strive for it.

When we are tempted to compromise our values in pursuit of power and expediency, we look to Jesus who rejected that kind of power and exposed it for the lie that it is. True power doesn't come from domination, but from compassion, responsibility, and aligning ourselves with God's hope for the world. When it seems the problems we face are too big, our enemies too important or powerful, remember that throughout history, it has been the actions of ordinary people working together, non-violently, committed to principle, who make the greatest impact: ending slavery, child labor, and apartheid; achieving universal suffrage. Remember that the fire hoses and attack dogs of Bull Connor were defeated by teenagers locking arms and showing the world the weakness and fear of their oppressors. Remember that it was prayer and faith in Jesus that ignited and sustained the Civil Rights movement. Jesus didn't *overpower* his enemies; he *loved* them. And when they killed him for it, he rose again, revealing the powerlessness of their human power.

The faith we proclaim was not birthed under the banner of conquest, but by a band of friends who followed Jesus, shared what they had seen and heard, and did their best to keep doing what he did. They didn't have a political action committee or a database of deep-pocketed donors. They didn't have a seven-figure budget or a seven-word mission statement. They didn't even have a building to use as home base. What they *did* have was the strength of their conviction and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

When we face temptation – and we will – remember that we don't face it alone. When we are tempted to sacrifice our values in pursuit of our goals – no matter how worthy those goals may be – remember the one who showed us how to say no to the ways of the world and stay true to our faith and calling. And when we are tempted to use what power and influence we have to push our agenda, remember that true power is demonstrated in humility, compassion, and sacrifice.

Lead us not into temptation, God. But when we face it, show us the way through. Amen.

¹ Joerg Rieger in *Unsettling the Word: Biblical Experiments in Decolonization*. Ed. Steve Heinrichs. New York: Orbis Books (2019), 208-209.