

Into Temptation

Matthew 4:1-11 (March 1, 2020)

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Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. 3The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” 4But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” 5Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” 7Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” 8Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; 9and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” 10Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” 11Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Historical Context

Set between the baptism of Jesus and the beginning of his public life, the account of the temptations occupies a key place in the gospels. Jesus is brought by the Spirit of God into the desert and, after he fasts for forty days the tempter comes and confronts him. It is the struggle that Jesus experiences, and not evil in itself, that is the subject of the story.

Theme: Into Temptation

The PBS documentary series *Frontline* produced an episode a few years ago called "[The Persuaders](#)" that examined the evolution of modern advertising. In years past, advertisements boasted of the quality of the product. Today, however, advertisements make a promise less about the quality of a product and more about an imagined lifestyle that owning the product can provide. By owning this kind of car, or using this kind of wineglass, advertisers suggest, we will discover our identity and move closer to having a meaningful life.

On the face of it, such advertising sounds ludicrous. Yet the documentary suggests that we are so starved for a sense of meaning and purpose that we make many of our purchasing decisions based on our hope that the story is true -- that we will feel more whole if we buy their product.

Which brings us back to the gospel reading. One way to read it is to imagine that Jesus shows us the key to resisting temptation is by finding our identity in our relationship with God. At the same time, it's important to recognize that temptation is not one and done. Jesus rejects the tempter here, but he has other moments of doubt, particularly at Gethsemane and the cross. Similarly, our life as Christians does not eliminate doubt, need, or a sense of incompleteness. We will inevitably fall short in claiming our God-given identity. Yet Jesus has triumphed, not only at this moment but also and more importantly at the cross, committing himself and his destiny to God. Therefore, when we fall short we can confess our failings and trust that in and through the crucified and risen Jesus we have the promise of forgiveness and new life.